



## **The Leslie Street Spit Project**

**A five year journey tracking the creative instinct.**

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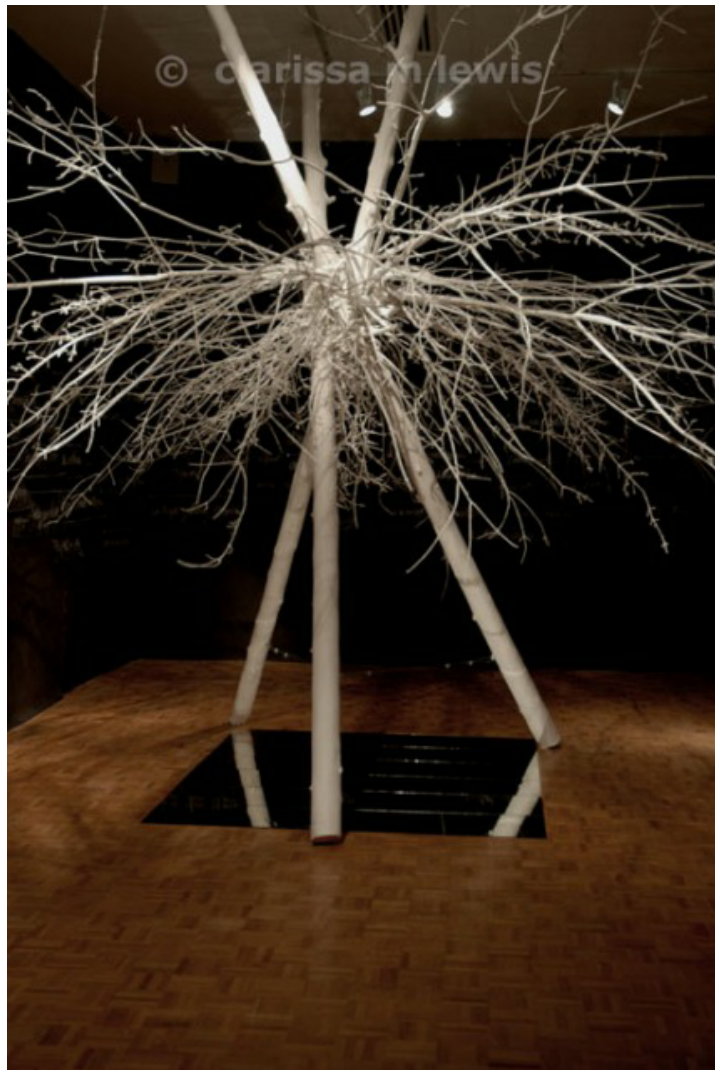
In this article I will be talking about the interplay between the human psyche and our surroundings as it exists in urban locations. Using the example of 'The Leslie Street Spit' in Toronto Canada, I will take you on a virtual visit to a playground for the creative instinct. By the time we finish, I hope that I will have assisted the 'Leslie Street Spit' in transporting you by metaphor expressed; by mystery and by an infusion of wonder. I like John Berger's notion that it might be possible to find heaven by 'lifting up something small and at hand...as small as a pebble' (Berger, "Steps Toward a Small Theory of the Visible")...or could it perhaps also be a bit of rubble?



This will be a journey to a heaven, a temenos. I will try to bring you as close as possible to experiencing what I do as I fall further and deeper in love with and in awe of 'The Leslie Street Spit'.

I ask you to suspend judgment. We will not consider who is qualified to be called an artist nor will we define what constitutes art. In this context that will be irrelevant. What I will be sharing with you is the witnessing of creative instinct at play. It springs from the infinite depth of the unconscious – mysterious and linked to the divine. In this instinct, human beings are more alike than different.

Creative instinct reveals itself effortlessly in the unconventional studio of city life -- easier to identify here than in a formal studio space. To give you a frame of reference for our journey, I am a maker of things, a curator, a witness, a framer. I am influenced by Jungian ideas. To place my interest in 'The Leslie Street Spit' inside the sphere of my work, here is an example in two views of 'Reflection' I built this site-specific sculptural installation because I was curious about what *thinking* might look like if it had a physical presence. It would hold elements of soul, body and idiosyncratic architecture. Depending on the site, it stands about 12 x 14 ft. There is a [companion video 'Return'](#) which is about looking at the 'thinking' thing as a metaphor for transformation and transcendence.



*Reflection*



*Reflection - detail*

My goal in making art is to engage the soul as well as the intellect; to find resonance with the viewer. I think of my approach as a quasi archaeological–psychological-spiritual one: looking deeply to find resonance for the soul. Sometimes, as happened with ‘The Leslie Street Spit’ the process begins itself unbidden, quietly moving in, making alterations to my vision and understanding, until I realize looking back that I am just catching up to it all.

I believe that making meaning of art is a collaborative effort between the viewer and the artwork. The collaboration plays out in the space, the virtual ‘ditch’ between them. I’ve come to view the ‘ditch’ in part as the meeting ground of two. Here I ran into a naming problem: two “unconscious-es.” This isn't a sanctioned word but the makeshift pluralisation feels right. The meeting is between only two. It is more personal, closer to the heart and bone than the descriptions ‘unconscious pro-

cesses' or 'unconscious entities'. So, for the moment, given the shortcoming of language, the two 'unconscioues' meet in that meaning-making ditch. It is the place of resonance, of the possibility of vibration between two psyches, and it is visceral. In time it lasts only a moment -- that second or two of pure non verbal, non analyzing meeting -- a moment later the need to intellectualize or to articulate kicks in.

To chance upon anonymously made art is to encounter the mystery of creative instinct. The first pure moment of meeting holds an invitation to hush. Not knowing who the artist was holds that unconscious meeting of two in the 'ditch' open for just a little longer. Attempting to make meaning by labeling and analyzing the personal life of the artist is impossible. We are left to respond without words.

You now know a little more about the way I see things. I will introduce the 'The Leslie Street Spit.' I came to witness the creative instinct at play as I was being slowly and exquisitely ambushed by a land formation.



*Leslie Street Spit – Aerial View.  
Image permission Toronto Harbour Authority*

Leslie Street is an arterial road that cradles the southeast side of Toronto at its rubble coaxed ever-further-into-Lake-Ontario end. There is a gate at the bottom of Leslie Street, the threshold between the road and 'The Leslie Street Spit'. Affectionately called 'The Spit,' it is a human-made peninsula extending south-westerly into Lake Ontario. The original purpose was to build a commercial harbour. Almost immediately it became redundant. Plans changed to accommodate dumping of an endless supply of rubble generated by building and development booms of the '60's and '70's. There is a part of me where optimism and remnants of '60's flower child still reside. The unfolding of 'The Spit' into an urban wilderness that was never in the city's plans delights that part of me.

Today, responsibility for 'The Spit' is divided along its narrow length: the southern half facing the city has been designated a wilderness nature reserve managed by the city's Conservation Authority. The northern half, the responsibility of the Toronto Harbour Authority, faces the open water of Lake Ontario. It is the dumping zone where columns of fill-laden trucks arrive on weekdays to unload their cargo from the demolition of the built world. Or art materials, depending on your point of view.

The juxtaposition of purposes for 'The Spit' is intriguing. It fuels the energy crackling so tangibly and clearly at this meeting edge of intentions. I see 'The Leslie Street Spit' as an expanded understanding of an ecotone. The word originates from the Greek word: tonos/tension. It is the threshold, sudden or gradual, narrow or wide, between two different patches of landscape. An ecotone has its own characteristics in addition to sharing certain characteristics of the two meeting communities. I believe this permeable divide is responsible for a magical quality. While standing in the present moment on this slender junction that is 'The Leslie Street Spit,' it is possible to look metaphorically and literally back and forward in time; to experience simultaneously the present moment, memory and possibility.

'The Spit' is an ecotone where the meeting of two urban purposes has created a fine edge between the destruction of the built world and the gradual, easily unnoticed repossession by the natural world. The electricity of the human instinct to create rides this edge.

Rubble art is the result.

At the less travelled most rubbled, raw, pushing-into-Lake-Ontario reaches, the artworks are waiting to be found – anonymous, left behind; made with materials at hand. They appear like mushrooms over night, are altered, disappear without a trace, are resurrected, reincarnated; and often are the result of sequential collaboration.

I began as a weekend visitor years ago. Over the past 5 years a slowly emerging consciousness has transformed my perception of ‘The Spit’ from that of an appreciative casual visitor into a relationship of astonishing depth.

Here lies a quintessential example of the vibrant interplay between the human psyche and our surround as it exists in urban locations.



- A large body of water, the symbol for the collective unconscious, surrounds ‘The Leslie Street Spit’.
- ‘The Spit’ itself is symbolic of the collective conscious in the fragments of the built world found there.
- The personal conscious is in the physical existence of the creative expressions that materialize spontaneously and anonymously.
- Finally, the personal unconscious -- the fertile, deep place which drives the need to create -- lies at the heart of these creative works.

This magical location offers entry to a relationship. It is a portal to transformation and transcendence. Crucial to the mystery of ‘The Spit’ is its wild nature -- an unpredictable place. It is essential that the art works found there are ephemeral, un-organized and that their genesis and authorship are secrets owned by ‘The Spit’. The art holds the tension between the need to create and the transience of its expression, a precarious balance of creation and destruction, birth and death and rebirth.



We have access on weekends. Please come with me.



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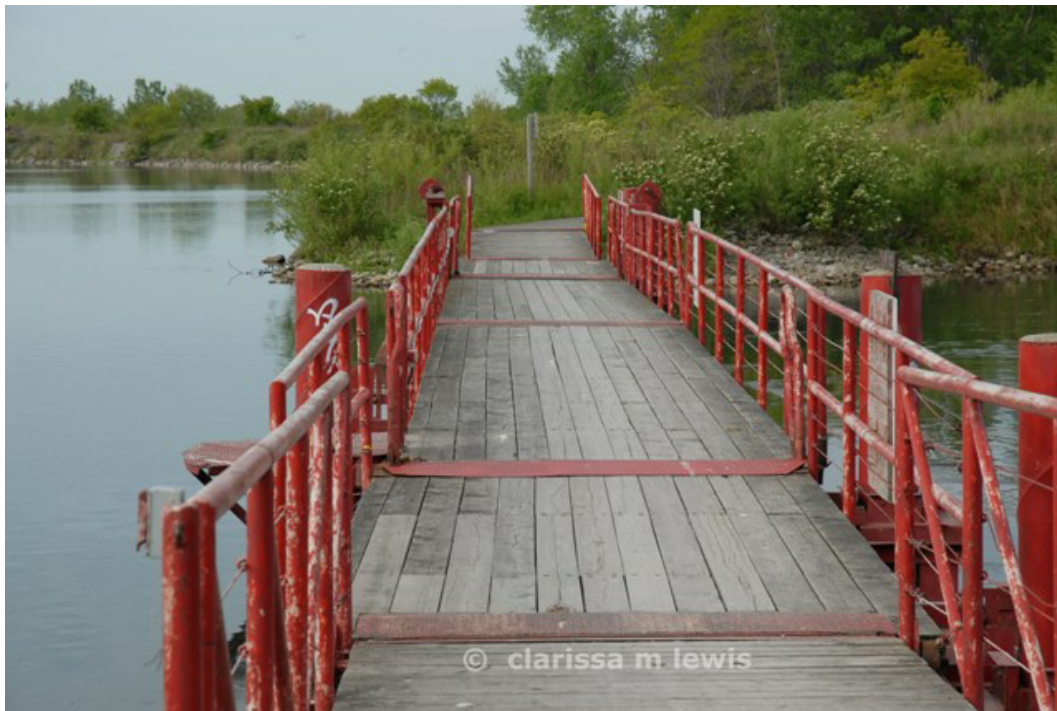


The gate opens at 9:00 but we are here earlier. Whether on a bicycle or walking you can squeeze in at an opening between the fence and the gate. I like this early unofficial admission time because I know I will find no artists at work. An important, no, an urgently important aspect of this experience is to hold the mystery unsolved. I think it keeps me closer to a meeting of the ‘unconscious.’

We travel along the entrance road, paved, wide and much used,



then, cross here.



The road width is consistent from the entrance but once we've crossed the bridge the scrub growth encroaches, less troubled by traffic.



Shoulders gone, shrubs and grasses lean in. Little snakes scurry out of the way.



Martins atop small houses, staking claim. The chatter of sanctuary birds so loud for a moment it feels like a gabble filled party.

We see this startling strong determination:



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and this terrible beauty:



the stressed hosting trees, overharvested by cormorants; the beauty of denuded silhouettes; light against blue sky; dark against an overcast sky.

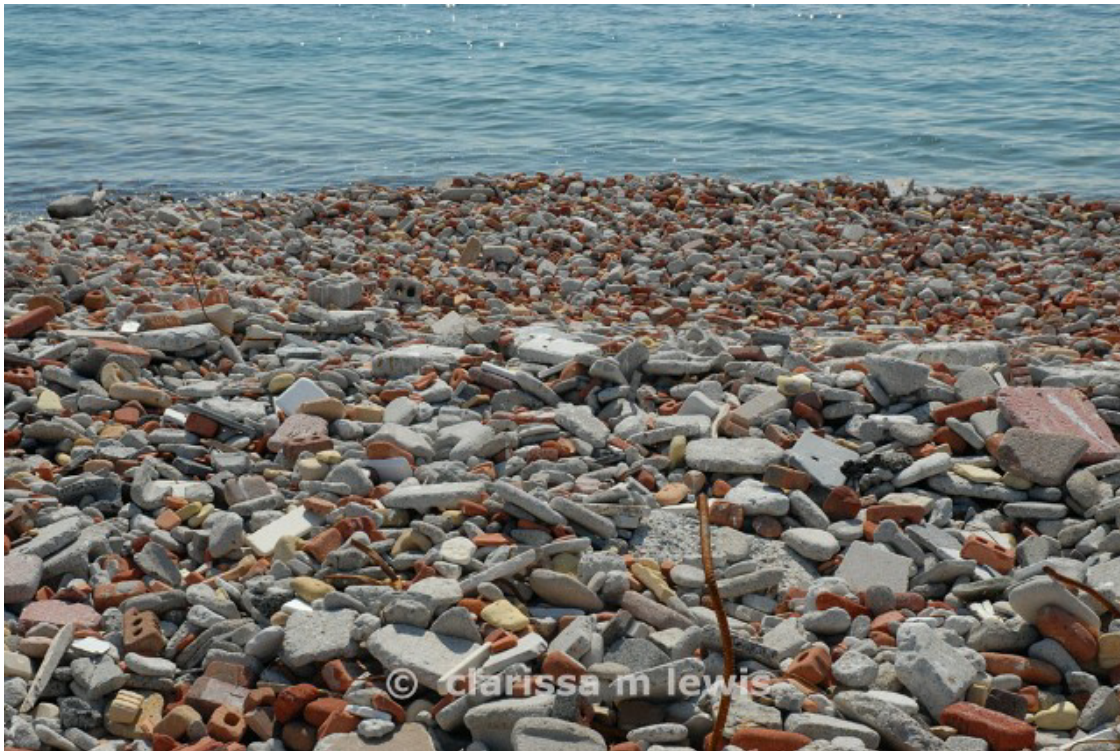
I'm directing your attention to these things because they set the stage; prepare the heart and mind to receive what lies ahead.

• • •

And now we arrive where the pavement ends. The road narrows to a rough two-track path, winding its way teardrop shaped, around a high-on-the-hill lighthouse.



We've arrive at the most remote and narrowest part of 'The Spit'. From here we see exposed rubble everywhere on the lake side.



The artworks we've come to find stand out boldly



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or are camouflaged within their surroundings



It is imperative to look carefully, to scan without hurry, to hush.

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Gradually and imperceptibly over the years, I became more thoughtfully curious about all of this. My curiosity intensified and evolved into a need to witness and record that I did not understand. So strong has that need become that I feel an irresistible compulsion to go to do the work that feels as if it is expected of me. During the past couple of years I have become mindful of a grow-

ing relationship with and to that environment; in particular of the interplay between the natural and deconstructed urban worlds; between the creative instinct and its expression, and of my response.



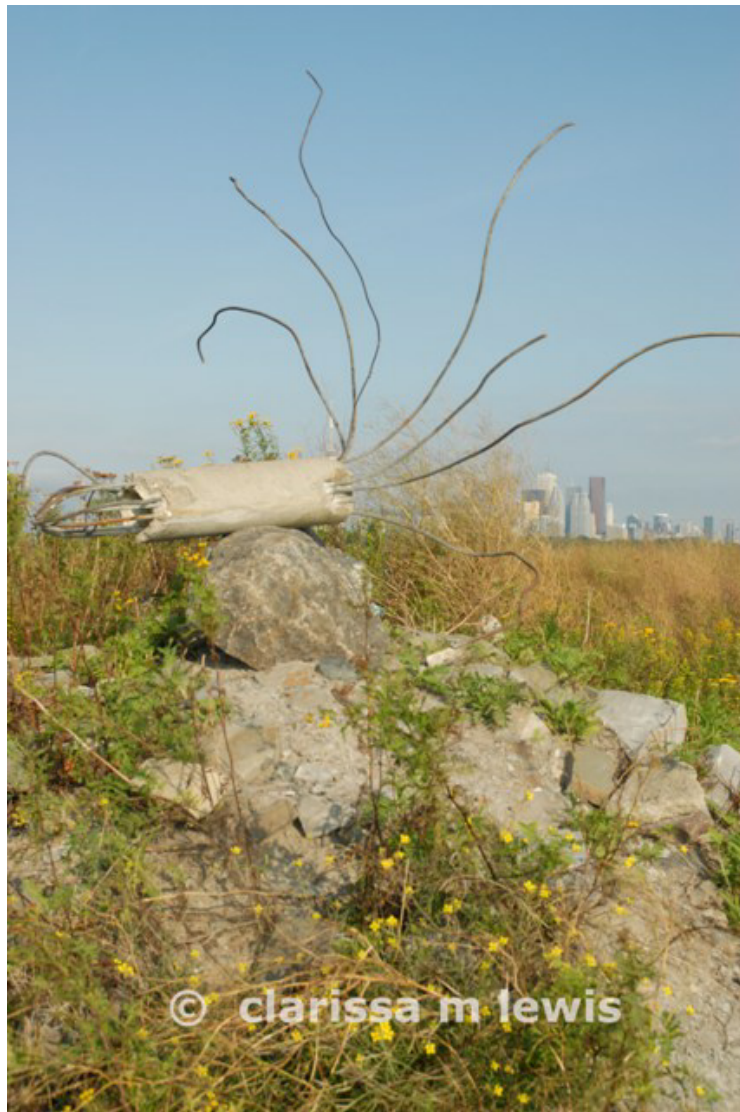
With this laying on of my grandmother's sampler made as a school assignment at the age of 11, together with a recreation of a crown of flowers like my grandmother braided for my mother and then my mother for me and then me for my daughters, I wanted to see how my experience of the deconstructed city would be altered by this gesture. I was interested in the passage of time and how this metaphorical telescoping and overlaying of it might affect my perception of history; might spark a reflection on the notion of history and its personal outcomes. I was interested in how the feminine and masculine (in the Jungian understanding of them rather than personal gender) would relate to one another as a result of this imaging of them.

• • •



Looking back? I truly have been ambushed. I have fallen in love with and am in awe of this very edge of the dance of transformation and transcendence. My need to witness and record continues. On occasion I've felt drawn to add small interventions, wanting to participate in the sequential collaborations. Following is a small selection of images tracking evidence of creative instinct at play.

The Rebar Creature is so far the only constant in its many transformations and relocations since I began this project in 2008. Unless otherwise noted, all are as found, without intervention by me.



April 14, 2008



July 17, 2010



June 11, 2011



June 26, 2011 (with intervention)



August 20, 2011



September 15, 2011



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May 20, 2012



May 26, 2012

• • •



Small dream houses come and go,



May 12, 2012

each year becoming more ambitious



May 14, 2012

and in turn the impact of destructive gestures on them.



May 26, 2012

The tentative small beginning of 'do-over' somehow poignant to observe.



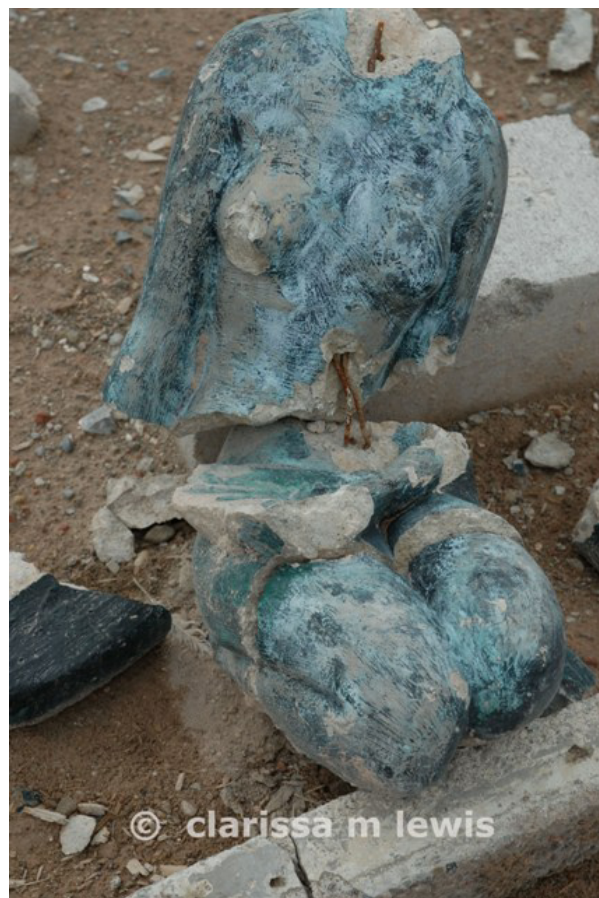
July 1, 2012

• • •

My first meeting of the Blue Madonna was in the newest most active dumping sector. I was taken by her immediately, small and steadfast. The compassion she evoked was unmistakable in the efforts of passersby to keep her intact.



August 20, 2011



August 20, 2011

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September 11, 2011 Blue Madonna with Wreath (with intervention)



September 18, 2011

Delight this day! To find the orange pylon marking her place, to think that someone else was also interested in her.



October 9, 2011



February 18, 2012





March 25, 2012

At the end, all that remained of her was the pylon marker and some half hidden bits of blue-painted concrete over the rubble cliff. A few weeks later: the little Madonna five months gone, the pylon still there, tipped over; that small flower nearby, all by itself, no obvious cause for it springing up there.

• • •

My adult self has come to concede the existence of synchronicities that I had no qualms accepting as a child. I seem no longer able to rationalize my way out of respecting them. Still, I'm shy to feel like someone who is honoured by them. And then I was broadsided by this one:



June 10, 2012

There it was alone and crimson, the kind of red that's lit from within, that seems to have a beat.

I almost did not stop. Flowers are not my purpose. I lost my internal wrestling match, got off my bike to find this:



Had I not caved in, I would not have seen this magnificent 6' tall fellow over the edge of the rubble cliff.

Of course, I scrambled down to get up close!





The next week, these had popped up and again, the internal wrestle: stop, move on, stop, move on, STOP!



June 17, 2012

Stop it was. Had I not, I would not have seen this:



What a significant experience I would have missed had I been convinced by the wrong argument.

• • •

I don't doubt for a moment that our relationship, 'The Spit' and mine, will expand and deepen as I become increasingly open to witnessing and to consciousness of the creative and divine aspect of the unconscious. Even within the most recent few visits I'm astonished by an ability to hold without judgment or opinion, but instead with curiosity and compassion both the creative and destructive forces that ride the ecotone.

In February 2012 I flinched at the sight of a completely, totally, leveled rubble field. Only the re-bar creature remained untouched. The bulldozers had done a thorough job. My response sur-

prised me. Together with the flinch came a wave of faith in 'The Spit's' ability to sweet-whisper to this season's creative souls.



February 18, 2012



In June 2012, I saw this:



and this, rejoicing in brick hurling success.



And this month [July 2012]

The seagull bodies one week.



July 8, 2012 encased in their tiny rubble homages the next.



July 15, 2012



July 8, 2012



July 15, 2012

It is odd that in these deepening five years, only recently have I seen evidence of this juxtaposition to the creative instinct so vividly displayed in human behaviour. Perhaps it is only recently that I've been ready to recognize 'The Spit' as holding opposing human-borne forces temporarily in balance. Is this the way of all harmonious existence? This balance held by the tension of the opposites?

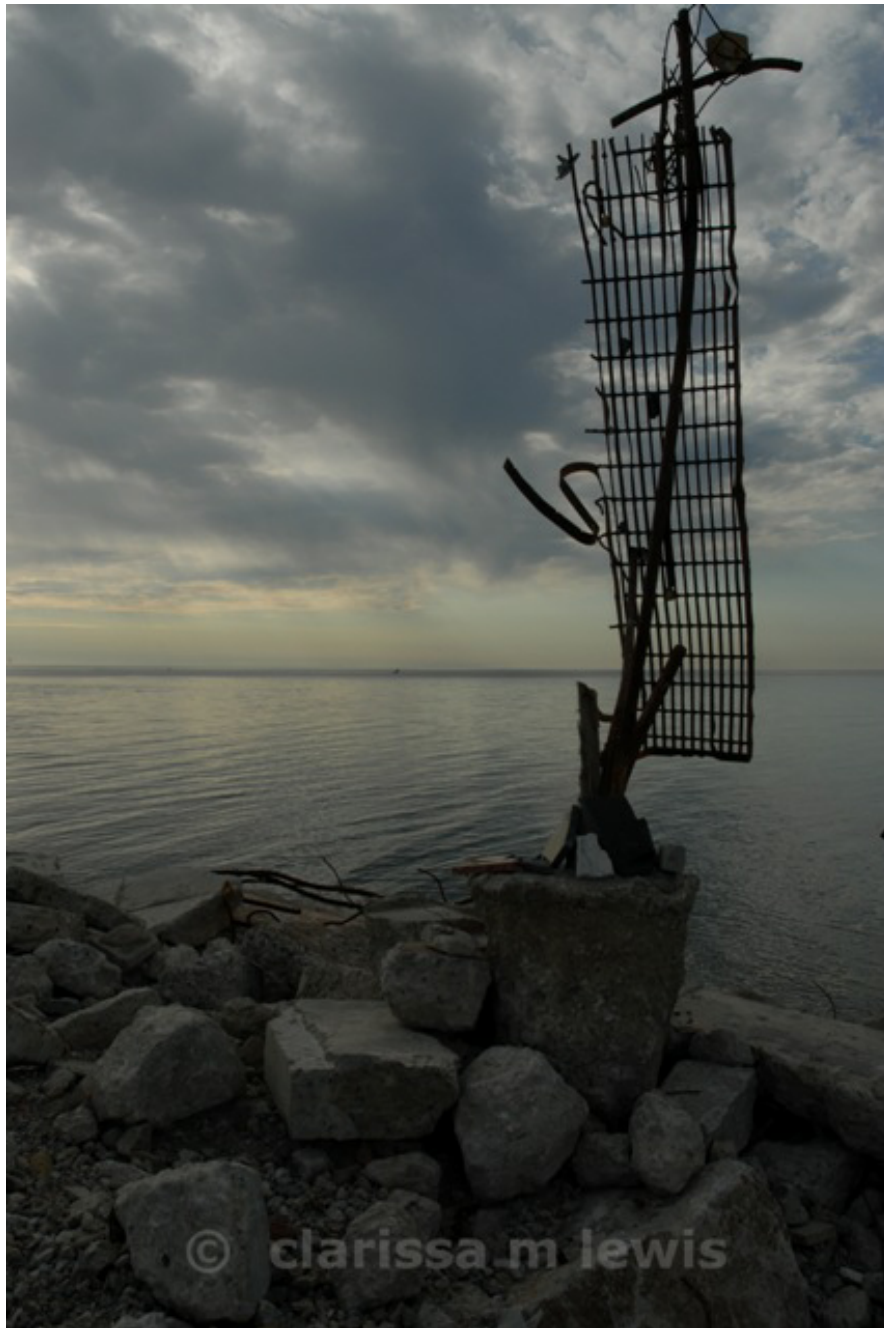
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October 9, 2011

Terry Tempest Williams [American author, conservationist and activist] describes an ecotone in this way:

“It’s where it’s most alive...It’s that interface between peace and chaos. It’s that creative edge that we find most instructive. It’s also the most frightening, because it’s completely uncertain and unpredictable ...” American Public Media Interview, Feb 2011



July 1, 2012

I would like to leave you with this:

- to embrace 'The Spit' as an ecotone, as the playground for the creative instinct
- to recognize its metaphor
- to be in awe of its mystery and surprised by its revelations



- to stand on its slender being right now looking at once at the past and future of matter and to see the divine
- to be in wonder of the harmony in the tension of its opposites
- to never lose that wonder

That's the thing! The thing to take away, intense and deeply personal – expansive and completely universal.



With Appreciation to the ARAS website, in particular for the papers of Diane Fremont and Sylvester Wojkowski for their orientation to a Jungian view of art and psyche and for their inspiration.

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