This post is the seed of a paper I am writing about a way to think with meaning across sites and scales. My thinking here is influenced by encounters of many kinds with great thinkers such as Avital Ronell, Judith Butler, Diane Davis, and Jacques Derrida. Derrida opens *Aporias* with this sentence: “In advance, I thank you for your patience in what you are going to endure.” With the same expression of gratitude, and an additional acknowledgement of the incompleteness of my thinking here, I echo that sentiment. I will be returning to this, editing, updating, so I welcome your thoughts and comments.

I. SUMMARY

I have spent some time working as an artist, making objects and sculptural installations with those objects. My work focused on the *syntax of proximity* – which I think of as how we move objects around in relation to one another and produce new meanings. This is *proximity syntax*.

Now in my work as an anthropologist, I find myself returning to this idea. It comes up when I consider my research on “space.” I ask: what is the object of study here? From the micro-relations among very small things such as *microbialites* and *tardigrades* (pictured above, which both have/had an impact on the Earth at a large scale) to the macro-configurations of ideas like interstellar travel – there is an apparent coherence across these sites and scales that we call ‘space science’ or just space. I’m especially interested in how we make what I might call *sculptural discourses*. This turns out to be connected to my prior major research project with social movements and internet social media, the focus of my MA research.

I see my activity in relation to the internet as similar to my work with proximity syntax in sculpture. I tweet, listen, watch, email, write, collect images, distribute words and images, share a quote, respond to my own tweets and those of others – all of these engagements are connected across scales and sites into a coherence. However that coherence across sites and scales is made invisible when we insist on producing a document. The same is true of other such things – musical albums, imaginary worlds, and so on. With imaginary worlds, the reenacting, cosplay, LARPing, fanfiction – all of this makes up, expands, and builds the coherence across sites and scales. And this is related to what’s going on in planetary analogue research as well, and in space simulations also.

So, to allow these proximity syntax relationships to be objects of study, and to communicate in terms of that same ontology of proximity syntax, I have to allow for the dissaggregation of these things from the ‘document’ so that the proximity relationships can become a part of the text. This is what I think of in terms of the *proximity syntax* in the *sculptural work of discourse*. Amassing objects, either in small micro-level analysis or in larger scale Big Data analysis doesn’t give access to that variance of
proximity across site and scale as it moves and relates within the suspension of the installation as a whole. The installation, also, importantly, is not installed, it is always 

installing – always writing new meaning through the proximity syntax.

These visual arts metaphors may be only one way to consider this approach I am proposing. Below I continue to play out this metaphor and explore the possibilities of these “Installations of Meaning” and “Sculptural Discourses in Site/Scale Suspensions.”

Interstellar Distances In Perspective (Image Credit: NASA)

II. SCULPTURAL DISCOURSE ACROSS SITES AND SCALES

We create knowledge across multiple scales and sites and this has a kind of coherence. The demand to aggregate that knowledge as a statement or story or finality in a single document, a single text, is a burden, but also a throwback.

I tweet, listen, watch, email, write, collect images, distribute words and images, share a quote, respond to my own tweets – all of these engagements are connected across scales and sites into a coherence which is invisible if you insist on a document. They are not bounded temporally or thematically but they are an installation of discourses, in the sense that we use the word installation to refer to an art installation – a coherent body of disparate objects brought together in an exhibition space.

The exhibit hall is – perhaps – a life, an audience, a reader, the viewers, some form of others who receive/produce while receiving. The discourse installation is a form of sculpture produced through engagements with proximity syntax. Previously I described proximity syntax in terms of conceptual art:

Proximity Syntax

When proximity adjustment is the method of creating art, the materials and methods used to assemble, group or otherwise relate materials are of equal importance. The adjustment can involve changes to an object, the object’s environment, the context or location of the object or the way in which the object is displayed or referenced.

The placement of an idea into a proximity relationship is a conceptual act of art. This may involve a presentation through words, symbols, situations and other media. The object/idea could be an art object, media such as sound or light or an even more elusive/intangible force.

My work is primarily created through acts of proximity adjustment. Through investigations in the studio, I build the objects. The work is then placed or installed. Thereby, the production and installation of art also becomes the introduction of an idea into a space. Both the construction of the objects and the communication project installations address this proximity syntax.
Just as I move objects and ideas in physical space and mental space to create new proximity relationships, we now position discourse and content through juxtaposition, remixing, and reference in relationships across sites and scales. These placements are then a kind of proximity relationship as well, but one that is not possible, or at least not maintained, through aggregating texts in a document. If such proximity relationships were aggregated in a document, it would not maintain coherence, it would be incoherent, incomprehensible.

To develop new proximity relationships and communicate with that proximity syntax in order to maintain coherence, we have to allow for the dissaggregation of these ideas so that the proximity relationships can become a part of the text – this is the syntax of proximity in the sculptural work of discourse.

The insistence that we continue to produce ideas in the form of documents is then an aporia because it prevents the expression of these proximity syntactic relationships that emerge across sites and scales. We express across multiple sites and scales because these planes, or venues are media for the content but also because they are a social media, a web of sociality. These sites and scales have sensory and embodied aspects – they are social-technological techniques of the body like the “selfie” as well as textual interactions like the tweet, the retweet, the meta-commentaries produced among and between social media and other timelines and feeds. These feeds are streaming across sites and scales, into our pockets, across continents, to satellites, under the sea, back to our computers, and through our speech and stories, and are incorporated into reflexive compositions of proximity syntax, into sculptural discourses.

None of the elements or modes of transit or proximity relations can be extracted and examined individually, and when we try, they are no more representative of the coherence than collections of cultural objects. Amassing these objects, either in small micro-level analysis or in larger scale Big Data analysis does not provide access to the variance of proximity across site and scale as it moves and relates within the suspension of the “installation” as a whole. The installation is not installed, it is always installing – always writing new meanings through the proximity syntax; or Writing new meaning, following Derrida.

The suspension within which the installation sits is a fluid, a stuff that is liquid – not a hanging of things – there are no wires holding up parts of the installation.

Are there currents? If so what are they? Is this is a sea, are there waves, is this a suspension as vacuum?

This is not a theory of art installations. This is a noticing of the problem of the aggregated document as the standard of textual production today. This problem applies whether that document is a web site or a video or a multi-media project, or a museum art installation because it is not representing or signifying the “coherence” that is formed through ongoing installing processes across sites and scales, processes through which meaning is re-figured in the proximity syntax.
III. PRODUCTION, RECEPTION, TRANSLATION

This theory of installations of meaning has implications for production, reception, and translation. The production across sites and scales is discussed above. What is an example of concrete output using this theory? A dissertation, a book, a statement from someone who is thinking on a problem – these things could be coherent in the thinker’s output across sites and scales. A dissertation might be re-defined as all output across all sites and scales of a graduate student over a 4 year period. A book might be re-defined as all output across all sites and scales of an author over a 20 year or 1 year, or 1 week period.

Translation into an installation of meaning means moving the content of a static, single, text into multiple sites and scales so that a student or any reader could encounter all of the content across sites and scales (video, social media, web sites, etc.) By browsing videos, blog posts, reading books, walking a path, eating a meal – a reader would have “read the text.”

The movement between the formats is one aspect of translation. Consider also the existing concept of the Proximity Search. A proximity search applies rules to searches which constrain the proximity. This echoes the rules we apply today to the production of a document or text. It also echoes our processes in anthropology of data collection and analysis. These rules and techniques constrain the sites and scales allowed or included, and prevent discovery on the one hand – and prevent creation of installations of meaning on the other. This new mode of thinking I propose demands the freedom to produce sculptural discourses in site/scale suspensions, to liberate creation from the document.

The installations of meaning grow through remixes, juxtapositions – when a musician releases an album, covers, remixes, and other things are produced – conversations occur. That entire coherence is the object of study, the object of production, reception, and translation.

This is the same with imaginary worlds, or worlds of imagination. The reenacting, cosplay, LARPing, fanfiction, and so on – all of this makes up, expands, and builds the coherence across sites and scales.

Elsewhere I have been thinking about Writing worlding as ethnographic work, drawing on ontology, enacted with a recognition of deferred meaning (e.g., Oman-Reagan 2015). I imagine Writing worlding as ethnography that makes no claim to translation or to ultimately meaningful signification. It is ethnography that ignores the idea of fiction by swallowing it, and instead engages in the process of making worlds through constitutive speech acts, and by digesting the problem of signification.

Writing worlding calls on the power of all language to describe all things, and at the same time
recognizes the contradictions inherent in the anthropological project of writing (small w) comparisons of comparisons by uncovering what it means to defer meaning; what Derrida calls Différence (difference [différence] with an a). I wonder how often people save, copy, or archive the material they post across sites and scales? Comments on blog posts, forums, Facebook, text messages, thoughts in the night — are they preserved, related to again? Or is it all dumped out into internet space and lost? It often feels like this content is being thrown into a hole, but it isn’t — it is also producing these installations, it is building our sculptural discourses across sites and scales. Perhaps the first task of Writing worlding is to begin to describe the coherence of these sculptural discourses.

QUESTIONS

What would a holographic ethnography look like?

What kind of installations exist at the extremes of sites and scale? Such as what Timothy Morton calls "Hyperobjects, or "entities of such vast temporal and spatial dimensions that they defeat traditional ideas about what a thing is in the first place."

What is discarded to produce the document? What is discarded to make coherence in the document and how does this discarding process erase coherence of the installation?

REFERENCES


Oman-Reagan, Michael P. 2015 Writing Worlding: Turning to Ontology at the Dead End of “Culture.” Unpublished MS, Department of Anthropology, Memorial University of Newfoundland.

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