

Humility : Drift Residency

Nicole Loeffler-Gladstone, in collaboration with Audrey Rachelle
Shoreline Art Cottage, August–October 2021

I collaborated with fellow dancer Audrey Rachelle to create a site-responsive performance and interactive experience at Saltwater Park. We spent almost our entire residency on the beach itself. We observed and documented ecological phenomena, spoke with interested visitors, and used our dance improvisation skills to explore different ways of interacting with the environment.

Part of my original proposal included a challenge to deviate from my usual choreographic approach, which is based on collaborative improvisation with other dancers. Instead, I wanted this project to serve as an experiment in collaborating with the landscape itself—that is, considering the beach and all of its life to be improvisational partners and teachers.

I also hoped to create a dance film, and begin work on “embodied ecology cards”: naturalist ID cards that include suggestions for imaginative, embodied play or exploration, in addition to standard plant and animal identification.

Audrey and I adhered very closely to my original intention of learning “choreography” from the landscape itself. Dozens of hours of onsite observation and exploration yielded scores, or improvisational movement guidelines, that are intimately related to the beach. A few of our site-responsive scores could be extended to other beach environments with similar features, like driftwood and open water. Others, though, are totally unique to Richmond Beach Saltwater Park.

Engaging with these unique scores, such as greeting the tree (I think it's a pine tree?) to the left of the picnic shelter, is a critical step toward building reciprocal relationships with the beach landscape. I believe land, air, water, and more-than-human beings offer profound wisdom and care, and it's up to us—us uninvited guests, occupiers, and descendants of colonizers—to notice and honor that care by returning it.

Movement improvisation is especially effective at building full-sensory awareness, and an open awareness builds one's ability to be in empathetic relationship. Relationships, based on feeling, have

the power to change our behavior where additional knowledge cannot. For that reason, Audrey and I asked our audience/participants, “Could you fall in love with this place?”



Performance, September 24 (12:30pm), Audience watching, Photo: DF

We answered our own question by creating a movement experience for park visitors to engage in embodied exploration of the site. Our goal was to support participants as they used the same tools we use as professional dancers and improvisors. We achieved this by creating a walk that traversed the beach from the “Welcoming Figure” sculpture, past the large pine tree, around the high point, down to the water, along the shore, and back to the large driftwood on the sand below “Welcoming Figure.” This loop encouraged participants to tune their senses, physically explore, and consider the many possibilities for relationship found throughout the landscape.



Photo: Ruby Townsend

The walk culminated in an athletic movement section that Audrey and I performed while the participants watched. This section demonstrated some of the ways we allowed movement in the landscape to teach and cultivate our own improvisation. We rolled and slid over the large driftwood, in patterns taught to us by the waves that toss trees up onto shore.

Creating and rehearsing this section gave us both a deep appreciation for the power of water to smooth roughness, its strength, and the reliable support of a massive tree trunk. These qualities are now intrinsically linked to my understanding of Saltwater Park, and influence my appreciation for the place. They are also movement qualities that Audrey and I researched and developed through physical exploration, impossible to replicate without that exact piece of driftwood.



Performance, September 24, 12:30 pm, a small child is inspired to leave his mother's side and run closer to the performers (DF)



Rehearsal, September 21, Photo: Ruby Townsend



Performance, September 24, Comment Board, Photo: DF

I overestimated how much could be achieved during this residency, though the actual pinch-points were unanticipated. Hauling food, gear, and signage to and from the cottage was taxing and ate into our rehearsal time. We were unable to produce a dance film, but we hope to continue working toward that goal. The film will be an important accessibility tool and will allow something ephemeral, like dance improvisation, to spark imagination through a longer life.

Dozens of hours of onsite research laid the foundation for the embodied ecology cards, but we were not able to start developing the physical cards during our residency. However, each onsite rehearsal day included time for writing down observations, improvisational scores, and ideas. We now have considerable research to support future work on the cards.



Rehearsal, September 14 (Photo: DF)

Saltwater Park visitors generally keep to themselves. Few people approached our rehearsals or sought us out (though we were highly visible to anyone on the beach). We successfully engaged with folks who stopped to talk when we put up our signs, suggesting that official-looking signage encourages people to approach. We received invaluable feedback from those who participated in our final showings but I had hoped to generate those kinds of interactions during the rehearsal process, too.

Audrey and I both feel that we could spend 40 lifetimes, not just 40 hours, exploring the beach. The

project now has a much longer timeline to accommodate the pace required for this kind of deep relationship-building. We're proud to share feedback from some of the participants: "I often glaze over when I watch live performance, but the walk prepared me to receive and pay attention to what you're offering." And, "I feel like I could play again, and I haven't just played and explored at the beach since I was a little kid."