Landscape Quartet: strategies for ecological sound art

Introduction

This paper reflects on the initial stages of a research project, called the 'Landscape Quartet', exploring practical strategies for ecological sound art and their significance. It is research with experimental art practice at its core, determining both research process and research outcomes (Borgdorff in Biggs & Karlsson 2010: 57), seeking to critically engage with notions of the environment and our relationship with it. Broadly speaking, it joins a number of other areas of arts practice, academic endeavour, and philosophical enquiry to question the paradigm of post-Enlightenment thinking, and offer critique on Cartesian notions of the world, perception, understanding, consciousness, and so on.

Metis Prelude [sound and images, in background]

I begin with an account of a performance of mine from the 2011 WFAE conference. The performance was an improvised hour-long multi-channel collage using field recordings made during three days of listening-led walks in Corfu town. Halfway into what was a hot and humid midday hour, storm winds began to rattle the open windows of the Old Fort’s Wheatstore – the venue for the performance. The wind and then rain began to weave their presence into the space; distant rumblings and thunder added their voices to an electric atmosphere. It was an exhilarating and arresting intervention that drew attention to my sense of separation between the containing architectural space of the venue and the weather-world outside by virtue of way these
circumstances, as they unfolded, acted to remove that same sense of separation.

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**Representation and Non-Representation**

Of particular concern to the Landscape Quartet project as a whole is the way certain mechanisms of representation, uncritically received, tend to support divisions characteristic of the Cartesian paradigm; for example between mind and body, culture and nature, and seeing and hearing. For one of my colleagues Bennett Hogg, this has meant exploring and arguing for modes of creative practice that are eco-systemic in approach (Hogg 2013).

[SLIDE 5 – HOGG VIDEO]

In contrast to a more conventionally distanced positioning of the artist, Hogg provides examples from a number of artists and ultimately his own practice that exhibit explicitly participative and active sounding relations with the environment through which he sees “a broader set of cultural practices in which the imperial power of ‘the human’ over the rest of the world is shifting in favour of what we might call a more eco-systemic engagement.” (1) His argument highlights the way post-Enlightenment representation, as the West’s culturally accepted normative ‘report on reality’, elicits an ideologically blind ‘othering’ of Nature. (3)

[SLIDE 6 – QUOTES]

Offering critique via theoreticians such as Tim Morton (‘in a society that took care of its surroundings in a more comprehensive way, our idea of environment would have withered away’ 2007: 141) and Salome Voegelin (‘there is no place where I am not heard … a philosophy of sound art […] necessitates an involved participation, rather than a detached viewing position’ 2010: xii) and artist Richard Long (‘my art is the essence of my experience, not a representation of it’ 2007: 26), Hogg presents eco-systemic engagement as a move from representation to participation, where the involvement of the improvising listener/maker resists at “every possible register the split between subject and object, culture and nature, splits that are played out in representation over and over again.” (7)
A counterpart to these ideas can be found in the theoretical and methodological formulations of non-representational theory originating in the work of human geographer Nigel Thrift. Arising, in part, from a similar dissatisfaction of the privileging of the visual and failure to problematise representation (Thrift 1996: 4), it conceives the world in practical and processual terms, and as something in a perpetual state of becoming. (Waterton 20xx: xx) More a style of thinking, than a single theoretical framework, it is not against representation per se but rather argues that in order to take representation seriously, we need first to understand it ‘not as a code to be broken’ but as instances, events and practices that are performative in and of themselves. (Dewsbury et al. 2002: 438, cited in Waterton 20xx: xx)

Instead of privileging the visual, all the senses are foregrounded, with an emphasis on “embodiment, encounters, performances and practices, and an understanding of objects and contexts as active constitutive elements in all actions and interactions.” (Waterton 20xx: xx, citing Thrift 1996, 1999, 2003, 2008) Additionally, affect, and related pre-conscious and pre-cognitive intuitive triggers also play important roles in this realignment of ways of knowing, doing and making sense of our place in the world. (Pile 2010)

As Hogg among others points out, notions of landscape and environment have for some time been understood in terms of representation: as things somehow to be captured and understood through sight. Non-representational theory offers a commanding remodelling of notions of landscape and our relationship to it that help further define Hogg’s notion of ‘eco-systemic engagement.’ As Emma Waterton explains in her recent chapter Landscape and Non-Representational Theories, landscapes, re-imagined as capable of affecting, provoking, stimulating and doing, become fluid and animating processes rather than static backdrops. (20xx: xx) Landscapes not only surround us, but they “force us to think – through their contexts, prompts and familiarity (or not)” (Waterman 20xx: xx, after Dewsbury 2010): body and landscape are recursively entwined, constitutive and constituting, always in a process of (re)formation. (xx)
In a similar way, anthropologist Tim Ingold, in his confrontation of the division between the ‘two worlds’ of nature and society, argues for what he calls a dwelling perspective that views “the immersion of the organism-person in an environment or lifeworld as an inescapable condition of existence … [where] the world continually comes into being around the inhabitant.” (CHECK QUOTE PE 153) And from within this perspective the human being is necessarily conceived not as a ‘composite entity made up of separable but complementary parts, such as body, mind, and culture, but rather as a singular locus of creative growth within a continually unfolding field of relationships.’ (2000: 4) The unfolding of these relationships – and arguably the forms of practice, performance and eco-systemic engagement already referred to – is theorised by Ingold in relation to movement. (Lee & Ingold 2007: 76) ‘Life on the spot,’ he writes, ‘surely cannot yield an experience of place’, because ‘every somewhere must lie on one or several paths of movement to and from places elsewhere.’ (2007: 2) The movement of dwellers is defined by Ingold in the act of ‘wayfinding’ where people ‘feel their way through a world that is itself in motion, continually coming into being […]’ (PE 155) And ‘far from being ancillary to the … collection of data … for subsequent processing, movement is … the inhabitant’s way of knowing’. (CHECK QUOTE 2011: 154)

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We can summarise these ideas as follows: knowledge and meaning emerge by virtue of movements and practices performed within and through our relational and situated contexts of being. Put another way, experience of the landscape is fundamentally multi-layered and multi-sensual, more-than-representational (Lorimer 2005: 83), and perceptions of and insight into both the landscape and ourselves, knowing and being-known, are forged in the inescapable interconnectivity of the two. On this basis, useful methodological parallels exist for the Landscape Quartet with social science research where corporeal knowledge, feeling, and sensuous engagements are drawn upon in relation to how identities are shaped and triggered by acts of being and doing. (Waterton 2011) And we can argue that through the formulations of being and doing specific to art practice there resides the possibility of research processes and outcomes uniquely positioned to interpret and explore such relationally constituted and experientially rooted forms of knowledge. I want now to explore some connections between these ideas and the sound art practice I’ve been developing as
part of the Landscape Quartet project.

**Wicken Fen Weather-world: ‘in, of, and for’ place** [sound and images]

[SLIDE 11 – WICKEN FEN PHOTO & AUDIO]

Building on previous work, listening and walking, usually over a number of days, have become integral to my practice methodology as the initial stage for any performance. In essence it facilitates a multisensory fusion of *being* and *doing* that binds feelings of place and self across a variety of registers (including not only sound, but also, for example memory, physicality, encounters with non-human animals and vegetation, imagination, smell-sound-sight, pre-cognitive and pre-conscious intuitions, and so on), and initiates a process of attunement from which artistic responses gradually surface. These are responses that can be understood as being ‘in’, ‘of’ and ‘for’ the environment.¹

[SLIDE 12 – PERFORMANCE SET-UP]

As a complement to this listening/walking method, and arising specifically from my experiences in Corfu, I have developed a performance set-up that allows for improvised location-specific electronic performance. Technically, this comprises of vibrational speakers that play through any suitably resonant material within the environment, and live sampling with sound modifications achieved through a combination of an iPad running SampleWiz and a Korg Kaoss Pad. Any resulting improvised performance is intended as a direct and holistic response to my experience of and engagement with place, including all that has contributed to the point of performance and the performance itself.

10’30

[SLIDE 13 – EAST MERE HIDE VIDEO – 6mins of text to end]

+ 1’30 of video on end = 7’30min vid

No audience as such is invited or typically present, although video and audio recordings document the process with the understanding that they

¹ This idea comes from one my colleagues on the project, Sabine Vogel, who described our duo work at the Jubilee Well along the Wansbeck River, Morpeth UK, in this way.
will contribute to a later stage of artistic production, an example of which you can now see and partially hear. This example comes from part of the Landscape Quartet project exploring memories of childhood homelands, which for me has led to the area of South East England known as the fens, specifically the National Trust nature reserve Wicken Fen and some of its bird hides.

‘in’ the environment
The central basis of the practice is to occur ‘in’ the experience of the landscape or environment. As I have already described, preparation and performance, conceptual and practical, are initiated in the landscape (the relational context of a processual unfolding and situated immediacy), and emanate from attentiveness to sensations and emergent meanings that arise from it.

‘of’ the environment
Extending this, it is ‘of’ the landscape through processes of *wayfinding* where a ‘way through’ is felt and intuited. This includes waiting and simply not knowing what the next step might be, alongside clearer kinds of directive insight as well as other more questioning kinds of active practical exploration. In a more material sense this ‘of-ness’ is found in the recycling of what is already to be heard in the air, as it is returned, modified, and re-sounded through materials already *of* the environment, with their own specific connections of shape, density, weathering, purpose, history, and so on.

‘for’ the environment
Finally, it is ‘for’ the landscape in that from a perspective that affirms the dialogic, constitutive and constituting, relations between the landscape and self, environment and body, it is an art practice that can be understood as much for the environment as it is for human edification. Speaking personally, my experience is that these performances inhabit or generate a kind of liminal and shared space, that serves to ritualise the ontological reality of this reciprocity.

This *in/of/for* characterisation follows Tim Ingold, following Merleau-Ponty, in his claim that light, sound, and the weather-world of earth and sky are ontologically prior to the visual, the aural and the landscape, and agrees with his argument that (I quote): ‘To regain the currents of life, and of sensory awareness, we need to join in the movements that give rise to things rather than casting our attention back upon their objective and objectified forms. We need, in a word, to undo the operation of
inversions, abandoning the fixities of genes, images, recordings and landscapes for the generative movements, respectively, of life, light, sound and weather.’ (97) My performance practice can be understood as an experimental method seeking to ontologically realign myself and itself with such generative flows and the threads of perception and feeling issuing from them. Again, quoting Ingold, he writes, “To be sentient is to open up to a world, to yield to its embrace, and resonate in one’s inner being to its illuminations and reverberations. Bathed in light, submerged in sound and rapt in feeling, the sentient body, at once both perceiver and producer, traces the paths of the world’s becoming in the very course of contributing to its ongoing renewal.” (BA 12)

Such ‘openings up’ (as perceiver/producer, listener/maker) yield particular kinds of meaning and links back to my experience in Corfu. When the ready boundaries of perception and consciousness are loosened we find our ego-selves taking off for while to allow for more expanded states of consciousness. This, we might argue, is the prized goal of many a practice rightfully carried out, be it in sport, cooking, intimacy between friends, meditation, and so on. As cultural geographer David Crouch writes in relation to the concept of ‘spacing’ (an active verb used to contrast the static noun of ‘landscape’): “To ‘feel’ landscape in the expressive poetics of spacing is a way to imagine one’s place in the world. The individual can feel so connected with space that s/he no longer is aware, momentarily, of being (merely) human; we may become the event, become the landscape.” (Crouch 2010: 14) Common to artists, musicians and in particular free improvisers (see Becker 2004, Nachmanovitch 1990 and Sansom 2007), it is this kind of connective and ontological knowing that the Wicken Fen performances also pursue, inhabit and celebrate, and where ‘in’, ‘of’ and ‘for’ conflate still further. It is perhaps as a form of practice circulating around the development of this kind of knowledge that its activist credentials reside. As Tim Ingold suggests, we can view the activities leading to the production of what we call in the West ‘art’ “not as ways of representing the world of experience on a higher, more symbolic plane, but of probing more deeply into it and discovering the significance that lies therein.” (PE 11)

video run for 1’30 to end

[SLIDE 14 – le fin]

[SLIDE 15 – REFERENCES]
REFERENCES


