

## **Mapping Native Flora in NYC: The Chorography of Collaboration**

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### INTRODUCTION

This paper outlines *The City from a Plant's Perspective: Mapping Native Flora in NYC*, a collaborative site-specific project. Participants were myself (Lise Brenner, choreographer), Ulrich Lorimer (curator, Native Plant Garden, Brooklyn Botanical Garden) and Katrina Simon (Senior Lecturer, Landscape Design, University of New South Wales, Sydney). The impetus was iLAB, a research grant offered annually since 2006 through iLAND Art ([www.ilandart.org](http://www.ilandart.org)) for performance research between movement-based artists and scientists. The research must centre on some aspect of the New York City environment and a public presentation of the research is required.

CHOROGRAPHY: *N.* GEOGRAPHICAL DESCRIPTION OF A REGION. (FROM *KHŌROS*; 'PLACE' + *-GRAPHEIN*, 'WRITING') [1]

'It is clearly not sufficient to say that any collaborative or conversational encounter constitutes a work of art. What is at stake in these projects is not dialogue per se but the extent to which the artist is able to catalyze emancipatory insights through dialogue.' [Kester, 2002, pg 20]

This is from Graham Kester's *Conversation Pieces*, in which he provides a conceptual framework for interactive public art making, including an overview of the history of modern visual art criticism. His argument is too lengthy to recap here, but in essence argues a lack of comprehension of the elegance (the art, in fact) of paradigm construction required for work that relies on public engagement, which by necessity often privileges modes of interaction and relationship creation over a resulting art object. This paper follows his lead, in that I have focused on how and why we did what we did more than what we did. The outcomes of our collaboration encompass walking events, field notes, idiosyncratic maps and potential dance scores created by walk

participants, a web archive, videos, this paper, and future proposals. However, the working relationship itself is not limited to any of them; each outcome is an experiment in relational negotiation. It is that experiment that I have focused on.

Our collaborative process made practical use of three key generative concepts: a matrix, the triangle of concept/method/development as a basis of practice, and our appreciation of the cross-disciplinary possibilities inherent in considerations of movement, space and time. The following statement by conceptual artist Robert Irwin describes the mindset from which these core practices arose:

'We decided that all we wanted to find out was how two radically separate disciplines could interact, what could be the grounds. There was no way that I was going to find out everything Wortz knew the way he had, in other words, bit by bit, going to school, learning all the technical data. And there was really no need. The question was, is it possible for me to understand how and in what way he sets his questions and structures his information?' [Wechsler, 1982, pg 127]

I have used the term 'chorography' throughout the paper as a recurring structural and conceptual thread. At a crucial point in my thinking about *Native Flora*, encountering 'chorography' in the course of my research on mapping provided a much-needed label for my sense of the inherent relationship between cartography and choreography. [4] This has to do with seeing in layers and cross-connections; with how variation arises from repetition; with the importance of time and the cyclical nature of experience; with the way perception alters when eye level and time of day shift. Chorography inserts the personal (the 'dancer' replaces 'the dance') into the godlike abstraction of cartography; it makes relationships possible. What happens to perception, when you take a city with one of the costliest per-square-footage rates in the world, and re-assign the value system to privilege weeds?

‘For Heidegger space is neither an external object nor an inner experience, it is ‘that for which room has been made’. Dwelling involves, in his words, ‘a staying with things’. The spaces through which we go daily are provided for by locales that may constitute moments of particular density or depth: one of Heidegger’s examples is a bridge... Personal biographies are built from located acts; place is a relational concept, ‘always drawn to our attention through what happens there or through the things we expect to find there’... people are constructed in and dispersed through their habituated landscape: each individual, significantly, has a particular site of possibilities in presenting an account of their own landscape: *stories*.’ [Pearson, 2006, pgs 10-11]

Three voices tell the stories of this paper. Uli and Katrina’s comments ‘from the field’ (generated during the six months we planned and executed *Native Flora*), are interwoven with my organizing voice and performance practitioner’s standpoint. This is a discussion about being and doing, and is, for me, highly personal. For me to maintain a detached or objectively critical tone would be a false detachment. I have tried here to make an analysis of lived activity, and the writing style reflects that.

A compact version of the matrix, our collaborative ‘map’, follows this introduction. Built off of the seven basic movement qualities of ballet technique, this was the fulcrum of our collaboration, bringing visibility to the intersections between discipline-specific concepts. [6] We each filled in the matrix on our own and thus rather blindly; it was only after it was consolidated we realized what a vital tool we had.

Following the matrix (and some commentary from Uli and Katrina) is the bulk of the paper, in sections of varying length, dealing with (not necessarily in this order or confined solely to one section): New York City, the major factors (artistic and personal) that led me to initiate the application to iLAB and to issue my invitation to Uli and Katrina, the notion of authorship, some of their thoughts on accepting my invitation, documentation, Floyd Bennett Field; in other words, the underlying stories that contributed to the process we named

*Mapping Native Flora in NYC.* This matrix of stories was perhaps our core research question: the world is many multiples of layers and the question is, which one are you trying to see? Or maybe better, how many can (or will) you let yourself see?

## I. MATRIX

*The idea behind the matrix was to create a framework allowing us to re-conceptualise our own disciplines/activities/practices in terms related or common to all. It has the seven basic movement qualities of ballet in one axis and attributes of our different disciplines in the other... The headings in the second row are... categories of observable attributes that intersect with the movement qualities and can be documented in relation to specific sites, at a range of scales, and combined. [Katrina Simon ('KS')]*

The evolution of the matrix was central in achieving my missions and goals for the residency. It was a great way to cross reference botanical and ecological concepts with landscape and movement. One of my favourite little revelations was how plant communities bend. One plant, on its own, does not have enough support to remain upright, so when in harmony with thousands of others, it relies on its neighbours for support... the community as whole can stand strong together. [Uli Lorimer ('UL')]

*All the key words relate to action, making me think of the dynamic qualities of a landscape abandoned and changing under its own 'steam', and about how these same ideas can relate to design—not design seen as the disposition of 'things', but as the orchestration of forces and events (and inadvertently, things). [KS]*

SEE MATRIX (LINK)

## II. CONTEXTS AND EVENTS

COUNTRY, LAND(S), TERRITORY, COUNTRY AS OPPOSED TO TOWN (FROM *CHÔRA* DEF. GREEK) [7]

One of the truisms about New York is that it is a place that doesn't remember its own history. [8] In my experience, New Yorkers, like the farmers of my father's hometown in Eastern Colorado, remember every bit of their local daily lives, because this is a walking city, and walkers live within details. For many New Yorkers, the currently rampant bulldozing across the five boroughs of familiar small buildings, quiet streets, backyards and the local shoe repair shop engenders distrust of the political and politically-supported powers that be, if not outright despair, as wave after wave of unconsidered and destructive development and economic laissez faire combines to wreck the network of small businesses, local industry, and the ability to live in the city as a policeman, teacher, health care aide or artist; as stable working class neighbourhoods gentrify into multi-million dollar condos, and the fabric shops that dotted lower Manhattan, handy for all costume needs from Broadway to belly dance, pack up and disappear, as it becomes fiscally and physically overwhelming to put on one weekend performance a year... As all the bits and pieces of the worlds that once made possible the 'perfume' of New York are erased and sometimes individually bemoaned in a left front column of the NY Times Metro section, it seems clear that what is urgently required is some reminder of environmental reality. Gardens, no matter how Eden-like, are cultivated. And every garden, no matter how cultivated, is dependent upon the native elements of weather, soil types, moisture, etc.

*Native Flora* was a way of taking some of this on, especially the kind of tired cynicism to which many New Yorkers (including myself) are prone. Looking for plants is inherently positive. It starts from the assumption of success, no matter how limited. It is like going to a daily ballet class. The dancer may well know that she is not ballerina material, may even know that she really and truly is not even capable of dancing adequately but that is irrelevant, the daily action is an affirmation of a joy in life that has nothing to do with necessity,

and everything to do with love and faith. And so with plants—they continue, in the most appalling circumstances, to poke up, bloom, spread seeds, and wither, only to return again (unless covered with concrete). They only ask for a chance and a small crack in the ground, and they will produce something.

My specific goal was to raise awareness about native plants within an urban environment. These are plants that evolved here in the metropolitan area and are best suited to its pressures. I wanted to educate the public about exotic invasive species, which often compete better than natives for urban space. Abandoned lots are extremely harsh places, with little water, and even less nutrition; factors which contribute to the success of invasives. Since we are going to focus on these abandoned places, I know we will find a majority of the plants to be alien with some of the more adaptable natives mixed in. This situation presents the perfect opportunity to tackle both issues (native plants and exotic invasive species). [UL]

#### DISPERSAL OF ORGANISMS: A CRITICAL PROCESS FOR UNDERSTANDING BOTH GEOGRAPHIC ISOLATION IN EVOLUTION AND THE BROAD PATTERNS OF CURRENT GEOGRAPHIC DISTRIBUTIONS

I have always been fascinated by the movement of plants... that plants can move around, even hundreds of miles away... [UL]

*The starting point was the invitation – out of the blue, and a delightful interlude in an otherwise ordinary workday... The connection was via someone who has seen some of the work I have made out of maps, and this was in a sense the role in which I entered – as someone who had developed specific techniques for mapping and working with maps, that could assist with the unfolding of the project. [KS]*

I was unsure about what to expect when we began. I did not see how my particular knowledge was going to fit into the greater picture... My perspective was therefore somewhat reserved. I thought I would just “stick to my guns” and only contribute from a purely scientific standpoint. I have

never been involved with a collaborative creative process such as this one, particularly one involving so many different interests and perspectives. [UL]

*I was immediately intrigued by the combination of people... ideas about movement get talked about a lot in landscape but often in a very vague way... That this collaboration is about the process of collaboration, rather than just the means to an end, is also intriguing... leads to expectation that I can become much more aware of how this process actually unfolds, and in doing so, articulate and direct it better in future in other situations. [KS]*

As a horticulturalist, I have trained my eye to recognize small differences in leaf shape, colour, texture, growth habit. In order to correctly discern what separates one species from another, you have to pay great attention to the details... I always had an affinity for observing. As I walk around the city, I am aware of the abandoned lots and waste places, the cracks in the sidewalk, the postage stamp parks, highway medians, and train tracks where plant life thrives, be it native or exotic invasive. I see a city, one full of life that exists on a time scale apart from ours. If I can get people to look at an abandoned lot and see a potential community garden rather than a place to dump garbage, then I am satisfied. [UL]

*I was thinking about the residency in two related but slightly different ways – as a ‘mapping’ person, and as a designer. It is my interest in the emergent qualities of the urban landscape, its inherent variability and how this might be harnessed in design acts that made me want to know more about how other disciplines and modes of working can enrich this design process. [KS]*

We started with this idea of mapping NYC from the perspective of native plants, how do they move around, what are the pressures which affect their survival, and exactly where are the places left for them to gain a foothold. We agreed that we needed to scout out a few specific places in NYC, and the need to familiarize all involved with identification techniques for the specific plants... My concern was that most of the abandoned places in the

city are filled with a large number of exotic invasive plants, and few natives. Floyd Bennett Field struck me with the layers of sounds, everything from planes overhead on their way to JFK, to passing cars, model airplanes and toy race cars, and of course the abundant bird and insect life. Of interest as well was how the use of the land had changed so much over the course of history... it had all the elements of our various disciplines. I think that it was after our trip there that we had thought of the idea of a mapping matrix or template, incorporating elements from everyone, which would be a guide for our public participants. [UL]

Uli's expertise provided an opportunity to investigate the city both analytically and viscerally; to engage with an environmental element of New York's metropolitan culture that contained a great deal of historical information and ecological importance, but had almost no public visibility, or emotional resonance. Mapping native plants was a way to examine 'the ramifications of social, cultural, political and historical context upon the nature, form and function of performance', which was my goal in initiating *Native Flora*. The following puts the fragment in context, from the introduction to *Theatre/Archaeology*.

'We seem to be operating within a triangular field of attention that includes at its apexes the terms '*practice*', '*context*' and '*analysis*'. Practice because several of us are professional performance practitioners and because we want to make things – performances, knowledges – as much as we want to reflect on things. Context because we are interested in the ramifications of social, cultural, political and historical context upon the nature, form and function of performance, as operational in our particular set of circumstances, and because we are equally concerned with the effect of the performance environment – location, site, architecture, scenography – upon dramaturgy and techniques of exposition. Analysis because we desire to develop appropriate means to describe, document and ultimately legitimise performance practices... the folklorist, the archaeologist, the geographer are most welcome to come and stand in our field. We do not simply want to appropriate their methodologies. We want them to look, and



to enable us to look through them, at performance: it is already in the nature of their discourses to favour the local, the particular. Their analytical approaches must surely be instructive; at least, they are not forever searching for a universal revelation of the human condition. Finally, we want to reclaim and re-articulate the notion of 'event-ness' in performance studies – practice, context, theory. [Pearson and Shanks, 2002, pg xiv]

Mike Pearson (performance) and Michael Shanks (archaeology) co-authored the book. Every time the authorial voice changes, the reader is alerted (the writer here is Pearson): *Theatre/Archaeology* has its keys, it is in part a map to their cooperative creative process – or *practice* – as co-authors. One of the questions I experiment with as a choreographer is who leads, and how? What makes a dance work? How much is choreographer and how much is dancer when it comes to the actual mechanics of navigating the dance around the space? As a choreographer, I have been very grateful for the mistakes and enormous inventiveness inherent in dancers' 'making do'; that the human person will always fail to be 'perfect' and will therefore make innumerable and personal contributions within a piece (whether set or improvised) of choreography. The question of what is failure and what is choreography, or, to make *context* a step broader, what needs to be planned and what simply needs to be noticed: this became my central question when pondering what form 'a dance' might take within our collaboration and our public presentations of our collaboration. It is a question of analysis, and of what a practice is deemed able to hold.

Thus: the landscapes we investigated were full of 'found' choreography, performed by both the native plants and the larger urban habitat within which they exist (the airplanes heading to JFK over Jamaica Bay, the Empire State Building intermittently visible between clumps of second-growth woodland, the 1970's housing projects looming behind the now-only-a-landmark Parachute ride at Coney Island). The question was not how to manufacture an entertainment, but how to convey our 'found' pleasure in terms that would encourage other people to do the same.

*Usually when I am working on a project with other people we sit around a table and we draw while we talk. It has taken a while for me to get a sense of the physicality of the places that are going to be the focus of this project... in my mind is an interesting combination of ambiguous landscape qualities intuited via satellite imagery, and comments made over the phone about what places are like. At this stage I am not so much interested in the precise, quantifiable 'reality' of these landscapes but what they are like to encounter and move through. [KS]*

CHOROGRAPHY: POSITION OF AN ELEMENT IN A TEXT (METAPHOR). [10]

Returning to Pearson, and context and practice and who (or what) actually 'makes' a dance: the question of attribution of authorship, and beyond that, accurate attribution of creative input—these too were very much a subject of our collaboration, and now, this paper. How contributions are acknowledged, both within the active conversation of making something and later (for example, in how the resulting book is formatted), determines a great deal about how a practice is formed, how it embodies, and how it is pursued. My experiments into the nature of choreographic thinking have included, among other things, staged dance performances and running a company as well as one-on-one guided tours of Amsterdam, a dance for simultaneous radio broadcast, and afternoons in Wales describing 'found' dances in the patterns of sheep, discarded lolly wrappers, the colours of bracken. However, until *Native Flora*, I couldn't name what I was doing. Uli and Katrina provided the necessary discussion and methodological experimental field.

Katrina's suggestion that I read James Corner on cartography was part of what allowed me to name my activities 'choreographic research'. In his *The Agency of Mapping*, I discovered descriptions of an idealized choreography, within which the dancer, though possibly present, has no affective agency.

'Mappings have agency because of the double-sided characteristic of all maps. First, their surfaces are directly analogous to actual ground conditions; as horizontal planes, they record the surface of the earth as

direct impressions... walks and sightings across land may be literally projected onto paper... Conversely, one can put one's finger on a map and trace out a particular route or itinerary, the map projecting a mental image into the spatial imagination. Because of this directness, maps are taken to be 'true' and 'objective' measures of the world, and are accorded a kind of benign neutrality. By contrast, the other side of this analogous characteristic is the inevitable *abstractness* of maps, the result of selection, omission, isolation, distance and codification. Map devices such as frame, scale, orientation, projections, indexing and naming reveal artificial geographies that remain unavailable to human eyes. Maps present only one version of the earth's surface, an eidetic fiction constructed from factual observation. As both analogy and abstraction, then, the surface of the map functions like an operating table, a staging ground or a theatre of operations upon which the mapper collects, combines, connects, marks, masks, relates and generally explores. These surfaces are massive collection, sorting and transfer sites, great files upon which real material conditions are isolated, indexed and placed within an assortment of relational structures.' [Cosgrove, 1999, pg 214-215]

Robert Moses, the man who built New York City's highways, was just such a cartographer (choreographer/chorographer). He rearranged the way in which New Yorkers moved around their city. He insisted on the importance of car transport, and was so convincing that whole neighbourhoods were destroyed as a result. Cars over housing, over people, over air quality, over, even, the right of some city dwellers to effective mass transit. It was an amazing performance act.

'... the historian's liberation from the limitations of time and space: the freedom to give greater attention to some things than to others and thus to depart from strict chronology; the license to connect things disconnected in space, and thus to rearrange geography... These procedures are so basic that historians tend to take them granted: we rarely even think about what we're doing when we do it. And yet they get at the heart of what we mean

by representation, which is simply the rearrangement of reality to suit our purposes.' [Gaddis, 2002, pg 20]

'CHOROGRAPHY IS A POETICS FOR MAKING A MAP' [ULMER, ONLINE]

Watching Uli use the *Audubon Field Guide to Wildflowers* to track down an elusive goldenrod in an abandoned, city-block square building foundation in Red Hook, Brooklyn, I realized that classification systems are also maps, maps with depth. They chart relationships and imply layers, rather than positing the more or less horizontal plane. Plant identification systems have to include time: descriptions of seeds, of buds, of blossoms.

*Landscape architecture as a discipline can have a tendency to either romanticize ecology or reduce it to 'ecological services'. I found concentrating on movement in its many aspects a rich way to consider the potential and inherent resilience of the plant world, and to rethink the notion of plant 'community' in a way which did not anthropomorphize the plant world.*

*Similar realizations came to me when thinking about movement in terms of dance and choreography. A deadening and reductive terminology of 'active' and 'passive' spaces has become pervasive in landscape architecture, and the exercise we did on the Coney Island boardwalk, when we climbed up out of the mist, made me conscious that even when physically still we may be vibrantly connected to other spaces and activities, through smell, sound, vibration, memory... [KS]*

Botanising relates on an intuitive, visceral level quite directly to dancing. It is a series of descriptions of living beings. Following plants, we were constantly ignoring the lines established by paths and sidewalks. Pathways could not be predetermined; they depended upon the presence of the plants, his alertness, and my willingness to follow. I was able to notice rules about urban walking because we broke them. I developed a mental picture of a New York City where property lines were made hazy by habitat boundaries.

In *Theatre/Archaeology* Pearson and Shanks describe investigations of place through practices derived from archaeology (physical layers, representing passages of time) and site-specific performance making. These investigations are an affirmation of the importance of locale, and of localness. They embrace a wide historical perspective. Being local and historical and specifically located, they are potentially post-colonial (hence political). They insist on the validity of local memory, daily experience: the value of the shoe repair shop. Part of what we were tackling in *Native Flora* was the collective amnesia imposed on New Yorkers by conditions of constant change.

CHOROGRAPHY: A SPACE OR ROOM IN WHICH A THING IS, PARTLY OCCUPIED SPACE (FROM *CHÔRA* GREEK; DEF.) [14]

*My main recollections when I think of the first visits to Floyd Bennett Field are noticing things that I normally don't pay attention to... the apparently simple idea of 'movement' suddenly made me perceive an extraordinary array of complex movement in what I would normally have considered in static, analytical terms. It gave me a sense of how layered and ingenious ecological processes are, and how contingent. [KS]*

The result of landfill joining several of the Jamaica Bay tidal islands into one continuous flat space, Floyd Bennett is a very large, and very complicated, site. New York City's first commercial airfield, it was built in 1931, appropriated by the military during the 1940's, and is now a Historic Landmark within the National Parks System. On the very eastern edge of the very eastern section of Brooklyn (the Flatlands) getting there requires a serious commitment; it is a destination. It is on the city's edge, psychically as well as literally (one very concrete result of 'remapping' NYC to prioritise native flora is that the periphery becomes central). There is a sports centre and plane museum, a Concorde parked in front. Cricket pitches, soccer fields, baseball diamonds. Camping, NYC Board of Education environmental education, NYC Police helicopter and bullhorn training, NYC Sanitation training (these are off-limits). Abandoned hangars, abandoned barracks. Miles of intersecting

runways, maintained for cars on the north, left elsewhere to succession and reversion to dune and woodland. Home to a miniature airplane club, with its own airfield, a miniature car dirt track. Wind-boarding. Bikes, the bird sanctuary, blimp parking on the central runway. Bats. Recording the sound of crickets and poplars, the playback is all motors. On the beaches, huge skeletons of crumbled jetties, metal, people fishing, high stands of reeds. It is very flat. The largest community garden in New York City, second-growth woodland full of sumac and porcelain berry bushes, dune habitats supporting delicate lichens and heathers, pine, bayberry. Home to the model train club of South Brooklyn.

*The issue of scale is in my mind as I think about the large wide-open expanse of the airfield, the body (or bodies) in that space, and the plant communities and their often-tiny constituent plants (leaning on each other for support). [KS]*

CHOROGRAPHY: POSITION OF AN ELEMENT IN A TEXT (METAPHOR). [15]

The moment when everything really crystallized for me was on the boardwalk on Coney Island. I asked how Lise goes about making a dance. She said the hard part was trying to condense all of the ideas in her head and give them meaning through movement. Katrina then described her process when assigning student projects. She has them begin with a concept/hypothesis or theme, then devise a method to realize the concept, making sure that the method and concept are aligned. This leads to the development of the concept into something tangible... I realized that they start with many ideas and work forward to solidify and concentrate those ideas into something concrete, whereas I start out with what is already in place and work backwards. I know what plants are there now, but I don't know how long they have been there, how they got there, or where they came from. BUT the concept/method-alignment analogy holds true for both ways of processing ideas. You can apply this construct to almost any idea and generate something worthwhile and meaningful. [UL]

This conversation arose out of one of the biggest paradigm gaps we encountered: the utility of randomness. Uli's position was that randomness = unexplained patterns, and exists to be resolved; Katrina and I argued for its necessity when creating situations that are unpredictable enough to be engaging. The underlying tension seems to me well encapsulated by Robert Irwin when he states that artistic activity is based upon 'reason/individual/intuition/feeling' while scientific method depends upon 'logic/community/intellect/mental', saying, "I can reason, but I cannot logic. ... I use logic." [Wechsler, 1982, pg 135]

This is not to again restate that old idea that artists feel and scientists don't. It is simply to say that, in this situation of exploring NYC as a collaborative team with a primary goal of understanding how each of us (as representatives of disparate modes of practice) actually operated, Uli's use of observation was trained towards description and induction while Katrina's and mine used the focus and clarity his training provided to think interpretively, to say 'what if' (to modes of perception, to potential landscapes). The role of art in my mind is to connect. This is both choreographic and chorographic, I am committed to describing my surroundings; I am committed to engaging other people in at least noticing theirs. Teaching ballet, design, horticulture is teaching a language. Languages, like maps, give access to a landscape: names, usage, points of reference.

(TIME AND) PLACE (FROM *CHÔRA*) [17]

We led three walks, two consecutive ones through different areas of Floyd Bennett Field on Sunday, September 30, and one at Coney Island on Friday, October 5. People were invited via Uli's and my networks, and through an emailing from iLAND. The result was a varied (in age, ethnicity, and professional background) mix of people. The morning walk at Floyd Bennett included the community gardens, runways 40 years into reverting to grass and woodland, and a fairly 'native' dune habitat. The afternoon followed a well-maintained runway, bordered with grasslands (mowed yearly, established bird sanctuary), and with second-growth woodland. This walk brought us into

contact with all the human activities given place at Floyd Bennett, and ended in late afternoon on the northern fishing beach, looking out into Jamaica Bay. The Coney Island Walk started and ended at Nathan's Famous Hotdogs, and followed (in a fog) the boardwalk, ending at sunset (as the fog cleared).

These public events were meant to be a window into our working relationship. Everything we had worked on had been about sharpening the ability to notice, to broaden perception and from that, evoke participation. The metaphor that drew everything, 'audience' included, together was the notion of collaborative data collection. We provided graph-paper field notebooks and pencils for everyone on the three walks. We wanted to be sure that everyone understand and was comfortable with the idea that their contributions were truly part of our research, so Katrina inscribed a basic release form and places for names and addresses (once Katrina photographed the contents, the books were returned) inside the front covers. And we planned methods of facilitating interactive activity, using varying degrees of being directive.

We built each walk from where the research of the project started: a plant walk led by Uli. The plants, and their habits (dispersal, succession, the effects of disturbance) provided clarity: this is what happens, here is where you can see it. The relative timings (from seed to plant, from concrete to meadow) are tangible. The next step, into abstraction and the beginnings of grappling with scale, was highly subjective mapping: walk 20 paces and note what you see (repeat 10 times); draw a map of how you got here today; draw a map of what you imagine this site will be in 50 years. So movement through time and space, representation, value judgements, juxtaposition—all of it was put into practice through familiar, if slightly heightened, actions. What was left for me was to provide the next step, into awareness of a context of practice. My role (which I feel was most clearly realized with the Coney Island group) was to figure out the reversal of expectation, to point out: '*you* just did the performance'.

Uli's and my early site visits had functioned as rehearsals, the muscle-memory documentation specific to dancer/choreographers. Through repetition



I had become interested in the mechanics of walking and seeing particular to looking for plants. The pathways (as I said earlier) were not linear. They responded to stimuli, very much like being in a group improvisation. I wondered about the feasibility of asking people to retrace their steps, repeat actions. In the end, drawing from old choreography assignments, I set up simple listening and watching tasks, asking people to collect 3 sounds and estimate their distance; to look up, right and left; to list everything they could see that moved; and finally, to arrange all the elements in some way that made sense to them: a map of observations, a score for a dance. Choreographic material to be organized, readied for presentation. Most people participated in using the books, trying the tasks, and in sharing their work. [18]

DISTURBANCE; A TEMPORARY CHANGE IN AVERAGE ENVIRONMENTAL CONDITIONS THAT CAUSES A PRONOUNCED CHANGE IN AN ECOSYSTEM [19]

I thought that what we achieved was getting our participants to expand their experience through the use of our three concepts (the matrix, the triad of concept/method/development, and the appreciation of possibilities in the overlap of our disciplines). By teaching or coaching ourselves, and the participants, in practice, context, and analysis, we were able to achieve all of the goals we set out to do, both collectively and individually, from the very beginning. [UL]

The action of investigating dance and choreography without making a definitive statement in the form of a 'dance' results in a strange situation: what is there to critique, if there is no object, only experience?

Nazeeme, age 12, watched the toy planes twirl and dive, juxtaposed with the long glide of the jets flying into JFK. He was willing to try to see the dancing in it. His little sister was more interested in the dead dog on the pink blanket and that all the butterflies she saw were yellow.

As collaborators, we explored our terrain, literally and philosophically. To fully activate our understanding of this process, we asked people to join us in our walking, to participate in an experiential, interactive mapping of what we thought we'd discovered. Having two, well-separated days of events meant that we had the opportunity to loop back into reflection and exploration: the resulting frame for participation was substantially more structured at Coney Island than it had been at Floyd Bennett, and the participants notebooks reflect our more directive stance; less various in what is observed, more 'productive' in terms of 'assignments' completed. Neither outcome is more or less 'good' in our terms, the ultimate point for us was that they saw something, that the trip to Floyd Bennett provided 'a temporary change in average environmental conditions' that, structured as 'a presentation' allowed us the liberty to interrupt participants' normal modes of perception with hierarchies of observation drawn from botany, design, and dance. What was for us quantifiably successful was how Pearson and Shanks' 'triangular field of attention' was borne out in all of our activities, that what we privileged, across all situations, was whatever was productive of ongoing conversation and interest and reflection; not 'a' dance, or plant, or new garden design. What mattered was the degree of generative 'disturbance' in our normal fields, and the many possible iterations of 'dances', 'designs', 'plants' (of which this paper is one) that will one day result.

## NOTES

1. Hutchinson Encyclopaedia, online.
2. Kester, Grant H. *Conversation Pieces* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2004) pg 69.
3. Robert Irwin (artist) discussing his 1968-1971 collaboration with Dr. Ed Wortz, head of NASA's life sciences department. From: Wechsler, Lawrence. *Seeing is Forgetting The Name of the Thing One Sees: A life of contemporary artist Robert Irwin* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1982) pg 127.
4. Being able to label the previously unnamed is an underlying theme in my experience of *Native Flora*; I think one of the values of cross-disciplinary work

is forcing each practitioner into categorizing the self-evident so that it is expressible and accessible to those to whom it is initially far from obvious. The process often seems to re-affirm value(s). Of course, once stated, 'it' becomes once again self-evident and in no need of stating; this may indeed be the fate of this paper.

5. Pearson, Mike. In Comes I, Performance, Memory and Landscape (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2006) pgs 10-11.

6. As defined by ballet master Alfredo Corvino, 1916-2005, New York City.

7. <http://www.humbot.org/static/new/chorography.html>

8. The physical environment of New York City, of which the remaining pockets of native flora are one of the very few remnants, has been exploited and taken for granted since the first Dutch settler, following Henry Hudson's 1609 expedition, stepped ashore into a landscape promptly characterized by the newcomers as an 'empty' paradise. Teeming with game, streams of fish, mountains of oysters, abundant salt marshes, loaded with berries, fruits, and timber, elegantly located with an enormous natural harbour at the mouth of a major waterway, Manhattan and the surrounding areas gave rise to all kinds of panegyric descriptions, both written and pictorial. And yet, this land, whose air was so sweet its perfume was repeatedly reported as wafting 20 miles out to sea, never inspired the corporate bodies bringing the Dutch, or the English, or the Swedes, or any other European settlers to consider anything other than how to exploit the natural environmental advantages shaped and maintained by Native Americans for several thousand years. This is an echoing silence, and a political one, one in that helps stifle environmental awareness, and action. For modern remnants of native flora in the NY area, see the website for the Native Plants Garden at the Brooklyn Botanical Garden <http://www.bbg.org/exp/stroll/nativeflora.html> and the website for the Metropolitan Flora Project, linked to the same site. Russell Shorto's *The Island at the Centre of the World* (Doubleday, 2004) gives a very readable and comprehensive account of the Dutch Colonial period and how their cultural attitudes shaped contemporary New York; Cantwell and Wall's *Unearthing Gotham* (Yale University Press, 2001) describes very vividly the Native American world they walked into, and documents the traces that have survived. Eric Sanderson's book about his *Mannahatta Project* is due out in

2009. An environmental historian and CEO of the Wildlife Conservation Society ([www.wcs.org](http://www.wcs.org)), Sanderson has created an unprecedented data collection that makes it possible to recreate the soil types, flora and fauna present on every square foot of Manhattan Island as it was when Henry Hudson sailed the Haalve Maan into the harbour in September 1609.

9. <http://www.humbot.org/static/new/chorography.html>

10. Pearson, Mike and Shanks, Michael. Theatre/Archaeology (London: Routledge, 2001) pg xiv.

11. Ulmer, Gregory @ <http://www.pre-text.com/ptlist/octulmer.html> definition only cited at <http://www.humbot.org/static/new/chorography.html>

12. Corner, James. 'The Agency of Mapping', in Mappings, Denis Cosgrove (ed) (London: Reaktion Books, Ltd, 1999) pgs 214-215.

13. Gaddis, John Lewis. The Landscape of History (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002) pg 20.

14. <http://www.humbot.org/static/new/chorography.html>

15. <http://www.humbot.org/static/new/chorography.html>

16. <http://www.humbot.org/static/new/chorography.html>

17. Wechsler, pg 135

18. Edited compilations are archived on [www.iLANDart.org](http://www.iLANDart.org), under iLAB 2007, along with the various matrices, photos, references, etc. Also archived is video footage, iLAND's documentation, for which no permission was requested, causing an enlightening paradigm clash. As Katrina later wrote, 'the observer changes the thing observed, and the process of documentation/recording should be as carefully tailored to the project as every other facet'. As a dancer I am used to being filmed, with or without any discussion or agreement on my part. Having been a performer/participant in the 2006 iLAB, I knew it was how iLAND documented events, but the implications for our project hadn't consciously registered.

19. <http://www.humbot.org/static/new/chorography.html>

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Brooklyn Botanical Garden: [ww.bbg.org](http://ww.bbg.org)

Hutchinson Encyclopaedia: [www.helicon.co.uk](http://www.helicon.co.uk)

iLAND Art: [www.ilandart.org](http://www.ilandart.org)

Definitions of chorography from

<http://www.humbot.org/static/new/chorography.html>

Wildlife Conservation Society: [www.wcs.org](http://www.wcs.org)

### **Further Reading**

A full reference list compiled during the course of *Native Flora*, is available on the iLAB 2007 webpage, which can be accessed at [www.ilandart.org](http://www.ilandart.org) click on RESIDENCIES and click on 2007.

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