

Like a Whisper: Time on the Land

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(Source: Like-a-Whisper.com)

The past lives on in art and memory, but it is not static: it shifts and changes as the present throws its shadow backwards. The landscape also changes, but far more slowly; it is a living link between what we were and what we have become.

—Margaret Drabble

Like a Whisper: Time on the Land is a collaborative project to photograph the traces of human and geologic activity on the land; a geography resulting from years of scarring and healing leaving marks on the land, much like the erasures and scrapings in old manuscripts on precious vellum, resulting in a palimpsest. We expressively document these layered marks at sites of Ancient Rome occupation along the path of Hadrian's Wall in northern England using mobile technology. Our process is best characterized as call and response, like a jazz riff where one musician offers a phrase and another responds; a photograph is made that gives rise to others. It is an inventive process of exploration and discovery where our collective experience, our shared finding is greater than any individual's seeing and the outcome is enlarged. As the process of change in the landscape we visit is never static, thus our work together is always evolving; and although our deep commitment to the collaborative process, which began with *UConn Digital Atelier 2005*, never waivers the means we find to work together is always evolving.

While in Northumberland, a painter, a sculptor, and two photographers from southern New England photograph a landscape familiar yet foreign. The sense of familiar is grounded in a shared geologic heritage of common bedrock dating back to when New England and old England were part of the continuous land mass Pangaea, a time millions of years before our continents were formed (Thorson, *Stone by Stone*). Also, a more recent history of glacial ice masses scraping, gouging and grinding the surface rock in both landscapes renders landforms familiar.

The sense of foreign is grounded in the abundant evidence of human life found in the landscape of Northumberland. Walking the woods of southern New England one rarely encounters human artifacts older than the eighteenth century, yet along Hadrian's Wall (built 123–128 A.C.E.) one is walking a path along the northern edge of the Roman Empire. The presence of such deep history is foreign and while walking the course of a path almost two thousand years old one feels the weight of Thoreau's words: "To stand on the meeting of two eternities: the past and future, which is the present moment."

Human perception of time is a slippery construct. It seems to move both quickly and slowly. Some cultures view time as linear while others have a ceremonial sense, a simultaneous perception of past, present and future dipped into with the aid of ritual dance (Mitchell, *Ceremonial Time*). Science conceives of time as deep; the sciences of geology and evolution explain Earth's history spread out over billions of years. While literal interpretations of the Old Testament, such as Archbishop Ussher's 1650

calculations dating creation to 4004 B.C.E. pack creation into six thousand years; a blink of the eye on a geologic scale. We believe that visual art can allow one to dream into or wonder about the nature of such mysteries.

Deep time, a founding concept of geology, has been the center of controversy since Scotsman James Hutton presented his ideas to the Royal Society of Edinburgh in 1795. Hutton's observation that profound change in the land was the gradual accumulation of continuous processes led to his theory of Uniformitarianism, popularized in 1830 by Charles Lyell's *Principles of Geology*; a book Darwin carried on the H.M.S. Beagle. Earth processes are everywhere present in the borderland of Northern England and Scotland and it is no coincidence that this landscape gave rise to Hutton's observations. In fact, it is believed that Hutton was sitting on Hadrian's Wall when his ideas first coalesced (Repcheck, *The Man Who Found Time*). In the landscape that gave rise to our modern ideas about time, we photograph traces of human and geologic time.

Hadrian's Wall is a landscape of ruins; the remains of formal structures and ancient forts are everywhere present. The site defines construction and de-construction. Ancient histories bump up against present realities; Hadrian's Wall National Path follows an ancient border, 19th and 20th century farmhouses and field walls are built with ancient stone. *Like a Whisper* is an evocative photographic rendering of ideas about fragmented histories, process, destruction and excavation, and remnants, as well as the nature of our artistic practice through collaborative process using contemporary technologies.