

## Map & Universe

### making a site-specific artwork in Southern Sweden

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*The strata of the Earth is a jumbled museum. Embedded in sediment is a text that contains limits and boundaries which evade the rational order, and social structures which confine art. In order to read the rocks we must become conscious of geologic time, and of the layers of prehistoric material that is entombed in the Earth's crust. When one scans the ruined sites of pre-history one sees a heap of wrecked maps that upsets our present art historical limits. A rubble of logic confronts the viewer as he looks into the levels of the sedimentations.*

Robert Smithson<sup>1</sup>



Spring at Brunåkra, 2016. Photo: Julie Poitras Santos

#### **Wander**

Walking away from the courtyard at Brunåkra, an 1889 farmhouse in Gislöv, Sweden, one is immediately aware of the Baltic Sea. It lies downhill in the distance, a crisp blue line that in duller light could be mistaken for cloud cover. This day in May it is bright and sunny and the surrounding rapeseed fields rinse the eyes in a brilliant yellow. The rapeseed is as tall as the walker. To see anything in the distance one must find an elevated point. Most often one walks immersed in the waves of green stalks with the yellow horizon spread around at eye-height like a thickly painted line. The landscape unfolds in pathways, cultivated geometric planes and lines.

I'm staying at Brunåkra, a small artist residency located outside of Simrishamn in southern Sweden. I'm the only artist in attendance, and I'm looking for the church path that was pointed out to me on Google Earth, a remnant trace visible from a satellite in space. I've been invited here to make a walking-based artwork, and with the assistance of my hosts, I begin by exploring the surroundings. All the paths around here used to arrow directly out from the church to surrounding farms, the former making a kind of wheel-hub for the local farming community. Marked by boulders, the old road is still used by harvesters to travel the fields. As one walks uphill away from the sea, the path turns by increments grassy. One chooses the right tire track or the left, separated by a spray of tall grasses and Queen Anne's lace.

As the path crests the modest rise, ruins of an old structure crumble off to the right. Set back and swamped in a lace of overgrowth and wildflowers, a few remaining timbers and stonewalls rise above the mass of vegetation. Elm trees have grown up through what might have been the foundation. I tell myself stories. I see the church steeple off through the fields like a mirage, a ship's sail. Visibility was a requirement for the distance between farm and church, a sightline connecting the periphery to the centre. The old path continues and arrives at a threshold, perhaps the original entry to the forgotten farm. Unlike other entries dotted about the spreading fields and farms announcing their historic occupation with a gateway formed by two massive trees – elms, perhaps, or elder - this portal conveys a bright humility. Stonewall rubble on a slight rise, two apple trees and a stand of lilac, blossoms at the ready. I make a note to return.

## Map

Google Earth consumes the planet like a replicating cover seen from above. If I shift the cursor can I expand it to Lewis Carroll's vision or Borges' rigour?

*“And then came the grandest idea of all! We actually made a map of the country, on the scale of a mile to the mile!”*

*“Have you used it much?” I enquired.*

*“It has never been spread out, yet,” said Mein Herr, “the farmers objected: they said it would cover the whole country, and shut out the sunlight! So we now use the country itself, as its own map,*



Östra Nöbelöv from above. Google Maps

*and I assure you it does nearly as well. Now let me ask you another question. What is the smallest world you would care to inhabit?"*

Lewis Carroll *Sylvie and Bruno Concluded*<sup>2</sup>

I have a small portion of the local world uploaded in my pocket. *Mappa*, napkin, sailcloth, banner, cellphone. Throughout the planted fields are findings added to my own. Iron Age tools, burial grounds, and runic stones. Old paths discarded or still used. Vertical sediment, historical layers, map on top of map on top of map. Erupting through the dirt or disappearing into it, turned up or turned down. Smithson's wrecked maps, or Baudrillard's tatters, both...neither. Moving toward the small town of Östra Nöbelöv, the path breaks into tidy yards. Invoking the 'right to roam' so unfamiliar to American consciousness, I press cautiously forward through the linked spaces, trying to appear friendly, seeking driveway or road. A figure shifts through a curtained window. Trespass is allowed here, yet walking through someone's property is discomfoting. My track makes breaks in the map, the grid of ownership and order.

Further on, the church grounds are tidy but all the doors to the church are closed. Not a soul about.

## Storytelling

My hosts invite local friends and artists to dinner from Östra Nöbelöv and Gislöv, Simrishamn. The weekends are caught up with merriment and storytelling. I may be the only official artist at the residency but the countryside is filled with individuals who pass through Brunåkra, many working with animals and on farms others deep in the late spring work of the studio. There is talk of lost sheep, a new horse, a career low-point, a new project, travels abroad, and a desire for community.

Each day I depart from the courtyard thinking about a project for Brunåkra. I roam aimlessly, wander, turn, wind, weave. I want a story I can walk into. Do we want the double, the replication, the mirror to assure ourselves we are, as the red arrow points, *here*? To make the here something we can hold onto and carry, something to *speak and say*? I am looking for a story to tell, on a scale of one-to-one. A map I can enter.

On this trip I've learned about the *sögumaður*, an Icelandic storyteller who during the long winters walked from farm to farm and received room and board for telling tales. The stories were about elves and trolls and little people, ghosts and magicians and gargoyles. Begun

probably in the 1300s when the sagas were written, this tradition was in practice for centuries, up to the early 1900s according to the storyteller who told me. As in Mario Vargas Llosa's novel *The Storyteller*, the storyteller binds distant sites together, makes connections between people and carries news from one site to another creating a spatial web of communication and narrative inscribed by human walking.<sup>3</sup> Pathways are both story and the remnant of story, connection and guide.

## Lost

*Depart from the courtyard, walk to the sea and back. Leave the courtyard, walk the old church path to Östra Nöbelöv and back. From the courtyard, walk to the church path threshold and back. Walk to the sea, to Brantevik, on the back road and back to the courtyard. Walk to Gislöv town and back. Walk to the sea, to Gislövshammer and back to the courtyard. Walk to Gislövshammer, then Skillinge and back. Walk to the sea and then back to the courtyard...*

As it happens, I'm walking in circles. Lost. I'm well beyond the reach of my phone's GPS; I haven't paid to use it here. What am I doing here? What is the story I am walking into? Walking is a way to learn a place, to match steps, to translate spaces. It takes the measure of a place, moves across geologic, biologic and cultural surfaces. Performed research. Losing the map, I gain the universe. *Here* is not on the map, but always now, where my foot is landing. In the distance a wind turbine turns steady in the wind. What have I learned?

'To lose yourself...' writes Rebecca Solnit, 'is to be fully present, and to be fully present is to be capable of being in uncertainty and mystery.'<sup>4</sup> We want to become *unlost*, we want to find ourselves again by external means, locate the sail on the horizon, chase away uncertainty. And yet, for a moment... our senses sharpen, we feel everything around us; breathe.

## Labyrinth

A labyrinth evokes elemental and mythic conditions of being lost and of finding one's way, out of the underworld into enlightenment. A labyrinth dips below the surface, a symbolic map of a larger, more internal journey. One of the guides for my journey, *Lines* by Tim Ingold, informs me that 'the entrance to the maze marks the point at which [one] goes underground. Now as an interface between earth and air, the ground is a kind of surface that is visible from above'.<sup>5</sup> Dipping below the surface of the map one travels the labyrinth. Immersion leads to a vertical, deeper habitation of the surround.

Solnit's *Wanderlust*, my other guide, tells me that 'in Scandinavia there are 500 known labyrinths made of stones laid on the earth; until the twentieth century, fisherman would walk them before putting out to sea to ensure good catches or favourable winds.'<sup>6</sup> I begin to collect palm-sized black stones from the beach and carry them back up the hill. An enormous deposit of shale lies broken and polished, two-kilometres from the farm.

I walk to the sea and back, favourable winds.

## Courtyard

Walking out and back from the residency makes the spokes of a new wheel. Each time I return to the courtyard at the heart of the farm, Brunåkra. Six hours from Stockholm, just up from the sea it becomes its own centre. And the centre is a kind of opening, an invitation. Courtyards were always the centre of farm life in this region, sites of commerce and family labour. In a sense the courtyard was the equivalent of the village square for a family, a personal commons full of activity. Minor tasks carried out in the sun. At the museum in the nearby town of Simrishamn, I encounter early twentieth century paintings of courtyards with carefully laid cobblestones mimicking the restored stonework of the contemporary town. Each farm courtyard had a central tree or well. The long farm buildings surround the space and keep out constant wind. There was often a smithy, places for animals and constant passage, the comings and goings of family and workers.

The courtyard at Brunåkra is overgrown with grasses. The farm was built in 1889, but it still receives the daily passage of family, animals and visitors in the same way. I learn from my hosts, who know someone whose grandmother lived here, that the courtyard was once a clean area of stones. And I see it, beneath the uppermost layer of dirt, the hesitant revelation of lines. My hosts talk about the challenges of creating community in rural areas. They want to bring people together and have more active community led gatherings. I recognize we are feeling isolated with our computers these days, longing for a more collective conversation.

I begin weeding. As I proceed, I begin to understand the mat of weeds as a kind of fabric I am unravelling, a map that blocks out the light. The spreading network of geranium and clover pinned deeply by staunch grasses and dandelions. Weeding as praxis. It's a heroic task, really, and one I have barely enough time for, but I want to see the courtyard stones swept bare. I want to create a labyrinth, creating a path that reflects my lost and introspective wanderings.

Through a synchronous connection, I make a new friend. She runs Österlenskolan in Simrishamn and encourages students to come to spend the day at Brunåkra and help weed the courtyard.<sup>7</sup> The space hums with activity. We have dinners and barbecues. Visitors and workers pass through. Others join in, my hosts join in and a power washer is procured. Under the layer of grass is a gravestone, face first, planted in the soil. Our community extends back in time.



Students from Österlenskolan weeding. Photo: Julie Poitras Santos

Former gravestones from the church were used to pave resident courtyards throughout the region. The courtyard is abuzz with new activity and I insert black beach stones into the former pattern. There are pre-existing structures I'm adding to, creating lines within an earlier order.

## Community

The night of the opening arrives and cars line up on the long driveway into the farm. The air is clean in dusk light. The entry into the courtyard is blocked so that the evening begins on the periphery, outside the barn. Hot tea and brandy is served; artists, students, friends gather. I see familiar faces and new ones from the neighbourhood. After opening conversations, we begin. I guide the group to walk a mowed path, reflecting my earlier circular wandering, in tall grass around the periphery of the farm. The evening is cool and damp; rain has just finished in time for our event. The narrowness of the path whittles the chatty group into a silent single file.

Walking the pathway one by one, we ultimately arrive at the back entrance of the courtyard and the entrance to the labyrinth. Participants are instructed to consider a time when they were lost as they wend their way through the stone labyrinth. We enter; descend. Again the group is silent and reflective, as we look down at our feet and the stones, pacing our steps, turning in on ourselves, away from the gate, away from the centre and back again. A labyrinth makes mazes in the mind, turning and turning and entering. Dizzying. Lostness is a

determination we make.  
Outside the structure of  
knowing, it invites a present  
attention, a kind of listening.  
Walking together, we navigate  
the uncertain map.

After participants resurface from  
the labyrinth, we gather at the  
entrance. Everyone is invited to  
share a story about being lost.  
The stories are personal; there  
is risk involved, the kind of risk  
that builds intimacy. There are

stories of distant travel and stories of childhood, being lost in the woods or in the men's room  
at a football stadium, a distant field. A child falls on the ice, a mother-in-law offers a compass  
to a new wife, a recent immigrant makes a new friend in the hospital where his companion is  
dying. Each story intersects with another, lostness irrevocably meets finding. The emptiness  
is filled with people.

As the evening wears on, midsummer light still on the clouded horizon, we gather by a stove  
in the barn, making a large meal together, staying warm. We move into the house, and more  
wine is poured, more stories shared. The night extends; it goes on and on and by the end of  
the night a small community is formed. The following day, I will pack my bags and catch a

train to the airport; it isn't my  
community as much as theirs. I am a  
visitor here. I hope they will return to  
this courtyard and walk the labyrinth  
now and again, maintain the path in  
the spirit of the conversations that  
brought us all together here.

The time of art, the time it takes, is  
not an object but an experience.  
While the stones map a path in the  
terrain, the experience of the work is  
carried within the individuals.

Bringing the studio into the world, the



Photo: Josima Quintellier



Photo: Josima Quintellier

world takes its time. Ultimately, Map & Universe operates in ritual form. In 1969, Victor and Edith Turner proffered the idea that a breakdown in existing structure was a component that contributes to *communitas*, a spontaneous group feeling of communion.<sup>8</sup> Through risking the public self together to share in the experience of being lost, bonds are formed. Bringing together a community that desires itself, sharing stories, having a meal. There is no object of commerce, no thing. The thing – small stones, a map – melts into the earth.

What remains is us, for a time.

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#### ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> Flam, Jack (ed.), *Robert Smithson: The Collected Writings* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), p. 110.

<sup>2</sup> Carroll, Lewis, *Sylvie and Bruno Concluded* (London: MacMillan and Co, 1893), p. 393.

<sup>3</sup> Llosa, Mario Vargas, *The Storyteller* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1989)

<sup>4</sup> Solnit, Rebecca, *A Field Guide to Getting Lost* (New York: Viking Penguin, 2005), p. 6.

<sup>5</sup> Ingold, Tim, *Lines: a brief history* (London: Routledge, 2007), p. 56.

<sup>6</sup> Solnit, Rebecca, *Wanderlust: a history of walking* (New York: Viking Penguin, 2000), p. 71.

<sup>7</sup> See <http://osterlenskolan.se/>

<sup>8</sup> Turner, Victor, *The Ritual Process, Structure and Anti-Structure* (Rutgers: Transaction, 1969), pp. 127-128.