

## **I LIKE THE UNPATH BEST Art-Practice-Writing and the Creation of Complex, Generative and Complicating Forms and Contexts**

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### **ABSTRACT**

*Situating myself as a visual artist with a multi-modal practice, this paper will explore the relationship of writing to making, using the relationship of writing to my own practice to explore questions relating to research processes, the volume of information gathered, and the insertion of other disciplinary perspectives. Here, I will address the element of my practice that is based in landscape, specifically explorations that begin with the idea that places are multi-layered, ever-changing, embodied and always active. In seeing places as experiential fields of investigation, writing can add a more complex dimension as it flows from the landscape itself and research about it, to practice, with writing occasionally becoming the artform itself.*

This article will consider the connection of writing to practice, and specifically use the relationship of writing within my own arts practice to explore questions relating to research processes and the potential outcomes and outputs of that research.

The relationship of art and writing, art to writing and writing to art is complex and ongoing, and it is not my intent in this article to survey its complex and multifaceted history. Rather, this article will consider a specific subject, that of landscape and place<sup>1</sup>, and the interplay between research - writing - making, how each of these elements can inform the other and what happens in the spaces of research and its aftermath when one brings other disciplinary perspectives, investigations and ways of seeing and encountering into one's work. In particular I will address how writing has shifted from being an integral but inward and private part of an arts practice to an element of work which can be outward

Image 1. *Tetrao urugallus* (male)

Found object collected while broodcounting

facing, and what that contributes to my arts practice and research.

I'll consider this also with regard to writing that may be described, broadly, as 'new nature writing', and to anthropological perspectives and the 'performative turn' in geography (Wylie 2007) for the insights that they bring to an arts practice, and to what, potentially, an arts practice can bring to these disciplines. Here, theory can come to life, and become investigated in the practice of making art, and fostering deep understandings about ideas of place, as well as time spent within place together with a responsive and multi-modal arts practice come together to help me understand this landscape and thereafter make work from it. I will be referring specifically to a collection of multi-media creative non-fiction essays made in response to a sustained investigation of particular forests, and there are excerpts from this writing and images of artwork, including stills from videoworks, at the edges of this narrative. I will finish this article with at more sustained example of a primary text which will have alongside it some of the field notes, followed by a commentary about the work itself.

My interest in multi-modal ways of working that both encompass and inform writing has developed from a sustained period of research into the forest landscapes of the North of Scotland, particularly the remnant Scots pine forest of Abernethy, which spreads just to the north of the Cairngorm mountains and spills into their hinterlands. In this work I was specifically interested in how we become familiar, and how we come to know a place, and the ways in which this knowledge might be manifested. This interest started as part of an interdisciplinary practice based PhD (Thomson 2013), and came in response to what might be considered to be 'excess data' - information that I didn't quite know how to incorporate into my arts practice as it stood. My investigations also interrogated and were informed by perspectives from other disciplines, including social history, ecology, anthropology and geography and in the intersections between the directions being taken in these disciplines and artists' ongoing engagement with landscape. I was also interested in new perspectives on nature writing, which have focused 'on finding meaning not in the rare and exotic but in our common, unremarkable encounters with the natural world, and in combining both scientific, scholarly observation of nature with carefully

Image 2. Sketchbook and source text for the artist's book, *Dead Amongst the Living, Fieldguide*

crafted, discursive writing' (Moran 2014: 49). Moran is careful not to compartmentalise this genre, and discusses it as 'thematically wide-ranging and stylistically digressive, combining personal recollection with natural history, cultural history, psychogeography, travel and topographical writing, folklore and prose poetry, which makes them correspondingly difficult to categorise' (2014: 49). Such a perspective chimes with *Granta 102 The New Nature Writing* in which James Cowley's editorial discusses a way of writing about the landscape where writers 'don't simply want to walk into the wild, to rhapsodise and commune; they aspire to see with a scientific eye and write with literary affect' (2008: 9). At the same time, he notes 'The best new nature writing is also an experiment in forms: the field report, the essay, the memoir, the travelogue' (2008: 10). The inherent hybridity and cross-form nature of such writing intersects nicely with these other perspectives and disciplinary worldviews which inform and ground both my artmaking and the artwork which arises from and feeds into the writing which I will go on to discuss (eg. Ingold, 2000; Wylie, 2005, 2007; Stewart 2007, 2011).

From within the framework of being a visual artist who makes work about place and landscape, and as someone who writes, I am interested in the possible various functions of the essay form<sup>2</sup>. Such a perspective considers how a primary written work can operate in conjunction with other visual outputs and forms of making that are elastic, that may or may not contain overt elements of critique or criticism, may be interrogative, or whimsical, that can exist as fragment(s) or as more long-form prose. Writing here is something that can sometimes add, perhaps clarify, perhaps complicate, perhaps challenge, perhaps confound. Here, writing is considered in relation to the flow between subject, practice and writing and the interplay of influences from a range of different sources and disciplines.

Within this then, the essay might sit,

- as eye-witness to process
- as an interstitial state between artwork and, potentially a thesis or academic article on one hand; or the artwork and subject matter on the other
- as a source of lyrical description that gives presence and voice to information and experience that

Image 3. *Bridal*, videowork; also accompanies an essay *About the Crows*

cannot find its way in to an artwork, or can re-present information in a way that draws attention to it

- as the (re)interrogation of an event or experience
- as a moment of consolidation - the results of pause and reflection in (still) ongoing interactions with place or subject
- as journey: how the path of a narrative can echo the path of discovery, learning, making
- as revealer of other elements perhaps not apparent when the work was initiated, or in the finished artwork
- as distillation: of fact, interest and choice, as well as poetics and artistic licence
- as a companion

In disciplines such as anthropology and human geography there is a strand of thinking and an impetus to conceptualise, characterise and theorise a world which is not static, but in constant motion, constantly evolving, morphing, changing, and a world that we are inherently a part of and will change, as it also changes us. In human and cultural geography there is an expanding body of thought and research which Wylie describes as being a ‘performative turn’ (2007: 162), a shift away from describing representations to a way of working and thinking which is spatially oriented, but also relational, embodied, and ongoing, and for many of these writers and researchers, grounded in *doing*. In anthropology, Tim Ingold’s book *The Perception of the Environment* is an investigation about how we dwell in what he calls ‘the lifeworld’ and in it he explores the ways in which we inhabit the world and how our lives consist of constant interactions with other people, the ‘things’ of the world, and our environment. In considering ‘the temporality of landscape’, he contends ‘through living in it, the landscape becomes a part of us, just as we are a part of it (2000: 191). For all of these writers mentioned above and many others, how we come to know is essentially embodied and rooted in movement, life, living (Bender 2001, Ingold 2000, 2010, 2011, Cresswell, 2011) and attention (Stewart, 2007, 2011; Ingold, 2010), and is experienced rationally and irrationally, partially, subjectively and is ongoing and unending.

Further, in these encompassing conceptualisations, reflections about the significance of atmospheres and affective registers in relation to how we understand place also become of significance (Ingold, 2010; Stewart 2011), for example in the anthropologist Kathleen Stewart's writing about the senses and 'atmospheric attunements' (2011) and how important they are to how places are made and felt. Her book *Ordinary Affects* (2007) takes account of atmospheres and emotions that places or situations or what is (or becomes) noticed engenders, and reveals in form and content a writing style that seeks to explore, experiment and speculate, rather than definitively answer, define and conclude. Here, Stewart takes account of seeming insignificances and the vagaries of mood and attitude while at the same time she is able to approach larger and more complex (anthropological) themes. Stewart's work, like those of others, speaks to the very subjectivity of how who we are affects our experiences and responses. More, however, her work contains within it an awareness of and a willingness to explore and take account of the minutiae, singular moments that might build into a bigger picture (or not), and those things that begin as insignificant that become something more.

Stewart's work, in tandem with these other writers, asks for a flexibility of response and, indeed, an acknowledgement of the different registers that our responses might take. This way of thinking and working can intuitively resonate with how one works as an artist, not least in terms the decisions one makes as to the work that eventually evolves, and indeed, what it is of (a) place one wants to describe or convey. The relationality, attentiveness, inherent subjectivity and ongoingness is an important element of these perspectives, and marries with an arts practice based on constant re-visits to a place and what becomes revealed over time, and the new knowledge and awarenesses that increasing familiarity, or new learning, or simply being in a place at a different time of year, or in a different light may bring. Conceptualisations of place articulated by the disciplines of anthropology and geography can also assist in the creation of what Lorimer has described as 'accounts that are thickened by the patient labour of studied inspection or attentive listening; and lightly flecked with insights from theory' (Lorimer in Merriman et al. 2008: 197).

Image 4. Still from video, *sometimes all there is to movement is shadow and light*

Importantly however the impetus in these disciplines is not only seek to analyse, critique and explain the world, but find appropriate ways to convey this information, as Lorimer alludes to above. In fact, Lorimer has called for geographers to find ‘a language sufficient to do fullest justice to the intensities, to the properties and to the rich lore of place’ (2008: 182), and here I would include the potential of a visual language). Dewsbury et al. (2002) ask of geographers how they might deal with and articulate the ‘intangibles’ that they encounter. Other writers are also asking important questions as to the methods through which their disciplines can learn about the world (see Ingold, 2013, and his perspectives on making and creativity). Writers from other disciplines have often turned to artists and their work to explore and gain fresh perspectives on their fields of study (see for example Tim Ingold on Breugel’s painting *The Harvesters* when considering the temporality of landscape (2000); Yusoff and Gabrys (2006) on time and space inherent in Robert Smithson’s work; Tim Edensor’s consideration of the work of Richard Long and Francis Frances Alÿs to look at rhythms of walking (2010); Harriet Hawkins on site, the body and practice (2012); Wylie on Cezanne (2008), as well as thinkers and critics such as John Berger and Lucy Lippard).

The very nature of this world so described points to the need for porosity between disciplinary boundaries, and it is sometimes at the intersections and the slippages between disciplines that the most interesting encounters and revelations take place. Further, the way of thinking and being in the world outlined above seems to me to be an integral part of making, and practice, though often conceived of more lyrically, and often, for artists and creative writers, quite instinctually. North American writers like Barry Lopez, Terry Tempest Williams and Rebecca Solnit and Scottish writers like Kathleen Jamie and Nan Shepherd amongst a myriad of others have all engaged with landscape and place in complex and multifaceted ways. They each straddle a whole range of different knowledges in their investigations and their writing, and interweave personal histories and perspectives with an inquisitiveness and a thirst for understanding that draws on a myriad of other sources and connectivities, and their writings draw links with sometimes disparate themes in ways that other their

Image 5: Still from videowork, *Bridal*

*Driving just outside Glasgow, I’m on the road that cuts north around the west side of the Campsie Fells between the towns of Lennoxton and Fintry. It is the B822 and is known as the Crow Road, and yes, five or six rooks fly over. The phrase ‘to take the Crow Road’ comes into my head, and I’ve heard some use the phrase to mean take the most direct route, and others use it to mean to die. Another day and further north, I’m on the A9, the main artery from the Central Belt into the Highlands of Scotland, and rooks and carrion crows in particular seem the most ubiquitous of birds. They insinuate themselves into the landscape, gathering in the fields, perching on and flying above the trees, sitting on the lines between telephone poles and sometimes sweeping down onto the road to pick at roadkill – rabbits, pheasants, an occasional deer. They play chicken with the cars, taking off at the very last moment as cars speed towards them at 70 miles an hour.*

Image 6. Photo, still from video and soundwork *Bridal II*, and opening lines from the essay, *About the Crows*.

subject matter in intriguing ways. Nan Shepherd (2008: 6) in *The Living Mountain* writes about walking in the Cairngorm mountains and observes ‘the thing to be known grows with the knowing’ (2008: 84), and in that knowing, we learn not just of what she writes about, and, over the course of the book, an accumulation of knowledge about the intricacies and layers of this area, from the micro to the macro, the present to a much deeper time, but, also, a little about the author herself, and her preoccupations and perspectives on the world as well as her deep love of where she walks. Here, Shepherd is writing from within place, and from a longstanding and intimate engagement and connection which touches on its physical characteristics, the practicalities and realities of walking this terrain and the poetics of place and how she is affected by it. The title of this article, *I like the unpath best* comes from *The Living Mountain* and the phrase seems to me to speak to the shifts in form and outcomes and the excitement that might come from alternative ways of conceiving our work and the outcomes of our research, including, sometimes, dead-ends and the excitement and sometimes trepidation in being lost, figuratively and, sometimes, literally, and where not knowing just might take us.

Previously I have discussed how academic disciplines such as geography and anthropology can write of their subject in a manner that is so formal that they can sometimes lose sight of the texture of the phenomena they seek to explore and describe, and of how by its very nature art is well placed to intervene and give insights into particularly the more affective registers of place (Thomson 2013). I’ve argued for the importance of wordlessness and for the value of a contemporary arts practice in this regard. *Sometimes all there is to movement is shadow and light* (see Image 4) is a calm and contemplative dual-channel videowork which recreates the space and sounds of a coastal forest, revealing simply how the wind moving the clouds changes the light through the trees. The work and its title is in part a creative response to writings on mobilities and walking (Cresswell 2011; Edensor 2000) and conceptualisations of a world that is always in motion, and is a contemplation of what (bodily) stillness can bring.

Image 7: Constant effort

My research about the forests generated a huge body of information that touched on ecology, social

and cultural histories and conservation as well as geographical and anthropological writing. It also included ethnographic fieldwork, where discovering place through how others walked and worked within it became an important aspect of how the multi-layeredness of place became revealed. Indeed what was revealed through encounters with ecologists and foresters, and when I walked with them and learned from them as they went about their work often became what was written about. The artwork made included etchings and lithographs, photographs, sculptural pieces, bookworks, sound and videoworks. The diversity of forms emerged from and enacts the intricate, diverse and multi-modal processes of research, discovery and making. Because of the methodologies adopted, the nature and volume of information meant that it was not always able to sit wholly within my artwork (or my critical writing), nor was an art object (whether print, sound or video) always the most appropriate or only output. This in itself led me to consider the alternative forms whereby the volume and complexity of the knowledge gathered could be communicated and experienced. The (re)incorporation of writing into my practice and outcomes, and, specifically writing which made sometimes tentative forays across different registers helped me combine the more affective, felt and subjective nature of response with the more factual knowledge gathered. This, together with visual, non-textual elements of description came together to create the possibilities of layered readings of image, text, and multi-modal forms that speak to the complexities and various and varying registers of place.

Thus, the essay form became a way of utilising the breadth of practice-based enquiry by revealing how we might craft our notes and sketches and sustained research processes into iterative and generative forms that can further reveal and complicate our and our readers' understanding of our chosen subjects. Here, the essay begins to exist as a form that encompasses the unfolding and interweaving of research and artmaking; distillations of fact, interest and choice; poetics, artistic licence and is a source of further description that gives context, presence and voice to information that can also re-contextualise the other artworks made.

I'll finish with some examples of my own work that show how I've dealt with some of these spillages and porosities between forms and how I have fused some of the images and artwork made with more



lyrical and sometimes factual descriptions which give a deeper or different context to the work.

Images 8, 9 & 10: Constant Effort

## I

The series of photographs entitled *Constant Effort* (see images 7 - 10) can hang as a series of photoworks in a gallery, can become an artist's book, or can become part of a photo-essay with a piece of writing that serves to contextualise and complicate the images of the caught birds as it details the conversations with a bird-ringer I spent a morning with, and the complications and perhaps contradictions of conservation that I encountered through engaging in this activity. No matter the form, these works only exist because of the morning I spent with a bird ringer and the conversations that we had as he went about his work.

## II

What follows are extracts from an essay, *two walks to find crossbills*.

Sometimes when walking in Abernethy I'll hear a chattering of birds in the trees overhead, and at other times, I've heard a sound like someone clicking two fingernails together. Perhaps a pine cone has fallen near to where I've been standing, and when I've looked up, there's been movement, a flutter above, a bird or two hanging upside down on the cones

...

Once, on a scorching day in early summer I went for a walk, hoping to see crossbills in the trees and aiming for a lochan and wanting but not expecting to see a diver, instead finding a solitary widgeon. I remember the day clearly - it was at the very end of May, breezy and sunny and there were thick clouds of pine pollen that had just lifted and at one point swept towards and over me, leaving a thin yellow film on my arms, my sunglasses and binoculars. It was a long, solitary walk, hot, and I hadn't brought enough water. I crossed a river before the track swept uphill, and I startled a young deer that bounded away through the trees.

Image 11. Fieldnote from two walks to find crossbills

...

One February, I spent a couple of days walking Abernethy with an ecologist who was recording crossbill calls as part of a national survey to establish the relative numbers of each of the subspecies present in Scotland.

...

Fieldwork like this demands time to stop and listen, though the day and the weather encourages constant movement. At each of the five points we stopped and waited between fifteen and twenty minutes. Cold seeped through thick soles and socks in those moments, and if we heard crossbills en route from one location to another we also stopped, recorded the coordinates where we heard the birds and tried to record their call, and identify numbers and sexes. Crossbills pair off early, the ecologist said, and even by this winter-bound February, she thought that they had started to pair off. She also thought that pairs seemed less likely to interact with the lure than groups or singles, though was not quite sure. I wondered whether what felt like such intuitive, instinctual observations would make it into her final research report, and what would just sit as part of the gut knowledge she carries with her as she moves through this place.

From this second site we saw a few pairs of birds, and one flock of about eleven from the second site, too far away and too flighty to record.

...

A couple of days later, we went out again, this time cutting back to the reserve from the north east, through an estate. On this day, more thrown than the first, we had three sites to get to. It was a laden day, that kind of day where the clouds above are dark and it always seemed brighter at the horizon. The kind of day that despite wearing so many layers, I could not quite get warm. Waves of snow peeled across the land, though never so thick that the hillsides beyond disappeared. Our steps

Image 12: Sketch for *walkDrawing: crossbill survey* (see Thomson, 2012, for a discussion about this still ongoing series of etchings, and ideas of spatiality, the line, task-based movement through space and the incorporation of technology (specifically the GPS) into practice).

were noisy in the stillness...

...

We walked down through trees and across a valley and a river that was meandering and sluggish. It was marshy beneath the snow and sometimes we sunk into the knee-deep pits between the heather clumps, the Vibram soles of our walking boots pulling up the mud from beneath the snow.

This was another landscape entirely. Eerie. Still. There was a group of taller standing deadwood in front of us, and beyond them bog pines: small and stunted, like supersized bonsai. Pale grey and spindly, they had branches at odd angles, like broken arms. The skeletal remains. The bare bones.

We wondered, the ecologist and I, at these snags on this river plain, the ones before, taller and in groups, grown to full height, and these smaller ones; we wondered if the river had changed course or whether the water table had risen and drowned them.

...

That day in February, after visiting this last site, we walked back a different way from where we'd come and headed towards a narrow pass - Eag Mhor - that would take us northwards back to the car, and I was suddenly shocked by the fact that I had been there before. We had been walking along the same path I'd been on on that hot May day, and had eaten our lunch at that same lochan - albeit at a different spot; we had approached it from the north and not the east as I had done then. Though I thought I was in a new place, I was re-visiting some of the same ground I had walked before.

And it was not the expanse of landscape that re-rooted me in that place but a simply fork in the track, with a small decline to a river I had not wanted to cross that day in May. A sweep round I had taken, just before I had turned back, where the pollen had lain in thick yellow bands on puddles

Image 13: Field sketch, Two walks to find crossbills, *bogpines/ drowned pines*

that seemed to evaporate even as I watched. I'd followed the track around, aware of a river and a path beyond it going to the east, wondered where they led but had not gone any further. That crossbill day, I went back a few steps and took another photograph, sure then that I had taken one from about the same spot that May, when I'd seen another pollen cloud over distant trees.

That February, we crossed the river and headed east to loop back to our starting point, through a narrow gully, off the reserve and back on to estate land. We found the corpse of a young, emaciated red deer, entrails showing and ears eaten away. The ecologist said that when she'd been out walking with her dog they'd found lots of dead deer under trees, and we wondered about the effects of that hard winter, these changing winters we're having on deer and other populations as we made our way home.

I realised then how with every step I can flit between reverie and attentiveness, and from a passive to an active awareness of my surroundings. Sometimes it's a birdcall that snaps me from myself, at other times, a trip or a stumble, or just something of the place itself. This is what struck me there and then. And I realised that knowing the ecologist knew where she was going and how to get there had meant that I had not to look at the map to see where we were, so I did not really know where I was. And then there was the shift from summer to winter, from being by myself to being in company, from a summer's day meander to a purposeful task, and from being too hot and having hayfever to not being able to quite heat up: all of these came together to put me firmly in my place.

### **Post-script: an Abernethy Suite**

Still, after that walk, beyond the essay written above, I didn't know what art/work would come out of it, but on reflection, it was the strange, otherworldly bog-pines that stuck in my mind, whose form I wanted to bring to attention by making work about them. Out of that day, three large etchings, these ghostly trees that lingered in my mind, emerged as the Abernethy Suite.

Image 14: *Abernethy Suite No. 2*,  
Etching (66cm x 94cm)

The examples above reveal how one might integrate an in depth and rigorous research process with an arts practice to bring to life a particular place or experience, or give further context. The essay, further, gives a completely different meaning and context to what became the suite of three large, rather austere etchings called the 'Abernethy Suite' which came out of what was around 13 miles of walking over 12 hours over two, snowy February days in sub-zero-temperatures, with the seemingly singular intention of looking for a particular kind of finch, and speaks to both the exteriority and the interiority of self in place, and in the activity one is undertaking, and the inherent multisensoriality of that experience.

Ingold has argued 'the purpose of art is not to mediate a shuttling back and forth between radically opposed and mutually exclusive domains of mind and world...but rather to bring mind and world in an ongoing movement' (2011: 178), and it is the ways in which we as artists might respond to those ways of thinking about the world that has led to a more complex iteration of the role of writing within work that seeks to explore the multifaceted nature of place and of our relationships within it. Work that can sit as images on a gallery wall or as video projections can be incorporated into essays, and the function of still image or indeed video alongside words can create pauses, or moments of reflection, or can take the dialogue within the essay down unexpected paths. So too can reading within a soundscape. At the same time, the text might explain more fully the circumstances through which the artwork has been made.

Finding our ways around writing and art can be like the processes of movement through places. The different things we notice at any given point and what comes to our attention will vary each time we visit a place. Some elements of places will remain elusive and intangible (and be significant for that). Some of our encounters might merit more explanation and interpretation than what we can give in a print, video or other artwork. What we observe, experience and choose to remark on or evoke will also vary and shift and change. How writing might play a part in finding the right form might become an important element of an arts practice at certain points in time<sup>3</sup>. The melding of different forms,

coupled with the integration of the knowledge gathered through sustained research can forge the creation of complex creative responses to this always ongoing, unfinished, subjective and affective world, and forms that play to the strengths of wordful and wordless description.

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<sup>1</sup> It should be noted that place, space and landscape are not straightforward terms, and have been interrogated and theorised by numerous writers. See for example

<sup>2</sup> See D'Agata (2003), Reeder (this volume) for overviews of the essay form and its potential.

<sup>3</sup> Inherent to this potential expansion of practice are questions about the quality and craft of the writing, adherence to the same rigorous editorial process we give to our art making, and the knowledge and skill that that will require. All of this has implications for us as artists - have we this skill and if not, how do we gain it, and also, as arts educators - what needs to be in place in order for us to support our students to follow such paths. See Reeder (this volume) for a discussion about craft and rigour.

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