

PHENOMENOLOGY – MAKING PLACE ONE'S PROPERTY



I have been visiting the island of Bornholm in the Baltic south of Sweden over the last few years – another exploration through an archaeological sensibility of the archipelago of the North Sea [Link]. This year has involved something of a virtual conversation with the ghost of Chris Tilley. I heard that at the time of his death last March he was planning a visit, an expedition to the island, and I have been recalling the summer of 1988 I spent with him exploring archaeological experiences of prehistoric sites and monuments in Sweden [Link]. Tilley had come to stand for what got called an archaeological phenomenology (he considered it anthropology, not archaeology) – close attention to embodied and located experiences of ruins and remains as a means of establishing connections and understanding of people in the past. I have been thinking again about phenomenology [Link].

Last week I came across the work of Oluf Høst, a twentieth century painter (1884 – 1966) who made his home on the island at Gudhjem (God's home).

A lifelong motif in his art is a farm, Bognemark. He painted and repainted the place over decades. The works hang together as painterly explorations of weather, atmosphere, light, seasons, with occasional appearances of ghostly figurative

forms, and the constant of an abstract infrastructure – the composition of farm buildings.

The constraint of iterative focus upon a subject is a familiar conceit in the arts. Høst was very aware of Cezanne's series of still lifes and especially the paintings of Mont St Victoire, of Monet's many studies of the cathedral at Rouen. I have used this device myself in a series of some 3000 photographs, taken over a decade, of an apple tree near our place in Northern California – [\[Link\]](#) [\[Link\]](#).



Oluf Høst. Bognemark, Gudhjem, Bornholm.



So what is the connection with phenomenology – that philosophical and methodological concern with the qualities of (human) experience?

The conceit of iterative return to the same subject shifts focus from represented subject matter (a farm, a bowl of fruit, a mountain, a tree) to processes of experience, to how we relate to things, to modes of engagement and mediation – cognition and attention, evaluation and sensation in experience of things, and their transformations through text, image, sound, touch. These are all matters of phenomenological concern.

Høst's journals show that the farm was his personal inspirational locus for such (phenomenological) explorations in his meticulous attention to qualities of located experiences via the proxy of pigment and paint.

And Bognemark was also a metonym – for the north, a correlative for Nordic experiences-in-place.

“A sky can be both yellow and blue: a fairy tale.”

“Bognemark’s western extension late in the year must be the color of nature itself: old age, sun, and moisture.”

“Look, how blue is the wind.”

“Cézanne did not engage with the hazy four-dimensional; he proceeded along the exhausting path of experience.”

“Intense textural sensation – intimate textural sensation – a sense of material.”

“Blue is the basic Nordic tone.”

Tilley was little concerned with mediation. While his writing sometimes adapted what one might call documentary and somewhat academic thick description, he did not discuss media and style [\[Link\]](#).

Tilley was very much concerned, even obsessed, with mode of engagement. To achieve a transcendental immediacy of experience (of ruins and remains) he held that one must live in place, make place the everyday, return and focus attention in an *embodied familiarity* with one’s place of interest, one’s subject of study [\[Link\]](#) [\[Link\]](#). Tilley is one with Høst in this emphasis upon familiarity. And upon the transcendental – experiences (of places and things) that take us out of the ordinary and the local.

Høst’s works make me think of another aspect to this mode of engagement.

One can legitimately say Høst was obsessed with Bognemark (The Oluf Høst Museum even held an exhibition under this title a few years back). He bought it in the 1930s to make sure only he had access to the place to paint it (a fellow painter,

Niels Lergaard, also had his eyes on the place). He invented the farm's name. He visited every day – it was just up from his house by the beach and harbor at Gudhjem.

The farm was very much Høst's property. He desired to own the experience. Originally called Skovly, after purchase in 1935 Høst renamed it Baunemark, Bågnemark, then Bognemark. Reference is probably to *bavne*, a beacon on high ground used by Vikings to warn of war. The renaming was part of the long process of making the place mythical – transcendental.

The phenomenological tension is between the individual and intimate qualities of experience, and concepts, values, aspects that transcend. Høst's transcendental was nature, the north, and long term inhabitation. For Tilley it was embodied and located qualities of experience that connected past and present, the shared features of experience in the human condition [Link].

As part of this phenomenological engagement Tilley set up home in the landscapes he loved and studied. Høst took the further step of making home his personal property – the abstraction of the commodity.

What is to be done when there are neither options? When one might never be at home in place?



“I must have this for my sole use.”

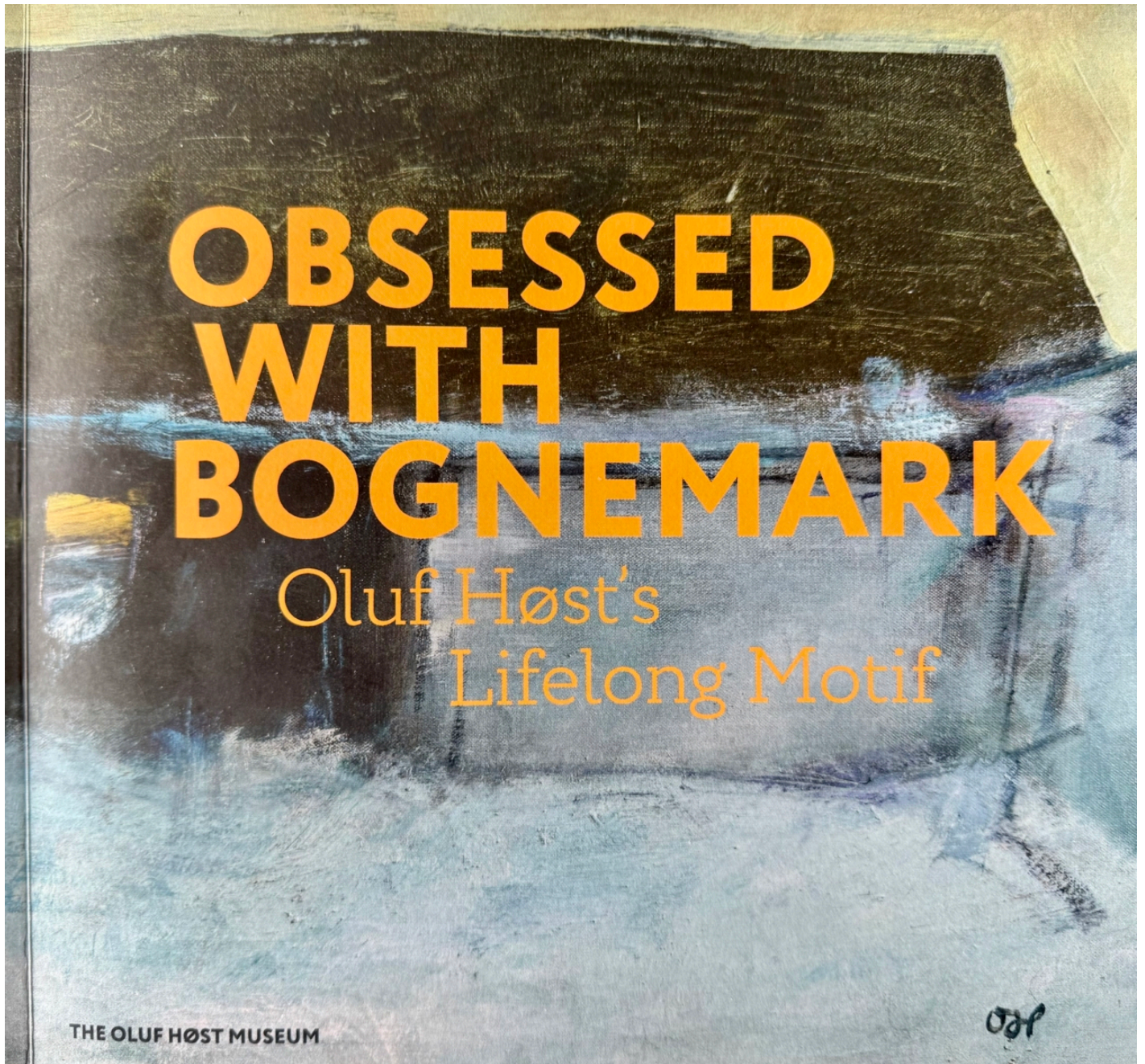






Norresân, Gudhjem, Høst's house, now the Oluf Høst Museum.

"Well, it's a beautiful house, but how bourgeois" – comment made by rival artist Niels Lergaard who was prevented from painting Bognemark by Høst's purchase.



The book accompanying the exhibition held in 2020.