

Repetitions

For *Repetitions*, featuring works by Leigh Hobba, Ciara Moore, Daniel von Sturmer, Martin Walsch, Plimsoll Gallery, School of Art, University of Tasmania, April 2008

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Oars sweep against resisting calm, the arc of their pull marking out a disturbance that clusters round each bite of the blade, their swing marking a measured passage across the lake's expanse. The oars' rhythmic movement, their muffled thudding resounding in the wooden curve of the hull whose upturned vaulting duplicates the sky's own arch, reverberates in two realms, under air and above water, connecting at the same time as it disrupts. The movement of the oar, and of the boat, is also the movement of the oarsman, the strength of arm and shoulder at one with the outstretched oar, reaching, grasping, pulling, releasing, and reaching again. A horn challenges the expectant quiet of the sky, a shotgun shatters it, the sounds repeating themselves in rolling waves, re-enacting a ritual long past, subsiding back into heavy stillness. The sound of the horn announces an arrival, declares an audience, proclaims an event – the gunshot commands it. In this place, in which the very light has the character of an immersive medium, in which the earth beckons toward its green embrace, one watches for the appearance, the imminent presence, of a hidden majesty, a concealed wonder, a secret – one that does not reside only in what is awaited, but in the place itself.

Any and every place retains its own obscurity, its own hiddenness. The sense of a place is thus given neither in anything made present within it nor in some simple self-presenting of the place as such, but is rather a sense, and a reality, secreted in the movements, the rhythms, the tangled and triangulated connections of elements that make up its very fabric. It is evident in our very immersion in the place, in the singular strands, like threads in a delicate and

finely-worked net, that draw the spaces and times of the place together, that draw us into that place, and into the places found within it (the boat, the lake, the guarding hills), that draw the place into itself, that draw this place into other places, and other places into this place. Wherever we are, *where we are* is always some place, though the place may be one that remains unknown, unnamed, uncertain. Whatever the place, no matter how familiar, no matter how close to home, a strangeness, an uncanniness belongs to it – the place always retains its depths. To become familiar with a place, to learn to inhabit it, is not to dispel its secrets, nor to render it into some simply intelligible form – as if the place could be transformed into a sign, an idea, a mere position – it is to work oneself into that place, to take in its rhythms and movements, to become part of them, and for them to become part of one's self.

The sense of place that is evident here may take on the character of a dreamwork – affecting, powerful, often vivid, both connected and disconnected, and yet also elusive. Perhaps any sensing of place, even the most wakeful, must have something like such a dreamt character, yet a dreaming that is embodied, materialised, made real. Through the prosthetic vision of a camera, against the restless circling of an overhead fan, in the altered and diminished half-light of a city hotel-room, things dissolve into shadow and reflection, their features rendered occasionally bright by the harshness of fluorescence from without, their forms and textures diffusing back into the anonymity of the temporary; in uncertain closeness, the fixed and partial view of another space, another story, another life, opens up – and then abruptly closes. Through the camera and the images it records, a place appears, but as an intersection of places, a place intruding into other places, a place that holds itself in semi-transparency, a place visible only in fragments.

In the rhythms of light, in the reflection, duplication and superimposition of images, in the brief flickering, shifting appearances of things, the place is reconstituted into its most basic of elements, themselves becoming apparent only in their uncertain relation to one another, invoking, repeating, mirroring. It is as if the place is no longer occupied by objects or

bodies, but only by their ghosts, their remembrances, their traces, their outlines faded into mere shading, their parts lost and recombined into new and strange assemblages. The space that opens up in this palimpsest of light and dark, of shape and shadow, is one defined by the simple relatedness of the elements within it – a space of pure juxtaposition, reiteration, transposition. Movements within that space are no longer movements of things through a single spatial field, but rather movements that belong, strangely, to the space itself. Space itself moves, spaces are overlaid onto spaces, spaces shift within spaces, spaces create spaces – space becomes a rhythm, a movement, a re-iterated shaping and re-shaping. Space merges with time, and time with space.

When we encounter places in ways that already disrupt our usual sensing of things, and so also separate that sensing from its everyday connection to action, then our very being in place, our ‘placedness’, as well as the place itself, comes to the fore. Sometimes that placedness appears immediately problematic in that neither our own relation to the place, our orientation within, nor the orientation of the place to other places, is intelligible to us – we are lost, bewildered, displaced. Sometimes that placedness appears in terms of our very familiarity with the place, and yet even such familiarity may appear as unfamiliar and disorienting.

In the encounter with place, and with our own placedness, what is encountered is itself a secret, something that remains hidden, a mystery, something that resists understanding. One cannot come to a sense of a place without also coming to a sense of one’s own implication in that place, even if only as a brief witness to it, even if as an outsider, a newcomer, an interloper. Indeed, the outsider is an outsider only through coming into the place from without, but as such, the outsider is also always inside. The sense of a place thus already includes some sense of oneself, a sense of one’s own being in that place, and one’s entanglement within it. The sense and recognition of a place is always, to a greater or lesser extent, reflexive, and as such it both encompasses that on which it reflects – oneself, the place as such – but never

fully illuminates that which it encompasses. For that which is the source of reflection is never itself wholly given in the reflection. In the encounter with place, both place and self are made evident, and yet in being made evident, they become salient only partially, in aspects or glimpses, like a snatch of song or the profile of a face. It is not merely that the encounter with place is not given in an encounter with any *single* element – idea, image, position – but that the place itself appears always as multiple and as active, as a shifting, interweaving body of elements and events, in which we are ourselves encompassed at the same time at the very moment of our encounter. In that encounter, the place does not stand opposite to and apart from us, instead we become a part of the place, are internalised within it, at one and the same time as the place also becomes a part of us.

The Greek philosopher Aristotle claimed that when we sense something we become identical with that thing in just the respect in which it is sensed. Thus, in seeing the whiteness of a tabletop, we become one with that surface in that our own eyes take on the whiteness that is also found in the table. Such a view seems exactly to capture the connectedness to place that occurs through bodily feeling. The sensing of place is something *felt*, no less than it is *seen* or *heard* (no less, indeed, than it is tasted or smelt), and that felt sensing of place often constitutes an almost literal internalising of the place through our own bodily taking-in of the rhythms and regularities to which we attend – something that may occur even when the experience of the place is mediated through recording, editing, and digital re-presentation. We come to a commonality with place, not merely through being in place, but through our sharing in the movements of that place in the movement, real or perhaps imagined, of our bodies – place comes to be within us. One hears the scrape and splash of the oar, but one also feels its sweep and pull; one sees a flickering pattern, and the fluttering moths of light seem to brush against our very eyes; one watches and listens for the countless falling of snowflakes, the latter heard in the very falling of silence, and one feels, even if only in imagination, each small impact, senses the enveloping lightness, soon become

heavy, of snow; one sees the constant rise and fall of waves, feeling a responsive rise and fall in one's own breath and pulse, sensing the supporting, but also enveloping depths that lie beneath; one watches the metronomic beat of a pendulum, formed by the uncertain balance of a set-square ruler on a table's sharp edge, square upon square, and in the watching, so the movement is transferred to one's own gaze, and thence to one's own rhythms, a nodding of the head, a slight swaying of the limbs, as the pendulum measures and mirrors, not merely space nor time, but our own attentiveness.

The rhythms of place, and of space and time (for rhythm, like movement, surely encompasses both) that are made evident here themselves indicate the manner in which, while places retain their own secrets, resisting any attempt to resolve the obscurity of their nature, still the elements that make up those places abide by a measure and pattern that is a part of the very fabric of those places, and that underpins their articulated and complex character. The singularity of places can be understood as a function of the multiple differentiation and pluralisation of their elements, and of those elements' reciprocal responsiveness and relatedness, of the encoding and re-encoding of minute signals, signs and sequences: in its timed and metered swing, the balanced square marks out with formal precision the movement that exists within and between places, the measured character of their underlying forms, the shaped regularity of their spaces; the territorial calling of birds demarcates the boundedness of a place in airborne activity, while the delicate tremor of a spider's web, stretched between twigs, across water, over rocks, registers a constant dynamic of air and sound, capturing and transmitting the place's inner motions; a television searches from channel to channel, each curtailed image suddenly flashed before us, punctuating the silence of the room's ordered interiority, rendering the steadiness of awareness, the even-ness of time, as a staccato cycle of recurrent moments. The character of a place is itself a function of the interactive multiplicity that arises within it. This appears in the visualised landscape, in its re-presented form, in the way in which such visualisation may be constituted through the

accumulative addition of the smallest of pictorial components: in the painter's forming of a canvas through the application of each considered brushstroke; in the video image that manufactures the intelligibility of that image through the reiterated patterning of a plurality of light-points; in the re-visioning of a place, decomposed into a plurality of numbered locations, through its reconstitution by means of the re-positioning of each numerical element within an empty space – like the building-up of raindrops onto a patch of dry ground, snowflakes onto bare earth – so that the image appears as a kind of visualised arithmetical sum, and yet textured, shaped, and formed as the place itself.

Part of the secret of a place lies in the other places with which it communicates – any one place stands within a network of places to which it is constantly responsive, part of a system of transmissions and transpositions that move across places, through places, into places. In the tracking of pathways through a landscape – the line of travel indicated as a series of continually changing numerical locations, a sequence of names that overlay other names beneath – places appear collected like shells on a necklace continually remade, present not only in the interconnected lines of their topography, but each place, each name, holding a secret history within – each tiny shell apparent as a reiteration of the other, and yet each essentially itself. Yet places are not only serially connected, as if in time, but also simultaneously, in space. Looking at a map of the island that was Van Dieman's Land, its shape presented through names that burn into sudden salience and then die out, one sees each name, each signified place, as it stands in a familial nesting of names, of places, the density of names recording the density of the movement, the activities, the lives – of those who name and whose names are now remembered – as articulated between those places as well as within them. Every place opens up, not merely outward to other places, but also inwards, to the places that are found within it. No place, not even the most mundane, is without such depths. Look within the crevices of a dead tree, into the small shelter in a rocky cleft, towards the corners of a

room or the edges of a piece of furniture, onto the dimpled surface of a bench, around to the other side of a shutter. Perhaps these are too small, too partial, too arbitrary to be called 'places' – for places are surely those spaces and time that allow for the fullness of action and movement, and that can readily be recognised as such – and yet sometimes we can project into such places, no matter how small or unusual they may seem, in a way such that they open up as having their own sense, reality, mystery. The camera and the microphone allow us to enter such spaces, open them up as places, in a way that may otherwise occur only seldom – we recognise the activity and movement that take place within them, and we come to see the extent to which there may be an inner life to place, and an inner placedness, that goes beyond that to which we are ordinarily attuned.

Similarly, through the communicability of places with other places, sometimes, and not only through the artificial extendedness of sense, we encounter the sudden intrusion into this place, into the realm of the apparently known and understood, something that can only belong in a space and a time alien to this. Not a place that is to be found internal to the familiar, the place that it invokes can perhaps not even properly be grasped as a place at all, only as something beyond, outside, apart. A fish (is it that?) pulled from the coldest and deepest of waters, that is not one fish but two, that in its death-throes still strives to eat, and yet what it eats is a reiteration of its own body – engulfing what it already is. The creature that eats itself is an old sign for the world – and not only the world, but life – as constantly finding its own sustenance in itself; it also signifies the world in its movement as an incessant eating up of time, which is also an eating up of space. Perhaps, in their ever-changing and dynamic interconnection, places can be understood as having a similar character, but rather than understand places as perpetually self-devouring, it is their character as constantly self-opening, self-disclosing, that is here the more important and the more salient, and that is also evident in this strange and self-reflexive image.

The fish that eats its own reflection, the creature that swallows itself, may be seen as a marker of the impenetrability, the partiality, the blind mystery, that is itself evident in the coming to sense, the coming to appearance, of the reality of a place – a coming to sense that is nevertheless also a disclosing, an opening up. All appearing is surely like this, never complete, only ever half-seen, half-heard, half-known, evident in recurrences and duplications that both familiarise and make strange. If it is in and through the multiple repetitions of place, and our own participation in those repetitions, that such appearing occurs, then the mystery of place, the secret that is announced in the rhythms and movements that are proper to it, is the very secret of appearing as such: that every appearing is simultaneously a remaining hidden, every singularity also a pluralisation, every place both a home and a foreign land.

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