



Whiting, M. (2018) 'Acts of empathy', in Maltby, P., ed. *Cicatrix: the scar of a healed wound*, exhibition catalogue, 12 September – 1 December. Swindon: Swindon Museum and Art Gallery, pp. 10-19.

This is an accepted manuscript of an essay for an exhibition catalogue published for the 'Cicatrix' exhibition at Swindon Museum and Art Gallery, Bath Road, Swindon. The exhibition marks the centenary of WW1 and offers an alternative viewpoint of events concerned with The Great War and the concept of scarring; the physical marks left behind, seen as part of the landscape... and then the other scars. Commonwealth Artists Sophie Cape, Catherine Farish and Caro Williams were invited to make work for the project alongside British artists Henny Burnett, Susan Francis and Prudence Maltby.

URL: <http://swindonmuseumandartgallery.org.uk/event/cicatrix-the-scar-of-a-healed-wound/>

ResearchSPAcE

<http://researchspace.bathspa.ac.uk/>

This pre-published version is made available in accordance with publisher policies.

Please cite only the published version using the reference above.

Your access and use of this document is based on your acceptance of the ResearchSPAcE Metadata and Data Policies, as well as applicable law:-

<https://researchspace.bathspa.ac.uk/policies.html>

Unless you accept the terms of these Policies in full, you do not have permission to download this document.

This cover sheet may not be removed from the document.

Please scroll down to view the document.

CICATRIX

Acts of Empathy
Dr Michele Whiting

“I think we all have empathy. We may not have enough courage to display it.” Maya Angelou

MAP OF SALISBURY PLAIN or Image on the Plain

The environment of Salisbury Plain is one of three hundred and sixty degree panoramic views of chalk escarpments and sharply contoured landmarks; a profoundly wide open-skied space that holds a nexus of its own biological, political, moral and social worlds, of course framed by the predictable dichotomy confronting us of beauty and war, one co-existing with the other, prompting dualities of access and prohibition, pleasure and pain.

To walk here is to negotiate obstacles that are both starkly natural and man-made, these might be from geologies of land formation, ancient ancestors or yesterday's and today's practice warfare. Within its boundaries lies the ovoid 30 mile perimeter of an active military firing range/ danger zone- with warning red flags posted at judicious locations; spanning from Westbury to Tilshead to Bishopstrow and beyond. Walking this perimeter, at a macroscopic level we are as aware of the rifle ranges, observation points, military architecture and phenomena, as we are of reading the land for its ancient long barrows and hill forts, enclosures and settlements, somehow they co-exist in this space.

For great stretches of the perimeter we are alone, even where the Wessex ridgeway and the Imber range perimeter path run parallel: phone contact blocked and the bearings on the map at odds with the landscape somehow. Here, in this isolation there is a sense of foreboding; it is easy to stray into danger areas unbidden, but military notices and reminders ensure a hasty set of checks and balances take place to re-route us. The fresh planting of shrubs and trees also reminds us that we are in a managed environment, with its own needs and demands, and amongst all this an abandoned farm might be visible, a look-out tower or red flags. The landscape of the Plain is pitted and gouged, reflecting the conflicts that have taken place, practiced here for the first and subsequent times.

Deep in the grass here is a spent shell of a bullet, there Pink Sainfoins (*onobrychis viciifolia*), look down into the soil you will see tiny headed flowers amongst many grasses, sedges and the better known Common Poppy, Cowslips, and Birdsfoot Trefoil. There is much here within the wild flowers that is edible or useful for medication: Salad, Wild Carrot, Marjoram, Milk Wort, and Juniper, but more of that later. The 300 square miles of Salisbury Plain is the largest expanse of chalk grassland in North West Europe, and the biodiversity (although always at risk and contested) is here because of active military presence. There are key historical archaeological features such as the First World War practice trenches and buildings that serve as training architecture for the troops, as well as the better known

abandoned villages like Imber and the tightly protected experimental research facilities of Porton Down.

Underfoot, the going can be extraordinarily tough, great gouges of tank tracks make the walking at best uneven; when it is wet, it can be claggy with clay, chalks' companion. With little shelter from the wind, there are high escarpments to traverse, clambering, trudging, step after step, the rhythm of walking beats its own reminder into our very being of the young soldiers training here for active military service, those gone before us and those in training now. But on a quiet day:

the sound, the sound,
and the light,
and the colour, the colour,
and the wide openness...

...the horizon is ever present, in other situations it is a symbolic reminder of a new future, a hopeful time, but here it is a reminder of other tomorrows, the separation between earth and sky, perhaps heaven and perhaps hell. Brown, green, white, blue: wind in our faces, chalk underfoot, shrubs, flowers, wildlife clinging to its ecosystem – erosions of time and space apparent to us. We are of the earth, slipping between co-existences of nature and mans' more violent interventions, consciously and unconsciously in and out of personal experiences as we put one foot in front of another

We feel these multi-layered often contested multiplicities as we navigate the pathways, and we organise them into interior 'dramatic spatio- temporal structure(s)' through which as visitors, walkers, and as artists we begin to make our imaginative negotiations. It is at this juncture, in this vast place, that the international project *Cicatrix* ideologically positions and offers itself: a touring project with an initial aim of investigating further insights into the First World War legacy of Salisbury Plain (initially funded through Arts Council England). The project, curated and led by Prudence Maltby, has evolved over the four years through differing phases, has toured different venues and grown; reworking, re-envisaging, depending on the spaces where the touring exhibition has been shown. *Cicatrix* as an active creative space has developed its own multi-layered economy, itself reflecting the earlier mentioned multiplicities of the Plain. The artists, respondents, writers, international artists and contributors have maintained the dialogue as purposeful and active intellectual and empathetic spaces. Necessarily (because of this place) there are inconsistencies, overlaps and cross overs. Bucolic images of '*landscapes*' the works made within the *Cicatrix* project are not; they are instead inextricably and palpably linked to the First World War, to many wars in fact, man- made wars that scar and maim, kill and destroy, and to their aftermath; the distant view, the healed wound.

Now let's consider *empathy*, not the cloying sweet kind of sympathy that is often the subject of greeting cards and casual enquiry, but a knowing and genuine experience that encounters the situation, place or thing for itself - through not supplanting or making assumptions, but perceiving it in and of itself. Empathy is generally considered to be 'putting oneself in other peoples' shoes' and whilst this is a valuable commodity, it can also make assumptions about what we might feel or assume we might feel. Empathy as 'an act' can be a conscious choice to bear witness to something as it is; in the situation of *Cicatrix* this

seems important so that we see the scar of the healed wound for the trauma –in- itself. This notion also lends itself to thinking about the position of the maker (the artist) to the trauma, the creative work and to the situation or context of its making; we will be picking up on some of the works in this essay, to explore ideas of empathetic acts or responses within and of Salisbury Plain and its contingencies.

Often intentionality is discussed in thinking about and discussing a work of art, the intention of the artist perhaps being a key component to understanding the work at times; but within this project there are many works, locations, times and contributors, and I would argue here that the intentionality of the works as a body is about bearing witness through acts of empathy- seeing the healed wound (war) for what it is. And in this set of circumstances, Salisbury Plain becomes a complex container of things; things to be found and looked at as they are. At times in the works this seems to be reflected on as transitions, or inner reorientation suggestive of other agencies in other places- political ties, links, movements and shared emotional economies.

The title *Cicatrix* suggests scarification and the subsequent visibility of the healed wound, the notion of which surfaces with varying degrees of viscerality in the works. Take for instance Prudence Maltby's drawings, there are shapes and scourges within the surfaces of the drawings that speak of tension, anger and humility; familiar and non- familiar marks that simultaneously pull you in and push you away. Their affect is cumulative in the sense that a horror unfolds of many conflicts. If you try to comprehend them as a body, they move further into the distance, but if you stand and let them come towards you, you can feel the presence of war and its long-reaching aftermaths as chasms within the surfaces of the works. This comes from a form of interior empathy as an essence of the act of empathy. A deeply penetrative experience of direct emotion enunciated through the drawings, the pressure exerted on the page, the grasp of the drawing medium, in fact, the real physicality of making the drawing. This is not from an object in front of the artist so that it is being perceived, but rather from something not entirely known but experienced and felt, given back to us (the viewer) through the *very* act of drawing, so the *very* act of empathy. As viewers to the works we are searching for experiences and similarities with what we have known or know about, and the drawings embrace uncertainty and contingencies in an intimate, sensitive yet direct way.

Again, and again, the works on view oscillate between exclusion and inclusion, between here and there, then and now, never more apparent than in Susan Francis's video *Experimental Ground*- the installation of which underscores the banality of the everydayness of Porton Down: a site of the Ministry of Defence's Science and Technology Laboratory, which spans some 7000 acres, known for its utmost secrecy.

Historically this area was used for research and development of chemical weapons used in the First World War such as Phosgene and Mustard Gas. It feels loaded with military secrets; to be in this place is to experience the wound of exclusion, of what it is to be kept apart from secrets. Through performance in the film, in this very particular location, the artist is confronting the wound itself, performing exclusions through firstly the making of her masked ungendered character, who then seemingly wants to infiltrate the denied spaces, walking the land, teasing out references to exclusion from the environs of the Porton Down

perimeter. The performance is drawn from footage of a prior experiment forming a gesture towards re-enactment. Through these documented interactions, the cultural meanings that have evolved over time begin to pin prick at the video's surface. This is reinforced through the medium itself, sometimes hand-held footage and the occasionally jarring edit; all of which contribute towards a sense of displacement or dislocation and an empathy begins to poignantly surface through the hundred year old Juniper bushes struggle for survival, held within the frame.

These rare (and very old) plant species become both emblematic and totemic in the narrative of *Experimental Ground* and raise themselves once more in the work of Henny Burnett's *100 Wiltshire Towers* where cumulative small finds and bound artefacts are displayed within small plaster- cast towers, each a repeat of the other. Repetition and accumulation being key to this work, the towers (or chambers as they can be read) quietly echoing the vast numbers of fallen, and in this way impermanence and transience are accentuated. This becomes more apparent again through the performative nature of this work; the artist suggesting to the viewer that they swap something of theirs/some memento, for the miniature juniper headed figures encased in the installation. This becomes a form of re-enactment for the 'Fums up' themselves as they are gifted in a similar way to the original intention of them, a keepsake and charm against mal-intent.

The overall affect in the space is of a brooding presence of place, an altered scale that holds in its miniature forms, military architecture and humanity, visually drawing upon scientific enquiry and museum display that brings to the fore a sensitive meta-fiction of the repetitive and futile, the intensely personal and the coldly political. Empathy in this work is shared with the viewer, it is within the act of perceiving the small and almost insignificant that tells of a very human story, drawing us, as viewers, into the folds of the artist that shows something that is concealed behind another countenance. Overall, Henny Burnett's work in the show manoeuvres discreetly within the interstices of place, history and peoples, remaining intuitively adept with certain finds, places and things that conjures up a particular world view that asks us to remain receptive and therefore empathetic.

The inclusion of Commonwealth artists to respond to the place and ideas held within the ideas of the project, as well as pieces chosen specifically from The Swindon Collection, carefully creates and mediates new spaces and visions, giving further insights; Caro Williams, Catherine Farish and Sophie Cape have contributed works that have other mediated viewpoints and communal aspects within them.

Some of the earlier thoughts about physicality have bearing on the work by Commonwealth artist Sophie Cape, the energy of the work exploding across the canvas in direct empathy with the physicality of war. She writes that 'The scars left in the landscape by man's intervention is an element of the Cicatrix project that I relate to deeply.' Like Maltby's visceral mark making, Cape too has reacted through her body to the subject matter. This larger scale work references movement, physical inscribing through jerks, spasms and reaches, you can see the physical stretch of the artist, the embodied presence of someone capturing what it might feel like to be in that internal emotional space. The language here is of gesture, the work moves from the blackest black to the lightest light with an openness and freedom that comes from understanding another landscape, another divide, an other

existence, and it is through this emotional exclusion that empathy comes to the visceral surface and confronts the viewer- so that speech and thought become less prioritised than feeling itself, and it is here also that a common denominator is found within Maltby's drawings.

Call and Response by Caro Williams being pertinent to the notion of mediation through the sound's multiple layers of birdsong, from Fort Takanuna Historic Reserve, Auckland, bought together with song heard at the Bulford Kiwi on Salisbury Plain, and this is intermingled with Morse code transmission of *Returning, We Hear the Larks* – Isaac Rosenberg 1890-1918

The creative venture reflects the diaspora of troops, the here and there, the then and now, commonalities with Susan Francis's *Experimental Ground*. As the two steel transmitters of the sound are positioned in space, so an empathetic act of wandering takes place both physically and mentally, encouraging the visitor to regain an act of solitude through choosing their way of engaging with the work, moving into and out of their zones of sound, in and out of focus, so to speak.

Williams writes *"The title of these works refers to the musical term call and response as being a succession of two distinct phrases usually played by different musicians where the second phrase is heard as a direct response to the first..."*. The layering of sound, like the layering of memories pervades the space, collaborations made through space and time that push at painful sores and absences genuinely felt.

Enduring empathy underscores the works by Canadian artist Catherine Farish, this is not to be confused with nostalgia, as these images are based in the historical account of indigenous soldiers, who Farish states *"What a paradox that indigenous soldiers went to war in Europe to fight for the very people who had betrayed and conquered them... indigenous soldiers were decorated as war heroes and on their return in 1918 were not given the same benefits or financial support as non-indigenous veterans."* This was Farish's chance to honour the Canadian troops' contribution, through visiting the Plain, working with the cartographies of the landscape and the images of men who had visited there in the Winter of 1914, one of the wettest and coldest recorded. The disjunction between the surface and the images of the men, creates a distance in the work that is mediated through the materiality of the scarred and marked surface, layered, intermeshed and a stark reminder to the physical hardship of a physical war. Through this the soldiers seem suspended in time, held within the actions of war made manifest through the works' surface, interrupting the fabric of their reality. It is here that uncomfortable thoughts of inevitable decomposition emerge, the physicality of the marks coming from first- hand experience of walking the mudded, hard going Plain in winter, and Farish uses this experience to reflect the Canadian troops' visceral and almost unimaginable experiences in an act of tangible, direct empathy.

The *Cicatrix* project's ideation, that is the very act of creative generation and the actualisation of the project's whole, has produced a strong sense of unity of meaning. There are moments that are shared and commonalities that occur across the works. These have come about through the artists' engagements with acts of empathy, which perhaps can be considered a common denominator within the works, performed through the physical

gestures of making. Individually, the artists responded to time and place, past and present through experiential and empathetic acts investigating the absence of what is *really* present in this place. They encountered historical war fought then and its continuations now spreading like the tendrils of a wide root system. Because of this - as viewers to the collective works - we realise that although we are witnessing something past, that it reaches profoundly into the present. It is made explicit here through a harmony of 'empathetics' coming together in the making, collation and curation of the works, through which there is an outburst of meaning that holds in its grasps single moments that become a fusion (perhaps the cicatrix of the project's title) of a deep sense of understanding and perhaps also musings on the incomprehensible acts of war.

References

- Obrist, H. (2014) *Ways of Curating*. UK, USA. Penguin Books.
- Osborne R. (2008) *Philosophy in Art*. London, Zidane Press.
- Stein, E. (1921) *Trans Stein, W.* Washington USA. ICS Publishing.
- Tuan Yi Fu. (1977) *Space and Place* p 123) Minnesota, USA. Minnesota Press.
- <http://jncc.defra.gov.uk/protectedsites/sacselection/sac.asp?EUCode=UK0012683>