Rethinking site as field, field notes, observations and practices

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Aiming to introduce some key issues of fieldwork: history and methodology. The keynote speakers at the November 2009 conference had collectively and in dialogue during the two days, enabled a deeper focus of this ‘work’: of practice, secretion, openness, limit, hybridity, reconstructions. The opening presentation invited theorisation, what are the values that guide us? What values guide site and fieldwork activity in architecture, or even define and discipline the disciplinary field? To what end and whose benefit are these activities undertaken?

After a full day of diverse and stimulating papers, including the view of the presentations in the Matthew Gallery, and an enjoyable dinner in the early twentieth century space of the Sculpture Court, honed with colloquies of the ‘greyed’ Pantheon form, award winning UK Broadcasters and oral historians. Alan Chim, opened the conference gathering on Saturday morning. He shared knowledge and practices of fieldwork, through his oral history and audio essays which are usually based in urban landscapes, and in this session he visually; journeyed from a Birmingham industrial estate to Idogenous Hill to Penrith, to ongoing work at the changing area of Kings Cross in London, explaining his ambition to unlock memories, to explore living memory, to craft a new construction, he expressed his position in relation to an ‘outside art’ of two traditions: voice and sound which both connect with worlds of place, and ultimately potentially create new experiences. The lingering of constructed images through sound and voice are achieved with a close and practiced relationship with particular tools- the microphone, recording equipment, and an implicit relationship with the subject; person and place. Oral fieldwork is a slow, yet open process, and an opening up of questions of store of the gathered material, and the openness of dissemination resonated with Andrea’s opening question of the ethics of benefit and one.

The lingering sensation of Alan’s presentation on the subsequent keynote presentation was an unexpectedly rich dialogue, where questions burned into the beginning of Can Akay’s contribution. Can, an architect based in Turkey, who works across the boundaries of architecture, art, urbanism, practice, and research, is an expert of spatial practices, and as he had he termed, a spatial anthropologist. The responsive discussion with Alan was to the idea of tools and practices in the urban context, of working with the overlooked and understanding the generative potential of a carefully crafted observational output which might activate and perhaps change some aspect of the complex condition of the contemporary, continental urban domain. He described his aims as exploring limits, tools and methodologies of existing modes and traditions of practice in the city through his oral history and audio essays which are usually based in urban landscapes, and in this session he visually; journeyed from a Birmingham industrial estate to Idogenous Hill to Penrith, to ongoing work at the changing area of Kings Cross in London, explaining his ambition to unlock memories, to explore living memory, to craft a new construction, he expressed his position in relation to an ‘outside art’ of two traditions: voice and sound which both connect with worlds of place, and ultimately potentially create new experiences. The lingering of constructed images through sound and voice are achieved with a close and practiced relationship with particular tools- the microphone, recording equipment, and an implicit relationship with the subject; person and place. Oral fieldwork is a slow, yet open process, and an opening up of questions of store of the gathered material, and the openness of dissemination resonated with Andrea’s opening question of the ethics of benefit and one.

Three dominant threads did emerge from this plenary discussion. Firstly, a reminder of basic questions- taking on board an attentiveness to habits and habitual practices of what is understood within and without the ‘field’? Secondly, of identifying some tone, texture and fabric of the conference, perhaps “thinning the concept and thickening the discourse”, to quote Andrea Kahn’s critically opening comments on the Friday morning.

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