

In a hole in Rural Saskatchewan, Canada without a Phone

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Abstract

A discussion of *The Hole Residency* provides a context for assessing the crucial role that technology can play in art projects that are framed in the boundaries of social practice or socially-engaged art, especially by the near-absence of technology in such projects. *The Hole Residency* is a project focused on duration, visceral experience, collaboration, and the opportunity to engage directly with nature. It also provides a framework for considering the relationship between art, science and technology within a hands-on context.

Keywords

Technology, nature, social practice, socially-engaged art, space, duration, collaboration, visceral

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The Hole Residency began as a durational investigation of a 6-foot-deep hole dug on my property on Treaty 6 Indigenous land in rural Saskatchewan, Canada. The hole is open to the sky, with a square tower of ground in the middle where a wild rose bush once stood. A neighbour with a backhoe dug a wide deep trench around the rosebush, and then added a ramp into the hole. Various layers of history are embedded in that land. The most recent historical event was the first settlers arriving on this specific plot of land in 1903. Just before this was the signing of Treaty 6 with the Indigenous population in the late 1800's altering the access to this land by the Indigenous peoples. The earliest information that I found about this land was the fact that a glacier passed across this specific area millennia ago.

As I told people about the project, various people wanted to visit, to read relevant material to me, and somehow to share the experience. I decided that the presence of other people in the hole would further



enrich the experience for me. I advertised the possibility of attending a one or two day residency in the hole on various residency sites. I had an overwhelming response to the call. In total 45 different people from coast to coast in Canada, and from England, Ireland, Israel, the Philippines, New York and the Netherlands attended the Hole Residency with me. I was in the hole for 65 days – some of the participants were there for one day, and others for two. Each person brought something original and special to their day(s) in the hole. Each day was a gift and a challenge for me. A crucial aspect of the process for me was the fact that each person allowed me to see the hole in a different way. Some people came with elaborate

arrangements for us, while others came with very few plans or expectations. Regardless of the starting point, each day unfolded with its own rhythms and memorable nuances.

The fact that this hole is in an isolated part of the country meant a shift in focus towards the natural environment surrounding us each day. Some people came with an extensive knowledge of geology, biology, ornithology. I expanded my knowledge of the birds flying overhead, and learned how to translate the details of flight patterns and markings to realize the extensive diversity of birdlife in the area. Maybe more relevant to this paper is the way that various people utilized the time to viscerally explore their natural environment. One person lay on the sand for hours and waited for anything crawling or flying to touch his exposed skin, a very embodied relationship to studying bugs. Another person physically moved with the line of the shadow of the sun, marking these edges with material available in the hole, as well as his own body.



The original plan was to live stream each day to PAVED Gallery in Saskatoon, the host organization. After much consultation with local companies, I realized that given the location and existing technology, the only way that I might possibly live stream was if a tower was installed near the hole. I developed an alternative system in which I used power packs to power a camera that would record onto one 64 GB chip for 6 hours each day. The power pack was deposited outside the hole with a camera adapter plugged into it. Wires hung over the edge limiting the movement of the camera. There was no camera operator, just a fixed camera, aimed generally into the space that we occupied. With no zooms or pans, the camera recorded what was in front of it. Participants had a choice in terms of the direction that the camera aimed, and some chose to focus on specific parts of the hole. Most ignored it. The chip was transported to Paved every evening to be inserted into the media player the next day at noon, totally unedited. People visiting the gallery made assumptions about the technology based on the coding embedded in the footage that often suggests live streaming, not

considering the obvious limits of technology in most rural areas in Canada.

The total lack of access to the Internet or to electricity had other crucial consequences. No one was able to check one's cell phone. We were unable to get any weather reports including notice of an approaching tornado. No one could fact-check from science sites or use any on-line resources. We had no access to any entertainment except what was around us in nature. This unusual circumstance shaped all aspects of the time in the hole, including not knowing how much time had passed. (No one has watches anymore.) The day ended when the red light on the camera dimmed. This led to an emphasis on the visceral experiences provided by physically being present in the space. Participants looked to the sky and the shadows for a sense of time, reclaiming traditional modes of sensing the passage of time.

Many participants have written back to me talking about how much this experience has altered their core perceptions of the world around them. For each person, it was a unique opportunity to be present in silence and in intimacy with one other person, to pay attention to the walls of sand, to witness the details in the trailing roots that hung down from above, to listen to the various birds particularly the bank swallows that began nesting in the walls after the project began, and to have the luxury of 6 hours unbroken by digital interruptions. A crucial collaborator in this process was the weather. The spring and early summer of 2017 was exceptionally dry. However, during the 65 days, the weather ranged from brutally hot to bonechillingly cold, with pouring rain, hail, high winds that blew the sand everywhere, and even that nearby tornado.



It was crucial for me to enter into the hole each day with respect for the direction that each person was offering to me. The second person had asked to replicate a process that her mother and other elders did each year on Sweet Grass Indigenous Reserve in Treaty 6 in which they sat in a sacred natural location all day for a series of days. Completing these two days in silence in the rain and the wind of early May was a crucial turning point and message for me about the significance of just being present, and allowing each

person to respond directly to various aspects of the natural environment.

I recognize that talking about the nearabsence of technology at ISEA may seem counterintuitive. But by creating an environment that removed digital media except for an observing camera, an awareness of the role of pervasive technology became a crucial part of the experience. This project placed heightened emphasis on what we can learn by physically exploring a space – touching, tasting, listening, letting sensation flow over one's body. This ability to experience through all the channels of perception may be what we are in danger of losing with our focus on small screens and buttons.