

Psychoswimography: Santa Barbara

VANESSA DAWS DESCRIBES HER PARTICIPATION IN THE BABEL WORKING GROUP CONFERENCE TITLED 'ON THE BEACH: PRECARIOUSNESS, RISK, FORMS OF LIFE, AFFINITY AND PLAY AT THE EDGE OF THE WORLD,' HELD IN SANTA BARBARA, USA IN OCTOBER 2014.



Swimming through the Kelp Forest off Santa Cruz Island, Santa Barbara, 2014, photo by Vanessa Daws



The Ocean Ducks' Breakfast Table, Santa Barbara, 2014, photo by Vanessa Daws



The Cruise Ship Off Leadbetter Beach, Santa Barbara, 2014, photo by Vanessa Daws

"Psychoswimography: To explore place through the art of swimming."¹

"Planktos: Drifting."²

"This art of swimming, it being so profitable a thing as it is towards the preserving of man's life when as he is at any time distressed in the greedy jaws of the swelling sea, destitute of any other help, although it be praised by no-one, yet is it praiseworthy in nature."³

I stand at a dusty crossroads with instructions on how to get to my accommodation typed into my phone. Ed, my 'couch surfing' host, has left the key under the mat, as he's away coaching at a volleyball tournament. This is my first afternoon in sunny California.

A bit lost, sweaty and frazzled, I go into the nearest shop to ask directions and buy a drink – it's hot! Inside, I'm met by a smiling shopkeeper. We strike up a casual conversation and just because I can't help myself, I ask him if he swims at all. He answers "no because my grandfather did all the swimming for me". Then he tells me that his grandfather was one of the few hundred survivors of the RMS Lusitania that sunk in 1915. Hearing this story, which instantly connected Ireland and America through the ocean, was a great way to start my project in Santa Barbara.

I'm a visual artist and avid open-water swimmer living in Dublin. My art practice uses swimming as a starting point. I work in a range of art forms including video, sound, animation, drawing and publications. Through journey, encounter, conversation and swimming, my work investigates where this drive to immerse oneself in water comes from. Is it the sheer thrill of the unknown? Or the desire to feel the water on our skin, the cold on our head, adapt our breathing and feel we exist?

In February 2014, eight months earlier, Michael O'Rourke, writer and member of the BABEL Working Group, visited me in my studio at the RHA. We had met the previous year at the '(((O)))' event at Clonlea Studios in Blackrock, Dublin and kept in touch.⁴ As we discussed my research and how my work is completely driven by swimming and all things aqua, he told me about BABEL and the theme for their third biennial meeting, which would be held in Santa Barbara in October and was titled 'On the Beach: Precariousness, Risk, Forms of Life, Affinity, and Play at the Edge of the World'.⁵

I emailed Eileen Joy, co-founder of BABEL, and asked how I might go about being a part of the conference. In the proposal that I subsequently submitted – entitled, *Psychoswimography: Santa Barbara* – I suggested that I come to Santa Barbara a few weeks prior to the BABEL event to meet sea swimmers, marine biologists and members of the local aquatic community and create new site-specific work. This work would be realised in the form of a printed handout, a film and, if logistics and the ocean allowed, a presentation in the sea: a shared experience of the water. Eileen replied that my work sounded perfect for the conference and she thought I could exhibit my work in a group exhibition as part of the event.

I was unsuccessful in securing any funding to assist me on this trip, having tried three different funding bodies. By the time I had sent off

applications and got the responses, many months had gone by and by then I was too invested in the project to let it go. I got to Santa Barbara by saving, scrounging and a lot of luck.

Before setting out I had made contact with the Ocean Ducks, a group of local sea swimmers. During my three weeks in Santa Barbara they took me under their wing and played a crucial part in the work I made for BABEL. They meet every Sunday at Butterfly Beach. I had arrived on a Saturday and catching this swim was crucial for determining how the rest of the first week would go.

I hired a mountain bike for the three weeks. After many gruelling uphill 10km bike rides to my accommodation in searing heat (Santa Barbara was experiencing a heat wave and has suffered a drought for five years), I discovered that buses take bikes on racks at the front – genius.

I swam every day, cycled, filmed and interviewed. A flywheel momentum gathered with the project. I spoke to many people, including the Santa Barbara Channel Keeper, Jean-Michel Cousteau's Ocean Futures and Alice Alldredge, head of Marine Biology at UCSB, who told me about marine snow. Marine snow is made up of small particles of debris that creatures latch onto and feed upon. These particles can be up to 1cm large and consist of whole colonies of species. They can take weeks to finally drift down to the bottom of the ocean, where they become a vital source of food for the plankton. These interviews became the soundscape for my film.

19 days after arriving in Santa Barbara I had most of the film made, postcard invites printed and a swim event planned. BABEL encourages sessions that take the audience out of the lecture hall or use alternative ways of presenting. "And thus we propose to comb the beach – not straighten out, nor even to mine, but to entangle while also pondering."⁶

On the first day of the conference I got up at 4am to meet Ben and Morgan from Santa Barbara Channel Keeper. We went out into the bay on their boat, about 10km out, to meet a huge cruise ship and to politely remind them that they were now entering a no dumping zone. Straight after this I made it in time to catch Steve Mentz's bodysurfing session – an 'immersive practicum' – at Hendry's Beach. The highlight for me was getting to meet in person (and better still in the ocean) the writers Steve Mentz and Stacy Alaimo, who were both plenary speakers at BABEL and whose work I admire. After our initial bodysurf we went – seaweed in hair – to the opening plenary session, the first of many fascinating events at BABEL.

My swim event was held on the final day at lunchtime. The idea was to allow the participants of BABEL and the Ocean Ducks a chance for a shared experience of the Pacific and the potential to view the rest of the day from a more fluid perspective. Every Sunday at Butterfly Beach Rami and Emilio from the Ocean Ducks bring a fold up table and after their swim the swimmers have a breakfast of homemade cakes, oranges and passion fruits picked from their gardens, and Emilio always brings a bag of 12 bagels. I asked if we could replicate this for the BABEL swim. The Ocean Ducks brought their table and put on a great picnic to compliment the post swim conversation.

Steve Mentz commented: "Splashing in the green Pacific last October I spied two opposed ideas. The first, the familiar one, was escape. When land mammals enter the ocean, buoyancy makes things possible. Swimming is almost flying and I love its singular touch. What I remember most about Santa Barbara is how artistic practice made swimming into community. We were surrounded by swimmers: Ocean Ducks, surfers, scholars of pre-modern literature and critical theory, all together in the ocean. To be in that translucent alien world but not alone in it: the gift of art."⁷

For Stacy Alaimo the swim "felt like an experiment with becoming a medium for art. To be ourselves in interchange with the ocean, to be aesthetically overcome by the blues and greens of the water ... what is most beautiful to me is to think of how swimming – the immersion of the human in water – releases us from transcendent perspectives, unmoors us as terrestrial creatures, allows us to hover in other ways of being that are, perhaps, less separate from the substances of the world".⁸

The work I made in Santa Barbara was created from chance meetings, which were rooted in the generosity and friendship of strangers. I set out with a rough idea of what I wanted to achieve, but I allowed the flow and ebb of the Pacific to guide the work; this took the project on a journey I could never have planned.

On my way home to Ireland I 'escaped' – swimming from Alcatraz Island at dawn. After Santa Barbara, apart from being lean, fit and tanned, I walked around with pep in my step and a new-found confidence that my work can stand up on an international platform and make a difference to a wider community.

A month later in Dublin, along with the swimmers from Malahide, I created 'Uncharted', a culminating art event for the Artist in the Community Award 2014. The event created an aural myth of the Lambay Swim, which we had undertaken as a group earlier in the year. We also invited the audience to enter the sea and, as the sun rose, we ate barbecued Lambay wallaby burgers. A pattern of practice seems to be emerging.

Vanessa Daws graduated from NCAD with an MA Art in the Digital World 2013. Daws has had seven solo exhibitions in Ireland (2009 – 2011) and was Artist in Residence, KilkennyArts Office (2010). She has since had a research residency at Studio 468 (2013), followed studio residency at the RHA (2014). Daws was a recipient of the Artist in the Community Award 2014 and has just been awarded the UCD Art in Science Residency 2015.

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Notes

1. A term coined by Daws, from compounding psychogeography and swimming
2. The word *Planktos* is Latin for drifting / wandering
3. Everard Digby, *De Arte Natandi*, 1587 (trans. Christofer Middleton)
4. *clonleastudios.com*
5. The BABEL Working Group was founded in 2004 and describes itself as "a global alliance of scholars, researchers, artists and others situated in institutional and para-academic spaces who are interested in creative risk taking, unconventional co-disciplinary collaboration, and the cultivation of productively 'dissensual' conversations about Big Questions" (babel-meeting.org)
6. Eileen Joy, *On the Beach*, 'Preamble II: Conference Precis', 2014
7. From correspondence (stevementz.com)
8. From correspondence