

Shelley O'Brien -

Arts-Based Ethnography: The Urban-Nature Illusion in Tokyo and Toronto

Arts-Based Ethnography: The Urban-Nature Illusion in Tokyo and Toronto

by
Shelley O'Brien

supervised by
Ray Rogers

A Major Portfolio
submitted to the Faculty of Environmental Studies
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master in Environmental
Studies
York University, Toronto, Ontario, Canada

July 5, 2017

Table Of Contents **page**

1. Foreword **1**

2. Theoretical Framework **1**

i. Introduction

ii. What is Sensory Ethnography - as research practice, as analysis?

iii. Arts-Based Inquiry or Arts-Informed Research

iv. Sensory Ethnography and Arts-Based Research through the eyes of a Buddhist Musician/Artist

v. 5 places in Tokyo and Toronto: How a way of looking shaped an approach

vi. Conclusion

vii. Reflections

viii. Bibliography

3. Portfolio Commentaries (Artifacts, Video Link, Explanation, Commentary) **10**

Site 1: Harajuku, Tokyo

Site 2: Meiji Shrine, Tokyo

Site 3: Shinjuku Gyoen, Tokyo

Site 4: High Park, Toronto

Site 5: Financial District, Toronto

4. Artistic Outcomes **USB**

Site 1: Harajuku Girl (movie, soundscape, photo of artifacts, mp3 sound file)

Site 2: Water and Wishes (movie, soundscape, photo of artifacts, mp3 sound file)

Site 3: Blossoming (movie, soundscape, photo of artifacts, mp3 sound file)

Site 4: High Park Sounds Like This (movie, photo of artifacts, mp3 sound file)

Site 5: 108 (movie, photo of artifacts, mp3 sound file)

1. Foreword

The final outcome of my Major Portfolio is a direct evolution from my Plan of Study. The Plan of Study outlined three areas of concentration: Looking at the Japanese shinto-buddhist ethos, Rewilding ourselves, and artistic outcomes. My Major Portfolio has developed those three themes to: Sensory Ethnography, Socio-Cultural Commentary on Modernity, and Arts-Based Research and Inquiry.

Looking at the Japanese shinto-buddhist ethos became practicing my research through Sensory ethnography and my own background in zen buddhism. My research and past time spent in Japan led me to receive a research award to bring my research to Tokyo, therefore 3 of the 5 research sites were in Japan. I chose not to focus on Japanese traditions, like craft and design, but instead the practice of zen buddhism in relation to embodied ethnography. The social commentaries (in mini documentary form) that resulted from my research are all a reflection on our uneasy relationship to modernity and our resulting dis-ease with ourselves and our own natures. The idea of rewilding simply evolved into a way of studying and expressing the world using embodied experience, or sensory ethnography, and arts-based research and inquiry.

The artistic outcomes became cohesive: 5 mini documentaries with soundscapes and compositions overlaid as social commentary on the idea of an Urban-Nature Illusion.

2. Theoretical Framework

i. Introduction

As someone who has spent most of my adult life as an artist and Zen practitioner, my work in making meaning out of the world has very much been situated in artistic, spiritual and embodied ways of knowing, and therefore, outside of traditional intellectual frameworks. As an academic in the field of environmental studies, my response to the crisis of modernity is therefore based in these practices which by design, return one to the senses. Specifically, I use songwriting (poetry and music composition) set to film as a methodology for creating commentary on place. The research process for the purposes of this masters thesis first involved choosing contained locations in Tokyo and Toronto to conduct the work. In Tokyo, I chose three neighbouring places: Harajuku, a busy fashion area; Meiji Jinja, a Shinto Shrine adjacent to Harajuku; and Shinjuku Gyoen, a city park. In Toronto, I chose High Park, a busy and diverse urban park, and the Financial District, a busy downtown banking centre.

In terms of conducting the research, I first travelled to each place to practice sensory ethnography (taking in place through smell, sound, touch, taste, sight). In these moments of practice, I am simultaneously “collecting” data (though not as a traditional researcher with measurements on pen and paper), as an artist and human, through embodied sensory perception. This data collection occurs both as an observer-in-place and as a participant. As a researcher, I note the impossibility of remaining impartial. I have my own biases and ways of seeing, but instead of attempting to deny this, I use

my history and my artistic skills to choose and record sounds, photos and video I find compelling, participate in the rituals of place, note scents and textures, and collect artifacts that I feel are relevant or representative. Once this data has been amalgamated, I walk within and with the designated place in mind, journaling and letting the place “work through me.” From this process, I write poetry, music, put together the video footage with the result of approximately 3 minutes of audio-visual commentary, accompanied by physical artifacts, sound clips and scents.

This “method of meaning making” (Knowles and Cole, 2008), generally considered sensory anthropology or ethnography (used interchangeably) and arts-based research and inquiry, make up the theoretical framework of this portfolio, and are used through all phases of research. Below is a further explanation of each, and a step by step overview of how they (along with my Zen and music practices) shaped my approach to the five research sites. It is my hypothesis that using one’s senses in an attuned and embodied way (in sensual scholarship) can be a method for understanding ourselves, and for developing a more whole-body understanding and remembering of our lost selves or biospheric selves (Livingston, 1994), our communities, and the natural world.

ii. What is Sensory Ethnography - as research practice, as analysis?

*“If you would walk the highest Way,
do not reject the sense domain.
For as it is, whole and complete,
this sense world is enlightenment.”
-The Third Zen Patriarch*

“...sensory perception is a cultural as well as physical act” -Constance Classen

“what has been called the ‘sensory turn’ is part of a wider shift in how we might understand the world, and that this has implications for how we might intervene in the world – as designers, artists, activists, by influencing policy, as educators or through other forms of action.” -Sarah Pink

In the early 1990’s, sensory anthropology was primarily a response to the general rendering of cultures as discourse or text. The focus on writing about culture distracted ethnographers from *sensing* culture. A growing number of anthropologists felt the latter should take priority. The introduction of “embodiment” as a paradigm for anthropology together with the notion of “sensuous mimesis” (Taussig 1993), Constance Classen’s idea of alternative “sensory models” (Classen 1990, 1993) and Paul Stoller’s call for “sensuous scholarship” (Stoller 1997) helped develop the “sensory turn” by making anthropologists aware of how they could use their own bodies and senses as means of research and analysis (Howe, 2010).

Stoller suggests that written texts may propel readers to new levels of compassionate awareness, but they cannot achieve the impression of a direct connection to experiential realities that is implied by sound or video recordings or scents. (Pink, p164) Indeed, "It is through our actions in the world – through the ways in which we move through the world, react to it, turn it to our needs, and engage with it to solve problems – that the meaning that the world has for us is revealed" (Pink p10–11, 185). Results of such sensory ethnographies and the people that are developing their methodologies and practicing them inspire new ways of knowing, and have the capacity to shift understandings of the world. The ethnographer's task is not simply to represent, but to convince. One seeks to "invite empathetic engagements" and in doing so to invoke a sense of intimacy and sympathy in the audience. This task involves engaging audiences in ways that enable their sense of knowing, in some embodied way (Pink, 187).

There have been a series of recent innovations in this field, including ethnographic filmmaking, art practice and projects, and ethnographic sound art.

iii. Arts-Based Inquiry or Arts-Informed Research

Arts-based inquiry is "the systematic use of the artistic process, the actual making of artistic expressions in all of the different forms of the arts, as a primary way of understanding and examining experience by both researchers and the people that they involve in their studies" (Knowles and Cole p. 29).

As a method of qualitative research, there are several defining elements to this approach (Knowles and Cole, 2008):

1. A commitment to a particular art form(s)
2. Methodological Integrity
3. An open, creative inquiry process
4. A clear presence of the researcher and her artistry
5. Strong reflexive elements, though not necessarily about the researcher
6. Intention to reach an audience

Foremost in mind are the educative possibilities of this type of research, as a way to transcend typical "telling" of findings, and as a way of conveying that which cannot be conveyed in typical language.

On a methodological level, "arts-based practices have been developed for all research phases: data collection, analysis, interpretation, and representation" (Leavy, 2009, p. 12)

Mimesis as experiential art-making/practice, and its potential to deconstruct the barriers of self and other are also of key interest here. The ability to mime, and mime well...is the capacity to Other (Taussig, from Benjamin, p19). It is through what Taussig calls the "mimetic faculty" that "one is able to grasp that which is strange - other - through resemblances, through copies of it. The power of the mimetic faculty devolves from its

fundamental sensuality: **miming something entails contact**. Copying a thing...creates a flash of sensation that engenders a sense of comprehension. For Benjamin and Taussig...we copy the world to comprehend it **through our bodies**" (Stoller, p66 (emphasis added)). This "contact", engaged in with sensual awareness, embodiment, presence and attention, and with practice, can become the "a-ha" moment of understanding ("a flash of sensation"). Understanding experientially with the body is a far different, deeper type of understanding than mere comprehension.

Therefore, it would seem that sensory ethnography and Arts-Based Inquiry go hand in hand.

iv. Sensory Ethnography and Arts-Based Research through the eyes of a Buddhist Musician/Artist

"Whether it's Tibetan chanting, Japanese Zen or Thai forest meditation, Buddhism... evokes something at right angles to capitalist modernity" (Ivy, p313)

"These mountains and rivers, the great Earth and its boundless oceans are continually manifesting the words of the ancient teachers, continually expressing the truth of the universe." -- John Daido Looi

In Zen retreat, we are treated to a break from the visual bombardments of the world. We are instructed to keep our eyes down for the full length of the retreat. Everyone wears the same colour, and all the hues in our practice centre are muted, blank, unpatterned. Our sense of hearing is also limited. Bells and drums signal the different breaks and time periods during the day, and we hear very few words. All of these practices serve to heighten our intuitive sense, and our sense of embodiment. It may sound harsh, but this kind of structure, after the bombardments of day to day life, is actually a sweet relief. Other senses are involved or heightened: the smell of incense aids in concentration and calms the mind. The cooler temperature allows the mind to stay clear. The restriction of waste, water use and energy consumption tames the qualities of greed and indifference that we so easily slip into.

I am approaching my work as an arts-based sensory ethnographer with a background in the practices of Zen Meditation and making music. Meditation techniques like deep listening, observation, metta practice (wishing loving-kindness to others) body awareness (in other words, sensory ethnography) are not separate from research practice. Work in sensory ethnography (with the body-mind of an artist) make up the entire spectrum of my efforts in data collection. As a practicing artist (composer, songwriter, musician) I have also used a specific method of arts-based inquiry or research. This method involves being-in-place, listening and recording sound and video, and revisiting and walking (contemplative study) with my observations about each location. From this point a creative alchemy is occurring, and as I work with the video, music and lyrics begin to emerge until an organic end-point is met, and an aspect of each place is expressed. As a rule, listening generally becomes the sense I lean on (both in my efforts in data collection and in the methodology) to amalgamate and

alchemize the data into audio-visual art. It is my go-to sense of relief. Sights and smells often are bombarding, but shifting to listening grounds me and helps me understand in a different way. As it is said in Zen: "Listen with your eyes, listen with your *hara* (guts)!"

Also, "When you hear the way birds overlap in the forest and you hear the way voices overlap in the forest, all of a sudden you can grasp something at a sensuous level that is considerably more abstract and difficult to convey in a written ethnography" (Feld and Brenneis)

This in no way negates the fact that all the senses are interrelated and interconnected and factor into this portfolio, but instead a listening-focus is the stepping off point for the purposes of this project.

I will go into the details of the research process more thoroughly in the next section of this paper.

v. 5 Places in Tokyo and Toronto: How a way of looking shaped an approach

As mentioned in the introduction, I chose three neighbouring places in Tokyo: Harajuku, a busy fashion area; Meiji Jinja, a Shinto Shrine adjacent to Harajuku; and Shinjuku Gyoen, a city park. In Toronto, I chose High Park, a busy and diverse urban park, and the Financial District, a busy downtown banking centre. The method of research that emerged is shaped by my current practices as both a buddhist and a musician/artist.

Step One: Empty Observer/Data Collection

I approached each of these five places with the general idea of being first what I term an "empty observer". This means that every aspect of the place is strange to me, almost as though I'm an alien and have no concept of what a place means, only a concept of how it makes me feel. This also connects to both being a creative artist, and thoroughly experiencing things and writing about them, and the Zen idea of beginner's mind, or approaching everything with new eyes. Also on a more subtle level, as you become attuned to the present, reality itself *does* become strange (some early koans support this and point you in this direction: What was my face before my parents gave birth to me? What is the sound of one hand clapping? Who am I?). At my first visit to each place, I collected sound clips, video clips, artifacts and smells. I then journaled in free form about each place: impressions, noted sensory perceptions, sounds etc.

Step Two: Participant/Data Collection

Next I revisited each place as a participant. What are people doing in these places? I would do it also, noting and recording how it felt, collecting artifacts from the experience, and journaling about it after.

Step Three: Data Immersion/Deconstruction

After I concluded my visits to each place (I visited each place at least 2 times, and up to 5 times, spending a minimum of an hour each time), I transferred the audio and visual data to a hard drive, reviewing it as I did this, and in a sense, deconstructing all of the collective data I had. This is a practice I use as an artist often, taking ideas apart completely, making things elemental, so they can be put back together in a new way. At this time, usually I would notice a general theme emerging. This theme would be the foundation of a socio-ecological commentary on each place.

It's important to note that I had a strong feeling to not let each place become too familiar, as I felt that would make it more difficult to comment on and create about. In particular, High Park is somewhere I go to often, but I chose to focus on High Park during the Cherry Blossom "craze", which made it very strange to me!

Step Four: Working With the Theme

Holding on to this theme, I would walk with it, write and brainstorm with it, in some cases make other art (for High Park I used paper and stickers to explore, and recorded this as well). During this step, I am using both meditative and creative techniques; holding a question or general inquiry about a place (which is what we often do in Zen meditation), while intuitively working to vocalize and express in music and/or words (or, poetically) what the point is in a socio-ecological commentary.

Step Five: Putting it Back Together

The final step is to use audio-visual formats to bring the videos of place together with soundscape, music, and, in some cases, lyrics. This final product then creatively and evocatively points out some socio-ecological aspect of each place.

vi. Conclusion

At its conclusion, conducting sense and arts-based ethnographic research in Tokyo and Toronto, and holding questions about modernity and our relationship to nature while doing so, has led me to creatively conceptualize the crisis of modernity. In my research, we city-dwellers exhibit our "out-of-stepness" with the cycles and patterns (indeed, I would even argue, the very *ethics* of nature), at every turn. My own personal practice, as well as seeing small vestiges of care in places such as the Meiji Shrine, guide me to believe that we still fundamentally hold a biophilic essence and ethics of compassion, but this out-of-stepness is the confounding norm. Our disjointed and wrongly-directed efforts to hold on to what is wild/beautiful/whole (within a skewed framework of commodification and separation), lead only to a very misguided sense of satisfaction: fleeting and transient. Ultimately, these efforts only seem to mute our biospheric selves (Livingston, 1994) and solidify illusions of a separate self.

vii. Reflections

“When you find your place where you are, practice occurs”

“Grass, trees, tiles and walls practice together with you. They have the same nature, the same mind and life, the same body and capacity as you.” - Elhei Dogen, Zen master

Being embodied (also called “continuous practice” in zen buddhism) in the modern world is a subversive act. Being with your sense perceptions as they come and go with each inhale and exhale is counter to what is expected of us by the world we live in. Putting down your phone. Opting out of consumer norms. Giving up the commute. Downsizing your life. All of these seem to be impossible tasks, and yet, there are myriad ways we can and do do this, and claim back our wild beings, our biospheric selves (Livingston).

As a zen practitioner, practice begins with breath. We inhale, we exhale. The first practice you are given is to count your breath, and often the last practice, after decades of mind-bending questions, or “koans” is to do Shinkantaza, being “just here”, simply breathing. When we inhale, we take in the world. We integrate what is outside of ourselves, and use what we need. When we exhale, we let go of ourselves. We give up part of us, often things we don’t use, and surrender to what is. This paying attention is a big part of being a sensory ethnographer, as it marries us to the here and now. As Sojun Roshi (head of the Berkeley Zen Centre) says:

“Inhaling is inspiration, or coming to life, which is differentiation. Exhaling is letting go, called expiration, which is ‘becoming-one-with’. So in expiration we let go and become one with the universe, without differentiation. And when we inhale, we discriminate and come to life, bringing all the forms to life. Inhaling is differentiated samadhi [concentration]; exhaling is the samadhi of oneness. These are the two sides of our life, which is birth and death. Inhaling we come to life, which is called ‘birth’. And exhaling we come to life, which is called ‘death’ or ‘letting-go-and-becoming -one-with’. Dying is ‘becoming-one-with’. Birth is called ‘differentiation’. These are the two sides of one coin. The two sides of our life ... So this pulse of in and out, being born and letting go, is actually our life. Continuous life ...”

If we as sensory ethnographers can access this practice of presence as we move through our research, a greater depth and breadth of experience becomes available to us. We become embodied ethnographers.

When we use arts-based research to bring our sense perceptions and embodied practice to life, we represent the creative force of the universe, and therefore find even more powerful means than words and research papers to connect and relate to others. When you tap into the universal truth that undoubtedly (from a buddhist perspective) we are all born, we all encounter suffering, and we all die, you clear a pathway to establishing an intimacy with everything. This is a step further than Sensory Anthropology, as we then represent our intimacy (gleaned by embodied being in the world) *with* the world, through art and mimesis (representation, as defined by Aristotle).

What is true intimacy with all things? Can embodied practice (in this case, sensory anthropology with a zen buddhist perspective, coupled with arts-based research and production in the form of music and audio-visual spectacle) perform a dual function, disrupting the inattention (or conversely, cultivating the attention) of both the practitioner and the audience? Children in particular understand a great deal through the body (being embodied) than language, and mimesis for children is the initial language of learning and power (Bresler, p924). Can Sensory Anthropology and Arts-based Research be the basis of a way of learning for children? Are there curricula in the works that focus on this kind of "learning what I already know" or "learning what I *am*"? How could such a curriculum be developed to reinforce these ideas and practices for young children? Can repetitive practice in this embodied way cause enough disruption to solidify a new "culture of compassion" and care? Can this culture of compassion co-exist in modernity? Does it already? Where?

Beyond these specific questions, the larger question remains: how do traditional knowing and critical academic perspectives relate, if at all? Are they two worlds, or "two sides of the same coin"? How does one negotiate multiple ways of knowing in a culture of academia?

My final hypothesis is in line with Gary Snyder's words: "wildness won't go away". A culture of compassion is always available to us. Embodied living and practice (and the present moment through which we access them) are to be found right-where-you-are. It is found in the breath you are currently taking, in the pressing of a piano key, in the eyes of an owl padlocked to a plastic branch, in a still-burning cigarette butt, in the smell of green tea, in the sound of a passing subway train. In the here-and-now one can come to understand the ephemerality of existence. And if you truly understand, only compassion can follow.

viii. Bibliography

Andrews, Elizabeth. Arts-Based Research: An Overview. Web Blog. 2009.

<http://www.personal.psu.edu/eja149/blogs/elizandrews/2009/11/arts-based-research-an-overview.html>

Benjamin, W „The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility.“ (Third Version) in Eiland, H & Jennings, MW (eds.) Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings vol.4 1938-1940 (Belknap Press: Mass. 2003)

Bresler, Liora, ed. *International handbook of research in arts education*. Vol. 16. Springer Science & Business Media, 2007.

Classen, Constance. *The Deepest Sense*. University of Illinois Press. 2012

Classen, Constance. "Green Pleasures: Sustainable Cities and the Senses." *Harvard Design Magazine* 31 (2009): 66-73.

Shelley O'Brien -

Arts-Based Ethnography: The Urban-Nature Illusion in Tokyo and Toronto

Cole, Ardra L., and J. Gary Knowles. "Arts-informed research." Handbook of the arts in qualitative research (2008): 55-70.

Ivy, Marilyn. "Modernity," in Critical Term in The Study of Buddhism, ed. Donald Lopez University of Chicago Press, 2005.

Knowles, J. Gary, and Ardra L. Cole. Handbook of the arts in qualitative research: Perspectives, methodologies, examples, and issues. Sage, 2008.

Leavy, Patricia. Method meets art: Arts-based research practice. Guilford Publications, 2015.

Livingston, John A. Rogue Primate: An explanation of human domestication. Key Porter Books. (1994)

MacKenzie, Louisa. The Poetry of Place: Lyric, Landscape and Ideology in Renaissance France. University of Toronto Press. 2011.

Pink, Sarah. Doing Sensory Ethnography. 2012

Redfield, James Adam. "Being Time: Zen, Modernity, the Contemporary." *Diogenes* 58.4 (2012): 88-103.

Stoller, Paul. Sensuous Scholarship. University of Pennsylvania Press. 2010.

Taussig, Michael T. Mimesis and Alterity: a Particular History of the Senses. Psychology Press, 1993.

Shelley O'Brien -

Arts-Based Ethnography: The Urban-Nature Illusion in Tokyo and Toronto

3. Place Commentaries

Site 1: Harajuku, Tokyo

Scent: Waffle Cone

Feeling: Empty Substance

[Video Link: HERE](#)

Artifacts:



Explanation

Harajuku is an area (beside harajuku station) in Tokyo, known as a centre of Japanese youth culture and fashion. "Harajuku style" originated with Japanese teen girls (often drop outs) dressing up. <http://www.wikihow.com/Dress-Harajuku-Style> Harajuku is definitely "kawaii" or "cute" overload. Japan is so good at cute. Award winning author Haruki Murakami talks about the way Japan embraces immaturity, and how the "cute culture" is a "clever wisdom learned in the past 60 years after the war". (Miyazaki, pg7)

American singer Gwen Stefani and Scottish band Belle and Sebastien both reference Harajuku in songs.

Commentary

I found Harajuku utterly confounding and compelling. I was most drawn to the contrast of Harajuku sweets and street fashion with a small, unobtrusive basement off the main street which housed a plastic forest full of stunning wild owls. As a result, the video and song, called Harajuku Owls, is a play on the title of Gwen Stefani's Harajuku Girls.

The myriad teens above some dressed very elaborately in their so-called subversiveness, pose for photos of themselves, or head to a shop full of food-truck sized machines with curtains accross them, waiting in line to pose for "purikura" photos, (a play on the words print club (elaborate and incredibly photoshoppable selfies)) They eat empty calories at the many crepe, cotton candy and ice cream shops above, and buy brightly coloured, cute/girly clothing at the shops. Meanwhile, in one of many local animal cafes, beautiful wild owls perch padlocked to their plastic branches in a basement below the street, nocturnal animals awake during the day, under the spotlight and with a soundtrack of fake birds.

How my heart ached for these painfully stoic and magnificent creatures. Though we are all wild at heart, most humans walk around not knowing...in a complete state of ignorance. These animals must cope with living a life not able to be who they are. How utterly lost, and how utterly wild.

Lyrics: Harajuku Owl

I'm a Harajuku girl, Harajuku girl, ooh
I spread my wings and plastic blossoms sing, ooh
Sugar angels strut above, bound by sticky love, ooh
I am bound below but my heart knows where to go, ooh

*Underground my dreams are the only things to fly
Padlocked to their schemes I wear garments of sky
Look in my eyes and see the n/light
Wild and full of l/night*

Cotton candy woes in cotton candy clothes, oh
Your self just a machine, a selfie on a screen, oh

You Harajuku girls, Harajuku girls, ooh
If you could spread your wings you could learn to sing too.

Site 2: Meiji Shrine, Tokyo

Scent: Cypress/Incense

Feeling: Unbound, Timeless Care

[Video Link: HERE](#)

Artifacts:



Explanation

This shrine is in the centre of 170 acres of 100-year old forest. The emperor and empress Meiji are enshrined here. The forest (containing 100,000 trees) was donated from all parts of Japan and planted by school children. It is a shrine, which means it is Shinto (as opposed to temples, which are Buddhist). Shinto is the indigenous religion of Japan. It has also recently been labeled a forest religion, and there are “chinju no mori” or sacred shrine forests all over Japan. Some say Shinto was essentialized as an “eco-religion”, and a recent invention (since WWII) (Rots, 2014). Rots also mentions that shrine projects to protect local ecosystems are happening all over Japan, but are being appropriated by the establishment to provide global legitimacy.

Commentary

This place is lost-in-time. Simple. It really is nestled in a forest. There are 1500 year old Japanese Cypress gates; ironically, trees that old don't exist in Japan, but were imported from Taiwan. So much ritual and tradition in the care, as grounds keepers tend to the paths with twig rakes and traditional tools. It's obviously not "wilderness" but the forests are essentially untended for 100 years. It truly felt magnificent and powerful to me, though also safe. I felt reverence there. I could smell the cypress trees and see how cared for it was. To me, in all my research this was the clearest manifestation of rewilding: planting 100,000 trees in the middle of Tokyo and not doing anything to interfere. If modernity weakened spirituality in favour of materiality, it is remarkable to see such so much spirit in the midst of one of the most materialistic places on earth. Perhaps, in the Japanese fashion of looking at the world as a turning wheel and not a dichotomy, materiality and tradition co-exist completely. I opted to write an instrumental piece for the Meiji Shrine, to reflect the peaceful and empty mind of one walking through that forest.

Instrumental Song: Water and Wishes

Site 3: Shinjuku Gyoen
Scent/Taste: Green Tea
Feeling: Relaxed Joy
[Video Link: HERE](#)

Artifacts:



Explanation

This gated park, with an entry fee of around \$2, used to be the residence of a well-to-do family in Japan. It is now a national park of 140 acres. Most of the garden was destroyed in WW II and rebuilt. It is a mix of garden styles - French, English and Japanese, and a favourite spot for *Hanami*, or cherry blossom viewing.

Commentary

At first, I was pretty uninspired by this place. lots of dirt, and some nice trees. Clara (my daughter) and I came across a rogue early-blooming cherry tree, that was pretty and a good photo op, and there were lots of happy school children playing and running and relatively free to roam around, probably a luxury in such a packed and congested city. We noticed a homeless person (relatively rare in Japan, though becoming more and more common) sitting just outside the gates which made me wonder if he could ever afford to go into the park.

Eventually though, I came to understand the park more as a participant than an observer. To Clara, and to so many children, this was a beautiful place of space and adventure, and what a lucky happenstance to come across a beautiful blooming tree. The resulting video became a play on a day in the park with a child - instead of taking a critical look at what this park was lacking, I came to understand that for a child, this park was a pretty amazing universe to explore, and that my own notions of "wild" need not colour this moment - an authentic (blossoming) experience is available anywhere, anytime. It is easier to see this truth when you are the mother of a young one!

Lyrics: Blossoming

Look to the leaves, is it spring? is it spring?
Run to the trees, see them blossoming, blossoming

Blossoms rise upon your face, you are this bright embrace

Sit before me now and show me how, show me how
To be like the trees, blossoming, blossoming

Site 4: High Park, Toronto

Scent: Deisel

Feeling: Melancholy

[Video Link: HERE](#)

Artifacts:



Commentary

High Park is a nearly 400 acre park in the heart of Toronto. It is an amazingly diverse place with forests, savannah, waterfront and recreational-use spaces. I've been very interested in the way High Park is used by city dwellers, and the effects of this use. Most of my research happened during cherry blossom viewing, so there is a specific theme to this site.

Explanation

Along with a creative investigation into blossom viewing (a very old tradition in Japan, but relatively recent craze here) I concurrently recorded a fast-motion depiction of high park's history, and told a story about photographers feeding the wildlife in high park. The musical addition was really tied to the noises in the soundscape that I recorded on cherry blossom hill. I specifically chose the music to be free form - with no time signature, and echoing what stood out to me amongst the people and sounds. My intended result is to show both the complexity and the tragedy of nature when people attempt to capture the eternally un-capturable ephemerality and beauty. From a buddhist perspective, we and the flower are the same, we and the moon are the same. Looking outside ourselves for truth will only lead us to suffer more.

Song and Soundscape: High Park Sounds Like This

Shelley O'Brien -

Arts-Based Ethnography: The Urban-Nature Illusion in Tokyo and Toronto

Site 5: Financial District (King - Adelaide - York - Bay), Toronto

Scent: Cigarette Butts

Feeling: Defiled, Arid, Alienated

[Video Link: HERE](#)

Artifacts:



Commentary

I used to work in the financial district, but it's been a number of years, and though I would say I was used to that environment, I was still very struck by its lack of life. The things that stood out to me most were the turning wheels and the cigarette butts. Through the lens of modernity, wheels are such a symbol of progress through ideas and concepts and the possibility of exchange and movement. In buddhism, the turning wheel is a teaching tool showing us that birth and death follow each other, that greed anger and ignorance perpetuated lead to suffering, and that practice, compassion and wisdom are ways beyond this suffering.

Explanation

When I arrived on my second trip to the financial district, I was compelled by the myriad cigarette butts literally everywhere. I went into Starbucks and asked for a bag, and collected 108 (a fraction of the thousands that were there on the ground), to symbolize the 108 defilements in buddhism. With each cigarette butt, I thought of a corresponding

Shelley O'Brien -

Arts-Based Ethnography: The Urban-Nature Illusion in Tokyo and Toronto

defilement. The resulting soundscape is meant to be off-putting and a bit sinister, urging those who watch to look within themselves for compassion and wisdom.

Song and Soundscape: 108 (the 108 Defilements)

Bibliography

Miyazaki, Hayao. *Starting Point*. VIZ Media. April, 2013

Rots, Aike P. "Sacred Forests, Sacred Nation: The Shinto Environmentalist Paradigm and the Rediscovery of" Chinju no Mori"." *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies* (2015): 205-233.