

Trespasses and Retreats

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Hesitant, I entered the paddock of Clydesdale horses as if in a human herd. These are truly impressive animals, graceful yet imposing against the scale of the human body. I was clinging close to others while reliving the feelings triggered by a close encounter with police horses in a tightly packed crowd at a festival years ago. The circumstances here in the artist Mari Keski-Korsu's *Clydesdale Oracle* (2016), however, were radically different. Rather than the authorities enforcing their rule on the people, we were trespassing now onto the territory of the horses. The fence suddenly appeared as much a means to keep us out as to keep the horses in. How could we enter with permission on their land? As we settled in the middle of the paddock, I closed my eyes and attempted to feel the presence of the horses around us. But they had withdrawn to the furthest end of the paddock away from us.

I got to know SSW in the context of a European project *Frontiers in Retreat*, which examined how planetary ecological changes in their complexity, resonant with the entwined geopolitical and socioeconomic processes, may become negotiable in the seemingly wild frontiers at the edges of Europe. These non-urban contexts are where the battles are taking place today—over natural resources, land and human rights, climate justice. The sites, outside the white cube and the more tightly stratified urban landscape, have become fertile terrains for conceptual and material excavations in contemporary art, as well as for practices that examine and experiment within the frontier between the semiotic and the sensible. They often activate the persistent unease hovering between the binaries that refuse to dissolve in the language framing these practices. Yet, both the artistic and discursive practices have to also negotiate the legacy of colonial practices deep rooted in modernism that continue to inform our approaches today.

How to approach the sites of intense nature-culture entanglement otherwise than as resources of knowledge or matter to be extracted for new works? How can critical encounters with different contexts and communities remain irreducible to exchange value? How to be other than a tourist consuming novel environments, or an explorer in search of yet-untapped resources on the last frontiers, or an introvert hermit momentarily retreating to wherever elsewhere? When people move and meet, all kinds of unexpected and disorderly transformative encounters are indeed possible, but not guaranteed.

It has become clear in recent years that the age of innocence with regards to mobility is over. All modes of cultural exchange and artistic explorations are entangled in the complex mesh of geopolitical and economic power relations. What does it mean to be mobile at the time of enforced migrations, reinforced borders, growing xenophobia, escalating global warming, and mass extinctions? Who has access to international circulation? What is the cost of being on the move—ecologically, socially, personally, intellectually?

While residencies often appear as nodes on a map of transnational circulation, at SSW as in many remote residencies the location in a specific context is highlighted. Yet in the era of advanced globalisation and climate change, every site is already deeply embedded in planetary processes. Their specificities only come into focus in and through relations to elsewhere. Moreover, a site can be understood as a situation. It is not an object of study, or an environment to inhabit—rather, it is in a ceaseless formation that we are part of. Sensitivity to local particularities today requires thus critical positioning of the artist, curator or researcher engaging with the site in the midst of the ongoing movement between places.

This anchoring is what may allow them to also have deeper resonance with other grounded ways of thinking. Practices that are rooted can share with each other insights into irreducible differences as well as processes connecting them. A great deal lands on the shoulders of the organisations as mediators hosting the visiting artists. Here yet another frontier appears, between the visitors and the visited, those on the move and those grounded, their diverse knowledges and their individual bounds of the thinkable.

Yet situated practice requires ceaseless critical repositioning. What is taken, what is left behind? How can the brief encounters have longer lasting ripple effects? What is required of the artist and the organisations that host the

visitors passing through their communities? And what about the expanded community, beyond the humans, that is also affected by the decisions made here, as Isabelle Stengers would ask (2016)?

I may not have succeeded in interspecies communication with the horses on the paddock, but certainly became aware of the complex dynamics of power at play. It brought home the necessity of trust, which needs careful nurture, as the base of empathy. This requires a leap toward empathy no longer built on identification. Or, compassion that ruptures the aggressively guarded illusion of human self-containment grounded on the exclusion and exploitation of others. There is, however, no pure harmony between all species behind the floodgates opened by this rupture. Trespassing may indeed be at play here, but as a passing of a threshold beyond oneself and what one cannot yet know.

Felix Guattari's call for solidarity between struggles and for a transversal understanding of ecology demands that we address three entwined ecological registers—the environment, the social, and the mental. This requires that we consider the complex interrelated processes and impacts of our work: What processes do our practices participate in or contribute to—in terms of their environmental impacts, but also power relations in our communities and modes of communication, and in terms of their subjective affects?

The challenges posed by the interwoven promises, potentialities and responsibilities that come with being a temporary resident, thus come to the fore in numerous ways. The impossibility of the wandering artist to commit sustained time to any one place may be in irreconcilable dissonance with the temporalities of others worked with. When forever going solo, what can be the artist's role in the ever-more urgently needed collective processes? The sites of residencies may offer momentarily shared points of grounding. Artistic explorations in the residencies take place in the presence of the numerous others they are composed of, which through the process of engagement de- and recompose us as much as we affect them. This requires critically situated and embedded practices—and not just of the artists but all of those shaping the institutions of art.

Peripheries rich in alternatives and micro-histories, those forgotten or pushed to the sides, may act as interlocutors, not simply resources or reserves. Perhaps outcomes may thus also take unexpected forms that require curiosity and care of their polyphony.

Can residencies offer retreats—refuges even—for a multiplicity of discourses and epistemologies to coexist and evolve together in response to the urgencies faced today? Rather than certain discursive frames, which necessarily exclude some others, this demands commitment to the never-completed labour of ‘staying with the trouble’ (Haraway, 2016). It calls for experiments with forms of collectivity, entanglement and sympoiesis that struggle to break with institutional hierarchies as well as all gendered, racialised and naturalised power dynamics. Retreat may then be a withdrawal from some kind of interactions, positions and perspectives, but simultaneously a dynamic activation of other modes of experience and experimentation. Retreats from what are considered to be centre(s) may thus radically challenge the very notion of the centre and associated traditions of thought or habitual patterns of practice.

References

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Taru first visited SSW as part of *Frontiers in Retreat*, an EU Large Cooperation project (2013-18). Next year, we will be working with Taru through the *North AiR* network, reconsidering the role of artists’ residency in a time of climate breakdown.

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