

## **Between Land and Sea**

Show: Ian Hamilton Finlay, Mare Terra

There is much cultural theory written about the beach, but rather less about the sea. Literature that addresses the space between, the space within which tidal water moves vertically and horizontally, principally at the behest of our Moon and Sun, is still more scarce. It is the intention of what follows to begin to consider how we are to understand our encounter with this shifting, unstable space.

Perhaps the hardest thing is to visualise what happens within the space, and the forces that determine the movement of the tide. The best way to do this is to stand, at low tide, at the water's edge and attempt to visualise what the next six hours or so will bring. (I say "six hours or so", because there is no absolute pattern to the movements of tidal waters. So many variable factors come into play (the Encyclopaedia Britannica suggests in excess of 40) that we can only predict, that is, approximate, the times of high and low waters at any particular location.) Standing in this space, as we imagine the advance and rise of the water with time,

Show: Jan Dibbets, Dutch Mountain, Sea Hills, 1971 x 2

Show: Goldsworthy, East Coast Sea Cairn, New York, 2001 x 2

we imagine our own complete immersion - or, more realistically, our being swept away. Immediately we occupy this space, one often of great beauty, we are under threat. But as artists, we might also imagine the purely formal morphology of our particular tidal advance, seeing the body of water that advances on rather more sculptural terms. Or we may consider the wealth of wildlife and pollutants that the sea will bring with it. Beyond this, and far more difficult, we may try to call to mind an image of the gravitational forces exerted by the celestial bodies - including our planet - that cause the movement. I find these latter forces unimaginable. Whatever, such imaginary constructions of tidal movement will be both beautiful and overwhelming. The space we occupy will not last long, and nor will we if we remain.

Rather more useful in terms of attempting to theorise this thoroughly transient, liminal space - a space that lies between or at thresholds - is the identification of certain oppositions clearly at play. One of the most important is the Sea/ Seaside distinction, which aligns more or less with the Nature/ Culture distinction. On one hand, the ocean; on the other, the beach with its various ritual and architectural constructions. In *Mythologies*, Roland Barthes wrote:

"Here I am, before the sea; it is true it bears no message. But on the beach, what material for semiology!"

On the one hand, endlessly changing forms, currents and movements without name. On the other (depending on location and season) sandcastles, beach-huts, wind-breaks and barbecues, promenades, sea defences and piers. Using examples from art's history, we might consider this the distinction between

SHOW: Friedrich, Monk, 1809

and

SHOW: Forbes, A Fish Sale on a Cornish Beach, 1885

On the one hand, difference is reduced to a minimum as the sea and sky become infinite, in this making reference to the Romantic sublime, to those forces that exceeded representation and, through their magnitude, threatened to overwhelm and destroy man. On the other, the deployment of familiar cultural signs that speak of a lifestyle, of man living at one with nature in general and the seashore in particular.

Thus, the distinction also becomes one between the Infinite and the Finite.

It is to the former that Anthony Gormley refers in describing the ambitions of

Show: Another Place (1997)

as being akin to the German Romantic's spiritualism, but in its "hundred clones" rather than the single figure, it counters the idea of a romantic escape: he calls it a "persistent and repeated presence: there isn't another place. We only have this place and this is what we have to deal with, the here and now, the changing tide and the changing light and the feeling of the mud squeezing up between your toes and the fact that yes, which is a horizon that is our perceptual limit: that is the reality halo. [...]

I want to acknowledge the fact that we live in an industrial, man made world. Another Place and Critical Mass are both very insistent about their nature as industrially produced mass-produced surrogates for the body." The horizon is all but lost in the Friedrich; its presence to Gormley is paramount; according to his account, Another Place sits between Friedrich's otherworldliness and Forbes's naturalism, and is neither: it is an embodied realism that does not seek to escape its status as fiction.

Like

SHOW: Land Sea and Air (II), 1982

It is down to earth and remains in contact with water, air and earth.

Beyond Sea and Seaside (Nature and Culture): A further opposition, rather more obvious, is between wet and dry. Not as a result of tidal movement but rather as a result of fluctuating levels of rainfall, Robert Smithson's Spiral Jetty has gone in the years since its construction from

Show: standing in water, to

Show: submerged under water, to

Show: being completely removed from the water. A possible explanation for the five year drought that has led to the present state of the Jetty is not clear, but the possible political message of changes in climate in relation to global warming is clear. Related to this latter political significance of the work of art are the photographs of John Davies,

Show: J Davies Butetown Cardiff 1996 x 3

in which attention is paid to the tidal movements in Cardiff Bay, prior to the completion of the barrage which successfully flooded the bay, facilitating economic re-development of the area, but in the process destroying important wildlife habitats and bringing to a close the normal tidal functions of an estuary. Much opposition to the Bay was voiced but in the end, the economy was deemed more important. The Bay is now a nice place to shop, drink coffee and sail.

Aligned with this wet/ dry opposition is another, which could be described loosely as “hospitable to life/ inhospitable to life.” While the beach that is above the reach of the tide is not a place that nothing lives, it is not a place that many things inhabit. In contrast, the sea is brimming with life and, in some accounts, is the origin of life on our planet. It is in relation to this that the sea has been sometimes gendered feminine, the land masculine; the former aligned again with nature, the latter with culture. It is in direct relation to this that we are to understand the

Show: Pier and Ocean paintings of Mondrian.

Lines that describe each are opposed at right angles and, in his writings, Mondrian made explicit the alignment of the vertical line with both the male and culture, and the horizontal line with the female and nature: here, pier and ocean. In his writings, SHOW: Peter Lanyon, Offshore

Completely reverses this structure, as he describes the ocean as male and the shoreline as female. In his account, the interaction of the two is the penetration of the one - the shoreline, cliffs, caves etc - by the other, in an act that he compares with sexual union.

A further opposition of importance here is between the beach, and even more, rocks and the promenade as Stasis, and the ocean as Kinesis. The former aligns once more with culture, the world of being: one that puts a hold on things, and brings them into presence. The latter aligns with nature and the world of becoming, of continual escape from presence, and of absence: it remains without coherent shape and largely without name. Another way of putting this distinction is Active/ Passive (though reversed). The sea acts; it moves and shapes. The shore is acted upon, it is moved and shaped. At times, the relationship is a truly violent one, the Active component (the Sea) particularly treacherous for men and women: consider the 16

Chinese cockle pickers swept away to their deaths by an incoming tide at Morecombe in February last year; consider the massive expansion of the tidal reach that was the Tsunami that last Boxing Day led to the death of thousands around the Indian Ocean; and consider the 1000 plus thought to have died in New Orleans in the last few days as a result of Hurricane Katrina driving the sea way beyond the usual limits at which it meets the land.

This more destructive relationship is one that has featured with relative frequency in more contemporary works of art. The object of SHOW: Susan Hiller's dedicated to the unknown Artists 1972-76 is surely not the relation of sea to land, per se, but the image she has chosen for this piece clearly calls attention to precisely the violent aspect of the relationship. In her lighthouse films and related works, such as Teignmouth Electron 2000, Tacita Dean Show: Teignmouth Electron (1999), x 2 addresses the extraordinary tale of Donald Crowhurst who disappeared at sea in 1969 while taking place in a boat race around the world. However, Crowhurst never left the Atlantic, radioing in false reports on his positions. In the end, apparently, Crowhurst jumped overboard. The Trimaran was washed up among the tropical vegetation of the Cayman Brac. Perhaps something of an aside, but the role of that which is washed up on the shore, the flotsam and jetsam from sources near and far, has been the stuff of much art including that of SHOW: Setch and Show: Lanyon, Oarscape, 1962

More directly concerned with such destruction are certain of the works of the American ceramic artists George Geyer and Tom McMillan. In 1978, Geyer did his SHOW: "Tidal Erosion and Pollution Project" in which 3 foot square, 2 inch thick panels of unfired clay were hung partially within the tidal reach in a dock at Newport Beach, California. In 3 weeks, the panels were corroded and their shape altered, apparently by both tidal movements and by pollution. In a collaborative work entitled SHOW: "Surflin Erosion", done about 1980, Geyer and McMillin installed five panels, each 5 foot square and 5.5 inches thick, constructed from sand, earth, an epoxy-based plastic and organic hardener and held within wooden frames, into a beach in California at low tide. The installation lasted longer than expected - it was 21 days before the last panel finally decayed and was pulled to sea, following swells in excess of 10 foot.

More familiar and dealing importantly with the theme of destruction in the present context are the works of Andy Goldsworthy.

Show: x5

Carefully and with great precision, he constructs or carves elegant, even beautiful forms precisely within the reach of the incoming tide. Whether through a gentle undermining of the structure or through a violent smashing of the form, the erasure of the work is part of its creation. As in so many of his works, natural forces combine with and eventually undermine those of culture. Yet it is here clear that Creation and Destruction - in this case, aligning with Culture and Nature - work together in these pieces.

This symbiotic relationship between creation and destruction - one which Picasso summed up with the assertion that a work of art is a sum of destructions - is important not only to understanding the art works mentioned as an outcome of the Kinesis/ Stasis opposition, but to understanding each of the oppositions identified thus far. Things are rarely organised around such binary oppositions in reality - or, rather, organisation of things according to such structure is usually flawed.

The history of thought has organised thinking into pairs which structure understanding. Thus, when Derrida reads Plato, he identifies such oppositions as speech/writing, life/death, soul/ body, good/ evil, day/ night (Dissemination, 85), and further on, writes that "In order for these contrary values (good/evil, true/ false, essence/appearance, inside/ outside, etc.) to be in opposition, each of the terms must be simply *external* to the other, which means that one of these oppositions (the opposition between inside and outside) must already be accredited as the matrix of all possible opposition." (Dissemination, 103) Derrida would repeatedly seek to demonstrate through the texts he analyses that, though one element in each binary opposition has traditionally been privileged over the other - usually to some ideological end - the oppositions are unstable and the privileging is unfounded.

The essay "Parergon" from *The Truth in Painting* concerns itself with the distinction between inside and outside and the structure of the border through a consideration of the decorative, what he sees as a supplement to the work of art itself - the "*parergon* is against, beside and above the *ergon*, the work accomplished ... but it is not incidental; it is connected to and cooperates in its inside operation from the outside." The most useful example he offers of this is the frame of a picture, which is both inside and outside the work: it is that which isolates the art work from the world - and thus, culture from nature - yet it is not the art work, nor is it merely another part

of the world. It is both, and neither: the relation inside/ outside becomes complex one which will not withstand notions of complete exteriority.

The same is true for each of the oppositional pairs we have identified in the relation of the sea to the shore, thus far, only now it is not the frame that mediates work and world that is our concern, but the margin that exists between low and high water. The most important of these, the distinction between Nature and Culture (identified through the relation of the Sea to Seaside), is challenged the moment that we remind ourselves that the status of Nature is always already as a cultural construct. The deepest of oceans, the most remote of deserts, the highest of mountains: all correspond to our conceptions of them as established culturally. Yet, as we stand in the path of the incoming tide, we nonetheless feel the threat of an untamed force, of an immeasurable and un-representable presence that cannot be reduced to mere signs. It is in this space, though, that on a warm Summers day we are surrounded by an excess of material for the semiotician such as Barthes described - t-shirts and hats with logos; bathing costumes; shaped and shapeless bodies; boogie and surf boards; and life guards who emulate characters they've seen on television programmes from the 1990s. In this space, then, we move between the sea and the seaside; between nature and culture; and between the sublime and the ridiculous. Further, the space is both dry and wet; it is hospitable and hostile; feminine and masculine; passive and active; and it is both creative and destructive.

SHOW: Goldsworthy, Haysham Head Lancashire, 1977

It is a space of continual conflict between these forces, a battleground.

I had intended to use this as the final image, but facing it in the volume I was reading was a further image, a far more haunting one:

SHOW: Goldsworthy, Morecombe Bay [AGAIN], Lancashire, October 1976

It is not about the work of Goldsworthy, but about the work of Ian Hamilton Finlay that Tom Lubbock writes the following, with which I'll finish.

If there was no more sea, as the Book of Revelation prophesies, there would be no more dry land either; the land would have lost its defining other half (though half is not the half of it). We'd just have all one world, which is perhaps what Revelation had in mind. The difference between land and sea is one of the biggest differences in the world. From space it is the big visible difference. Amongst people too, a deep division can be felt between those who know the sea - and those who know it only as a supplier of seaside's and sea-views, and beyond that, a place where there are worse troubles and plenty more fish.