

Connecting people with landscape

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This piece explores the ways we can connect to the landscape through arts-based and experimental filmmaking techniques, based on my own artistic practice. It is illustrated using a selection of sketches, diagrams and photographs that have emerged from an artistic research project that attempts to engage people with the Cornish landscape as co-creators, or, people who participate *in* the landscape. The motivation for my practice comes from a perceived disconnection to the natural world, or ‘landscape’. In art, the term ‘landscape’ typically evokes a static, and often romanticized, scene viewed from a single perspective. My research aims to reclaim the idea of landscape as not just the land we have shaped, but as something that equally shapes us. Throughout my practice, audio-visual materials are not merely documentation or fieldwork recordings, but are used to provoke thoughts on how we can connect and engage with the natural world.

Landscape and photography

In her book *On Photography* (1990), Susan Sontag questions the potential power dynamics between photographer and subject: “To photograph is to appropriate the thing photographed. It means putting oneself into a certain relation to the world that feels like knowledge – and, therefore, like power” (Sontag, 1990: 4). In an ecological context, this statement suggests the person holding the camera stakes their claim on what they are photographing. In the case of landscape photography, it is as if the land were a thing that could be owned through the photographic image. This form of ‘othering’ can position us as separate from and above nature.

In contrast, my suggestion is that we could be creating a connection through the act of taking a photograph. There is a focusing of attention that takes place when we engage with nature in a multi-sensory way, and a landscape as a subject is not necessarily objectified or othered. This would be a photographic

practice that immerses itself in the landscape rather than one that detaches itself from it.

Material culture researcher Sophie Woodward argues that photographs are objects that not only capture but, through their own material nature, produce knowledge. In this way, the photograph becomes its own object that actively mediates the person and landscape. Taking a photograph can thus produce “material and multi-sensory ways of knowing” (Woodward, 2020: 71), where meaning becomes entangled in the methods and materials used to communicate our environments.

Landscape architect James Corner (in Corner and Hirsch, 2014: 241) argues that landscape is a human construction that is understood through the image. As he puts it: “Landscape and image are inseparable. Without image there is no such thing as landscape, only unmediated environment”. While Corner makes a key point about the integral relation between image and landscape, his argument relies on a distinction between nature and culture, or the natural environment and humans – a distinction that belongs to a historically western perspective.

In contrast, like Woodward I would argue that images and photographs can aid a material understanding of, and engagement with, the natural world. A focus on the materiality of images subverts the dichotomy of nature–culture, allowing for a connection which, while mediated, is useful for seeing ourselves as part of the natural world. Further to this, I am interested in how a socially-engaged artistic practice can help us understand our position in the landscape – beyond us simply representing it as a ‘distant view’ – through embodied understanding and co-creation. A socially-engaged practice, or socially-engaged art, involves collaboration and participation in the creation of the artwork. People are often the “material of the work” (Tate Modern, 2022) and taking part in collective art-making can help to encourage conversation and connection around certain issues. As literary ecologist Joseph Meeker suggests, we need to work collaboratively and creatively in order to live and survive with the natural world (Meeker, 1980). In particular, rather than thinking of socially-engaged practices as strictly human-centred approaches, I am interested in what might emerge from working with people *in*, *through* and *with* nature, and how material approaches can help us to see ourselves as part of the same natural system.

Reconnecting with the natural world

My artistic research started with the questions, how can we reconnect to the natural world and can this connection or engagement be adequately captured and related audio-visually? The perceived disconnection I felt from my natural environment was personal; I am from Cornwall but do not know the names of most plants, nor can I identify many rocks (though this knowledge is improving), and I knew this was not uncommon. A recent article published in BBC Future (Ro, 2019) discusses the importance of recognizing the under-appreciation of plants in our own environments, or ‘plant blindness’. The effects are mutual: not only does an understanding of plants encourage us to

look after the environment, but the connection is also good for our mental health. Despite this alienation from nature (that can be attributed to increased urbanization and time spent with devices), there seems to be a renewed interest in the arts, humanities and social sciences to reengage our understanding of the natural world through new interdisciplinary paradigms and knowledge. One of the dominant approaches in this ‘turn to matter’ over the last couple of decades is *new materialism*, which acknowledges matter as having its own agency and not separate from meaning, thereby challenging the nature–culture dualism (e.g. Barad, 2007).

In a similar drive to reconnect with nature and a concern for our impact on the world, many artists are applying natural pigments and dyes to their work. In photography, there is a rise in alternative processes such as lumen, anotype and chlorophyll printing that experiment with plant-based pigments and properties to develop images as opposed to using industrial developers that harm the environment. In addition, plant-based processes can conceptually and practically reinforce the content of an artwork; for example, phenolic compounds, found in many plants, are the agents responsible for actually developing a photograph.

Not only do these techniques involve plant and landscape agents alongside human ones, but experimental processes can also allow for unexpected connections and interpretations. I am interested in this as a form of engagement, where a focus on materials and processes that form an image can be seen as an additional layer of co-creative engagement. For example, in my work *Seaweed by Seaweed*, there are traces of the handmade process on the surface of the image that make visible the human actor’s engagement in the image-making process. In a similar vein, photographer Stephen Gill aspires to let nature make the work as he tries to remove himself as an agent in the photo-making process. Apart from using plant pigments in his processing, he often installs cameras in nature that are triggered by animal and plant movement to get “nature’s perspective” (Louisiana Channel, 2021).

My own artistic research practice emerged from how I go about making film work. Walking is often the first stage of this process; it allows me to be in a landscape and experience the associated sounds and other sensations. I regularly pause and take photographs, audio recordings and sometimes sketches. This work becomes a record of process and a paused experience, which I may incorporate into the film.

I recently designed and co-curated a project called *Moving Landscapes*, in order to extend my practice so that it involved more voices. Moving into socially-engaged practice, I was aiming for a more inclusive and collective understanding of landscapes, which could both engage participants and audiences, and help my own understanding through learning and connecting with others. Working with artists, all with a land-based practice, we each went on a specific circular walk around a different part of the Cornish landscape. I gave instructions which included making stops or pauses to record a section of scenery. We then made an audio recording that described what we were looking at or what was in that section of landscape. I printed the photographs and made

soundscapes from the fieldwork that became a further set of instructions for another group of people to engage with creatively. Crucially, this second group of participants were without access to the outdoors at the time, due to being vulnerable adults living with dementia (and their carers) during lockdown. The landscape packs offered them a way to engage with sections of land that they would otherwise not have been able to access. Additionally, it offered them a way into another person's artistic practice that connects with nature using various photographic and artistic techniques and materials.

In my filmmaking practice, I am interested in how marks and traces can contribute additional layers of understanding as indicators of multi-sensory knowing through process, and how they can offer different insights and interpretations to the viewer. More recently, I have begun thinking about how marks and textures as layers on the film surface could signify the voice of someone who has participated in the film's creation. Though this is still a work in progress, I am keen to develop this idea and make work where the social and material are not distinct from each other but co-exist, and are made visible through the filmmaking: working towards increased engagement and respect for the natural world, of which we are a part.

References

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Rachael's images

Examples of these (all from 2020 and 2021) appear on the pages that follow.



Trees and Roots (35mm stills film and collage)



Seaweed by Seaweed (image processed using seaweed developer)



Scanned artworks by participants from the *Moving Landscapes* project



Experiments in Engagement (film still)



Carn Marth Walk (film still)