

# A Series of Attempts



Erica Molesworth

## Attempt 0

### TO STRUCTURE:

Principles of connection and heterogeneity: any point of a rhizome can be connected to anything other, and must be. This is very different from the tree or root, which plots a point, fixes an order.

- Deleuze & Guattari<sup>1</sup>

...landscapes are networks or assemblages...

- Levi R. Bryant<sup>2</sup>

...a theory of humour is not humorous. A joke explained is a joke misunderstood.

- Simon Critchley<sup>3</sup>

To imagine a structure for art is difficult. Its ideas swirl around each other, returning to some minor point and then exploding outwards again, only to swing back around to something mentioned earlier (...I remember reading something like this before...). Art exists in a series of interconnected relationships, as in a spiral labyrinth where the paths cross over one another.

It is even more difficult, even impossible, to 'explain' art (like a joke, does its explanation kill it?). Better to create a landscape of ideas in which art operates and is built. We will walk down a series of paths and, in the words of Robert Smithson, "Some paths go somewhere, some don't... I'll designate points on a line and stabilize the chaos between the two points. Like stepping stones."<sup>4</sup>

My studio practice operates on the assumption that the relationships between works are as important as the individual works themselves. When I put together a collection of works about landscape, I am thinking about my experience of spaces. As I move through landscape, I do not perceive everything in detail but rather gain a generalized impression with seemingly random

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<sup>1</sup> Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 7.

<sup>2</sup> Quoted in Roman Davis, "On Landscape Ontology: An Interview with Levi Bryant," *faslanyc*, November 5, 2011, <http://faslanyc.blogspot.com/2011/11/on-landscape-ontology-interview-with.html>.

<sup>3</sup> Simon Critchley, *On Humour* (London: Routledge, 2002), 2.

<sup>4</sup> Robert Smithson, "Fragments of a Conversation (1969)," ed. William C. Lipke, in *Robert Smithson: The Collected Writings*, 2nd Edition, ed. Jack Flam (Los Angeles: The University of California Press, 1996), 190.

elements presenting sporadically. These elements are usually incongruities that are often the result of a layering of different ideas about human use of landscape. Sometimes these different ideas occur over time – in which changing fashions in economics, resource management, conservation, ecology or (sub)urban planning reveal themselves in the landscape. At other times, they are the result of competing but concurrent views on the use of space and its relationship to economic and social factors.

Down in the partially post-industrial landscape of San Francisco's old port district, there is a deeply incongruous semi-reclaimed piece of parkland including a concrete rubble jetty that extends, seemingly without purpose, into the Bay. The existence of this jetty is also the non-existence of a bridge. It is the result of an attempt to conquer an expanse of water that was abandoned almost before it began. Economic, political and social factors determined that such a bridge was no longer viable. Another set of such factors decided that the now defunct foundations of this bridge should be reconstructed into a rubble pier and the surrounding site converted into an environmental reconstruction zone and public recreational area.

This non-existence of the bridge is also a philosophical conundrum – a jetty to nowhere – that both constructs and constrains human movement through space. It raises questions concerning the extent to which humans can remake and reconstruct natural forms. It also seems to ask what makes a bridge a *bridge*: Is a bridge with a gap in the middle still a bridge? Is a bridge that only reaches partway across a body of water still a bridge? And to what extent is the human view and use of land completely determined by such physical and philosophical constructions over the landscape? Can we find ways to creatively use and reshape such constructions?

Human movement through space reveals the interconnectedness of objects and ideas in the landscape, and all three things – movement, objects, ideas - are part of any philosophy of landscape. The camera on the other hand often seems to create a kind of distance to its subject. It allows us access to these places but also frames them: puts them in a box that is necessarily “over there” and apart from us. I – as the operator of the camera – feel a distance at the same time that my presence is proven. This paper too is written from a kind of distance: as though the camera is writing. In my work and this paper, I want the audience to feel remote but also let in. I want the position of the artist to exist as a kind of empty space – an outline in the landscape that others can walk into.

## Attempt #1

### TO BUILD A BRIDGE:

The bridge is ambiguous everywhere: it alternately welds together and opposes insularities...

As a transgression of the limit, a disobedience of the law of the place, it represents a departure, an attack on a state, the ambition of a conquering power, or the flight of an exile; in any case, the “betrayal” of an order...

It is as though delimitation itself were the bridge that opens the inside to its other.

- Michel de Certeau<sup>5</sup>

In his 2011 work *Construction Site*, Mark Wallinger commissioned construction workers to build scaffolding on a beach to exactly line-up with the horizon in the background. For us to understand this work, we have to acknowledge the existence of a certain conception of the landscape. This conception is of the landscape-as-image, in which our shifting perspective of the curvature of the earth (the horizon) becomes a formal line in a picture, and where the fluid shoreline becomes another. This conception of the earth as a view then enables us to understand the overlaid construction of the scaffolding as a kind of mapping of the formal qualities of landscape-as-image. This is the kind of view that is foundational to the planning and building of all kinds of human constructions over the landscape.

The bridge is another kind of line that connects one part of the picture to another. The bridge “carries on a double life in innumerable memories of places and everyday legends.”<sup>6</sup> It is both a metaphor and a physical extension of the landscape. It represents a conquest of space, but a fragile one: what happens when that connecting line is broken or is never drawn? The Bay Area is, for obvious reasons, a place of bridges: bridges that have not stood up to earthquakes, bridges that have been replaced, bridges that have become obsolete, bridges with gaps in them. Along with these bridges are the concomitant sites of potential and un-built bridges: simply the

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<sup>5</sup> Certeau, Michel de, and Steven Rendall (trans.), *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 128-9.

<sup>6</sup> Certeau, *Practice of Everyday Life*, 128.

expanse of the Bay. These sites seem to point to the failure of the grand plan, to the paucity of the conception of landscape-as-image.

This idea of landscape as an unfinished map with an overlaid system of human-drawn lines can give rise to a certain absurdity. What if, for example, the lines of latitude and longitude were literal lines drawn across the surface of the earth?

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An artist emerges from the water at Peace Haven on the south coast of Britain and proceeds to walk north using a handheld GPS device to follow the exact line of the Greenwich Meridian. He proceeds directly through every obstacle in his prescribed path: streams are crossed, windows climbed through and hallways navigated. The final shot shows the artist swimming off again into the North Sea.

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This is exactly what British artist Simon Faithfull documented in his 2009 video work *0°00' Navigation (Part I: A Journey Across England)*. The Greenwich Meridian, passing through the Royal Observatory in London, was established by an Englishman at the height of British naval power and was selected as the official Prime Meridian in 1884 by a conference of 25 nations in Washington, D.C. (France abstained). The genius of Faithfull's action is to treat this arbitrary construct of global power structures – the 0°00'00" line of longitude – as though it were an actual line in the lived experience of places. The fact that this line in no way matches the actual experience of being 'on the ground' – with its intervening houses, streams, and fences – reveals the limitations of this human-imposed grid system. (Interestingly, as a result of shifting scientific knowledge, the system does not even quite match up with itself: the GPS reference 0°00'00" longitude is actually 100 meters or 0°00'05.33" E of the old Greenwich Meridian). The human attempt to navigate space through longitude therefore seems slightly absurd and anachronistic but nevertheless still forms the basis of GPS technology today and remains the primary way that we in the contemporary Western world locate ourselves. The conception of landscape-as-image is deeply embedded in our cultural understanding of landscape and in our daily lives. It provides an illusion of control over the vastness of the globe that comes out of and promotes a view of space as owned or open to conquest. It also provides the basis for all kinds of human

navigation through space – from individuals using GPS for directions to a friend’s house, to immense global flows of capital along air and shipping freight routes.

The word ‘landscape’ is commonly associated with a field of view and with vision, perhaps because of a similarity between the suffixes *-scape* and *-scope*, or even a phonic association with the words *scan* and *span*. However, the *-scape* in ‘landscape’ is actually etymologically linked to human-land interaction: “There is a notion, embedded in the original word, of a mutual shaping of people and place.”<sup>7</sup> In other words, ‘landscape’ does not just refer to a unified image seen – but strangely disassociated – from the human viewpoint (as in some landscape painting or photography); it is a word historically associated with human presence and intervention. Representations of landscape are therefore as much about the human element ‘right here’ as opposed to nature ‘over there,’ so the representations of landscape that I am interested in acknowledge the complex ways that humans construct views, frames and grids over landscape. These constructions are often characterized as utilitarian but, when taken out of their supporting frameworks, can start to seem fragile, awkward and absurd. It is at these points that my work appears.

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<sup>7</sup> Anne Whiston Spirn quoted in Rachael Ziady DeLue, and James Elkins (eds), *Landscape Theory* (New York: Routledge, 2008), 92.

## Attempt #2

### REDUCTION AD ABSURDUM:

They hide their humor in plain sight, letting it bleach bone black and white in the obvious, deadpan midday sun.

- Tim Davis<sup>8</sup>

A joke is a play upon form that affords an opportunity for realizing that an accepted pattern has no necessity.

- Mary Douglas<sup>9</sup>

Humor in its first analysis is a perception of the incongruous.

- James Russell Lowell<sup>10</sup>

The word absurd comes from the Latin *absurdus* [*ab-* (badly) + *-surdus* (deaf)] meaning out of tune or discordant. Humor can be many things, but when it is absurd, it speaks to specific social conditions that determine what is acceptable and what is possible. For something to be 'out of tune,' there must be a scaled system that tells us what is *in* tune.

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An artist lays out a blanket on a New York City street corner in the midst of winter snow, and begins setting up a makeshift street stall alongside other vendors in Cooper Square. His wares, carefully laid out, are painstakingly crafted snowballs in a variety of sizes (from XS to XL) with prices to match.

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This artist was David Hammons and the work *Bliz-aard Ball Sale* (1983). His act is absurd in that its discordant logic turns the social judgment of what is reasonable and what is ridiculous back onto itself. Such actions could quite easily be dismissed but they could also produce a line of questioning if we see the artist's role as offering a different perspective on how to be in the world. The questions raised by this work are around the idea of value (particularly in an art

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<sup>8</sup> Tim Davis, "Photogeliophobia: Fear of Funny Photography – A Diagnosis," *Aperture* 212 (Fall 2013): 44.

<sup>9</sup> Mary Douglas, "Do dogs laugh?" and "Jokes" in *Implicit Meanings: Essays in Anthropology* (London: Routledge, 1975), 96.

<sup>10</sup> Quoted in Simon Critchley, *On Humour* (London: Routledge, 2002), 3.

context) and where value comes from. Since snow is ubiquitous and ephemeral, for example, is it the fashioning into differently sized balls that adds value (the labor value)? Is it the arbitrary assignation of price? The mere presence of the artist? Or is it the snow's white color that adds value? By taking on the role of the absurdist street hustler, the artist begins to reveal the layers of absurdity within value judgments about art and, by extension, the capitalist system itself.

For Sculpture Projects Muenster 2007, Hammons predicted rain for August 18 (it was sunny that day), and proposed this work for the Nuit Blanche celebrations in Paris: 'For my piece, I predicted that a double rainbow would appear over the city at night on 4 October.' It did not (and indeed his name was removed from the festival's line-up)<sup>11</sup>. In another time, Diogenes the Cynic, ancient Greek philosopher-provocateur, walked around the agora with a lamp in the daytime. When inevitably asked why he was doing such a pointless thing, he would respond that he was looking for the truth. I keep returning to this practice of performing actions outside in the real world that do not have utilitarian goals, outcomes or 'performance indicators' – in other words, that are out of tune with the current system and are, in that key way, essentially *absurd*.

Another way to characterize these gestures is as failures. Hammons' snowballs deliberately fail as conventional art commodities (although ironically in the long term they succeed through the artworld operations of the circulation of documentation, critical acclaim and infamy). He later failed to predict either rain or rainbows (and here the removal of his name from the festival is an artworld failure too). Bas Jan Ader made a career of failing – and falling (is it a coincidence that these words are so similar?) In *Fall I (Los Angeles)*, 1970, Ader sits atop the roof of his bungalow on a chair. From here, in a series of precarious toppling movements and awkward stages, he falls from the roof to the ground. Except that we know from the presence of the camera, the questionable placement of a chair on a pitched roof and his apparently forced toppling that this fall is staged. If a fall is staged, is it actually a dive? If a failure is intended, does its execution become its success? In Ader's falls, there are certain points at which gravity undoubtedly takes over and where the body loses control over itself, becoming in the process both *incongruous* and *absurd*. These are key elements of comedy but also of the idea that even forced actions can be overtaken by forces outside our control.

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<sup>11</sup> Steven Stern, "A Fraction of the Whole," *Frieze* 121 (March 2009). accessed November 16, 2014, [http://www.frieze.com/issue/article/a\\_fraction\\_of\\_the\\_whole/](http://www.frieze.com/issue/article/a_fraction_of_the_whole/).

The staged fall has a better-known history outside of art – in comedy – where it is known as a *pratfall*. In *Steamboat Bill Jr.* (1928), Buster Keaton (an artist whose utterly incongruous deadpan expression makes him perhaps the greatest absurdist of all) survived a house facade falling on him by locating himself in one of its empty window spaces. When Steve McQueen restages this scene in *Deadpan* (1997), he creates a paradoxical vision of the artist as anti-hero: completely unable to control external forces but somehow distanced (deadpanned) and nimble enough to negotiate a partial space in which to act. I am fascinated by the basic futility of human attempts to constantly exert control over both our own bodies and the semi-incomprehensible operations of the non-human world. The incongruity lies in the difference between our self-belief in our ability to control these things and the fact that such attempts nearly always fail in the long-term (although contingent action is always possible). This is the essence of my interest in the absurd. My work can be seen as a series of attempts to place myself in that tiny attic window that gave both Keaton and McQueen a space in which to continue to act.

## Attempt #3

### TO COVER A DISTANCE:

... the primarily urban character of the *dérive*, in its element in the great industrially transformed cities – those centers of possibilities and meanings – could be expressed in Marx's phrase: 'Men can see nothing around them that is not their own image; everything speaks to them of themselves. Their very landscape is alive.'

- Guy Debord<sup>12</sup>

Five years after photography, one more technology, telegraphy, arrived to transform time. Telegraph messages traveled almost instantly as electrical impulses over the wires, a technology that telephones and the Internet would only elaborate. "This is indeed the annihilation of space," the Philadelphia Ledger exclaimed over the first long-distance telegram in the United States.

- Rebecca Solnit<sup>13</sup>

It would seem a simple task: to walk.

In 1967, Richard Long stopped at a field in Wiltshire in between hitchhiking. He walked up and down in a straight line over and over until his path flattened out the grass and became visible as a line. *A Line Made by Walking*. Minimal photographic documentation was soon all that remained of this activity.

In June 2005, Francis Alÿs walked from one end of Jerusalem to another carrying a leaking can of green paint. His walk took him 15 miles over abandoned lots, streets and parks. Alÿs' line follows that one drawn on a map to indicate Israeli territory after the Arab-Israeli armistice of 1948. *The Green Line*. Alÿs' performance shadows a barrier that exists in concrete physical and heavily guarded form, and one that has shifted and changed with extensive real-world consequences for untold numbers of people. His own green line, on the other hand, will only last until the next rainstorm.

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<sup>12</sup> Guy Debord, "Theory of the Derive," *International Situationniste* #2 (December 1958), in *Situationist International Anthology*, trans. Ken Knabb (Berkeley, CA: Bureau of Public Secrets, 2006), 51.

<sup>13</sup> Rebecca Solnit, *River of Shadows: Eadweard Muybridge and the Technological Wild West* (New York: Penguin, 2003), 17.

Walking then is not such a simple task. It can be one that requires overcoming obstacles – from a small stream to an impassable national border. Artistic inventions that involve simple acts of walking (Vito Acconci, Sophie Calle, Janet Cardiff, to name but a few) have powerfully disrupted the accepted role of the individual in urban spaces and histories. In his 2007 exhibition at David Zwirner New York, Alÿs asked, “Can an absurd act provoke a transgression that makes you abandon the standard assumptions on the sources of conflict?” and answered his own question with, “Sometimes Doing Something Poetic Can Become Political, and Sometimes Doing Something Political Can Become Poetic.”<sup>14</sup>

A strange saying is sometimes used to describe walking and other forms of traversal: ‘to cover a distance.’ The word traversal is linked to the idea of a passing human presence in the environment. The word ‘covering’ implies that some trace of the traversal remains after the traveller has passed through and that, in a small way, the traveller has staked some claim of ownership over that distance. We might think of paths and roads that cover a stretch between cities, of railroad tracks and pipelines that span continents, or of cell towers dotting the landscape. I am reminded also of Christo and Jeanne-Claude – particularly their *Wrapped* works as well as *The Umbrellas* and *Surrounded Miami Islands*. All of these, like bridges, are human attempts at covering the landscape. In the work of Christo and Jeanne-Claude there is a continued attempt to cover (literally) vast distances as in *The Umbrellas* project, which took place in both Japan and California (1984-91), or the wrapping of a 1.5mile stretch of coast in Sydney in *Wrapped Coast* (1968-9). In these projects, the impracticality of the materials and the tortuous bureaucratic process involved seem equally as important as the finished works. They highlight the hubristic, often political, factors that underlie the deceptively simple desire to ‘cover a distance.’

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An artist stands on a Californian headland and attempts to signal across the Pacific Ocean to Australia. She hopefully holds up the flag that in the International Code of Signals means, “I wish to communicate with you.” The signal is not understood.

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<sup>14</sup> “Francis Alÿs: Sometimes Doing Something Poetic Can Become Political And Sometimes Doing Something Political Can Become Poetic, February 15 - March 17, 2007,” *David Zwirner exhibitions page*, accessed October 19, 2014, <http://www.davidzwirner.com/exhibition/sometimes-doing-something-poetic-can-become-political-and-sometimes-doing-something-political-can-become-poetic/>.

In this situation, the distance I attempt to cover is one that was once completely impassable. Later, it could be covered through a long and arduous sea voyage. The journey became a shorter one by aeroplane and is now covered virtually instantaneously through online video conferencing software. My use of marine signal flags in this work references both the idea of anachronism and pre-coded failure. 'Anachronism' in its simplest definition means against or out of time and implies a chronological inconsistency. These flags fall easily into this category. They are communication devices that seem to belong to another time (the high watermark of international seafaring and naval power) but are actually still kept aboard most boats and used often. I use these flags because they represent a form of visual communication that completely fails to do what more recently developed communication technologies do so well, that is, to cover a distance. These anachronistic technologies point to my failure to connect my bodily understanding of distance to the telescoping of space and time that began in the nineteenth century and continues apace today. As Rebecca Solnit so elegantly discusses, this telescoping or "annihilation" of space and time is interwoven with the development of photography and was foreshadowed by Karl Marx: "Capital must on the one side strive to tear down every spatial barrier to intercourse... [and] on the other hand to annihilate this space with time, i.e., to reduce to a minimum the time spent in motion from one place to another."<sup>15</sup>

All these attempts at covering distance however - from the most contemporary to the anachronistic - are failed. For the essential quality of distance is its inability to be covered. To contemplate distance is to desire, and to conquer desire is also to lose it: "For the blue is not in the place those miles away at the horizon, but in the atmospheric distance between you and the mountains."<sup>16</sup>

I always feel a pull to see what is over the next mountain, the next horizon.

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In 1971, another artist - Bas Jan Ader - stood at the edge of a large body of water and attempted to say 'Farewell to Faraway Friends.' In 1975, he set off on a solo crossing of the Atlantic 'In Search of the Miraculous.' He was never seen again.

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<sup>15</sup> Karl Marx, *Grundrisse* (1858) quoted in Rebecca Solnit, *River of Shadows: Eadweard Muybridge and the Technological Wild West* (New York: Penguin, 2003), 18.

<sup>16</sup> Rebecca Solnit, *A Field Guide to Getting Lost*, (London: Viking, 2005), 29.



## Attempt #4

### TO BE NATIVE:

It is odd how the tree has dominated Western reality and all of Western thought, from botany to biology and anatomy, but also gnosiology, theology, ontology, all of philosophy

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Nomadic waves or flows of deterritorialization go from the central layer to the periphery, then from the new center to the new periphery, falling back to the old center and launching forth to the new.

- Deleuze & Guattari<sup>17</sup>

The Australian *Eucalyptus Globulus* was introduced into the denuded landscape of post-Gold Rush San Francisco. Its ability to quickly greenify the scenery was highly valued and start-up companies began to promise an end to the hardwood famine with “Forests grown while you wait.”<sup>18</sup> Instead, eucalyptus railroad ties cracked and telegraph poles rotted while the trees continued to spread like wildfire across the native landscape. This story of an introduced species follows a similar pattern to other stories across the globe and across history. They make up some of human beings’ most spectacular failures in regard to the environment. In the case of the eucalyptus, this seems particularly so, since “from the beginning, the importation of non-native flora was driven as much by aesthetic desires as economic needs. Post–Gold Rush Californians were not satisfied with the existing landscape. It looked unfinished.”<sup>19</sup> What turned out to be a major environmental mistake was born in large part from an obsession with the landscape-as-image.

This human ‘mistake’ – the introduction of non-native or ‘invasive’ species – is now an embedded part of ecological systems across the globe. The very notion of ‘native’ is problematized and many even now assume that eucalypts are native to California in spite of

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<sup>17</sup> Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 18, 53.

<sup>18</sup> Jared Farmer, “Gone Native: California’s Love-Hate Relationship with Eucalyptus Trees,” *Frontiers*, Huntington-USC Institute on California and the West, Spring/Summer (2007): 20.

<sup>19</sup> Farmer, “Gone Native,” 19.

their contribution to fire and drought. Cane Toads from South and Central America were introduced to Australia in an attempt to control agricultural pests and are now themselves an insidious pest in Northern Australia. However most now accept that complete eradication is impossible and some form of coexistence needs to be negotiated. In these human-influenced systems, plants can be endemic to both Siberia and California, and the Californian state flower is widely sold in Australian consumer plant nurseries. In a highly globalized world where flows of people, plants and animals are harder and harder to control, strict demarcations between native and non-native are more difficult to draw. We live in a time of invasive species.

Rhododendrons are not native to Scotland. They were brought there from southern Spain in 1763 by Swedish Botanist Claes Alstroemer. They have been designated an invasive species and there are continuing (failed) efforts to eradicate them entirely in Scotland. In 2000, Simon Starling was inspired by such efforts to return some Scottish rhododendrons to their home in southern Spain. The full title of the work describes the work's narrative: *Rescued Rhododendrons (7 Rhododendron ponticum plants rescued from Elrick Hill, Scotland and transported to Parque Los Alcornocales, Spain, from where they were introduced into cultivation in 1763 by Claes Alstroemer)*. Starling then documented this humorously forced effort at deglobalization in 5 photographs depicting the artist's journey by car through the UK, France and Spain. While I do not deny the real and harmful effects of introduced plants, Starling's work highlights some of the problems I have with obsessing over 'native' versus 'invasive' species. My discomfort is not only based on practicality (attempts at complete eradication of invasive species have been unsuccessful) but is also due to the fact that such terminology is haunted by ongoing anti-immigration sentiments in the UK and Europe, as well as the shadow cast by historical characterizations of national 'purity' pitted against destructive outsiders. Starling's work points to the now Sisyphean task of returning countless plants to their country of origin, and slyly pokes fun at the invocation of fantasies of a pure, untouched 'nature' – or a 'natural' state of affairs – to justify regressive politics.

## ***California Natives***

### ***Claytonia sibirica***

"Candyflower"

Native to Siberia and western North America.

Introduced into the United Kingdom by the 18th century where it has become very widespread.

Reseeds.

### ***Eschscholzia californica***

"California Poppy"

Native to the United States and Mexico (official state flower of California).

Naturalized in Australia and introduced to South Africa, Chile, and Argentina.

Survives only mild winters.

### ***Boykinia occidentalis***

Coast Boykinia "brookfoam"

Native to the west coast of North America from British Columbia to California.

Herbaceous perennial from rhizome.

### ***Fragaria vesca ssp. californica***

"Wood Strawberry" California subspecies

Grows naturally throughout much of the Northern Hemisphere.

### ***Tellima grandiflora***

"Fringe Cups"

Native of western North America, from Alaska to northern California.

Naturalized in Great Britain.

Thrives on neglect, reseeding readily.

### ***Monardella odoratissima***

"Mountain Pennyroyal" Sierra

Found in many Northern California mountain ranges, and sometimes outside California, as far north as Washington, and in Nevada and Utah.

Propagated easily from cuttings.

## Attempt #5

### TO LET TREES TALK:

It's a practice and a process of becoming fully aware of how human beings are connected with other beings – animal, vegetable, or mineral. Ultimately, this includes thinking about democracy. What would a truly democratic encounter between truly equal beings look like, what would it be – can we even imagine it?

- Timothy Morton<sup>20</sup>

The Disney approach to creating a connection with the natural world through anthropomorphism is justifiably seen as cheesy. It is a sanitized and saccharine version of animality – G-rated, cleansed of bodily needs, desires and functions. Its approach to the landscape runs a similar course, with some recent attempts at complexity. A false purity is imposed upon the idea of “nature” in which human presence is seen as something that can be kept separate from the natural world and violent colonial histories, previously ignored, are made palatable. Since we are humans however, completely non-anthropomorphic options for engaging with the non-human seem impossible. An adjusted form of tactical anthropomorphism provides an entry point into thinking through our position in relation to the non-human world: a world in which we are enmeshed, rather than one looked upon from some separate vantage point.

In “Why Look At Animals?” John Berger writes, “Until the 19th century anthropomorphism was integral to the relation between man and animal... Today we live without them. And in this new solitude, anthropomorphism makes us doubly uneasy.”<sup>21</sup> The refusal of anthropomorphism is in proportion to our dedication to our own separateness and scientific superiority as a species and Berger writes that the marginalization of animals is in direct correlation to the capitalist atomization of individuals in advanced Western economies. Animals no longer perform valuable functions autonomously and alongside human social groups, but rather remain in human lives merely as dependent pets belonging to individual family units. We no longer work in tandem with animals but observe them at a critical distance: they have become for us the objects of

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<sup>20</sup> Timothy Morton, *The Ecological Thought* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2012), 7.

<sup>21</sup> John Berger, “Why Look at Animals?” (1980), in *About Looking* (New York: Vintage, 1991), 11.

photography and scientific study. From this distance, they induce fantasies of wildness and nature. Berger argues that the popularization of zoos in the nineteenth century coincided with the disappearance of animals from people's lives and, in the guise of offering access to them, completed their marginalization. Animals were separated and placed within the frame of an animal "museum, whose purpose was to further knowledge and public enlightenment."<sup>22</sup> Humans continued to look at animals but, by marginalizing them from their lives, removed their ability to look back. In the process, we no longer recognized the returned gaze that had worked to place us in a less hierarchical, more situated relationship with our surroundings.

The rise of the United States' National Parks system and other similar efforts to protect parcels of land began in around 1864 (in Yosemite Valley, California) at around the same time as the popularization of zoos. As zoos are monuments to the disappearance of animals from our lives, perhaps national parks and their like are monuments to the disappearance of forests. As the natural world – of which we were once an inseparable part – was marginalized from our lives, so we memorialized this separation in the form of designated nature zones. This cemented our withdrawal from 'nature' (the term itself a sign of separation) and our treatment of it as a mere object of study, family visits, photography and spectacle.

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An artist sets up a screen with a live feed of an Australian Eucalyptus Pilularis in an Oakland nature preserve so that a Californian Eucalyptus Globulus might commune via video conference with a distant relative across the Pacific Ocean. It seemed important to let the trees speak for themselves.

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My desire to allow trees to talk in the way we do is an example of anthropomorphism, recalling fairy stories and childhood fantasies. However when I set up a live video exchange between an Australian eucalyptus and its Californian relative, I opened up a space in which viewers might start to look at trees in relation to each other, and in a shared relation with us in the world, rather than as objects peripheral to a human centeredness. I also opened up a space in which a conversation occurred between a 'native' species and an 'invasive' one in just the kind of

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<sup>22</sup> Berger, *About Looking*, 21.

distance-erasing technological environment that has accelerated similar global flows of people and plants. Trees have become the objects of our observation and photography but we have refused their ability to look back at us. My aim was to begin to reverse that kind of thinking. My process can be described as essentially speculative in the sense that all my projects act “as if.” As if trees could talk. As if I could communicate across vast distances. As if a bridge had been built. Of course, most of the time I cannot; I am brought up short and I fail. But my appeal is to the viewer’s imagination and to the idea that freewheeling speculation can be generative of different ways of seeing and different ways of operating in the world.

## Attempt #6

### TO MAP A LANDSCAPE TO A PHOTOGRAPH:

Photogrammetrists:

Collect, analyze, and interpret geographic information provided by geodetic surveys, aerial photographs, and satellite data. Research, study, and prepare maps and other spatial data in digital or graphic form for legal, social, political, educational, and design purposes. May work with Geographic Information Systems (GIS). May design and evaluate algorithms, data structures, and user interfaces for GIS and mapping systems.<sup>23</sup>

Consumers... will never know who has tasked a satellite to take a picture (unless they did it themselves) in order to see something close up, but from far away. And every view from a satellite is an experiment with the technology of looking close up at a distance, remotely examining and representing something...

- Laura Kurgan<sup>24</sup>

Two 4'x4' high-resolution, blue bulls-eyes are staked into the ground (made from bio-degradable fabric and not recommended for flight scales over 1:3600). From above, an aerial photograph is taken of that terrain from a plane, satellite or drone. Using a mathematical formula based on the known distance along the ground between the two targets, the focal length of the lens (and adjusted for other factors) the landscape becomes calibrated to the image through the staking out of the traditional "X-marks-the-spot."

Much of human beings' relationship to the environment is predicated on such processes. Rather than the Borgesian attempt to create a 1:1 map in "The Exactitude of Science," we have a constant scaling of the landscape to the human, and a constant calibration of that landscape to the image. This extreme and ongoing act of cartography, in which the world is reduced to the fragile constructions of humanity, has always been central to the role of photography specifically and technologies of vision generally.

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<sup>23</sup> "Occupational Employment and Wages, May 2013," Bureau of Labor Statistics, last modified April 19, 2014, <http://www.bls.gov/oes/current/oes171021.htm>.

<sup>24</sup> Laura Kurgan, *Close Up at a Distance: Mapping, Technology and Politics* (New York: Zone Books, 2013), 20-3.

Most photography is not made for artistic purposes; it is made to serve quite utilitarian requirements. Indeed, in “Seeing Machines,” Trevor Paglen points out that much of contemporary photography is not even meant for human consumption. He adopts the term *seeing machines* “to encompass the myriad ways that not only humans use technology to “see” the world, but the ways machines see the world for other machines.”<sup>25</sup> These other uses of vision technologies encompass not only vast amounts of data but also entail specific ways of seeing – even styles – that have always had implications for ‘art’ photography. “Seeing machines create noncontiguous spatial and temporal geometries. They collapse the near into the distant, and the present into the past and future.”<sup>26</sup> Examples include not only satellite and drone photography, but also number-plate and facial recognition software and other automated surveillance technologies.

Hito Steyerl’s 2013 video work, *How Not To Be Seen. A Fucking Didactic Educational .MOV File*, is partly inspired by photo calibration targets in the California desert, which look like giant patterns of pixels in the ground. As described by the Center for Land Use Interpretation, “the targets function like an eye chart at the optometrist, where the smallest group of bars that can be resolved marks the limit of the resolution for the optical instrument that is being used. For aerial photography, it provides a platform to test, calibrate, and focus aerial cameras traveling at different speeds and altitudes.”<sup>27</sup> The targets can also be used in the same way by satellites. Steyerl uses one of these targets as a way to describe the way in which the world has become calibrated to images. The mechanical voiceover in the work intones, “it calibrates the world as a picture” and “resolution determines visibility.” These targets were designed for analogue photography and so are now largely obsolete. They continue on however as crumbling swaths of concrete in the desert, resembling inscrutable artworks from a long-forgotten civilization...

Another anachronism.

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<sup>25</sup> Trevor Paglen, “Seeing Machines,” *Still Searching: On Online Discourse on Photography: Fotomuseum Winterthur blog*, 13 March 2014, accessed October 5, 2014, <http://blog.fotomuseum.ch/2014/03/ii-seeing-machines/>.

<sup>26</sup> Trevor Paglen, “Geographies of Photography,” *Still Searching: On Online Discourse on Photography: Fotomuseum Winterthur blog*, 11 April 2014, accessed October 5, 2014, <http://blog.fotomuseum.ch/2014/04/iv-geographies-of-photography/>.

<sup>27</sup> Centre for Land Use Interpretation, “Photo Calibration Targets: Terrestrial Test Patterns Used For Aerial Imaging,” *Lay of the Land* (Winter 2013), accessed November 13, 2014, <http://www.org/newsletter/winter-2013/photo-calibration-targets>.

My interest in the rise of these machines of seeing (drones, satellites, surveillance, GIS) comes from my interest in the idea of *viewpoint*. The use of cameras – still or moving – once implied a human viewpoint: someone standing on a lookout point or someone walking or driving through space. The classic instance of this is Caspar David Friedrich's 1818 painting *Wanderer above the Sea of Fog*. This viewpoint can no longer be taken for granted. The first photograph of earth from space was taken by a human. Now the vast majority are taken via satellite or other automated systems. Video footage shot from drones is increasingly popular, despite a slightly uncanny and unmistakably machine-like movement and viewpoint. A related feeling of the uncanny has been with photography from the beginning, as evidenced by the early popularity of spirit photography, for example. Cameras have always been seen as semi-autonomous machines and so their ability to capture an image of the world still retains a sense of the uncanny. (In Australia, public television publishes a warning before any program that shows photographic images of dead Aboriginal people.)

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An artist walks down a roughly constructed rubble jetty that stretches out into the bay only to end abruptly in a short, concrete staircase to nowhere. The surrounding salty marshland, loading dock and decommissioned navy ship recede out of the side of the frame, and only the view across the bay remains. The camera gazes out at an expanse of water and some distant shore.

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In the work I make, there *is* a human behind the camera and moving with the camera through space. This viewpoint is highlighted by a hand-held aesthetic and the prevalence of framing that imitates the idea of looking out, as if from a 'lookout' point. In the past, I sometimes performed in my videos and my presence in the frame referenced the ideas and history of the human form in the landscape. Recently, I have instead chosen to reference the human through highlighting the presence of the artist behind the camera. My work is still about the body in space and time, but it is not about my specific body. My aim in the work is to acknowledge my presence behind the camera but to empty out this body so that it can also be a place occupied by the viewer. My viewpoint in the work is open to others for the purposes of imaginative and generative speculation. I am present but I am invisible. I am a machine but not one.

## Attempt #7

### TO BE IN TWO PLACES AT ONCE:

It was the sense of organization, a place contained in an unyielding frame... with a reading of local time in the digital display in a corner of the screen. Kotka was another world but she could see it in its realness, in its hours, minutes and seconds.

- Don DeLillo<sup>28</sup>

...Hitchcock's signature cinematic technique, the pull focus. By simultaneously zooming and pulling away, we appear to be in the same place, yet the place seems to distort beyond our control. The two contradictory motions don't cancel one another out. Rather, they reestablish the way we experience "here."

- Timothy Morton<sup>29</sup>

The ideal vantage point – because it combines the effect of movement with distance – is the deck of a ship putting out to sea. A description of the vanishing land is sufficient to evoke the passenger still straining to see it: soon it is only a shadow, a rumour, a noise.

- Marc Auge<sup>30</sup>

The technologies of photography, and for me particularly the moving image, allow a kind of time travel: the ability to be in two places at once. Through them, we can move through space – the 'real' space of the captured image but also, where that fails us, imaginative space. This failure occurs at the edges of bodies of water or cliffs, in the contemplation of vast distances, or anywhere there is no obvious opportunity for human movement. This includes virtual spaces and the unlocatable space where long-distance telephone calls and online conversations take place – not the particular place where each participant is located, but where their voices merge and exchange and the moment of communication occurs. This failure of the captured image and its replacement by imagined space also occurs in those projected, indeterminately located but also collectively physical spaces such as 'climate.' My work shows an awareness in the captured photographic image of the relationship not just between the real space and its

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<sup>28</sup> Don DeLillo, *The Body Artist* (New York: Scribner, 2001), 38.

<sup>29</sup> Timothy Morton, *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology after the End of the World* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013), 21.

<sup>30</sup> Marc Auge, *Non-Places: An Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity*, trans. John Howe (London: Verso, 1995), 89.

representation but also between movement and stillness, and the relationship between the space in which viewing takes place (a gallery or other) and that other, imagined space that occurs in the mind of the viewer looking at the work.

Robert Smithson's *Cayuga Salt Mine Project* (1969) consists of 8 mirrors inside the gallery space, each resting horizontally on heaps of rock salt a few inches high. In addition, a series of mirrors marks the route from this interior non-site to the underground site that was the source of the salt – the nearby Cayuga Salt Mine. This mirror trail creates a space between the 'real' site of the mine and the non-site of the gallery, but also – like the non-site itself – confuses the idea of presence by making things *be in two places at once*. The mirrors are in the landscape but also reflect the sky and distant landscape as well as doubling nearby objects. The presence of the salt in the gallery literally mirrors the site into the non-site and starts to make the two places merge into each other to form another, indeterminate space: "An artist in a sense does not differentiate experience into objects. Everything is a field or maze... You just follow and what you're left with is like a network or a series of points, and then these points can then be built in conceptual structures."<sup>31</sup> This indeterminate space between the site and non-site is the same space that allows photography to be time travel in the sense that the time and place in the image is also part of the moment of looking. The travel between site and non-site (what Smithson calls the "non-trip"<sup>32</sup>) can be likened to the imaginative space opened up by the photography of movement and the moving image.

In my piece, *Untitled*, the camera (and through implication, the artist) moves down a jetty (from the French *jetée*, "thrown outwards") but is pulled up short by its ending, and both viewer and camera operator are left to look out across the expanse of water. This particular jetty is located in Heron's Head Park, San Francisco. Now a marshland reconstruction area and recreational park, the site had been slated for another bridge across the Bay.<sup>33</sup> The project was abandoned however and its nascent foundations were demolished and refashioned in the form of a rubble jetty thrown out into the bay – for apparently no other purpose than landscaping. Today's visitor

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<sup>31</sup> Robert Smithson, "Fragments of a Conversation," in *Robert Smithson: The Collected Writings*, 2nd Edition, ed. Jack Flam (Los Angeles: The University of California Press, 1996), 190.

<sup>32</sup> Robert Smithson, "A Provisional Theory of Non-Sites," in *Robert Smithson: The Collected Writings*, 2nd Edition, ed. Jack Flam (Los Angeles: The University of California Press, 1996), 364.

<sup>33</sup> Centre for Land Use Interpretation with Matthew Coolidge, *Around the Bay: man-made sites of interest in the San Francisco Bay region*, ed. Sarah Simons (New York: Blast Books, 2013), 16.

can meander its length but is constrained by the existing structures of the site. The distance across the bay becomes a space we can only move through imaginatively.

Constrained by physical space and operating in the realm of speculation and imagination, the viewer and the camera operator ponder options to overcome this problem of space.

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An artist looks back at a rocky pier from her new position on the water. From here she moves backwards, away from the initial attempt and outwards from the shore. The place that seemed like an edge becomes smaller and smaller as the camera moves further away into the imagined space of the bay.

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The viewer of this piece is in at least two places at once, acutely conscious of a double movement away and towards at the same time. This kind of disorientation emphasizes the indeterminacy of experience of space, and the way in which physical spaces merge in and out of imagined space. Where we stand – in the world and in images – is not fixed.

## **Attempt X**

### **THIS IS NOT THE LAST ATTEMPT:**

I have sketched out a landscape of ideas and I now come to a point that seems to call for an ending. But to end something is not as easy as it seems. One of the ideas I have outlined is that of human construction, intervention and framing of the environment, and our failed desires to impose order upon the landscape. Drawing clear lines has been a problem because there are none. I have also touched on my presence or lack thereof, and I have written myself intermittently in and out of the work. I have created an ambiguous human presence in the landscape and identified a certain blankness at the center of photographic technology.

There has been a tension in the work between the concrete impacts of human intervention in the environment and the fluid poetics of representation. I have also attempted to walk the line between lived experience, the high-definition realness of video and photography and the possibility of speculation and imagination. Location is essential to viewing the landscape but it is also – particularly now – indeterminate and far more fluid than it has been. Sometimes the work was even a little funny – with things being a bit out of place or a bit out of tune.

So in the end I do not want this work to be foreclosed. I want to keep it open for the next attempt. But this does seem as good a place as any to stop.

a blank page

think of a blank  
page at the  
end of a book  
closing the book  
and picking up  
your steps as

backwards

you go

closing up  
the mountains  
and sand as  
you walk off  
the land and out  
of the words.

- *disowning* by William L. Fox



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