

Feral Practice: the ramifications of making-with in a multispecies world

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Abstract

In 2012, after eighteen years working as a visual artist in London, I moved to a village in Kent. My paper explores the unplanned revolution that took place in my practice and thinking as a result of working with this wildish place. I discuss the role of touch, intimacy and shared vulnerability in my experience of developing a ‘feral practice’, which seeks out intimate co-productions with other species and milieus. My ‘meeting species’ comes through an artistic process of ‘making-with’. What gets produced by these meetings is artwork, but also a series of transformations: in knowledge, aesthetics, agency, relationship. The aesthetics of each artwork become tied to its ethical intent and interspecies context: the artist’s desire and control over the work’s formal qualities must continually adjust to the need for the nonhuman participant/s activity to be elicited and foregrounded. The artist is ‘retrained’. I draw on Haraway, Morton, Martin, Bennett and Plumwood to tease out the tangled affective, agential and ethical questions encountered, and conclude by analyzing the radical shift in aesthetics my work is undergoing via discussion of the ‘expanded painting’ of Laura Lisbon, and Claire Bishop’s critique of participatory practice.

Introduction

Over the last few years I have developed a ‘feral’ practice of visual art. By which I mean one that emerges in co-production with a diverse network of nonhuman and human persons, that escapes the confines of studio and gallery to seek crossings and connections, aesthetic influences, meaning and content from outside the human realm. The term ‘feral’ is used in contrast to notions of wildness/wilderness that conceive the wild in opposition

to the human. Feral practice keeps the body and imagination of the human/artist clearly in the frame.

The core of my work is now developing strategies for and reflecting interspecies co-productions. While I spend a considerable proportion of my time reading and writing, it is the time spent outdoors listening, learning, responding to, and making-with the beyond-human, which is the engine of my work and ideas. Where most recent eco-political art employs a technological or scientific aesthetic, my methods emphasise strategies of the hands-on and affective, thus foregrounding intimacy, viscosity, even *complicity*. My touch, and the touch of my nonhuman participant/s, meet via the artwork, sometimes at an interface or 'contact zone' created by the surface of paper/canvas.

My paper touches on how this came about (it seems relevant that it wasn't a planned, intentional project) and what the ramifications for my art practice have been in terms of ethics and aesthetics. I will draw on Haraway, Morton, Martin, Bennett and Plumwood to tease out the tangled affective, agential and ethical questions encountered, and conclude by analyzing the radical shift in aesthetics my work is undergoing via discussion of the 'expanded painting' of Laura Lisbon, and Claire Bishop's critique of participatory practice.

From a Wood to a World

In 2012, after eighteen years living and working as a visual artist in London, working in the studio making painting and sculpture, I moved to a village in Kent, where the M25 borders the wooded chalk hills of the North Downs. Having daily contact with a wildish place, with other species, made the art world swiftly seem rather less real. My artistic imagination, having been confined to thinking about objects and images in white-walled spaces, stepped out into a complex living world, and couldn't bring itself to get back indoors. Something fundamentally shifts in attention, in consciousness, in my body and my being, once I have been out in the beyond-human world for a while. Over time, as this went on, a quiet, unplanned revolution unfolded in my art practice. And that change has brought with it a host of associated fascinations, problems and questions for the work, some of which I am going to discuss here.

This move to Kent wasn't planned, but came about through sheer chance interacting with the sort of chemical or magnetic attraction people are confident to mention in relation to sexual partners, but that clearly occurs in other spheres as well. A picture of a cottage for rent in a village I had visited for weekend walks turned up in my inbox, and I immediately booked a viewing, even though we were supposed to be buying our first tiny flat in South East London. When we moved, about a month later, I was in daily contact with nonhuman nature for the first time since childhood. Very soon my overwhelming urge was that I *had* to respond to this in my work, directly, politically, personally. That I needed to work towards, and somehow for, this beyond-human sphere. But I had no idea *what* to do.

In the first year I made very little, and what I did make was bad, not to put too fine a point on it. It was key, in some difficult to define way, that my body was also failing, or

was enacting some sort of refusal. I couldn't be actively dominant, I couldn't stride across these new-discovered hills because of health problems I'd had for a while. I had a regime of sitting, standing, kneeling, and lying down in rotation to be able to function at all. But my short excursions, and time spent examining all the corners of the garden, were in themselves a gradual immersion in this newly complex, multispecies environment. I couldn't walk far, so I walked and sat down, walked and reclined, walked and kneeled, which meant I took my time, and really looked at things. The world became more nuanced. I got closer to the ground, and noticed different things. I moved in, and towards, the world in new ways.

As time went by, and I progressed physically and creatively, I experimented with making outdoor stagings of drawings and paintings in the woods. I left one or two of these experiments out to disintegrate over time but most were a performance to camera. There was something visually intriguing about these installations. I enjoyed seeing the drawn marks and the geometric aesthetic of squared paper up against the wriggling energetic stuff of nature, raising queries for me about the relative ontological status and liveliness of trees and leaves versus that of art objects. But there were problems. The work ended up as a photograph for a human audience, or as something with ambivalent status – was it trash? in the woods. I sensed a lack of interest from the trees. There was a mismatch or failure to connect or to communicate, which at the time I couldn't begin to articulate.



Mile a Minute installation 2013



Rubbing Inner Wood 2013

A breakthrough came eventually with the drawing *Rubbing Inner Wood*. It was made by rubbing graphite over Japanese washi paper, which was positioned on the mirrored cut surfaces of a fallen beech tree. I had admired the distinctive shape of this cut beech as I walked the nearby path. Here was a making process that required intimacy, touch; literally rubbing up against my subject. As I made the drawings I learned the tree, or met the tree, to use a Haraway-infused term, in a more intimate way. This was much more satisfying– I had the smell of the tree in my nose and we exchanged cells via mutual abrasion. It wasn't scientific knowledge, but it was *a* knowing. It was a meeting of bodies - our bodies that were both vulnerable.

The status of the artwork also seemed altered. What was produced was clearly a *co-production* between myself and this tree. I argue there is a stronger indexical relationship between that tree and the rubbing we made, than between that tree and this photograph. I chose the paper and the graphite, while the tree determined the size, shape and mark-making. The rubbed marks were made by the tree's texture, its body, the meeting of its touch and mine.

I began to make rubbings with growing trees, encircling their trunks in different colours of paper. As the project progressed I would take the paper up to as high as I could reach from the top of my stepladders, and down to the ground, covering all the visible roots of the tree to the point where they disappeared under the soil.

In each drawing, what was produced by our intra-action was an artwork, but also a transformation of our relationship. *The tree and me met there*, at the interface of paper. We rubbed up against each other, exchanging some surface cells, and got ethically and aesthetically entwined. As Donna Haraway puts it: "My premise is that touch ramifies and shapes accountability. Accountability, caring for, being affected, and entering into responsibility are not ethical abstractions; these mundane prosaic things are the result of having truck with each other." (Haraway, D., 2008, p.36) Each of my rubbed trees became individuated, personified to me. A tree can be aware of the walk of an insect across its leaves. While bark is less sensitive, it seems likely that the tree can feel the rubbing process, and certainly feels the weight of my body shifting around on its roots.

These *Rubbings in a Wood* emerged as a series that will, if completed, include one individual from each species of tree in Shoreham Woods, and in the wider project they combine with sculptures, video installation, performed sound pieces and various diverse co-productions with other beings, to become multi-disciplinary gallery installations, which in their overlap of forms, and their diversity of scale and media, aim to mirror the sense of discovery and detail in wooded space, and the way that multiple disparate but interlocking large and small things build towards a unique "ecology".

This project, entitled *Wood to World* is not a scientific study, it does not produce evidence-based knowledge. Nor do I have any misconception that I can ever really achieve or complete my 'woodland portrait' – an acceptance of failure, the utter unfinishability of the task, is written in at the outset, and plays a generative role. What it is is a bodily situated, experiential, aesthetic exploration of a place, and a becoming-with a place, over a significant period of time.

It is through these initially clumsy engagements, body to body, with the ordinary-extraordinary world on my doorstep, that I came to the work of Donna Haraway. I learned sensually how ecologically resonant it was to be passionate about the ordinary – the ordinary lives and interconnections enacted between real creatures and the patch(es) of land that they inhabit. I took the wood as my companion, wildish as it is. Haraway makes the point that companion species, if taken seriously and followed through, can be portholes into new worlds of *becoming-with*, or *autre-mondialisations*, a term she borrows from Beatriz Preciado, lecturer in gender in Paris and Barcelona.

Haraway's technique is to track the entangled histories of specific companion dogs (the claimed-as-wolf-crosses running in the Santa Cruz park, the Pyrenees livestock guarding

dog Willem, playmate of her own Cayenne) with furious, intelligent curiosity, leading her to bedevilled and tangled multispecies histories of slavery, apartheid, herding, and middle eastern warzones. My technique, emerging as it did from a practice of painting, emphasises the hands-on and affective, thus foregrounding intimacy, viscosity, even *complicity*, complicity not quite as “complicit in a crime”, but as in getting mixed up in such a way as that one cannot quite distinguish at what point I, or my agency, ends and my co-worker’s begins. To delve into the mulch and squelch of the bluebell, rather than just admire the view of its carpet of blue.

The intimacy I practice could be described as an attempt to bring to conscious attention Timothy Morton’s concept of radical interconnection, or “unbearable intimacy”. The key theme in his book *Ecology Without Nature* is that nothing is natural, and there is no Nature; meaning there is no unacculturated naturalness, and that the binary division between nature and culture, between us and them (or that), is bogus. Another way he puts it, that I have found useful, is that there is no “background” of naturalness. A capitalized Nature implies an “over-there-ness” that plays the background to the foreground of my/our/human needs and dramas. It mirrors my attempt to turn the attentions of the viewer away from an idea of landscape that privileges view, or vista, and towards the idea of landscape that privileges the interconnected lives being lived within that view.

In his more recent book *The Ecological Thought*, Morton aims to describe the relation between entities beyond this collapsing of the Nature/Society divide. Here he draws on, or parallels, object relations as described by Graham Harman and Object Oriented Philosophy. For Harman, objects are constantly withdrawing from one another, and have a core that is essentially unknowable and “other”. At first glance, *The Ecological Thought* is completely opposed to Harman. Morton posits radical interconnection, after all. The titular “ecological thought” is, essentially, that everything is connected, and that that “everything” is enormous. He is a fan of the Tibetans, and his thinking clearly draws on Eastern philosophical traditions, without elaborating them. Morton does not allow, however, for any *uncomplicated access* to what we are connected with. The “unbearable intimacy”, between all things, which constitute each other's environment and are co-dependent; is between what he terms “strange strangers”.

For Morton, humanity cannot truly access the entities we encounter, or are enmeshed with, because our consciousness and subjectivity are impassable barriers. We are thus caught in an inescapably ironic, alienated, claustrophobic position, where we can only encounter the strange stranger with a kind of “melancholic tenderness”.

But this concept of the “strange stranger” to me somehow misses the point, like the Romantic with a capital R who adores and embraces the lover dying of consumption because they are so beautiful, they burn so bright, yet are so fleeting, rather than seeking to comfort, or alleviate suffering, or to offer and seek any real intimacy. Morton’s approach emerges from literary criticism, with a specific concentration on the English Romantic poets, which perhaps produces this emphasis on the strangeness and unreachability of the other. As Julia Martin comments in her PhD thesis on Ecocritical Art, he does not even allow for our becoming more familiar, as with greater intimacy the other becomes ever more strange.

The description of ecological entities as "strange strangers" produces and

reflects an inherent aesthetic distance between entities, and thus does not overcome the dualism which Morton criticises in the modernist Nature-Society relationship, but merely replaces it with a more individualistic Environment-Self dualism, in which all strangers become environment to a centrally immersed but introverted self. (Martin, 2014, p.83)

My embrace of the generative and ethical productivity of failure – for instance that I can never fully know or portray this wood – touches on similar ideas to Morton’s strange stranger, but the emphasis is different. For me the melancholy of his tenderness is not useful, and neither is the strangeness. Things get worse, in that my woodland project, in terms of its localized, embedded, place-specific thinking, is something Morton would vociferously argue against. Morton is against localism and “sense of place”, because he thinks they ultimately lead to nationalism and fascism. He tends to repeatedly eulogise the big, monstrous and fictional and dismiss the small, real, and local. He says that we need to think big, rational, cooperative thoughts - he opposes the terms community and cooperation (the former suggests locality and necessity, where the latter can be global, and is always chosen).

Because my practice drives my thinking, and thus emerges from assemblages and milieus that I physically inhabit and with which I am corporeally enmeshed (as I would argue do many, if not most, real ecological entities) Morton’s sentences read as problematic – do his attitudes leave real persons and ecologies hanging, in favour of something more darkly, even self-centeredly, Romantic? Is the “dark ecology” Morton espouses actually caught in the looping romanticism of mistaking self for other that he himself criticizes in *Ecology Without Nature*?

The aesthetics of interspecies coproduction

Where *Wood to World* aims to become-with and nurture solidarity with a broad milieu of entangled species, subsequent projects have moved towards eliciting and reflecting artistic encounters with a single species over extended periods, or a succession of seasons. I want to bring in just one of these to elucidate my work in interspecies aesthetics.

Foxing is a winter activity for me, the first iteration took place last winter 2016-17, and I’m now gearing up to a new series of activities. *Foxing* asks: how might one meet fox, or meet foxes halfway?

Foxing had two main strands last winter, one in which I worked with a fox rescue centre; in intimate proximity with foxes, but in a contained situation; and the one I want to concentrate on here, in which I attempted to make an ‘interspecies action painting’ with my local foxes. My practice emerges from painting and I retain a deep interest in the intimacies of touch – the rub, the interchange, the marks made. I decided to set up a contact zone in which to enact an exchange with the foxes who visit our garden, leave their ‘sudden sharp hot stink’ (Hughes, *The Thought Fox*, 1957) on our gate, press their feet to form the delicate path that leads down behind a hedge to the shared lawn at the back of our flats. In a post-humanist practice, visual artists perhaps have a head start, accustomed as they are to placing verbal communication as just “one semiotic, syntactical

and rhetorical system among many. All animals... read and write, not with ink but with urine, faeces, and so very many other substances.' (Yates, 2012, p.200) I wanted to ask my foxes some (open) questions. I wanted to capture their painterly traces.

I laid the patio with a canvas tablecloth, stitched together in the freezing weather, and put soft slabs of clay and paint-covered boards around the edges, to capture foxy footprints. I laid my table with dishes of homemade apple juice and elderberry wine, and spread it with peanuts, pheasant bones, fish skins, honey sandwiches, raw eggs. With the trail camera primed, I awaited the magic of interspecies art.

Foxes are supremely agile, and clearly have an aversion to getting their pretty feet near any dubious surfaces. After initial – what I didn't appreciate at the time as runaway – success (three foxprints on a slab of river clay) Darren the dog fox (my principal artist) went out of his way to avoid treading on my clay tiles or my paint traps.

On successive mornings over the winter, via infrared trailcam footage, I watched Darren manoeuvre around the patio, carefully finding every last peanut and piece of cheese without setting foot on my (inexplicably terrifying) clay slabs or trays of sticky paint (food colouring in a flour-thickened oil and water emulsion). It seemed clear that he couldn't *see* the scenario well, despite his glowing eyes. He is guided, overwhelmingly, by his nose.¹ It takes him quite a while and some circling, to pin down exactly where the wafts of peanut and cheese are coming from. He is also extremely determined. After seven previous patio circlings on the night pictured, he zones in, reaches down from the step above, and carefully licks the one remaining peanut from where it had fallen onto the surface of my clay, without leaving a single mark.

The following night I put the food in a truly inaccessible place, the only route in forcing his feet onto the scary clay tiles. *Surely he will?* He spends a long time sniffing, circling, staring, worrying, and is clearly unnerved by it all. And...? Nope. Darren even *digs a hole* from the other side of the fence to try to get at the food. My intentions are blocked (as are his) and take an underground swerve, arced via foxy resistance and illuminated by night-vision technology.

The Patio Project deliciously unearths what is at work in the feral practice of 'making-with': intra-active, embodied entanglements, throwing up expressive acts. In assemblage theory causality becomes reciprocal, porous. Concepts can arise and artworks can be made that could not be conceived or made by any of the participants in the assemblage in isolation, or a different configuration.

In *Foxing*, the foxy-human crossings are most revealing / productive between my and Darren's asymmetric intentions, percepts, concepts and interpretations. The artwork is a product of both our specific *relation*, and our specific *non*-relation. We have entered into an unpredictable, asymmetric conversation. Our multimedia meetings are enacted thus far through paint, pawprints, peanuts, trailcam and holes. The aesthetics of the resulting objects are unpredictable, processual, incomplete.

While the philosophical and ethical questions raised by my interspecies encounters are an important aspect of my enquiry, I am keen for feral practice to produce art objects that operate at multiple levels within contemporary art discourse. The interaction of human

artist and nonhuman others is an unfolding complex encounter which makes its own aesthetic and practical demands. The resulting artwork needs to operate within these terms and on its own terms once re-sited in the space of display (which in most instances is not the same as the space of making).



Foxing, installation at PEER, 2017

For the exhibition *Foxing* at PEER in London, I displayed the pigment-stained and muddied canvas on the floor of the gallery's larger room, alongside photographs of the canvas in situ, photographic documentation of various moments in the process, and one edit of footage from the trailcam showing how the foxes interacted with the 'set'. The floor canvas translocated into the gallery space occupied an awkward in-between status. Clearly, it sits within a painting tradition. Though misshapen and perhaps confusingly marked (some paw prints were distinct, many less so), I purposely chose a traditional painter's surface material. Can it be judged in those terms aesthetically? Yes. Is it particularly interesting on those terms aesthetically? Hmm. My inclusion of the accoutrements, the story, if you like, of its coming-into-being suggests not. My question here was why? Was it a failure of confidence? Or something more interesting?

In my analysis of how the work operates within traditional aesthetic terms I refer to the expanded painting of artist Laura Lisbon, who foregrounds subtle trace gestures in painting by the use of semi-architectural methods of display. Lisbon started to become fascinated by the 'offspray' that the process of making her airbrushed and spray painted works created on the walls of her studio space, and shifted her attention over to these haphazardly created marks. The resulting works are refined and delicate, with subtle gradations (or spray-dations) of monochromatic paint across huge swathes of translucent ground held in tension by the pleasingly firm rectangles of her installation structures. They speak to me of noticing the non-dominant mark-making of the world, which resonates with my intent, but then settle quite comfortably within a post-modernist (I mean the kind of post-modern that is more like a return to modernism, but with a twist) model of contemporary artmaking.



Laura Lisbon, Corner Setup (wall displacement) 2009

Her work is interesting, beautiful, but to transpose it onto my projects brings up a recurrent issue - nonhuman intention often gets rewritten as haphazard or chance (I am keen to oppose this, but is not the focus of this paper). The other sticking point is that her technique is perhaps a bit too *polite* if one is aiming to foreground the otherness of a beyond-human encounter, more particularly the *foxiness* of this encounter. Feral practice, while not intended to conjure images of mangy foxes spreading rubbish across the streets and competing for the remains of the KFC bonanza, certainly aims to get a whiff of fox pee in your nose.

This pungent potion, which incidentally I have come to relish the smell of, was heavily soaked into one of the boards on which I laid my paint trap. Darren wasn't going to tread on it, but he wanted to make damn sure that it was known to be his. I took the board to the studio with the canvas, but not to the gallery, and in retrospect I regret that. One of the potential issues I get is that the work begins to lose its radical status by being brought into the gallery space and denuded of its odd, domestic-feral-wild context. Where were the plant pots and stones that held it down? Where's the stink? They were represented at a distance by the documentation, but tamed, and in any future version of *Foxing* in a gallery, I would want to bring more of the generative, awkward multisensory messiness into the display space.



Foxing, work in progress on The Patio Project, 2016-17

So, if not in the 'just-post'-modernist tradition, where to place my work within an existing aesthetic of contemporary art? In seeking out and orchestrating structures to elicit co-productions with other species, I am arguably entering an offshoot of the territory of participatory art. Claire Bishop's *Artificial Hells* critiques the way that contemporary participatory practice is currently evaluated in exclusively *ethical* rather than *aesthetic* terms. 'Consensual collaboration is valued over artistic mastery and individualism, regardless of what the project sets out to do or actually achieves.' (Bishop, 2012, p.20)

Participatory art with humans is generally regarded as 'radical', Bishop argues, inasmuch as it rejects authorship and spectacle. Artists are praised for authorial renunciation, are criticized for seeking to control an individualized aesthetic territory, and lauded for turning as many 'passive' spectators into the 'active' participants as possible (regardless, sometimes, of what their activity actually is). Bishop steers clear of criticizing the ethical aims of participatory art, but she strongly questions why, in that case, participatory art projects are always judged against other contemporary art, rather than being judged against other inventive *social* projects. The result, she claims, is that 'art enters a realm of useful, ameliorative and ultimately modest gestures, rather than the creation of singular acts that leave behind them a troubling wake.' (Bishop, 2012, p.23)

Bishop draws on Ranciere's aesthetic theory to propose how aesthetics could usefully re-enter our understanding and critique of participatory art, particularly his reinvention of the word aesthetic as a *mode of experience*, having the effect that it is not only the art object/event, but all the discourse surrounding it, that operates in the aesthetic realm. The one can complicate, even contradict, the other.

The aesthetic for Ranciere therefore signals an ability to think contradiction: the productive contradiction of art's relationship to social change, which is characterized by the paradox of belief in art's autonomy and in it being inextricably bound to the promise of a better world to come... This friction ideally produces the formation of elements 'capable of speaking twice: from their readability and from their unreadability' (Bishop, 2004, pp.29-30)

This passage offers a useful way of thinking about the duality of my project – which emphasises both an ethics of process (cultivating an active listening engagement, experimenting with unconscious reasoning, practicing active uncertainty as a tool for learning) and an aesthetic of product (the aesthetic encounter between the human viewer and the silent, eloquent object). While I am using some of the techniques advocated by supporters of participatory art (such as Grant Kester) that Bishop challenges, like ‘empathetic identification’ and ‘a capacity to listen, openly and actively’ (ibid p.25), I also claim the artistic position that Bishop theorises as Lacanian: to follow my urges, and curiosities, and to seek out ‘*enjoyment* and *disruption*’ (ibid, p.39). The art object will aim to express, yet should also exceed, my ethical intention. ‘*Aisthesis*’ is a key term here, again taken from Ranciere, via Kant, which places the aesthetic as “an autonomous regime of experience that is not reducible to logic, reason or morality.’ (ibid p.18)

When, Lucy Kimbell, an artist who has also tussled with interspecies ethics versus aesthetics, planned her ‘Rat Evaluated Artwork’ in 2005, she sketched a complex series of clear tunnels, with junctions acting as points of choice for rats as they moved through the work, each labelled according to her imagined rattish evaluation of the artwork at that point (‘exploitative’ / ‘beautiful’ / ‘not fully resolved’) The piece was never made. Kimbell slowly realised she could not do it, even though she wanted to, for a mixture of practical and ethical reasons. Her thinking had evolved considerably through her practice research, and had left her plans behind. It is the language she uses to describe this process that I find particularly apposite: ‘She [the owner of the rats] had agreed to let me try to train them aesthetically. Neither of us was clear what that meant’ and ‘I was just doing a thing, and seeing what it was like. And that moves you forward, not the design, not the conceptualization of it’. (Kimbell quoted in Baker, p.47) What I find both refreshing and experientially familiar in these descriptions is Kimbell’s determined admittance of not knowing, and thus her openness and attentiveness to what actually happens, and what that changes. Being in active and listening relation to the nonhuman (learning to do this better) then becomes both method, and result.

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