



PROJECT MUSE®

A Conversation at Sea

Matt Packer, Sean Lynch

Utopian Studies, Volume 21, Number 1, 2010, pp. 16-23 (Article)

Published by Penn State University Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/utp.0.0006>



➔ *For additional information about this article*

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/382293>

A Conversation at Sea

MATT PACKER AND SEAN LYNCH

SEAN LYNCH: Thomas Johnson Westropp saw the island of HyBrazil from cliffs over the Atlantic when he was five years old. He returned there with his mother when he was twelve, in 1872, and again HyBrazil appeared before him. In his writings in later life he recalled that he made a sketch of this mirage. The sketch is now lost, and *A Preliminary Sketch for the Reappearance of HyBrazil* revolves around making a stand-in replacement for it.

Here, the idea of an adequate alternative originating from historical reconstruction is important. I found some drawings Westropp completed in Kilkee three years later, when he was fifteen. When I look at them, I think about his desire to once again see this mirage and the longing for a potentially unattainable landscape. Another example of this quasi-mirage can be seen in Spielberg's *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*. Here, Richard Dreyfuss sculpts the Devil's Tower mountain out of potato mash, before a subsequent journey to find this mountain.

MATT PACKER: There's a difference between these two examples, however. While the mashed potato is traditional in the sense of being a speculative model (made in the advance order of realization and fulfillment), your example of the Kilkee drawings is a retrospective alignment.

The 1875 drawings are not drawings of HyBrazil, but *nearly*. This is the same place, but a vision three years after the mirage. I like this *nearly* about your work, particularly the demands it makes in abstracting and reconstituting histories and representations. However, this approximation seems to have the added effect of putting you at the center of things. Aren't Westropp's Kilkee drawings essentially a model for your own speculations?

SL: I am the author of a situational understanding but not necessarily of its origins or elements. There is a performative action on my part, to examine and contextualize the dramas and traces of a historical phenomenon. In this context, we can prospect, gather, and, as you mention, speculate. Such actions might help find hidden currents and unsuspected passages. Certainly the

*This material appeared previously in a 2009 exhibition as "A Preliminary Sketch for the Re-Appearance of HyBrazil," by Sean Lynch and Matt Packer (ISBN 978-0-9558630-3-5). *Utopian Studies*, Vol. 21, No. 1, 2010
Copyright © 2010 The Pennsylvania State University, University Park, PA



Figure 1.

development of geographical knowledge has gaps and continuities, regressions and contradictions to expose.

MP: There's an interesting history of "phantom" islands in the Atlantic, some of which were purely mythic constructions, others that were plotted onto maps up until the nineteenth century as a result of navigational errors. The reports of these islands, HyBrazil included, more or less coincide with the Age of Enlightenment and the development of reason and rationality as the prime authority of human understanding.

However, the sea has persisted as a rather irrational space: a space of chance. The eighteenth-century economist Adam Smith described the sea as a "lottery" in terms of the lives risked by sailors for comparatively little gain.¹ The sea is also a lottery if we think of the traditions of "wrecking" that supported marginal coastal villages through the centuries. This involved the plundering of ships, lured into troubled waters by lights deliberately placed on the coastline to fool ships' navigation.²

On another tangent, but related in a roundabout way, there's a famous Dürer etching of a rhinoceros that has always been very important for me. The rhinoceros depicted in Dürer's etching drowned in a shipwreck in

1516 after making debut appearances all over Europe. It was on its way to be viewed by the Pope on special request. Dürer based his image on secondhand sources, so the rhinoceros is trapped in a false representation. The elaborate armor plating in Dürer's image reflects the fact that it was based upon a sighting in Lisbon, where the rhinoceros was "dressed up" to fight a public battle with a similarly "dressed-up" elephant. Moreover, the rhinoceros is doubly trapped, in a fate completely alien to its nature.

Perhaps the story of the rhinoceros points in a similar direction to what you describe as the regression of geographical knowledge. There's

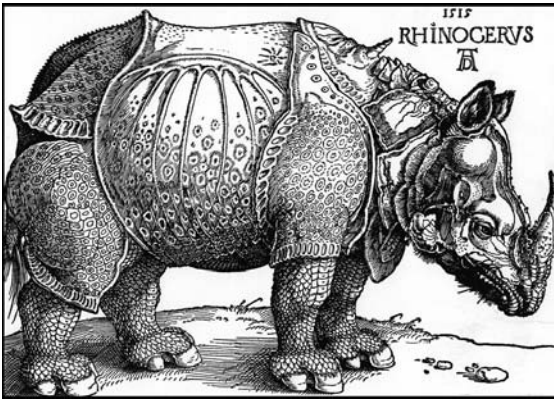


Figure 2.



Figure 3.

also a dumb formal relationship that emerges between an image of a BMW motorbike at Branscombe Bay in Devon (part of salvage washed ashore from the cargo ship *MSC Napoli*, after it was holed in a storm in 2007) and Dürer's etching.³ It's like a bad joke impossible to resist, as if the rhinoceros has evolved over four centuries and made its way back to the shore!

SL: Yes, it should be an aim to find a kind of redemptive zone for the forgotten and unclaimed, for what are literally floating objects. The sea can be this site par excellence.⁴

Here's Westropp photographing at the Cliffs of Moher, enjoying afternoon tea with accompanying view. Inevitably this image is of a romantic tradition, a traveler of the landscape reaches the sea, the edge of the land and the effective end of his journey. In an Irish sense this tradition of experiencing environment has its roots in topographical antiquarians such as Gabriel Beranger. A precursor to Westropp, Beranger often painted watercolors featuring himself and friends as active participants in decoding the Irish



Figure 4.

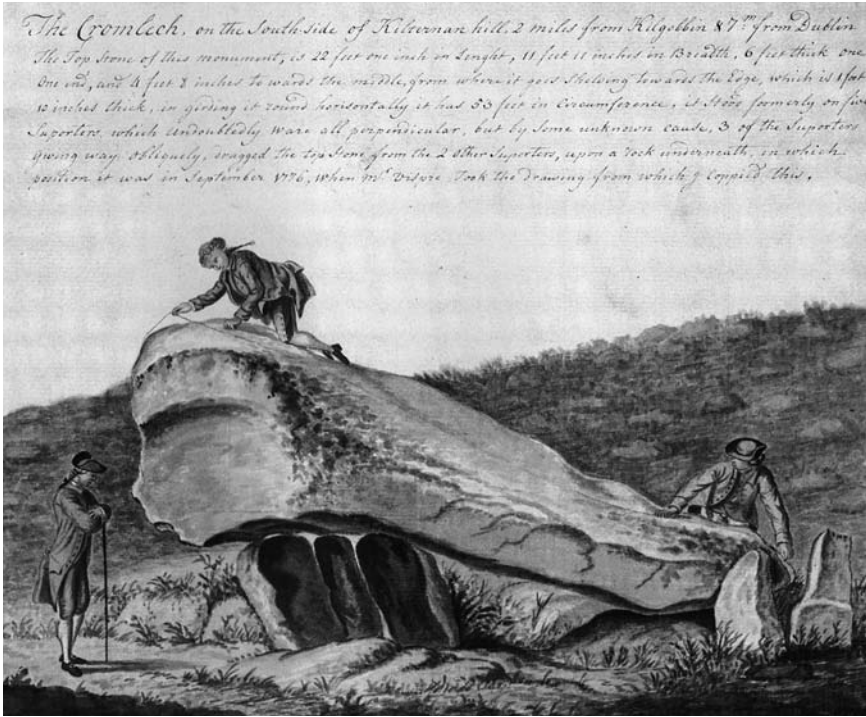


Figure 5.

landscape.⁵ Here, Beranger portrays himself measuring Kiltoran Dolmen in County Dublin in 1776.

I am interested in continuing to apply a strain of dandyism to landscape. Specifically, Charles Baudelaire's definition elevates aesthetic understanding to "reflect that there is a sort of grandeur in all follies, a driving power in every sort of excess."⁶ He writes of the Parisian flaneur's attempt to combat and destroy triviality, to underscore conformity and homogeneous generalization. There is a joy in the specificity of site and place here that could continue to influence ways of working in our surroundings today.

MP: Dandyism is certainly an interesting proposition for the contemporary environment, especially in thinking of Baudelaire's description of dandies as disenchanting and leisured "outsiders." He also suggests that dandyism appears in periods of transition "when democracy has not yet become all-powerful,



Figure 6.

and when aristocracy is only partially weakened and discredited.”⁷ Dandyism is interesting here because it’s never about establishing a position outside of society as such, rather to create an inside position of being an “outsider.” That’s the trick, the X factor.

I have another ruinous anecdote I’m afraid: Irish Ferries have launched a new Rosslare/Cherbourg ferry called *Oscar Wilde*, named after the most famous dandy of them all. According to a local newspaper, the ferry is being kitted out with facilities “that will reflect the link with Oscar Wilde, including . . . the Left Bank Brasserie and the fitting of an extra bow thruster for improved manoeuv[e]rability.”⁸ With this one exception, I’ve always understood dandyism to be an urban phenomenon. Do you think of dandyism as something that can be applied anywhere?

SL: Certainly a primitive dandyism exists in the holiday getaway, where one can skip, hop, and jump on a plane or boat to a tourist destination. However, I think a more articulate approach with the characteristics we’ve outlined might be investigated and developed, one that considers disclosure and resonance of transitional moments in landscape and environment.⁹ As you say, nuanced participation is important here.

I often contemplate George Brecht in this regard. He moved to England in 1968, set up Brecht and MacDiarmid Research Associates, and began organizing a series of *Land Mass Translocation* projects. He wrote, “We believe that such translocation of land masses is (or could) be technologically feasible within the next ten years, and are studying the geophysical, economic, social and other aspects of such an arrangement.”¹⁰ One idea was the *Wedding of Miami and Havana*, which would see Cuba moving northwards to kiss Florida after a decade of Cold War friction.

MP: That’s got me thinking of Robert Smithson and his proposal for an *Island of Broken Glass*. He wanted to pour a hundred tons of glass onto an existing rocky island just off the shore of Miami. It never happened for ecological reasons and for fear of endangering wildlife. Smithson defended this by saying, “The *Island* is not meant to save anything or anybody, but to reveal things as they are.”¹¹ We can only imagine the perceptual effect of this work: the light refracting in all directions as a result of the glass. It would have been a translocation of a different sort, as though the location was added with 50 percent extra.

This makes sense to me in relation to your series of photographs taken from the shore in the supposed direction of the island of HyBrazil. You could say that nothing is revealed by these photographs, and certainly no island appears as confirmation of Westropp’s original vision. All we see is sea and sky. And yet, through the sequencing of these photographs—it’s as though a new layer is applied which relinquishes the doubt and somehow transfers the potential revelation and reconstruction of HyBrazil.

Endnotes

1. Adam Smith, *An Inquiry into the Nature And Causes of the Wealth of Nations*, vol. 1 (London: W. Strahan and T. Cadell, 1776), bk. 1, chap. X, pt. 1.

2. Bella Bathurst, *The Wreckers: A Story of Killing Seas, False Lights, and Plundered Ships* (London: Harper Collins, 2006).

3. See www.bbc.co.uk/devon/content/articles/2007/07/16/napoli_timeline_feature.shtml.

4. A story from Galway sees a quarreling father and son cast anchor in a fog off the Aran Islands. A giant appears out of the sea and complains.

When they raise the anchor, some cabbage is on the flukes, and the pair begins arguing about whether it came from the giant's garden or from his table. Diarmuid Ó Briain, "Sean Ára a bhí ann fadó" (Old Aran That Existed Once Upon a Time), in *An Stoc* (1927), quoted in Miceal Ross, "Anchors in a Three-Decker World," *Folklore* 109 (1998): 72.

5. Gabriel Beranger (ca. 1730–1817) was an artist of French Huguenot extraction who lived in Dublin. He made a tour through the west of Ireland in 1779, keeping an itinerary illustrated with sketches, which he later arranged for publication in bound volumes. See Peter Harbison, *Beranger's Views of Ireland* (Dublin: Royal Irish Academy, 1991).

6. Charles Baudelaire, "The Painter of Modern Life" (1863), in *Selected Writings on Art and Literature*, trans. P. E. Charvet (New York: Viking 1972), 395–422.

7. Ibid.

8. Available at www.newrossstandard.ie/news/oscar-wilde-joins-irish-ferries-fleet-1079449.html.

9. The landscape debates of Irish art can be referenced here. The Delighted Eye touring exhibition, curated by Frances Ruane in 1980, argued for the existence of a specifically "Irish" genre ennobled by its lyrical, indirect, and poetic qualities. Reacting against such characteristics, Tom Duddy's 1987 essay "Irish Art Criticism—A Provincialism of the Right?" notes that "romantic concepts of place, atmosphere, native sensibility, native impulse, local genius, and the Celtic imagination are given priority over much more 'dirty' materialistic concepts as economy, market, commodity, visual ideology" (*Circa* 35 [July/August 1987]: 14–18, 987, in Fintan Cullen, ed., *Sources on Irish Art: A Reader* [Cork, 2000], 95). Duddy suggests a careful balance of both strands, to anchor and particularize specific meanings offered by images themselves.

10. George Brecht, *Notes on Chart No. 1 of the Land Mass Translocation Project* (1969), in *Behind the Facts. Interfunktionen 1968–1975*, ed. Gloria Moure (Barcelona, 2004), 184.

11. "Four Conversations Between Dennis Wheeler and Robert Smithson (1969–1970)," in *Robert Smithson: The Collected Writings*, ed. Jack Flam (Berkeley, 1996), 197.