

Introduction: Layered Landscapes

Ysanne Holt * and Rupert Ashmore *

Department of Arts, Northumbria University, Newcastle upon Tyne NE1 8ST, UK

* Correspondence: ysanne.holt@northumbria.ac.uk (Y.H.); r.ashmore@northumbria.ac.uk (R.A.)

Received: 9 February 2020; Accepted: 19 February 2020; Published: 27 February 2020

Keywords: landscape; meshscapes; edge-lands; northern Britain; art; photography; performance

This Special Issue of *Arts* investigates a series of creative projects focused upon and sited within certain peripheral landscapes of northern Britain. Emerging from fine art, performance, sound, photography and digital media, these projects each signify a continuous questioning of our socio-economic and cultural relationship with the landscape. They also complicate the traditional, and still ubiquitous representation of the northern British landscape: the framed visual image. Since the 1970s, Rosalind Krauss and others have highlighted that placing a section of space within the confines of the frame conceptually separates that landscape from the nuanced and intricate relationships of its wider context (Krauss 1982; Ziady DeLue and Elkins 2008). The inevitable consequence is a logocentric alignment of that particular space with well-worn narratives and aesthetic tropes such as “wilderness” or “the picturesque”. Indeed, Robin Kelsey suggests that, even though much of the pictorial landscape tradition conjures a nostalgic longing for communion with the natural world, the very act of framing landscape emphasises our desire to remove ourselves from this world into the realm of “culture” (Kelsey 2008). Framed images of the land, therefore, can curtail our appreciation of the interwovenness of landscape, and our place within it, and crystallise meanings into accepted parameters.

Nonetheless, the arts have also presented landscape as a palimpsest, evoking the past in the present by acknowledging physical histories embodied in geological processes or socio-cultural ones through the aesthetics of ruination. Additional understanding of the impacts of the past on the landscape is stimulated in more recent artistic strategies of deep mapping. Here, a more active relationship is set up between multiple histories and socio-economic processes and the present landscape. Complementary or contradictory narratives, myths and histories may emerge, and the phenomena that have impacted a specific space inevitably stretch beyond the frame.

The projects considered here, however, go further still, investigating specific spaces as they exist and are experienced in a number of different registers, whether that be through a geo-political, socio-economic or nature/cultural lens. They explicitly aim to put narratives and ways of knowing in dialogue with each other. Importantly, this is more than an historical exercise. Representations of the landscape-as-palimpsest, and even some examples of deep mapping, might be accused of only investigating the formative processes of landscape *up to a certain point*: the present. Instead, the projects discussed in this Special Issue highlight the ongoing influence of connections, relationships and historical processes within all these registers. These landscapes are quite explicitly still under formation and on the move. Historical fragments or colliding spheres of interest are springboards: vectors that can still be travelled as very active lines of enquiry.

The specific sites of these investigations are also important. If Britain is conceived as a geographical entity, then its northern edges inevitably invite enquiry—an edge is, most obviously, where one thing becomes something else. Edges reveal that, individually and collectively, we demarcate phenomena into discrete “islands of meaning”. Through social, psychological and cultural processes of categorisation, we differentiate between spaces and places, blocks of time, people,

relationships and behaviours and draw boundaries around the phenomena we consider similar and exclude those we assume to be different. Thus, we maintain a coherent sense of identity and a contingent understanding of the world (Zerubavel 1991).

Whilst the phenomena that seem to typify an “island of meaning” may actually be unstable and questionable when placed under scrutiny, there is a tendency to take them for granted—unless changes in the wider environment undermine accepted meanings and force a re-delineation. However, at the edges, borders and boundaries between these phenomena, we have no such luxury. The edge is where an island of meaning is activated, dynamic—where we inevitably draw “fine lines” between what is and what is not. Sometimes there is the temptation to alter or soften the boundary to encompass an entity’s unruly parts or mould the unruly parts to fit the border, but ultimately the edge can never be examined without questioning: Why here? Why that?

Eviatar Zerubavel (1991) encourages us to interrogate why we make particular meanings in this place or around this thing, but of course, his assumption is that these constructs are inherently unstable and always contingent. The reality is always “fuzzy”; on closer inspection, the fine line is actually a grey area. Similarly, whilst Paul Farley and Michael Symonds Roberts examine the edge-lands between urban and rural space, they also identify fluid expanses that defy clear definition and delineation. These are areas, which, if we turn away, will have changed—physically, socially and economically—on our return (Farley and Roberts 2011).

The fact that these are *northern* edges further obscures a clean categorisation and adds more “fuzziness”. As the opening chapters of Dave Russell’s *Looking North* highlight, defining what delineates “the north” of Britain is virtually impossible (Russell 2004, pp. 1–45). Indeed, that volume goes on to investigate northernness through different cultural, social and economic registers. However, while categorisation of what constitutes the north may always be fluid and contingent upon perspective, it is clear that different cultural narratives pertain, and while putative assumptions may be constructed, they have real and ongoing effects. Connections are as influential as distinctions. Boundaries between elements may appear harder to contest, for example, the edge between land and sea. Although, as several of the essays in this Special Issue confirm, land-based and maritime economies and ecologies are intrinsically linked, and the movements of water shape the social structures and meanings of life on land. After all, we delineate the river from the sea with the word “mouth”—an opening that facilitates passage and refutes division (it is difficult to conceive of the mouth of a river as “closed”).

For Zerubavel, the contestable divisions between islands of meaning have been most vividly interrogated by the “fuzzy brains” of artists. In his view, it is the arts that have intentionally set out to question how and why we delineate and categorise and to distort or obscure the division between “figure and ground” (Zerubavel 1991, p. 97). His particular examples are largely taken from early- to mid-20th-century Modernism, but the six papers in this Special Issue of *Arts* extend this timeframe, informed by subsequent approaches that sought to challenge the discrete boundaries between codes of artistic practice—conceptualism, collaboration, performance and digital and multi-media forms—and interdisciplinary scholarship, employing methods that integrate the cultural with the sociological, political, economic and ecological.

Contributors here include academics from the broad field of visual culture studies and practitioners of fine art, performance, photography and digital media. Our focus overall is framed by our interest in what we have termed, in part by way of a provocation, northern “peripheral” landscapes in Britain, understood here as both geographical and socially marginal. To this task, the essays bring relational perspectives and a concern with the edges—between space, sites, practices and disciplines. Our interests therefore explicitly reside with those landscapes layered with complementary or contradictory narratives and those spaces existing and experienced in a number of different registers. The Special Issue also draws upon, and extends, a decade of research by the editors and their collaborative partners, investigating cultural practices in border and island locations in northern England and Scotland (McLanahan and Holt 2010; Holt et al. 2018; Holt 2018). Three papers are from artistic practitioners (Goodfellow, Pencak and Collins) outlining the conceptual

foundations and methodologies of specific projects, and three are analyses of particular bodies of creative practice within the wider context established here (Holt, Panneels and Ashmore).

Significantly, these projects and papers have emerged in a wider environment of intensified cultural and socio-political “line-drawing”. At the time of writing, the ongoing processes surrounding Brexit are providing multiple cases of delineation, border-making, and the construction and reconstruction of islands of meaning, as Britain negotiates a transition from integration with, to a position on the edge of, Europe. It is notable that what some predicted to be a smooth transition has foundered upon an unavoidable, geographical “fine line”—the physical border between Eire and Northern Ireland—and that this is increasingly causing disruptive feedback towards other islands of meaning that were already under stress: political sovereignty; “democracy”; national identity and the Anglo–Scottish Union.

So, a questioning of the coherence of a singular British entity has been most active in the North. In this last case, the arts in Scotland have been unpicking those islands of meaning pertaining to Scottish identity since well before the 2014 independence referendum and have continued apace as the temperature has risen on that issue since the Brexit decision in 2016. One might cite Martin Parr’s *Think of Scotland* photographic project here (2007–2017) or the three exhibitions over 2019–2020: *Romantic Scotland* (at Duff House, Banff); *Wild and Majestic: Romantic Visions of Scotland* (National Museum of Scotland); and *The Remaking of Scotland: Nation, Migration, Globalisation 1760–1860* (Scottish National Portrait Gallery). These all require us to consider some of the abstract assumptions and recycled stereotypes that sit at the core of this particular island of meaning. Perhaps more reflective of the approaches adopted in this Special Issue is the exhibition of the Document Scotland group of photographers, *A Contested Land*, which toured through venues in Scotland and England in 2019. As the title suggests, these photographs are much more grounded in the specificities and nuances of place. While abstract ideas of national identity flow through them, these layers or vectors of meaning also serve to enhance or contextualise a specifically located materiality. Stephen McLaren’s project, *Edinburgh Unchained*, picks up one of the themes of “Remaking Scotland” and examines the grand but seldom remarked upon Georgian and early Victorian doorways and porticos of Edinburgh’s New Town. The photographs seem to conjure Hill and Adamson’s early photographs of Scotland’s cultural refinement, but these specific residences and company buildings were all built from the profits of the Atlantic slave and sugar trades—specifically through Scottish colonial interests in Jamaica. They are presented by McLaren alongside images of the tombs of civic figures and buildings established in the West Indies by Scottish colonialists, all compromised by this history of exploitation. Ideas of Scottish autonomy (not to mention narratives of historic oppression) become complicated when Edinburgh’s exploitative histories of global trade are acknowledged, especially when seen through the symbols of civic worthiness embodied in the factual existence of stone.

Sophie Gerrard’s *The Flows* and Colin McPherson’s *Easdale* take us to Scotland’s “peripheral” places. *The Flows* examines the peat expanses of north–west Scotland. While intimately recording the landscape and its thinly distributed population, the photographs are layered with the understanding that this is a landscape that has been continually taken for granted and exploited by wider forces; yet, it retains national cultural significance and global environmental importance. McPherson’s *Easdale* focuses on one of the few Hebridean islands to experience notable repopulation over the last few decades. Once a thriving centre for a global slate trade, that industry disappeared after a catastrophic storm in the 1880s. The photographs examine the lives of the residents who re-established a community on the island a century later, and their precarity is almost tangible. While virtually all these residents were drawn here by emotion, rather than genealogy, their situation seems to mirror that of their predecessors—everyday life and the urge to build community is always impacted by environmental change, wider policy, economics and ideas about what the Scottish periphery should be and who it should be for.

These three series are grounded in the materiality of place, but the extent to which the human experience of locality is perhaps complicated by more abstract narratives is suggested by Jeremy Sutton-Hibbert’s photographs of protests in public spaces in and around Glasgow (Sutton-Hibbert 2018). Here, we see explicitly situated actions in response to events and issues—climate change,

Scottish independence, nuclear weapons—with cultural and practical effects on lived experience. Taken en masse, however, the messages merge and bleed into each other. Specific issues give way to fuzziness. Are we looking at evidence of Glasgow's history of, and potential for, politically cohesive community or a sense of place dissolving into emotive, abstract statements and the floating signifiers of crisis?

Both singly and collectively, these projects seem to suggest a common conclusion: islands of meaning and the borders between them appear to be stable when viewed through one lens, but become grey, fuzzy and deeply unstable when overlaid by other vectors, factors and narratives. It is a situation that mirrors the Irish border. This border is one that cows cross daily to graze but has global implications for customs unions and trade organisations. A fine line exists between peace and unrest and all points in between.

A discussion of such overlaid and dynamic interrelations features throughout this Special Issue. In this regard, several of the essays adopt conceptual frameworks of the kind proposed by, for example, social anthropologist Tim Ingold and human geographer Doreen Massey. In essence, their writings underline a relational sense of place—of place as always in motion as opposed to one with an established and largely unchanging identity. With these perspectives uppermost, questions of national identity are less explicitly explored here; indeed, abstractions such as national identity are just one element in a kaleidoscope of interconnections. In this regard, edge-lands are also sites of movement and certainly not of fixed parameters. Edges or border regions are, in themselves, perceived to be “networks”, or following Timothy Morton and Ingold perhaps more significantly, they are “meshworks” of entangled relations drawing in elements, materials and identities from within, around and elsewhere (Ingold 2007).

Again, within this mindset, the conceptualisation of ‘north’ is still relevant, but those outworn and stereotypical associations of northern regions as remote, isolated and authentic are essentially jettisoned in our reframing here—which instead emphasises interwoven ecologies, contingency and embodied experiences of place. Thought in this way, place is continually being constructed in situ, through interactions, and the English–Scottish border, for example, is specifically not a line between two territories but a borderland, a space of flow and interconnections, a meshscape. This will remain so, regardless of the outcome of another Scottish independence referendum.

Through reference to her own choreographic practice, Claire Pencak's essay in this Special Issue underlines a concern with the more-than-human, as related to this particular border space. Her own Geopoetic perspective, drawing upon the writings of Kenneth White, eschews any separation of the human from the natural world and emphasises instead ongoing bodily and perceptual processes of sensing place and of thinking “with” and “through” sites and their constitutive elements in the Scottish borders. Through ethical and participatory forms of choreographic performance in relation to the material elements of stone, water and wood, a series of what are termed here “tuning activities” facilitate an embodied knowing. At its core, a practice of this kind challenges ideas of a border as a bounded place with associated qualities of difference, of rivalry or of existing at an edge. Instead a spatial quality of wide openness emerges, and a subjective border is opened. Through perceptions of both nature and place as perpetually in motion, site is understood to gather “the wider context of place or world into itself” (p. 11). Placemaking here is a compositional process, and in this context, borders are potentially similar to bridges—sites that join rather than divide. Rivers, similarly, are fluid, ongoing forces of interconnection, moving outwards towards tributaries and across geopolitical borders. Following Rose, rivers underline interdependencies, interactions and communication on all scales (Rose 2017).

Such a view preoccupies Ysanne Holt in her analysis of an exhibition by the artist Tania Kovats, which she locates within a recent body of creative practice in and around the Scottish border rivers, most notably the river Tweed. Holt's essay also emphasises that sense of landscape “in process” and as constituted from layers of human and non-human, natural and cultural interactions through time. The continual flow of rivers from their source outwards to the sea is underpinned by a shared view of the “hydrosocial”—of water as actively embedding and expressing social relations. Such a view has emerged in number of recent “place-based” approaches to Scottish borders' rivers—approaches

that cohere across the arts, humanities and social sciences. The implications of a continual movement of water lends itself to a cross-disciplinary border crossing and a conceptual fluidity. From art practices with an eco-activist agenda concerned with the local impact of global warming and climate change to the more broadly environmental consciousness that characterises the particular works by Kovats discussed here, a non-anthropocentric ecological sensibility is at play. Again, following Ingold, Kovats' river Tweed-following exhibition *Head to Mouth* underlines a sense of the human as an "organism in its environment" (Ingold 2000). Holt, similar to several others in this Special Issue (notably Panneels and Pencak), is concerned with the non-material benefits of natural environments as defined in the context of "cultural ecosystem services" thinking. Signalling the value of natural resources such as water in spiritual, aesthetic, sense of place and cultural heritage contexts, Kovats' exhibition in Berwick-upon-Tweed speaks to ideas of border-crossings between the real and imaginary, the natural and supernatural, visible and invisible, the past, the present and potential futures for this region. It engages in forms equivalent to deep mapping, uncovering layers of connection from 19th-century antiquarianism, folklore, geology, history and hearsay and all. Holt argues that this has the effect of dissolving boundaries and making connections with future-oriented potential in these insecure and uncertain times.

Paul Goodfellow's account of his own digital photographic practice, which takes place in northern island and border regions, both challenges and envelops data. In this fundamentally systems approach, data are connected to matter by connected electrons, computer systems or algorithms—indexical of conceptual objects. Goodfellow brings "ground-truthing" approaches to the fore, using practices of walking and a phenomenological dissipation of the self into space, at the same time as also structuring, anchoring or contesting histories, stories and/or systems of understanding. His multi-dimensional mappings disrupt the subjectivity of linear perspective and complicate distinct apprehensions of nature and culture, England and Scotland. His work prompts us to question the nature of photographic representation and foregrounds a subjective experience of space and time with implications of ghosts, stories and the uncanny. Once again, our sense of time and space, past and present is complicated through systemic processes, repeated experience and an emphasis on partial connections and on cultural, fictive and sensory overlays. Goodfellow speaks to the need to reassert lived experience in the representation of space and processes.

In his account of documentary photographs of sites of post-industrial decline in northern England in the late 20th and early 21st centuries, Rupert Ashmore calls fundamentally for greater responsibility in looking. He brings the "mobilities approach" mostly identified in recent debates within human, cultural and economic geographies to his subject: the work of the Tyneside-based Amber collective. Viewed through a "mobilities" lens, their photographs are not simply to be understood as static images signifying a sense of melancholic, often even nostalgic "pastness", as is so often assumed. From a macro to micro scale, an understanding emerges of sites as typified by meshworks defined through unequal movement, intertwined and relational but with temporary stabilisations. Here, Ashmore considers the photograph not as a static image of a point of time, but as suggestive of a longer "photographic event" (Azoulay 2008). This is to recognise the viewer as part of an ecosystem and to think of both the industrial and post-industrial as a continuum with which the viewer has a relational position and perhaps some potential agency.

A concern with agency and cultural ecosystems also informs Inge Panneels's investigation of the activities of artists Julia Barton and Stephen Hurrell on the north-western coast of Scotland. These projects engage local communities in acts of "critical cartography"—actions of mapping that reveal and contest the power to delineate, identify and name and investigate and question the already-mapped and un-mapped. They work at the intersection of the natural movements of sea and wind, the layers of energy and fishing policy, the way locality is understood through histories and anecdotes and the realities of pollution and environmental and cultural sustainability. They map the intersections of the micro and macro, the global and local, and provide insights into ecological, political and cultural tensions. Again, the approaches of Ingold and Morton are important, as well as those of 19th-century planner and environmentalist, Patrick Geddes. Historical and local knowledge, and art, science and policy are layered to produce temporally and spatially specific meanings and

understandings of place that reflect Grant Kester's notion of "Littoral art". Panneels asserts that such experimental ways of producing new knowledge can bolster environmental and cultural sustainability appropriate to the way that the Anthropocene upends accepted ways of knowing.

Rebecca Collins and Johanna Linsley introduce the research methodologies employed in their site-specific sound project, *Stolen Voices*, which takes the innovative form of a briefing for would-be investigators. In order to collate an understanding of the coastal sites of Seaham in County Durham and Aberdeen, evidence accumulates in the form of overheard snippets of conversation, fragments of historical and architectural information and insights from critical theory and fiction. These "extracts" bounce off understandings of local deindustrialisation, fossil fuel extraction and cultural and political tensions over globalisation, climate change and industrial life reframed as heritage. The investigation is imbued with the tension of an undetermined crisis, and similar to Sutton-Hibbert's placards, the snippets may become imbued with a non-specific amalgamation of ecological, cultural and economic threat. The specifics of the local become temporarily grounded, enabling us to think about the interplay of micro and macro dynamics. *Stolen Voices* offers knowledge on the edges of understanding, which troubles a solid identification of place. Instead, it offers pulses of intertwined imaginaries and experiences: registering these coastal places as connected but also singular and temporarily fixing the contingent elements that make "here" here.

To step into the shoes of the investigator is perhaps an appropriate way to explore these layered landscapes. It is not only the artist who explores the fuzzy, grey areas between islands of meaning, the detective also draws together fragments and incongruities and is willing to place a piece of evidence in different contexts—always anticipating that a picture may come into focus or lead to other threads of enquiry or remain obscured. Similarly, the essays in "Layered Landscapes" highlight the embodied experiences and materiality of place, but these realities are always entwined with wider processes and forces. Rotating our angle of view can reveal other connections and disconnections. Other elements remain intangible, but creative experimentation and pre-existing fragments can provide jumping-off points to reveal new ways of understanding. These, however, are always contingent and temporarily and spatially situated, ready to be layered into future experiences of those northern peripheral landscapes that are continually under formation.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

References

- Azoulay, Ariella. 2008. *The Civil Contract of Photography*. New York: Zone Books.
- Farley, Paul, and Michael Symmons Roberts. 2011. *Edgelands: Journeys into England's True Wilderness*. London: Jonathan Cape.
- Holt, Ysanne, David Martin-Jones, and Owain Jones, eds. 2018. *Visual Culture in the Northern British Archipelago: Imagining Islands*. Abingdon: Routledge.
- Holt, Ysanne. 2018. Borderlands: Visual and Material Culture in the Interwar Anglo-Scottish Borders. In *Rural Modernity in Britain: A Critical Intervention*. Edited by Kristin Bluemel and Michael McCluskey. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
- Ingold, Timothy. 2000. *The Perception of the Environment: Essays on Livelihood, Dwelling and Skill*. London: Routledge.
- Ingold, Timothy. 2007. *Lines: A Brief History*. London: Routledge.
- Kelsey, Robin. 2008. Landscape as Not Belonging. In *Landscape Theory*. Edited by Rachael Ziady DeLue and James Elkins. Abingdon: Routledge. pp. 203–13.
- Krauss, Rosalind. 1982. Photography's Discursive Spaces: Landscape/View. *Art Journal* 42: 311–19.
- McLanahan, Angela; and Ysanne Holt. 2010. North—A Themed Issue. *Visual Culture in Britain* 11. Edited by Angela McLanahan and Ysanne Holt.
- Rose, Deborah Bird. 2017. Connectivity Thinking, Animism, and the Pursuit of Liveliness. *Educational Theory* 67: 491–508.
- Russell, Dave. 2004. *Looking North: Northern England and the National Imagination*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.

Sutton-Hibbert, Jeremy. 2018. A Contested Land: New Work and Exhibition from Document Scotland. Available online: <http://www.documentscotland.com/a-contested-land-scotland-photographers/> (accessed on 12 November 2019).

Zerubavel, Eviatar. 1991. *The Fine Line: Making Distinctions in Everyday Life*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
Ziady DeLue, Rachael, and James Elkins, eds. 2008. *Landscape Theory*. Abingdon: Routledge.



© 2020 by the authors. Licensee MDPI, Basel, Switzerland. This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).