

A Word on Place : Altering the Meaning of Place with Typographic Installations

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Abstract: With the challenge of exploring a particular rural site and responding with installations of type, students investigate the intersection of place, preconception, knowledge, experience and design. With a project named *4 (or 5) letters in a field*, student teams participate with the changing conditions of a site and audience to alter the meaning of a place.

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The site.

The site of this exploration is a small—only about 5 acres—hayfield that lies just east of my home. The field itself is a hayfield, with a mix of timothy, alfalfa, much and varied clovers and emerging forbs as well as encroaching goldenrod, purple asters, bindweed and blue flag iris.

Bounding the eastern edge of my property line, it provides a clear view to the heavy stand of reed canary grass that sits with its roots in water-logged land that slopes to spring fed mudflats to the north. A tall stand of old black-locust trees makes for a visual barrier across our fence line, with those trees ringing an old farmer-dug pond that is slowly filling with deepening muck.

To the north of this strip of field is a small woodlot holding aging poplars, silver maples, some box elder, old apple trees, and underbrush of sumac, raspberry brambles, currants, milkweed, willows and other wild plants. This woodlot edge is always oscillating, trying hard to expand into the open field, with sumac and brambles and poplars all vying for sunlight and open ground. Wild grapes and Virginia Creeper vines extent high into the tree canopy, using the framework of sumac to start a climb which in some cases reach the height of mature maples and poplar trees, easily reaching 50 feet or more.

The western boundary transitions into our household space, where a septic mound system is in place, beehives are nestled into a wild-growing tangle of young maples, more currants, a remnant raspberry patch, box elder, red-twig dogwood, milkweed, dogbane and ferns. Elderberries grow on the mound, and goldenrod, asters, trefoil and red and white clovers are profuse. Docks have begun to populate some of the uncut grassy areas, and other forbs have also started to appear.

The south edge is bounded by county road PP. It carries traffic to the homes and places there, as well as leading across a county line and onward to other resources of the area; a creek and river, a small college town, an old rock quarry, a man who studies raptors, a farm where I purchase straw bales, a local bar, my brother's house, and other sites of community.

From the field to this road is a tended ditch. Always a point of contentious boundary, it grows an assortment of wildflowers and fast-growing shrubs. It is mowed heavily by the county; at times to excess (it seems to me). It clearly wants to be a hedgerow, and tries hard to make a rush for that each spring and summer season. Dogbane has started encroaching as a hardier shrub defense, and now extends from the west into the field a short way.

This is the stage. I haven't mentioned the weather this place holds, the changing atmospheric moments that bring light and temperature and wind and wet air together for striking and somber and brilliant moments of opaque fog, dark cloudbanks of hailstorms

summering, and wet-shoe nights of heavy dew and clear skies of stars and cell-tower beacons to the east and west of our property.

I could go on, but then it is so full it cannot be all told.

And perhaps therein is the conundrum. Place requires/requests an attention to all it has to offer; its dead animals and nocturnal plays that go on without an interlocutor, its perpetual cooling and warming cycles tied to the year, its eyeful of aurora dependent on distant space weather. Other conditions are hidden in time, geology and human interactions—all of these further shaping a knowing of place. A deep knowledge that includes wild apples and neighbors' land management attitudes as well as water use and drainage, soil conditions and types, human histories of progress and desire. Shifting cultural ideas of pollution and agricultural practice. All of these conditions further framed in nested relationships from hyper-local to global weather and economic conditions.

Again, this is the stage.

The process (exploration).

As part of an Environmental / Experiential Graphic Design course (EGD), the assignment asked student teams to carefully examine a site and respond to it with a specific typographic installation limited to 4 or 5 letters / letterforms. The assignment was named “4 (or 5) letters in a field”. Early on students examined methods of understanding place both through indirect experience (existing recorded information) and specific experiential knowledge. This assignment was meant to explore both methods of knowing a place that is unknown and to respond to a site with a graphic response. Once this “research” was completed, students were then tasked with creating a graphic solution that would then elicit some resonating response from someone viewing / experiencing this work.

This effort of creating meaning from a site is not new or unusual in any way. Long a tenant of Environmental Art; it is often manifest in site specific earthworks and installations in place that reflect or enhance a specific location, or bring attention to a cultural condition or event of said place.

Early on, students did not know that I was a steward of this landscape and lived on property that adjoined the field, or that I had also grown up there, moved away and then returned in the last few years.

Site visit.

I should admit now to having preconceived ideas of how this work might take place and even what might come from this exploration, at least as far as what knowledge might be tapped into and a sense of what the resulting work might come to look like.

The site visit began changing my preconceptions almost immediately.

Students were asked to form teams as a method in which to broaden potential solutions, as well as a way in which to allow a deeper research practice to take place. I gave

students an address, and then asked them to meet me at the site to examine it. I did not specify tools for this assessment, although as a group we did come up with ways and means to assess a site when on location. This list included a measuring wheel (or surveyor's wheel), a tape measure, the camera, and digging tools. It also included resources to identify plant and animals.

While I had made it clear that the site was wet, and that there would be insects, tall grasses and other conditions to be aware of, once on site I was reminded that the sun was hot, the ground wet, and that inadequate clothing and shoes had been worn. With student teams walking across the landscape, I was aware that many were intently examining the plants and general condition of the landscape, with some people eagerly crouching to examine plants, collecting some samples and largely using their phones to make photographs and record voice memos. Some video material was collected and a "walking/driving through" of the viewing path was made. When I asked about plant identification on-site, several teams told me that were simply making photographs of specimens that they would then "google" when back at their studios to identify plants. This immediate disconnect with the site surprised me, as did the relatively short period that students spent on-site. A general discomfort with the place was evident, and this was reinforced when I offered some apples from my adjoining trees to them.

While not perfect, they are certainly edible. Some people simply took them, polished them a bit and then ate them while remarking about their good flavor, others examined them carefully for blemish, looking for and selecting the most "perfect". Some, encountering a blemish, ate a bit and then discarded them.

I also offered my own experience of living on the site as a research resource, no one team asked to formally interview me. While I was often asked for anecdotal information, this seemed to be more of an inquiry of correction than a desire to ask someone with a deeper knowledge of place what was perceived as meaningful.

Assumptions were made about the audience that would encounter this work. The course required the creation of a design document that included audience identification. Student teams identified the audience as "aging men...", "50-70 year old men in pickup trucks..." "slowly driving elderly rural people..." These responses came from the short observational period of the initial (and from what I could tell only), site visit.

This brevity of understanding of the site surprised me. The potential to know a (new) place was unexpected, even though the site was within 20 minutes of the campus and easily accessible throughout the period of the assigned work—two and a half weeks.

The dependence on off-site and virtual research also struck me. No one asked to revisit the site. No one asked to camp there, to come at odd hours to see how the site changed. No one made a request for (personal) historical images of the site, or visited the County courthouse for records. Nearly all research was completed through on-line research; even though the designers were encouraged to return to the site for short or extended visits.

The process (creation).

In spite of what I perceived as a less-than-engaged process, I was stunned at the thoughtful nature and power of the design solutions. The opportunity to create a large-scale installation in a public space was exciting for most of the students. The idea that something would exist in a place of public viewing for upwards of two weeks clearly intrigued them. The making of this work with simple recyclable materials was also interesting to them. As Graphic Design students they often find themselves spending a disproportionate amount of time “making” on-screen versus an extended time constructing a physical object. This clearly gave them pleasure and different working process they enjoyed. Teams worked hard to conceptualize an approach (a reasoning for the design), visualizing it with drawings and constructed virtual placement of the design within photographs of the site, and generating some prototyping to test the visibility of the design solution and the construction of the work itself.

A design proposal was completed and reviewed, an installation schedule was generated, and pieces were completed within 3 weeks. 7 installations were scheduled, with an installation process reviewed and demonstrated. Work was to be installed by teams with my assistance. The resulting work follows.

- Install one – *Hush* – team Allison Witte + Amy Greenwald

Meant to respond to the changing leaf colors of the season, and the movement of wind through the trees. *Hush* was a dramatic introduction for the project as a whole. When resulting movement of carefully cut fringe and the implied movement of the italic letterforms juxtaposed with the message made for a compelling piece.

- Install two – deer/sumac – team Rachael Kwaitkowski + Christie Moore

More subtle in concept and presence, deer/sumac presented a common silhouette on the site. Deer frequent the field and often cross the road near the point of installation. The somewhat camouflaged color required a more thoughtful “reading” by viewers, with the word “sumac” positioned within the form of a deer.

- Install three – HEY! – team Shannon Lecher + Alex Gillis

A desire to inject humour into the site was evidenced by this teams solution. Identifying a common salutation in the region, this installation also played on the fact of the double entendre and the site itself (hayfield). Constructed of a hay-filled wire form, this compounded meaning; while potentially heavy-handed, communicated a reminder of place as a site of both human agricultural practice and social interaction.

- Install four – hope – team Heather Reilly + Aimee VanWychen

Interested in the space at the east end of the site, a more poetic approach was undertaken by this team. Largely overgrown with Reed Canary grass—an invasive plant species—this very wet area was meant to connect meaning with the potential that more natural spaces have. The idea of hope as a projection of thoughtful projection was asked of the viewer.

- Install five – COLLECT – team Nathaniel Weeden + Elizabeth Lied

Struck by the disconnect between what is considered a pastoral space of neatly controlled natural spaces and the obvious disregard for them by the continued disposal of trash along the roadside adjoining the site, this team decided to call attention to this by constructing COLLECT. At the same time, the idea of collecting as a practice of knowing place was also made visible. From some distance this piece seemed innocuous and merely about a colorful configuration of materials. Once near it the understanding that it consisted of trash was striking. Once passed the piece could also be viewed in the rear view mirror as right-reading. Although receding it reminded the viewer with its persistent message.

- Install six – SOUL – team Rachel Montoya + Derek Steger

Once again the space of transition between the more “wild” part of the site and the more cultivated was chosen. Reminding viewers that sites also contain a largely unseen component, this piece also played with the idea of the spirit of a place as being both elusive and also part of a cultural collective. Choosing a typeface that evoked the 1960s, they also chose to coat the letterforms with a phosphorescent paint. Once exposed to sunlight the text glowed a faint and pale blue-green through several hours of darkness. While hard to see when looked at directly, it revealed itself with averted vision—a phantom apparition in a wild place.

- Install seven – decay – team Michelle Hilger + Paul Barker

One of the few pieces that used time as a viewing element, decay was constructed of degradable materials that were meant to break down with the elements. Installed last and meant to be in place for a longer period of time it was also designed to blend into the darkening area of trees and brush. Installed in late fall it seemed almost invisible at times, but by this time the audience had been primed to look for a new installation once the previous one had disappeared.

The process (response).

In asking students to respond to place, I considered the layering of experience in such places and what it means to connect with them briefly. However, I did not anticipate the

response to these messages in-place that would come from the people that live there and drive past the property with regularity.

The injection of text on the landscape was profound. The response was almost immediate with a nearby neighbor driving over to speak with me about what was going on in the field. The most often asked (and first) question was ; what does it mean? My response was most often “what do you think it means?” Obviously this lead to a more complex conversation about meaning, higher education, territories of place, and relationships that come from text being encoded onto a landscape. Clearly the viewers thought this was an attempt to communicate something. Large and difficult to ignore, the voice of the text was thought to come from me, and not from others who were linking place with content.

This often led to some challenging conversations. One neighbor was concerned that these messages were somehow connected to him. The thought was that rather than speak with him frankly (which we often do), I was sending a more complex —and public communication to him. Even though the field of inquiry (literally) was a landscape, the stronger communication was that it was my property, and the text was more strongly linked to myself as the landowner.

This occurred repeatedly, as people stopped by to find out what was going on. It even became a conversation at one local bar, owned by a previous neighbor of mine. His conversation with me when I was having dinner there was about a frustration about what the work was about. Many people had asked him about it, and he had done his best to imagine what I was doing. When I explained this more carefully, he strongly suggested I put in place a sign that would explain the work, so that there was not any confusion about what was going on. I asked him why and he was clear that many theories existed. The frustration of not-knowing was clear. I asked him about his placement of used equipment and tools on his (adjoining) property, and if he felt it necessary to place a sign there to let people know what he was doing. He responded that this was different; that the meaning was clearer and within a convention of the perceptions of what rural is about.

This became the crux of the work. The idea that a landscape and or place holds unseen and unspoken messages is an accepted one — it is a hayfield, personal property, a place that changes seasonally, a neglected landscape (a reflection on the owner’s capacity to manage a landscape), or a pastoral space that offers a changing view of a “natural landscape. In this it allows a reading that is dependent on the investment in place *that the viewers have*. It does not matter so much what the landscape has to say, and in fact we can’t be sure of what voice it would use to communicate this to us without some special reading capacity that we would need to have.

Indeed being linked to place allows a person a capacity to “know” a place in many ways, often without having this knowing linked to text at all. Text most definitely changes a place. Although obvious, it was especially evident with this work. It reminds us that place is a site of cultural phenomenon as much as it is of the non-human condition that exists there. Humans make sites have meaning. Adding human-built elements to the site changes meaning profoundly, while also revealing the often buried and more layered

meaning that comes with humans occupying those spaces. The conventions of the culture that occupies these spaces play out in making meaning of them. While often broad in their effect, they can also be uniquely specific to a location.

One interesting response came from a person that I had known years ago growing up in this area. One day while walking a gravel road nearby, I watched a truck pass me, with the driver waving. I didn't have time to see who it was, but responded with a wave back. I watched as the driver headed away and over a hill. I saw the truck return, slowly approaching me, and then stopping. The driver—who I knew—said hello and asked me about the “words in my field”. He mentioned the bar discussion and one of the theories they had discussed; this being about me having a disagreement with my neighbor and passing insults to him. We talked about the works and he asked if this would continue (decay had just been installed). When I said no he said how he would miss this interjection of text. He then told me how much he looked forward to seeing them each morning as he took his coffee into his truck and drove to work. He said that seeing what new word might be there was of interest to him, that it made him “think about what those particular words meant” to that place, that day. Finally, he remarked that this often “made his day”.

End.

So what then, did this work do to examine meaning in relation to place? It is difficult to say how deeply the designers themselves made meaning of this place. Student design teams did connect with place in many ways. I had expected that this would encourage a more meaningful appreciation of this site specifically, and to all places more specifically. It is hard to measure if this is so. While the work was beautiful and brilliant, it was also more about the designer/ design team than it is about the place. Clearly a dialogue existed as the works communicate some meaning of the site to viewers. At their best these works tapped into some common idea of the site.

One test for this is to imagine these pieces in a different place, in my asking I suggested what a colleague had thought meaningful; an urban space. When asked about this, the students responded that they thought they would be ignored as those spaces already hold an overwhelming multitude of messages to consider. The blankness of the field and the restraint of the assignment (4 or 5 letters), made for a very carefully chosen and thoughtful message. The conditions of the landscape also become a strong consideration. Figure ground relationships came into play, as the “figure” (the text and word chosen, the formal considerations of color and materials), had to be linked to a relationship of the “ground” — the field itself and all its elements of color and light and material and position and darkness and daylight and plants and animals and weather and people and ideas of rural and vehicles driving and ideas of time, history and ownership.

This I imagine is how we make meaning of places. We construct both simple and elaborate cultural communications about them when we can. We also find ourselves deeply connected to places outside of what we know as cultural conventions, often leaving us with a loss for words. Experiencing these spaces as we walk and work them,

steward them, own them and change them (or not) makes them have special meaning for us. Allowing others to shape that meaning with us, even temporarily, can bring into focus the value of people and communities in making meaning there.