

Close to the Water

This lecture was delivered live through a radio mike while balancing a single scull boat on the River Aura before an audience on the moving 'Fori' or ferry at the opening of New Performance Turku.

"The motion of the oars, the dip and drag...as poets have felt in their own meter the beat of the rowers heart and the pull of the rower's arms...moving through the world on the surface of the canvas like a rower moving through the water in a weightless scull" That was philosopher Elaine Scarry in *On Beauty and being Just* - talking about the American painter/rower Thomas Eakins' painting *The Champion Single Sculls*. This serves almost as a mirror, reflecting back a portrait of a rower engaged in a state of introspection. That has inspired me to row this light single-scutt rowing boat towards you today and say something about the resonances between art, rowing and the history of the water.

Rowing a single scull boat like this one which I am in, is like flying, or being in zero gravity, with only these thin oars to balance me. You can see how this is very finely balanced ...and if I make a mistake I will capsize. Rowers have their own names for all the parts of the rowing action. The *catch*, the *stroke*, the *swing*, the *finish* are all enhanced by modern technology designed to ever go faster. The sliding seat which I am sitting on is a disputed invention either happening in the North of England or New York in the middle-19th Century. The outriggers either side of me are stolen from Pacific island technology thousands of years old. It is similar to the 'stealing of the trapeze' by modern sailors from indigenous islanders - cited by Singapore artist/sailor Charles Lim Yi Yong in his decolonising artwork, *Stealing The Trapeze*. At the centre of his exhibition is a book from he stole from his school in England which asserts that the trapeze was invented by a white male sailor - Sir Peter Scott.

All these technologies, designed to make the single scull go ever faster, serve to isolate the single rower in this fast, light racing shell, alone and dwarfed by the river, as I am now. You can consider me, dressed as a parody of a white male - I am Anglo-Indian, which is kind of white, - balancing precariously here on the river as a symbol of the headlong accelerationist technological world - potentially about to unbalanced by the winds of change, to be tumbled into the water. When everything is in flux in the world, perhaps all we have in common is the communities which we form around us.

Which takes us to the intensely community-based experience of the enormous *Kirkkovene* - the Finnish Church Boat, often seen going up and down here, the 'jumbo jet' of remote communities here, where outlying villagers rowed individually to a hub Church Boat Port, thence to row solemnly with up to 60 others, side by side, the able-bodied rowing and the less-strong passengers swaying to help the boat move along. The Church Boat was in use since the reformation in the 17th Century and the Church made it compulsory to maintain them.

For many, this was the only way to get to church, the only social contact with other villages for a week. It was rowed in casual clothes: "women with plain shirts, scarves, underskirts, night gowns and bare feet; men with underwear and shoes made of birch bark or none at all", then on arrival they would wash and get dressed up in their Sunday best for church. These boats could also often be carrying a corpse in a coffin on her or his way to be buried. The outward passage was quiet and sombre, with perhaps the singing of sacred songs.

But on the way back the Church Boat atmosphere changes, perhaps reflecting its Pagan past. The return trip was an opportunity for locals' racing spirit, with men doffing their dark hats and jackets in an atmosphere that was anything but reverential. What had been a quiet, reverent atmosphere on the way to church became a raucous race between villages. From *The Race of the Church Boats*: "To develop a greater speed the outside of the boat was lubricated with tallow, butter or eggs. The cox yelled the tempo for the rowers and the non-rowers swayed themselves. And so eager were they to win that they were aching all over after the race even for several days". If a village developed a particularly fast boat they hid it on their return, so other villages could not emulate it.

It is not known exactly how the Church boat evolved but it must, I think, have been influenced by the Viking Long Boat in the pre-Christian times when the Norse tribes settled in Finland, sharing a Pagan religion with the Finns. I have heard the Finnish tribes used the Viking roving boats as models for their boats, but most historical boats in the world have much in common. 'Viking' is also a verb, and the boats were used to go 'Viking' ie. raiding, but it is disputed whether the Finnish tribes also did this. Finns were not Vikings but they shared the same water-space and trade routes to the east. Remains of a Viking Rhime-stone, possibly used as an anchor, have recently been found on the island of Hitis, a Viking trading place near, Kyrksund, not far from here. I can't help thinking that the wild row back from Church resonated with the rower's shared Pagan heritage with the Vikings, breaking through the Christian church's systems of control, throwing off the formal Sunday clothes and racing to the finish...

Nowadays modern Church Boat Races take place on lakes all over Finland with the famous Sulkava race reaching 60 kilometres. Artist Tapio Makela, who has taken part in Church boat racing with his family, describes Sulkava well: "Up to ten thousand bodies rowing forward, while moving backwards..." I have not experienced Church Boat Racing but I would like to try and experience the intense nature of community that this brings. When the sea levels rise, we may all be living on islands and lakes and we may all need to rely on close communities as the Church boat communities did.

This light boat below me is also a symbol of the intense form of capitalism that makes us want to go faster. Is interesting to compare the Church Boat race's evolution to another watery tradition, that of the watermen rowing their 'Wherries' on the Thames in London. Before rowing become an aristocratic pastime at Oxford and Cambridge, the professional boatmen on the Thames competed with one another to go faster. It was very early on when one waterman decided to challenge another waterman or when one passenger urged his waterman on to a speedy passage that boat speed became an asset. A waterman could enhance his income by receiving a gratuity from his pleased patron or gain publicity and a reputation by winning contests. Racing between watermen soon flourished, similar on an international level to the colonial races between multi-sailed streamlined tea clippers and the Opium traders. The faster you could get your product to market with your superior technology the better, regardless of the human cost – a decolonising narrative also cited by Charles Lim.

In 1715 an actor named Thomas Doggett used these watermen regularly to cross the Thames to get to his theatre appearances. He decided to place a sum of money in an endowment to provide for a race for a Coat and Badge to take place "forever" for 6 emerging watermen. This competition continues today. As late as the early 50's there was a dispute in the UK Amateur Rowing Association about whether 'professional' ie. working-class rowers could compete in the same races as Oxbridge rowers. Even in rowing there is class war.

Rowing for many is also a religion, and people who join Rowing clubs are often fanatical in their determination, training early in the morning and pushing their bodies and boats to go faster. The modern day Episcopalian rower/priest, Stacey Grossman takes the religious analogy one step further "Rowers move forward facing backwards, which demands absolute trust in the one steering and directing. ...When we give in to the greater goal, we sometimes feel as though we are flying. There are deep spiritual lessons to be learned on the water — about leading, about following, about control, about winning, and losing — and I try to pay attention to them. Rowing for me is a spiritual and physical practice of the most satisfying order". She even finds rowing in the Bible. I'm not personally religious but this well-known account of Walking on the Water is interesting for all kinds of post-religious reasons.

"Later that night, the boat was in the middle of the lake, and he was alone on land. He saw the disciples straining at the oars, because the wind was against them. Shortly before dawn he went out to them, walking on the lake. He was about to pass by them, but when they saw him walking on the lake, they thought he was a ghost. They cried out, because they all saw him and were terrified.

Immediately he spoke to them and said, 'Take courage! It is I. Don't be afraid.' Then he climbed into the boat with them, and the wind died down. They were completely amazed...." *Mark 6. 45-53.*

It is difficult not to draw parallels here with the practice of classical performance art, where the body itself becomes a medium of artistic expression, 'Walking on Water,' stripping away artifice and releasing a collective energy between the artist and the 'battery' of the audience. Beuys said 'even the peeling of a potato can become a work of art if it is a conscious act'. I would like to suggest that to scull this boat, thinking and not-thinking about the way I take a stroke like this...is a conscious act. It is a post-art action. The fragility of this position symbolises the the fragility of society torn apart by nationalism, fear of immigrants and the Trump insurgency. In an act of sensorial empathy, I invite you to imagine yourself embodied in this boat, unbalanced, right here in this light boat on the water of the River Aura that 'it is possible to use performance art and embodied knowledge to explain and to experience the transitional shifts around us'.

Imagine too, how much more fragile are the small improvised craft that are bringing asylum-seekers and other escapees from war and probably soon, climate refugees, across the Mediterranean. This boat is designed with the payoff between stability and speed – the stability brought about by 20 years of practice by a human – not a post-human. The vessels used by those who cross have no such long development behind them. They are utilised out of desperation.

So finally I would like to thank some of the people who have inspired me think about moving on and being moved by the water. First the inventor and creative thinker Buckminster Fuller, who was a keen oarsman, but after several close calls with his single scull boat rowing from his island, designed the Watercraft- Rowing Needles, a two-hull rowing shell, which he produced several versions of, which one could scull without capsizing, but never mass-produced. The amazing Maribel Yerxa Vinson-Owen, also a figure-skating champion, whose sculling photo from the '50s 'Joyous on the Charles River' inspired me. The Cecil Ladies Rowing Club, Clapton, formed before women got before the vote in the '20s. Black British artist and rower Ingrid Pollard, who for several decades has photographed herself in idyllic English landscapes, challenging cultural expectations of who is indigenous to these landscapes. The Indian teacher KR Ushakumari, who rows every day to a remote area in Kerala to teach tribal children. The Turkish artist Ihsan Banabak and Austrian artist Gerald Harringer, who in *Row for Europe* rowed 2200 kilometers from Linz to the Black Sea in a project about borders. Charles Lim Yi Yong, who I mentioned earlier. The Finnish artists group *Baltic Herring*, who drifted randomly across the Baltic in a raft made of junk materials, collecting stories. Finally the inspirational Antti Laitinen, who I met at this Festival, who rowed his bark boat across the Baltic Sea and rowed his palm-tree island up the Thames River in London and was nearly arrested by the river police.

I'd finally like to thank the rowing club *Turun Soutajat ry* - another form of close community, for lending me this wonderful vehicle. For all the symbolism I have drawn with speed and capitalism, this is still a very fast zero-emissions vehicle that can float on the higher waters of climate change without increasing it. Those that use it understand the currents, wind and water intimately and can experience the changes being brought about by changing climate and tidal patterns first hand.

With that, I will thank you, the audience, particularly the rowers among you, for coming. I hope you can see a little more the connections I am making from this boat to what is happening in wider society and visit some of the performances in the festival. I now will turn this boat round - with some difficulty as I am a self-taught rower - and race home from this Church of New Performance. As is often said by coaches encouraging crews to go faster - let the boat sing!