Practicing Landscape: Field Guide No. 2

Landscapes of Energy and Extraction:

Landscape as Archive

Foreword

Susan Brind

Welcome to the second publication in Reading Landscape's Field Guide series 'Landscape as Archive': a collaboration between Gina Wall (Glasgow School of Art) and Alex Hale (Historic Environment Scotland – HES) that evidences Reading Landscape's engagement in interdisciplinary dialogue and collaboration.

For 10 years we have nurtured partnerships with anthropologists, archaeologists, geographers, ecologists, urban planners, legal and Scottish Government policy makers: through projects and exhibitions, as well as online and live seminars[1]. Working alongside external partners has prompted us to re-think what the term 'landscape' might include, and mixing creative practices with other knowledges has allowed subtle understandings and new research methodologies to be shared. Specifically, over a 6-year period, Gina Wall and Alex Hale have been exploring how art and archaeology might develop innovative research methods.

In the Summer of 2018, in collaboration with other Reading Landscape members, Gina and Alex worked at Scalan Mills, Morayshire devising expressive, experimental and experiential ways of recording a unique heritage site, documenting barns with graffiti dating from the 19th Century pencilled onto their wooden interiors: texts that captured the voices, environmental conditions, and social history of the locality. Following this research, more traditional archaeological survey methods were shared by Alex and colleagues from HES as Gina and others learnt how to conduct an optical instrument survey in Garnethill Park, Glasgow; a site retaining traces of several public art interventions dating from 1978 to the present.

[1] For further information about Reading Landscape's online seminar series, as well as other projects, please visit our website: https:/readingthelandscapesite.com/

Gina and Alex have co-authored conference papers and journal articles informed by these experiences, "where disciplinary certainties and known practices are unsettled, expanded and re-cast[2]." Beyond these outputs, they independently contribute to wider dialogues about archaeology of the contemporary world through two related interdisciplinary research networks funded by the Royal Society of Edinburgh: firstly, #3M_DO_2019; and secondly, the International Network for Contemporary Archaeology in Scotland (INCAScot), to which other Reading Landscape members contribute also.

The particular focus of this publication results from Gina and Alex fieldwalking[3] the site of GSA's Highlands and Islands Campus on the Altyre estate, Forres, where Gina is based. Like many landscapes, this place has had various guises. It is a palimpsest where different temporalities co-exist in the present. In its current manifestation it includes the family home of Clan Cummings, owners of the estate for over 800 years, as well as heritage-listed architecture dating from the 19th Century. Less obvious is the presence of a Gothic archway in the walled garden, possibly retrieved from the 12th Century Elgin Cathedral and, more deeply embedded in the ground(s), the remains of a Bronze Age site (around 4,000 years before present). It is this latter feature that forms the focus of Gina and Alex's dialogue here: presenting evidence of a Cist that has, through time and archaeology, been covered, uncovered, and re-discovered; material and bodily matter being dematerialised and re-distributed in the process. Their thoughtful and creative consideration of the archive held within and beyond this particular site is what allows Gina and Alex, through their research process, and Michael Mersinis in his response, to think below the surface; to re-align or re-attach objective and analytical modes of categorisation to our subjective, poetic and imaginal worlds.

[2] See: Wall, Gina and Alex Hale, 'Art & Archaeology: Uncomfortable Archival Landscapes'. https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1111/jade.12316, first published in the International Journal of Art and Design Education, 2020.
[3] A non-invasive archaeological method used to build up a picture of human activity in a given area.

Landscape as Archive

Gina Wall & Alex Hale

There are over 2700 cists recorded in the National Record of the Historic Environment for Scotland (NRHE). Cists /ˈkɪsts/ are the archaeological remainders of a Bronze Age burial rite that comprise discrete, but defined spaces in the landscape. Often no larger than a wheeled suitcase, cists are made up of stone slabs set on edge and covered with a heavy capstone. They mark a pause in the landscape, where a person has been laid to rest.

Archaeologists have demonstrated through excavation that people were placed in cists as bodies or after cremation. A cremated human weighs roughly between 1-1.5 kgs. As the space is closed by the placing of a capstone it becomes something else, a vessel in the landscape for their afterlife. The space is big enough to hold them and perhaps some earthly things, like a pot, some metalwork or jewellery. This enslabbed space evokes thoughts of an ending, a body at rest, but also a foretelling, an 'open-ended gathering'[1].

This field guide aims to explore some of these thoughts through materials and materialities, enlivened by the Loch of Blairs cist in Moray, Scotland, which re-surfaced in July 1931.

Fig. 3. Cist at Loch of Blairs, Morayshire, showing end slab slightly displaced.

1931

The Loch of Blairs cist was re-discovered during the digging of a sand and gravel quarry into a glacial mound, to provide material for the development of the road network. From a brief report published in the Proceedings of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland[2], it was investigated by J. Graham Callander, director of the National Museum of Antiquities. His words shed light on what was noticed at the time. The cist contained cremated bones and a broken pot, in archaeological terms identified as a Food Vessel. This form of pottery was in circulation around 4000 years ago, based on typological dating[3].

The report was accompanied by a photograph of the cist, taken from the south, looking into the dark void that had been made by the excavators creating an opening in the corner between the end and a side slab. The cist sits high up in the freshly-dug face of the quarry and the capstone is still in place. Upon opening and inspection, some objects from the cist were removed. Fragments of the Food Vessel and some cremated bones were taken to the National Museum in Edinburgh. It was the intention of Alister Gordon Cumming to fence off the site and leave it as it had been discovered[4]. Despite some of the contents of the cist being taken away in 1931, the place remained, an open-ended reminder of a person's life.

We can suppose that the re-surfacing of the cist, as a result of road building, didn't recover all of the remains of the person who was laid to rest there. Small fragments of cremated bone and pottery could have survived in the cist after its re-opening. This Edwardian intrusion ensured that the bones of the person and pot fragments have been dispersed across the landscape, from the floor of the quarry to the National Museum; a re-distribution of their material presence.

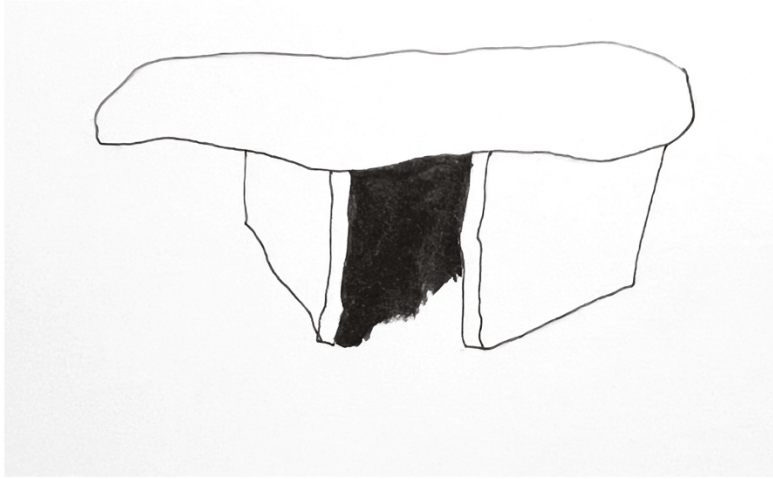
1965

On Monday 16th August 1965, Keith Blood visited the site. As an archaeologist working with the Ordnance Survey known as a Field Investigator, his job involved travelling around parts of Scotland, revisiting known sites and discovering new archaeological remains. Once re-located, he took a photograph of the cist 34 years after it was opened. His image helps us to understand the construction of the cist, its position in the gravel quarry and consider the landscape in process.

Blood's photograph is archaeological in its composition. As a member of the Ordnance Survey Archaeology Division (AO/Scotland), Blood was one of the most knowledgeable people when it came to surveying, recording and interpreting the surface remains of Scottish 'field' archaeology[5]. The photograph resonates of a period of intensive surveying and recording of archaeological remains. A positive pursuit of knowledge. The OS were prolific in their data-gathering, processing and ensuring that the past was represented on maps at a range of scales. The past became a fixed present, as a result of their methodical practices.

The 1965 photograph illustrates a number of these practices, including an alphanumeric identification code (AO 65 39|8), a 3-foot scale pole placed vertically to the left of the cist, the categorisation via the photograph title of 'Cist from the south' and showing the position of the cist in the face of the quarry. These practices, codices and materialities make the place present and yet kept at a distance by the formalising systems. The person from the past in the present, held in the cist, was not othered to Keith Blood, he lived in that past through the application of systematic recording practices. But these presencing practices are a form of forgetting which renders the person and their life, family and stories down to a number, a dot on a map, to alphanumeric code. The code identifies the Archaeology Division (AO), the year (1965), the site number (39) and the council region of Moray (8).

One thing that is apparent when we compare the two photographs is that the capstone, which was lifted during the 1931 opening, appears in the 1965 photograph as sitting on the vertical slabs the other way around. Was it taken off at some point and put back the wrong way around or has one of the photographs been printed in reverse? Perhaps the 1931 image was inverted when it was reproduced in the 1932 edition of the Proceedings of the Society of Antiquaries. Not only did the pursuit of archaeological knowledge lead to an opening, but it led to a dispersal of the person's remains, and the representation of the past through photography appears to pivot through time and space.



2021

On Thursday 18th November 2021, we relocated some of the remains of the cist. A surfacing for a third time. It had undergone some changes since the last time it was recorded. As the dusk fell and we re-located the sand and gravel quarry, we searched for slabs on a slope covered with needles and stabilised by pines. Two rocks appeared as Gina took a phone call, fragments of conglomerate, containing fist-sized stones in a matrix of sand, gravel, heat and pressure. Surfaces partially grown with lichen were stained white with calcium that shone in the half-light. Compared with the remains documented by Keith Blood, the cist had succumbed to actions of weathering, tree growth and gravity, and had collapsed.

The pot found in the cist gives a clue to the age of the burial, but it also provides a complex artefact which may or may not help date the find. Food Vessels generally did not hold food, although they may have contained liquids. Radiocarbon dates from other cists suggest that the vessels were used in burial rites around 4000 years ago. We are reminded of excavation reports from other cists of meadowsweet pollen surviving to provide archaeologists with evidence of the use of this plant in burial shawls[6]. These are tempting morsels of matter to be sampled, analysed and interpreted. Today, the coil-built pot fragments and the small bag of cremated human bones, which weighs less than 500 gms, are held in the National Museum of Scotland climate-controlled stores, shrouded in ethical protocols and physical security.

This person lived, loved and died in the region now known as Moray. Although there is a point in the landscape where they were buried, their remains are scattered across Scotland, which legitimises the question: ‘where is their last resting place?’ The remains that survive are not the sum of their life and we refrain from reducing them to the contents of the cist alone. Upon reopening in 1931, did the cist unfurl new possibilities for our understanding of what it is to be human, to be alone and one of many, to be alive and dead in the landscape?

The re-surfacing of this cist in 2021 continues an arc which begins with laying a person to rest, several millenia before now and continues through disruptive, colonialist practices, facilitated by the relentless press of capitalism. At this very point in the landscape the expansion of the road network is complicit with the knowledge economy in their extractive modalities. The archive is filled, the museum store burgeons through opening, excavation and artefact deposition. However, we keenly sense the need for respons-ability[7], that is, the ethical responsibility to another. We respond to the cry of their distributed remains: is it time to consider anew how we care for the bones and pottery sherds? Something is missing from the landscape, rather than a place of rest, it is a dark place of disruption and trauma. Perhaps it is now time to return the lightness of this being to the landscape in which they belong.

57.577883, -3.6408845

At the darkling of a day in the field in November, tired legs, light receding below the horizon, we search for a Bronze Age cist. We encircle the point on the map, accurate to 10 metres. Through the paper portal, we key in to the landscape. We walk the site, looking, moving, doing archaeology. With visibility diminishing rapidly there is a startling discovery: the capstone of the cist has resurfaced.

The phone lights in the falling dark, a momentary ingression from a nearby constellation which feels so very far away. My mother is on the other end of the line.


meadow sweets shroom

Antiquity No.	County	Parish	
NJ 05 NW 16	Moray 10 SE 1	Illustrations	

Cist
from the south

AO(S)65/39/8 Authority 3

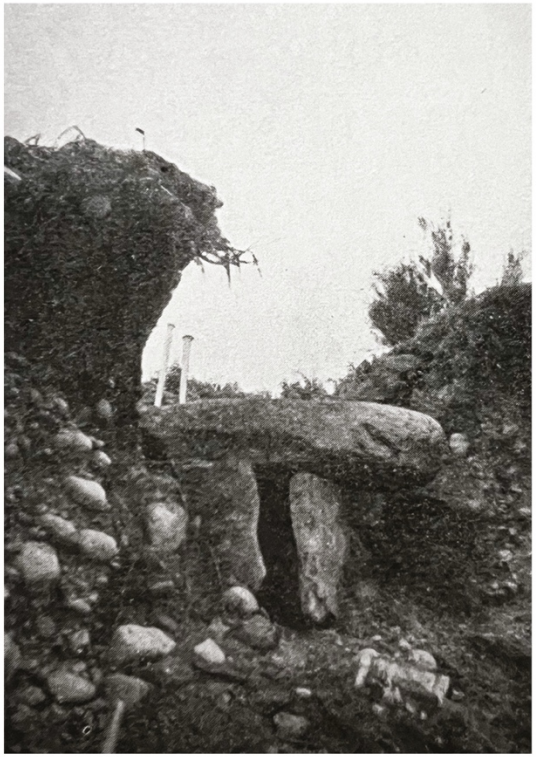
O.S.495

D 37442/1/S.269/5 24m 4/65 TCL

To dig in, to dig down, to processually uncover, keeps the ghost in its place. To live well we should be open to haunting, open to the address of the other, the voice from other times, other places which intra-acts with our own. There is an ethical dimension to this, visitation compels recalibration.

To be open to haunting is to stay at the surface, to understand it as a nexus of times — pasts, presents, futures, and to allow the spectral to leak through, to affect. For the spectre is not a thing, nor an apparition, nor a trick of the quantum light, but a way of being in and of the present.

All of our landscapes are landscapes of death. They are scattered with those who came before, human and more-than-human. The person who lay buried by the Loch of Blairs was a member of the population, a social group, a family — loved. Their place of rest is marked on the map by symbolic convention, a legend. In allowing ourselves to be addressed by them, to be disrupted by them, they become a person again, they live through their remains; they linger in the landscape again, and again, and again.



The ghostly, the ghastly, the spectral, the revenant can only visit if the linearity of time is ruptured in some way. Invoking Hamlet's meeting with the ghost of his father, Jacques Derrida famously asserted that time is out of joint, off its hinges[8], the living present is 'non-contemporaneous' with itself[9]. The 1931 image pivots, the cist is prized open, deranged.

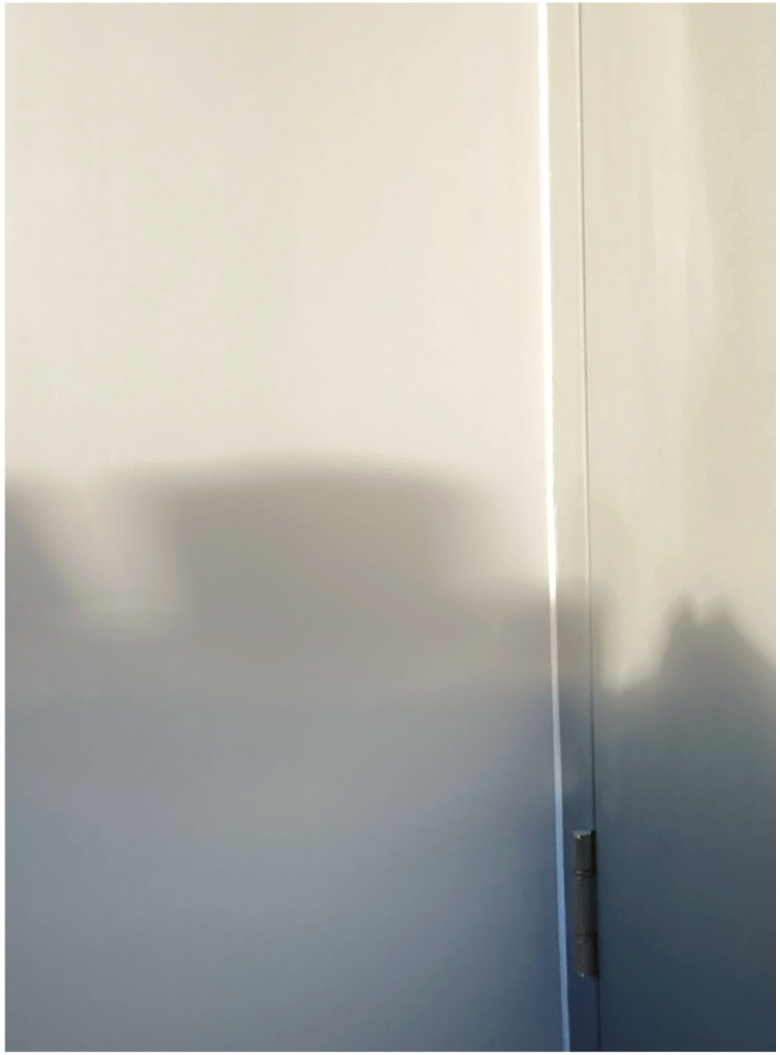
Under the fluorescent light everything looks cold, the shadows flattened, sanitising the surroundings. The polythene bag of bones looks like something you might place in the freezer, or put a sandwich in. But here, in the climate-controlled atmosphere of the museum store, it is the last resting place of parts of a person who lived around 4,000 years before now. Holding a small section of bone carefully in a nitrile gloved hand, we look closely and notice a fibrous piece of plant root, running through its cavity. The branching form of the rootlet snakes, capillary-like, through the cavity like ossified blood vessels.

The sherds of the clay pot are carefully marked in an indented pattern; regular, triangular marks made with wood or perhaps the bones of a bird. The clay is strong, stony and rough, shot through with glinting mica; it looks like a small landscape, cliff-edged and rugged. The hand-built pot carries the traces of its making, the pressure of fingers pinching and stretching, layer on layer, we see the touch of your hands. We feel the care of making, the respectful ritual of building this vessel for another's remains.

Being attentive to the spectral is both an attitude and an ethics; a way of understanding and a way of being. Attuning to the paranormal is to feel that which resides alongside or underneath the conventions and inherited norms by which we flatten ourselves and straighten out. By heeding the archaeological imaginary, in the present, on the surface, we are made spectral by, what we call by convention from our positionality, the ghost. They address us from a time outside of our time, they live on in the imagination, they live here again.

Such a small quantity of bone matter: you are not altogether here.

I sat to your right waiting for you to depart. Your hair fanned gently across the pillow on which you lay, so soft, such lovely hair. It felt like moments, days, years, just you and me, nearing the end of your life. The sunlight travelled casting shadows, liquid light slipping across the wall, palpable. Although I was waiting for you to go, I did not want you to leave. The threshold was unknown, would it be today, tomorrow, when? It was an eternity that was simply not long enough. The fine ash of the maternal body is now settled in the matrices of my living memory.



skylark, wood pigeon, blackbird
open sky, hedgerow, granite
wet rose petals, pink touched with green

void space, dusty memory
sandy soil
you are folded back in

Endnotes

[1] Tsing, A. L., (2015) 'The Mushroom at the End of the World', Princeton: Princeton University Press, p. 22.
[2] Callander, J. G., (1932) 'Unrecorded urns from different parts of Scotland', Proceedings of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland 1931-32, Vol. 66, pp. 404-405.
[3] ScARF (2012) Downes, J. (ed.) 'Chalcolithic and Bronze Age Scotland: ScARF report', Scottish Archaeology Research Framework: Society of Antiquaries. Available online at https://tinyurl.com/v8yd423.
[4] Sir Alister Gordon Cumming alerted J. G. Callander to the discovery of the cist on his Altyre estate, as mentioned in Callander, J. G., (1932) 'Unrecorded urns from different parts of Scotland', Proceedings of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland 1931-32, Vol. 66, pp. 405.
[5] Davidson, J. L., Cowley, D. C., Barneveld, J., & Ferguson, L. M., (1999), 'Archaeological Mapping in the North of Scotland', in Frodsham, P., Topping, P. & Cowley, D. 'We were always chasing time', Northern Archaeology, Vol. 17/18, Northumberland Archaeological Group, pp. 15-21.
[6] Dickson, C. and Dickson, J., (2000) 'Plants and People in Ancient Scotland', London: NPI Media Group.
[7] Barad, Karen, (2007) 'Meeting the Universe Halfway. Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning', Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press.
[8] Derrida, J., (2006) 'Specters of Marx'. London: Routledge, p. 20.
[9] Ibid. p.xviii

Links

Care of Human Remains:
https://www.nms.ac.uk/about-us/our-services/training-and-guidance-for-museums/archaeological-human-remains-collections/
https://worldarchaeologicalcongress.com/code-of-ethics/
https://www.museumsgalleriesscotland.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/guidelines-for-the-care-of-human-remains-in-scottish-museum-collections.pdf
National Record of the Historic Environment:
https://canmore.org.uk/site/15792

Image Acknowledgements

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