



Dolce far Niente

Jennifer Teets

Recently, a friend turned me on to the Tibetan term shul. “Shul,” he wrote, “is used to describe the scarred hollow in the ground where a house once stood, the indentation in the grass where an animal slept last night” or, as he put it, “...the debris from a performance as an impression of something that used to be, but is no longer there.” It must have been just before—or right after this—that I began thinking about the act of creating a structure upon which an artwork could rest, arise out of or mutate into what wasn’t there. (Or was it?) It would originate from the ashes of memory and inhabit an infra-thin amorphous space as a flaky residue of the mind occupying the inside of a shell. Shul, as another friend described it, seems to encapsulate and embody an *in-between*, like the vacuous space of a glass or bowl.

I began to imagine, could an abandoned ruin or hollow space left on a landscape be a shul? Can in-betweens be stimulated—shaken up? Could an exhibition encapsulate the guts of the inside of bowls, glasses or other vessels? How could an exhibition or artwork embody the structure of nothing or the space of in-betweens? Does “nothing” even matter, really? And if nothing does matter, dialectically, what tactics exist to make it “something?” Could it be possible to collectively simulate an experience where an event or exhibition happens on the basis of seeming nothingness?



In New York, after a collective hypnosis session organized by a friend, I told a colleague about my idea to conduct a discussion on nothingness for a workshop at the California College of the Arts in San Francisco. I wanted to put together an event based on the material and thought of the vaporous, evaporating present. I must have sounded like I was referring to a meeting in a sauna, because my friend said, “Why not the Sutro Baths?” She proceeded to describe to me a marvelous, lavish bathhouse on the west side of San Francisco that mysteriously burned to the ground in 1966. (Please indulge in the irony here: water and fire!) What was left standing, she added, was just a skeleton of the building and a carved out chunk of land where seawater rests in small pools and reservoirs.

Later I read that the structure was initially conceived in 1888 as a massive engineering enterprise funded under the auspices of Adolph Sutro, an avid collector and educator. Complete with an Egyptian mummy and artifact collection, as well as a panorama of the world, a concert hall, an ice rink and a Roman statue garden, Sutro opened his natatorium to the public in 1896. The one-of-a-kind facility hosted up to 25,000 in its bunkers and swimming facilities. Seven pools, the stage and seating for thousands to observe were all topped by a glazed roof of 100,000 panes of glass to allow sunlight in. Seawater filled the largest of the tanks; the rest were heated to varying temperatures, which ranged from ice-cold to a steaming eighty degrees. One could enter the pools in a number of ways: trampolines, flying rings, slides, swings, toboggans and diving platforms.

Here we can see the present as somehow a mirror of the past. When speaking of such a structure or non-structure, *The Morning Call* of San Francisco noted in 1893, before Sutro was built, “There was a huge depression on the north side of the road that runs to Sutro Heights, and in the depression or gully was a sea of sand, and rock, and seaweed and spray, and the gulls went there to roost.” That will always remain a wild and barren place, people said. Soon they would see how mistaken they were:

The gully is still there, but in the place of its jagged rocks and sand dunes is a huge series of concrete reservoirs; and rising high over these long reservoirs is a bewildering mass of green iron and wood framework. Soon many hundreds of tons of glass will be covered over this framework. The Sutro Baths and casino will be enclosed, and one of the most desolate and forlorn spots in the world will have been converted into one of the finest structures in the world—if not the finest.

One man’s trash is another man’s treasure.

Could comments penned in 1893 have been a prediction of the fire of 1966 or the present? Is it possible to capture the cyclical process of detritus? Today, the sprawling structure resembles nothing of the bathhouse and casino of yesteryear but a Roman ruin with a parking lot flushed by the tides of the Pacific. The artifacts—the memories and stories of one ruin—occupy a ruin to be. Sculptures gaze out to sea, as if sentinels silently protecting the land to their backs, unknowing of their own impending disappearance.



I also read on the Internet that in 1881 a viewing cliff at Sutro was built under the title of “Dolce far Niente,” meaning, “The sweetness of doing nothing.” Dolce far Niente shined in glory until its decay in 1939.

Assimilating all of this material, I asked artists to respond to the overall topic with an image, a recording, a film or reference to integrate into the discussion. Some sent nothing. Others emptied galleries or hollowed the earth. One sent a topiary frame in the shape of a bunny; another an “empty” but voluminous pair of starched jeans. I began to think of hosting a tour of the Egyptian collection at Sutro from the perspective of today, conducted by its current curator at the San Francisco State University’s Museum Studies Program, which rescued the collection from the 1966 fire, later housing it for teaching purposes. Unfortunately, the curator could not attend to responsibilities outside of the University, so we instead made an artificial tour of its storage facilities via PowerPoint.

I also asked a few artists to respond with specific texts or interventions. I decided that I wanted to accompany the artists in an impromptu *dérive* where the experience would speak for itself, so I never went to Sutro beforehand. But could we discuss the reality of inhabiting the Sutro ruins in the sense of a *dérive*—a drift? France Fiction, an artist/curatorial collective and gallery in Paris, participated in the project via Skype. What resulted was a multilayered virtual questionnaire on dreams, reality, nothingness, dancing, the individual self, icons and the processes of seeing. Darius Miksys told me he hoped to discover some hidden structure of himself (which he didn’t) while writing, tapping only into his own mind and thoughts—no links, no quotations, no quick environmental reflections or web inspirations. Asli Cavusoglu responded with a work “upon arrival” or on delay (see page 26). I asked a random man at a coffee shop to join us at the Sutro ruins the night of our visit to make a statement for Asli. He never arrived, but a month later he surfaced in the e-mail in-boxes of the attendees, stating simply, “Nothing remains as nothing if

you talk about it.” Nothing was talked about with the students, and nothing on the subject came into my e-mail in-box after that. As we meandered around Sutro, however, a text message suddenly reached my cell phone as we arrived at a tunnel:

No matter how unattractive things sometimes are, after some time, they can turn your sympathy settings upside down... Situation is simple to explained [sic]—sometimes you need more time to understand, to grasp the essence. Preferences swap positions, options change strategy, world slowly flips showing its mirror picture. Assuming that probably sooner or later you will like what your [sic] dislike, the question is, whether it is worth the effort to like things in advance. Novelties force themselves to be liked, because it is the only way they can survive. Such an “imperative of modernity” could be applied in other fields, say, art. Art is rarely innovative, because if it would be such, it would be undetectable as art and most likely, it wouldn’t be detectable at all. Unless it would be liked as such.

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