

8. Landscape(s) of the Mind: Psychic Space and Narrative Specificity (Notes from a Work in Progress)

John Coleman

Each of us exists within a visceral world. We are wrapped among a simultaneity of physical experiences: our perceptions of sound, light, temperature, touch; our responses to the threat of danger, or the expression of a desire become memory: entering into a shifting fabric of what we have known. The specificity of a particular site/location is, I believe, a woven container of associations . . . a fluid mix of the physical, emotional, personal, social, and political. This fabric is nonlinear; extending inward, and out. The present is written upon by its inhabitants: all of us containers ourselves.

Within the body of this rumination, I will speak to two installations that help to shape my own sense of the range of narrative possibilities within this medium: David Hammons's *Jesus Is the Light* and Ed Kienholz and Nancy Reddin Kienholz's *Sollie 17*. As I gather and organize these ideas, I am myself preparing a project to be installed in October 1997 at Randolph Street Gallery (RSG) in Chicago, in conjunction with the exhibition programming for *Trace*. Notes from a work in progress are presented as a map of my process specific to the installation, *A Prayer for My Son and Myself*.

(Journal entry: July 1997)

This project is part of a series of offerings to my son Ayo. At each location that he visited in the first year of his life, I am constructing a piece in his honor. We were in Chicago when he was about ten weeks old and my son and I spent three days walking the streets. I was moved by the number of black folks that stopped in traffic, rolled down their windows, and shouted: "Go 'head, baby, you let him know who his daddy is!" At RSG, I will develop an intimate sound installation that focuses upon my own recommitment to the spiritual and human development within myself as I struggle to become a more complete model and guide for him. I am approaching the entire space as a psychic landscape with-

in which love, hope, possibility, and struggle reverberate. I will explore some of the tools that my father armed me with for survival and growth: the self-reliance and resilience, while also speaking through some of the distance and pain that I hope not to pass on.

In August 1991, I had the opportunity to join an installation crew for the La Jolla Museum of Contemporary Art (MoCA). A sizable collection of David Hammons's work had been compiled in an exhibit titled *Rousing the Rubble*. This exhibit began at the Institute for Contemporary Art P.S. 1, went through Philadelphia, then came on to San Diego. David made it a practice to request that African American artists, craftspeople, and students be included in the preparation for his projects, so there I was, along with performer-poet-painter Patricia Payne. Hammons's work has always considered the specificity of a particular cultural and political space, in relationship to a specific historical moment. In 1991, then as now, most museums in the United States remained primarily white institutions. The most consistent black faces one tends to see are those of the guards. It is into this conceptual space that Hammons brought his deification of basketball: an urban black street game of grace, power, strategy, and pipe dreams. He constructed backboards and hoops from discarded materials found in an



Figure 1. Installation view of *A Prayer for My Son and Myself*, 1997. 900 square feet. Materials include splayed rubber skins, circle of black-eyed peas, bicycle inner tubes, oak frame, enamel bucket, found men's ties, lead houses, treated chairs, slate chalkboard, a field of soil, beeswax, tar paper and treated wood. Not pictured are the sounds of spoken prayer (see text), layered talking drums, cicadas, crickets, distant laughter, birds, and traffic. Photograph by Tom Van Eynde. Courtesy of the artist.

urban landscape and recast them as ritual objects of resistance, healing, and celebration. An entire gallery within the La Jolla MoCA was inscribed as sacred space: a *court* situated between opposing emblematic "hoops." At this site, a gathering of black men charged, slid, spun, and faded: placing jump shots in the game. David conducted an improvised musical invocation à la Sun Ra, or Jameel Moondoc and the Jus Grew Orchestra at courtside. The marks from the ball and skids from high-tops remained as evidence. This ritual event was itself a descendant of another project titled *Higher Goals*, composed of basketball hoops and boards set absurdly high on top of telephone poles skinned with geometric patterns of bottle caps: metaphoric carrots dangling from very high sticks. These objects were installed on streets in Brooklyn and Harlem. The content of this narrative is dependent upon the context of a larger framework of U.S. popular culture: urban black culture, recruitment practices of the NCAA, and of course the NBA (a fabric of very specific social spaces).

I just finished reading Ernest Gaines's *A Lesson before Dying*. In a 1940s Louisiana parish, a young black man, Jefferson, accepts a ride from a couple of buddies hell-bent on finding another taste. The fellas, Brother and Bear, stop off at a liquor store at the side of the road hoping to obtain a bottle. Their cash is short, and they request that the storekeeper float them the difference, knowing that he would be paid as soon as they were. The elderly storekeeper (addressed as Mr. Gropé) refuses the "boys." The fellas persist, and a fight ensues and results in the shooting deaths of Mr. Gropé, Brother, and Bear. Jefferson is at the wrong place at the wrong time. Two white men walk in and find him standing there in shock, with a bottle in his hand.

At the trial, the defense attorney (in all his benevolence) assumes a patronizing tone as he asks the good men of the jury to consider the obvious fact that this poor dumb creature is incapable of planning and enacting anything, let alone the charges:

Gentlemen of the jury, look at him—look at him—look at this. Do you see a man sitting here? Do you see a man sitting here? I ask you, I implore, look carefully—do you see a man sitting here?¹

The attorney goes on to describe Jefferson as a "cornered animal" descended from what he referred to as "the deepest jungle of blackest Africa."

Within the spaces of Gaines's narrative, I discovered a means to convey my experience of Hammons's ephemeral installation *Jesus Is the Light* (included in the *Rousing the Rubble* exhibition). The piece is deceptively simple: a bare plywood box set upon the floor within the gallery. The structure's walls measure fifteen by fifteen feet, with a twelve-foot ceiling. There is one entrance, a doorway covered with a (light-tight) heavy black curtain. Step from the well-lit space of the gallery, through the curtain, and you are now standing in a velvet darkness. As your eyes adjust, you become aware of a faint glow; a series of soft spots of light floating just out of reach above your head. These spots are fading slowly. They seem to move and sway. And the interior is even darker now. Over your left shoulder, you hear the whirring blades of an old electric fan oscillating on its pivot: an arc of breezes moving from right to left and back again.

Then there is the unseen voice of Aretha Franklin singing "Jesus Is the Light." She fills the room: rising, falling, flying. Darkness envelops you: it is the light touch of a caress. A soft embrace . . . The space expands.

Abruptly, a bare lightbulb hanging from an old cord at the center of the small room floods the space with yellow-white light. Now you see the peeling, pressed-tin ceiling and walls, a flimsy shelf with the dusty fan, a boom box in the corner. Above your head hang dozens of cheap plastic figures of Jesus on the cross (straight from the bodega). You are squinting in the glare. And you discover that there are other people with you there, also shading their eyes from the harsh light. Again your eyes adjust, as you look at the simple details. Then the light clicks off. The dark falls hard, and the dream space opens up before you: stars brilliant now, and dancing in the night sky. Aretha soars.

All of the elements were laid out: very limited materials, limited space, simple construction; yet the synergy of the components existing in relationship to each other resulted in this state of flux and possibilities. Elegance: articulate and visceral. Transmutation: "all progress is a returning home" (the Kybalion).²

Gentlemen of the jury, be merciful. For God's sake, be merciful. He is innocent of all charges brought against him.

But let us say he was not. Let us for a moment say he was not. What justice would there be to take this life? Justice, gentlemen? Why, I would just as soon put a hog in the electric chair as this.³

The attorney completes his final arguments. The jury is released to its deliberations and returns the guilty verdict after lunch. Jefferson's posture is that of internalized defeat. He is convinced that his life is as meaningless and empty as the white men who convicted him.

The judge condemns him to death.

This narrative is told in the first person: the voice of the schoolteacher. Grant Wiggins grew up in the quarter, a descendant of cane-cutting sharecroppers: poor and black. He played in the dust of the unpaved roads, and went to church and school in the same building where he is now teaching. He was raised by his aunt, Tante Lou. Grant has completed a university education and has returned reluctantly to teach in the quarter, "because it is the only thing that an educated black man can do in the South today." He does not enjoy it. He sees himself as trapped within a hopeless situation. Helpless in the face of recurring cycles. He is almost contemptuous of the dusty black sons and daughters of sharecroppers: the same mothers, fathers, sisters, brothers, neighbors, ministers, and classmates that he grew up with. Grant is frustrated and on the verge of defeat. Tante Lou and Jefferson's aunt, Miss Emma, manipulate Grant into visiting Jefferson in jail:

"Called him a hog."

She said that, and it was quiet again. My aunt looked at me, then back down at the table. I waited.

She turned her head slowly and looked directly at me. Her large, dark face

showed all the pain she had gone through this day, this past weekend. No. The pain I saw in that face came from many years past.

"I don't want them to kill no hog," she said. "I want a man to go to that chair, on his own two feet."⁴

Grant, the teacher, is again trapped and obliged. He accompanies Miss Emma, Tante Lou, and Reverend Ambrose to visit Jefferson. Miss Emma has cooked fried chicken, corn bread, and sweet potatoes for him. The visit does not go well. And subsequent visits do not go well. Jefferson leaves his back to his visitors, facing the wall that he does not see, staring up at the ceiling that he does not see; he thrusts his entire face into a plate of his aunt's food, and does not eat: "corn for a hog." He is abusive and defiant, but slowly, painfully, the two men come to trust, and move into a profound shakedown. Jefferson comes to recognize his own beauty and strength as he prepares to die; an opportunity to give something basic and necessary to those left behind; the need of every member of the community to see him dignified and unbeaten, even as he sits strapped in that chair waiting; the need for him to confirm the faith in the face of overwhelming doubt. *I am a man.*

Grant receives an education. He comes to recognize its value and its cost. He comes to an understanding of just how much has been given to him: the struggles to plant and nurture a dignified life, where so much creeping death has been sown:

"You think you educated, but you not. You think you the only person ever had to lie? You think I never had to lie?"

"I don't know, Reverend."

"Yes, you know. You know, all right. That's why you look down on me, because you know I lie. At wakes, at funerals, at weddings—yes, I lie. I lie at wakes and funerals to relieve pain. 'Cause reading, writing, and 'rithmetic is not enough. You think that's all they sent you to school for? They sent you to school to relieve pain, to relieve hurt—and if you have to lie to do it, then you lie. You lie and you lie and you lie. When you tell yourself you feeling good when you sick, you lying. When you tell other people you feeling good when you sick, you lying. You tell them that 'cause they have pain too, and you don't want to add yours—and you lie. She been lying every day of her life, your aunt in there. That's how you got through that university—cheating herself here, cheating herself there, but always telling you she's all right. I've seen her hands bleed from picking cotton. I've seen the blisters from the hoe and the cane knife. At that church, crying on her knees. You ever looked at the scabs on her knees, boy? Course you never. 'Cause she never wanted you to see it. And that's the difference between me and you, boy; that make me the educated one, and you the gump. I know my people. I know what they gone through. I know they done cheated themselves, lied to themselves—hoping that one they all love and trust can come back and help relieve the pain."⁵

When they finally lead him to the chair, put the sack over his head, and throw the switch, Jefferson is the strongest man in the room. Transformation and release.



Figure 2. Detail of the installation *A Prayer for My Son and Myself*. Photograph by Tom Van Eynde. Courtesy of the artist.

(Journal entry: July 1997)

On the day you came into the world, you sent flowers to your mother & your grandmothers. . . . You lifted your head & smiled.

Young brother @ the market today told us—"my baby boy is due in the next two weeks. . . . I come all this way, yeah, I'm'a be there for him."

As I approach forty years of age, I still remember the stories of my youth: B'rer Rabbit, the *Odyssey*, *Aesop's Fables*. I recall the first time that I heard James Baldwin's voice slip off the page, the musicality of Maya Angelou's voice, the sight of Ellison's invisible narrator squatting in the glaring light of his cubicle under the streets of Manhattan—speaking the map of his becoming. I find myself engaged simultaneously within the telling, the spoken exchange, and the poetry of the presentation. I am drawn by the sounds of the voices, the silences, the overlay of the said and the unsaid, the smells in and of the place, the feel of the texture upon the floor. The rust or heat or glare . . . There is room for me to move.

Installation became my primary working environment because of its potential to exist within both physical and psychic spaces: to extend the written, spoken, and/or implied narrative into the realm of a physically engaged experience. Space is tangible, much like color, texture, form. It can be shaped to mean, to contain, to conjure . . .

In speaking of the Kienholzes' work, Thomas McEvilley writes:

Space, the figure, and narrativity turn curiously onto and into one another as if they were almost one—or one possible triangulation of forces somehow perilously remaining in balance. Space is the medium that enables the figure to exist; the figure, in turn, is the agent that activates space. Their collaboration, finally, is the necessary cause of the special situation in which narrative can occur: where event horizons explode into events.⁶

Ed and Nancy Reddin Kienholz's images have consistently seduced the viewer into peeking across a shifting line of interior/exterior relationships: outward into specifically American spaces of marginalization and denial left festering. Unaddressed. We look through doors, windows, and bars—from one American landscape to another. The portraits are precise. Unsentimental.

With the tableau *Sollie 17*, the viewer again looks past a (slightly) open door into a space of abandonment and waiting. Time is fractured. Repetitious. The quick glance into this interior is frozen with concrete traces of Sollie's movements through the day. His image is repeated at three locations within the tiny room:

One: Lying on top of the narrow bed: head and shoulder propped upon a filthy, uncased pillow. His face is obscured by the book that he gazes past: *A Handful of Men*. His left hand thrust into his briefs.

Two: Sitting on the edge of the bed—unclothed, except for drooping (used-to-be-white) briefs. His neck and shoulders bowed into a concavity of apparent resignation. Sollie's head is in profile: a flat black-and-white portrait of a man cast aside.

Three: Standing with his back to the door. He appears to be gazing out the window on the back wall. The space outside is literally flat and gray.

The voyeur follows the truncated arc of a pendulum: from the bed, to the window, then back again. "Space is an oppressive force." There is no exit (though the sign above the pay phone, right here, points back the way that we came). *Sollie 17* is another haunted stage set in an American script.

flophouse

you haven't lived
until you've been in a
flophouse
with nothing but one
light bulb
and 56 men
squeezed together

on cots
with everybody
snoring
at once
and some of those snores
so
deep and
gross and
unbelievable—
dark
snotty
gross
subhuman
wheezings
from hell
itself.
your mind
almost breaks
under those
death-like
sounds
and the
intermingling
odors:
hard
unwashed socks
pissed and
shitted
underwear
and over it all
slowly circulating
air
much like that
emanating from
uncovered
garbage
cans.
and those
bodies
in the dark

fat and thin
and
bent
some
legless
armless
some
mindless
and worst of
all:
the total
absence of
hope
it shrouds
them
covers them
totally.

(Charles Bukowski)⁷



Figure 3. Detail of the installation *A Prayer for My Son and Myself*. Photograph by Tom Van Eynde. Courtesy of the artist.

(Journal entry: August 1997)

Patching a slow leak: looking into tubs of reflected images. Bubbles rising.

Inner-(tube)-skins: my father's ties rising.

Provide a shelter. A circle of four chairs: talking drums and spoken prayer. A call and response set in a field of soil.

In August 1995, the Regional Artists Program (RAP) held its grant application review at Randolph Street Gallery. Artist Nanette Yannuzzi Macias was on the committee, ten weeks after giving birth to our son. We joined her in Chicago and hit the streets.

In September 1996 I submitted a proposal for RSG's project room. Randolph Street is one of a handful of alternative spaces still surviving in the Midwest. Of the shows here, 75 percent include at least one installation, providing a venue for artists on a community, regional, and national level. "If these walls could talk . . ."

Operating a nonprofit space has always been challenging: a balance of fund-raising activities, grant writing, property rentals, program scheduling, accounting, and final reports, but given the recent restructuring of the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA), many venues are struggling to reinvent themselves. RSG saw its general budget shrink drastically from \$450,000 in 1996 to \$180,000 for fiscal 1998. In previous years, grants from the NEA provided the bulk of the operating budget, supplemented by grants from large foundations (for example, Chicago Community Trust, Sara Lee, and Illinois Arts Council). The new guidelines limit funding to institutions only (no more individual grants), and each institution may apply for *one project only*, under *one* category: Creation and Presentation, Heritage and Preservation, Education and Access, or Planning and Stabilization. The already precarious fiscal landscape has become prohibitive. In fiscal year 1995, RSG was staffed with five full-time employees, two part-time employees, and five interns each semester. This number shrank to a combined total of one and one-half positions, and the gallery spent much of fiscal 1997 in hiatus. *Installation in the United States is dependent upon the survival of these spaces nationally. It is the not-for-profit spaces that provide the venue and resources for almost all of the installation work produced in this country.* With the demise of Individual Artists Grants (both regional and national), it is the alternative spaces that allocate monies to artists for materials, travel, and production. Museums are not available to the vast majority of artists (though these institutions are eligible for the same funding resources as struggling spaces: they are much more attractive and less controversial investments).

(Journal entry: September 1997)

—a circle of prayer: voices rising from the chairs—

. . . it's hot again today. I'm way out on Western just in front of San Luis Body shop. Across the street, a brother climbs back into the battered cream-colored pickup: the family landscaping business operates from there. . . . Glass crystal fragments lie in the spaces between square blocks of sidewalk—La Mejor Oficina, (West) North Avenue

1600 block, and the bus stop across the street. Iglesia Consejo Moral in a small two-story brick office building . . . & next door, two tiny black faces peer out from behind rusted bars: one window open in the triptych with green shades and a canary yellow shirt. Next corner, a fire fountain sprays relief into the street . . .

"Daddy, squirt me . . ."

It's hot, and sharp, and alive, my son. This is your world . . . laughter, joy, and tears. I'm here. From the beginning: this moment . . . Still arming & disarming myself . . .

You need weapons here: Spirit skin that resists, if not transforms assault . . .

You need scars that form, then heal . . .

You need a heart willing to risk (& lose) again. Long curious fingers to seek out the beauty . . .

(resilience & flow)

I hear the voices of so many circling back for me/you: cars stopped in traffic . . .

"Go 'head . . ."

in the park, the street, at the lake:

"That's it, baby—you show him who his daddy is . . ."

faces reflecting joy & hopefulness—approaching: we need each other with so much urgency. And the spoken ladder/nets of my elder brothers weave patterns of interlocking fingers—so many hands guiding my footsteps: your eyes open wide.

Mumia was all over the street that summer: Cleveland, Chicago, L.A., Philly. A collective countdown to stop the clock: tic tic—The hands move, and I'm in L.A. Monday afternoon, Geronimo Pratt is released after 27 years in a cage. And now, so much joy and hopefulness looking out . . . Tuesday morning I'm heading east on Adams just past Western: drivin' slow—so good to be right here . . .

Plainclothes detective flyin' too low for radar pulls up on my right & flashes a badge framed by a squeezed square leather wallet . . . and once again, your brother is holding his hands in plain sight: guns drawn with backup crouching behind the door.

Tic-Tic-Tic . . . shhhhhhhhh . . .

Son, push the tube into the bucket and look for bubbles rising in the water . . . there's the hole—you see it? Now go get the scissors from the kitchen drawer and I'll show you how we're gonna patch that leak . . .

That's it, Son, push the tube into the bucket and look for bubbles rising in the water . . . there's the hole—see it? Now go get those scissors and I'll show you how we'll fix it.

So, I pop the cover off the funny little cardboard box, and ruff-scrub up the surface of that tube all around the hole—then spread clear runny glue that was always cold to the touch. Sometimes, it was a slooow leak . . .

Gradual.

But, I'm here. Stumbling, and getting up again. Ven acá. Ven acá. I'll show you my uncertainty.

(Journal entry: November 7, 1997)

The candles are here by my side of the bed. You were conceived here. Your mother's contractions began here. You are lying here between us now . . .

(Late postscript)

As a final note, I am including this memo just received:

For Immediate Release
February 13, 1998

Contact: Mary Murphy / Jane Saks

Randolph Street Gallery to Close

CHICAGO, February 13, 1998—Randolph Street Gallery announced today that it is closing, effective immediately. This decision by the Board of Directors to close the 19-year-old non-profit arts institution was due to a serious lack of financial and human resources, brought about by broader cultural changes that have impacted the viability of this and similar arts organizations nationwide.

Randolph Street Gallery, founded in 1979 as a way to advance contemporary arts and artists working beyond the scope of mainstream institutions, quickly grew into a leading center for progressive cultural practice. The artist-run organization presented and produced works by thousands of artists based in Chicago and beyond. Exhibitions, performances, multi-disciplinary arts projects, publications, public art, artist support programs, and a wide range of educational activities provided multiple opportunities for interchange between artists and a broad public on the relevant issues of the day.

In recent years, however, major changes in the art world—including large reductions in funding for contemporary artists and artist-run organizations, increased legal reporting requirements, and government pressures, along with a weakening in the market for progressive arts activities—caused the

organization to consider its future viability. In January 1997, the board and staff took a six-month hiatus from producing programs to focus their full efforts on re-inventing the gallery and gathering additional financial support.

Despite some success at these efforts, Randolph Street Gallery continued to be seriously limited by severe financial burdens. Given these conditions, the board concluded that continuing would have required fundamental changes beyond the core goals and purposes of the organization.

"The decision to close the gallery was not made lightly, nor without considering many other possible options through a lengthy process of examination and consultation with independent facilitators and peers," said Hamza Walker, chairman of the Board. "This difficult decision was made easier by recognizing the extraordinary dedication and creative approach of our many artists, arts workers and colleagues who created a unique artistic experience here. That will survive as RSG's legacy. We thank Chicago for nineteen good years."

Walker added, "While in many respects, Randolph Street Gallery achieved its goals, its closing means one less venue for artists and audiences. Chicago continues to need vital and visible organizations that support contemporary artists and artmaking practice. The individuals who have been part of RSG continue to encourage such efforts."

Thanks to Paul Brenner, director of RSG, for insights & assistance.

Notes

1. Ernest Gaines, *A Lesson before Dying* (New York: Knopf, 1993; reprint, New York: Vintage Books, 1994), 7.
2. The Kybalion is a text on the study of the Hermetic philosophy of ancient Egypt and Greece (Chicago: Yogi Publication Society, Masonic Temple, 1912).
3. Ibid., 8.
4. Ibid., 12, 13.
5. Ibid., 217-18.
6. Thomas McEvilley, *Kienholz: A Retrospective: Location and Space*, exhibition catalog (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 1996), 52.
7. Excerpt from "flopouse" copyright 1992 by Charles Bukowski. Reprinted from *The Last Night of the Earth Poems* with the permission of Black Sparrow Press.