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The Island of Hoo: A combinatory reading of ruins

Rupert Griffiths and Lia Wei

Hoo Fort is an abandoned stone fort on a small uninhabited island in the estuary of the River Medway. It has an almost identical twin, Fort Darnet, which stands on a second island a thousand meters downstream. The two forts were constructed in the late nineteenth century as part of the Chatham defences, a programme of works set against the possible invasion of the Medway after the Dutch had raided the area in 1667.

Hoo Fort is a circular structure of extremely solid construction, while the island itself is quite marshy, and subsidence was a major issue during construction. It is made up of assembled granite blocks and vaulted brickwork and is further protected by a circular moat. It has a lower level, now partly flooded, and an upper level, which is in surprisingly good condition (Figure 1). The upper level consists of eleven alcoves, each having a large window-like aperture cut into iron plate, each of which looks out over the river. There are eleven radial arches that intersect a circular thoroughfare, each with a hearth to warm those who manned the guns that were once trained out of each window. These arches are oriented around a central circular platform, now a wild garden of blackberry and hawthorn, and are connected by eleven arched brick bridges over the watery void of the lower level.

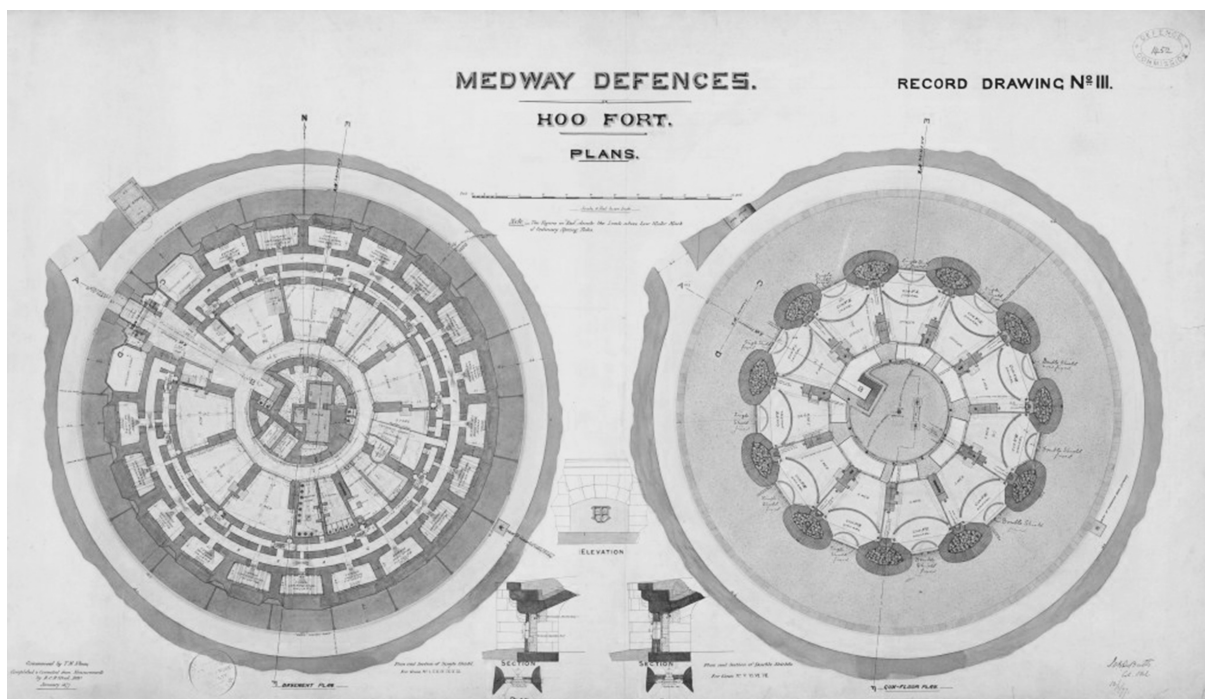


Figure1. Plan of Hoo Fort showing the upper and lower levels.

At high tide, on an autumn evening in 2015, we boarded a Kayak laden with equipment and a few provisions and made our way across the Medway to Hoo Fort. One of our duo is a cultural geographer, the other an archaeologist, and we are also both artists. We have been collaborating under the moniker SSG (Site_Seal_Gesture) since 2013, developing experimental fieldwork methods in dialogue with abandoned and ruinous defensive architectures in rural and urban margins. Our aim is to tell stories that explore moments of

intersection between lived experience and the *longue durée*, giving equal voice to the temporalities of flesh and stone.

In this essay, we will narrate our encounter with Hoo Fort. This encounter followed our participation in the *Topographies Project: Beaches Symposium* in Whitstable, Kent in 2015 through which we became more conscious of how the legal conceptions of access and ownership of such semi-wild spaces have been constructed historically (translations by Geoffrey Samuel):

In the second century:

Some things in natural law (natural iure) are common to all men [sic]; some things belong to towns (universitates); some things to no one (nullius); but most things belong to individuals acquired on various grounds. 1. And so by natural law things in common are: air, flowing water, and the sea together with seashores.

Digest of Justinian, Book 1, Title 8

In the seventeenth century:

The skies, stars, light, air and sea are things that are so common to all in the society of men [sic] that no one can become their master nor deprive others of them.

Domat, J. *Les loix civiles dans leur ordre naturel*, 2nd Edition, 1695. Preliminary Book, Title III, Section I

And in the nineteenth century:

By natural law (ius naturale), the rivers, the sea and its shores belong to everybody (communia sunt). The seashore is public (publicum est) right up to where the tide reaches.

Robert Joseph Pothier, *Pandectae Justinianae in Novum Ordinem Digestae, De Diversis Juris Antiqui, Libri 50, Titium 17, Pisis*, 1825 Edition (first published 1748)

Such questions of ownership and thus access complement contemporary debates regarding the production and dissemination of knowledge and who lays claim to this and on what grounds (for example, Donna Haraway's *Simians, cyborgs and women: The reinvention of nature*, 1991). Our approach to ruins addresses such issues, focusing on how the relationship between landscapes, material remains, and the researcher can be storied: whose story is told, who (or what) is the narrator, and how is time experienced, understood or represented?

Lived experience and the *longue durée*

Moving through labyrinthine architectural remains pushes the body firmly into a sensuous and embodied present (Figure 2). Simultaneously, it orients the mind towards the past and what is beyond direct experience. As a body standing amongst stone and concrete, one inhabits a point of intersection between lived experience and the *longue durée*. On one hand, SSG approaches this point as a dialogue between the individual and the material ruin.

In this case, our dialogue draws from several academic disciplines—archaeology, cultural geography, and anthropology in particular—and attendant literatures that interrogate the relationship between the human subject and the material landscape. Examples include John Dewsbury, Paul Harrison, Mitch Rose, and John Wylie’s ‘Enacting geographies’ in *Geoforum* (2002, issue 33, no. 4) or Tim Edensor’s essay ‘Walking through ruins’ in *Ways of walking: Ethnography and practice on foot* (edited by Tim Ingold, 2008).

On the other hand, as a dyad, SSG considers this point to be a dialogue between its two members. In this case, our dialogue draws from literary and artistic practices that give voice to dyadic relationships, such as the tarot, the Yijing (Book of Changes), various surrealist practices, absurdist literature and the theatre of the absurd, and Freudian psychoanalysis. These practices have one point in common: their combinatory nature—something that we will come back to later. Our attention was brought to the combinatory qualities of objects by Eugene Wang’s article on early Buddhist stupas in Northern China ‘What do trigrams have to do with Buddhas? The Northern Liang stupas as a hybrid spatial model’ (in *Anthropology and Aesthetics*, issue 35, no. 1, 1999).

We bring these two sources of dialogue—academic and dyadic—together through texts, sketches, itineraries, photographs, sound recordings, and objects; equally, we conduct these dialogues through practices such as gleaning, carving, casting, printing, painting, and stone rubbing.



Figure 2. Crossing the moat to enter the fort.

Ruins and bricolage

Ruins can be considered as an assemblage of material fragments that have lost cultural legibility. Such fragments are not defined by scale—they could equally be an architectural volume, a small architectural detail, an object, or an inscription—but by their semiotic detachment from their original context. The archaeologist may attempt to reconstruct the practices and beliefs of a past society or culture from such fragments. A cultural geographer might consider how such fragments have been used by a group or institution to construct a narrative of the past and for what purpose. An artist might respond in yet another way, integrating such forms and inscriptions into new cultural expressions.

Underlying these three examples is the combinatory practice of bricolage, which constructs unity from a diverse, sometimes chaotic, collection of things. The kinship between bricolage and archaeology is noted by Bjørnar Olsen: ‘the *bricoleur* and the archaeologist join forces in

working on what there actually *is*—which is often the fragmented, the discarded and abandoned’ (*In defence of things: Archaeology and the ontology of objects*, 2013, page 152). As Olsen notes, the bricoleur/archaeologist bring those found fragments together in a complex synthesis of seemingly unconnected parts. Multiple fragments of potentially diverse origin are synthesised into stories of origin.

In the tarot card game, chance encounter and synthesis are also central. The history of the card game is itself an excellent example of a story constructed from partial fragments and unfounded beliefs—for example, in the eighteenth century, authors, such as Antoine de G belin, identify the cards with the book of Thot, thus tracing their origin to ancient Egypt. The first tarot sets were, in fact, hand-painted card games used by Renaissance nobility, with variations according to the different courts of Europe (see William M. Voelkle, ‘The Visconti-Sforza tarots’ in *Tarot Triumphant*, FMR, no. 8, pages 42–43). The occultist use of the cards can be seen as a form of ‘counter-Renaissance’, where origins were looked for in the deep past, and archetypal references were forced upon medieval iconography (see Michael Dummett’s ‘Tracing the Tarot’ in the same issue of FMR). Thus, despite its Renaissance origin, the tarot has been mythologised as an occult syncretic system that incorporated symbolism and imagery from a multitude of beliefs, keeping them simultaneously hidden and accessible, freed from the linear constraints of sacred books and acting as a form of *d tournement*.

Hoo and the tarot

We arrived on the island of Hoo at dusk at high tide. As we made our way to the fort, the tide began to slowly recede, soon leaving us surrounded on all sides by mudflats, making retreat back to the mainland impossible. We crossed the moat, climbed into the fort, and started walking the wide circulatory passage, passing identical alcoves one after the other in the darkness. The feeling of disorientation was total; the distance, both in time and space, between one alcove and another appeared to shrink and extend without rule. This effect was exaggerated by the asymmetrical division of the space into eleven sections, which constantly disrupted the expectation of uniformity when looking across the central axis. Thick metal rings hung from the vaulted ceilings, adding to an impression of interconnected spaces and interwoven relations.

We had brought a pack of tarot cards with us. The combination of figures, objects, and environments shown on the cards responded to the fort, its wider landscape, and our dyad. The reading of the cards is constructed upon small details on individual cards as well as the relationship between a selection of cards. The game thus encourages attention to detail and a strong focus on the synthesis of relationships between people, things, and places. Literature and art offer many examples of authors using the tarot cards as building blocks for narrative. Italo Calvino structured his book *The Manor of Crossed Destinies* (1969) around the tarot deck, letting each card speak and relate to the next. This resulted in a novel with several parallel and interlacing lines, with no privileged narrator or thread. Similarly, Alejandro Jodorowsky, in addition to writing an inspired guide to tarot reading and interpretation, based his film writing for the 1973 film *La Montagna Sagrada* on the tarot deck. Both authors used the tarot as raw material for their narrative enterprises and as a device for ensuring that their stories remain open-ended, exploiting the combinatory potential of the game. Instead

of providing a fixed interpretation, the game offers an ever-mutable and highly personalized tool for identification, embodiment, and narration. The cards not only confer agency equally upon animate and inanimate objects but can also be used to choreograph one's attention to the environment. The scale of the cards themselves lends intimacy—being small, they fit easily into a pocket and are thus highly mobile—and the cohort of human and non-human characters and objects accompany one's thoughts and mediate one's relation to the environment.

Detail and surrealism

The attention to detail proper to tarot readings also has an affinity to surrealism. Dali developed what he termed *paranoid critical method* to create paintings. He adopted a paranoid perspective, amplifying insignificant details encountered in everyday life to create sometimes unsettling tableaux (see George E. Marcus, *Paranoia within reason: A casebook on conspiracy as explanation*, 1999). A similar approach can be seen in Max Ernst's frottage. Paranoia can be thought of as a breakdown in the ability to distinguish between significant and insignificant cues in the environment. In this case, small details can take on great importance. Closely related to this are what Freud called *screen memories*—banal mental images that hide traumatic memories from the individual. Screen memories consist of small and apparently irrelevant details—for example, a fleck of paint on a door handle—that formed in memory at the moment of a traumatic event, while the trauma itself remains unremembered. A similar device is used in Edward Hopper's paintings and is often seen in horror films: a detail is given exaggerated attention, unsettling the viewer and their expectation (see Margaret Iversen's, *Beyond pleasure: Freud, Lacan, Barthes*, 2007).

We used the tarot to microscope into the material traces of memories and potential emotions contained within the ruin. Indeed, ruins are an assemblage of details, each of which is as significant or insignificant as the other. This offers the opportunity to give voice to the overlooked and create a narrative that does not privilege an authorial perspective, something that we wrote about in our article 'Reverse archaeology: Experiments in carving and casting space' in the *Journal of Contemporary Archaeology* (issue 4, no. 2, 2017). Such an approach can be seen in the work of the geographer, Caitlin DeSilvey. In her description of an abandoned Montana homestead, she proposes an approach to ruins that considers fragments—whether stone, mouse eaten papers, or a draw full of cutlery—to be the visible manifestation of a host of agencies, from humans to animals, insects, water, air, and fungi (see her article 'Observed decay: Telling stories with mutable things' in the *Journal of Material Culture*, issue 11, no. 3, 2006). When she tells stories about ruins, she does not follow a familiar cultural narrative but rather gives expression to those things that have agency but do not have a voice, giving equal relevance to each. Such an approach is in harmony with the condition of ruination, where the original significance of buildings, objects, and humans has been lost.

The Story of Stone

The foregrounding of other than human perspectives for narration can also be seen in *The Story of the Stone*, written by Cao Xueqin and first published in 1791—one of the four major classics of Chinese literature, more commonly known as the *Dream of the Red Chamber*. This

intricate story follows a young boy from an eminent family, Jia Baoyu, who was born with a piece of magical jade in his mouth, to which he serves as a vehicle for reincarnation. Through Baoyu, the stone is given a chance to experience human existence, a form of personification that is not a mere literary device (for an interesting comparison of the magical role of jade in several Chinese classic novels, see Jing Wang's *The story of stone: Intertextuality, ancient Chinese stone lore, and the stone symbolism in dream of the red chamber, water margin, and the journey to the west*, 1992). Jade, which has been valued since Neolithic times, acquired its own characterology wherein virtue is defined by toughness, transparency, and purity of sound—qualities that correspond to a moral and sensorial quest. It could be said that the whole story is told from the point of view of a stone. In addition to this meta-narrative, much of the story is located indoors, and the text is extremely descriptive of the interiors and objects, which is in keeping with the explosion in popular material culture during the Ming and Qing dynasties (see Craig Clunas's *Superfluous things: Material culture and social status in early modern China*, 2004). This was an historic moment in which object biographies became proxies for human characters, more convincing story tellers than the characters themselves. This literary strategy is also reflected in anthropological works, such as Arjun Appadurai's *The social life of things: Commodities in cultural perspective* (1988).



Figure 3. Tarot seal carvings and prints (Lia Wei, 2017). The synthetic aspects of seals can be traced back to their first appearance. Early seals belonged to the category of jade and bronze, and were a powerful synthesizing tool, a kind of synesthetic visual expression.

Returning to the stone of the fort: we approach sites similarly, as temporary dwellings—for example, we chose to strand ourselves overnight on this small island. In this way, a site first becomes familiar through its simple affordances—in this case, where we can stow the boat, where we can find shelter, how we can dry ourselves, where wood can be found for a fire. Once these needs had been addressed, we turned to the cards to pass time and listen to the fort through our dyad. For this experiment, we took the 21 Major Arcana (the picture cards) from the pack and discarded the rest. During the night, we played with the imagery of the cards and the structure of the fort, attempting to align one to the other and, in doing so,

seeking small differences between the eleven repeated architectural volumes as well as their relation to one another and their orientation to the world outside (Figures 4–6).

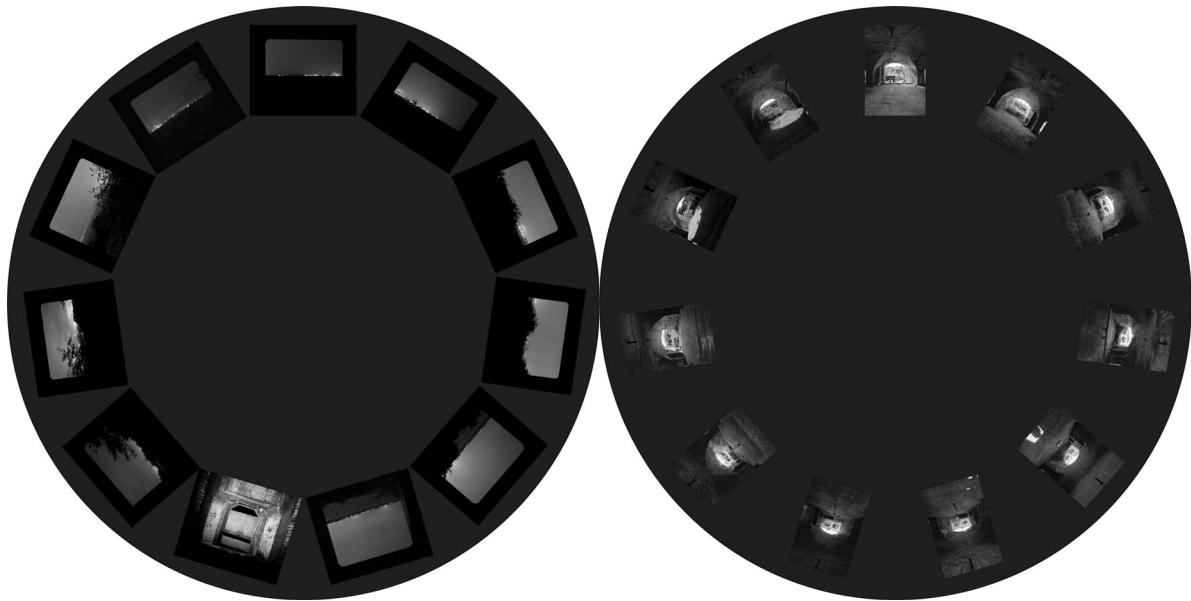


Figure 4. Photographs looking out from each window and photographs looking in from each alcove.

The following morning, we placed one card onto the ground in each alcove, reserving the central and last card, *La Roue de Fortune*, to the inner core of the fort. We identified parts of the architecture with figures such as *Le Chariot*, *L’Hermite*, and *Le Bateleur* by extracting attitudes, attributes, and small details from the illustrated figures—buttons on clothing, flourishes of background vegetation, small stones, and ad hoc furniture. This exercise populated the fort with figures, a bi-dimensional army, placed in sympathy with the fort. This activated the space: the narrative unfolded all around, and we became actors within it rather than maintaining control over it. Adjacent or opposing figures fell into dialogue, forming groups or antagonistic factions. The only nameless card of the deck, Arcanum 13 (*L’arcane sans Nom*) blew away in a gust of wind, and, despite our best efforts, we could not subsequently find it. Through this momentary event, we became familiar with all the nooks, crannies and holes in the alcove, and discovered that there were channels to the levels below, which may have been used for communications. The figures turned into guides, impelling exploration and mapping the territory. Equally, like a mandala—where the figures of deities are assigned positions from which they exert their influence, and where the meditator visualizes him or herself or the deity through a combination of space, colour, and position—Hoo Fort turned into a map of mind.

Thus, the use of these cards was not an exercise in anthropomorphizing the architecture; rather, it was a means of mineralizing the human and blurring the distinction between our own transitory thoughts, desires, passions, fears and the material presence of the stone fort.



Figure 6. Cards aligned with the fort.

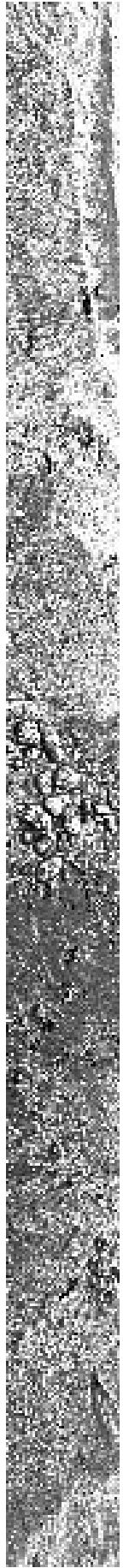
The following afternoon, when planning our return to the mainland, we kept looking out of the fort over the river, waiting for the tide to rise and deliver the island from its isolating circle of mud. The fort evoked a verse of a poem by Octavio Paz entitled *Envoi*:

*Imprisoned by four walls
(to the North, the crystal of non-knowledge
a landscape to be invented
to the South, reflective memory
to the East, the mirror
to the West, stone and the song of silence)
I wrote messages, but received no reply.*

— Octavio Paz

The NOM project: Qualifying stones

As the tide slowly rose over the mud, we left the fort and took the boat to the water's edge. Standing in the bright sunlight, after having familiarised ourselves with the structure of Hoo Fort and inhabited one of its many stories, the fort became a compass from which lines traced out across the territory, linking us to previous experiments. Our compass looked out over the moat, beyond the horizon, and pointed memory towards another island of granite. The shoreline, strewn with driftwood, plastics, concrete blocks, and rusting iron took us back a few months to a brief walk on the western tip of the isle of Skye (Figure 7). As we walked along the beach, we started to collect stones that had a particular presence. We soon started to attribute names to each stone. Inspired by the syllabic structure of the Chinese language



and the mixture of ideographic and phonetic principles that preside over the formation of Chinese characters, we decided to limit ourselves to three-lettered names that had a formal, visual, conceptual, or visually poetic (verbivocovisual) relation to the stones; for example, the stones PIC, GON, HOL (Figure 8). Sometimes the ‘attitude’ of the stone would dictate its name.

We soon had several pages of three-lettered stone names. After this first phase of ‘fieldwork’—a combination of gleaning and literary bricolage whereby we attributed names to stones found both by chance and by systematically walking the beach—we began to propose names before having found a corresponding stone. Acknowledging how arbitrary our process of attributing names had become, we opted for a mathematical solution, looking for all combinations of three-lettered names. The unpronounceable, such as XWT and KWZ, were initially discarded, but then we returned to these non-vowel written forms and accepted them too. Without restrictions, the literary flow now flooded and overwhelmed physical reality. With a list of 17,576 possible combinations of three letters from the 26 letters of the English alphabet—our ‘hypothesis’ in other words—we planned to return to the field to find their corresponding stones.

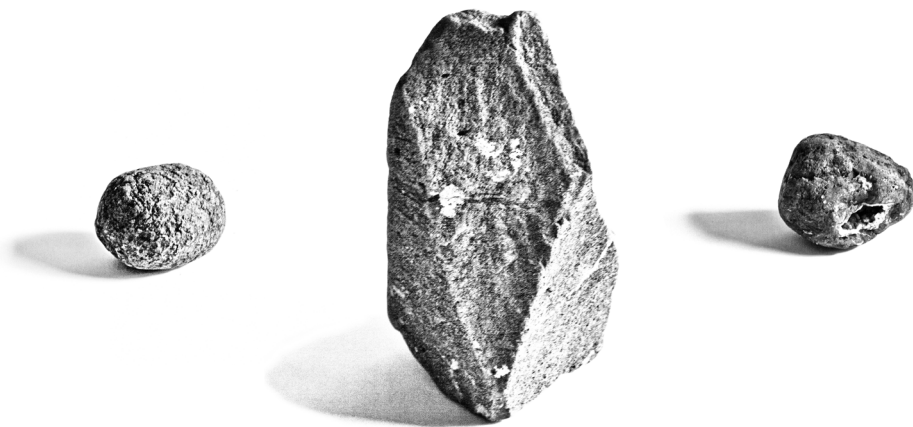


Figure 7 (left). Skye beach scan.
Figure 8 (above): BOL, PIC, HOL.

Absurd as this process might appear, it gains an historical dimension when placed in a Chinese literati context. Eminent scholars, artists, and antiquarians collected stones for their evocative shapes. They compiled catalogues that had an entry for each item with an ink drawing (or its xylographic reproduction), a name for the stone and a poem or description qualifying it (Figure 9). A true encyclopaedia of

stones grew, not only for items directly collected by the author but including references to existing descriptions of stones long lost, which retained only a literary existence.



Figure 9. Wushi 舞石 dancing stone, in *Suyuan shipu* 素園石譜 (Manual of stones from the plain garden) by Lin Youlin 林有麟, 1613. Ming Dynasty (1368–1644).

The stones themselves, items with no intrinsic value, were modified in barely perceptible ways to bring them closer to established standards of lithic beauty. A modified natural stone would then be mounted on a wooden pedestal, further framing this new object. Inscriptions bearing the name of the collector, the place and date where the stone was found or kept, and the impression given by the stone in poetic form were added to the new-born

monument. The pedestal, the inscription, the authors, and audience added to the biography of what started as a simple stone along a pathway.

Absurdism

Our work could also be seen from another perspective—that of the absurd—which is also closely linked to bricolage. As an artistic genre, absurdism draws from existentialism—a philosophy that proposes meaninglessness as a fundamental condition of being. Absurdist literature and the theatre of the absurd often deal with the human experience of fragmentation and absence. If it can be assumed that meaning is the experience of significance—whether that be through the recognition of a pattern, the emotional support of another, or the experience of our world as an ordered place—then if we give equal significance to all that we encounter, we will struggle to find meaning. The ruin, in having erased familiar signifiers, is a landscape where all things are equal and equally available. As such, the ruin is the ideal theatre of the absurd. Through our encounters with ruins, we experience a series of apparently disconnected events—chance encounters—that we have no control over. As Ulrich Baer points out, this is the condition under which most people experience the historical events that shape the world (*Spectral evidence: The photography of trauma*, 2002).

As a creative practice, absurdism actively creates the conditions for the chance encounter of fragments, whether they be discrete images and motifs or fragments of drawings—in other words, as a practice, absurdism simulates fragmentation in order to create a field available for creative reassembly (i.e., bricolage). Surrealist games, such as exquisite corpse, automatic writing, or the reading of tarot cards, each simulate fragmentation through chance and the recombination of parts in order to create dialogue. These dialogues are usually between two, simulating concealment, revelation, and synthesis.

This essay combines a report on a journey to an abandoned military fort located on a marshy island with an experiment in narration—eleven architectural arcades centred on an island, the 21 arcana of the tarot, a duo of wanderers, and stones collected along the way provide the frame for the story, the characters, and the authors and for a literary appropriation of Hoo Fort. This narrative experiment approached the fort through a tarot card game and the further stories that evolved from this original matrix. Our practice has drawn from dada, surrealism, the literature and theatre of the absurd, and combinatory systems such as the tarot. We experimented with methods of description, recording, and storytelling that addressed the nexus of lived experience and material traces of the past. Such combinatory systems encourage syncretism and help the researcher to be attentive to detail and to synthesise a multitude of viewpoints and materials, to link flesh and stone, and to give voice to that which is voiceless.

Hoo Fort's circular form and its isolation from the mainland buttressed our impression of it as both a combinatory archive and a monumental clock in which memory and meaning are mutable, constantly emerging in new configurations. Circumambulating the fort became a pursuit of details that linked one card to another, which involved the movement of ourselves in both conscious and preconscious relation to objects and architectures—a pilgrimage of

sorts. Each card inhabited a niche, and the fort's ground plan became a diagram. The empty stone tower began to talk, to articulate images and ideas.