

'If everything is moving where is here?': Lisa Robertson's *Occasional Work* on cities, space and impermanence

In her 2003 collection of essays *Occasional Work and Seven Walks from the Office for Soft Architecture*, poet Lisa Robertson describes a shifting and dissolving Vancouver. Through a consideration of the theoretical work of geographer Doreen Massey and architect Rem Koolhaas, we explore the ways that, for Robertson, space is not reducible to singular, official narratives, but is the result of the complex and contradictory accretion of multiple historical trajectories. Focusing on Vancouver's New Brighton Park, both in Robertson's text and as a physical space, we ask how clashing forces, from the forceful organisational movements of global capital to the differentiating, yet minor, descriptions of the wandering poet, produce a space, a specific site, together through their cooperations and antagonisms?

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In *For Space* (2005), British geographer Doreen Massey challenges the notion that place is 'some romance of a pre-given collective identity or of the eternity of the hills' (p. 140) and suggests instead that it is the intersection point of multiple trajectories through space and time, from the quick movements of the weather to the geologic movements of mountains. Massey asks, quite explicitly, 'if everything is moving where is here?' (p. 141), reminding us of the difficulty of assigning identity to a space that is constantly shifting and helpfully echoing both the organising question of our symposium at the British Library in September 2011 – 'Where is Here Now?' – and what Northrop Frye considered the key question of Canadian culture in the 1960s – 'Where is here?'. In so doing, Massey's insistence on a shifting 'here' situates Frye's concerns with geography in a contemporary frame and asserts the importance of temporality, inviting us to think about what happens to space in the face of impermanence. In the late twentieth-century work of Dutch architect Rem Koolhaas, the notion of impermanence was linked to urban space where, as those of us who live in big cities know, things are moving all the time. Where, in the urban

contexts that shape literary studies in the twenty-first century, is here? And is 'here' anywhere else?

We come to this question through the writing of Lisa Robertson,¹ who lived in Vancouver from 1985 to 2003, during a period of rapid urban expansion, and wrote about it in a series of essays collected under the title *Occasional Work and Seven Walks from the Office for Soft Architecture* (hereafter referred to as *Occasional Work*) in 2003.² Robertson's life itself is a tangled web of spatial shifts and settlements. Though Robertson lived in Vancouver for nearly two decades, she is not 'from' Vancouver, as we might say. She was born in Toronto in 1961. Her mother was Canadian, her father British. She spent most of her childhood in an agricultural village north of Toronto. In 1978, she joined Katimavik, which she describes as the then 'Liberal government's collectivist youth work programme', and over the next months worked in Quebec, Nova Scotia and Alberta. Although she would not publish her first chapbook, *The Apothecary*, until 1991, by her late teens, she already considered herself a serious writer, meaning she 'wrote every day' and 'imagined that in the future writing would be [her] livelihood' (Robertson, Emails to Susan Rudy, 11 November 2011). Over the next thirty years she would live what she describes as an 'intense life organizing, studying, editing, writing and teaching' (Robertson, Emails to Susan Rudy, 11 November 2011). After her stint with Katimavik, she stayed on in western Canada to work as a tree planter and lived in a series of free cabins in British Columbia, most of them on Salt Spring Island off the coast of Vancouver.

Robertson first came to Europe in 1983, leaving and returning again in 1984 to obtain a British passport and to move to Paris, where she continued to read, write and take on odd jobs to pay the bills. She spent some time living in Paris's English-language bookstore Shakespeare and Company and later working for a family in Normandy. She moved to Vancouver in 1985 to study, write and eventually run Proprioception Books, the bookstore she purchased in 1988 at the age of 27. Robertson was a key member of the infamous Kootenay School of Writing Collective and a board member at Artspeak Gallery, both based in Vancouver. In 1999, she moved temporarily to Britain to take up a position as the Judith E. Wilson Visiting Fellow in Poetry at the University of Cambridge. In 2003, she was visiting poet/lecturer at the University of California, San Diego, for a term before moving to France for four years. In 2005, she was visiting poet at the American University of Paris. She returned to California for three years between 2007 and 2010, serving as Roberta C. Holloway Lecturer in the

Practice of Poetry at Berkeley and teaching at the California College of the Arts. She was writer in residence at Vancouver's Simon Fraser University in 2010.

As these multiple professional affiliations suggest, Robertson has held a series of prestigious but impermanent academic positions. Significantly, she speaks of having followed her passions to the places she has lived: 'The only time I had no choice but to move,' she writes, 'was in 2010 when my visa was not renewed in the USA after the economic crash' (Emails to Susan Rudy, 12 December 2011). Given Robertson's, and our own more recent, peripatetic existence, it is perhaps no accident that we were drawn to write an article asking 'where is here if everything is moving?'

Within this field of spatial motion, we turn to Robertson's *Occasional Work*. Ostensibly a collection of essays commissioned for various art shows and exhibits, *Occasional Work* explores the notion of spatial impermanence in Vancouver during a period of rapid change.³ But this is too reductive a description. As Paul Stephens notes, 'The book might be best categorized as a series of prose-poetic essays related to Vancouver's urban geography', but it contains 'photographs, a manifesto, meditations on botany and architecture, as well as a "Value Village Lyric"' (p. 15). As Miriam Nichols points out, while thoroughly researched, these essays are 'never academic', 'closer to poetry than to conventional art criticism' (p. 157). Moreover they are anti-lyric poems written, not only without an 'I', but without a conventional author. Issued out of what she calls the Office for Soft Architecture, a fictional architectural office interested only in studies and proposals rather than built structures, this office investigates sites (like shacks, scaffolds, fabrics, furnishings, the weather) that make the impermanence of structures visible.

In the Acknowledgments to *Occasional Work*, Robertson describes the essays as reflecting 'Vancouver's changing urban texture' (unpag.), the effect on the city of two major international events – the World Expo of 1986 and the 2003 announcement that Vancouver would host the 2010 Winter Olympics – both citing and siting an anxiety stemming from dramatic spatial shifts that were occurring. She narrates the plan of action that makes up the organisational drive of her book:

In this period of accelerated growth and increasingly globalizing economies, much of what I loved about this city seemed to be disappearing. I thought I should document the physical transitions I was witnessing in my daily life, and in this way question my own nostalgia for the minor, the local, the ruinous; for decay. (unpag.)

As she writes on the first page of the book:

The Office for Soft Architecture came into being as I watched the city of Vancouver dissolve in the fluid called money. Buildings disappeared into newness. I tried to recall spaces, but what I remembered was surfaces. Here and there money had tarried. The result seemed emotional. I wanted to document this process. I began to research the history of surfaces. I included my own desires in the research. In this way, I became multiple. (Robertson 2003: 1)

Anticipating the recent spatial turn in literary studies, the essays of Robertson's *Occasional Work* provide evidence of how very early Robertson was reading the key texts of spatial theory: Henri Lefebvre's *The Production of Space*, Gaston Bachelard's *The Poetics of Space*, and Michel de Certeau's *The Practice of Everyday Life*. She was also thinking about space in architectural terms. The work of Dutch architect Rem Koolhaas and his Office for Metropolitan Architecture was important to her,⁴ especially their outrageously spacious (more than 1,000 pages) and innovative text *S,M,L,XL* (*Small, Medium, Large, Extra-Large*), which is organised, not chronologically or thematically, but by the increasing sizes that architectural and urban design might encompass.

Perhaps echoing this generically complex text, Robertson's *Occasional Work* both gestures towards and reshapes several prose essay forms, including the manifesto, the historical narrative and the research paper. This reoccupation of a conventional form is not surprising. Robertson's work had previously moved into and re-territorialised the most demanding of literary forms, including the lyric (see *The Men: A Lyric Book* [2006]), the epic (see *Debbie: An Epic* [1997])⁵ and the eclogue (see *XEclogue* [1993]), as well as discourses seemingly unrelated to literature, like meteorological discourse (see *The Weather* [2001]). *Occasional Work*'s adoption of the various genres (manifesto, research paper, 'walk') that describe the city is an attempt to occupy a kind of urban discourse, albeit in an excessive way. The text consists of two parts: *Occasional Work* begins with an introductory manifesto for 'Soft Architecture' and is followed by twelve essays that variously explore impermanent spaces: 'Doubt and the History of Scaffolding', 'Pure Surface', 'Playing House: A Brief Account of the Idea of the Shack', and 'Spatial Synthetics: A Theory', for example. The *Seven Walks* section consists of seven essays entitled, simply, 'Walk One', 'Walk Two', 'Walk Three', etc., which emerged out of workshops Robertson led at the Kootenay School of Writing in 2001 (Stephens 2010: 31). Robertson's 'Office for Soft Architecture', or 'O.S.A.' as she calls it, echoing Koolhaas'

O.M.A. (Office for Metropolitan Architecture), originated when Susan Edelstein of Artspeak Gallery commissioned the essay 'Soft Architecture: A Manifesto' to accompany an exhibition by Sharon Yuen and Josée Bernard (*Acknowledgments, Occasional Work*, unpag.): '[a] theory of cloth, memory, and gods emerged' (p. 4).

Critics have taken up the work of Robertson's Office in a number of ways, considering her complex text within feminist, ecocritical and spatial discourses. We are most concerned with a trio of essays – by Michael Davidson, Maia Joseph and Paul Stephens respectively – which specifically consider *Occasional Work* as a text exploring and describing the city of Vancouver. Considering Robertson's work alongside that of American poet Mark Nowak and Mexican poet Cristina Rivera-Garza in his essay 'On the Outskirts of Form: Cosmopoetics in the Shadow of NAFTA' (2008), Davidson presents Robertson as the Canadian corner of a triangle of North American poets that consider the city within a global context affected by labour flows, trade agreements and outsourcing. For Davidson, Robertson's 'soft architecture' takes on a specific tenor in the context of global economies as the architectures of a new global city like Vancouver 'is "soft", its glamorous surface permeated by investment capital from East Asia and elsewhere' (p. 738). In her 'The Afterlife of the City: Reconsidering Urban Poetic Practice' (2009), Joseph compares Robertson's work to that of Meredith Quartermain, another Vancouver poet interested in the spatial dynamics of the city, focusing on the role of the poet as a spatial practitioner exploring 'the fringe and forgotten spaces of the city, gathering and telling marginalized stories' (p. 152). Unlike Davidson, who examines Robertson's Vancouver on a global scale, Joseph considers the interaction between the street and the page through 'the practice of description', which, for Robertson, 'includes not simply reflecting the city but also reflecting *on* the city – contemplating its histories, its present conditions, its possible futures' (p. 160). Stephens's "'The Dystopia of the Obsolete": Lisa Robertson's Vancouver and the Poetics of Nostalgia' (2010) looks to *Occasional Work* and several other of Robertson's books for examples of her approach to nostalgia and Utopia, particularly the way that nostalgia both 'enables a false return to paradise' and 'can also permit a reconsideration of the grammar of contemporary social relations' (p. 24). Stephens leaps between the various spatial practices at play in Robertson's text and the way they play out in her extremely poetic descriptions, suggesting the way that, for Robertson, the city is the noisy intersection of various historical trajectories. Like the shack, Stephens suggests that '[s]urrounded by wilderness, the city is a

haphazard work-in-progress, built from the materials of its own past' (p. 21). Like Stephens, we consider Robertson's Vancouver (and, in fact, our own places) the accreted sum of all spatial entanglements, from the forceful organisational movements of global capital to the differentiating, yet minor, descriptions of the wandering poet, as well as many other actors that affect and produce space. How do these clashing spatial forces produce a space, a specific site, together through their cooperations and antagonisms?

'Site Report: New Brighton Park'

Robertson's soft architectural theory is one that considers impermanence, focused as it is on the ways spaces shift. To cue us to this, Robertson points us to Koolhaas and the O.M.A. in the third piece in the first section of *Occasional Work*, the piece 'Site Report: New Brighton Park,' which opens with an epigraph from Koolhaas's 1994 essay, 'What Ever Happened to Urbanism?':

If there is to be a 'new urbanism' it will not be based on the twin fantasies of order and omnipotence; it will be the staging of uncertainty; it will no longer be concerned with the arrangement of more or less permanent objects but with the irrigation of territories with potential. (Robertson quoting Koolhaas 2006: 31)

Koolhaas's essay appears in the fourth and final section of *S,M,L,XL*, a book which structures itself around increasing scales of architectural size, moving through houses, apartment blocks, museums and airports before reaching, in the 'XL' section, the scale of the city, of urban life, urban planning, and the practice known as Urbanism. Koolhaas opens his essay by pondering the disappearance of modernist urbanism, and its desire to design cities from the top down, at the moment that urban populations have begun to balloon. Citing figures like those from Lagos, whose population grew, in twenty years, from 2 to 7 to 12 to 15 million, Koolhaas notes the ways modernist urbanism, 'unable to invent and implement at the scale demanded by its apocalyptic demographics' (p. 961), has been unable to keep up with the impressively shifting size of the urban.

Remarkably, writes Koolhaas, although "the" city no longer exists', cities continue to be 'defiant', persistent; they continue to move, grow and exceed the hand of urban planners. The failure of seemingly utopian design and new beginnings for cities is something that, Koolhaas suggests, has

become a bit of a joke and point of shame for those attempting to design spaces that work in positive ways for the actors in those spaces. What results is a retreat into 'the parasitic security of architecture', choosing instead to design on smaller, more controllable scales. In arguing for a 'new' urbanism that stages uncertainty rather than arranging the supposedly permanent objects of architecture, Koolhaas suggests that there ought to at least be an attempt to engage with the accidental designs of the city on a larger scale that admits chance, chaos, failure, and uncertainty:

To survive, urbanism will have to imagine a new newness. Liberated from its atavistic duties, urbanism redefined as a way of operating on the inevitable will attack architecture, invade its trenches, drive it from its bastions, undermine its certainties, explode its limits, ridicule its preoccupations with matter and substance, destroy its traditions, smoke out its practitioners. (Koolhaas 1995: 971)

Koolhaas proposes that urbanism might be a kind of 'operation on the inevitable', the inevitable being the impermanent spaces of the city being changed by the trajectories of myriad actors (human, animal, architectural, capital, narrative etc.) moving in and across those spaces, defining them in often contradictory ways. Somehow, for Koolhaas, urbanism and urbanists should aspire to move from being the makers of the city to its subjects, recognising that space is produced not from heaven to earth (as a modernist urbanism might have it), but from earth to heaven.

It is in this spirit of inversion that Robertson asserts that '[t]he new urbanism' began in New Brighton Park in 1863 (p. 37). She sees the park as 'an inverted Utopia, where [détourning the May '68 situationist slogan] *sous la plage, le pavé*' ['under the beach, pavement']. Robertson gestures here to a site under repeated revision, a site that admits change and admits impermanence in a way that repeatedly and often unsuccessfully reaches for something better, using the spatial impermanence Koolhaas hints at as a source of new urban configurations. In true manifesto style, Koolhaas suggests that some kind of urbanism, some kind of position-taking on how to manifest the urban, will be necessary to change urban spaces for the better (whatever that 'better' may be). Sharing Koolhaas's desire for alternative ways to occupy the city, Robertson responds with her own manifestos for architectures that are not fixed or hard, but soft. Her manifesto for soft architecture concludes, not with a statement and a firm position, but with a question and a gesture outward: 'What if there is no "space," only a permanent, slow-motion mystic takeover, an implausibly

careening awning? Nothing is utopian. Everything wants to be. Soft Architects face the reaching middle' (p. 17). For Koolhaas, rather than 'aim for stable configurations', a 'new' urbanism might 'enable processes that refuse to be crystallized into definitive form' (p. 969). A new urbanism then redefines its practice 'as a way of operating on the inevitable', and as concerned with 'the irrigation of territories with potential' (pp. 969–71) in an attempt to complicate and undermine the certainties some might hold with regard to the architectures around us.

'Site Report: New Brighton Park'⁶ explicitly maps out this change in urban texture since New Brighton Park 'comprised the first real estate transaction in what was to become our city' (p. 38). A 'parcel of land' (p. 30) in East Vancouver, just north of the Pacific National Exhibition grounds facing Burrard Inlet and flanked on either side by heavy industry and shipping, New Brighton Park, previously known as 'Lot 26', 'was purchased at land auction in New Westminster in 1869, \$25 down, \$25 later, by George Black, Scots butcher. This was the first colonial sale of the Musqueam clam beach called Khanamoot' (p. 39). Robertson explores the park as a site of multiple historical trajectories defined more by the residues of past structure than present architecture. For Robertson, New Brighton Park is a site that 'beautifully lacks architecture' – 'nothing and everything took place here, then moved on' (p. 37).

In a short reading of the park through Robertson's essay, Paul Stephens outlines the ways that the park 'retains traces of many of the major events of Western Canadian history', suggesting that '[t]he substitutions imposed on the landscape are not systematic or evolutionary – they are practical and unambitious adaptations to existing conditions' (p. 28). Stephens considers the park a minor space that is ideal for Robertson's soft architectural purposes because it is 'uncategorizable, underappreciated, and diverse' (p. 29). Framing the park as an almost incidental production, more contingent than sweeping, Stephens reminds us of the ways that, for Robertson, space is a product of its time, a product of the adding up of historical decision-making and labouring bodies. Coming out of this framing of the messy, intersecting narratives of New Brighton, caught between reclamation and gentrification, we would like to suggest that, for Robertson, New Brighton Park represents a meeting place for Koolhaas's 'new urbanism' and Doreen Massey's conception of place as the meeting point of multiple trajectories in space. This combination of Koolhaas and Massey frames Robertson's New Brighton as a site of spatio-temporal shift, not as only the effect of gentrifying redesigns, but also of the spatial labour happening on the ground

by various and varying actors. Instead of a site of passive recreation, within this frame the park becomes a site of active spatial production – Henri Lefebvre might remind us that '(social) space is a (social) product' (Lefebvre 1991: 26). For both Koolhaas and Massey, their individual negotiations of 'design' and 'place' respectively speak to a desire to think about the ways that spatial identity adds up on the ground as well as on paper.

In a 2000 email conversation with Steve McCaffery as part of the PhillyTalks series curated by Louis Cabri at the Kelly Writers House in Philadelphia, Robertson speaks explicitly about her interest in Koolhaas's essay, excited by the idea that 'design for [Koolhaas] is the description of intensity flows' (Robertson and McCaffery 2000: 32). What we can see in Robertson's 'Site Report' on New Brighton Park is precisely this kind of description of intensity flows. Robertson takes Koolhaas's suggestion that the purpose of a new urbanism is the 'irrigation of territories with potential' (p. 969), flooding the site with meaning by putting back into consideration the various narratives and uses that have been attached to the site. Suddenly, with any number of introduced and reintroduced narratives moving across it, New Brighton Park drips with potential. New Brighton Park becomes a site where nothing and everything can take place. By excessively flooding the site with meaning, Robertson defies the kinds of stratifying structures (the monument, the institution) that would seek to define space by a single narrative.

With this singular, defining narrative in mind, Robertson describes a 'commemorative bronze plaque' that 'narrates the park's civic historical status' (p. 38). According to Robertson, the plaque establishes an origin or 'inaugural mythos' for the park. 'Here Vancouver began', it says, 'All was forest towering to the skies. British Royal Engineers surveyed it into lots, 1863, and named the area Hastings Townsite ... Everything began at Hastings' (p. 38). The plaque gives the sense that here (New Brighton Park) is where raw undefined nature was finally defined – surveyed, given specific uses, and named. Despite this impulse toward the creation of a stratified New Brighton Park, Robertson shows us a site that resists easy meanings. For her, the park is 'never a settlement, always already a zone of leisured flows and their minor intensifications' (p. 41). Robertson's suggestion that the park is 'never a settlement' is defiant and not a little ironic given the plaque's use of settlement as the dominant organising narrative of the site. The park is caught between its official narrative of settlement and Robertson's assertion that the park is never settled, that the space of the park can change even if only in a minor way.

If the park is not a settlement and is instead ‘always already a zone of leisured flows’, what then is a *leisured* flow? Is it a flow that moves at a leisurely pace? A site of leisure like a person of leisure? Do we take New Brighton Park as a flowing trajectory that drifts slowly or as a settlement that is unable to stay still? Perhaps it would be best to turn to Massey who, at the opening of *For Space*, argues that we need to look at space as a product of interrelations that is always in process and never a closed system. For Massey, space and its seemingly more permanent cousin, place, are the result of a tangled and interacting web of trajectories where, as the quotation we drew from her earlier suggests, everything is moving. This is not meant to be a kind of romanticisation of flow like the kind that attaches itself to globalising flows of capital, where everything is free to move (as long as it has enough cash behind it). Instead, Massey asks us to think of space and place in terms of their ‘throwntogetherness’, that is, the way that spaces are defined by the intersecting trajectories that cross that space, from the seemingly minor – commute, work, commute, sleep – to more major transnational shifts, forming, in the spatial entanglements of those trajectories, sites of serious relational investment that we might call ‘place’. Massey’s reading of space and place allows us to see our spatial environs as necessarily complex and multiple, rather than simply defined in the way New Brighton Park is by simple historical narratives or seemingly permanent architectural structures. Space and place are messy, produced by the ways that various actors move across them in the spirit of collaboration or in violent antagonism.

It is in this web of entanglements that Robertson’s complicated New Brighton emerges as a site between settlement and change, a site that is continually settling without making itself permanent. This does not make New Brighton perpetually new, however. Instead, Robertson presents New Brighton as a space of accretions and residues. She conducts a virtual archaeology of the site by mobilising the civic archives,⁷ carefully outlining its historical uses from the beautiful (Brighton House: ‘a playland⁸ at the end of the first stagecoach route in the colony’ [p. 39]) to the ugly (the site of the ‘first racial exclusion policy on Vancouver parkland’ [p. 40]). Robertson spends a sizeable chunk of her essay tracing these historical narratives without defining the origin of the site in the way that the plaque does, choosing instead to investigate the ways that these historical trajectories stack up and entangle in the present New Brighton Park. If, Robertson notes, ‘[a] shantytown of squatters overlaid the economically dormant site with its various savaged shelters’, it is significant to notice the

'[t]ruant patches of comfrey and mint' that 'mark long-disappeared shanty gardens' (pp. 40–1), because of the way that those truant plants compose a material residue of the past, not only reminding us of what happened on that site but also what has the possibility of returning.

Robertson returns to the site of New Brighton in several ways. She approaches the park by walking its paths and considering its details. She goes to the Vancouver City Archives and the Vancouver Public Library to excavate a history for the site beyond the official narrative literally set in stone via a series of historical plaques. She takes these various and varying histories and mobilises them across the site. New Brighton Park becomes a site where space can be reimagined and reconfigured, not in the sense that the space can be completely erased and rebuilt as something carefully planned to work in an anticipated way. But rather in the sense that Robertson perhaps conflictedly describes at the end of her essay: 'Soft architects believe that this site demonstrates the best possible use of an urban origin: Change its name repeatedly. Burn it down. From the rubble confect a prosthetic pleasure ground; with fluent obliviousness, picnic there' (p. 41). While this mission statement for soft architecture flirts with the destroy–rebuild logic of gentrification, Robertson asserts that a new spatialisation of the site *already* takes into account the rubble of the past. By flooding the site with meaning, Robertson lets us know that '*sous la plage, le pavé*' – that underneath the utopian fixtures of the park are the conflicting and conflicted pasts of a city.

Our new New Brightons

It is with Robertson's practice in mind that Ryan spent an afternoon in his newly adopted home of Vancouver walking through New Brighton Park, attempting to spot and capture on film the space Robertson describes in her essay. In late summer 2011, he noticed a space less messy and derelict than Robertson's description might suggest. Walking to the west end of the park gave him a glimpse of the 'broken cement chunks' Robertson describes lining a portion of the shoreline. But he didn't see '[c]rab traps hang from the pier and early morning salvagers comb the rough little beaches' (p. 40). Instead, he noticed a heavily defaced government notice that the park's pier was 'closed to crab fishing'. Over a decade after writing her essay, New Brighton Park has changed. New official narratives are mobilised with a plaque that commemorates a 1935 labour battle. The park is cleaner and

feels safe, even if, for Ryan, that safety is tied to a subject position that is white, middle class and male.

What he noticed the most, though, was the proliferation of signs that attempt to regulate the flows through the park. No one is allowed in the park after 10 p.m. Dogs are restricted from the beach and can only go off leash in a specific area. Ironically, a sign telling us that swimming is forbidden also invites us to 'enjoy the pier and shoreline'. These signs legislate the ways that human and non-human actors are supposed to use the park. Evident between Robertson's New Brighton and this new New Brighton is a tension between the planned and lived aspects of space, between the intended uses of a space and its actual uses. The park's signs attempt to settle a site that Robertson claims is 'never a settlement' (p. 41). They attempt to build conventions in a site that 'disperses convention' (p. 41). In contrast, Robertson's essay explodes with possibility, recognising a dense and noisy version of place that shifts and is shifted. In New Brighton Park, we can perhaps glimpse a site between design and practice, a site of contradictions that exceeds any simple, single narrative, where after having answered the question "Where is here now?" we immediately turn around and ask the question again and again and again.

As Robertson's 'Site Report' enacts, "'here" is an intertwining of histories in which the spatiality of those histories (their then as well as their there) is inescapably entangled' (Massey 2005: 139). In a space that is continually changing and recycling, Massey argues that '[i]t's the returns ... and the very differentiation of temporalities that lend continuity' (ibid.). In other words, a sense of spatial stability arises from the returning and intersection of these various historical trajectories across a distinct site. New Brighton Park is defined by the narratives and actors that traverse it, leave, and return, as much as by those that have not (yet) left. What Robertson describes in her 'Site Report' is the way that ideas, people and objects keep returning to the site, even if they have disappeared. In describing the 'hereness' of New Brighton Park, she stages the many returns that could serve to define the site, not only in terms of the historical past, but also in terms of the present state of the park and its future.

The poem tucked just inside the front cover of the first edition of *Occasional Work* (see Figure 1), articulates this sense of the site as a space of repeated departures and returns. Robertson floods this site with words that fill up the margins and reach across the middle, repeating the mantra: 'We went, we returned. We went; we returned. We went: we returned.' She insists on these spatial trajectories, following with a series of statements

We went, we returned. We went, we returned. We went, we returned. Now place softens to become the lining of the mouth. Our older relatives are gone now and are half dreaming us into our mouths. Now a rocket of words bursts from our teeth. Now we climb into our dress; our dress of more shape. Now we sew ourselves into air. There are people who donate faces and tongues. Maybe they are the older relatives. Now we run our fingers over their fingers and are startled into humility. Now seeds we've burst too from the terrestrial emotional surface. We can't understand cloth, home, anything. Are we here to say we can't sustain this register? We can't yet participate in lost death. We must get into this soft lining. Now we were born complex, messy, willful, doubled, into tables and postcards and mats. Our faces now model themselves outwards towards themselves. Now we have or own a shelf. We need it or don't. All the memory stretches out in a continual thin plane. Our faces keep reading it. Now place sign: dirty water, plants, coins, unraveled stuff. All the memory is false, therefore necessary. We're speaking for the air in the shape-filled cities, the air of the black branches, the objects covered in string, the strudged paper against the metal fence, some spatial confusion which replaces love. Now we move gently as the prepositions. What is communicate? Deep in our bodies it's better than this. Deep in our doubt a terrestrial clicking. Now we wish to be in one place yet move like blackbirds.

Figure 1.

that each begin with the word 'Now', a marker of the immediate present: 'Now a rocket of words bursts from our teeth'; 'Now we sew ourselves into air'; 'Now we wish to be in one place yet move like blackbirds'. Here, Robertson's myriad of shared paths through space are both poetic and delusional, leaving us as readers to ask what it means to return to a site that feels, in some ways, unmoored from what we remember. What might a space look like where, using Robertson's words, 'There are people who donate faces and tongues', or where 'We can't understand cloth, home, anything'? What might a space look like where we ask questions like, 'Are we here to say we can't sustain this register?' and 'What is communicate?'

Robertson's *Occasional Work* raises vital yet strangely unaskable questions for those of us who study literary texts at a moment in history when impermanent structures are being raised globally against the abuses of capitalism and when another park in Vancouver – the lawn of the Vancouver Art Gallery during the Fall 2011 Occupy Vancouver protests⁹ – can be re-quilted by the application of tentative fabrics, not only the fabric of tents and tarps, but also the precarious social fabric (activists, students, the homeless) assembled by the occupying communities. Occupy Vancouver's temporary settlement complicated the identity of a space seen by many as a place to meet friends or eat lunch on a nice day, turning a site

of flow into a site of settlement by literally 'setting up camp'. What does it mean to occupy a space with an eye to change it, even as the spaces we occupy have been taken from others, parcelled out and sold in the real estate transactions that compose our spatial lives? With the recognition that this article was written between two cities, one at the heart of empire (London) and the other inside unceded Coast-Salish territory (Vancouver), what does it even mean to 'occupy'? To *take* space or to take *up* space? In 'The Cabins', a written response posted on the *Capilano Review's* website to the global Occupy movement, Robertson speaks of the temporary spaces she has inhabited and her experience of 'occupation', particularly as it relates to her work as a poet:

What is being a poet if it's not a parody? What good is it otherwise? Every poet dreams of wild implicit economies on the opaque side of legibility. We try to replicate them in poems and the efforts are flimsy and awkward, uncomfortable. That's their dignity. The cabins, the basement suites, the garrets, the long crowded bar tables, the decaying houses of lost France, the MLA stale hotel room interviews: I've been an occupant my whole life. (unpag.)

Robertson's movements from escape to integration – from the cabin to the basement suite, from the lost decaying house to the hotel room interview – are a series of migratory moments, provoked out of necessity, that show the tensions within the word 'occupy'. If being an occupant is a state of being, is occupation as a political manoeuvre a kind of ridiculous prospect – a first-world parody of a refugee camp that fills up with those who have been chased out of the system (youth, the working classes, the homeless)?

Are not the flimsy structures and illegible demands of Occupy precisely what make them powerful and even *poetic*? The wild dreams of Occupy echo Robertson's concerns about poetry and its attempts to bring into being the opaque and perhaps impossible. The youthfulness of the cabins Robertson describes in her essay echoes the physical structures embodied by the tent cities – the structures susceptible to the elements, the mess of discourses, the lack of power or running water. The surprise comes when Robertson frames her current home in the French countryside, a home that, in a strange way, resembles the bare life of the cabins, not in terms of the past and the pastoral, with which it certainly resonates, but a kind of future:

These days I can't stop thinking about the cabins as I follow the occupy movement on the internet. I read Vila-Matas and Pierre Hadot in a low-rent stone house on the edge of fields in central France. I heat with wood. My neighbours are poor and are out ploughing or threshing til midnight. Everybody knows how to make something, and how to fix what they have. In a certain way capitalism has already left; the countryside's emptied out, house prices keep dropping, no one can get a mortgage, the cars are old. (unpag.)

With a kind of relief, she writes about where she lives now, in a space left *in the wake of capital* – a space capitalism has left fallow and a space that capitalism has left scarred – describing in the process a series of returns (to self-sufficiency, to difficulty). But while Robertson, perhaps ironically, sees a return to the virtues of poverty in the French countryside, Occupy returns poverty to the scene of the crime, erasing the geographical distance between the accumulation of wealth and its after-effects. By flooding sites like Wall Street with the mess of voices of the 99 per cent in an attempt at direct democracy, is not Occupy attempting to find ways to live outside of capitalism at the same time it is protesting the effects of capitalism? Instead of finding the utopian site under the cobblestones (*sous le pavé, la plage*), perhaps they are instead finding the messy city of contradictions and possibilities under the finished utopian sheen of the financial district (*sous la plage, le pavé*), finding ways, as Robertson does in 'Site Report: New Brighton Park', to mobilise the possibilities opened up by the return of past narratives to claim a renewed right to the city and the future.

Notes

- 1 This article arose out of our research at the University of Calgary. Rudy published the first full-length book chapter on Robertson's *The Weather* (See Butling and Rudy 2005). In 2011, Fitzpatrick completed an MA thesis entitled "'Change its name repeatedly. Burn it down': The Politics of Place as Impermanent in Lisa Robertson's *Occasional Work and Seven Walks from the Office for Soft Architecture*' under Rudy's supervision. Like Robertson, who was based in Vancouver, Canada for many years but has since lived in Cambridge, San Diego, Paris and Berkeley, we too have been on the move. Fitzpatrick now lives in Vancouver where he is completing a PhD at Simon Fraser University under the supervision of Jeff Derksen. His dissertation is tentatively entitled 'Out of Canada: Innovative Canadian Writing and the Social Production of Space'. Rudy is now based in London, England, where she is Director of the Rhodes Project and a 2012–13 Visiting Research Fellow at the Institute of English Studies,

- School of Advanced Study, University of London. We are grateful to Lisa Robertson for her detailed responses to our inquiries about her biography.
- 2 Originally published in the United States by Portland, Oregon's Clear Cut Press, the second and third editions of *Occasional Work* appeared in 2006 and 2011 from Toronto's Coach House Press.
 - 3 Robertson links her interest in space and architecture directly to the long period she spent living in Vancouver (Emails to Susan Rudy).
 - 4 In 1996, Robertson stayed with Susan Rudy while in Calgary to do a reading and found Koolhaas's *S,M,L,XL* at Pages, a local bookstore.
 - 5 For a recent, very able, analysis of Robertson's reworking of the epic form, see Bronwyn Haslam's 'History and Hysteria' (2011).
 - 6 This five-page text was written in 1999 for an issue of Toronto's *Mix* magazine on real estate.
 - 7 She notes in a short introduction to the essay that '[h]istorical research concerning the site was conducted at Vancouver City Archives and in the Northwest History Room at Vancouver Public Library' (3rd edn, 33).
 - 8 It is interesting to note that Playland is also the name of an amusement park directly south of New Brighton Park. It is the home of the yearly Pacific National Exhibition.
 - 9 Occupy Vancouver was one of many offshoots of the Fall 2011 Occupy Wall Street encampment, where a small community of activists, students, homeless and other concerned citizens 'occupied' a presumably public space (the lawn of the Vancouver Art Gallery) both to protest at a myriad of concerns revolving around contemporary capitalism and to begin to find ways to create social bonds outside of that milieu (however utopian that gesture was). Particularly resonant to the Vancouver offshoot were issues of real estate, affordable housing, homelessness and First Nations.

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