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The (Un)Capture of Cappanawalla: Vital Materiality and Collaborative Artistic Emergence

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ABSTRACT

This visual essay recounts a photography excursion that unexpectedly evolved into a transformative artistic encounter on Cappanawalla mountain in rural Ireland. What started as a systematic and detached approach of photographic framing and capture, took on a dramatic shift toward an exertion of unknown forces disrupting the human role as artist-photographer. Various nonhuman actants exerted their vital materiality as thing-power forces and collaborators in the creation of images along Cappanawalla. This experience provoked a radical reframing of artistic creation as a distributive agency of authorship among the vital materiality, in which the human is just one creative actant among many.

Figure 1. The most direct path between the village and the studio is a narrow corkscrew road called N67. This harrowing walking path to the studio is a human-made assemblage of the built environment — smooth pavement, 100 kmph speed limits, wire fences, crafted stone walls, and manicured shrubbery aligning the road's shoulders.

Figure 2. I set up my tripod along a hazardous curve of N67 on this early Saturday morning, wary of speeding automobiles, as I dutifully frame and capture the path in front of me.

Introduction

This visual essay recounts a photography excursion that evolved into a transformative artistic encounter during my stay at an artist residency at Burren College of Art in rural Ballyvaughan, Ireland. The college and artist studios are situated at the base of Cappanawalla, a 300-meter-high mountain that is part of the limestone karst region in County Clare called The Burren. In this essay, I detail a day-long walking journey on a cool and drizzly September morning, in which I set out to systematically photograph the paths of the various routes between the residential village of Ballyvaughan and the artist studio at Burren College of Art located three kilometers away.

The essay is presented in two temporal voices. The first voice is from the day of the outing as I narrated my role as both hiker and artist while traversing various routes to the studio, from the primary N67 throughway, to the tertiary Wood Loop and Burren Way, and finally with the ascent of Cappanawalla mountain. It comprises selected photographs from the journey, each presented with captions that are abridged and edited transcripts of phone voice recordings that I made at approximately the same moment that the corresponding image was created. The second temporal voice of this essay is presented as present-moment reflections and connections to non- or posthumanist philosophy and photography theory, as I contemplate the significance of this experience on artist subjectivity and the conditions through which artworks are created.

The exposures made at the beginning of this excursion demonstrated my intention for creating a systematic photographic approach during my walks. It entailed stopping my walk at precise, five-minute intervals to set up my tripod and camera and make an exposure of the path ahead of me at that moment along my route.

Figure 3. I venture down a side path that leads to the second route to the studio, a back road called Wood Loop that runs parallel to the primary road. As I lug my camera and tripod, I am guided by smaller paved paths that fade into grassy patches between parallel asphalt engravings.

Figure 4. The vegetation of the area is slowly reinhabiting and disrupting the order and boundaries of this built environment. At a certain point, the gravel road leads to a verdant pasture matted by tire tracks.

Figure 5. Quickly the path morphs into meandering trail of scattered rocks. Neon pink arrows are spray-painted on certain stones as guideposts for hikers. These indexes of repeated traversals are the final signs of human-made material traces that guide the way.

Figure 6. Despite this change in terrain to uneven ground, I am still able to firmly plant my tripod on the mostly-hardened soil — I am in control of my objective. I am going through all of the procedures for preparing the camera, as I have done thousands of times in the past. I wait for a moment of stillness in the breeze to click the shutter and capture the image.

Through this systematic and detached approach, I began to recognize how the photographs were revealing partially hidden traces of the built environment that might be viewed as ordinary or unsightly amidst the quintessential Irish countryside scenes that were being framed in the overall photographic presentation.

I recognized these furtive traces of the built environment creating a conceptual tension as blemishes in the postcard-like imagery of picturesque rural Ireland. Sandeep Banarjee (2014) describes the picturesque as an "ordering impulse that harmonizes the elements within the frame of view", as it simultaneously "screens out the unseemly to structure the affect" (p. 353). While I was indeed drawn to this "ordering impulse" of the picturesque, I was also attempting to contaminate it by retaining the "unseemly" elements such as the tire tracks, the potholes, the pink spray-painted markings, which added a tinge of ambiguity or defamiliarization to the clichéd representation of the Irish countryside. With this conceptual underpinning in mind, I proceeded with total control of my set objective along the initial routes of my walk: to accumulate and collect the photographs of the paths of each route by deploying a formal consistency of timing, context, and framing.

I reflect now on the term "capture" that I used throughout my voice recordings early in the journey. It prompts me to consider Gilles Deleuze's likening of photography to the capturing instinct of identifying, collecting, and classifying phenomena. Deleuze (2003) sees photography as inherently fixing and reducing the movements and flows of the world to presuppositions and resemblance, which represents clichés or "figurations" (p. xiv) as readymade perceptions of the preconceived images: "what we see, what we perceive, are photographs" (p. 91). However, as soon as I set foot beyond the base of Cappanawalla mountain, the subtle

Figure 7. As I walk along the third path to the studio called the Burren Way, I am led to the base of Cappanawalla mountain. The only way forward from here is into the open field of scattered limestone and raveling vegetation. In the thick patches of grass among these deposits of rock, I am still able to settle my tripod down and capture a sharp, low-angle frame of the base ahead.

Figure 8. My footing becomes more unsteady as I venture further toward the mountain. The fragile ground of limestone fragments presents a disorienting negotiation of balance, placement, and pivot. I attempt to set my tripod down, but there is no way to stabilize its legs atop this shifting ground of teetering, jagged rocks. Nevertheless, I click the shutter at the five-minute mark.

remains of the built environment had completely disappeared. With this initial conceptual approach now missing from my objective, I began to feel an unfamiliar and dramatic shift — an exertion of unknown forces that were disrupting my smooth flow of walking, and my capturing instinct as a photographer.

I was being shaken from my stance on this path, both in my unsteady balance, and in my role as a photographer seeking make a clear exposure as I have done on the earlier routes. My attempts to systematically capture, collect, and to fix the framing along this route were being disrupted. Something else was also happening in how I was perceiving the paths ahead. The straggling limestone surface was exerting an alien vitality in its terrain. Manuel Delanda's (1992) offers insight into how matter "can 'express' itself in complex and creative ways" (p. 133). This encounter actualized a new awareness of the limestone rocks along Cappanawalla, which Delanda describes as "a kind of 'wisdom of rocks'" that calls forth "a way of listening to creative, expressive flow of matter for guidance on how to work with our own organic strata" (p. 143). Though I had initially dismissed this sea of limestone rocks as a mere hinderance to my capturing objective, I quickly became attentive to this wisdom of the rocks in a way I had never perceived before now. I was encountering what Deleuze calls a "problematic field", in which my "threshold of consciousness" became "adjusted to (my) perceptions of the real relations" (p. 165). The "problem" of the creative expressive of the rocks pushed my thought to its limits as it was confronted with what was unfamiliar and unknown to previous experiences.

Various nonhuman forces were now forming compounding disruptions inhibiting this photographic endeavor to capture Cappanawalla. Jane Bennett (2004) describes "thing-power materialism" as an animacy or vibrance in the nonhuman phenomena that "flows

Figure 9. I am uncertain what kind of alien pictures are being created in these conditions. The rocky ground is taking over; nudging and shifting my camera out of place as I seek to retain a steady positioning. Another five minutes pass; another press of the shutter.

Figure 10. As I reach the base of Cappanawalla, my unsteady horizontal movement now encounters an even more precariously steep ascent — gravity is beginning to play a prominent, disruptive role. The stronger wind gusts at these higher altitudes have become another force to negotiate in my hopeless attempts to steady the camera.

around but also through humans" (p. 349). Bennett (2010) further develops this concept as "vital materiality", such that a vital materialist "cultivate(s) the ability to discern nonhuman vitality" in the things around and through us that otherwise appear passive, inert, or — in the context of my endeavor on that day — suitable for capture by a photographer (p. 14). In the initial steps of the ascension of Cappanawalla mountain, I construed these elements as mere nuisances or obstacles to my photographer-objective of capturing the scene. This mindset quickly shifted toward a recognition of the agency and nonhuman vitality of this vibrant matter as I ascended further and realized that my initial objective as a photographer had encountered a qualitative transformation.

At this point, I was beginning to acknowledge my camera as a co-collaborator, whereas earlier in the excursion, the camera was considered to be an instrument for capturing the paths ahead. Among the various forces emerging along Cappanawalla, the camera was perceived as similarly possessing a vital materiality as a co-participant that is also negotiating the various thing-power forces along the mountain. Joanna Zylinska (2014) affirms that the camera, as a "photographic apparatus", is an active participant in "the mutual intertwining and co-constitution of the organic and the machinic, the technical and the discursive, in the production of vision, and hence of the world" (p. 148). Midway through my journey on that morning, I was becoming starkly aware in practice of how the camera was not a passive image recording device of which I was in full control. On the contrary, it was contributing "the photographic condition which exceeds human photographic practices" to this engagement of human and nonhuman actants along Cappanawalla (Zylinska, 2016, p. 180).

As I was forced to relinquish greater control of my own agency

Figure 11. I am becoming resigned to the fact that these interval-based images being creating are going to take a much different form than I had initially intended. I realize that my camera has now become a counterpart with me in this struggle to create images that fulfill my original objective along this trek.

Figure 12. The further immersed I become in the swirling forces on Cappanawalla, the more I contemplate the creation of these photographs.

as a photographer, I started to perceive a new co-constitutive agency emerging with and through the creative expression of all forms of matter along Cappanawalla. These nonhuman actants — the unstable limestone debris; the wild and tangled vegetation; the wind and rain; the steep incline; the camera as an active participant —were all exerting their various thing-power forces of pressure, intensity, speed, slowness, rhythm, and flow. I was experiencing a hyper-awareness of the creative assemblage of Cappanawalla in these moments. Bennett (2010) refers to assemblages as "ad hoc groupings of diverse elements, of vibrant materials of all sorts" (p. 23). Assemblages are not stable entities; they are composed of a multiplicity of heterogeneous relations in an ongoing, asymmetrical relationship between what Deleuze and Guattari (1987) call "a territorialized assemblage" (p. 312) and "deterritorialized assemblages" (p. 325). The various constitutive bodies and forces constantly enact and shift from within, varying the speeds and intensities of assemblages. To territorialize is to form a habit, through which identities of things and behaviors become fixed within a particular constructed territory. My ingrained experiential habits of capturing a frame through photography was one territorialized assemblage that was becoming deterritorialized in its encounter with the expressive sensations of the vital materiality along Cappanawalla.

At this stage of the climb, I was repeatedly referring to the various thing-power forces along Cappanawalla as my "collaborators". There is always the risk of anthropomorphizing these various actants by referring to them as such. However, I follow Bennett's (2010) suggestion that there are certain benefits to this approach: "a touch of anthropomorphism... can catalyze a sensibility that finds a world filled not with ontologically distinct categories of beings (subjects and objects) but with variously composed materialities that

Figure 13. All of the photographs are now being made collaboratively with various forces, such as the ground, the altitude, the wind, and the thickets.

Figure 14. I continue to faithfully click the shutter at the five-minute mark, but I have given up on attempting to use the tripod. I have now taken the camera with its strap securely wrapped around my hand. I try to keep the camera from crashing into the rocks as I attempt to balance my climb with my free hand against gravity and momentum.

Figure 15. As my collaborators have taken far greater control of the situation, I am no longer attempting to control the framing or focus of the camera. Even my assumed control and intentionality of clicking the shutter is systematically determined by the alarm of a phone timer buzzing at five-minute intervals.

Figure 16. Cappanawalla is less a straight vertical mountain, and more a series of inclines and plateaus. Every time I ascend to the next level, I am unsure how far I am from the summit. I am exhausted and discomposed, but I am determined to climb with the hopes that the next plateau I reach is the top of Cappanawalla.

form confederations" (p. 99). Bennett also importantly clarifies that "vital materialism is not the perfect equality of actants" (p.104). She likens this asymmetry of agentic influence within assemblages to riding a bike on a bumpy road: "One can throw one's weight this way or that, inflect the bike in one direction or toward one trajectory of motion. But the rider is but one actant operative in the moving whole" (Bennett, 2010, p. 38).

Figure 16

Figure 17

I remember that despite the utter silence surrounding me, there was a flushing roar pulsating inside my head. I was hearing and feeling the blood violently flowing through my body. Between the physical and mental exhaustion and the vacuum of sound other than the heavy breathing and circulation of blood in my body, I became intensely aware of the assemblage that makes up the everything of *me*, as I knelt at the edge of the sprawling summit of the mountain. Bennett (2010) reflects on the assemblage of the human body — "the minerality of our bones, or the metal of our blood, or the electricity of our neurons" — as a confederacy of actants that are "lively and self-organizing, rather than as passive or mechanical means under the direction of something nonmaterial, that is, an active soul or mind" (p. 10). Before this excursion, I would have considered these very same material forms as vital and alive inside my body, but passive and stable when composing the limestone rocks scattered along Cappanawalla. At this moment atop the mountain, the internal human vitality and the external nonhuman vitality were one in the same as inextricably entwined assemblages of thing-power creative expression.

The above photograph was the only frame that was created atop Cappanawalla. I do not remember pressing the shutter at any moment

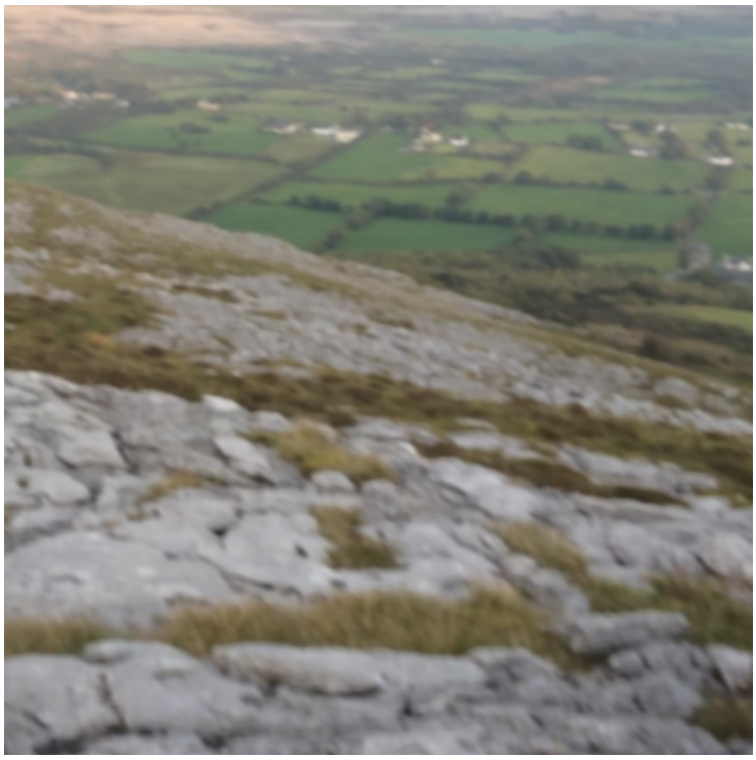

Figure 17. Finally, after traversing seven ascending shelves of terrain, the protruding oblong limestone fragments begin to flatten into zigzagging but level terrain. The deafening howl of the gusts below have surprisingly calmed, and the silence at the top of Cappanawalla becomes overwhelming.

Figure 18. My first instinct is not to unfurl the tripod and start searching for calm and steady scenes to capture. All I desire to do now is collapse to the cool limestone ground and become absorbed in the assemblage that collaborated to make this happen.

on the summit, so I assume it unintentionally clicked. This is the last frame that was created during my excursion along Cappanawalla that day. I chose not to capture any more photographs from this point forward — neither at any other moment atop the mountain, nor during my descent to the studio below — because, to me, Cappanawalla ceased to be apprehended in a conventional sense. I had instead recognized this environment, and my engagement within it, as an assemblage of vital materialities that, as Bennett (2010) articulates, "can aid or destroy, enrich or disable, ennoble or degrade us, in any case call for our attentiveness, or even "respect"..." (p. ix). Indeed, the vital materiality of and along Cappanawalla mountain had *captured me* in various ways that Bennett describes. But this wasn't done *to* me; rather Bennett clarifies that the "efficacy or agency" of all actants enmeshed in the assemblages of vital materiality "always depends on the collaboration, cooperation, or interactive interference of many bodies and forces" (p. 21). I still had agency, and it was disproportionate to the other material forces at play. But that agency had become more "flattened, read horizontally as a juxtaposition rather than vertically as a hierarchy of being" (pp. 9–10).

Conclusion

As I reflect on the lasting impact of this experience, I return to connections between Deleuze's concepts and non- or posthumanist philosophy in creating a tension with Deleuze's framing of photography. Deleuze finds inherent fault in photography's fixity of the movements and flows of the world, which reduces phenomena to presuppositions and resemblance. This critique would apply to the initial photographs of my excursion, in which I attempted to capture or represent the picturesque Irish countryside, even if my conceptual intention was to subvert the harmonizing elements of the picturesque. In discussing Francis

Bacon's paintings, Deleuze (2003) deploys the concept of "figuration" to indicate "the bogus violence of the represented or the signified" (p. xiv). The photographs made early in the day's journey captured the forms along the routes in terms of figuration, or as "related to an object that it is supposed to represent" (p. 36).

Deleuze also refers to the concept of "the Figure" as "a form related to sensation", which is the opposite of figuration (p. 34). The Figure pulls forth the sensations from representation by "act(ing) immediately upon the nervous system" (p. 34), creating a disruptive and exorbitant "force exerted on a body" (p. 48) that "makes the invisible visible" (p. 49). My journey along the various routes to the studio starkly reveals this radical shift from utilizing photography as capturing of figuration along initial paths of N67, Wood Loop, and Burren Way, to an encounter with photography along Cappanawalla that emerged through vital human and nonhuman actualizations of lines of slippage, rupture, and disruption — of the Figure pulling forth the sensations from the "preestablished clichés" of representation (Deleuze & Guattari, 1994, p. 204).

This shift from the figuration to the Figure in my photography excursion draws connections to the creative potential and reciprocal engagement between non- or posthumanist philosophy and "nonhuman photography" (and vice versa), through which Zylinska (2015) acknowledges, "the reason photography may lend itself to this kind of cross-modal experimentation is because of its ontological, or world-making (rather than just representational), capabilities" (p. 135). What emerged along Cappanawalla mountain is an example of a human-nonhuman assemblage of vital materialities activating photography's potential to become an intensely generative and creative force.

This vital materialist conception of photography also evokes what Jeffrey Fraenkel (2013) calls "the unphotographable," or an attempt "to describe by photographic means that which is not so readily seen: thought, time, ghosts, god, dreams" by invoking "photography's paradoxical abilities to render the immaterial and evanescent" (np). On Cappanawalla, the problem wasn't necessarily what was photographed that was unphotographable, but rather who or what was in the role of the photographer — or perhaps viewing myself as an *unphotographer* in respect to a distributive agency of authorship among the vital materiality, through which I was just one artist-actant among many. On this day I was part of a collaborative creation of something entirely unexpected and new through an artmaking process that wasn't only made by *me* as the sole artist.

That morning along Cappanawalla provoked a radical reframing of artistic creation that has transformed the way I have approached artmaking since. When I engage in an artistic process today, I am keenly aware of the vital materiality that contributes to the work. Admittedly, it is often not as extreme or dramatic as that initial experience among the thing-power forces along Cappanawalla. But that experience was the initial engagement that formed a new conception of approaching artmaking going forward. I draw a connection with this experience to a passage from Deleuze (1994) that I contemplate often: "Something in the world forces us to think.... not of recognition but a fundamental 'encounter'... it is opposed to recognition" (p. 139). In contemplating the creation of an artwork, this *encounter* on Cappanawalla provoked a new and ongoing sensibility toward reframing the problem of artmaking away from privileging the individual human artist as sole creator. This new materialist "ability to discern nonhuman vitality" opens new encounters that forces me to shape my consideration of the conditions through which artmaking can happen (Bennett, 2010, p. 14). I continue to willfully relinquish my role as a sole authorial artist to varying degrees through artmaking. Often it happens unexpectedly and with initial resistance, as it did on that morning in Ireland. But then I reflect on the (un)capture of Cappanawalla, and my artist subjectivity is opened again to transformation and emergence with and through the vital materiality of collaborative thing-power forces, intensities, and sensations that reveal exquisitely unsteady terrains of artistic creation.

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