

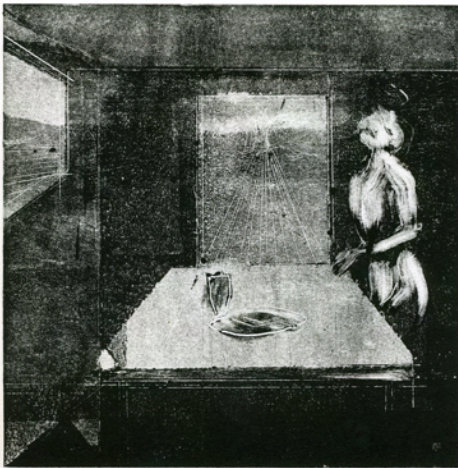
Uninvited Guests: Digesting the Unfathomable Implications of Multiple Horizons

Clive Knights

Portland State University, Portland, USA

knightsc@pdx.edu

"It is not a question of 'nature.' 'Nature,' as it is most often understood, is an abstraction, as is the idea of man standing before it. What is real is the earth, the sea, the sky, the sand, one's feet on the ground, and one's breath, the smell of grass and of coal, the crackling of electricity, the swarming of pixels..... There is no real except for the earth, with all its corners and recesses, all its lands and their peasants. In this sense, the country represents the order of meaning that is posited selfsame with the earth, equally separated from the order of language and from that of nature. It is an order of the body, of embodied extension, disposed and exposed: the earth such that it has nothing other than itself outside itself."¹



Hunger, monotype, 2010 (by the author)

This presentation acknowledges a statement from the ACS founding white paper that identifies the spiritual capacity of human being as the accomplishment of "a heightened or alternative state of mind in which one is overcome by, or perceives the presence, insight, or action of forces beyond self-limited consciousness." To be overcome, therefore, is to experience, palpably, one's limits, where the saturation of the capacities of the conscious mind resuscitates our awareness of the pre-reflective situatedness of our sense of self in our bodies; that our self-knowledge is indeed partial, fragmentary, incomplete, inflected, if not infected, by as much that is out of reach as is seemingly graspable, as much that is outside us as is inside (while being reminded that this concept itself is a corporeal metaphor, inspired after the fact of our cavernous, enveloped human body). As organisms our bodies are already at work in the world regardless of what we think, while as humans our civility is already at work in the community through an adoption of tacit expectations of behavior played across a worldly setting, organized by the artifacts we create from the resources of that setting through human making.

¹ Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Ground of the Image* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005) p56

As a human-made phenomenon, architecture rests on the earth and genuflects to the sky in offering a place in which living human bodies can dwell. Making architecture is an act of negotiation between our finite mortality and the transcendent setting in which our lives unfold; a setting that, no matter how much we struggle to take it all in, always seems to extend beyond the reach of our perceptions. The conjecture here is that human experience is 'horizontal', such that, though we must accept that we may never grasp the world comprehensively, we can, nevertheless, following Merleau-Ponty's insight, respond to being 'situated' with gesture. With gesture we turn both ourselves and others toward horizons that open up to us, pointing them out, so to speak, in order to share the space and time (the place) they configure in paying attention to, and discerning, what matters, together. We stretch limbs into the depth of space, the edges of which we cannot reach, and we attune our ambulant body and the rhythm of our breath to the depth of time, the duration of which we cannot exhaust.



Path across Council Crest Park
student study drawing, charcoal, 2015

At any place, at any time, playing out as topographic background,² there are forces persistently engaging us that are not of human volition: fatigue, the east wind, gravitational pull, the noon-day sun, the profile of a mountain range, insect bites, the length of a human stride, the hardness of basalt, the pungency of lavender bushes, the frequency of a bird call, the density of rain clouds and so on. These influences come and go, moving through our perceptual field almost willfully with little regard for human vulnerabilities and cares, these too remaining somewhat beyond design or invention: for instance, nobody volunteered to be sentient, or for the particular pneumatic capacity of inhaling-exhaling lungs, or to sweat between the toes; we found ourselves this way.

One perennial, insistent horizon remains the finite trajectory of our mortality, addressed at a fundamental level by the survival instinct; we have to breathe, eat, rest, discharge waste,

² "There is always more to topography.... than what might be viewed (or considered) at any given moment.... Differences are discovered in the spread of topography; contrast and complementarity structure relationships between its situations and institutions. Topography continually gives itself otherwise.... Topography ceaselessly offers experience both unexpected and familiar situations. If space advances its array all at once (in simultaneity), topography takes time to present its locations. In any given site, at any given moment, its structure requires that some places be recalled, others anticipated. For this reason topography also measures human finitude, inviting and outpacing movement through it." David Leatherbarrow, *Topographical Stories* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004) p249

procreate, and, interestingly, commune, that is, form alliances with others in mutual support through the efficacy of 'intermediaries', putting a medium of some sort, in the middle, between us, a conflation of our gestures, a language. Without figuration in language, these necessities for the maintenance of life could very easily be deemed forms of incarceration, multiple subjugations of our capacities for action beneath a prescriptive agenda that has been determined by something or someone else, by another. It is against this ground of being that the figure of human freedom can be revealed in its multiple guises, where the tensional relation between where we find ourselves and where we want to be is played out in the paradoxical imaginings of utopia. As George Steiner aptly states "As rudimentary sagacity has it, we know neither of our coming nor of our going hence. We are inmates, not begetters or masters, of our lives. Yet the indistinct intimation of a lost freedom or of a freedom to be regained – Arcadia behind us, Utopia before – hammers at the far threshold of the human psyche. This shadowy pulsebeat lies at the heart of our mythologies and of our politics. We are creatures at once vexed and consoled by summons of a freedom just out of reach."³

Referencing philosopher Richard Kearney's discussion of the 'task of hospitality'⁴ as a fundamental human response to relations of host and guest, of receiving the stranger in our midst, the perennial guest at the table, so to speak, this paper discusses the unfolding generosity of a group of graduate architecture students in their efforts to host a multi-course, multi-location, horizon-inspired picnic for a number of guests in August 2015. In prosaic terms the students were asked to familiarize themselves with a particular setting, specifically, Council Crest Park, the highest public park in Portland, Oregon, a place dominated by the passive 'views' it affords of the terrestrial horizon through an almost 270 degree panorama that takes in both the Cascade and Coastal range of mountains, the Willamette and Columbia river valleys, and downtown Portland with its suburban hinterlands.



Facing east, Council Crest Park, August 2015

Students were asked to communicate their emerging familiarity with this place by means that challenged the tyranny of the purely visual and instantaneous definition of horizon, the view, which promotes a disengaged encounter typical of touristic experience. A fusion of horizons was to be instigated through the drama of a meal, an institution renowned for its role of engendering friendship and collectivity, breaking bread together in getting to know each other, while assuaging

³ George Steiner, *Real Presences* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989) p153

⁴ Richard Kearney, *Anatheism: Returning to God after God* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010)

one of the mutual orders of the human body, the temporal cycle of hunger. In other words, the question was posed, 'How could a meal unfold as a metaphor of the unfolding landscape of this place?' How could the cultivation of the topography of a culinary experience - that is, the recurring communion over food articulated by 'place-setting' and ensuing gustatory experiences - be choreographed to orient guests in relation to layered interpretations of place. Pondering the meal as an exemplary interweaving of perceptual encounters, ranging from the intimacy of touch and taste on the tongue to distant encounters of the 'terroir' (that is, from inside the body to the furthest reaches beyond it) the question of placement here employs, within its repertoire, the particularities of demarcation and orientation of the dining event on the ground, en-tabling, identifying the topos (theme) of the table setting, the arrangement and posture of guests' bodies, choice of foodstuffs and beverages, preparations and manner of delivery, as well as the contribution of paraphernalia such as plates, dishes, cutlery, napkins and so on.

To be welcomed, to be invited to the table, to be set in place by the ideality of a meal, oriented spatially by its entablement and oriented temporally by its coursing; is this not a recurring indication of a deeply rooted aspiration to discover new correspondences between us at every mealtime? Isn't every meal a latent, though unavoidably expendable, proposition of utopia, a fragile accord, the potential for a new harmony amongst people and place where a common dish is ultimately, literally, eaten, swallowed up, absorbed into the differentiated tissues of participants, only to be re-made again and again on the promise of reciprocated hospitality? To participate and be creatively active in such a situation was the underlying pedagogical ambition of this studio experience, to give place to the disclosure of relationships between bodies, where topographies of earth and of flesh find communion, and we recognize it as such.



Place-setting for the salad course, Picnic at Council Crest Park, Portland, August 2015