A Day at the Beach: Walking with David Horvitz

By David Matarin; June 28, 2017

On the morning of June 10, as part of the group show "Paratextual," curated by Asha Bukojemsky at Samuel Freeman Gallery in Los Angeles (May 13–June 17), the LA-based artist David Horvitz led an off-site excursion to a public beach in Rancho Palos Verdes. A live addendum to his work Public Access (2010–11), which is included in "Paratextual," the artist guided a group of about twelve participants on a walk-and-talk to one of the beaches he photographed in the original project.

Horvitz tends to play with the boundaries between the work and its reception and interpretation, folding new developments into the work itself. Public Access, a web-based artwork, is a spell-binding and mercurial project with a long tail. The artist traveled the entirety of the coast of California, from Mexico to Oregon, stopping along the way at over fifty public beaches to photograph himself by the shoreline. In similarly composed landscape-portraits, Horvitz looks out at the sea with his back to the camera in images reminiscent of Caspar David Friedrich's Wanderer Above the Sea of Fog (1818) and Bas Jan Ader's Farewell to Faraway Friends (1971). These photos were uploaded to the public domain repository Wikimedia Commons, and subsequently inserted into the respective Wikipedia pages for the beaches that he visited. A debate ensued on Wikipedia's talk pages among other contributors, who speculated about the intention behind and suitability of the images, which were ultimately taken down by the site. The photographs, Wiki pages, contributors' conversations, and additional texts by Horvitz and poet Ed Steck were compiled into a book. Horvitz later traveled to several libraries along the California coast, inserting copies of the book into local history sections.

The walk-and-talk participants were given Google coordinates of the parking lot on the Palos Verdes Peninsula where we were to meet. We drove past the Trump National Golf Course clubhouse and through a subdivision of partially constructed, cheap-looking Spanish style mansions that make up the Estates at Trump National, a rather sad-looking luxury development adjacent to the golf course. Once assembled in the parking lot, our group started down the access trail, stopping to discuss the land usage regulations that allowed for and inspired our outing.
California is unique in that all its beaches are public; privately owned coastal properties are required to allow access to the beachfront. The Trump organization originally intended to turn the golf course into a private club like its others, with memberships costing $300,000, but because of the California Coastal Commission's mandate for open access, the plan failed and it remains a public course.

We walked the right-of-way easement that cuts through the green of the golf course between the eighth and sixteenth holes and along the ridge of the peninsula toward Founders Park, where we intended to visit a plaque commemorating the site of the first farm on the Palos Verdes Peninsula operated by a Japanese-American family. In silence, we read the history of the Ishibashi family, who leased the land in 1908 and pioneered farming on the peninsula until the outbreak of World War II. The company that owned the land ordered them off the premises and demolished the original farmhouse. The family was split up and dispersed to internment camps in North Dakota, Arizona, Utah, and California's Central Valley. After the war, some members of the Ishibashi family returned to the Peninsula, eventually buying back over five hundred acres of the property. Their descendants sold their last remaining land in 2011, around the time of Horvitz's original Public Access trip.
Like all the attractions on the tour, the monument and its story were presented casually and without ceremony. Later, while reading Horvitz's introductory text to Public Access, published by Rhizome in 2011, I came across the artist's account of asking his mother for a childhood memory at a California beach. Her mother was also a native Californian, and was interned in a camp in Colorado during the war. Horvitz relays the story she told of a day trip to Malibu. A relative buried a watermelon in the sand to cool it down, but the stick he used to mark its location was washed away by the waves, and no one could find the hidden fruit.

We walked from the monument to the Sunrise Trail, which runs along the cliffs and down the dunes to the beach. The cliff's edge had stunning views of the ocean below, which was dotted with container ships from the nearby port of San Pedro. On the beach, we put down towels and lay on the sand. Horvitz suggested we close our eyes for thirty minutes and focus on the sound of the ocean. The sound of wind and waves droned beneath intermittent noises from an animated baby, and a vigilant, small dog among our group. Several people put their heads on canvas bags designed by the artist and supplied by the gallery, emblazoned with the slogan NOBODY OWNS THE BEACH. On the inside tags, where the laundry instructions should be, is a passage from The Edge of the Sea (1955), a novel by marine biologist Rachel Carson (1907–64). It begins with the poetic lines, "On all these shores there are echoes of past and future: of the flow of time, obliterating yet containing all that has gone before..."

![Participants walking down Sunset Trail, Rancho Palos Verdes. Photo Lee Thompson](image1)

![One member of the group wearing Horvitz's NOBODY OWNS THE BEACH tote bag, Rancho Palos Verdes. Photo Andrea Breiling](image2)

When photos from Public Access were shown at Blum & Poe gallery in 2014, they were paired with Horvitz's sculptural work somewhere in between the jurisdiction of time (2014), various glass vessels containing ocean water collected at a longitude 127.5 degrees west of the prime meridian, effectively between the Pacific and Alaskan time zones. The metaphoric resonance between data, history, and the sea recurs in Horvitz's work. When the project launched in 2011, #Egypt was the top-trending hashtag of the year on Twitter, owing to the Egyptian revolution that catalyzed the Arab Spring. Occupy Wall Street spread from a local protest to a worldwide movement in a matter of months. There seemed good reason to believe in the promise of a utopian, networked future.

Even though Horvitz was accused of "sock puppetry" (creating multiple usernames for the purpose of deception) and practical joking by commenters in the Wikipedia talk pages, there was never any doubt that the intention of Public Access's online critics was ultimately to serve the good of the community through a democratic process. The takeaway of Horvitz's project seemed to be proof that cyberspace is a self-regulating system—a collective mind capable of self-reflection and adjustment.
In 2017, that system appears to have broken down. Twitter harbors armies of trolls and disinformation is deployed for the express purpose of swaying real power. The radical horizontality and flatness of information online, wherein art, news, and entertainment are regarded with equal value, has erupted into the real world and caused catastrophe, begetting an inflammatory president whose social media obsession serves as a screen to conceal a brutal, self-serving realpolitik. Horvitz follows a sort of communitarian logic in revisiting a six-year-old artwork by re-performing it with others.

The group ends the tour on the beach, Rancho Palos Verdes. Photo Lee Thompson.