



## The East Lynn River

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“A genuine emptiness, a pure silence is not feasible-either conceptually or in fact ... the artist who creates silence or emptiness must produce something dialectical: a full void, an enriching emptiness, a resonating or eloquent silence.”

(Susan Sontag, *The Aesthetics of Silence, in Styles of Radical Will, p 11*)

The ‘place’ that I chose for my contribution to the Box Project was the East Lynn River in North Devon. I had been working on an earlier project on drawing in this vicinity when I began to focus my attention more closely on the vicissitudes of a section of the river and particularly the riverbed, as it had changed over the course of time and how it now appeared.



The geological formations of rocks were deposited in former shallow seas during the Devonian period (400 million years ago), initially as layers of mud or sand and later squeezed between crustal plates. The Lynton Beds, as they are known, are partly made up of dark blue-grey slates, red/brown sandstones that are “ripple-marked and bioturbated”<sup>i</sup> Since the Ice Age the river’s course has altered direction from a northerly to a north-westerly direction, toward the sea at Lynmouth. The banks of the river are contorted by the uneven, irregular gradients and precipitous and tangled woodland overhanging most of its upper flanks. The riverbed is a continually varied terrain of rocks and sediment, the flow of water constantly changing its velocity as it works its way around and over imposing boulders. Over the short course of approximately four miles, between the village of Brendon and Watersmeet, there are sudden variations in widths and depths of water. Fast flowing, narrow channels of rushing water are transported into translucent shallow pools that move slowly over beds of blue slate and sanguine-coloured Devon sandstone pebbles.



The river is also well known as one of the tributaries that led to the Lynmouth Flood of 1952 resulting in 34 known fatalities. The massive displacement of materials from the river banks, riverbeds and peat from nearby moorland contributed to the devastation caused by this huge volume of fast moving water into the harbour at Lynmouth.

My visual recordings of parts of the river, using both a video and stills camera, have incorporated aspects of this environment. This continually changing location invites a range of visual and haptic trajectories as one moves along the sides of the river, using the camera as an extension of one's own body. I found my own sense of proximity to the ground became a puzzle of contradictory pathways, in which distance, height, texture and sound continually altered one's experience of the riverside. As I walked along pathways of varying gradients on either side of the river, the sounds of rushing water became variously muted by other noises including those made by my own feet over mud, rock and shale that had fallen from the steeply rising hillside. Proximities that I perceived both visually and physically became fractured continuously as I moved within and through the spaces, experiencing multiple visual proximities depending on the direction I turned my head, each point in my location offering strongly contrasting images.

For my contribution to the Box Project I decided to make work derived from ideas about a discreet section in the history of the river, that of the flood in 1952, and to try to discover whether these sensory experiences that appeared as my own response to this place might appear as a transformation of that event. The riverbed appeared to me as a catalyst of change and movement with its erosions, traces of movement, embedded microorganisms and shifting boulders. During the twelve months preceding the making of this work I was amazed by the transformation in the colour of the exposed rocks that protrude from the surface of the water. Some more exposed, flatter boulders had changed from a sanguine, brown/grey colour to a ghostly chalky white, following an extended period of very little rainfall and correspondingly low-river levels.



Fig.1 Riverbed showing exposed flat rock layers, March 2011



Fig.2 Riverbed showing the same exposed riverbed section, February 2012

The dramatic changes in the external appearance of the riverbed's exposed rocks as a consequence of variations in water levels over such a relatively short space of time demonstrated the unstable qualities of the river itself and its environs. The relationships one might have with this place could also change :

“.....Lives are led not inside places but through, around, to and from them, from and to places elsewhere (Ingold 2000: 229).”

I decided to show how the river encompasses an environment of change that may prompt any archivist to continuously anticipate change and question one's multi-sensory perception of proximities as uncertain. The sudden changing depth in water and velocity of movement that took the residents of Lynmouth by surprise in August 1952, demonstrated how little we understand our environment. It seems that it is exceptionally hard to discover how our surroundings and our own actions influence the way we perceive the world but on this tragic occasion the unpredictability of that 'place' can force us to question these perceptions.

In 1952 thirty-four known people died as a consequence of the Lynmouth Flood in North Devon. The causes of this 'natural' disaster have been mainly attributed to the excessive amounts of rainfall in the week preceding the flood, the nature of the geological structure of the area and the re-routing of the river at Lynmouth. One of the deceased, a woman, has never been identified.

Controversy over the cause of the tragedy arose in 2001 when the BBC Radio Four's Document programme investigated an alleged environmental contrivance caused by a process known as 'cloud-seeding', involving experimental infusions of dry ice into clouds to encourage precipitation. No conclusive evidence has been found to prove that this may have caused the 1952 flood, in spite of a call for an inquiry on the part of survivors.

My box contains my own thoughts for those affected by the flood and the aftermath of loss that lingers for those left behind 60 years later. All of the paper used to make this work has been soaked in the East Lyn River at a point very close to the centre of Lynmouth where the majority of lives were lost. The paper therefore contains residues of micro-organisms found in the river and molds that have grown and dried out. Some of the photogravure prints have been taken from secondary images from newspaper cuttings showing the aftermath of the disaster.



In the making of this work the witnessing of displacement became its core.



In conclusion, in the making of this piece I became more aware that 'place' cannot exist without movement and that these are only neutral spaces insofar as there exist perceived boundaries, real and imagined. Human perception of space involves anticipation of movement – toward, around, away from, and of non-movement, due to barriers, real or sensed.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

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1. <sup>1</sup>The bioturbation of the rocks has been formed by burrowing creatures, whilst the sediment was soft, forming lines and crevices. ((Exmoor National Park File 5, 2012)
2. Tim Ingold, 'Against Space: Place, Movement, Knowledge' in , *'Boundless Worlds: An Anthropological Approach to Movement'*, ed P. Wynn Kirby, Berghahn Books(2009) - Chapter 2, (p 29-43).
3. Susan Sontag, *The Aesthetics of Silence* in 'Styles of Radical Will', Penguin Classics (2009)