Dr Charlie Brennan: Reflecting Place-Practice

Southern Cross University - lecturing and researching in Ethics and Sustainability.
Regional Initiative for Social Innovation & Research. http://risir.net

Contracting: putting sustainability and conservation ideals, designs and targets into practice.

http://www.charliebrennan.info
http://www.greateasternranges.org.au/jaliigirr-biodiversity-alliance
http://www.bellingenurbanlandcare.org.au
https://www.facebook.com/pages/Bellingen-Community-and-High-School-Garden

---

–

At this inaugural Ecoarts conference I was given the opportunity to present in the forms of a one-minute 'pop-up' speech and an A1 poster. Condensing the message was a challenge but here goes…

Our greatest challenge is to put our sustainability ideas and ideals into practice. Even at this time of heightened concern for the sustained well-being of the world, there is little requirement for more information or new ideas. People have been carrying out environmental work for at least 30-40 years and it is imperative that we acknowledge this and learn from it. This constitutes a set of ethical responses to harms inflicted upon communities of people and life. There is so much that can be learned from these attempts to put sustainability and conservation into practice.

We need to consider the nature of practice - it is not easy to see or understand. A practice perspective is more than being practical – it's a different way of framing understanding of how the world around us is shaped. Ehrenriech (2003) points out that we tend to not see people and the everyday practices that surround us. To the western mind practice is an epistemic blind spot (de Certeau 1984; Cresswell 2003; Raelin 2007) that we rarely use as a source of learning. To Schon (1987) practice is ambiguous, complex and often intuitive.

Practice happens in particular ecological, social and psychological contexts – 'places'. Place and sense of place describe the felt, experiential and narrative relationships between people and their places and is the subject of a substantive academic literature. This can also include displacement, non-place (Auge 1992) and shadow places (Plumwood 2008).

'Place-practice' combines practice and place perspectives. The illumination and acknowledgment of place-practice offers a diverse, inclusive and compassionate basis for putting sustainability ideas and ideals into practice. In almost all communities environmental matters have become polarised contested stories and social/psychological positions. This dynamic stalls movement towards a broader implementation of sustainable practices.

My thesis (Brennan 2011) reflected upon my own place-practice as a member of communities of practice (Wenger 1998). In order to do this I borrowed a technique from WG Sebald (1996, 1999, 2002). Enigmatic, uncaptioned black and white photographs were woven though the text. Their combination of ambiguity, emotive power and the juxtapositions between these images evoked and provoked the self-reflective process reminiscent of the work of Schama (1994).

Top: Black & white images used by Sebald in The Rings of Saturn (2002)
Below: Black & white images used in my thesis to evoke and provoke reflection on place-practice

Above: Colour images of JALIIGIRR Biodiversity Alliance area near Coffs Harbour. They are beautiful and typical of conservation images. But there something is missing from them – weeds, people and place-practices. Images copyright Shane Ruming.

References:

Augé, M. (1995). *Non-places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity.* London: Verso.
Brennan, C. (2011). *Situating Place-Practice.* Unpublished PhD thesis. University of Western Sydney.
Crawford, M. B. (2009). *Shop Class as Soulcraft: An Inquiry into the Value of Work.* USA: Penguin.
Cresswell, T. (2003). Landscape and the Obliteration of Practice. In *Handbook of Cultural Geography.* pp.296-289.
de Certeau, M. (1984). *The Practice of Everyday Life*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
Ehrenreich, B., (ed). (2003) Maid to Order. In *Global Woman*. London: Grants Books.
Plumwood, V. (2008). Shadow Places and the Politics of Dwelling.
Raelin, J. A. (2007). Toward an Epistemology of Practice. *Academy of Management Learning & Education* 6(4): pp. 495 519.
Schama, S. (1995). *Landscape and Memory*. New York: Random House.
Schon, D. A. (1983). *The Reflective Practitioner: How Professionals Think in Action.* London: Ashgate Publishing Limited.
Sebald, W. G. (1996). *The Emigrants*. London: The Harvill Press.
Sebald, W. G. (1999). *On the Natural History of Destruction*. Toronto: Vintage.
Sebald, W. G. (2002). *The Rings of Saturn.* London: Vintage.
Wenger, E. (1998). Communities of Practice: Learning as a Social System. *Systems Thinker* 9 (5) June 1998