

A wild seen: some modalities of perception in Adam Chodzko's recent outings

Dawn in the river valley. A long blink between day and night when possibility gathers for the hours ahead. Densely packed salty oaks stand on either bank. At high tide, which is also now, there's a shadowy gap between the lowest branches and the water into which a long thin boat slips, moving forward as the water flows back. A green buoy shaped like a witch's hat zips a diagonal across my field of vision as a flock of birds manifest overhead, each feather audible: *frr-frr frr-frr*. Moisture from the air collects on the top half of my face, gathering into droplets that cling and pool, the rest of me mummified in blankets against the early cold. Behind me, my guide's arms join with a paddle to form a crankshaft dipping in and pulling out of the retreating water. There's a bump in the boat's deck just behind my head, designed to seclude a single passenger lying flat in the hull. The boat rocks; it feels like I am being carried inside a body on the move, its hips swaying rhythmically. The congested sky clears for the rising sun, taking with it that in-between feeling in which the imagination tugs on its tethers.



*Ghost Archive (VII)* [production still from video] Adam Chodzko  
Helford River from Helston and Frenchman's Creek  
Date: April-May 2018  
18 mins 16 secs

My voyage in 'Ghost' took place in autumn 2018 on the Helston River in Cornwall, as part of the Groundwork arts festival. A kayak made of wood harvested from trees that grew in Alaska and Fiji among other places and customised to accommodate a passenger lying flat on their back, 'Ghost' is an artwork created in 2010 by British artist Adam

Chodzko (b. 1965). It was first deployed to visit Deadman's Island, a marshy islet on the south side of the Thames Estuary near where the rivers Swale and Medway meet, in Kent. In the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century the island was the burial site for prisoners held on ships anchored nearby. These days, rising sea levels push water into those people's graves, washing out their bones and leaving them exposed as the tide recedes. In piloting around Deadman's Island, 'Ghost' was fulfilling its original mission as a vessel for guiding the living to visit the dead.

Since those first outings, 'Ghost' has been on many journeys around the rivers and coasts of Great Britain and its ability to evoke an affinity with the dead remains strong. This is not only because the shape adopted by the passenger in the boat resembles that of a body in a coffin, but also because, conversely, during an excursion in 'Ghost' the senses brighten, attachment to the living world is affirmed, and the fact of the passenger's mortality surges up from the current of life.



*Ghost* (2010 -) on Gillan Creek, May 2018. Adam Chodzko  
Alaskan yellow cedar, western red cedar, Fijian mahogany, oak, ash, olive, walnut, and mixed media.  
23" h x 31" w x 22' l

Photo: Steve Tanner

The experience of lying in the boat, with its constant movement, flotation, swing-and-drag is alive with sensation. Encapsulated in the kayak surrounded by a body of water, I'm reminded of the liquid existence of a foetus *in utero*. Pre-birth and after-death:

‘Ghost’ summons up the states that bookend the continuum of physical life. And in the here and now, by encasing and transporting a body along the water, ‘Ghost’ elicits a complex of sensations both familiar and strange, unfurling a wilderness of perception. There can be but few art works that involve an experience so immersive, so wholly physical as this.

The wilderness of human experience, with its mind-body-spirit intricacies has been explored, mapped and codified for tens of thousands of years. In the 11<sup>th</sup> century, the abbess, visionary and composer Hildegard von Bingen negotiated it in her work as a healer informed by somatic and medical sciences, and influenced by divine revelations. Through an extraordinary chain of creative acts that generated esoteric language, exquisite music and experimental forms of care, Hildegard found and made meaning in spite of her conditioning. She grew her own world, transcending the patterns and programming of mediaeval patriarchal religion that governed the way she was supposed to see, and decreed what she was meant not to see. Hildegard’s desire to chart the wilderness around and inside her resonates today, as humanity reckons with its mass extinction of species known and unknown, just as it gains ever more detailed insights into the workings of the human body, often confirming what the ancients long ago intuited.

Hildegard’s work inspired Chodzko’s two-channel video installation ‘O, you happy roots, branch and mediatrix’ (2020), which was commissioned by Camden Art Centre, London. It plays out in real time using an image-recognition algorithm to seek out the shapes of shadows in foliage and match them to the letters in Hildegard’s *Lingua Ignota* or ‘unknown language’. These ciphers, the *letterae ignotae*, are then recombined by the computer programme into the names of plant species Hildegard compiled in her coded writings.





*O, you happy roots, branch and mediatrix* [live] (2020). Adam Chodsko Photo: Rob Harris  
Two screen video with sound, Hildegard von Bingen's 'lingua ignotae' and image recognition algorithm searching a live feed from the Camden Art Centre's garden, London  
Infinite duration

In contemporary life, discerning codes and recognising patterns has become the primary activity of countless systems operating on different scales and registers, from the intimate to the interplanetary, fun to financialization. In Chodsko's work, it's only a matter of time before Hildegard's *letterae ignotae* make themselves known as fleeting shapes of shade, just the right kind of negative space in the undergrowth. At that point they will be 'seen' by the image recognition programme designed to pick them up. The software is intent on its task, doggedly performing tricks in accordance with its maker's wishes. It scans the horizon and discards anything that does not match one of the desired shapes. Once it has the right symbols in the right order, it murmurs the breathy sibilants of Hildegard's plants: *Schamihilbuꝛ* — juniper tree; *Giginꝛibuz* — fig and *Schalmindibiz* — almond. Yet within minutes of watching this process, it seems to me that the programme has lulled itself into a repetitive trance, recognising the same few plant species over and over again. This may be due to the finitude of Hildegard's secret language — she named just 150 plants — or to the limitations of recursive technology when it is disconnected from a wider sense of purpose or meaning.



*O, you happy roots, branch and mediatrix* [live] (2020). Adam Chodzko [Production still from screen 2]  
Two screen video with sound, Hildegard von Bingen's 'lingua ignotae' and image recognition algorithm searching a live feed from the Camden Art Centre's garden, London  
Infinite duration

As the image recognition software proceeds, I yearn for it to take hold of itself and turn away from its fixed frame and finite code of behaviour. And then, just as I am about to turn my attention elsewhere, it shows me what it can do. It begins to *grow* its own world. The video feed starts to recombine fragments of Hildegard's existing plant names into new hybrids. The almond tree and the crocus breed a *Schalminindiaz* or Almondocus Tree; cornflower and willow come together to make *Magiziaz* or Cornflowe Willow. It pulls pictures of assorted leaves, trunks and petals out of an 'image compost' at the back of the screen to render visualisations of these new vegetal chimeras. This all happens thanks to a non-deterministic strand in the original programming, whose workings it takes me a moment to notice. The image-recognition software appears to be playing with what it knows, joining up things that don't belong together, just to see what happens. It sees and seizes on components of the unseen, which in isolation are merely incomplete names, but when harnessed together become potential new species of beauty and wonder.

The question of how the visible generates meaning is at the heart of another of Chodzko's recent videos, 'Thru hole I blind/O/Thru hole oui see' (2020), commissioned by More Than Ponies and set in the New Forest, an area of around 200 square miles of forest that William The Conqueror designated as royal hunting grounds in the 11<sup>th</sup>

century, 19 years or so before Hildegard was born in the Kingdom of Germany. Under the guise of an official meeting to which attendees have been asked to bring a range of objects (including a stone or spoon, damp moss or bread, an acorn or a pound coin), a narrator invites us to turn our attention towards what is apparent, hidden or invisible within the forest. The piece alternates between images taken using a range of techniques, including filmed close-ups, travelling and static shots, night-time photography and LIDAR (light detection and ranging) aerial remote sensing technology, which captures some aspects of the earth's surface from the sky but cannot see into others, such as the dense foliage of the holly tree. The video attends to areas of the forest just visible through gaps in the trees, alights on the elusive inhabitants of the area including a pair of grass-covered humanoids camouflaged in the green, ephemeral mushrooms, and de-visioning devices intended to ward off a certain kind of gaze, such as the daisy wheel or witch mark meant to avert the evil eye.



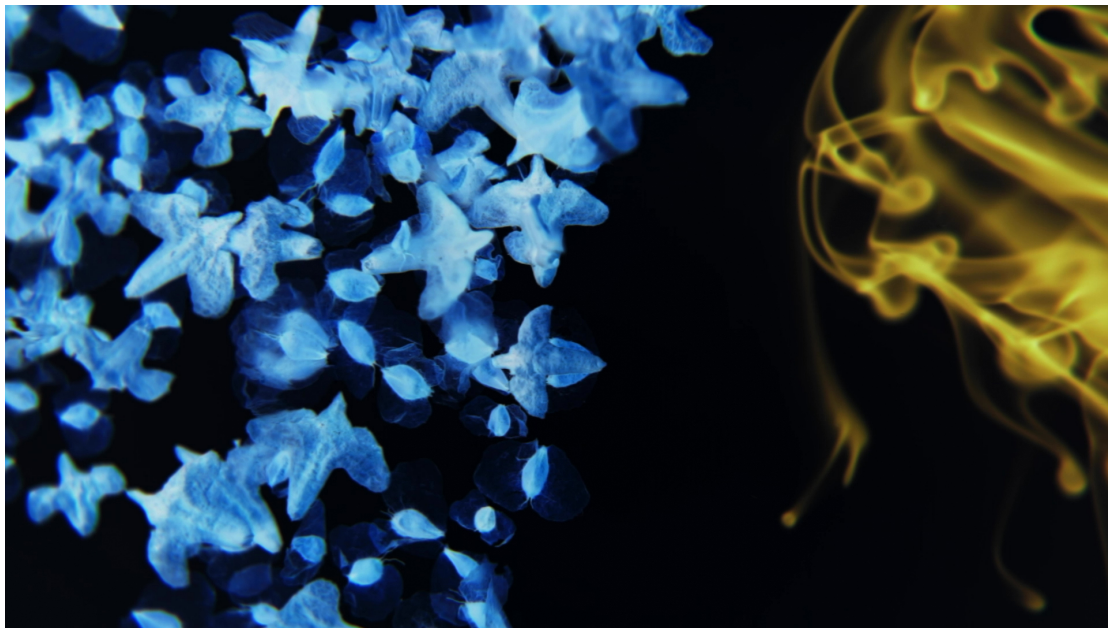
*Thru hole I blind/O/Thru hole oui see* (2020) Adam Chodzko [production still]  
 Single screen video with sound  
 A series of objects for the viewer to assemble in order to watch the video.  
 17 minutes

Looking through a hole, such as that found in hag stones or in air bordered by foliage, Chodzko's video offers intriguing glimpses into the ways the woods are seen and felt. In a reversal of focus, these curtailed glances draw attention to the missing majority of the picture and actually confirm the reality of what they do not reveal. They hint at the vast repository of space and energy beyond the framing device, nourishing a growing



suspicion that the woods, lovely as they look on screen or through a frame of one kind or another, can only ever be experienced through a fuller kind of presence. As the narrator explains: ‘the hole in a hag stone is a good way of perceiving the reality behind what we see.’

Philosophers analysing the existential nature of holes have come up with a clever coinage for holes: they are ‘ontological parasites’. A hole, they say, is entirely dependent on its host, without which it cannot exist. This opinion casts holes as secondary, existentially inferior to the stuff in which there is a hole. But this explanation of holes is constrained. Like the view from the bottom of a well, it forgets that a hole can be a mighty, moveable gateway into another universe in which being is constituted through as yet unknown forms of time, space, matter, behaviour and language.

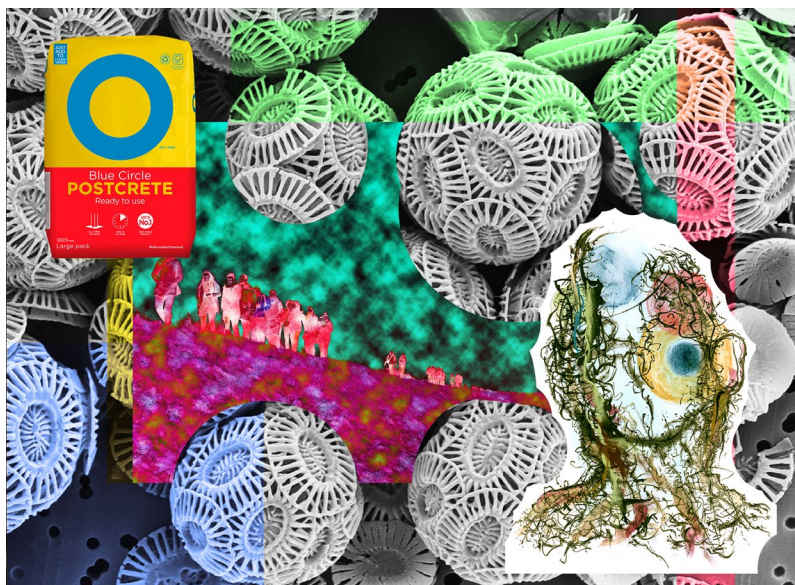


*Thru hole I blind/O/Thru hole oui see* (2020) Adam Chodzko [production still]  
Single screen video with sound  
A series of objects for the viewer to assemble in order to watch the video.  
17 minutes

As an unseen force propels Chodzko’s camera across the forest floor, a voiceover refers to our progression through the forest as a ‘therapeutic package’. The keys to a clearer understanding are available, but we cannot yet access them through the eyes we have manufactured with our ‘advanced’ world. Thankfully, help is delivered at intervals throughout the video in the form of a ‘guide for seeing’, which links different areas of the forest to specific emotions and conditions: resentment, security, shame, repetitive

strain injury. This mapping of affect onto place, visibility and body parts evokes the multimodal quality of perception. Seeing is never just seeing. Our perceptions are always a combination of inputs from more than one sense, and this often includes sensations we remain unaware of, such as sound frequencies or physical vibrations, unconscious thoughts and feelings that manifest in different parts of the body. In ‘Thru hole I blind/O/Thru hole oui see’ Chodzko hints that what we cannot see is still present, real and true. And it may already be acting on us. The forest may be healing us in spite of ourselves.

Chodzko’s latest work, ‘The Return of the Fleet Spring Heads’ (2021) is an hour-long science-fiction audio walk around the town of Northfleet, located on the Thames Estuary about 40 miles downstream from London and 15 miles upstream from Deadman’s Island. This is where the Thames begins to widen as it heads towards the North Sea, and where the aggregates industries that served London for centuries have been dying slowly over the past 50 years. The town sits on a chalky shelf of land, which was quarried for the production of cement to fuel a thriving industry in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. The riverbank is now home to abandoned factories where vegetation and graffiti proliferate while the area awaits its systematic regeneration as part of the Thames Gateway, Europe’s largest urbanisation project, which stretches from the eastern edge of London all the way to the sea.



*The Return of the Fleet Spring Heads* (2021). Adam Chodzko  
[production sketch]  
Audio-walk (via headphones and digital audio-player) with props and performers, along a route through Northfleet, Kent.  
1 hour 7 mins duration

The walk, created as part of the Estuary 2021 Festival, asks a solo wanderer to entrust their safety and orientation to a recorded voice, which points out aspects of the



landscape and the built environment, indicating recurring shapes and patterns, and relating anecdotes ranging from the mundane to the fantastical. This narrator is erudite and entertaining, and casts a glow of wonder on the most banal of sights. She transmutes a mildewed brown sweater caught in the branches of a tree into a rare species of moth, interprets a cliff-top warning sign as a reference to the ill-fated Icarus, and explains that the recurring graffiti tag 'NUGS' is an acronym, for the Northfleet UnderGround Sensing group. Everything in her purview holds meaning; everything is part of a pattern.

The Thames is a blind spot for many Londoners. Too big, too deep, too long to be captured in the mind's eye, it is usually apprehended in small slices, something to cross on the way rather than the vast entity that flows with the waters of the planet. In Northfleet, such experiential fragments are reconfigured as a series of slippages: in the moving fluid of the river, the friable edges of deep quarries; in the guide's accent, which shifts fluently between Jamaican, Mancunian and London vernaculars, and in her tone which is in turn gleeful, cautioning and reassuring. As the hands of my watch circle the dial, time also seems to slip and catch: at one point, I am brought to stand at the top edge of a quarry waving down at my past self, which stood in the distance just 20 minutes earlier waving up at my future self.



*The Return of the Fleet Spring Heads* (2021). Adam Chodzko [production still]  
Audio-walk (via headphones and digital audio-player) with props and performers, along a route through Northfleet, Kent.  
1 hour 7 mins duration

Chodzko's walk inhabits Northfleet's in-between status as an economically depressed town suspended between its robust history and glittering rebirth, a place where time, space and identity shimmer and shift. After the past and before the future, the timespace of Northfleet's 'now' is both real and unreal, marked and flavoured by what preceded it and what is yet to come. For me, the unfamiliar terrain and my guide's tendency to pierce through the strata of history breed uncertainty, confusion and at times a sense of threat. Perhaps this is just my body sensing the land's own distress: the trauma left over from the chronic quarrying of its crust; its trepidation at the impending overhaul of just-settled ruins. Maybe it doesn't really want a makeover.

And yet my senses become hyper-alert, ears straining across the plastic and metal of my headphones and opening to sounds near and far, my focus sharpening and eyes roving the horizon. I cannot fly, like some, or survive underwater, or spontaneously regenerate lost body parts. Like all animals, I survive by finding useful adaptations to my time and place. What I can do is conceptualise abstract patterns, identify similarities between the microscopic and the cosmic, and recognise in myself the same patterns that animate my environment, my past and future. And perhaps best of all, I can laugh and entertain myself with the reality of these illusions and the illusion of reality.



*The Return of the Fleet Spring Heads* (2021).  
Adam Chodzko  
[production still].  
Audio-walk (via headphones  
and digital audio-player) with  
props and performers, along a  
route through Northfleet, Kent.

Ellen Mara De Wachter, June 2021