Taking Place
Reflections from the Fieldworker

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Writingplace Journal #07 investigates fieldwork. While the two preceding issues of the journal, #5 *Narrative Methods for Writing Urban Places*, and #6 *City Narratives as Places of Meaningfulness, Appropriation and Integration*, addressed methodological and theoretical interrelations between stories and cities, this issue moves into the field, exploring the moment when reflection turns into action, and questions how knowledge produced via research is appraised and applied on the ground. In the articles, authors reflect on their concrete experiences, where insights regarding the city and its narratives have been made operational. Understanding the urban as a complex expression of social, historical, material, spatial and temporal relations between people and their built environment, we argue that this comprehension of places demands and envisions action, by which active and transformative processes take place in the real world. Fieldwork is in this sense both research and event, both investigative process and performative project.

This issue of *Writingplace Journal* explores how various practices of making (such as crafts, technical know-how), in all forms of creative expression named above, have scrutinized, appraised and tested relevant theories. Each contribution testifies to the engagement of fieldwork with the specific site, through a variety of aspects related to its history, its architecture and its community, and reflects on the developed activities and the impact they

have on the particular place. The articles give insight into the encounter (and possibly confrontation) with the challenges of real conditions, communities and territories. What happens in the congregation of ideas with space? Who is involved as the action takes place? How can participants and communities share positions and concerns on site? What can we learn from the narratives intended to activate place?

We will try to answer these questions through the investigation of projects that take action in the world. To do this we focus not just on fieldwork, but on the fieldworker her- or himself, individually or collectively understood. All of the articles in this issue are first-person perspectives on fieldwork, indeed projects presented by their authors about the process of discovering and activating a specific site at a precise moment: fieldwork as an experience of space and time. But how can the fieldworker be defined as a character? What is their historical and disciplinary background?

Ultimately, the first personification of the fieldworker was the voyager of the Grand Tour, which emerged between this enlightened individual searching for knowledge in historical and archaeological sites and that romantic subject aiming at the experience of the ruins and remnants of places that built our civilization. In a sense, the voyager combined the rational and emotional dimensions of the modern subject, as well as assuming the centrality of place in the formative processes of material knowledge and aesthetic experience. The famous *Voyage l'Orient* of Le Corbusier in 1910-1911, with the curiosity and enthusiasm of a young Pierre Jeanneret, is the perfect manifestation of the Grand Tour by an architect.[1] Written notes, diaries, drawings, maps and photographs are the registers of this encounter of the fieldworker with places and monuments, traversed by the strangeness or uncanniness of the confrontation with the unknown or the exotic. This idea grounds the framework of the fieldworker as both an explorer and artist to this day.

In 1929, among the events that took place during the revolutionary process in the Soviet Union after 1917, filmmaker Dziga Vertov presented *The Man with a Moving Camera*,[2] in what we can interpret as the paradigmatic representation of fieldwork in modernity. The 'man with a moving camera' immerses himself in the present reality of the emerging industrial and metropolitan environment. On the one hand, contemporary society and not nature or history became the object of the revolutionary film, marking the emergence and affirmation of the social and human sciences. On the other, the work cannot be separated from the medium used to depict reality, in this case the new technological means brought by industrialization. But Vertov's film is relevant for examining fieldwork on yet another level. The representation of the fieldworker as filmmaker is multiplied: the invisible one who captures the images that compose the film, indeed Vertov himself; the filmed one we see in action filming the scenes included in the film, actually his brother as actor; and the exposed one projected to the public in the audience of the cinema theatre in the final scenes of the film, as the result of the *montage* done by his wife, as well presented in the film. With Vertov's film, the fieldworker acts on and documents the present in motion, embracing this expanded field of the humanities with new artistic and technical devices. In the end, the fieldworker assumes here the simultaneous roles of author, producer and mediator within an emerging informational and communication society that never stopped its accelerated course.

The aftermath of the Second World War framed new critical perspectives of the fieldworker. A fragmented subject and a chaotic reality disturbed the idea of discovery and emancipation that guided the idea of the fieldworker. The group and individual journeys of artist Robert Smithson to the anonymous and dilapidated sites at the end of the 1960s, along with their confrontations with his childhood memories, presented fieldwork as an entropic activity. The 'non-sites', places that have blurred or neuter identities, 'ruins in reverse', remnants that were ruins before they were ever finished, reflected the disarray of the world and the attention necessary to

capture the surreal in these landscapes.[3] With Smithson, the fieldworker confronted the raw and banal reality as the focus of experimental research, giving meaning to apparently irrelevant and innocuous landscapes.[4] The exceptionality of historical and monumental places is radically exploded, opening the field to all the real itself.

This expansion of the scope of reality in fieldwork is also present in architecture in the same period. The workshop with students from Yale in 1968 that led to the famous publication *Learning from Las Vegas* by Robert Venturi, Denise Scott Brown and Steven Izenour[5] used an extensive set of media and techniques, from cartography to photography and film, as ways to study the American Strip through an immersion in its commercial and motorized environment.[6] As they say in their Studio Notes: 'We are evolving new tools for understanding new space and form, and graphic tools for representing them [because the] representation techniques learned from architecture and planning impede our understanding of Las Vegas.' Combining material reality with signage, confronting the contemporary commercial environment with historical urban and architectural typologies, *Learning from Las Vegas* challenged what was understood as fieldwork, in both conceptual and methodological terms, strategically focusing on a repressed urban condition to destabilize a conservative discipline. In a more subjective way, Reyner Banham assumed the character of the personal fieldworker with *Scenes in America Deserta*, published in 1982, through the extreme journey to the confines of human colonization in the desert.[7] This is in a sense a journey of self-discovery to the end of the world:

> *Clearly the desert has done to me what it has done to many of us desert freaks – it has made me ask questions about myself that I never would have asked . . . I have not done what one is supposed to do in deserts . . . I have not found myself. If anything, I have lost myself, in the sense that I now feel I understand myself less than I did before.*

In all these artistic and architectural practices of fieldwork it is the traditional and conventional status of place that is questioned and displaced, opening up the gaze and inquiry to unnoticed and invisible territories. These incursions would increasingly approximate the wild, dangerous and feral realities that were becoming part of the field of the contemporary fieldworker.

In the early 1990s, another perspective on the fieldworker was manifested in Samuel's Mockbee work with his Rural Studio in Auburn University in Alabama, congregating learning practices with engaging local communities. As he said: 'Theory and practice are not only interwoven with one's culture but with the responsibility of shaping the environment, of breaking up social complacency, and challenging the power of the status quo.' The field becomes a situated political arena and the work a collective experience based on participation. Rural Studio's eagerness and respect for social consciousness relocates the understanding of fieldwork from the position of passive observation and context learning to an active participant engagement from which community-based design emerges as a collective endeavour. In doing so, a fieldworker becomes a participant in residence, a practitioner within a community, someone who works with the complex conditions of the 'real-world'. Mockbee's legacy as *Citizen Architect*[8] sees the fieldworker position as an ethical responsibility in which the interaction between activity and place must include people and communities (in the case of Rural Studio this relationship is between students of architecture and the impoverished people of Hale County, Alabama, USA).[9] With their involvement, fieldworkers focus on action and the transformation of reality, contributing to creating strong social innovation and impact.

More recently, the idea of the fieldworker assumed the framework of spatial practice, rereading in new terms *The Production of Space* by Henri Lefebvre of 1974[10] and *The Practice of Everyday Life* by Michel de Certeau of 1984.[11] On the one hand, Jane Rendell proposed the idea of 'critical spatial practices' as a new interdisciplinary field 'between art and architecture' that crosses

the humanities, introducing a new creative and aesthetic dimension in the activity of fieldwork as art criticism, that is, a term that 'draws attention not only to the importance of the critical, but also to the spatial'.[12] This definition would later develop into her idea of 'site-writing' as an 'auto-biographical' and 'performative' act that draws 'inspiration from this intensely creative and theoretically rigorous strand of speculative criticism', aiming at 'alternative understandings of subjectivity and positionality'.[13] Combining the reading and intervention in space with memories and representations, both documental and material, as well as biographical and fictional, Rendell turns fieldwork into a spatialized productive and poetic practice. On the other hand, Markus Miessen and Shumon Basar have defined the 'spatial practitioner' in political terms, as an 'enabler, a facilitator of interaction that stimulates alternative debates and speculations', advancing an 'alternative model of participation within spatial practice', against the 'culture of consensus' and the 'ethos of compromise'.[14] Thus the fieldworker becomes an experimental actor in the urban environment, engaging politically and collectively through the instigation of conflict and dissent in public space. Indeed, the spatial practitioner, both focused on art criticism with Rendell or architectural activism with Miessen and Basar, establishes the contemporary structural imbrication of subject and reality, the reversibility of fieldworker and fieldwork, activating space as an arena of interrogation and change.

What all these fieldwork characters share is that for them the fieldwork implies leaving the comfort of the theoretical and engaging with the complexity of the world through real-life objects.[15] The fieldworkers present in this issue demonstrate the wide range of object-human interactions that add new richness to, and produce unexpected results of, fieldwork investigations. As papers featured in this volume show, objects can have multiple functions when conducting fieldwork. They may serve as a tool for clarification and finetuning of abstract thoughts, as a medium for communication between the fieldworker and their audience (other fieldworkers or

research subjects), or as a recording device that transcribes external inputs and makes sense of them in the process. Below we offer a brief overview of the type of fieldworkers that are featured in this issue, objects they used to mediate/bridge theory and practice, and modes of engagement with the outside world.

In some cases, fieldwork can be materialized in cultural events, such as festivals, exhibitions and performative events, such as shown in the first two articles of the issue, which present a curatorial view to fieldwork. The contribution by Inês Moreira and Patrícia Coelho explains how curatorial fieldwork can be developed as a critical practice. After discussing a number of curatorial experiences from the Baltic region, the article shows how fieldwork becomes a situated practice and an investigative process for the comprehension of places, learning from *Post-Nostalgic Knowings*. Concretely, the article shares how such curatorial fieldwork offers a new reading of the urban landscape of Freixo, a marginalized territory of Porto, Portugal, by creating a dialogue with the site, its local community and the artistic interventions. Curatorial fieldwork as a critical practice navigates through shared experiences, proposing new expectations of a site and simultaneously revealing the strategies of its future.

The contribution by Diana Ciufo and Isabella Indolfi discusses the ten-year-old Biennial of Environmental Art *Seminaria Sogninterra*. It analyses how the regeneration of the small town in southern Italy – where the Biennial takes place – is happening through a programme of art residency and local production. Participation, ephemerality and addition are the strategies implemented in the site-specific and community-based approach that leads Seminaria to engage local people in the realization of the event. Through the Seminaria case study, the authors demonstrate that community-based environmental art can shape a unique idea of public space, to draw new maps and new relations, to encourage interculturality and to reinforce social cohesion.

The contribution by Hanna Baumann, Ed Charlton and Jill Weintroub, entitled 'Urban Atmospherics', dwells on the idea of the local story, as they reflect on cross-disciplinary fieldwork conducted in Johannesburg. For this they developed a digital StoryMap, containing written reflections about atmospheric attunement to place, developed during the lockdown caused by a global pandemic.

It is through stories that participants and communities share positions and concerns on site. In some of the examples of fieldwork presented in this issue, the role of local inhabitants is crucial, and sometimes they become active participants of the fieldwork. For instance, in the article by Matej Nikšič, focused on a neighbourhood in Ljubljana, Slovenia, the *photostory* is used as an object to engage local inhabitants in a process of participatory urban regeneration, stressing the need for experimentation with new tools for community-based involvement in planning decision making.

Eva Schwab's contribution also touches on the role of local inhabitants. Based on these experiences surrounding the development of a regional vision for 'more than housing' in eastern upper Styria, and playing with collective scales of engagement through *urban plans,* she presents a tailored participatory approach that links the local and the regional scale. In doing so, she highlights the challenges of working within fixed geographical and regulatory boundaries as well as within established planning goals and strategies.

In these articles, the need to establish a dialogue with local inhabitants comes to the fore as a key issue, grounding the fieldwork in its social context. The article by Fernando Ferreira, which focused on a textile complex in Coelima, Portugal, explores the performative qualities of collective hand-weaving practices, as invitation to dialogue with locals. In this project, the physical act of *weaving ensembles* with Coelima workers

and local agents became a mode of reconstructing stories and memories of the factory's life. In this case, it becomes clear how *practices of making* (such as crafts, technical know-how) can be used and adapted for the purpose of fieldwork investigations.

The contribution by André Augusto Prevedello brings us back to one of the very practices of architectural making: the sketch. In sharing his sketchbook of a fieldwork investigation in Thessaloniki, Greece, the author shows how architectural tools such as the sketchbook allow a researcher from abroad to engage with the spatial complexity of the city, and use a project diary containing sketches and photographs as a strategy of de-rationalizing the planning process and stimulating discussions.

Finally, fieldwork also entails being outside, on the ground, getting one's hands and feet dirty. The issue closes with a visual essay, 'Dirty Work', by Michael Hirschbichler, presenting visual material of a fieldwork project that literally engages with the soil. The artists uses *oil paintings* to raise awareness of environmental impact of land extraction in the world's oldest industrial oil fields in Baku, Azerbaijan.

The diverse takes on fieldwork by the fieldworker that this issue presents are all characterized by fading boundaries between scientific research, artistic experiment and site-based actions that make use of expertise from different disciplines – from literature to textile making and photography. In this way, we recognize a new kind of environmental and spatial 'praxis' that not only values the knowledge that already exists in local urban cultures, but also develops new urban narratives as a means to develop, foster and protect built environments that are meaningful for their inhabitants. Important in developing this praxis is therefore the collection of site-specific studies, in which narrative approaches have been used to analyse and create meaning, appropriation and integration in urban projects.

1 Le Corbusier, *Journey to the East* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1987).
2 Dziga Verton, *The Man with the Moving Camera*, 1929, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cGYZ5847FiI.
3 Robert Smithson, 'The Monuments of Passaic', *Artforum* 6/4 (1967).
4 Emily Scott, 'Group Pioneering: Robert Smithson's and Circle's Early Forays in the Field', in: Suzanne Ewing et al. (eds.), *Architecture and Field/Work* (London/New York: Routledge, 2011).
5 Robert Venturi, Denise Scott Brown and Steven Izenour, *Learning from Las Vegas: The Forgotten Symbolism of Architectural Form* (Cambridge, MA/London: MIT Press, 1977 [1972]).
6 Martino Stierli, *Las Vegas in the Rearview Mirror: The City in Theory, Photography, and Film* (Los Angeles: The Getty Research Institute, 2010).
7 Reyner Banham. *Scenes in America Deserta* (Salt Lake City/London: Gibbs M. Smith/Thames & Hudson, 1982).
8 Sam Wainwright Douglas, *Citizen Architect: Samuel Mockbee and the Spirit of the Rural Studi*o, Big Beard Films, 2010.
9 Andrea Oppenheimer Dean and Timothy Hursley, *Rural Studio: Samuel Mockbee and an Architecture of Decency* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2002).
10 Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space* (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1991).
11 Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Berkeley/Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1984).
12 Jane Rendell, *Art and Architecture: A Place Between* (London/New York: I.B. Tauris, 2006).
13 Jane Rendell, *Site-Writing: The Architecture of Art Criticism* (London/New York: I.B. Tauris, 2010).
14 Markus Miessen and Shumon Basar, 'Introduction: Did We Mean Participate or Did We Mean Something Else?', in: Markus Miessen and Shumon Basar (eds.), *Did Someone Say Participate?* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2006).

15 Object-based learning is recently gaining significant traction both in architecture education and theory as a way to learn directly from the environment and fully engage with our senses when imagining and making spatial interventions. See, for example, UCL's Teaching & Object-Based Learning initiative (https://www.ucl.ac.uk/culture/schools/teaching-object-based-learning) and the publication by Helen J. Chatterjee and Leonie Hannan, *Engaging the Senses: Object-Based Learning in Higher Education* (London: Routledge, 2015). Another example is the Horizon 2020 project 'Communities of Tacit Knowledge: Architecture and its Ways of Knowing' (https://tacit-knowledge-architecture.com). Some recent publications that theorize about architectural research and design through objects are Harry Francis Mallgrave, *From Object to Experience: The New Culture of Architectural Design* (London: Bloomsbury, 2018) and Lara Schrijver (ed.), *The Tacit Dimension: Architecture Knowledge and Scientific Research* (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2021).