Archiving and Imagination in an Intertidal Zone

Jennifer Clarke and Jvan Yazdani

Introduction

In 1913 the Danish cargo steamer *G. Koch* ran aground on Aberdeen's Girdleness peninsula.[1] The site is listed in the National Record of the Historic Environment,[2] an archival resource that collates data from shipwreck investigations (Oaxley 2001). Her wrecked boiler, caught in the play of intertidal forces, remains intermittently visible in the intertidal zone: plunging into archival oblivion at high tide and resurfacing into view at low tide. This movement reminded us of the liminality of archives as devices for remembering and forgetting (Assmann 2010; Zeitlyn 2012), as just a few metres away is a construction site: Aberdeen's Harbour Expansion. In this brief article, we explore the concurrence of these historically disjointed sites, one under construction, another at the whims of the tide. Our collaboration emerges from everyday conversation, through different methods and across time, mediated by experimentation with visual methodologies and tools such as 360 cameras and optical instruments used for viewing at a distance. One of us has professional experience working with this construction project and researches marine infrastructures, the other is an artist and anthropologist concerned with art and ecology.

On Jvan's first research visit, he shot 360-degree footage of the boiler. Editing this footage involved a failure of sorts, but this became integral: glitchy yet eloquent, conveying a rich soundscape, it called upon the imagination. Later, when visiting the site together, we found the boiler underwater – out of sight, archived. Jen's later visits brought her own imaginative interactions. If the role of the imagination is crucial in apprehending what is not directly experienced (Sneath, Holbraad and Pedersen 2009: 12), we wanted to explore the role it plays in multisensory video-making (Pink 2009: 89) including the analytical aspect of visual research (Pink 2009, 2013). We set out to share conversation through writing grounded in analyses of our images, created independently, with the hope we might glimpse each other's perspective.

Jvan

Our original ambition was to bring our practices into the light of analysis, hence our recourse to 360-degree cameras, and binoculars, and the choice of a site that elicited visual discovery through imagination, thanks to the concealing/revealing effect of the tide. In the first place, the use of images helped me question the "coevalness" (Fabian, cited in Pandian 2012: 549) and coherence of 'landscape' and, in turn, fieldwork practices. It held in place a sense of time and process, which might have been concealed

Torry Coo, Girdleness, Aberdeen.
Photo: Jen Clarke, 2020.

if technological glitches, or plain miscalculations, had instead been written away. One example was our inability to use 360-degree footage to its full potential (cf. Bijker, Hughes and Pinch 1987); another was neglecting to consult a tide table chart before our first joint fieldwork, so the boiler was caught below sea level.

As it turned out, this was revelatory in another way and our experience that day appealed to the very core of our theoretical commitment: only an archival stretch of the imagination made the 'archived' boiler available to us. Its absence inhabited the material world and demanded our attention (Fowles 2010). For me, the boiler's archival status proceeded from such fugitivity (cf. Smith and Hennessy 2018), engendered by the coastline's functioning as a writing and erasing device (Carpenter 2016: 14; cf. Ingold 2015). My imagination harnessed these elements, and as an object of (cyclical) observation the boiler turned into something akin to a human-made, rusty, derelict satellite.

The G. Koch boiler (360-degree camera).
Photo: Jvan Yazdani, 2020.

Jen

Working on this project underscored my interest in the messiness of practice and of the ephemeral (Law 2004): I am drawn to failed things, discarded objects, unfinished images, glitches, errors and aberrations, which interrupt ordinary discourse, exposing the fragility of life. They help me think of things as materials in process, gatherings of materials, in movement (Ingold 2011). I am delighted when images I make end up being precisely not what was intended. My response to the 'failed' 360-video reframed my approach to this place, reminding me that sensory ethnography does more than document: "it's not CCTV," as Pink argues (2013: 336). It facilitates thinking, a way of remembering or getting to know – rather like a process of archiving.

The G. Koch boiler
through binoculars.
Photo: Jen Clarke, 2020.

The images I made at the site were after encountering and viewing Jvan's corrupted and non-visible recordings of the wreck of the ship's boiler. The first photograph is of the new harbour construction, rumbling away behind a foghorn, locally known as the Torry Coo (Scots for 'cow') for its mooing sound – a wail generated by oil-fired engines compressing air, forcing it through a rotating siren. The Coo was built along with the lighthouse after a whaling ship ran aground, killing dozens of men. When I encountered it, it had been silent for decades. The recordings we made here are dominated by the sound of wind, waves lapping on the shore, helicopters overhead.

Another set of images was made in a very different way to Jvan's 'failed' experiments in 360, yet a visual resonance with the fisheye lens intuitively made sense: I took pictures through a pair of binoculars, in the rain, inspired by the revelatory experience of discovering the boiler at low tide. I think this image speaks to your romantic imagination. The dark tunnels shape the direction of sight, echoing the significance of sound in its absence, offering an oneiric quality (Wylie 2009a).

The next image is a memorial bench near the Seafarers Memorial, a simple steel cross set into a cairn overlooking the harbour. I have been fascinated by memorial benches since encountering dozens during fieldwork in Scottish forests, hundreds of names engraved on rusting metal rectangles, thousands of rain-washed messages of sympathy and remembrance, made poignant by faded plastic flowers. Everyday memorializations involve particular kinds of imaginative acts – perhaps, like archiving, this requires processes of selection, as well as the fugitivity of memory, which is prone to slippage. The geographer John Wylie writes about similar coastal benches as "eyes without bodies [...] giving new sites for seeing, re-placing here and prospecting out there too eyes now closed and buried elsewhere" (2009a: 277).

Greyhope Bay Memorial bench, Aberdeen.
Photo: Jen Clarke, 2020.

Andrew Irving's experimental ethnography (2013) suggests that particular infrastructures facilitate certain experiences, pointing to the way that bridges draw people struggling with suicidal thoughts. Seas and coastlines offer places for contemplation and, in the ever-shifting horizon, changing perspective; studies in health call these "blue spaces" (Gascon et al. 2017). Circling the bench in the rain, I wondered not only about how people materialize loss, but also whether forgetting comes here. If (primarily Western) approaches to commemoration tend to attempt a sense of permanence, here, at the edge of the sea, is a space between past and future imaginations. Rather than recovering memory, in the midst of fog and light rain, with the sound of helicopters passing overhead, something more speculative might be possible.

At the construction site, with its constant rumbling of stone, heavy machinery and water displaced by earth and concrete, I sense how materiality exceeds the invocation of ground. This intertidal zone, where the sea meets the sky, where solids become gas and gas becomes liquid, is a place that shows how things could be otherwise. It offers an alternative for thinking about the imbrication of self and world, perhaps even turning this relation inside out, without "disavowing" the excavation of meaning in analysis (Wylie 2009b: 319).

View from a 360-degree camera placed directly on the G. Koch *boiler.*
Photo: Jvan Yazdani, 2020.

Jvan

Imagining what has been lost, hidden or potentially present, then, may be one means to deal with the difficulties inherent in reading space retrospectively (Lefebvre 1991 [1974]: 113), and a means of including human endeavours, accidents and intertidal forces. Our analysis thus motions between the images, our experiences of the site and archival knowledge of the shipwreck. Surely the boiler of the *G. Koch*, in the intertidal zone, has exercised its "thing power" (Bennet 2010) of attraction on me since I first learned about it through archival entries. Something about its semi-subaqueous, varying perceptibility appealed to a desire to explore other ways of doing fieldwork. When I look at footage taken by the 360 camera that I positioned on the boiler, for example, I see an attempt, clumsy as it was, to displace my own vantage point. Once again, however, our collaborative effort at 'scooping up' the site through a net, loosely interwoven, of technology and observation returned puzzling results: sounds (of wind, waves and a nearby stream), instead of images, standing out. It is by extending this attitude – a receptiveness to ambiguity, to the realization that reality exceeds and eludes our senses – from the sensorial to our very conceptions of the world that I suggest that ruins (Gordillo 2014; Edensor 2015) and construction sites share a condition of 'material becoming'. Something that could be either satisfying or unsettling.

Towards a Conclusion

Artists have long experimented with how to document and archive their work. Indeed, the art critic Hal Foster addressed the 'archival turn' in art in the 1990s, remarking that this was "concerned less with absolute origins than with obscure traces [suggestive of] unfulfilled beginnings or incomplete projects [...] that might offer points of departure again" (Foster 2004: 5). In passing, he posits that this archivality might be more accurately described as 'anarchival', which may be the most apt term for this project, too – understanding archives as permanently in process, assemblages that, in chaos, are constitutive of life (Buchanan 2020). Our collaboration might be an archiving rather than an archive – a process of imagination, documentation and reflection that came into being through conversation.

Notes:

[1] https://www.scottishshipwrecks.com/loss-of-the-g-koch/

[2] https://canmore.org.uk/site/312523/g-koch-girdle-ness-aberdeen-north-sea

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