ON “FLOATING AND FALLING”

PERRON, P. RICHARD
University of Manitoba, Winnipeh, perron@cc.umanitoba.ca

1 ABSTRACT

“Floating and Falling” is a video/performance garden artwork being developed by artist videographer Alex Poruchnyk. Poruchnyck is a nationally recognized Canadian artist and academic who works in sculpture and film related projects including animation and performance art. As an artist Poruchnyck continues to experiment with the expanding potentials of emergent media, In “Floating and Falling” the artist engages new video techniques to explore the temporal dimension of place.

This paper traces the artist’s garden building project and his experiments integrating video directly into his deliberate engagements of place. In this work the landscape is considered to be the actor in the performance, where the camera is embedded into the landscape recording the floating and falling of the “subject”. The work includes a number of experiments new media devices. Cameras are embedded in trees recording them falling to the ground or float with them in the wind. Cameras are embedded into forestry equipment record the process of human engagement with the forest. Remote controlled flying cameras track the forest change through time. 3D video cameras are used to record the spatial changes in the emerging garden. Finally the artist experiments with ideas regarding video projection within the forest itself.

The work posits a number of interesting ways of investigating landscape. The work questions the all too often destructive role that we engage in when adapting nature to our own desires. The work involves a deliberate undermining of our prevalent subject/object narrative about a forest by deliberately shifting the point of view from careful cinematographic framing to, for example, free floating tree point perspectives. Finally the work seeks to liberate the potential of disappearance as an essence of landscape phenomena.

1.1 Keywords
video performance art, actor, disappearance

Figure 1. Video frames of original forest scene
In October, 1999, a Lear Jet floated over America, finally falling in a field in South Dakota. This story has resonated with me since then and the idea of floating/falling and landscape continue to haunt my imagination. This particular story would play out in an eerily symbolic way. As the century drew near to its completion we would witness this image of technology on auto-pilot curiously drifting off course (destined originally for Dallas Texas), carrying six people to their deaths including the golf course architect Bruce Borland and the famed golfer Payne Stewart. As a Professor of Landscape Architecture I would dwell on the irony of this floating simulacra, of the floating coffin of a “place maker” and a golfer that was simultaneously a great athlete and, in ways the ultimate commodification of sport. As a Canadian I would watch the story unfold in a curious way as the newsmakers talked about how the American Air Force may be compelled to shoot the plane down before it entered Canadian air space. This plane with its stories and the influences that they carried had floated into Canada long ago.

In the summer of 2012 I entered into a discussion with the video artist and sculptor Alex Poruchnyk about his current work entitled “Floating and Falling”. For Poruchnyk ideas about floating and falling would prove to be both performative and exploratory. As an artist Poruchnyk was interested in uncovering new ways of seeing and reading the landscape, but most of all of engaging the landscape in a meaningful way. Focussing on the use of video as a primary medium of investigation he would begin to examine the nature of place and his relationship to the site. This paper traces the artist’s experiments integrating video directly into his deliberate engagements of place. In this work Poruchnyk asks how the landscape might be considered to be both subject and object, actor and viewer in the performance of human interactions with place. In this way the ideas of floating and falling are coincidently about ways of looking and ways of thinking about landscape process.

It’s hard to say where the ideas of floating and falling originated for the artist. As one who often looks at the world through the video camera lens, floating and falling emerge as dominant visual forces at times working in opposition, at other times as complementary conditions of a singular event, or metaphors drawn from the artists own memories and dreams. Floating and falling are naturally part of all of our dreamscapes, but how do they associate themselves with the observations of our realities? In a sense Poruchnyk began by reading the forest and the nearby lake through his own memories through his own experiences. Years ago he took care of his very sick daughter. He would speak about the potent memories of carrying her around and that he began to understand this forest in terms of how trees carry one another, support one another, that through the process of filming the forest he began to see the forest as being about complex relationships often acted out between individuals (trees or other vegetation usually) and that reading the landscape is really about uncovering these relationships in time.

When you carry someone who is sick and that you love, it is not about the burden, but rather about a different kind of familiarity, about an alternative kind of relationship and about mutual edification. Floating and falling in this way coexist, we carry each other, and together we fall softly, slowly, he began to see how trees seem to fall upon one another, to become king at the forest we are provided with reminders of what happened before. hought of as a sequence of events rather than a collection of objects.

Figure 2. Surveillance of site included floating cameras and parrot remote controlled video
The artist also began to realize, both physically and metaphorically, that we are never following our own paths, but rather we engage the potentials of a living palimpsest of events. Through his rather somatic approach to understanding the landscape, Poruchnyk began to intervene upon the dense forest, beginning with unplanned dérives (Figure 1) sometimes resulting in getting himself lost. (The dérives were recorded using cameras mounted on his person). Through subsequent investigations of the footage he would begin to make the following observations regarding his interpretations of place. First that the dérive is never innocent or absent of intention, that a number of things seem to be occurring. On the one hand, that the directionality of the wandering seemed to often be the result of the “affect” of forest features, that, for example, certain trees seemed to serve as attracters that pulled him forward or towards themselves. This would cause him to consider the source of such attractions, the power of the object or his tendency, as a filmmaker, to construct a coherent navigational narrative.

Alternately, his wanderings were influenced by a desire to “be a part” of the local ecology, that the paths chosen would follow existing paths that were created by the local fauna (usually white tailed deer, or black bear). Ironically his investigations would reveal that the paths often originated from human actions, sometimes his own, and that the palimpsest of events were precipitated in part by his own meanderings. As he wandered aimlessly in the forest, he would temporarily find that he was lost, and he would begin to become obsessed with “finding the survey stake”. Somehow the survey stake served as a touchstone to the place, but as his work continued he found that he required a different type of touchstone, a virtual touchstone that would allow him to be spatially networked to his past video experiences, a GPS based virtual index of video recordings. In this way place and experiences of place would be included into a floating hypermap accessible on a portable device.

Unlike many garden building exercises this projects was primarily extractive in nature, often about falling trees (Figure 2). He had originally purchased this property to site a film project where he could build a cave like structure and film the stormy beaches as a way of recreating his tale about the Orkney Islands. Now he found that he owned acres of dense forest that he barely understood. He remembers with humour the advice of an elderly woman who said to him: “You should cut it all down so that you can see what you have.” In a way she was right, he couldn’t see the forest for the trees. He couldn’t understand what was there because it was so dense and seemed so impenetrable. But what do you cut, how do you cut, what is this act of cutting? As an artist he was interested in decentering the narrative, of finding ways to tell the story through the agency of the forest.

Figure 3. Fishing line into tree canopy to attach video cameras
In a sense this work would become an exercise in what the cultural geographer Nigel Thrift calls nonrepresentational ethnography, of studying and exposing the performative natures of both *man* [sic] and *environment*, of trying to uncover the agency of the living system where human desires are searching for a foothold. “Nonrepresentational research pays attention to the sensuousness of our presence in the world, as well as to the affective dimensions of our actions, and the habituated nature of everyday existence.”¹ This act of working in the forest included a sensuousness that was at time aggressive and brutal, deliberate and exploratory. As a video artist he needed to record and expose this sensuousness, where the actors included not only himself, and the forest vegetation, but also the tools themselves (in some ways this work would continually return to the agency and sensuality² of the machine).

Floating and falling would become filters to the sensuousness of place. Using fishing line Poruchnyk would string cameras throughout the forest (Figure 3), dangling and drifting from branches the cameras would *sense* the tree, its gentle and steady interactions in the wind and the chaotic patterns of human interaction. This work was more than changing the point of view, of seeing the world from the canopy, (Figure 4) it was about sensing the point of view, of allowing the camera to float with the branches and to animate the vitality and everyday life of the forest. But it is also is about the vitality of interaction, of falling, of the sudden juxtaposition of events in time, of violent sudden acceleration and then… disappearance. The work uncovers the real affect of technology, the ability to control time, the ability to manipulate the acceleration and deceleration of natural events.

Figure 4. Viewing from the tree canopy


² The idea of sensuality of the machine comes from thinking about particular tools, what they do and how become one with our experiences; examples of machines with a strong sensuality might be a chainsaw or a motorcycle. But it is more than the sensual as a state of being *sexy*. http://thoughtcatalog.com/2012/the-sensuality-of-understanding/>
As Paul Virilio would say: "... one would now live a duration which would be his own and no one else's, by way of what you call the uncertain conformation of his immediate times, ... it would be a latitude given to each man to invent his own relation to time ..."³

Rather than recognizing loss as something that has occurred and is recorded as a memory (the disappeared), the emphasis is on the process disappearance itself. "[T]he tabula rasa is only a trick whose purpose is to deny particular absences any active value."⁴ There is agency in absence and in the disappearance of the vitality of place. Disappearance is a natural process and subject to manipulation. Landscape architects deliberate, or not, engage (speed up and slow down) social, cultural and ecological processes of disappearance. Metaphorically, landscape architecture is often viewed as a discipline of emergence, a discipline highlighted in the spring and summer. But it is also as much about the reconfiguration of decay, metaphorically the autumn (the fall) and winter, and there is great beauty, power and import in such processes. Disappearance in the boreal landscape, is normally a slow and gentle shifting of the landscape, complemented with sudden forces of landscape change. Poruchnyk’s work is about both the revelation of this gentleness, and a recording of the affects of place and of acting on place, a recording of the acceleration of disappearance in the landscape (Figure 5)

As an actor in this space the artist began to play out the act of garden design through extraction from within the forest rather than from an abstract drawing (or model) about a possible future. In this work the common architectural representation such as plan and section drawings were replaced with personal and aerial video tracking. Using the Parrot 2 remote control helicopter video system he could read in real time, on an iPhone, the activities taking place on the ground. As the camera hovered above the site he would begin to see how the agency of forest was shifting, the new revelation of light, the choreography of the blowing vegetation, the emergence of unexpected assemblages.

Using video cameras embedded in his person he would undertake a form of post-performative personal surveillance. He began to see himself as undertaking the simultaneous role of a director whose actions were being subjected to the limitations of the embodied recording, his everyday recording device, but also with a different kind of consciousness about, for example, framing the shot or creating a coherent sequence. At the same time he would become the actor and a different form of consciousness emerged, that included a blend of both personal questioning about the mixed messages of what he was actually doing to the forest (He would sometimes describe it as reality TV gone wrong); and seeing himself participating in the dramatization of an event. As part of his garden building he would often cut and then deliberately weave the residue back into the paths edge in an act of taking and putting back.

⁴ ibid, (p. 31).
By embedding cameras directly on equipment, such as chain saws and brush cutters he would begin to recognize the wonder and brutality of his actions. (Figure 6) As boys will be boys there remains a fascination with the agency of machines, and their uncanny ability to increase disorder and convert and limit a system’s biotic potential at rates that are both unnatural and difficult to imagine. It is hard to know whether this fascination with machines is in fact a fascination with their power or is it part of a deeper fascination with how they begin to redefine time itself.

“... time itself has no absolute rate of flow, nor do events have any absolute succession. Instead, the rate of flow and the succession of events is determined by the position of the observer, the speed at which he’s [she’s] moving, gravitational fields, temperature conditions, etc. All this is quite familiar, but it implies that a given culture has to set up some kind of framework in which people can relate to time. An individual has the same problem. His experience of time consists of nothing more than a succession of events and consciousness which he [she] has to order in some way from which he [she] projects principles or discerns certain rates of flow." (Lippard, p. 82)

Perhaps the most telling observation about the understanding rates of flow would be revealed when Poruchnyk would talk about the dynamic potential of the forest itself. He would continually be amazed at how quickly and persistently the forest would return, that within fairly short time frames he would have difficulty discerning the locations of his previous interventions. He would say that working in a forest was similar to “putting masking tape on the floor and saying that this is my office”.

In the end there are a number of lessons that landscape architecture may derive from artistic investigations like this one. First, there is an obvious potential for integrating technologies such as the drone cameras (Parrot 2) as a means of directly viewing sites that are complex and difficult to traverse; portable cameras (such as the GoPro and the stereo filming rigs) may be used as a direct means of getting feedback from on-site work; and the iPhone apps that are allowing us to manage recorded events and view remote actions in real time.

Alternatively this project begins to uncover a story about how we (landscape architecture included) have unwittingly entered into technology driven concepts of time. This is perhaps about more than technology being out of control but that time is now out of control. There was something eerie about a Lear Jet (a floating coffin) drifting across a continent, that in a way it should be allowed to drift until it was ready to fall to its own place of rest, but somehow this floating it was an uncomfortable part of our cultural narrative, like our landscapes it remained something that had to be contained and managed. But as we share with our landscapes, change them, design them we should consider how we are floating and falling, together we support one another, and together we may float and fall softly, slowly, gracefully.
REFERENCES
Figure 7. Raising the camera against a summer sky