

Being in Place

The land is important to me, but even more important is the idea that it becomes a "place" because someone has been there.

— MARLENE CREATES



In Maine, where you come from is always an issue. "Though I've spent a good portion of every year since birth in this house, in this town, I was born in Miami," writes Joseph Barth of Alna. "This automatically calls into question my credentials as a

native. Somehow a zygote starting its division here is not blessed with the same innate potential as a flesh-and-blood baby inhaling a first lungful of Maine air. But despite the accident of my subtropical birth, I've always felt that here is where I belong.

so I try to do my part and participate."

There are several tiers of status; to take them from the bottom up: Tourist/out of stater, summer person or someone "from away," local, and native. Native, however, does not mean indigenous people. Over

EVERY LANDSCAPE IS A HERMETIC NARRATIVE: "Finding a fitting place for oneself in the world is finding a place for oneself in a story." The story is composed of mythologies, histories, ideologies—the stuff of identity and representation. Jo Carson, a professional storyteller from Johnson City, Tennessee, knows her sight lines. She learned in college that when she talked Appalachian, people were "either rude or enchanted." Gradually she realized she was exotic because "I am of, and from, a single place, and most people don't have the privilege." As a "placed person," to use Wendell Berry's phrase, she says she is "involuntarily rooted.... Unless I can see these old mountains, some piece of heart is missing in me.... Perhaps in my last life I was a tree. I am from here, I was raised here." When Carson talks about place, she means not only landforms, but "the flavor of a society, the beliefs and activities of people who make up a given place." Her stories start with "basic central place functions—grocery store, gas station, auto mechanic, restaurant, movie house (read video rental, these days) and decent bookstore. Most geographers do not consider a bookstore a basic central place function, but I do."

MAGGIE LEE SAYRE, *River Life*, n.d. (Photo: Courtesy Center for Study of Southern Culture). Sayre lived most of her life on a houseboat with her family, fishing rivers through Kentucky and Tennessee. Born deaf, she began taking pictures as a child around 1936 with a box camera. She signed her work "Deaf Maggie Lee Sayre." Her pictorial autobiography, a chosen means of communication with a world she couldn't hear, combines local knowledge and respect for memory with an itinerant's curiosity, detailing the activity and paraphernalia of fishing life—the nets, the floods, the friends, the fish caught (giant carp, catfish and spoonbills). In regard to Sayre's life, Tom Rankin quotes Eudora Welty: "A sheltered life can be a very daring life. For all serious daring starts from within." About this picture, Sayre told Rankin: "This is Pearl Dotson.... That's my father on the porch.... I was standing on land when I snapped this shot, looking at the boat there. I think it's a good picture."

Much has been written in the last twenty years or so about "the sense of place," which is symbiotically related to a sense of displacement. I am ambivalent about this phrase even as I am touched by it. "A sense of place" has become not just a cliché but a kind of intellectual property, a way for nonbelongers to belong, momentarily. At the same time, senses of place, a serial sensitivity to place, are invaluable social and cultural tools, providing much-needed connections to what we call "nature" and, sometimes, to cultures not our own. Such motives should be neither discouraged nor disparaged.

All places exist somewhere between the inside and the outside views of them, the ways in which they compare to, and contrast with, other places. A sense of place is a virtual immersion that depends on lived experience and a topographical intimacy that is rare today both in ordinary life and in traditional educational fields. From the writer's viewpoint, it demands extensive visual and historical research, a great deal of walking "in the field," contact with oral tradition, and an intensive knowledge of both local multiculturalism and the broader context of multicenteredness. On one hand, there is "the ability to know a new place quickly and well, and to adapt to its circumstance," a source of mapping in indigenous societies. This is still a survival technique, a kind of scanning known to citydwellers as well as to woodsmen. On the other hand, memory is stratified. If we have seen a place through many years, each view, no matter how banal, is a palimpsest. Yi-fu Tuan says that the terrain of late childhood seems to penetrate our lives and memories most intensely. In Georgetown, driving on an almost-two-lane tarred road, I can call up its predecessors: the one-lane hardtop, the gravel, the dirt with the tall grasses growing up between the ruts, stained with oil from under the cars, the straightened curve now lying forgotten over there

heard in an Indian crafts store near Wiscasset: A Native American woman (from the West, I suspect) asks the white woman behind the cash register whether the objects

are all made by Native people. "Oh yes," she replies cheerfully, unaware that the question is culturally loaded, "all native Mainer."

The legal definition of a "resident" of

Georgetown is someone who lives here a minimum of six continuous weeks each year. A mere resident, however, is not a local and certainly not a native. A historical

in the puckerbrush. I can imagine even further back. The old road seen in photographs, described in recollections, is now woods, its ruts the faintest trace. Even as a newcomer, in New Mexico, once I know that *Avenida Vieja* (the old road) ran northeast-southwest before the highways came in and the adobe ruin next door might have been a stage stop, I can call it up along with the noisy carts and carriages that bumped over it. Memory is part first-person, part collective.

The sense of place, as the phrase suggests, does indeed emerge from the senses. The land, and even the spirit of the place, can be experienced kinetically, or kinesthetically, as well as visually. If one has been raised in a place, its textures and sensations, its smells and sounds, are recalled as they felt to a child's, adolescent's, adult's body. Even if one's history there is short, a place can still be felt as an extension of the body, especially the walking body, passing through and becoming part of the landscape. Michael Martone is eloquent about his sensuous identification with the Midwest:

The Midwest is too big to be seen [as the Heartland].... I think of it more as a web of tissue, a membrane, a skin. And the way I feel about the Midwest is the way my skin feels and the way I feel about my own skin.... the Midwest is hide, an organ of sense and not power, delicate and coarse at the same time....

Kent Ryden isolates the sense of place as a specific genre of regional folklore, offering four "layers of meaning" familiar to local residents but invisible to visitors, cartographers, and even scholars: local and material lore including local names for flora, fauna, and

topography; handed-down history, much of it intimate, some of it apocryphal; group identity and place-based individual identity; and the emotions or affective bonds attached to place, which Yi-fu Tuan calls "topophilia."

Place is most often examined from the subjective viewpoint of individual or community, while "region" has traditionally been more of an objective geographic term, later kidnapped by folklorists. In the fifties, a region was academically defined as a geographic center surrounded by "an area where nature acts in a roughly uniform manner." Today a region is generally understood not as a politically or geographically delimited space but one determined by stories, loyalties, group identity, common experiences and histories (often unrecorded), a state of mind rather than a place on a map. Perhaps the most accurate definition of a region, although the loosest, is Michael Steiner's; "the largest unit of territory about which a person can grasp 'the concrete realities of the land,' or which can be contained in a person's genuine sense of place."

"Regionalism"—named and practiced as either a generalized, idealized "all-Americanism" or a progressive social realism—was most popular in the thirties when, thanks to hard times, Americans moved voluntarily around the country less than they had in the twenties or would in the fifties. During the Great Depression, the faces and voices of "ordinary people" became visible and audible, through art, photographs, and journalism, and had a profound effect on New Deal government policy. John Dewey and other scholars recognized that local life became all the more intense as the nation's identity became more confusingly



notion of "nativism" colors the way people see their places. "It is part of Maine folklore that those from 'away' may be street-smart and book-smart, but they lack the knowl-

edge the true Mainer has of how to survive, physically and mentally, in a harsh climate," says Douglas Rooks. "Mainers tend to develop a get-along mentality, doing what-

ever's necessary in order to survive and stay in Maine," writes Edgar Allen Beem, but with this comes "a sense of limited horizons."

diverse and harder to grasp. (Allen Tate called America "that all-destroying abstraction.") The preoccupation with regionalism was a "search for the primal spatial structure of the country....[for] the true underlying fault lines of American culture."

Bioregionalism seems to me the most sensible, if least attainable, way of looking at the world. Rejecting the artificial boundaries that complicate lives and divide ecosystems, it combines changing human populations and distinct physical territories determined by land and life forms. But most significantly, a

region, like a community, is subjectively defined, delineated by those who live there, not by those who study it, as in Wendell Berry's description of regionalism as "local life aware of itself."

In April, 1996, the town of Fairfield, California, for instance, inspired by a coalition of local public artists and administrators, asked itself, "Where is Fairfield?" A local high school designed chairs as symbols of places in the community; grade schoolers designed postcards; t-shirts, supermarket bags, banners, local media, and oral history projects all asked the question. A year later, responses are still coming in as the formerly agricultural, now-urban, town continues the process of struggling to identify itself and its disparate parts.

In the art world, the conservative fifties saw regionalism denigrated and dismissed, in part because of its political associations with the radical thirties, in part because its narrative optimism, didactic oversimplification and populist accessibility was incompatible with the Cold War and out of sync with the sophisticated, individualist Abstract Expressionist movement,

PEDRO ROMERO, *El Torreón de El Torreón*, 1993, flagstone and ceramic tile, 14' high, Santa Fe (stonework by Phillip Romero). The stone tower built at the edge of a playground was inspired by early Spanish watchtowers in the Southwest, one of which gave this Santa Fe barrio its name. Romero found the watchtower first mentioned in records from 1703, when two sisters, Juana and Maria Griego, were upholding their right to live in it. The ceramic tile mural that circles the tower relates the history (beginning with a Native American) of this once agricultural area along the Santa Fe River. Today the *torreón* watches over the barrio children and reminds them of their ancestors.



Mainiac Cap (Photo: Lucy R. Lippard). Mainers are proud of being called Mainiacs. This cap is worn by a Kienholzian figure that is part of an



anonymous roadside sculpture near Skowhegan made of found objects and an abandoned car.

just then being discovered as the tool with which to wrench modern art away from Parisian dominance. Today the term *regionalism*, most often applied to conventional mediums such as painting and printmaking, continues to be used pejoratively, to mean corny backwater art flowing from the tributaries that might eventually reach the mainstream but is currently stagnating out there in the boondocks.

In fact, though, all art is regional, including that made in our "art capital," New York City. In itself extremely provincial, New York's artworld is rarely considered "regional" because it directly receives and transmits international influences. The difference between New York and "local" art scenes is that other places know what New York is up to but New York remains divinely oblivious to what's happening off the market and reviewing map. Yet, paradoxically, when the most sophisticated visitors from the coasts come to "the sticks," they often prefer local folk art and "naive" artists to warmed-over syntheses of current big-time styles. (Ad Reinhardt, the ultimate avant-gardist, "last painter" of apparently solid black canvases, once gave a jury prize to an elderly woman's leaf collages, infuriating his local imitators, who thought they had the inside track.)

Instead of getting angry, defensive, or discouraged, it might be a good idea for local artists to scrutinize their situation. Why does this very local art often speak so much more directly to those who look at a lot of art all over the place? What many of us find interesting and energetic in the "regions" is a certain "foreignness" (a variation on the Exotic Other) that, on further scrutiny, may really be an unexpected familiarity, emerging from half-forgotten sources in our own local popular cultures. Perhaps it is condescending to say that a regional art is often at its best when it is not reacting to

current marketplace trends but simply acting on its own instincts; the word "innocent"

is often used. But it can also be a matter of self-determination. Artists are stronger when they control their own destinies and respond to what they know best—which is not necessarily related to place. Sometimes significant work is done by those who have never (or rarely) budged from their place, who are satisfied with their lives, and work out from there, looking around with added intensity and depth because they are already familiar with the surface. These artists may seem marginal even to their local artworld, but not to their own audiences and communities.

It has been argued that there is no such thing as regionalism in our homogenized, peripatetic, electronic culture, where all citizens have theoretically equal access to the public library's copy of *Art in America* if not to the Museum of Modern Art (which costs as much as a movie). On another level altogether, middle-class museum-goers living out of the centers do become placeless as they try to improve and appreciate, and in the process learn to distrust their own locally acquired tastes. They are usually unaware that mainstream art in fact borrows incessantly from locally rooted imagery as well as from the much-maligned mass cultures—from Navajo blankets to Roman Catholic icons to Elvis to Disney.

Everybody comes from someplace, and the places we come from—cherished or rejected—inevitably affect our work. Most artists today come from a lot of places. Some are confused by this situation and turn to the international styles that claim to transcend it; others make the most of their multicenteredness. Some of the best regional art is made by transients who bring fresh eyes to the place where they have landed. They may be only in temporary exile from the

"How can you argue with a Mainer whose roots are 11 generations deep?" begins a local book review. Although my grandson is the fifth generation in my family to love this place, we're summer people "from away" and always will be. (In parts of the West the

term is "from off.") It's partly a class thing. You can be a newcomer, but if you've worked at the Bath Iron Works for a couple of years, you're a local (but not a native); you can come here summers all your life and you're still "from away."

Over the last thirty years, ownership of a "second home" has become more common among the middle class, and homes vary in scale from a full-sized winterized house on the shore to our summer-only house made of one layer of plywood, to a trailer on a

centers (usually through a teaching job), but they tend not to waste their time bemoaning their present location or getting away whenever possible. They are challenged by new surroundings and new cultures and bring new material into their art. As Ellen Dissanayake has observed, the function of art is to "make special"; as such, it can raise the "special" qualities of place embedded in everyday life, restoring them to those who created them. Yet modernist and some postmodernist art, skeptical of "authenticity," prides itself on departing from the original voices. The sources of landbased art and aesthetics remain opaque to those who only study them.

An American Brass Plant in Waterbury, once the tube mill of Benedict and Burnham, being torn down in 1961. From Brass Valley (Photo: Tom Kabelka, Waterbury Republican-American). Valley people, says worker Frieda Ewen, "are always on the edge....The factory can get up and go and people know that....You're totally dependent on that building." By 1980, there were fewer than 5,000 workers in Naugatuck Valley brass plants, where once there had been 50,000. The decline of the brass industry has been attributed to outdated machinery, high labor costs, runaway shops to Asia, South America, the Middle East, and to the replacement of brass by plastic and aluminum. According to longtime worker and union organizer Bill Moriarty, "one thing that went sour was that these were all once locally owned plants. Then Kennecott came in and took over Chase; Anaconda took over American Brass. The only semi-local plant was Scovill's; it also had tentacles out all over the country. These conglomerates came in, and they just ran these plants into the ground." Union man Tony Gerace adds, "We didn't realize that the bigger corporations could unload a particular plant without any feelings..."



In all discussions of place, it is a question of abstraction and specifics. If art is defined as "universal," and form is routinely favored over content, then artists are encouraged to transcend their immediate locales. But if content is considered the prime component of art, and lived experience is seen as a prime material, then regionalism is not a limitation but an advantage, a welcome base that need not exclude outside influences but sifts them through a local filter. Good regional art has both roots and reach.

A model for this kind of project, though not well-known among artists, was the Brass Valley Workers History Project, initiated in 1979 by Jeremy Brecher, Jerry Lombardi, and Jan Stackhouse in the Naugatuck Valley near Waterbury, Connecticut. It embraced community organizing, union education, an illustrated book on the local history, and an exhibition; in still another ripple outward, it inspired a larger process that included music festivals and teaching resources. The project did not enshrine the past in a palatable cocoon but functioned as a social catalyst. It was received by families living in the valley as "a kind of collective family album in a community where almost everyone has a relative who worked in the brass industry."

As early as 1947, geographer John K. Wright stated the importance of including in his field the way people saw the world as well as its physical attributes, of mapping the desirability and undesirability of places and the reasons people feel the way they do about them. This relationship of peripheral places to central places has also informed more recent studies. Psychologist Tony Hiss asks us to measure our closeness to neighbors and community and suggests ways to develop an "experiential watchfulness" over our regional "sweet spots," or favorite places. Seeing how they change at different times of day, week, and year can stimulate local activism:

patch of wooded inland. But when I was a child in the 1940s and 1950s there was a huge social gap between summer people and those called "the natives." It was cultural, not just economic, and rural versus urban. (Georgetown year-rounders were

just beginning to go to beaches for pleasure; many who spent their lives on the water never learned to swim.) Such differences were exacerbated by snobbery in some quarters. Within the summer colony itself, there were those who carefully distin-

guished renters from owners, prep school students from those who went to public high schools. Such attitudes have diminished greatly, but they have left scars.

Other than parks, what landscapes do you know and care about that you would nominate to a list of Outstanding National Landscapes? How secure are these places at this point? Who's in charge of them? What kind of changes to what you see, hear, smell, or touch would damage your sense of connectedness to these landscapes?

"Regional" photographers and conceptual artists have paralleled these ideas in the visual arts. Dan Higgins has been deeply rooted in the local for over twenty years. His works on Winooski, Vermont, are shown at local bars, stores, and other municipal sites. They include *The Forgotten Trash Can Photos* (1975), selected

DAN HIGGINS, *12 Scenic Views of Winooski, Vermont*, 1973, foldout postcard. The first in an ongoing series of communal, collaborative love notes to his hometown, Higgins made this with eighth graders at the John F. Kennedy Junior High School in Winooski as part of a Vermont Council on the Arts artist-in-the-schools program. Students took pictures of their favorite places which were offset printed, folded by hand, and distributed. This project epitomizes the lure of the local, its apparently innocuous sites—decidedly places rather than landscapes—offering a classic "geography of childhood." The imaginative viewer will be able to crawl under the bush, kick the dirt beneath the overpass, or hang out at the railroad tracks, sensing the secrecy that dramatizes ordinary crannies. The project works both as "art" and as an educational strategy by which students take their own realm seriously.

from a group of discarded photos from the fifties and sixties found behind a pharmacy. As Nathan Lyons has written, "the accidents of millions of amateurs devoid of a picture vocabulary—which produced an outpouring of multiple exposures, distortions, unusual perspectives, foreshortening of planes, imbalance—has contributed greatly to the visual vocabulary of all graphic media since the development of photography."

Higgins's *The Incredible Onion Portraits* (1978)—posed portraits of groups of Winooski people who shared a workplace, a school class, a club, or a neighborhood, each holding an onion—constitute not only a portrait of a place, but a commemoration of its history and a protest against its destruction, gentrification and homogenization by the bulldozers of urban renewal: "The Onion Portraits speak of specificity," wrote Higgins in his introduction. "They deal with fabrics and textures that exist rather than with planners' preconceptions.... The Onion is prop, appropriate not only because the town's name is the Abenaki word for wild onions growing along its river, but because the Onion is strong and reeks of a flavor unsettling to bourgeois taste.... To hold the Onion is to participate in local lore; its embrace is an affirmation of locality."

