



Sensory Ethnography



References:

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Stewart, Kathleen. 2007. *Ordinary Affects*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

knotty nose by Kianoosh Hassani

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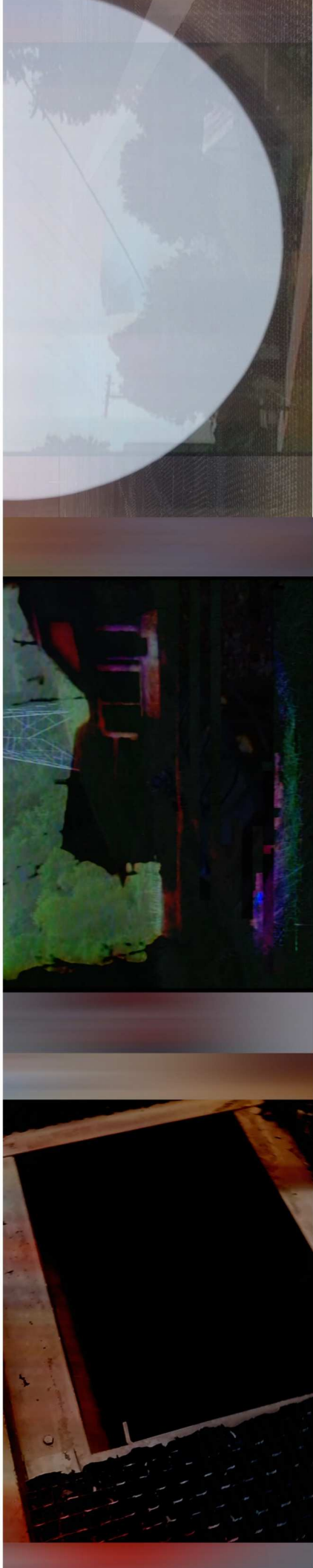
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Sensory Ethnography encompasses doing, thinking, and making. We walked along the Kanawha River in Charleston, WV on a windy day in late winter, attending, first, to “smellscapes.” Located in what is referred to as the “chemical valley,” scents of licorice wafting in the air often signal toxic output. Our sensory encounters included and exceeded smell, and our attention turned to what Ingold calls “textures” – which, in our case, was an entanglement of ground, atmosphere and perception. Smell as a texture of air, or smell as giving air shape. We made gesture drawings, wind noise recordings, took still and moving images. Many of these foregrounded intimacies within our group: children crouching, heads close together, reading commemorative plaques at the base of trees lining the river. Drawing pictures together at the BBQ restaurant. Talking, laughing, swinging, walking. Sensing scent and “writing sensorially” (using Stewart’s 100-word exercise) emphasized the haptic, putting the body at the center of our investigation. We wondered how we might decenter the body, or sense beyond the body, sensing scale, time, the nonhuman. We visited the Gavin Power Plant, a coal burning power plant on the Ohio River, curious about how we might “sense scale.” The plant was not running. A maintenance issue had shifted the plant into the category of “Down, Not Required (DNR).” We were able to go inside the cooling tower, impressive for its scale and unique acoustics, algae that had fallen off the walls crunching under our feet. What had been loud was quiet, what was usually hot was cool. The turbine, with its own concrete footings, was not vibrating the floor on which it lay. We sensed the scale of the plant, energy and electricity, the depression of the engineer, a suspended present and an unknown future. Modernity’s dinosaurs, a super sized steam engine lying dormant, even as they were stockpiling coal in the face of impending labor negotiations. A week later the plant was up and running again. Curiosity about the possibilities of sensing time, of temporal sense, took us to former mining towns: Santoy and Rendville. Literal ruins, bricks (“convict made”), and an urban decline long past. A floor painted aqua blue where people come together to paint. Lumps of coal lying on the ground amidst fallen leaves and slate blackboards lining the walls of a former school materialized bodies, lives, labor, and laughter still echoing into atmospheric futures. Here is some of what we made.



The production of power

The air is cool; darkness marks the expanse and the quietude.

The plant appears solid against the sky like the Washington Monument, or Half Dome.

—the cooling tower—echoes populate the hyperbolic volume drawing attention to the concrete walls in a state of pause

The plant is offline, shutdown.

"...the ground as a surface that itself undergoes continual formation within an unstable zone of interpenetration in which the substances of the earth mingle and bind with the medium of air."

– Tim Ingold

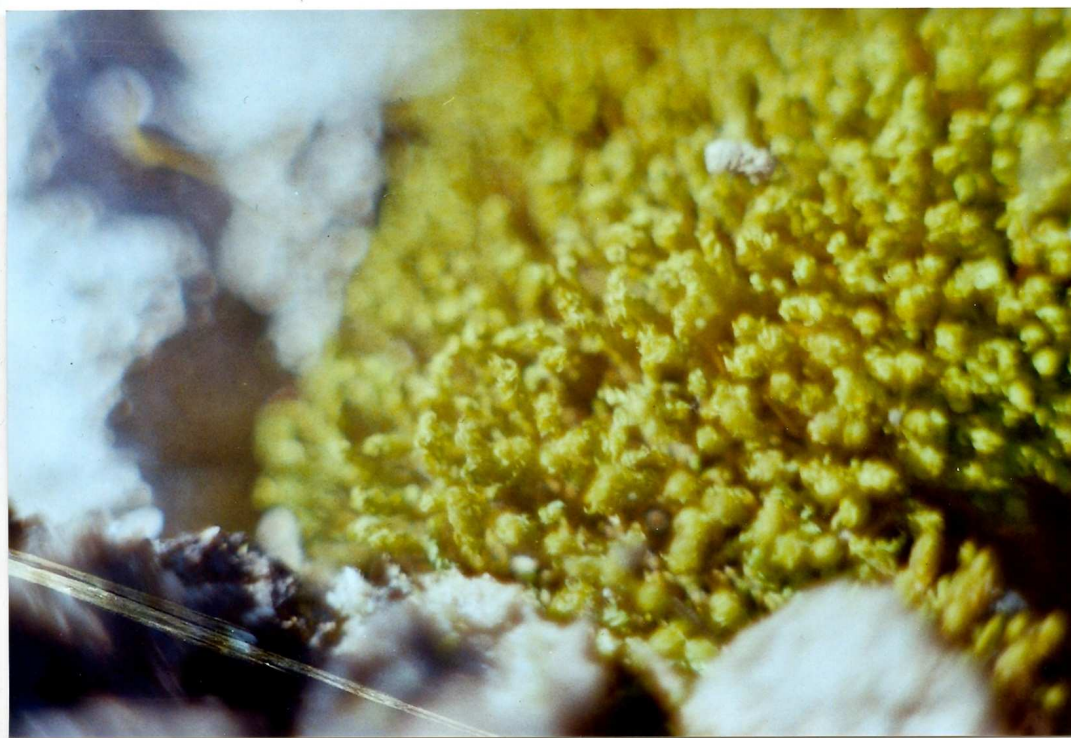




“The Grid
changes
as our
culture changes
alongside it
and
these changes
tend to follow
cultural shifts
over time.”
– Gretchen Bakke



"A still life is a static state filled with vibratory motion, or resonance.



A quivering in the stability of a category or a trajectory, it gives the ordinary the charge of an unfolding."
– Kathleen Stewart

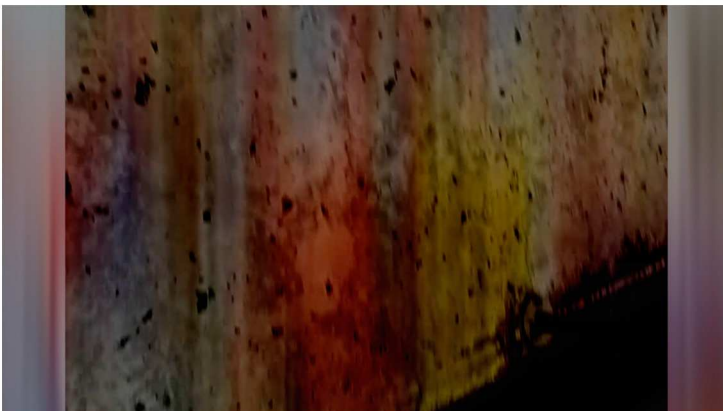


Hello Algae – !

Subjecting a person to something means taking up their time. Making them sit for it, restricts their space.

Why are you so resistant and resilient?

As in this big space and the smallest and insignificant of all organism – I track you under my boots.



The children were constantly moving dirt from these plaques with their little hands as if the plaques defined the trees and gave them permission to exist.

Were they (the plaques) the trees' urban identification cards?



I was coming back from behind my back and breathing through proboscis of my shadow. I couldn't see ninety-minute dreams anymore. They were calling me and making sounds of the helicopters which will crash on my school's ceiling upside down. I turn on the ceiling fan. My school is breathing through helicopter blades. Hidden dizzinesses come to me. Cinderella was too young when she was born. She was three in the eleventh year of her life. On the stairs of that decrepit school we met, she was running to put her cat inside the belly of piano. Belly of piano is the place where cat can tie itself to humane vibrations.





As we walked through the ruins of the former mining town, a half destroyed school building stood in front of us. Traces of past humans, including a child's boot, furniture and blackboards, sat among the ruins as green plants pushed between the rubble, marking the place as disbanded and profaned. The dark red, moist bricks tempted us to touch them, to feel the coldness of their surfaces, and the warmth of their color. This moment was the first time that I had stood in front of an actual ruin, even though I had studied "the ruined abode" motif in classic Arabic poetry. I certainly hadn't thought that a ruin could be so full of color and a place in which a new beginning could be celebrated; yet, this place was occupied, not necessarily by teachers and students, but by grass, insects, and flowers. Nature was reclaiming this place; decaying, decomposing, and invading the space in every direction possible.

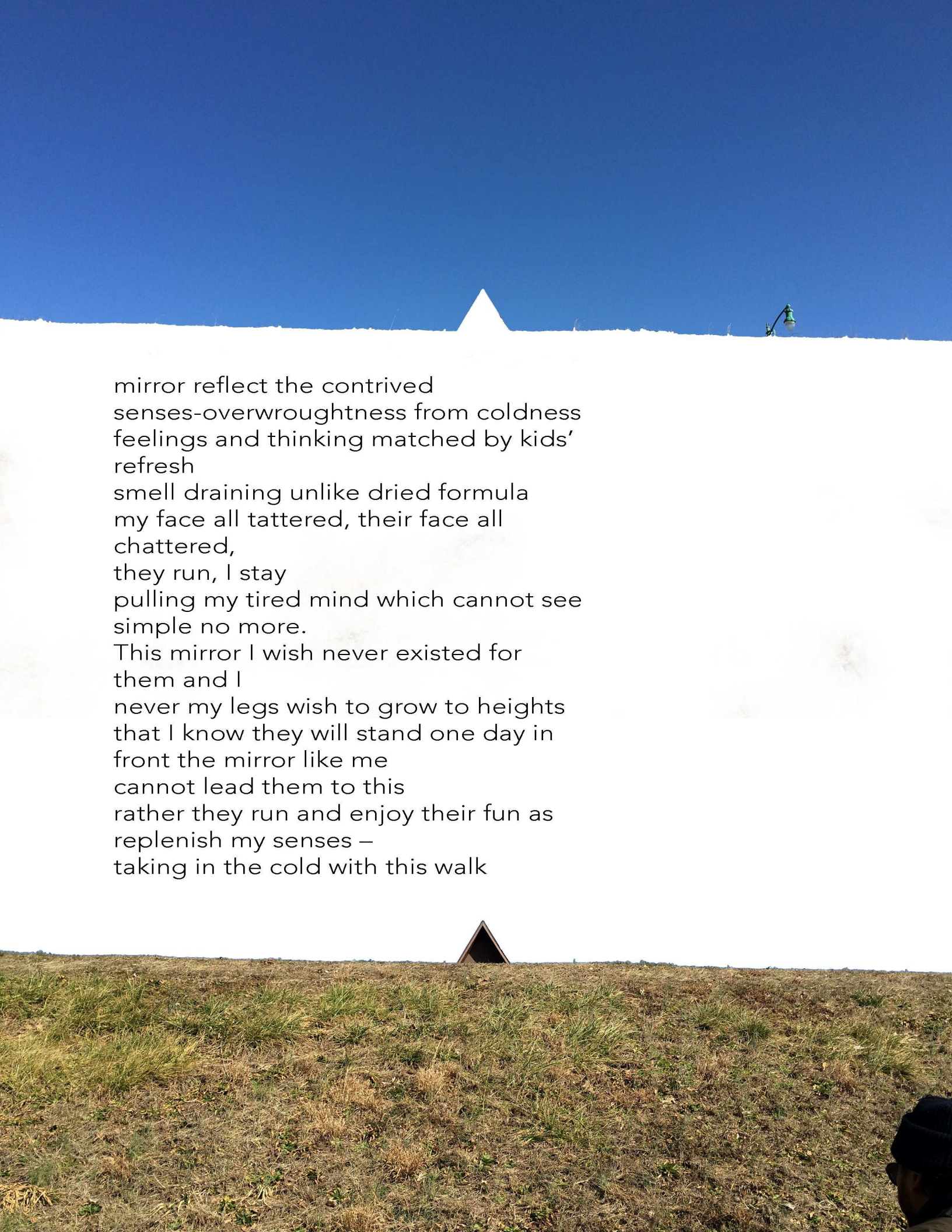




senses-overwroughtness



from coldness



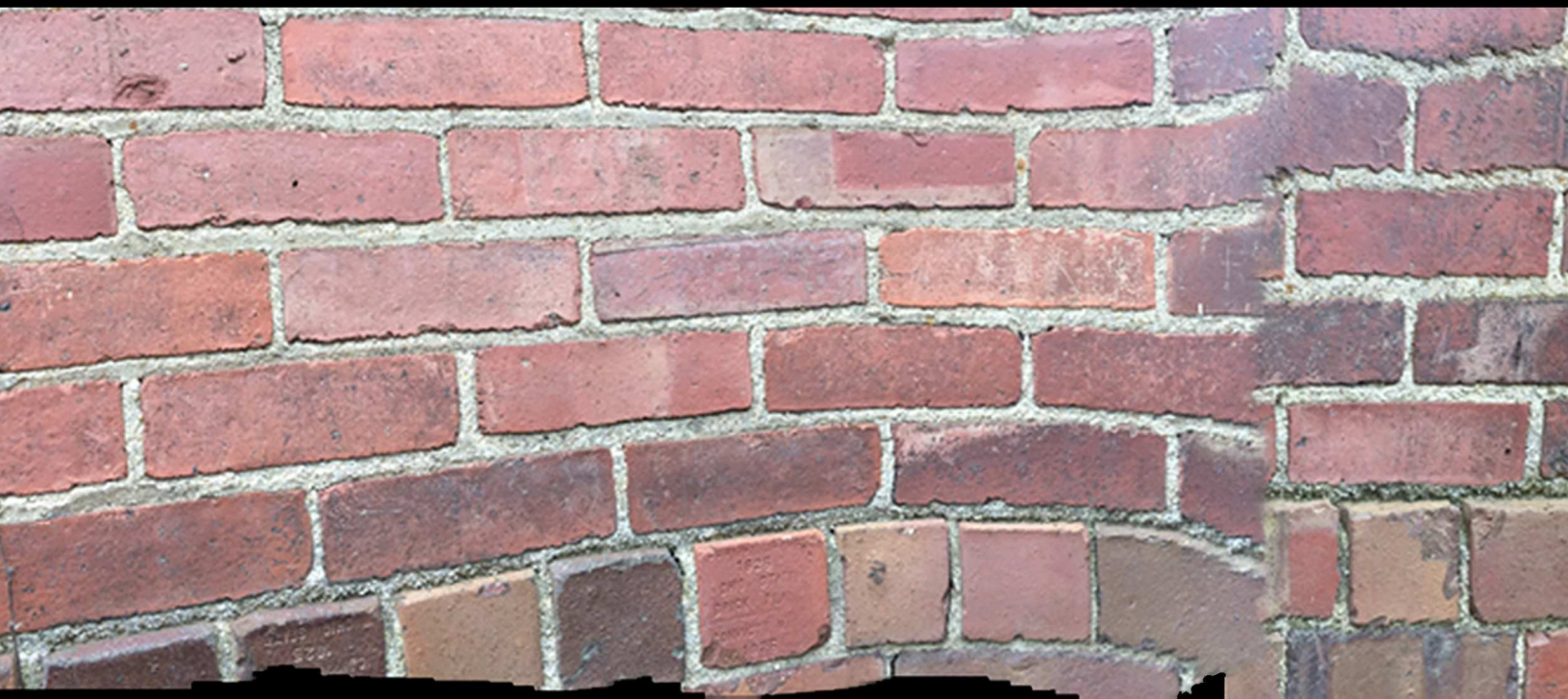
mirror reflect the contrived
senses-overwroughtness from coldness
feelings and thinking matched by kids'
refresh
smell draining unlike dried formula
my face all tattered, their face all
chattered,
they run, I stay
pulling my tired mind which cannot see
simple no more.
This mirror I wish never existed for
them and I
never my legs wish to grow to heights
that I know they will stand one day in
front the mirror like me
cannot lead them to this
rather they run and enjoy their fun as
replenish my senses –
taking in the cold with this walk



The wind was strong and hard to ignore. The boulevard sported interesting neighbors with trees on both sides, a highway to the left, and a chemical facility across the river. An artificial smell devoid of any natural scents filled the space. A barge sailed in front of us hauling coal. The smell from the barge was similar to dirt.



It took a few minutes after the barge had sailed past for the scent to dissipate. The burst of the smell of coal from the barge, and its dissipation, was an urgent call to reflect on nature, labor, energy, and movement. As the barge moved passed us, one might wonder whether smells could tell us more about spaces.

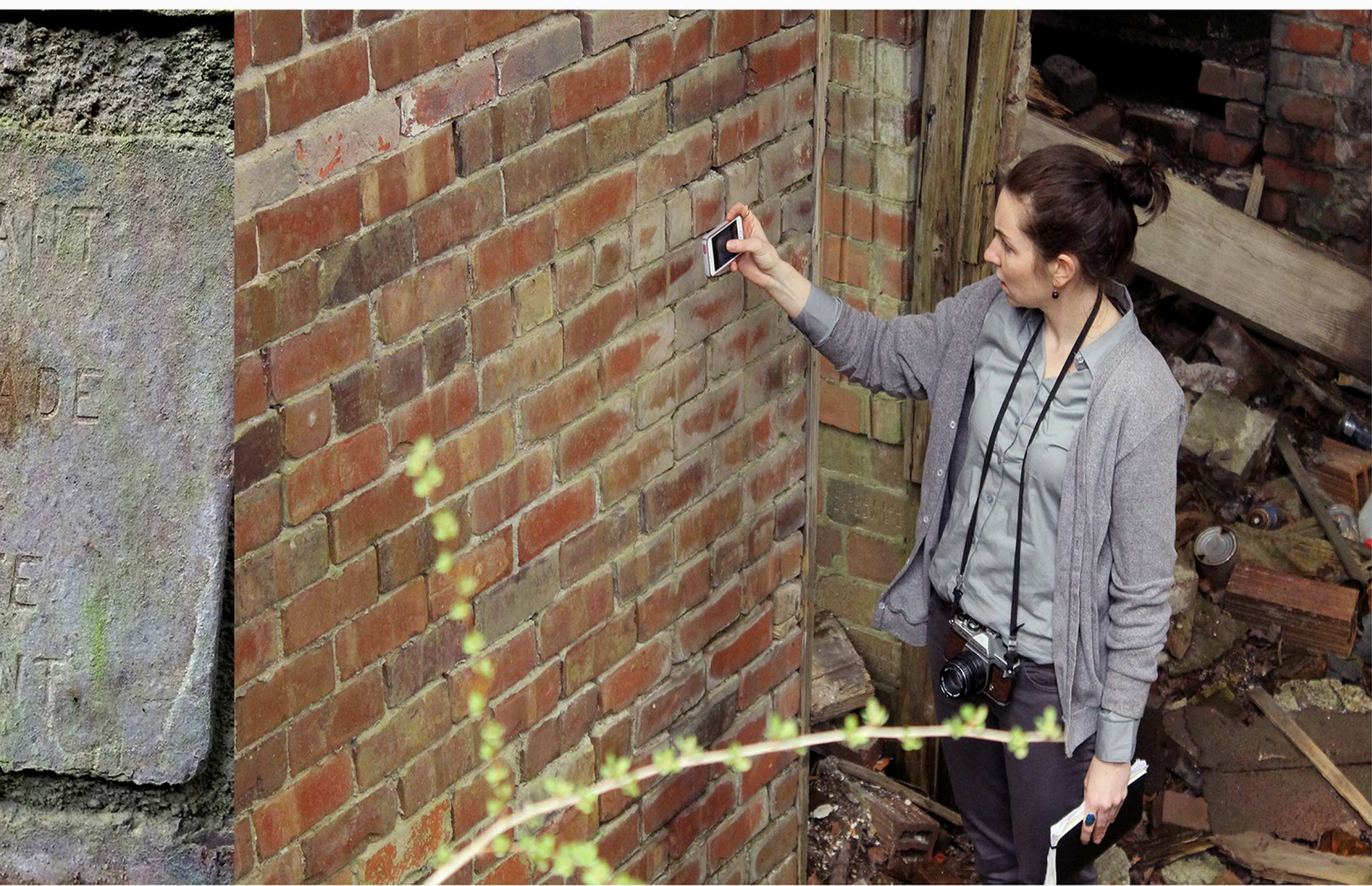




Temporality

The camera fixes scenes in a way that time cannot be fixed. Henri Lefebvre thought of time rhythmically: in cycles and in everyday routines. The past is not present; the past is absent; an absence that corresponds to the voids; voids that allow us to see through walls and floors. The camera is a tool for recording the present; the photograph is a tool for constructing the past. On the way out of the Rendville Art Center the director points to a shoddy framed black and white photograph, a bustling image of the town before the decline of the mines.





"Of 8 of the largest power plants in the world, AEP owns 6"



90 DBA

90 megawatts

180 megawatts

120 psi

4500 psi

26,000 volts

765,000 volts

400° F

1000° F

2500° F

6" lateral expansion

14" vertical expansion

20" "snorkel"

100' water tank

500 tons/hour

1500 tons/barge

25,000 tons/day

600,000 gallons/minute

3 minute supply

13 football fields

14 pulverizers

216 pipes

250 car train

6% of output

8% ash

30% more cost to run

34% efficiency

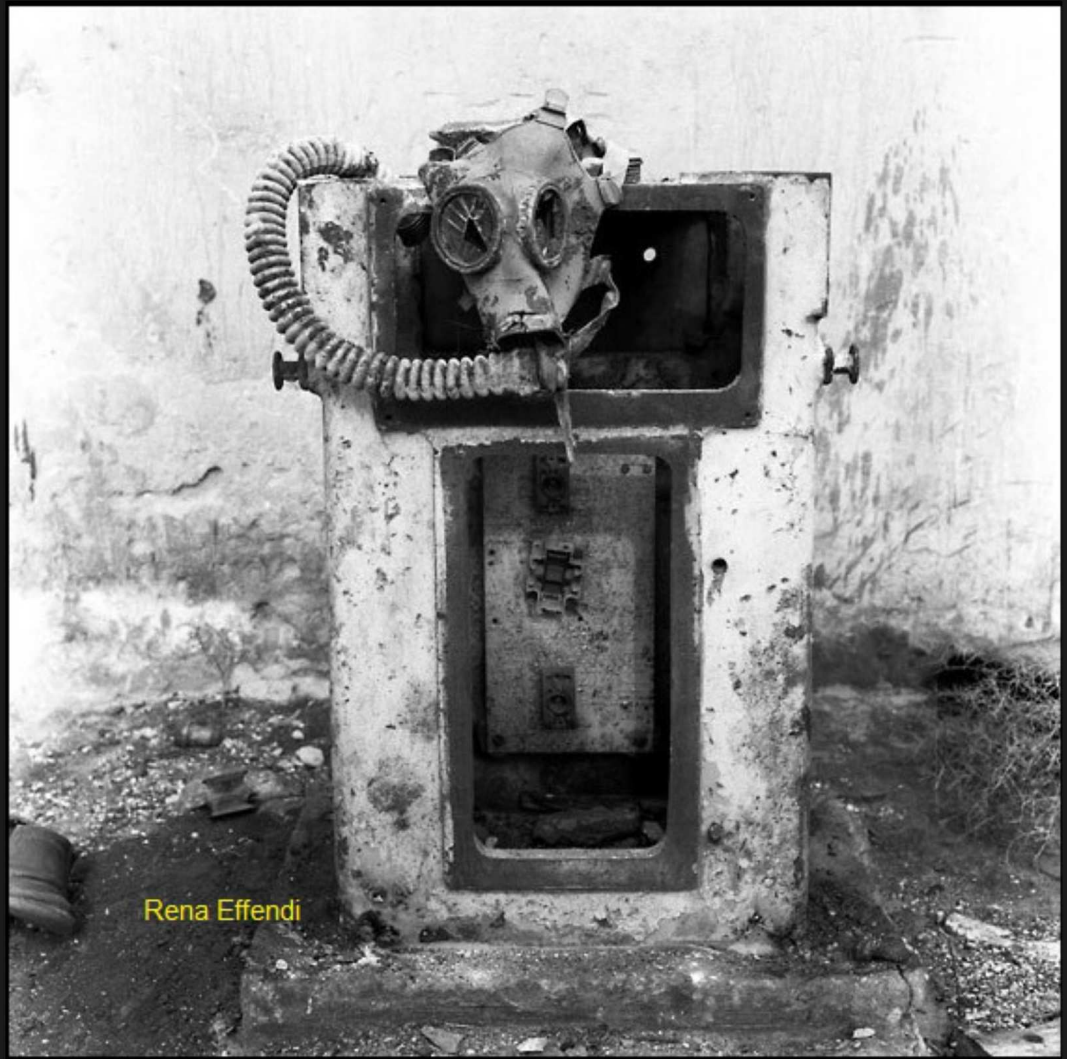
60% full

90% removed



Smellscape

I can smell oil, dust, chemicals in this frame through the mask depicted. The mask makes my sense of smelling activated and sensitive to the landscape. Here the motif is to smell through external organs. In our exploration: "knotty nose" our exploration: "knotty nose"



Tied knots in our string: knotty nose's first deep breath.



Smellscape

Knotty nose
learns to walk
up the stairs,
smelling the
ground.



Knotty nose
looks up
at the sky,
smelling the
sky.





Knotty nose
lost in
amusement
park.

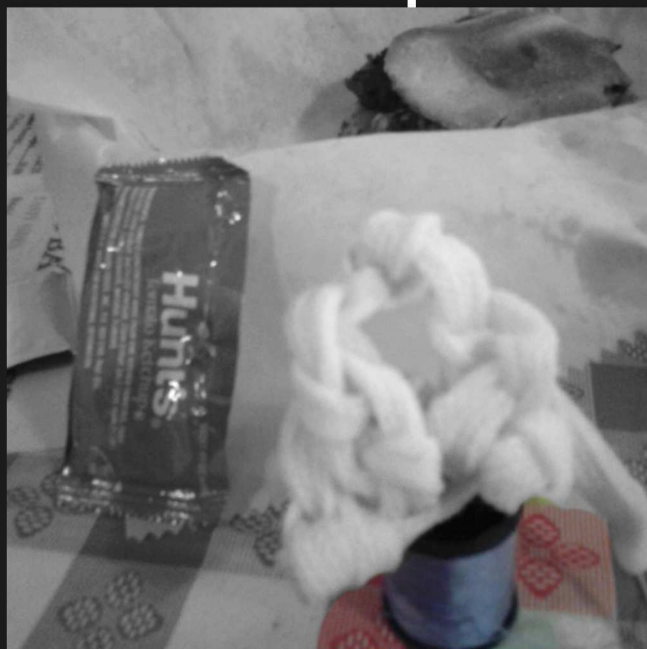


Spools looking for
Knotty nose following
her smell.



Smellscape

Spool of purple thread finds Knotty nose. Get her some spicy food.



Knotty nose learns about the concept of death.



Smellscape



End



