

Thinking-through-Media:

The *Genius Loci* from Artistic Research

-- Krien Clevis --

Art can be motivated by the desire to map current social issues or concerns addressed within a particular discourse (without actively participating in it), while art may also be used to initiate discussion through the media it produces. Moreover, through its way of showing things, art establishes a connection with its audience. In this context I describe the role of art, of any discipline, within such discourse as 'mediation'. Aside from being a vehicle for ideas or concerns, art also serves to constitute, displace, recreate, change or translate them. From this perspective, as well as on the basis of the artist's autonomous mode of thinking, art may in fact reveal different or alternative scientific perspectives to their audience, users, etc. In their research, artists capitalise on the synergy between their own artistic practice, the various relevant research concerns, and the unique interactions involved – while also pursuing reflection on these aspects. This is where artistic research and the different methods of thinking-through-media come in. My contribution will be one of a non-musician. As a visual artist, curator and researcher, I explore the role of images and their meaning when researching a specific place. By developing this notion of thinking-through-media in-between image and sound, I discuss three 'sightlines' to provide more detailed insight into artistic research methods and practices, including my own.

Part I: PLACE & MEMORY

As an artist I am fascinated by the phenomenon of *place* in relation to beginnings and final destinations. As a researcher, I studied the connection of the concept of place with *memory*, but also with the idea of transience and the transition from life to death. As my research was geared towards places of meaning, I also aspired to create *new* places of meaning. My search for them involved a journey through time and space – not just à la recherche du temps perdu (Proust 1913), but also à la recherche du lieu perdu. It all started with my own memory.

I grew up with *images*. My father was an architect, my mother was multi-creative. As a child I would sit at my father's drawing table and make sketches of the people who were going to live in the houses he designed. Had I been raised in another family I might well have developed other talents. My earliest memory, which dates from 1962 when I was two, is set in a nineteenth-century town house in a little village in Limburg, close to the Dutch/German border. This memory, if it is a real one indeed, is linked to sound rather than some image: I am an active toddler, leaning on the edge of my playpen. I remember this because I heard music on the radio: Maria Callas, *Madame Butterfly* (as I would learn years later). This was also the first time, as I remember now, that I had to cry, moved by the beauty I heard. Sometime later on (about a year or so, a long time in a child's experience), I cherished that memory and whenever I wanted to listen to the radio I would go and sit in the intimate space of my playpen. The *Top 40* was my favorite show, and for a long time it would really bother me when some song no longer made it to the list. Trying to cheer me up, my mother would tell me that there were evergreens, but that didn't convince me, for it meant you had to wait until some deejay would play your favourite evergreen on the radio, implying you were completely dependent on his whims.

In the early 1970s my parents became fervent collectors of *Alle 13 goed* – sets of the best loved pop songs which they played all the time, ad nauseam. Still, I realised that something quite different was going on as well. I had become aware of the notion of fleetingness, transience. If time made it possible for things to take place, because of the passing of time things would also be gone again in a flash, vanishing into the past. I began to record specific moments in stories and I started drawing – to capture some of the moments soon to be lost.

This new awareness in me, fuelled by a single song or sound fragment, proved defining for the rest of my life and, through its documentation, also for my artistry. The ‘Proust phenomenon’, the power of smells to trigger early memories, is well known of course.¹ Although my abovementioned memory was evoked not by a smell but by a sound, classical music in particular, the effect was basically the same.² In my case it pertained to a feeling of sorrow that not until much later I was able to link to the notion of the passing nature of all things. This is important to me because it touches on what in essence a memory embodies: a realisation of that which is not there anymore. I remember, and therefore I am. To me this understanding implies a desire to organise and cultivate some memory – reconstructing it, as well as shaping it and showing it. My starting point, in other words, is: why do I want to create certain images? Is it possible for us to grasp elements from our past experience? Is it possible for us to hold on to what is bound to pass? Our autobiographical memory exists as thoughts, on paper, and in images, and it is invoked by images, smells or sounds.

First sightline: Artistic sightline: *doing a place*

Artistic research is a specific mode of research in the domain of arts from the perspective of the arts themselves. This may apply to all arts (fine art and design, composing music, new media, film, performative art, etc.). It implies research by artists who start from their own work, which is realised in the questions they ask in relation to particular concerns in (the development of) their work. Unlike in strictly scholarly research, these concerns come into being in part by *doing*, trying, exercising, experimenting, developing, making. In this context, *making* involves such various mental activities as thinking, analysing, studying, understanding, scrutinising and reflecting. This process of making, including the problems that present themselves as the work evolves, gives rise to critical reflection, which in turn provides the basis for further research, also in other contexts (cultural, historical, and other scientific domains or practices). In my own practice, I’m not just interested in studying ‘place’, but also in occupying a ‘place of my own’. My research expanded into three areas linked to art: archaeology, architecture and (art)history. While archaeology seeks to uncover places and architecture works with places’ data in order to create new buildings, art (history) capitalises on a place’s multiple meanings and the role of perception – the

significance of different ways of looking to a particular place. In my own practice an art piece is the result of the intertwining of different studies and reflections throughout the making process.

Human beings are capable of three creative modes of action in particular: *visualising*, *complementing* and *symbolising*. Visualising, in the sense of man who builds what he has seen – to understand nature – and who subsequently tries to express it (where nature suggests unlimited space, man will build a fence); complementing, in the sense of adding something that is missing; and symbolising, as the main step that expresses the mode of *man-made* action, namely the power to translate, transform something into a new product, medium or place. The Norwegian architect Christian Norberg-Schulz (1926-2000) thus characterised the basic principle of creating or making as a process that takes place in order to appropriate a place and the transposition that comes about between idea and imagination or translation in a tangible object (Norberg-Schulz 1980). In the research of artists, the process of making coincides with the process of thinking³:

**Doing – making (the whole process) =
knowing → reflecting → artistic research**

Sound, smell and image are all autonomous sensory entities. They are tangible and have auto-biographical power; they all appeal to our sense of memory. Tangibility, tactility, grabbing, touching, feeling, smelling, tasting and hearing also apply to materiality – the material with which we create art. Artistic research is thinking through the material, determining its language, and what it represents; but also: what *does* the material *do*, and what does it bring about? The material represents and is performative at the same time. The *performative/ performativity* is defined as an expression or mode of expressing which not only describes or represents an act in language, but also causes something or sets something in motion.⁴ A text does not just have a meaning, but also does something, it is itself an enactment. Performance as method starts not from a given reality which precedes a personal experience, but from the world that is being enacted, performed or from the situation in which freely and actively a new world or reality is performed. In the performing or visual arts, a performance is a physical presentation within a seemingly familiar context in which acts occur which may completely surprise the spectator. In such instance, the performance or act refers to

generating a world, creating something new. No two performances are identical; in fact, they are always unique and they will also be experienced as such because each spectator is unique as well. The performative implies a fluid world in which subjects and objects do not yet exist, have not yet materialised, but in which they are in a state of ongoing change or transformation – one which is unstable and hard to repeat (Salter 2002). Thus, the performative *makes* and *realises* the world at the very moment it is called up by the audience.

Through my photoworks I intend not only to represent a place, but also to generate a world (like in the work *In Limbo*, see § 2.1 and Portfolio **Figure 1**). Basically, a photograph invites the observer to look while simultaneously directing his or her gaze. The image itself (the sightlines within the work), or the way of showing (the frame, installation in space, sightlines on the work), functions as a device which can be operated by the observer, who thus also gives meaning to the work. As spectators we select the images we perceive on the basis of the sightlines we ourselves create. The interaction or ‘cross-traffic’ between these sightlines – or: the meeting of making and receiving – takes place where representing and performing, the game of creating, converge and can be experienced by the spectator. Through my photoworks, I intend to share the visual story with the audience and find a way in which viewers of the work may appropriate the story and add to it by mobilising their own perceptions.

Artistic research involves acts of thinking through making. As argued by Tim Ingold, a drawing, for example, “is a process of thinking, not the projection of thoughts” (Ingold 2013: 128).⁵ Therefore artistic research makes *material arguments*. Art can create a world by using specific materials. A place as perceived in the ‘real’ world can be transformed into a new place by using the power of the imagination. Artistic research involves a form of thinking through matter (including the various disciplines, media and methods). Accordingly, artistic research is a form of *thinking-through-media*. It is a thinking through the material, determining its language and what it represents. But also: what does the material do, and what does it bring about? The material represents and is performative at the same time. As such, the material itself may activate the spectator as well.

A transposition occurs from *idea* to *image*, or to *sound*, etc. This transformation is important in the process of realising my own



Figure 1: In Limbo (2012-2015) © Krien Clevis

work. I complement and symbolise places; I record and render visible. I select some existing ‘real’ place to which I seek to add a new dimension; I disconnect or disengage a place from its everyday environment and give it a new context. In *doing, acting, making*, the place is transformed and all its physical elements and atmospheric qualities may resonate in the artwork. By fencing-in a place, it is isolated from its environment and takes on a symbolic function. From a social and historical perspective I look at and comment on a place and by photographing it I appropriate it, making it visible in its new context. The transformation process determines the expressiveness of the ultimate image. The artistic ‘I’ may refer to the ‘maker’ in various guises: a visual artist, composer, performer, etc. Artistic research is about that *transformation*; in fact, the creative process – the work’s materialisation – is the embodiment of the research.⁶ In the transformation, the process of thinking through making, the research becomes visible.

All art essentially seeks to appropriate a place in the transformation process and elevate it, so that it becomes a new ‘autonomous’ place. In this respect, the process of making a photograph involves an ethnographic process of observation: selecting the right moment, the right time of day and of year, while also leaving room for chance, serendipity. This also means knowing a place through and through, appropriating it and trying to grasp its spirit. The places I research are historical, actual (daily life) or imaginary (from my memory). They are all local – if within a larger global context – and many of them are *lieux perdus*, places of meaning no longer present as such in the real world. Being subject to ongoing changes, these places are marked by new layers of construction, temporal and spatial aspects, which are being overwritten all the time. If they did not yet figure as places of meaning, they become so by being photographed – I (re) create them also as maker.

My mode of research centres on three dimensions of places in particular: artistic, historical (§ 1.2) and embodied (or ethnographic, § 3.1). They determine the three similarly named sightlines in my work. All these places can be traced in time, and different layers of times are represented in the places (the present making contact with both past and future). Moreover, they also have in common that they revealed themselves to me: as *given places*, they are on my mental map, on a daily base in my hometown of Amsterdam, or

when staying in Rome or when travelling. I may run into them as part of everyday activities, when jogging or walking, which involves exploring and repeating the same routes. I have grown familiar with them and made them my own. At one point, they simply will reveal themselves to me. Next, it is up to the spectator to do something with these places. A major element of that is that spectators should manage to appropriate the new place by means of the photo also: ideally, the power of their imagination should trigger all sorts of associations and memories. This can be prompted by the image itself: a certain darkness, an indefinable atmosphere, or an added sound for instance, which stimulates the imagination (as in the work ***In Limbo***). At the end, the spectators of course are ‘doing’ the place as well, activated by their own associations.

Second Sightline: Historical sightline: *Genius Loci*

To get to the ‘bottom’ of a place (historical, concrete, imaginary), I have studied the phenomenon of *genius loci*, the spirit of place, which in antiquity referred to the protective spirit of some area or location.⁷ This originally Roman concept emphasises the characteristic nature or atmosphere of a certain location or the impression it left. It pertains to a metaphorical quality rather than a strictly defined one, a quality which becomes manifest in a suggestive or associative manner. By making a photo of a place I try to activate its spirit again – as a form of intervention in that place. The places to be photographed have a certain, given quality, but there is also a dimension that you can play with or certainly influence by making the photo. In this respect I consider the camera I use as an external eye that enhances the observation, an element that at times becomes visible on the actual photo only.

It is not impossible, however, to catch the *genius loci*. It is hidden in layers of time and space, but can barely be seen, if at all. At the same time, it may be experienced. The *genius loci* is always unique to a place and bound by it. A place changes because its surroundings or contexts change across time and space. This is not to say, however, that the *genius loci* is an unchangeable given. A place’s spirit is determined by all the people who in one way or another ever used that particular place. Every event or occurrence takes place, leaving traces behind that will in part define that place.



Figure 2: Bewaarplaats / Storage 4 (2012-2015) © Krien Clevis

In my photoworks, I look for ways to activate that *genius loci* and to incorporate the locations to be photographed in a new meaningful place. Just as such locations become isolated from their surroundings (in nearly all cases the image has no sounds, for instance), the photo of that place is literally and figuratively cut from raw reality, liberated from its existing context and thus itself becoming a *new place*. To me, they are *sanctuaries*, temporary storage places of indefinable residues or relics. In the series **Bewaarplaats / Storage** (2009-2012) (see Figure 2), I tried to 'capture' the *genius loci* of a contemporary construction site in Amsterdam, which through recent digging activities became directly linked to an age-old history. The underground location, part of a new subway line, reveals – much like in a time capsule – how a place in its very core, through excavation of the soil and subsequent construction, is changed and overwritten. The process of digging, the victory over forces of nature, the quest for the lowest point made possible by the construction effort – all reveal the changing history of a meaningful place that becomes a new one by recording it on a photo. The individual associations this image may subsequently evoke among spectators add another layer of meaning.

In my photoworks I try to represent that intangibility hidden in processes. But in contradiction to what the use of language suggests, when recording, fixing some moment in a photograph, the *genius loci* will always escape us. My photos thematise the quality of place in an affective manner. It is about a place's not-taken-for-grantedness, including its sightlines, terrestrial radiation, pits and traces. It is about 'triggering' that specific, not always visible quality of a particular place, and herein lies what the photos do/bring about. With my photos I try to appeal to the audience's affective, empathic and associative powers and to activate the atmospheric quality of a particular place. This sets in motion and *actualises the genius loci*.

Part II: IMAGE & SOUND

Is it possible to grasp sound? Does a *genius loci* exist of/in sound? Where do we encounter the *genius loci* of sound, and if we find it, does it reflect the emergence of a new place? If we cannot capture this spirit in an image, can we do so in a sound? Is there something in between? Here I come back to my initial question: How can we

conceive of this thinking-through-media in-between image and sound? Like an image, sound renders visible a taste of the past; like a Proustian effect,⁸ sound may trigger particular memories instantly, while images tend to provoke associations, depending on the kind of images used.⁹ But sound, perhaps more than images, may actually cause movement in response to the act of listening, which inevitably takes place as a temporal experience. Sound, in other words, may move us, as it were, into the past. Literally and figuratively, our perception of sound involves time travel – into the past reality and, after the sound dies down again, out of the past, underscoring, much like a memory, its fleeting character.

In Amsterdam, at 23 metres below the surface and precisely half-way into a bored tunnel connecting two subway stops, I found the sound of *nothing / nothingness*, as being a soft distant noise, like the echo of a cloud. It was ephemeral yet tied to this particular place; it grew more dim when doing two steps forwards or backwards, while it also became increasingly mixed with the sounds of the outside world, the faint noises coming from the future platforms of the metro station under construction. This experience revealed to me how changeability and the noises tied to a place come together.

In Limbo (see also the Figure 1)

The work *In Limbo* (2012-2015, Duratrans Lightbox with sound installation, 130 x 158 x 24,5 cm) evolved from the special attraction of the sound generated by the original place. As part of my mental map, I passed this place frequently while doing research at the Royal Netherlands Institute in Rome (KNIR). For me, the sound strengthened the image from the outset – it being a monotonous, piercing, indeterminate sound, which grows stronger and fades again while passing by. Much like the Proust phenomenon, I grew chained, as it were, to this place through its sound, which will forever stick in my memory. The actual place does not exist anymore; like so many others, it has been overwritten and took on a new role in my image. At the same time, I wanted to let the image keep all of its power of association and be open to the viewer. The sound is quite determinate, but it also triggers specific associations. Another sound would paint the image very differently indeed. I would like to engage in a kind of tense, animated interaction with my audience, as on this

one day in Ghent in May 2019, during my lecture at the KASK. If the *genius loci of sound* exists at all, in *In Limbo* it is intrinsically tied to place. It actually gives rise to an *in-between* experience, as in a passage between place and time.

Transformation

The changeability of the *genius loci* is crucial for my research. The quality of a new place lies in its *transformation*. The original genius loci which can still be felt changes because the context changes. This merely renders the newly emerged situation, which has incorporated the old one, richer, adding a new layer of meaning to the whole. This is essential to my search for the final place, which for the time being cannot be localised.

In the new places I create as an artist I try to offer spectators possibilities for opening up new layers – of memory, history, the *genius loci* of the site. The new places are expressions of my historical research and link up historical places with new, incorporated places. They are sites of transition, constantly subject to change, the final stop or destination being unknown. The permanent movement in fact reflects the mystery of the *genius loci*. Photos ought to be seen, but also felt (Barthes n.p.).¹⁰

Places of transition are productive because they change all the time. Layers of time and space from divergent historical periods may briefly coincide in a momentary ‘here and now’. This permanent dynamic suggests a connection with the concept of intertextuality, referring to the notion that every text is built from a mosaic of existing texts. Intertextuality suggests a fluid system, in which each text is in dialogue with other texts, and, more broadly, with the cultural context at large.¹¹ Yet there is more to it. Different, unlike images are connected to each other, reflect on and influence each other. Histories, places and media enter in a dialogue with one another, generating echoes which resonate in new times and places.

Is it possible for us to hold on to what is bound to pass? Can we isolate or ‘fix’ time and space? Do we have the power to touch the ephemeral and retain it, if only momentarily? And if so, are we closer to the *in-between* image and sound? The *in-between* image-and-sound indicates a transformation, a transition between image and sound. Passing in between place and time, it invokes a moment in which all disciplines converge and reinforce each other.

By ‘digging’ in collective classical history and tapping my personal recollections, I found fertile soil in which my fascination for place, transience, and transition could take root. My photo works involve photos in context which tell a story about a place. In my current work the Duratrans Light Boxes themselves serve as artistic accommodation, each work having its own individual encasing. As such each box is like a ‘house’ telling its own story, a temporary museum for the image, captured in a photo. It turns my photoworks into objects. Historical, current, or imaginary places, all shrouded – ‘placed’ – in a context of their own. The new house operates performatively: it gives visitors a red-carpet welcome by pulling them into the image, sprinkled with scent, and coming with climate control and sound. The sightlines on the work are enhanced by performative media, mutually influencing each other from the essence of the image in equal measure. The method of artistic research works by thinking-through-media, underpinning the *genius loci*, no matter how imaginary or ephemeral.

Disciplines may become interdisciplinary and media may become interchangeable and experienced side by side, and as such they all contribute to what constitutes our personal motivation. In artistic research I am concerned in particular with thinking-through-media. This involves a process that cannot be analysed from the outside by others; rather, it can only be transformed, reflected on, played with and felt from within by the maker. Subsequently, the work may find its way to the audience, which should ask what it brings about, rather than passively wondering what it means, as a way to generate active involvement. *Artistic research* refers to the trajectory the artwork has covered based on questions, studies and reflections, in order eventually to occupy a new place of its own, which in turn needs to be interrogated. This dynamic involves a continuum, and as such it embodies the very heart of research.

Part III: SILENCE

In recent years, I have been researching places with a more ethnographic approach. In 2014, I got the opportunity to start a new research at the Via Appia Antica in Rome, the oldest ‘memory lane’ of Europe, the road that like a green lung crosses southern sections of Rome. Initially I took part in an archaeology project performed by two Dutch universities in collaboration with the Royal Netherlands

Institute in Rome, and these concentrated on the first Miles V and VI of the ancient road. But my own project, called *In the Footsteps of Piranesi*, took much longer than anticipated, for each time I discovered new places to observe, and independently I worked on it until recently, concluding it with an exhibition in the Allard Pierson Museum for Archaeology in Amsterdam.¹²

The Via Appia Antica, named for its instigator Appius Claudius, was constructed as a basalt road between Rome and Brindisi, in the south-east of Italy. From its inception in 312 BC, it was considered as the *Queen of the Roads*, used for the transport of military units, goods and people. It was also the oldest and longest 'avenue of the dead'. From the first centuries BC onwards, this stretch of the road evolved into an exclusive residential neighbourhood and cemetery at the same time. After many of the funerary monuments had fallen into decay and even disappeared in the foliage for centuries, they were rediscovered in the modern era. In particular since the eighteenth century, the Via Appia Antica also attracted the attention of artists from around the world who represented elements of it in their paintings, drawings, etchings, photographs and, later on, movies.

In my research project I am guided by questions such as: What did the Via Appia look like? How was this collective memory lane viewed in different periods? What were the sightlines on the road like? How has the road changed over time? And how do we look at it now? Every historical image of the Via Appia is based on interpretation. From the mid-eighteenth century on, this road, its monuments and the surrounding landscape began to be mapped again. We will probably never have much certainty about its actual construction; the various drawings and maps available are all interpretations and reconstructions from later eras.

In historical imaging, the Italian graphic artist and architect Giovanni Battista Piranesi (1720-1778) made the first records of the ruins. In his wake, innumerable archaeologists, historians, architects, artists and photographers revisited the monuments.¹³ Thanks to their interpretations and ever-shifting perspectives, a rich and layered pictorial history of the Via Appia Antica has come down to us. As such, the representation of the Via Appia is also a story of images and in particular photography – a story of a changing landscape and of changing perspectives on its cultural heritage.

Third Sightline: Embodied/ethnographic sightline: *acting from within*

As part of my interest in the different perspectives that have shaped the perception of the Via Appia, I have been intrigued by all sorts of details that informed the representations of the different historical image-makers. I was wondering how they selected a specific angle or point of view for their representation of the funerary monuments along the road? What would happen when I tried to figure out the coordinates of their position and subsequently take pictures from the exact same spot? Along which sightlines do I need to look? What are the changes to be observed? How does some new image of the monument and its surroundings compare to the images made in the past? How did the monument's relation to its immediate surroundings change over time? Why did one take up that particular position way back then, and what did one see? What did earlier artists want to see or not, and what do we see today? These questions served as a starting-point for my research on Mile V and VI of the Via Appia Antica in Rome. Along these two miles I tried to establish the exact positions used by historical image-makers for depicting the road, focusing on their representation of the monuments in its immediate vicinity.

My research project does not focus on one monument as such or all the archaeological knowledge about it. Rather, I concentrate on the exact spot taken up by former artists for observing and representing the monument. By literally following in their footsteps, but also figuratively, through my study of their artistic point of view, I managed to find out what changes over time become noticeable. Although any place or location might be suitable for a project such as mine, as long as specific artistic representations are available, precisely along the Via Appia Antica it is hardly self-evident that a particular place and the memory of it converge in a natural way. This road is in fact a perfect example of a site that has been in motion for over two millennia, always adapting to new needs and the ravages of time. Behind the scenes of the seemingly eternal monuments, paradoxically, a never-ending process of change has been unfolding. In this project I concentrated on the question of how this has played out. The different perspectives on the landscape and in particular the often-clashing interests regarding this ancient stretch of road – preservation versus opening up for specific uses – served to underpin my study of the historical vantage points. The places of meaning

along this road eternalised in paintings, etchings and photographs prove to be part of a much larger continuum.

But how does my research relate to its concerns about research methods? Here, as an artistic researcher, I use an ethnographic approach; participatory observation plays an important role in my research. The body of the ethnographer is both observing and participating. Observation is also self-observation. This is why empirical ethnographic research can be seen as an *embodied practice*. Through observation, writing and documenting the ethnographer establishes the ‘authority’ of being a witness, of ‘being there’. All these forms of observing function as a constructive lens “to look through, in order to gain new ways of seeing”.¹⁴ My ethnographic approach, I believe, involves a method for enriching the (historical) context of the funerary monuments, if only by trying to follow in the footsteps of my artistic precursors. As an artist-researcher, or contemporary image-maker, I explore the challenges of my fellow-image-makers from the past by zooming in on the exact location of their creative intervention. The participant observer becomes an observing participant. I thereby rely on the medium of photography, using the camera as a tool for meta-observation. As such this method in part follows from the kind of research questions I am concerned with and the medium I work in (see Figure 3).

In my case I use the ethnographic object-subject relation in two ways: the object is the artistic point of view in relation to what is being observed, while the subject is the artist. And thereby I deploy the object-subject relation in a historical dimension. This ethnographic gaze or attitude is not geared to breaking down cultural, social or political boundaries. Nor does it reflect a forced or trendy ‘ethnographic turn’ in my work.¹⁵ My ‘transgression’, my crossing of cultural boundaries from an ethnographic perspective, involves a way of dealing with history. This method is realised in the history of the image, which is frozen in the single moment of taking a photo, and as such this method coincides with the material and context. Thereby I am less interested in object-related study (such as archaeological study) than in (re-)establishing a perspective on how and why a particular ‘artist’ or historical image-maker once approached that object. I focus on: which position did the artists take up and why? What did they see from that spot, and what do I see today? *I act from ‘within’*, as it were, from the angle of the inves-



Figure 3.1-3.5: Work in progress during the field research (2012-2019) © Krien Clevis

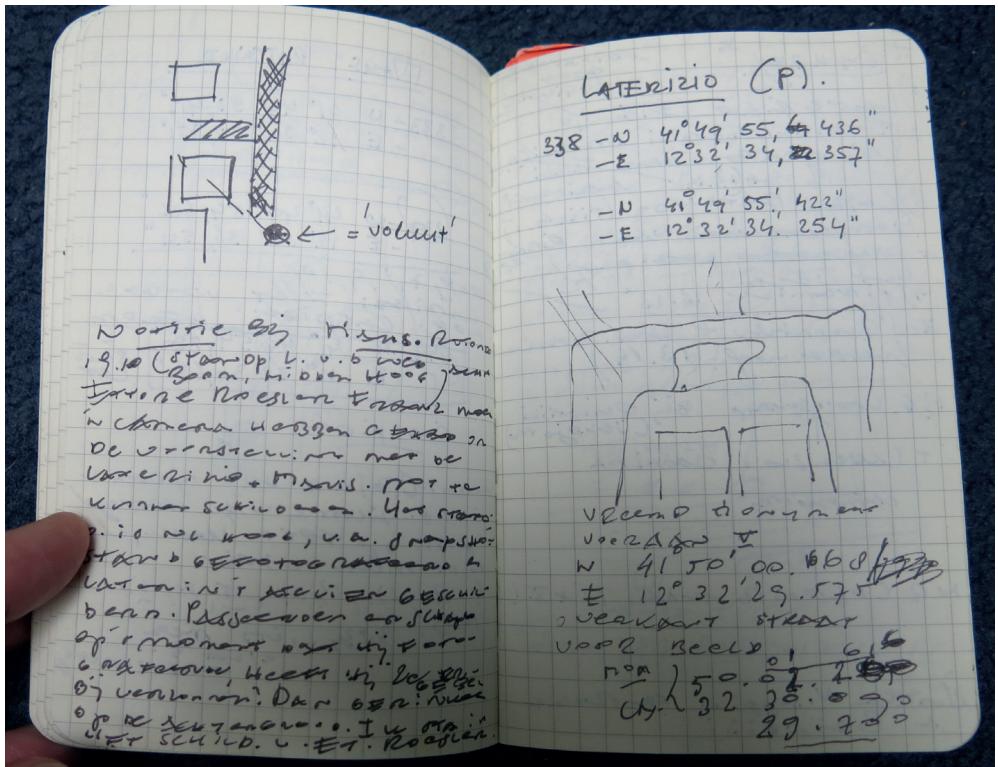




Figure 3.1-3.5: Work in progress during the field research (2012-2019) © Krien Clevis

tigated position, from the vision of the historical artist, and from my own body. The ethnographic other in fact is the ‘subject’ of the historical artist. As a contemporary artist I study this subject as an ‘object’, an ethnographic other.

In this respect, I play with the notion of ‘looking and being looked at’ – as an almost voyeuristic exchange of roles that occurs in the moment of photography. The ethnographic other in fact is the ‘subject’ of the historical artist. As a contemporary artist I study this subject as an ‘object’, an ethnographic other. This alterity or otherness is not outside of me, nor does it involve a colonial approach or representation of an exterior or alterity indigenous object.¹⁶ Rather, the object ‘fuses’ as it were with the ‘subject’ because I put myself in the shoes (read: vision) of the historical artist. Only the constraints of time set limits. In this sense my research is guided by the question of whether the artist transforms her own ‘self’ into the ‘other’ or whether the (observed and described) ‘other’ is transformed into a ‘self’ in the artwork? The change of roles can take place through my camera’s ‘extra eye’, and it is thus fixed (momentarily). The underlying concern is that in this way the changes of the place are revealed – or made more insightful at least – in a confrontation with time itself.

Genius Loci again

My approach is craftsman-like. On the basis of the historical image (drawing, watercolour, etching or photo) I study the position of the old master *in situ* through observations, analyses and measurements. To me this is much more difficult with respect to an (early) master such as Piranesi than with respect to a photographer. For instance, for his comprehensive publication *Antichità Romane* (1757), Piranesi relied on his detailed observations and studies on the Via Appia Antica, but also on his unbridled imagination, and Labruzzi added to his pen drawings a more romantic perspective. In contrast, a camera produces an unaltered registration. The lens type or negative format of a photograph from the past may be hard to verify, but it is well possible to reconstruct the exact setting of most photos. They leave no doubts on where the changes took place.¹⁷ Still, some nineteenth-century photographers, such as the brothers Fratelli Allinari (active since 1852) were all but ‘lazy painters’.¹⁸ They did their utmost to find the most spectacular or subtle angle to show what they wanted to show.¹⁹ These changes are still at work. The

'Queen of Roads' has no eternal status: its special quality is precisely reflected in its permanent change.

It is possible to describe my approach as follows: I study the original image or photo, observe the monument *in situ*, and try to determine the exact position of the old master. I use visual material on which both a monument and the road are visible and therefore measurable. I look at the horizon, the vanishing points, the perspective of the road and the perspectival shortening of the monument, the cut (of the image), the points of contact (between different monuments). In short, I deploy some of the basic lessons in perspective from the 'art-academic tradition'. Next, I fix the scene by defining the GPS coordinates, make a photo of the original artist's position and take a new photo from that exact same spot, and in this way I try to discover why and how at the time the monument was represented in its context from this angle. Affective aspects of place thereby play a major role. As an artist, you need to gain detailed knowledge of a *given place* on your own.²⁰

By repeating the journey, visiting the same place again and again, recognising the influence of the seasons, the time of day, etc., using all these ethnographic observing-documenting methods (i.e. walking, observing, writing, measuring, photographing, filming, recording, etc.), you make a specific place your own, whereby gradually its unique identity will reveal itself. An identity that in this instance has been variously represented by artists in the past. This is no easy task, for you do not simply take a picture to find out from which exact position a previous image was made. Rather than with snapshots, or recordings of moments, my concern is with recordings of time, and this calls for careful attention and a lot of patience. The digital or, in particular, analogue camera functions as a *camera obscura*, as a closed black box, in which moments from different times briefly converge and instantly vanish again. Using an analogue camera will put even more pressure on the method of detailed observation and analysis, given the technological constraints (a roll of film has only 36 slides).

All image-makers offer an interpretation based on the concerns of their time. Even when following in the footsteps of their precursors, they take up a historical position *and* a new one. As such they are handmaids of time. They can only confirm that time, in their time,

changed once again. This can be communicated in a romanticised fashion in a drawing, through the unalterable eye of the camera or in other ways. Regardless, their own footprints literally mark the always historical role of time, providing yet another new perspective in an ever-wider continuum. Instead of existing as a static given, a place of meaning is overwritten all the time, thus taking on new meaning. The concrete result of my *in situ* working method is a new photo, which seemingly records historical perspectives, but 'merely' reveals the changes of the place in context. And this is in fact my basic concern. How do you record or 'freeze' places of meaning within the quality of change? ('Freeze' is an intrinsically ephemeral notion of course: once, after a big rain shower, I saw the tropical summery Via Appia Antica suddenly change into an autumn-like, transient place.) At the same time, also here the *genius loci* may well be sustained through the artistic method of photography. The atmospheric quality of place cannot be captured in a single moment; only in the passing of time more elements will reveal themselves. But where I as an artist try to 'capture' a place, and appropriate it, my focus as artistic researcher with an ethnographic attitude is in fact to let go of the place, so as to make it subject to study and analysis. 'Contact' occurs only when time and position, through the extra camera eye, converge. Sometimes an un-expected gift of time renders new details visible. For example, I 'discovered' a stretch of the ancient road near the Tumulus Orazi, which in a photo from the late nineteenth century was not visible, or through the eyes of the old master (or my camera's 'extra eye') you see how exactly the road seems to go on infinitely when looked at from a specific perspective. At the same time, places can be entirely transformed by the presence or absence of trees and plants.

Based on many hikes along the Via Appia Antica, I gathered an array of data concerning the various positions of artists in the past.²¹ The photographic results, or, that is to say, the new photos, together with the historical images, form the basis for the actual artistic processing. These results amount to dozens of *one-minute movies* in which I have projected the new image material about the historical places as filmed in one minute (see Figure 4). This was quite an operation, not just involving a beamer, a slide projector, a film camera and a self-made mask, but also involving my own body. Because when the mask does not work sufficiently and the colour temperature of the camera changes during those one-minute stretches, I may be able to

deploy my body for regulating or manipulating the passage of time in front of the camera – the effort then being an *embodied practice* indeed. These movies, along with the historical representations, constitute the basis for the exhibition in the Allard Pierson Museum, in which a 2000-year biography of two miles is artistically translated into a 20-meter walk through the main museum corridor. I combined artistic visions of seven monuments along these fifth and sixth miles in 2D projections and 3D surroundings, and these were accompanied by 3D print models and by sound, which bring the road to life in its various dimensions. As such, several disciplines and time layers come together in its representation: 1. the historical image of the historical image maker, 2. the historical point of view I photographed, 3. the time travel movies, which show the changes of time, and 4. the 3D-application, which projects a view onto the future. The last layer has to be added by the public: they can arrange their own journey through time by means of the interactive applications.

Silence

In the end, the overall aim of this *In the Footsteps of Piranesi* project is to contribute to the *recording of time changing*. This project also contributes to the cultural biography of this specific area: the tangible past incorporated into the all-encompassing present; to follow in the historical footsteps that left traces in the present, and to ‘activate’ or ‘embody’ them, as it were, to render visible the changes of time. It situates contemporary research in a historical context and towards the future, of which we are a part as well. In the end, you may well see it as a tribute to the first artistic research *in situ* by my artistic predecessors. They are in fact the first contributors of looking at places of meaning (call it heritage places); they rendered visible the hidden tracks and traces of the monuments along the Via Appia, thus contributing to a continuously changing time and place. They gave me the opportunity to encounter and explore them again and made us believe that these places are vital and alive. “With each new encounter with the place, with each new experience of the place, meanings and memories may subtly, or otherwise, be rewritten or remade” (Smith 77). These places of meaning are thus simultaneously about change and continuity, an *in-between place and time*.

As a study, *In the footsteps of Piranesi* is an investigation of the actual positions or points of view of my artistic precursors. Although it is



Figure 4: G.B. Piranesi (1750-2016) Still one-minute movie © Krien Clevis

common to try to look into the minds of artists from the outside, I think it is more worthwhile to try and see what they saw – using their ‘footprints’ as *literal basis of their inner perspective on the outside world*. Turning upside down points of view is the expression of a principle, a certain method to re-conquer time, if only for a moment (Holmes 174).

The ethnographic method allowed me to broaden and deepen my artistic research. But I learnt most from the *places* I studied. As such, my approach involves meta-observation and a meta-listening (read: understanding) of place, allowing a place itself to start speaking from different perspectives, and this may pertain to the nearby trees, plants, birds, goats, earth, soil or other relevant elements. It is this *knowledge of the silence* (which cannot speak for itself or be captured in words, and which can only be experienced affectively)

that a specific place will produce. Affective aspects, atmospheric quality and notions of silence associated with some place are all actors that contribute to *doing* a place in different ways. They are important for our understanding when listening, understanding and thinking through media in-between image and sound.

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Notes

- 1 This phenomenon has been linked to Proust's *A la recherche du temps perdu*, in which he describes how his eating of a 'madeleine' as an adult reminds him of the happy moments of his childhood.
- 2 Already in the nineteenth century studies were done of people's earliest memories (such as by Viktor and Catherine Henry in 1896 and F.W. Colegrove in 1899). These studies revealed that early memories are nearly always described in visual terms, rather than in terms of smells or sounds. See also the chapter on "Flitsen in het duister: eerste herinneringen" in Draaisma, 2001.
- 3 Norberg-Schulz, in *Genius Loci*, refers to Heidegger's theory of *poiēsis*, which goes back to Greek antiquity. The notion of *techné* is linked directly to making. See also Wesseling 2007.
- 4 The British linguist philosopher John L. Austin was concerned with the relationship between 'saying' and 'doing' in language, thus providing the basis of contemporary debates on performativity. See also the introduction of Salter 2002.
- 5 Ruth Benschop describes Ingold's theories about *Making* in her inaugural speech, 2005 (35-37).
- 6 Or as Henk Borgdorff puts it: "For the opposition between theory and practice as soon we learn to understand the dynamic of the emergent field as a chain of transformations, ... interactions, and articulations that may ultimately produce more reality" (Borgdorff in Herzogenrath 39).
- 7 The *genius loci* refers to the atmospheric quality of a place whose meaning is rarely obvious right away. Indefinable by nature, the *genius loci* frequently determines a place's feel and character. For more on this, see Norberg-Schulz 1980, in particular the preface and Chapter I.
- 8 I refer to the first note, the Proust phenomenon, see 1.
- 9 I refer here to a brain experiment, a research I conducted in collaboration with a neuro-psychologist in the F.C. Donders Centre in Nijmegen (Centre for Cognitive Neuroimaging, 2007-2009). We tested a set of images combined with specific sentences on a group of ca. 30 voluntary test persons. The images I made contained only 'neutral' images, without any references to a certain emotion. The sentences however contained a neutral charge and a fear-provoking charge. For example: "The boy stepped bravely on the beach" and "The boy was never found again". At random these images were presented to the test persons both with and without the different sentences. The outcome of the experiment was that almost every test person had the highest score when seeing the image in combination with the fear sentence. It changed their perception and memory of the image. In addition, we found out that the area in the brain we had tested (amygdala) was close to the area where the association originated. See Willems, Clevis, Hagoort 2010.
- 10 The original title is *La Chambre claire* (Paris: Galimard 1980). See in particular Chapter 2 on the notions of *stadium* and *punctum*.
- 11 The concept of intertextuality was launched by Julia Kristeva (1941) in 1969. She claimed that every text is intertextual in the sense that every text is built from a mosaic of existing texts. Rather than being an autonomous object or closed system, a text is always linked to other texts and, more broadly, the cultural context at large. For Kristeva, the text is a crossroads of all sort of possible ideological (social, political, literary) systems which an author integrates in text, be it consciously or not. These systems, then, are not so much tied to the author, but function autonomously.
- 12 The artistic results of my photographic field research are gathered

- in the exhibition: February 21 – May 31, Allard Pierson Museum, Amsterdam. See: <https://allardpierson.nl/events/via-appia-revisited-tijdreizen-over-de-eeuwige-snelweg/>.
- 13 For example, Giovanni Battista Piranesi (1720-1778) is leading the long line of those who mapped the Via Appia Antica. He is followed by the Italian draughtsman Carlo Labruzzi (1748-1817) and several anonymous draughtsmen who did the *Grand Tour*. Next came the architect Luigi Canina (1850-1853), who exactly (re)constructed the Park, nearly at the same time as the early photographers in the mid- and late-nineteenth century, such as Thomas Ashby (archaeologist/photographer) and the Alinari and Alessandri brothers, followed by photographers from the 1950s and 1960s, who represented the funerary lane in a meanwhile radically changed urban landscape. At the same time, the Via Appia also serves as décor for fashion photographers and filmmakers, like the famous Pier Paolo Pasolini (1922-1975). The tourist snapshots of the 1970s were followed by creative reinterpretations by artists in the 1990s and later.
- 14 Ruth Benschop describes Hirschauer's theories about the "Ethnographic description and the silence of the social". See Benschop 2005 (p. 24-29).
- 15 I refer to Hal Foster's criticism of the 'ethnographic turn', which was taken by artists from the mid-1960s. Foster, H., "The Artist as Ethnographer", in *The Return of the Real*. Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1996.
- 16 I refer to Claude Lévi-Strauss's *The Savage Mind* (1962) and the parody on colonial ethnographic research, as described in *The Ethnographic Burlesque* (1998).
- 17 Such as a displaced monumental piece of marble in a photo from Underwood & Underwood, ca. 1900. Other photographers also control the situation, such as the French photographer Jacques Henri Larigue, who mirrored the negative to get the desired result in printed form (1960).
- 18 I refer to the term used by Hans den Hartog Jager in an article for newspaper *NRC*, which at the time caused a stir. Den Hartog Jager, H., "Luie Schilders", in *NRC*, 27 September 2003.
- 19 For example: the Via Appia in an infinite perspective, or the Via Appia as a convex road – formed by lava, which in the Iron Age flooded the ancient road from the nearby volcanic mountain range, the Colli Albani. Or just consider the changes of time itself on the Via Appia Antica, as recorded in detail by, for instance, the archaeologist and fairly good photographer Thomas Ashby (1874-1931), who in the late nineteenth century made photos of the 'walls' put in by Canina half a century before. More than half a century later, in 1968, the changes of time were photographed again by Maria Grazia Cederna, wife of Antonio Cederna (1921-1996), who expressed his discontent with the pollution and decay of the Via Appia resulting from the urban developments in the 1950s in pamphlets such as 'I Gangsters dell'Appia'.
- 20 'Given' refers to: not found yourself, but given by historical artists. At the same time, it refers to what Christian Norberg-Schulz means by the atmospheric quality of a place and how it gives itself (1980 n.p.).
- 21 These data concern the various positions of artists in the past, the coordinates of those positions, my photos based on these coordinates, descriptions of the historical images/ photos, the motivation/ history of the artists involved and my observations about changes of the scene in relation to the present. I process all data in a database (Excel), which meanwhile covers 10 monuments, more than 100 positions of some 50 different artists, as well as 1000 pictures. Together with the historical prints, my own new photos serve as starting point for my actual artistic processing.