"It was in the lime works, in the total seclusion of the lime works, that he had always believed he would be able to get it all written down, all at once. A head that was totally secluded, isolated from the outside world, would be able to write this book more easily than one involved with the outside world, with society." (Bernhard, 1973: 71)

For a period of about five years in the late 1990s, the Austrian writer Thomas Bernhard was the only author that I searched for when I entered a bookstore. For that time period, any bookstore that I walked into – full of its magnificent diversity of voices, approaches, thoughts – was distilled down quite simplistically into a “Thomas Bernhard bookstore,” and the same thing was true for libraries. Because of my unhealthy (but necessary) obsession with this one author, one voice, any library that I stepped into – by my simple act of entering it – became a “Thomas Bernhard library,” wherein I would seek new volumes and new translations of this author whose musical incantatory rhythmic prose had completely overtaken my mind. Readers of Bernhard may even smile as they read this essay, as they may find traces and evidence of Bernhardian prose expressed herein.

This, of course, is the admission of an absurd obsession. I have since been cured of this obsession, to the point where I often completely
assemblage of historic limestone kiln ruins in Rosendale, New York, as the location and topic of my PhD dissertation in archaeology at Columbia University (Figure 1). In this work, Bernhard’s narrator, Konrad, torments himself over a treatise on hearing which cannot find proper expression. The Lime Works ends (and begins) in a somewhat tragic manner, and that is where I can gladly say that my life has departed from the Bernhardian template (I finished my dissertation), but when I chose Rosendale as my research location, I immediately recognized it as a very suitable place to work on something that I may never finish. As expressed by Bernhard, “the lime works, designed as a lordly manor, had […] all the advantages of a kind of voluntary self-imprisonment at hard labor” (Bernhard, 1973: 25).

As a palimpsest of layered patina, any historical site – particularly of an industrial heritage nature – carries enormous potential for artistic interpretation. To an attentive observer, the depth of history and experience embedded within such sites is extremely evocative, where “every architectural detail is the result of a thousand years of calculations” (Bernhard, 1973: 24). For an artist, working within the context of such locations, the past serves as a kind of palette, offering color, texture, nuance and depth to the expressive content of their work.

At the request of the Century House Historical Society in Rosendale, and on two separate occasions (2017 and 2022), I organized two outdoor sculpture exhibits amidst the ruins of the limestone quarries, kilns and refinement structures of the property. The first exhibit was entitled Eotechnic Sensorium, and the second (co-organized with Michael Asbill) was entitled An/Aesthetics. Along with the writing of my dissertation, I can now see that my academic and artistic effort within the Rosendale lime works mirrored the movement of Bernhard’s anti-hero “away from the world which for decades he had regarded as worthless, offering no attraction whatsoever, a world he had always regarded as anti-historical, a world that was merely marking time, out of which he chose to move into the lime works for the sake of his scientific task, which meant his survival” (Bernhard, 1973: 14).

This is a testament to the power of art, the influence that a single work of art can have, how it can reverberate throughout a single lifetime and through the centuries. A typical Bernhard narrative is a cultivated litany
Figure 2. Laura McCullum’s Tears (hand-blown glass) in Eotechnic Sensorium, a group exhibit organized by Jeffrey Benjamin at the Century House Historical Society in Rosendale, New York, in 2017. Photo: Jeffrey Benjamin
of disavowal and disenchantment that somehow and quite magically leads to a re-enchantment with the world. Looking back, I can see this dynamic at play within my own efforts in Rosendale. My conscious recollection of this phenomenon causes me to muse over the futility of “using” art towards other purposes (i.e., selling real estate, illustrating an intellectual concept or writing an essay). Art will simply not be “used.” For instance, by showcasing an artist’s work one might indeed sell a building but lose (or gain) a whole country. In other words, art has a power that operates in multiple simultaneous directions and dimensions, often distracting or diverting our gaze just as much as it may hold our attention (Novitz, 1997).

I have elsewhere made the rather preposterous assertion that archaeology, like art, is a form of friendship. This is an assertion that I continue to stand behind. It was in this spirit that, in both instances, I invited friends to the Rosendale site to wander around the grounds to seek inspiration for their potential works (Figures 2 and 3). I recollect with great delight the memories of these simple walks through the wooded property with artists; our conversations were so thoughtful and profound. It was during this time that I was able to witness the development of tentative themes, often based on a great depth of personal experience. I must admit that, in this effort, my appropriation of “the lime works” as a location for artistic effort diverged dramatically from the experience of Bernhard’s narrator, for – far from being a narcissistic obsession – it was an experience that was simply shared among friends.
Especially in the early days of canal operations, the hoggees were mostly young children, many of them orphans. Work on the canal was hard and dangerous. Shallow as it may have been, falling in the water, getting tangled in the ropes and drowning was a real threat. Those who survived the hardships had to look elsewhere for work when the canal froze up in the winter. On top of everything, the profession was extremely disrespected, and the hoggees had to tolerate the taunts or shouts of passers-by (Wyld, 1962: 83):

“Hoggee on the towpath
Five cents a day
Picking up horseballs
To eat along the way”

As the railroad network improved, the transport of goods on the canal waned towards the end of the 1800s. The canal was drained for the most parts after the 1898 season, and finally abandoned completely in 1904. In the final years, only the northernmost stretch was in use, as cement was still being transported from Rosendale to Kingston on the Hudson. Although originally built for the purpose of transporting raw materials, the canal also saw other uses. In the years of operation, the canal company frowned upon the canal’s recreational use, but it quickly became a popular tourist destination, attracting visitors from afar to marvel at the scenic areas, to experience the canal from a rowboat, or skate on its frozen surface. Today the remaining stretches of the Delaware and Hudson Canal are historic sites that serve a purely recreational and educational purpose (Figure 5), much like the Snyder Estate, and especially the striking Widow Jane Mine, a large cavern that serves as a venue for various artistic events such as concerts. Through a process of heritagization, the sites have become locations for aesthetic regeneration, a phenomenological register of enjoyment that stands in stark contrast to the anaesthetic effects of alcohol and medicine that those working in the Rosendale cement mines and, undoubtedly, on the Delaware and Hudson Canal, too, had to resort to regularly (Benjamin, 2022: 30).
My research into the history of the area provided a context for my artistic work in the An/aesthetics exhibit in 2022. Inspired by my lifelong history in working with and training horses according to the principles of natural horsemanship (e.g., Hunt and Hunt, 1978), I was drawn to a particular feature on the Snyder Estate. A statue of a pissing child and a horse head relief on the side of a small bridge caught my attention, not because of the cultural significance of the *figur pissing* (*Lebenszzeichn*, 2016), but because of the combination of the figure and the relief.

The resulting artwork, which I call *Queerin’ the Hoggee*, is a site-specific installation consisting of the said statue and relief, both constructed out of cement, a ready-made latex horse mask, and a halter made from...
pink polyester rope (Figure 6). In natural horsemanship, the rope halter is considered a gentle instrument of control and, as part of my career in horsemanship, I used to make and sell them to my clients. Relearning to tie one provided for me a tactile and embodied connection to the historical significance of the hoggee.

With Queerin’ the Hoggee I want to draw the viewer’s attention to the complicated human-horse or human-mule relationship in the industrial past. Forced to work long hours on the towpath – but also in the mines – the human-animal hybrid became vital not only for the functioning of the canal transportation network, but also for the whole “riparian co-ontology” of the waterways, the amorphous intermingling of the multitude of different solid and liquid modes of existence that gave emergence to a complete industry, but which also continues to exist as an ecology in itself (Benjamin, 2022: 176). It is precisely via and along waterways that different parts of the American Northeast were first reached by industrial societies, then transformed through the practices of quarrying, and finally transported elsewhere in refined form.

REFERENCES


