

DISCONNECTED SPACE

– contacts with the absent in the blind spot

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EXPERIENCING OFF-CONNECTION

Imagine a vast sinkhole. Roads are swallowed up and connections are cut off. The inhabitants of the ruined homes are forced to move away. Those who had previously lived in the village will remember what kind of home it used to be. There is no place for remembrance, and memories cannot be shared with those who were never able to visit the village. The swallowed area is fenced off, only leaving a tangible *blind spot*.¹ I call this kind of experience of a lost connection *off-connection*.

Off-connections are not always the result of changes in physical space. For example, when the COVID-19 pandemic broke out, the streets of cities were already empty before the virus was able to spread widely throughout the population. In other words, off-connections may also be caused by changes in the perceptions of space.

Sometimes the experience of off-connection is brought about by a material phenomenon that has lost its materiality. For example, phantom limb syndrome can be considered an off-connection experience. Phantom limb syndrome is a condition in which patients experience the sensation of pain in a limb that has been lost. In the case of phantom limb syndrome, the experience of off-connection is corporeal. In this study, however, my focus is on how off-connections affect the experience of place. The study consists of three essays, which frame each individual artistic component.

In my first essay, *Elisenvaara-Pieksämäki – Wrecked Machine* (2017–2021), the occurrence of off-connection is evidenced by an abandoned rail line that has fallen into a blind spot. Forming a visible line across the landscape, the rails represent an absent means of connection. The subject of the *Lost Grandmother* (2017–2023) essay is reconnecting the long silenced executions carried out in 1918 at the end of the Finnish Civil War to the site of the memory in Kuusankoski. In the artistic component of the thesis *Disconnected City* (2021–2023), the secret hobo sign system used by hoboes

¹ In the Finnish language, the etymology of the word ‘katve’ refer to the spot in the forest, that is in the shades. In the vernacular, these blind spots commonly refer to areas that cannot be detected for one reason or another.

is used in off-connecting the daily textual structure of the city.

However, I am not suggesting that off-connections would always be stories about the breakdown of ideal order, as the off-connection can be a performative practice of resistance. It is also important to remember that in the case of off-connection, the concept of space always includes a temporal dimension. The broken link to which the experience refers is virtual and found in the past. By contrast, the experience itself is actual and present. This is why off-connection is never about returning to a lost order.

At the beginning of this research project, I started walking along an abandoned railway line towards a city to which I had taken a train to visit my grandparents in my childhood. I hoped that seeing the landscape that I had passed through decades earlier would remind me of the memories from a time gone by. After following the rails for some time, I entered silent countryside. Lizards and snakes rested atop the sun-warmed rails, flitting away when I approached them.

THREE ESSAYS AND THE UNDERLYING ART PRACTICES

My educational background is in documentary filmmaking. In many of the artistic experiments included in this study, I expanded the concept of cinema. This happened in the context of the experiments, where I studied, how film mediates the experience of a place.

The other methodological background of my research comes from participatory art practices. In 2009, I originally joined the live art collective *Other Spaces*, which was convened by philosopher-artist-researcher Esa Kirkkopello. The artistic practice of the collective is characterised by a collective bodily exercise as the form of a participatory performance.² In the exercise, bodily techniques are used to visit various other spaces. Most of the more than 200 exercises developed by the collective focus on non-human modes of experience.

In this study, I have applied the idea of the performative exercise developed by the collective as a method for artistic research. In collaboration with members of the Other Spaces collective, especially Timo Jokitalo and Kati Korosuo, I developed joint exercises to study the experiences of place. Feedback from participants in the exercises is one of the key elements of this study.

The thesis based on the artistic elements of my research are travel diaries on different manifestations of the concept of off-connection. I formed my understanding of the experientiality of off-connection in the constellation of these three different essays.

ELISENVAARA-PIEKSÄMÄKI – WRECKED MACHINE (2017–2021)

In my first essay on off-connection, I focus on an abandoned railway line, which is located in Savonlinna, my childhood hometown. Thirty years earlier, I had travelled by train on those same rails to visit my grandparents' hometown. The train line was then closed down and, soon after that, my grandparents had also passed away. My connection to the city through my grandparents was lost, and the track was forgotten as a link to that place.

Once, when I visited Savonlinna in 2017, I walked on the abandoned rail line. The first time, on a drizzly autumn day, I walked 10 kilometres from the edge of the city to a place where passenger trains once stopped. Walking along the track was so fascinating that I took it upon myself to examine the closed line by walking its sections from abandoned stop to abandoned stop.

In the technical glossary for railways, a 'switch' is a device that directs trains from one track to another. When a rail line is closed, it is thus disconnected. When walking on the abandoned rail line, I realised that the strange experience of space that led me along the abandoned track could be called off-connection.

2 Compiled as exercise videos, the performance production *The Angle of Water 104.45°* provides a good understanding of collective exercises. See <https://vimeopro.com/user151025373/angleofwater> (visited 15 November 2023).

In the case of an abandoned railway line, I examined the off-connection as the dissolution of a machine-ensemble (Schivelbusch), that once produced the spatial-temporal experience of train travel.³ In his book *Cinema 1: The Movement-Image*, Gilles Deleuze refers to the cinematic movement-image as the expressive equivalent of train travel. Following this observation, I started looking for the experience of an abandoned railway in an early film application called the phantom ride. In a phantom ride, the film camera was mounted to the front of a locomotive to film the scenery unfolding in front of the train. The landscape of the abandoned rail line had become as similar and unattainable a periphery as many of the landscapes depicted in phantom ride films, because many of them presented scenic trips to otherwise unattainable parts of the country.

So, in the first artistic experiment, I mounted a film camera onto a⁴ draizine (handcar), which I used to ride on the abandoned track. In the following artistic experiments, together with Timo Jokitalo and Kati Korosuo, we developed corporeal exercises, which were performed by collectively propelling the draizine. These exercises formed the basis for the *Draizine Performances* (2019).

In particular, we invited people living in the vicinity of the abandoned railway line to participate in the performances. In our most successful experiment, an exercise called *Panoramic View*,⁵ which was based on a Polaroid camera and the movement of the draizine, provided participants with transformative experiences of both time and space by unusual means. Edited by Pilvi Porkola and Suvi Salmenniemi, the peer-reviewed thesis was published in issue 17 of *Ruukku - Journal of Artistic Research* in 2021. *Everyday utopias*.

DISCONNECTED CITY (2021–2023)

The second artistic component of the study was created in 2020 during the COVID-19 lockdown, when the city was deserted, becoming a landscape of lonely, aimless wanders. Together with Timo Jokitalo and Kati Korosuo, it was our intention to continue conducting artistic experiments on the other section of the abandoned railway line, which was located in Russia. However, the pandemic interrupted our plans. As authors of live art, we began to consider how the experience of intercorporeality could be achieved in a collective exercise when participants were not able to meet in the same place to do the exercise at the same time.

I found a solution to this problem in hobo signs, a secret system of symbols used by tramps, but those signs led me to look at the subject of my research from a new perspective. Signs drawn with chalk or coal on the visible surfaces of the city meant that tramps leading a rootless existence could give advice and warnings to each other.

When I delved deeper into the background of these signs, I found that the system of symbols may not have been (at least not in general) a practice used by hoboes. However, similar signs had been

3 See Chapter 2 in Schivelbusch, Wolfgang (2014). *The Railway Journey: The Industrialization of Time and Space in the Nineteenth Century*. University of California Press.

4 This was a digital motion picture camera.

5 The title refers to a concept that Wolfgang Schivelbusch used to describe the experience of a train journey.

used by migrants who also spoke a secret language called *Rotwelsch*, particularly by those living in German regions.

The thing that fascinates me about these signs is how they structure the city as a textual space. Reading and writing secret messages requires walking, which creates a shared corporeal space between the drawer and the reader. In this way, secret signs offered a fascinating interpretation of Michel de Certeau's theory of walking in the city as an acting-out of space that creates anti-texts in the spatial order of the city.

The artistic component of the study is based on a playful exercise, in which participants draw signs on the streets, walk along the sign paths drawn by others and, along the way, make observations about the city by writing short texts. These texts form an indirect correspondence between the participants in the exercise.

The participatory exercise was held in public for the first time as part of the Research Pavilion, which was organised by Uniarts Helsinki in Töölö, Helsinki on June 21, 2021. After this, the exercise was held several times at public events throughout Helsinki.

The most fascinating observation of the exercise was that intertextualities were literally created at the writing places. The private observations presented in the writings were transferred to other writings, thus becoming shared observations. Occasionally, observations concerning a particular place were also transferred to texts written in other places. Such observations formed a textual space of the city that was rootless.

In a variety of ways, the texts written in the exercise challenged the usual characterisations of the city. They were often playful re-interpretations of how observed things were related to the places. I think that these kinds of texts interpret Michel de Certeau's idea of a *poetic geography* encountered by the walker. Through all of these means, the exercise disconnected the everyday structure of the urban space and temporarily formed another shared space within it.

LOST GRANDMOTHER (2017–2023)

In the third essay, I examine disconnection as a phenomenon concerning the sites of memory. The study is based on a film, in which the lost landscape of a memoir is sought by walking.

The Finnish Civil War ended on 10 May 1918. At dusk, 14 men taken prisoner as Red Guards were marched from Kuusankoski Oy paper mill to be shot at a gravel pit located just outside the city. The memory sites of the mass executions carried out in Kuusankoski in March 1918 were destroyed and the bloody deed was kept quiet for an exceptionally long time. In 1967, Verner Granqvist told a Finnish Broadcasting Company reporter how he had managed to escape from the execution procession. With the exception of this rare statement, no mention of these events had been made in the city for decades, at least not openly. As a result, the executions slipped into oblivion.

In May 2017, together with Kuusankoski playwright Juha Salminen, we followed by walking the route that the prisoners had taken from the factory to the gravel pit. We tried to detect the traces of the route from the landscape, that had changed during the 99 years between the event and us. This study was

made into a film, in which camera travels through the landscape by following the walker's point of view. However, many of the details in the milieu had changed. For example, an asphalt road passed through the place where Laura Viljander and 12 others were shot.

We added a single narrator to the film using a recorded interview with Verner Granqvist in 1967. Juha Salminen wrote a second narrator for the film, which was based on the subjectivity of one of the executed prisoners, Laura Viljander. The second narrator was based on our joint research we conducted on Laura's personal history. This narrator, which was performed by Noora Dadu, an actor from Kuusankoski, approached the execution procession through many of the observations that Verner Granqvist had suppressed in his interview.

We presented the film on 10 May 2018 in the hall of a former paper mill, which had been converted into a cultural event venue a few years earlier. 115 people attended the showing of the film. Most of them were local, while others were originally from the area, but had moved away. The film, which was shown at dusk, presented an historic event that was unknown to many of the attendees as a walk through a landscape they had known as their own home.

The third study compares the film with the concept of site of memory, which was developed in an oral history (Nora). The site of memory (*lieu de mémoire*) generally refers to places which are reference points for memoirs. In this study, I considered how the perception of place changes, when the place as the reference point in a memoir is used as the reference point in film, that deals with the memoir. A concept that connects the cinematic image of a site with the site as the point of reference to a lost memory is a blind spot. Sometimes the site of a silenced event has also remained in the blind spot of the sensible space. In such a place, the sensations that are mediated by the site provide a sensory experience for the blind spot of the memory. These blind spots in the landscape, such as nooks and crannies and forested cart paths, proved to be important pictorial motifs for our film.

EXPLORE, PERAMBULATE

According to Henk Borgdorff, artistic research is characterised by unfinished thinking because the objects of research do not have a specific identity. In this study, the ethic of unfinished thinking turned into a perambulatory method of research. According to Michel de Certeau: “To walk is to lack a place. It is the indefinite process of being absent and in search of a proper.” I have maintained this relationship with space that is characteristic of perambulation in relation to the phenomenon I have studied, which is why I have not tried to master it, for example, by mapping out the objects of my research.⁶ On the other hand, the research components are routes to the experiential nature of off-connection in different landscapes. The corporeal nature of walking is also important in all three artistic components of my study.

The written form of the thesis is an essay in this study, which, in my opinion, corresponds to the way I conduct perambulatory research in writing. In the article *The Essay as Form* (1958), Theodor Adorno describes the thinking of an essay as a heretic endeavour, in which new meanings are sought for concepts in contexts where they were previously unthinkable. The heresy in my study came from translations. Conceptual phenomena turned into experiential phenomena in artistic experiments, while experiential phenomena look for articulation in theoretical frames of reference.

I gathered my research on the *Research Catalogue* platform to emphasise that the findings of this study are not just written. In the expositions of the Research Catalogue publication platform, essays are comparable to the extensive documentation of artistic components, such as videos, photographs and audio recordings as well as texts, drawings and transliterated feedback on the exercises submitted by the participants. In expositions, I present instructions for many of the exercises used in the study in such detail that these exercises can be repeated with the help of these instructions. A critical evaluation of this study might require trialling of the exercise. In practice, however, trialling several exercises would prove difficult, as many of the exercises had a relationship with a specific place as well as with a specific group of people. However, repeatability is not a desired feature of this artistic study, either.

For example, Barbara Bolt stated that “...while in the scientific quantitative paradigm the validity of research lies in repetition of the same, the performative paradigm operates according to repetition with difference” (Bolt 2016, 132). The performative paradigm of this research is motivated by the idea that the techniques of the developed exercises would inspire new artistic experiments for which new and more insightful techniques would be developed.

6 In English, the word *research* is derived from the French word *rechercher*. Its etymology stems from the Latin word *circare*, which means to wander or traverse (Gansterer, Cocker & Greil).

OBSERVATIONS AND NEW PATHS

For this kind of study, which is conducted while wandering on foot, it is difficult to point out any aggregating endpoint. A typical aspect of the experientiality of perambulation is that, at some point, the observer will notice that they have arrived in a new area, which was revealed in this study as a disconnected space. The phenomenon, whose form I did not initially recognise, came to me on the ruins of the train track, on the forested cart path running behind yards and on the empty streets of a city depopulated by the pandemic. However, off-connection is not characteristic of certain types of places, but rather a way of perceiving the space.

In site-specific art, over time the *site* has changed its layer of meaning, in which different perceptions of the place are mixed together (Kwon). This is why it is sometimes difficult to understand what is meant by sites. As a concept, off-connection can help articulate some of the problems concerning the experientiality of a space encountered in site-specific art.

In the concept of off-connection, the experientiality of a site is not limited to the sensible characteristics of the space. The site is not only seen as a nexus of power dynamics, or as a reference point for discourses, as the experientiality of the site is also influenced by absent connections, and absence itself. The experience of the absent challenges the prevailing order of the space, thus suggesting that things could also be different.

When off-connection is identified as the underlying cause of an experience, the prevailing conception of the space can be challenged. Challenging prevailing ways of understanding space often motivates the practices of site-specific art. Off-connection could articulate some of these practices.

Sometimes, off-connections can also offer the researcher fascinating conceptual refuges. On one sunny summer day walking along the ruins of the rail line, I arrived in a marshy area located at its most remote extent. That is where I noticed that I was completely out of sight in a place where hardly anyone else would bother following me. There was no specific research task to be performed in that place, and no art-related discussion seemed to apply specifically to that place. It is there that I felt a sense of great liberation and peace. These kinds of blind spots are invaluable places and it might not be worth revealing all of them.

Written between 2017 and 2023 in Berlin, Helsinki, Savonlinna, Rantasalmi, Outokumpu, Hyrynsalmi and Kilpisjärvi

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