

Call and Response: Challenges of Printmaking in the Field

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THE CASE AT TĚŠETICE-KYOVICE, CZECH REPUBLIC

ABSTRACT

While exploring the terrain of prehistoric sites in the Czech Republic, Adrienne Momi conceived of a project to recreate the sensations and conditions of ritualistic art-making. The project took the form of a collaborative site-specific response to the land using hand-made paper and printmaking in the field by the author and four colleagues. The project sought to reactivate archaeological sites and to create a haptic understanding of pre-literate society, and hoped to reveal mysteries of the place which might not be revealed through traditional approaches to scholarship.

THE CALL

Shortly after the Czech Republic threw off the Soviet yoke in 1992, I was privileged to visit a private museum in Southern Moravia. Room after room in Prof. František Vildomec's home contained all manner and sizes of Neolithic and Paelolithic ceramic female figurines excavated at various ancient agricultural sites during the 1920s and 30s. Each figure had been discovered in what appeared to be a space devoted to ritual. If there was indeed a ritual element, how could we access the spiritual impulse of that preliterate culture?

BACKGROUND

In the course of my PhD studies, I became fascinated with ancient cultures, especially the Neolithic. These people did not have written language and we can only speculate about the meaning of their imagery. Suggestions have been made that images in Paleolithic caves, and later in Neolithic dwellings, had spiritual significance. David Miller suggests there are pre-literate mythemes buried in the modern psyche (1995). This notion tends to support the idea that the earth works, and the art they generated can today give us a insight into ancient experience: that the land may really

hold the stories of the people who have lived upon it. How can we investigate the spiritual impulse of preliterate cultures? One way is to allow the images made in that culture to speak. Susanne Langer writes in *Feeling and Form* that art is the creation of forms symbolic of human feeling, and that a work of art is more than an arrangement of given things. Something emerges that was not there before, and this new entity is the symbol of consciousness (1953, p.40) Can this be proven? It is very unlikely. However I decided it could be worthwhile posing these questions and seeing where they led.



Figure 1



Figure 2

Figure 1: "Figurines from the original excavation," 101 x 152, 1993, photo by Adrienne Mom

Figure 2: "Installation in Winter," 127x178, 1998, photo by Michal Novak

THE PROJECT

In the Spring of 1998 I arrived in Brno, Czech Republic to meet with Dr. Vladimír Podborský, Professor of Archaeology at Masaryk University and the director at Těšetice-Kyovice (T-K), a Neolithic site in the Danube River Plain. He reviewed my proposal to create an art installation that would investigate the mythic meaning of the figurines discovered there. Dr. Podborský supported my efforts with enthusiastic encouragement, and arranged a lease for the field for a year so that I could put my theory to the test. 'Footprints at Těšetice-Kyovice' began.

On the recommendation of my translator, Jindra Zelinková, I introduced myself to Dana Marková, a third generation Moravian sculptor and daughter of Jiří Marek. I outlined my proposal for creating an installation using only local materials, allowing the land to 'speak' through the artwork. She was very interested and helped me gather a group of noted women artists from the Brno community. I was honoured to collaborate with these notable women: a sculptor, Dana Marková; a fabric artist, Ema Hostavá; an illustrator, Vlasta Mlejnková; and an art professor, Oldřiška Keithová.

RESPONSE

I intended to create a monumental paper spiral, 100 m in diameter and populated with relief prints, over the buried neolithic construction. Through dousing and guess work we located the buried circular construction. Dr. Podborský called these rondels: massive tapered circular ditches bounded by wooden markers. They were possibly used as calendars to determine planting seasons by the early farmers, and have also been repositories of large quantities of figurines.

In order to print I needed a substrate: I harvested plant material to make paper using a mould made from fabric netting secured by an embroidery hoop. The round papers were rough and textured, shewn with fibres and seeds, and very much made of the place. My sculptor associate had a small house in a village south of Brno near the site and I made my base there. The neighbours must have been confounded when they awoke many mornings to see round circles of paper pasted to the windows for drying. For months, I rolled out what seemed like miles of brown wrapping paper, crawling after the paper ribbon as the spiral grew. The finished spiral roughly outlined the underlying rondel space. I found scraps of cardboard to make shaped relief plates depicting female and animal figurines, pottery with geometric patterns and even an image of the archaeologists' rendering of the rondel. I worked in solitude creating the footprints for Těšetice-Kyovice, either at the studio/house where I cast the paper and printed, or on the site itself, where I laboured to lay out the immense paper spiral. My company in the field was the goat, who seemed to think I carried food, and the watchman at the little museum, who lurked behind trees surreptitiously eying this strange woman at work. Soon I had a small library of elements inspired by the site. I could arrange and re-arrange



Figure 3



Figure 4



Figure 5



Figure 6

Figure 3: Cross section of Rondel ditch, 101 x 76, 1982, Masryk University team

Figure 4: "Aerial view of installation in Spring," 127x178, 1999. Michal Novak

Figure 5: "Spiral with Gates of the Ancestors in foreground," 127x178, Michal Novak

Figure 6: "Detail of Footprint at Exhibition in Brno," 101x152, 1999, Adrienne Momi

the relief plates to emphasize different imagery through changing its position and colour. Printing without the use of a press was tiring, but I made over 400 such prints, that I termed 'footprints', that we placed along the arcs of the spiral and the field. It was my first foray into printmaking in the field—literally.

While my prints echoed and honored ancient imagery from an outsider's perspective, each local woman's particular installation spoke to the deep resonance of her Czech soul with the land. Our team of artists met regularly to plan our contributions to the work; and I loved the surprise each brought to the site with her own expression. As composer Edward Elgar stated, "I think music is in the air all around me: I've only to take as much as I want." (Heselton, p.56). In a similar way, each artist listened to the voice of the landscape, felt it, and then brought her skills and sensitivity to shape that voice.

Dana Marková created a Janus faced male/female Embryo with a nest of wooden pillars unwittingly echoing the rondel architecture. Oldiřska Keithová sculpted 'Fields of Life' flanking the Embryo, plowing the soil and sowing oats to plant the seeds for new growth. Vlasta Mlejnková complemented the 'Fields of Life' with 'Fields of Death' set perpendicular to the first fields. Ema Hostavà's offering was called 'Gates to the Universe': woven willow baskets with arches drawn together as if in prayer planted in the field in the hope that the willows would sprout in the Spring. They led up to the center of the spiral, inviting the ancestors to return.

Our team of artists attended to the land with a sensitive eye and attempted to express what we experienced. We hoped that myths would reveal themselves. We delved into the collective unconscious. We hoped to discover the stories of the people who lived in that landscape through our presence and work within the same land. Before the winter settled in, we had made our mark on the site. Our offering spoke to the circularity of the original site, its apparent connection to farming, and a plea to the ancients to accept our intention. Left to weather over the hard Czech winter, everything we planted changed. Snow covered the sculptures and ice hardened the earthworks. The prints slowly melted into the ground deeply burying the images. When I returned to Moravia the following spring, the installation site was quite different, and it continued to change even more as new plants sprouted all around it. The footprints were beautiful in their decay, and it was fitting that in time, they would completely disappear.

CONCLUSION

Overwhelmed with the completion of such an intense undertaking, the team was left with an awed sense of time, of place, of continuum. Did we learn the meaning of the Neolithic imagery? Perhaps not the original intent, but certainly we learned the personal meaning of our efforts and how the experience had affected us all. There is a palpable sacred depth to this land, echoing with generations dating back millennia. Populated now by contemporary farmers who continue in the tradition



Figure 7



Figure 8

of the ancients, the site continues to yield not only the crops planted upon it but also its ancient secrets as new generations of researchers study it.

Photography has preserved that site and its changes. In the autumn of 1999, we held an exhibition and re-creation of the Těšetice-Kyovice installation at a former Cistercian Monastery in Brno in conjunction with a sculpture symposium, forming yet another collaboration. The experience at Těšetice-Kyovice led to a series of scholarly presentations including my PhD dissertation, *Footprints at Těšetice-Kyovice: 7500 Years of Sacred Story*, and numerous international symposia¹, notably the UNESCO International Symposium, Natural Sacred Sites, Paris, France (1999).

For almost five years I used art as a tool to allow me to hear, feel, and manifest mythic stories from a distant time in the Czech Republic. Printmaking was my chosen medium for many reasons. First, relief printing is easily portable, not requiring special equipment. Second, working from matrices was an obvious choice since I required a lot of images to populate my monumental installation. The flexibility of small interchangeable elements suited my needs perfectly. I could tinker with colours, layers and positioning endlessly. Each new combination offered me a fresh look at the meaning of the whole. The monumentality of scale, the necessity for collaboration, the need to adhere to a time frame, and active physical involvement mean there is a sacred connection between the people I met during those years and the land.

By repetitively re-visioning ancient images with sculpture, land art, and relief prints, and placing the results upon the soil under which those images were discovered, my colleagues and I sought to tap into the collective unconscious of their creators. That intention is not as unusual as it may at first seem. Personal experience and discussions with creative colleagues indicate that it is possible to feel as though something "other" is directing one's artwork. Jung describes the phenomenon:

One might almost describe it [a work of art] as a living being that uses man only as a nutrient medium, employing his capacities according to its own laws and shaping itself to the fulfillment of its own creative purpose. These works positively force themselves upon the author; his hand is seized, his pen writes down things his mind contemplates with amazement. . . sensing that his work is greater than himself. . . (Jung 1966, p.72)

The intention of this project was never to unearth new scientific facts about the Neolithic people who lived there so long ago. Rather, the body of work sought to investigate the mytho-poetic meaning of the ancient imagery that they created. Making prints using those images as inspiration was my vehicle. We worked in new ways and without preconceived ideas. We allowed ourselves to respond to the land and the ancient objects uncovered there. Dr. Podborský and his colleagues

eagerly supported this work, even though its methodology was far from their usual approach. As the repository of story, not its author, I came away from this experience with a deep sense of connection to the Neolithic settlers. We may not have definitively learned the meaning of those Neolithic figurines or the rondel's purpose, but we did directly experience their connection to the land, a connection that continues to this day.

IMAGE GALLERY



Figure 1. "Figurines from the original excavation," 101 x 152, 1993, photo by Adrienne Momi

IMAGE GALLERY



Figure 2. "Installation in Winter," 127x178, 1998, photo by Michal Novak



Figure 3: Cross section of Rondel ditch, 101 x 76, 1982, Masryk University team



Figure 4: "Aerial view of installation in Spring," 127x178, 1999. Michal Novak



Figure 5: "Spiral with Gates of the Ancestors in foreground," 127x178, Michal Novak



Figure 6. "Detail of Footprint at Exhibition in Brno," 101x152, 1999, Adrienne Momi



Figure 7. "Footprint in situ," 178x127, 1998, Michal Novak



Figure 8. "Spiral detail at Exhibition in Brno," 101x152, 1999, Adrienne Momi

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