

Re-negotiating Nature

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“If the landscape changes, then I don't know who I am either. The landscape is a refracted autobiography. As it disappears you lose your sense of self.”

*Iain Sinclair*ⁱ

What does it mean to talk about nature? Whether violent, imposing, tranquil or sublime, we often describe nature through language that implies an intrinsic entanglement with human activity, as a force within which a sense of the human spirit is intimately entwined and with a struggle for self, power and the assertion of will. This idea of nature's entanglement with humanity is at the heart of our ecological understanding of ourselves and growingly serves as a resource for artists' exploring our sense of place in the world.

From 16th October 2003 to the 21st March 2004, London's Tate Modern played host to Olafur Eliasson's dramatic *Weather Project*. Fourth in the series of Unilever sponsored art commissions for the museum, *The Weather Project* presented an industrial image of a setting sun, constructed inside the building. Viewed through a haze of smog, the image was created by way of a half-circle of mono-frequency lights mounted behind semi-transparent material, on the internal façade of the Tate's cavernous Turbine Hall. The complete circle of the 'sun' was formed by reflection through the installation of a series of mirrored panels covering the 155 metre long and 22 metre wide ceiling, transposing an image of the outside onto the building's vast architectural interior. The ever present fog was blown into the hall through large vents on either side of the Turbine Hall. Eliasson made no attempt to hide the fact that the mist, light and temperature were the residue of large constructed machines. Descending the Hall's steep ramp, the gas could be seen leaking into the building, in which the pretense of the situation was clearly visible. The industrial brutality of the lights, pipes, vents, fans and radiators used to produce the work challenged any attempt to experience the image as natural.

The artifice of Eliasson's installation played directly with the material and linguistic experience and idea of 'atmosphere', in which the signification of the word, referring to both a meteorological state and an emotional mood, could both be understood as constructs,

activating a condition that the art critic Adrian Searle argued was sublime and “difficult to ignore.”ⁱⁱ

Along with the notion of beauty, the idea of the sublime has often been used to think about our experience of nature. In the 1750’s the Irish philosopher Edmund Burke distinguished the terms in relation to scale. He defined the beautiful as something small, weak, light and delicate, in opposition to the sublime, which he said was vast, rugged, obscure and powerful. He argued that the former was simply attractive, whilst the latter engaged and strained our senses, encapsulating a state of pleasure aroused by objects that would usually repel us. Soon after Burke, Emmanuel Kant outlined a subtler distinction between the two terms. Kant argued that beauty was a measurable experience, while the sublime could refer to any feeling that seemed immeasurable, whether it was ‘fearful excitation’ or ‘quiet wonderment’. He wrote:

“The beautiful in nature is a question of the form of the object, and this consists in limitation, whereas the sublime is to be found in an object even devoid of form.”ⁱⁱⁱ

Kant described the experience of the beautiful as a two-part process: Firstly, apprehension, and secondly, imaginative comprehension. The first part of this process was shared with an experience of the sublime, whilst the second only belonged to the beautiful.^{iv} Both concepts were dependent on an underlying set of power relationships, that relate the possibility of knowing or not knowing to the sensuality of perception. In the case of the sublime, the concept houses the notion that things that are more powerful than us, or outside our comprehension, aren’t simply intimidating, but might also generate a sense of awe or respect, in which an implied danger is also capable of producing an overwhelming sense of pleasure. These ideas still retain a particular hold on our collective and social relationship to the idea of nature, in which notions of fate and our sense of humanity become inextricably tied; an idea still deeply embedded in our conventional sense of ecology.

One of the reasons Eliasson gave for his particular choice of ‘weather’ as the subject matter for his installation at Tate Modern, was that the weather is something he sees as communal. He described it as a common means through which people, both friends and strangers, are able to socialise. It is a part of our lives, and we often use it to facilitate our actions and

desires, whether tending our gardens or enjoying our holidays. And when the garden or holiday does not meet our expectations we will even blame nature in the form of the weather. In this sense we use it to manage our experiences.

“We have a desire to assume that certain things, like our reactions to the weather, are natural, but they are in fact cultural, and the result of this can be entrenched ideologies, which we take to be inevitable.”^v

This understanding of perception as inherently biased confronts the relationship between the idea of nature’s reality and its representation in both image and our mind’s eye.

Another of Eliasson’s projects, *Green River*, is a particularly good example for illustrating this and for inviting people to “reconsider [their] assumptions about the natural world”^{vi} and its relationship to the ‘real’. The project, which has had iterations in a number of major cities worldwide, involved pouring a harmless green liquid into rivers passing through those cities, creating what looked like an ominous or even toxic invasion. Eliasson’s *Green River* interventions emphasized the dynamism of the different rivers, disrupting the idea that they were static symbolic objects in the city.

“For a moment the river becomes three dimensional, a space, instead of the usual two-dimensional, static, representational experience we tend to have of a city center.”^{vii}

Again, there are obvious power relationships at play here, opening up questions of agency and who determines or defines this expanded sense of nature? How and why should one understand, enable or give voice to a river, and by extrapolation other objects of nature; a tree, an industrial logging process or a woodland.

In pre-modern cultures in the West, nature was often conceived as a female and powerful reproductive force deeply connected to both the individual human spirit and communal well-being. Similarly, in many non-western cultures, human existence has been intrinsically tied to the natural world and seen as a constituent part of it. In the West, the division between nature and human culture is a predominantly modern phenomenon. William Connolly argues that in modernity, “nature becomes a set of laws susceptible to human knowledge, a deposit of

resources for potential use or a set of vistas for aesthetic appreciation.”^{viii} In this modern sense the value of the relationship to nature shifts, becoming a force for humans to dominate and control.

John Jervis has pointed out that the reason for this shift in sensibility in the West was partly economic. He argues that considering the mining of the earth’s resources as a form of ecological rape “would have seriously inhibited the transformation of the world wrought by modernity.”^{ix} This rationalisation of nature, as a set of potentials for human use, undid an image of the earth as a mother figure that would have, “served as a cultural constraint restricting the actions of human beings.”^x As such we are moved away from any sense that nature is “apprehendable in some pure state,” emphasizing instead, how it “is always mediated or incorporated through practices of use, ritual, observation, and assimilation,”^{xi} both ours and those of other agents, machines, processes, systems, histories and futures.

This ideological shift, emphasizing the loss of nature’s independence from human agency, has been reflected on despondently by some, who have argued that this change marked the loss of an existence that somehow fitted into a larger and more powerful set of laws, readable in the form of natural signs.^{xii} However, it is becoming less and less possible to see a form of nature that does not bear the mark of human agency.

“Still powerful in our own time, the romanticism of ‘nature as wilderness’ remains deeply paradoxical. For a start, wilderness is fragile. Once touched, it disintegrates; once entered, it is lost. ‘Wilderness’ represents the ideal of immediate contact with non-human otherness; but that very contact corrupts the rationale for the contact in the first place.”^{xiii}

Jody Berland has addressed this growing realisation of the way in which our relationship to nature has become more consciously inscribed in our use of technology and media to mediate our relationship with the world.^{xiv} Instead of looking nostalgically to the past however, she argues that we should face up to our changed relationship to nature, which despite our intervention is still capable of shocking us with its force. She argues that nature,

“Is now more like a difficult child than a wilful parent – sometimes nasty, sometimes agreeable, always compelling our attention, always challenging our

knowledge of it, and yet unnervingly responsive to our words and deeds. We are related to it, we do affect it, and to that extent we are responsible for its well-being.”^{xv}

In this context, many artists have begun to adopt methodologies that embrace our more complex cultural relationship to nature. Many have sought out scientific or psycho-geographic strategies, as well as alternative forms of anthropological fieldwork within their work, in which there is an unveiling or reconstituting of nature and its landscapes as sites of fiction, fable and mythology. Their research often sets out to uncover something beyond or under the skin of such landscapes, weaving tales through film, performance and imagery into the factual texture of a given place. These artists and writers set out to disrupt and reflect on any knowingness we might have about nature and its geographic context. This kind of reflection is what Robert McFarlane has called “a mash-up of hauntology, geological sentience and political activism”, in which the hedgerows, fields and hills of our countryside “might be set seething.”^{xvi}

The challenge to artists working in King’s Wood is therefore multiple: To think about the tensions between the ancient woodland as a site of leisure, industry and labour, as well as a constructed space of pastoral beauty. Understood in this way, each artist’s personal movement, performance and relationship to King’s Wood must be defined in a network of intertwined industrial, biological, economic and ecological narratives, movements and distributions, in which they traverse through it and affect its ecology. Their work and activity would thus create distinct ‘times’ for the woods, each of which would establish its territory as constantly shifting and changing, a poetics of visible and invisible forces that continually reshape it.

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- ⁱ Iain Sinclair quoted in: COOKE, R. *The Interview: Iain Sinclair*. Available at <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2009/feb/08/iain-sinclair-interview> [Accessed 27.05.18].
- ⁱⁱ SEARLE, A. Give Me Sunshine. *The Guardian Weekly*. October 30 - November 5, 2003, p. 20.
- ⁱⁱⁱ KANT, I. *Critique of Judgement*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1973, p.90.
- ^{iv} In order to distinguish utilitarian objects from beautiful ones Kant also asserted that beautiful objects were not used in the same way as utilitarian ones. He believed that we could gain pleasure from beautiful objects without needing to use them. In this way he could describe the beautiful as being purposive without having a purpose.
- ^v Olafur Eliasson quoted in: KIMMELMAN, M. The Sun Sets at the Tate Modern. *The New York Times*, Sunday 21st March, Section 2, p.32.
- ^{vi} SPEAKS, M. From the Red Desert to the Green River. In: GRYNSZTEJN, M., et al. *Olafur Eliasson*. London: Phaidon Press Limited, 2002, p. 108.
- ^{vii} Olafur Eliasson quoted in: OBRIST, H. U. *Hans-Ulrich Obrist: Interviews Volume I*. Charta, 2003, pp. 195-196.
- ^{viii} CONNOLLY, W. *Political Theory and Modernity*. Oxford: Blackwell, 1989, p.2.
- ^{ix} JERVIS, J. *Transgressing the Modern: Explorations in the Western Experience of Otherness*. Oxford: Blackwell, 1999, p.137.
- ^x MERCHANT, C. Quoted in: JERVIS, J. *Transgressing the Modern: Explorations in the Western Experience of Otherness*. Oxford: Blackwell, 1999, p.137.
- ^{xi} CRARY, J. *Olafur Eliasson: Visionary Events*. Available at: < http://s3-eu-west-1.amazonaws.com/olafureliasson.net/texts/Olafur_Eliasson_Visionary_Events_by_Jonathan_Crary_111301.pdf > [Accessed 27.05.18].
- ^{xii} See for example: McKIBBIN, B. *The End of Nature*. New York: Anchor Books, 1990.
- ^{xiii} JERVIS, J. *Transgressing the Modern: Explorations in the Western Experience of Otherness*. Oxford: Blackwell, 1999, p.152.
- ^{xiv} BERLAND, J. On Reading the Weather. In: *Cultural Studies*, Volume 8 (Number 1), January 1994.
- ^{xv} BERLAND, J. On Reading the Weather. In: *Cultural Studies*, Volume 8 (Number 1), January 1994, p. 112.
- ^{xvi} MCFARLANE, R., 2015. The Eeriness of the English Countryside. *The Guardian* [online], 10 April. Available from: <http://www.theguardian.com/books/2015/apr/10/eeriness-english-countryside-robert-macfarlane> [Accessed 15 August 2015].