



Rachel Eng: Seeing from the inside

By Sarah Fritchey

Essay to accompany Rachel Eng's Solo Show at the Suffolk County Community College

February 6-March 5, 2020

Every year, between the 15th and 18th day of the eighth month on the Chinese lunar calendar, a giant wave reverses the flow of water in the Quintang River. Nicknamed the Silver Dragon, this famous tidal bore has reached up to 30 feet in height and 25 miles per hour in speed, and is one of a few that occurs naturally in the world. The roar of the wave can be heard for hours before it is seen, and the tide behind the wave makes the water rise for hours after it passes. This natural phenomenon has been celebrated for centuries, and draws thousands of people to unite along the river's shores.

As the water bends backwards, the ordinary is cast in reverse, distorting and recalibrating what we have come to expect from the landscape, place and time. This action, water reversing directions, is the zeitgeist of Rachel Eng's newest multimedia work. Conceived during a summer residency in Itoshima, a

rural region in the south of Japan, the work features an assemblage of three parts: an 8x8 foot bed of unfired clay that resembles a fungi blanket, a projected video of a looping waterfall and the sound of chimes. They combine to tell the story of Itoshima, a place defined by the interactivity of its parts.

The ghosts of Itoshima percolate all parts of the installation, its recycled clay, sacred chimes and the gnawing mysteries of its crannies. But the most jarring specter resides in the video of its waterfall, flowing in reverse. The water cascades, and then reverses, displacing itself, again and again. When the water moves forward, we inhabit what feels like real time. When the water recedes, we are pulled into the past, into an imaginary virtual time before we reached the waterfall, or into a more distant past before the waterfall existed. Captive to this cycle, we encounter a phenomenon that hits us with the willful force of a tidal bore, a momentary turn in gravity, or a tiny spit in the face. The water in reverse is a warning sign, a reminder of the power that humans have to disturb its flow.

In her Artist Statement, Eng describes her practice as an exercise in heightened observation and the aggregation of multiple singularities. She writes, "A raindrop, a grain of sand, and a microscopic bacterium may go unnoticed, along with a feral cat, a person in prayer or a protestor when they are a single unit. But when gathered together they can possess a monumentality." Her way of thinking suggests that we are living in what Michael Foucault has termed "an epoch of simultaneity," an era that conceives of space as being made up of networks of space that open onto one another, and cannot be reduced or superimposed. He writes, this new epoch is "one in which space takes for us the form of relations among sites", which are "defined by relations of proximity between points or elements". We see this concept play out in Eng's work as the sparse sound of chimes replaces the crushing sound of the waterfall, demonstrating a relationship of simultaneity rather than flow. Foucault's concept renovates two notions of linear space that came before it. In Medieval Times, people understood space to be a matter of extension, a group of hierarchal parts that built off one another, where some parts were more important than others. Galileo dismantled this concept in the 17th century, when against the popular opinion of the church, he proved that the Sun is the center of the universe, and that all of the planets rotate around it, including Earth. After Galileo, importance was no longer localized in site, since human life was no longer at the center, and space itself was reconceived as something more vast and infinite.

Like all of Eng's work, *To Displace Something* has evolved out of a process of personal research, collection and discovery. She began this piece on one of many hikes, collecting extensive data from fungi, water and trees. On one particular hike, passing by rice paddies and tree farms, she entered a wooded trail dotted by small streams, climbing to the top to find the main source of water. She returned the next day with a camera to capture the footage featured in the installation – a fury of white lacey beads cascading down eroded rocks.

Her journeys around Itoshima added a personal experiential layer to the scholarly work of other researchers about forest ecosystems in books, including Peter Wohlleben's *The Hidden Life of Trees*. Wohlleben writes, "trees are the essential carriers of water from the ocean to coastal regions and thousands of miles inland." They do this in two ways, by "intercepting rainfall in their canopies and allowing it to immediately evaporate again," and by "releasing water into the air through transpiration...a process which creates new clouds." From Wohlleben, she learned that forests would not exist in their magnitude or strength without the support of underground webs of fungi. He writes, "Over centuries, a single fungus can cover many square miles and network an entire forest. The fungal connections transmit signals from one tree to the next, helping the trees exchange news about insects, drought, and other dangers."

Eng's installation visualizes a world-system that blends Wohlleben's scientific research with her own to poetically articulate what Foucault describes as a web of divergent spaces. The work takes inspiration in the blueprints of forest and city architectures, which share many qualities. The clay section, for example, is made up of 144 small tiles that can be scaled up or down, depending on the size and needs of its host, much like a stretch of fungi growing underground. The soundtrack, a tapestry of chimes resembling the bells in Itoshima's temples and shrines, are mechanisms for communicating in a universal language understood by multiple species. The video of the waterfall, played horizontally on the ground, recalls the methods by which civic engineers have designed mechanisms for bringing water into cities.

The first time I met Rachel, I experienced her keen sensitivity towards being in a new place, and being a part of a community. She arrived in a small car filled with tidy buckets of clay hydrating in water. One by one, she carried the buckets into the gallery and began building. The next day she worked outside, tucking small bits of clay into the corners of our storefront, at the base of planted trees and cracks in the sidewalks. Another artist might have been stopped by city officials, but the regularity of her quiet work blended into the cityscape, as did she, working on all fours. When she finished, she stayed an extra day to help the other artists in the show build their work, quietly nourishing their contributions, knowing that this system would eventually care for her in return.

Eng credits the Land Work artists of the 1960s as sources of inspiration, specifically those who used their bodies to explore ephemerality, permanence and presence vis-a-vis the notions of landscape, sculpture and architecture. The light footedness of Richard Long's *A Line Made by Walking* has made an especially significant impact on her career in its recognition that humans are the accomplices in all that happens around us. I would argue that Eng's practice is also rooted in the affective turn that has impacted humanities scholarship over the past three decades, and thinks about the subject as an open system worked on by outside forces. Her work also joins the ranks of scientists and artists who grapple with immense topics, such as climate change, land use and development, by paying close attention to a small aspect of the system, revealing the whole through an analysis of its parts.

I suspect that Eng's relationship to ceramics is inseparable from her relationship to place. As Lucy Lippard defines it, place is "a portion of land/town/cityscape seen from the inside, the resonance of a specific location that is known and familiar...entwined with personal memory...marks made in the land that provoke and evoke...latitudinal and longitudinal within the map of a person's life...about connections, what surrounds it, what formed it, what happened there, what will happen there." As I witness this new piece, I can feel Eng's willingness to share her intimate experience of Itoshima with me, painting a multisensorial picture of what happened there, what it was like to look around, to make a memory, to get lost in the woods, to be of latitude, and to explore the unknown.

WORKS CITED

Michel Foucault, *Of Other Spaces: Utopias and Heterotopias: Architecture /Mouvement/ Continuité*. October, 1984. Print.

Lucy Lippard, *The Lure of the Local: Senses of Place in a Multicentered Society*. New York: New Press, 1998. Print.

Peter Wohlleben, *Hidden Life of Trees: What They Feel, How They Communicate?*. GREYSTONE Books, 2018. Print.

<https://www.nationalgeographic.org/encyclopedia/tidal-bore/>. Online.

<https://www.racheljeng.com/words.html>. Online.