

The Space between Body and Place

'Embodied Vistas' by Kye Wilson and Helena Eflerová

by Kate Davey

'Embodied Vistas' sees artists Kye Wilson and Helena Eflerová respond to the unique, historical character of Deptford Creek. Re-contextualising the creek history and its present role, they offer the audience an embodied experience, blurring the distinctions between place, one self and other.

Deptford Creek, one of London's most historic waterways; a half-mile muddy tidal reach, joins the 11 mile long Ravensbourne River as it journeys into the Thames. The area has a rich historical tapestry - it once made up part of the route for pilgrims in Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, and hosted the Battle of Deptford Bridge, when in 1471 Cornish rebels crossed the stretch of water. Prior to its closure in the nineteenth-century, the area housed a large power station, the pumping heart of Central London's electricity system. In its lifetime, the versatile area has also hosted chemical works, engineering works, gasworks, and soap and candle factories. More recently, the site has undergone a bout of regeneration, with a new version of the old Ha'penny Hatch footbridge opening in 2002. Other new constructions include the Floating Education Centre and the Docklands Light Railway.

Although the above is only a fleeting look at the Creek's bountiful history, we can slowly start to make sense of the backdrop to 'Embodied Vistas.' A link between present and past, body and space starts to emerge from the work; not least in the journey the figure makes across the body of water. The context under which we view the film becomes ever-deeper once we start to take into account every action that has made the Creek what it is today, combined with every action, thought, feeling, experience, that has made the figure who they are today. Steve Pile, writing in *'The Body and the City: Psychoanalysis, Space and Subjectivity'*, notes that whenever our bodies occupy a space, they bring with them "maps of desire, disgust, pleasure, pain, loathing, love."¹

Likewise, Elizabeth Kenworthy Teather says that "through the body's sensory organs, we perceive the qualities of space, through our cultural baggage we assess space; through a combination of creativity and motor skills we adapt and design space."² It has been noted by geographers such as Buttimer and Seamon that "places acquire meaning for people through their activities and personal experiences."³

This idea of embodiment, and the human body carrying with it at all times a specific set of meanings, experiences and societal structures can draw us towards the sociological theory of 'symbolic interactionism', pioneered by George Herbert Mead and Charles Horton. This theory analyses society and its peoples by looking into the meanings that people place on objects, events and places. From an interactionist perspective, "the body is always more than a tangible, physical, corporeal object; the body is also an enormous vessel of meaning, of utmost significance to both personhood and society."⁴

We can visualise the history of Deptford Creek in our minds, but when we are able to watch a figure embody this journey through time, it becomes much more real. Similarly, although we are watching a metaphorical journey through time and place, we, the audience, can overlay this experience with a particular journey - or the journey - through our own lives. We are drawn towards the space between the body and place; what lies here? Is it the same for everybody? What does this space mean for the figure moving through the Creek in 'Embodied Vistas'? What does it mean to the viewer?

¹ Pile, S., *The Body and the City: Psychoanalysis, Space and Subjectivity*, Psychology Press, 1996

² Teather, E. K. ed., *Embodied Geographies*, Routledge, 1999

³ Ibid.

⁴ Vannini, P. and Dennis Waskul, *Body/Embodiment: Symbolic Interaction and the Sociology of the Body*, Ashgate Publishing Ltd., 2012

Running parallel to the relationship between place and figure and the subsequent embodiment of this 'in-between space' in the film is the tick-tock of passing time. The movement of time is captured most visually within the gentle ebb and flow of the body of water. Certain shots focus simply on the rise and fall of this breathing beast. This brings to mind Hilary Lawson's idea of Video Painting; where a scene is filmed for a prolonged period of time, with very little camera movement. This new-age theory emerged in 2001 after Lawson released 'Closure'; a publication based on the 'theory of closure.' The art he included in his new taxonomy would attempt to avoid closure or ending by moving towards an infinite openness - eliminating the stuffiness and staticity of the still image. This infinite openness allows the time to become visible, so that – as in 'Embodied Vistas' - the personality of the relationship between figure and place can be explained as ever-changing.

The importance of the human relationship with space – and of site-specific self-perception - is not often given time for consideration. By portraying both time and the embodiment of place, 'Embodied Vistas' allows us as the viewer to experience this everyday phenomenon in an easily accessible way. We are given time to consider our relationship with the physical place, in this case Deptford Creek, and how this might be different – or similar – to the experience of the figure we see. We can also see it is a metaphorical journey, from one side of the Creek to the other; from decades, centuries, millennia ago, to the present day. Is there a particular place that we have a strong bodily connection to? And is this because of its history alone, or because of what we bring to the space in that specific moment in time? Can we ever simply experience a place without embodying the 'space' in between? Can we ever leave our own pre-conceptions and self-perceptions – in essence *who we are* - behind?

As I have noted before, Wilson's videos could be contextually placed in numerous areas within the traditional art history canon – installation art, site-specific art, self-portraiture, interactive art or *trompe l'oeil*. But it is this emerging idea of site-specific self-perception that sounds the loudest with regards to much of his recent work, including 'Embodied Vistas.' As Thomas Fuchs and Jann E. Schlimme noted in 'Embodiment and Psychopathology: A Phenomenological Perspective': "The Individual is in constant relationship to the world and to others,"⁵ and it is this relationship – between a human figure and a physical space - that is explored so beautifully in 'Embodied Vistas'.

⁵ Fuchs, T. and Jann E. Schlimme, 'Embodiment and Psychopathology: a Phenomenological Perspective' in *Current Opinion in Psychiatry*, 2009, No. 22, pp 570-575

Bibliography

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