

# In place of nature—a response to Leigh Woods

Justin Carter<sup>1</sup>

[Environment] should on no account be confused with the concept of nature. For the world can exist as nature only for a being that does not belong there, and that can look upon it, in the manner of the detached scientist, from such a safe distance that it is easy to connive in the illusion that it is unaffected by his presence. Thus the distinction between environment and nature corresponds to the difference in perspective between seeing ourselves as beings within a world and as beings without it.

—Tim Ingold

## Introduction

This paper reflects on an art project developed by the author which was commissioned for the exhibition *STILL LIFE/ecologies of perception* in 2013 by *Trust New Art*.<sup>2</sup> The artists brief was relatively open but demanded some kind of response to Leigh Woods where the work would be located. The Woods themselves are a National Trust nature reserve situated within walking distance of Bristol, but separated from the city by the imposing cliffs of the Avon Gorge.

The resultant work 'Autumn' (2013) existed in two related forms—as *object* and as *action*.<sup>3</sup> The *object* took the form of a tailored country-style suit printed with a camouflage pattern based on W. J. Muller's painting 'Autumn' (1833). As *action* it manifested itself as a series of walks beginning in Leigh Woods where Muller's work was painted, stretching to Bristol Museum in the city centre, where the original painting now hangs. During the exhibition period the artist regularly walked this route across urban/rural thresholds wearing the camouflage suit.

The whole project echoes something Tim Morton talks about in *Ecology Without Nature* when he imagines an aesthetic practice that could link urban and rural perspectives. He stated that:

Romantic ecology seeks a place away from the enervating, phantasmagoric illusions of city life, as well as the industry, dirt, and noise. Might one do something perverse and *combine* the fantasy thing of Romantic ecology—the resonant idea of place—with the thinking generated by critical consumerism and its ultimate paragon, the urban stroller, the De Quincy, the Baudelaire? It should not be impossible in principle, since nature is already the quintessence of kitsch. But it appears so. It is as if there is a critical discourse of the *country*, and a critical discourse of the *city*, to match the other ways in which the country and the city have been kept apart in poetics and ideology (2009, p. 169).

This project then, asks whether a 'sublime' or 'romantic' experience necessarily precludes new ways of relating and responding to landscape.

To make sense of a temporary, site-specific work after the event, and in the absence of the *place* in question, is always a challenge. However, because the work is read through the lens of *place*, outlining the particular spatial and historical qualities of Leigh Woods is a useful starting point. These rich and dynamic characteristics are at once unique to Bristol and yet strangely familiar in so much as they represent that ubiquitous and 'slippery' concept—nature. In this context 'Autumn' (2013) can be seen as an attempt to return to nature in order to understand its human construction.

## Setting the scene (*taking hold*)

Romantic art, with its engagement with immersion and the strange thing called nature (Morton 2009, p. 27).

Leigh Woods is a quiet haven within easy reach of the city centre—a pleasant place to walk the dog, or mountain-bike downhill towards the Avon Gorge. You are unlikely to see many people here with easels and sketchbooks these days, but in the early 1800s a number of artists, both amateur and professional, regularly visited Leigh Woods seeking inspiration from Nature. These artists later became known as the Bristol School. The most well known of these artists was Francis Danby—famed for his Romantic rural scenes. He and his contemporaries were instrumental in constructing and preserving the image of Leigh Woods in the public imagination. For these artists Leigh Woods provided the perfect range of scenery from secluded woodland glade, to spectacular open vista across the Avon Gorge.

William James Muller, a much younger artist, was also an active part of the Bristol School. He became as well known for his rural landscapes as he was for his urban depictions of the Bristol riots. Ironically, the riots themselves were aggravated by rising toll charges on the Bristol Bridge connecting urban and rural Bristol. Muller drew his inspiration from the contrasting subject matter available to him on either side of the Gorge: Urban Bristol ablaze on one side and tranquil woodland scenes on the other. In the Bristol context the physical landscape, specifically the difficulties of access across the Avon Gorge, seem to have been significant factors in establishing and maintaining distinct conceptions of urban and rural landscape. The true picture is slightly more complex:

Leigh Woods are a complex product of the changes wrought by man on the natural wildwood which existed there some six thousand years ago. A place of constant surprise to the enquiring naturalist, paradoxically the survival of so much of interest owes as much to the proximity of Bristol as to the difficulties of access imposed by the topography. Once the woods fell out of traditional use, so they were acquired, piece-by-piece, by a family whose wealth derived from the tobacco plant shipped from overseas to the Port of Bristol, through the Avon Gorge and under these very Leigh Woods. Gifts and grants of leases by the Wills family have ensured the survival of Leigh Woods during a century when so much ancient landscape has been lost (Lovatt, 1987, 3–20).

Lovatt's description of Leigh Woods (above) condenses some complex landscape characteristics. Before the completion of Brunel's Clifton Suspension Bridge in 1859 the Avon Gorge did much to restrict access to the Woods. It is probably true to say that at this time more people would have seen Leigh Woods from across the gorge than would have actually experienced *being* there firsthand. This factor would have made artistic representations of that landscape even more significant. Alan Frey in his introduction to *The Avon Gorge* discusses access and patterns of movement in and around the gorge:

In some respects the gorge is revealed as being highly distinctive, in its origin for example and its function as a natural *corridor* for migration and colonisation, although for other forms of wildlife it is not a specifically distinctive area. It is the past function of the gorge simultaneously as a *barrier* to the spread of urban Bristol yet as a lifeline to Bristol's maritime economy that has shaped it as a habitat and provides the key to its modern natural history (Frey, 1989; emphasis added).

In developing a rationale for the routes to be walked between Leigh Woods and Bristol Museum and Art Gallery, these dual aspects of the gorge providing both corridor and barrier became important influences in shaping my work. The circular journey of approximately seven miles (between Leigh Woods, Bristol Museum and back again) took between two and three hours to complete. The decision to adopt the practice of walking emerged in order to make conscious, physical connections between some conceptually inscribed binaries: landscape/architecture, rural/urban, woods/gallery, process/product, nature/culture, artist/artwork, audience/art. In this respect 'Autumn' (2013) is about unframing Muller's original painting and literally taking it for a walk through time and space. As Rebecca Solnit says, walking is a 'resistance to the postindustrial, postmodern

loss of space, time and embodiment' (Solnit 2002, p. 267). Walking then is a way of bringing these elements together again, making them tangible.

If Leigh Woods hasn't changed much since the 1820s and 30s, it is due in part to its ongoing protected status as Nature Reserve:

Leigh Woods has three important natural conservation designations, it is a National Nature Reserve (NNR) it has the European designation of being a Special Area of Conservation (SAC) and is a Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) (Gooding, 2013).

Despite bringing some practical advantages in terms of wildlife protection and management, designating any area of land 'Nature Reserve' reinforces the trope of nature as wilderness. The human urge to demarcate, segregate or distance are all forms of control. As Morton says, 'Distance and proximity are aestheticized terms. They imply a perceiving subject and a perceived object. They are part of Immanuel Kant's language of aesthetics—in order to have aesthetic appreciation, you have to have an appropriate distance toward the aesthetic "thing"' (2009, p. 28). Or as Tim Ingold (2000) states: 'For the world can exist as nature only for a being that does not belong there, and that can look upon it, in the manner of the detached scientist, from such a safe distance that it is easy to connive in the illusion that it is unaffected by his presence'. In this way, the endless interconnectedness of ecosystem or environment—of which we are part—become fragmented and distorted in our perpetual attempt to recognize them as nature, a cultural construction.



Figure 1. Detail of 'Autumn' by William James Muller.

The Romantic movement in the main considered nature the perfect backdrop for moral contemplation—landscape was framed in contrast to the Industrial Revolution and scientific notions of progress. Although Muller's 'Autumn' (1833) shares a fairly typical subject matter, it is slightly unusual in various other regards. First of all it is likely to have been painted *in situ*, outdoors, *in* the environment. Although this approach was not entirely unique within Romanticism—consider Turner or Constable for example—it certainly stands out in the context of the collection at Bristol Museum where it hangs in a room dedicated to the Bristol School. Muller's rather modest study depicting autumn

light breaking through a woodland glade is spontaneous, almost impressionistic in style and is also distinct for its modest size. Muller's attempts to capture the shifting changes in light and atmosphere echo his insistence on paying close attention to nature. 'I am more than ever convinced in the actual necessity of looking at nature with a much more observant eye than the mass of young artists do'.<sup>4</sup> The painting is the result of an artist working in the field developing an intense dialogue between hand and eye, responding intuitively to his surroundings.

'Autumn' is a painting about change—of light, of season. I would argue that, through Muller's concentrated effort, the work begins to represent the actual *process* of immersion. So, rather than depicting the human figure literally immersed *in nature* (a familiar subject within Romanticism) the work comes to represent immersion as *a process of mental attuning*. There is no human figure to be seen. Instead, Muller tries to offer us his immersed but fleeting viewpoint. In *Ecology Without Nature*, Tim Morton suggests that 'whether we think of nature as environment or as other beings, it keeps collapsing into subjectivity or objectivity. It is very hard, perhaps impossible, to keep nature just where it appears—somewhere inbetween' (2009, p. 41). In painting 'Autumn', Muller comes closer than most of his contemporaries to reaching this difficult, liminal space. However, despite the notable success Muller achieved in absorbing and representing his surroundings, this work seems to have been misunderstood in the way it was subsequently framed. Its over-elaborate gilt surround covers more than twice the surface area of the actual canvas. It is as if the work's lightness of touch needed to be grounded by symbols of value and permanence before it could ever enter the museum. This is the translation of environment as nature, repackaged as kitsch.



Figure 2. Contemplating Muller's original in Bristol Museum wearing the camouflage pattern suit.

In a chapter entitled 'Scapelands', Jean-Francois Lyotard describes landscape paintings hung in a museum in the following way:

When they are hung in the museum, works of art are stripped of their destination (be it mythical, religious or political). They are exhibited in their very presence, here and now, A cove, a mountain lake, a canal in the metropolis can be hung short of any destination, human or divine, and left there....it is not that you get lost in them, but that their meanings are lost. (Lyotard 1991, p.183 )

Feeling a similar sense of loss during the performance walks between Leigh Woods and Bristol Museum, a kind of redress began to take shape over the days and weeks that followed. A process of collection emerged—one that involved acorns, leaves and sticks—the latter used for walking. These items were collected in Leigh Woods and then either deposited beneath Muller’s work or gifted to slightly perplexed Museum visitors. This process attempted to make visible the gap between the ‘real’ and the ‘imagined’. It brings into focus the absence of time, duration and life cycles in the world of the Museum, fixated as it is with the notion of conservation, preservation and display. Even within the triple listed Nature Reserve of Leigh Woods, the cycle of life goes on unabated. *What would happen to the things I brought into the Museum? Would they be categorized, thrown, collected or taken? Were they art, rubbish, or just a nuisance?* This process of collection and depositing sought to subtly subvert the institutional processes.

### **Taking a painting for a walk (*letting go*)**

*By deciding to develop a camouflage pattern based on Muller’s painting some two hundred years after its creation, I had an instinctive desire to free the work, to unframe it and return it, not to nature, but to its original environment—to a state of process, a state of becoming (Heidegger 1962). Camouflage, with its dual origins in shamanistic ritual and military operation might provide the formal opportunity for the wearer to merge and emerge from this impossible binary.*

In the age of mechanical reproduction the artist no longer needs technical skill; not necessarily. Instead, a photograph is taken. The image is uploaded. The software is activated. The image is manipulated, repeated. The camouflage pattern is created.<sup>5</sup> In the same room (is it studio or office?) the same image is printed digitally onto cotton duck fabric, an imitation canvas. When the printing is complete the fabric is taken to the tailor who creates the garment. Money changes hands. All the artist needs is the imagination to spawn an idea and the ability to bring people together in order to make that idea real. When the work is documented, it is again repeated—a copy of a copy of a copy. In this way the idea travels.



Figure 3. Part of the route between Leigh Woods and Bristol Museum.

*My walk began in September 2013—the beginning of Autumn. Dressed in country style suit complete with ‘Autumn’ camouflage, I head for the trees. If I keep still no one will see me. If I move (especially in the city) I become conspicuous, a spectacle, an everyday oddity. Suddenly I feel like Cosimo from Italo Calvino’s *Baron in the Trees*—a boy who takes to the trees and never wants to come down again. Walking in the suit becomes my mode of creative practice. In this guise I break out of Leigh Woods into real life encounters beyond the scope of the curated project. I keep moving.*

Bateson constantly emphasised that stable features of the world remain imperceptible unless we move in relation to them: if the blind man picks up surface features of the road ahead by sweeping his cane from side to side, people with normal vision do the same with their eyes. Through this scanning movement we draw distinctions, in the sense not of representing them graphically, but of ‘pulling them out. (Ingold 2000, p.15)

*Beyond site, beyond sight. What becomes of the work if I become invisible? What becomes of the work if I am seen? What happens when the distance between artwork and artist is collapsed? How does this closeness, this lack of critical distance, this inability to stand back from yourself, your work, how does this affect the decisions taken in the work—directions taken, things said, gestures made? What happens to the boundaries distinguishing art and life? Are the possibilities liberating or .....?*

De Certeau states that: ‘To practice space is thus to repeat the joyful and silent experience of childhood: it is, in a place, *to be other and to move toward the other*’. He speaks of a kind of liberation. If the tangible, visible object disappears from sight it might come to settle in the imagination of the viewer. In anticipation of catching a glimpse of the artist/art-work, the audience might come to notice other things too. With the artwork dissolved, they themselves enter the frame and the work becomes nothing more than a story passed on from person to person.



Figure 4. Attempting to become invisible in Leigh Woods.  
'Nature, a transcendental term in a material mask' (Morton 2002, p14) .

De Certeau distinguishes between stories told by people, and rumours perpetuated by the media. ‘Stories diversify, rumours totalize’ he says (2004, p. 107). Rumours are the ill-founded attempt to grasp certainty from uncertainty. They represent the desperate

desire to simplify the complex and fragmented nature of reality. Stories on the other hand are elaborations on uncertainty—subjectivities shared to build new realities.

*Beneath a tree in the stillness of Nightingale Valley, a revelation: In the end everything I make, even the most elaborate sculpture, becomes nothing more than a story. Is this article part of that narrative, that myth? Fiction encoded in sculptural form, fragments re-connecting in the telling or re-telling. It's no longer **my** work. 'Stories thus carry out a labor that constantly transforms places into spaces or spaces into places' (Kwon 2002, p. 118).*

Ultimately though there is a realization that 'to walk is to lack a place' (Solnit 2002, p. 103). Walking is the embodiment of a longing. Here then is the paradox; there is a romantic notion at the heart of this project, one that is difficult to escape from: 'Autumn' is a homage to a fleeting moment. It's not a *place* you can ever get to.

## Conclusion

Re-engaging with environment through the body, through movement, through the multi-sensory experience of going responsively from one place to another, reminds us that the frameworks and thresholds which shape our thinking exist as much in the physical world as they do in our own heads. If landscape painting in the Romantic tradition forms part of that vast human construction we call Nature, then new artistic methods and approaches might provide the necessary tools for opening up and dismantling nature, replacing it with the notion of environment which is boundless and which we are part of.

Perhaps what truly distinguishes the predicament of people in modern metropolitan societies is the extent to which they are compelled to inhabit an environment that has been planned and built solely for the purposes of occupation. The architecture and public spaces of the built environment enclose and contain; its roads and highways connect. Transport systems nowadays span the globe in a vast network of destination-to-destination links. For passengers, strapped to their seats, travel is no longer an experience of movement in which action and perception are intimately coupled, but has become one of enforced immobility and sensory deprivation (Ingold 2007, p.102).



Figure 5. The quickest and most direct route from Leigh Woods to Bristol Museum — taking the lift at West End car park.

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## Notes

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1. Justin Carter, Reader in Contemporary Art Practice, Glasgow School of Art, 167 Renfrew Street, Garnethill, Glasgow, G3 6RQ. Email: [j.carter@gsa.ac.uk](mailto:j.carter@gsa.ac.uk)
2. Other artists included Marcus Coates, Peter Fraser, Mark Neville, Toby Ziegler, Awst & Walther, Paul Chaney & Kenna Hernly, Emily Speed, Tom Bailey, Jo Lathwood and Jez Riley French. The project was curated by Ruth Gooding.
3. During the project a film document was also made in collaboration with Ben A Owen, bringing together the object, action and context. <http://benjaminaowen.com/category/film/>
4. Muller, quoted by Greenacre and Stoddard (1991).
5. Thanks here to Alan Shaw at the Centre for Advanced Textiles, Glasgow School of Art.