

CURATED DECAY: PART ONE

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. . . and finally, in response, it occurred to me that Orford Ness is less a place that one remembers than one experiences as a place that *is* a memory. Despite the obduracy of the concrete walls buttressed by deep shingle embankments, built both to resist or mitigate environmental forces and engineering mishaps, the buildings are revenants lingering in a barren landscape, ghosts clothed in architectural garb rather than sheets. In that sense, Orford Ness is foreshadowed by Dunwich, just further up the Suffolk coast, in which all that barely remains is a vestige of what was once there. But ghostliness is hardly only a matter of the buildings and laboratories being left to a gradual process of ruination, what is known as “curated decay.” Decay is entropy in action and the visualization of temporality as fraying surfaces. And we see that decay—rapidly happening in slow motion—through the incessant transition of Orford Ness’ landscape itself, ever teetering between erosion and accretion. Of course, nature and culture are enmeshed; the decay of the buildings and the landscape are manifestations of the same force rather than parallel episodes. The lighthouse is no more.

What is an artist or writer to do in response when confronted by a place that is a memory rather than something strictly tangible? For example, artists—students and staff—here at the University of Suffolk. Possibly one answer is not to seek or use Orford Ness for *inspiration*; instead, it is a matter of letting oneself be *haunted* by it. Perhaps the difference between inspiration and haunting can be split with the artist being spoken of as a kind of medium for this specific occasion. That, after all, might provide a map for understanding how landscape and topography are translatable into artistic practices. To what extent do the various works in this exhibition figure this being haunted, and thereby potentially making the works into so many exercises—albeit unintended—of hauntology amongst other things?

Of course, yes, of course—all this risks pushing everything too far; the writing risks being a self-portrait of my own obsessions rather than an accounting of an exhibition. Yet such a claim, as wild as it might sound, seems to me neither inappropriate nor impertinent. This year marks 120 years since the publication of M. R. James’ momentous *Ghost Stories of an Antiquary*, and in those stories it tends to be places rather than people that are haunted, and places rather than people that haunt. Although James does wonder around the country and journeys into Europe, the geographical hub of the stories remains Suffolk. Great Livermere was his home and barely disguised locations such as Felixstowe and Aldeburgh appear in some of his most important stories. Orford and its Ness admittedly do not, but the history of the Ness as site for experimentation postdates James’ life, and his inclination to acknowledge Suffolk’s own hauntedness necessarily extends beyond the places he explicitly wrote about.

That haunting is not restricted to James. Other writers and artists seem to have felt it, whether they think of haunting as the presence of ghosts or in a wider sense as embeddedness in a past that refuses to pass. Psychogeography and hauntology fit together well in that regard. Time and space engender one another. Cobra Mist—can any communications array, bouncing invisible forces across landscapes sound more eerie? Do the artworks here likewise vibrate imperceptibly with ghost energies? “How is one to make sense of this? To make art of it?” somebody asked. After some reflection, it occurred to me . . .

END OF PART ONE