

Flirting with Space, the Question of Space and Beyond: An Interview

DAVID CROUCH *University of Derby*

HARRIET PARRY *University of Brighton*

David Crouch is Professor Emeritus in Cultural Geography and Senior Research Fellow at the University of Derby, UK. David's vital and inquisitive praxis attends to the creative nature of human and non-human relations in and with space, an approach also illustrated through his work as a practicing artist. His most recent research monograph *Flirting with Space* (Crouch 2010) exemplifies the rich rewards for such attention to the complexity, simplicity, playfulness and possibility that occurs through the practice of everyday living. Amongst his many contributions working to open up space for innovation in his field, David recently co-edited a publication entitled *The Question of Space* (Crouch and Nieuwenhuis Eds. 2017) with political geographer Dr Marijn Nieuwenhuis then Warwick University, now Durham. The text draws together a diverse group of authors writing across boundaries and territorialities that demonstrate the liveliness and ongoing value of playing with the concept of space, an approach that we have endeavoured to reflect in this special issue of *Networking Knowledge Mediating Place*.

The interview was conducted as a written email exchange over the summer and into the autumn of 2020, when universities started gearing up for a new scholarly year and the ongoing impact of the pandemic on academic research still remained unclear. As a PhD researcher about to embark on my third year at the University of Brighton, my fieldwork had been suspended and walking tours with participants around the heritage sites that were my case-studies seemed like a memory of an alternate reality. Although it was frustrating to have to take a step back from the physical and embodied experience of these sites, it also created a space to think about what it really means to *be*, through my contrasting disconnection from the animate and inanimate materiality of my social environment.

The emails between David and I therefore became a generative space for me to think through the physical sense of detachment from 'reality' imposed by lockdown. Our conversation was contextualised by the mass media broadcasting rolling images of restriction and protest, those yearning for space and escape and the critical inequality that defines the varied everyday experiences of bodies in a global pandemic. The conceptual space created gave us the opportunity to stop, think and reflect, generating a certain cadence of communication between us. In the same way that two beings can find a rhythm when travelling side-by-side, so I found myself falling into the rhythm of David's rich and impressionistic forms of thinking and writing.



Figure 1. David Crouch (2011) Space forms I [Gouache 20x14 cm]

DC: In gouache this image floats, suggests uncertainty but also the possibility of hope.

HP: Firstly it might be best to address your position on the terms ‘space’ and ‘place’. Our journal issue’s principle theme is ‘Mediating Place’ and the two terms are often used interchangeably and, as demonstrated in *The Question of Space* (Crouch and Nieuwenhuis Eds. 2017), can have very different meanings across disciplines and non-western ontologies. Could you briefly explain what you understand these terms to mean?

DC: One comes across a tortuous insistence that ‘place’ is home, is close, is habitual, familiar, reliable, zenith. Safe. Space is demoted as empty, awaiting fulfilment. Yet of course these meanings and distinctions happen the other way round too. Confusion.

It seems to me, and I prioritise human lives and values, the much unrehearsed geographies (rather than just governments, institutions, countries – more on that below), that meanings not only arise from popular culture’s dimensions of the media-led. One example occurs through tourism promotion: the place to go, great places, never spaces – unless that is applied to great open spaces – are they places too?! Here space seems too often to await achievement. Place is associated with full meaning-given stuff, of sites, particular locations. Our memories can work with outward fragments of influence, the media in all its forms can link up with our recall. The two words (or can they be ‘terms’?) are muddled yet also are held in highly distinctive ways. Thus we ‘know the place’, we don’t know the space. Once a place, always a place, always the place. These categories are spoken and written as fixities: place, space, their discreteness. Nevertheless, I feel sure that the secure idea of place will continue in everyday speech. It is just that for those trying to interpret, make sense or make better understanding and interpretation, it may serve to be more particular and explicit in what we mean and understand. It seems that place is something already there, awaiting our arrival, waiting to be held onto.

Have we never felt change, erasure, unfamiliarity, disappointment, excitement, new realisations and relations with space; with place, uncertainty? Our (human, human-other than human) lives bear many spaces. We make, lend meaning to spaces; we are affected by the

space, by what is around us, is remembered, or we felt given by diverse origins, sources variously mediated. Yet in practice, we cannot necessarily 'hold on' to what we already carry over time. That meaning, significance, resonance may change, gently over time or suddenly in excitement or disappointment. We may re-visit somewhere we knew well five, ten years ago and find it's changed, the desire perhaps erased. It feels different. We may try consciously to make it revert to what it was; we may try and wipe away what it was to us, and may reach a new realisation.

Memory and seasonality change (things) too. This is what – in part – what I mean by 'flirting', as explained in the earliest pages of *Flirting with Space* (Crouch 2010): nuance, inter-active. Space is not obvious. In another way of thinking space, feeling space, we participate in its making; in what we find and feel 'it' to be; 'it' being of our relationship felt in engaging landscapes (not simplistically landscapes, that takes us far too easily into particular artistic-given rules, not everyday life) these shapes are involved with organic and inorganic character. Their affectivity that we may find to ourselves is felt.

It may be that our expectations have been over-heated; media, advertising, friends sharing feelings, particular experiences we have had elsewhere since our last time here: this is the swirl of media/political/economic/environmental/and so on merges inchoately with human, everyday, so-called mundane lived experiences.

Culture is about our making of it, in and through our lives; not bestowed upon us, although that can seep into the mix too. Our feelings in the moment are affected too by who we are with, and not with at the time, or were (not) with last time.... So if place means fixity, duration, it must also mean fluidity, thus defying the huge literature that has, and still accompanies this word that has been played as one of a double that made the cornerstone of geography's fixity fetish and that infests other disciplines too. Instead, we need to comprehend the making, unmaking, perhaps slipperiness, defiance, of our multiple relations with the worlds we inhabit: affectivities, atmospheres, flirting and so on. Flirting is something that happens uncertainly, as is its outcome; the feelings involved are uneven, unsure and fluid; open. Space is not fixed, despite how much we may seek, feel or need regularities.

I have a brief story of my feelings, relationship, with the valley down to a brook behind my parents' house. It was the location (space, place?) where I loved to walk with our then very young children, draw and paint, and walk with my parents, too. After their deaths, gradually over a few years, visiting the same valley, crossing the brook, looking back up to the house, the visit, the feeling of being there, became different in colour, in emotion, in affect, in so many intermingling ways. Of course, my experience of being elsewhere, similar and markedly different, a film perhaps, melded into my feeling, experience, responses of being there. And of course what I was doing had changed, too. 'The new' emerged partly, perhaps predominantly through the web of what had already been. I am reminded of the extreme of what has been ordained to be place: sacred, of a distinctive 'feel' beyond everyday feeling; primordial, 'genius loci' of underlying spirit; its depth and power radiating out – or simply tangible: prefigured and unavoidable. Humbly tending a garden there brought depth to earth working.

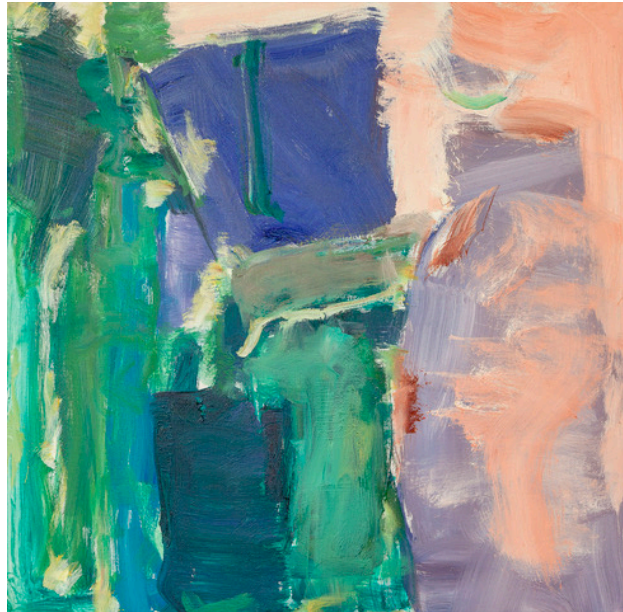


Figure 2. David Crouch (2019) *Landshapes 1* [oil on canvas 52cm.sq.]

D.C: Here the work in oil paint resists any 'measurable' forms or shapes, and suggests fluidity; the colours and their particular forms or detail, construction or intimate relations amongst them hovers; open to change.... They flow and touch, bounce and wriggle. They seem to have their own impulse, rather than being charted or controlled by the painter, or otherwise, even expectations of others. I hope too that they commingle amongst themselves- and of course their relation with my reaction, my responses to them.

HP: This special issue is resolutely multidisciplinary in its consideration of space, place and epistemology in general. Could you explain from your perspective where you see the value in drawing disciplines together to share ideas on similar subjects?

DC: For some time I have been working around multi-disciplinarity, only in recent decades inside it! Not in any way Post-disciplinarity, another term, an idea that is also absurd: all it would produce is mush, weak epistemology. But engaging between us is the exciting spark. For me this has been of great value, in for example in reconstructing our understanding of 'Landscape', human activities, reflections and feeling(s).

HP: In your book *Flirting with Space* (2010), you set out a particularly creative and generative way of describing interactions with space that includes the human and non-human, the living and the inanimate. How do you think your perspective as an artist has influenced this view?

DC: Undoubtedly my artwork, in its doing and in exhibiting, and gratefully having known and/or worked alongside professional/proper artists has a relationship with my ideas and ways in which I approach and find relationships in my thinking. This is one aspect of my early response to academic discussions of 'the body', although many of these can be arrived at through thinking outside the body. It is also a matter of feelings and our feeling for the world, up close and in its totality.

A particularly annoying survivor of centuries is embodied, if I may, in the peculiarity of the way many Renaissance artists thought it was all in geometrically arranged squares, a wire frame

before the artist, getting some (often awkward) resemblance, no, copy of exactly what they saw, accompanying Leonardo's 'Rules' of painting, as if there must be tight rules, imitation. It even seeps into contemporary socio-geography. A few centuries this way and we find a revival of an obsession with seeing, in for example 'the Gaze' granted to the primacy of the way we experience ('see') the world.

My late colleague John Urry found 'doing tourism' to be likened to Foucault's prison asylum control: watching and judging, exercising control. Martin Jay's book *Downcast Eyes* (1993), argues that sight, sometimes known as the 'noblest of the senses', has been underplayed in cultural content. Yet is it not now overplayed? Taken as it is, the seen image finds a one-dimensional human being, bereft of most senses and sensations. Engage also sound, smell, texture, and touch: a medley of comingling and a multiplicity of feeling, kindly, awkwardly, warmly, that John eventually did grasp, not without my pressure! My good colleague Sally Ness more recently explored the reality-of-knowing-feeling in her book *Choreographies of Landscape: Signs of Performance in Yosemite* (2016).

Much earlier I had found myself caught up in this absurd view of representation. I learned much on the importance of finding one's own way. The European artist Anne Lockwood spoke to me: 'David, you won't find your way until you make a mess!' The way took away from me the suffocation of getting it right in a way that mirrored the old 'perfectionists' and released me to a multiplicity of marks, looser, stronger; to tapping into, or opening out to, emotions: in being close to a model, feeling the character of the ground, in both, the excitement; tidiness had gone out of the window. I feel I have some identity with the way of working of Peter Lanyon; finding things mix, lines can outline movement, turning aside can give a different grasp, feel of things.
¹ The artwork is partly about me.

Along with Lanyon's art, I add Richard Diebenkorn.² There's also desire, feeling the wind around one, or the heat of the sun; feeling being in the world. Lanyon wrote of how caressing one's partner can be felt as a shape that reminds us of the natural world in curves and more. Each of these energies project onto how I relate with and understand people – individuals, collectivities, and their feelings about the other-than-human (non-human alas identifies only what they are not!): around feelings, multi-sensual and so on, uncertainties, working through different moments, cultures, experiences: understanding their doing.

¹ 'Peter Lanyon (8 February 1918 – 31 August 1964) was a Cornish painter of landscapes leaning heavily towards abstraction. Lanyon was one of the most important artists to emerge in post-war Britain'. (Tate.org)

² 'Richard Diebenkorn (April 22, 1922 – March 30, 1993) was an American painter and printmaker. His early work is associated with abstract expressionism and the Bay Area Figurative Movement of the 1950s and 1960s'. (Tate.org)



Figure 3. David Crouch (2017) Stillness [Oil on canvas 1m.sql]

DC: The slabs of colour are settled, they share a stillness, certainly calm.

HP: From my reading of your body of work, it appears that the way that you think and engage with your research subject involves a great deal of empathetic thinking and a curiosity with what some would consider the mundane. As you have described, trying to ‘settle the arrogance of what – and whom is/are important?’ (Crouch 2016, 4). How do you think the ‘everyday’ experience informs bigger philosophical questions?

DC: Everyday life, human actions and inter-actions, including with the other-than-human, has occurred over as many years as dictators have existed. No less it persists, and some, few, like John Fiske (1989), Daniel Miller (2008), De Certeau (1988), Richard Hoggart (2004), my good late friend and anarchist Colin Ward (1991), and most searchingly Raymond Williams (1989) have steadied the rush to theoretical oblivion in the bowels of media extremists and alert us to the absurdity of ‘post’ in terms of modern. I guess my response efforts here draw much as the previous question. Lived experience, gentle politics and care, empathy. Mundane ironically is the most important component, loved or loathed by participants, in existence. Power seeks to undervalue it, as do chunks of the media, even ‘big’ culture, that also often relies exactly upon the misunderstood mundane for its material – and inspiration – and creativity. Of course, the multiple and diverse interactions with power, authority, control, and more welcomingly staged culture can influence, can challenge, can critique the multiple bundles and energies that are culture, but not on its own. Dominant thinking of/on creativity without the mundane misses so much.

HP: This interview is taking place in October 2020 at a time when existing in, and rights to space has become foregrounded in the act everyday living. In particular the ongoing

Covid 19 Pandemic, the call to action by the Black Lives Matter movement triggered by the murder of George Floyd in the U.S. on 25 May 2020, and the continuing migrant crisis across Europe. These events have brought into sharp focus the structural inequalities of a British neo-colonial political system and the deep fissures between political ideologies that the ‘Vote Leave’ campaign exacerbated. What role do you think creativity and the act of ‘bricolage,’ drawing on your 2017 article ‘bricolage, poetics, spacing’ plays in everyday exposure to the affects of these events, and where does this take the work of academic researchers trying to contend with these issues? (Crouch 2017).

DC: Of course the issues raised here are vital. I am wary of expecting (they may hope for) dramatic change after a crisis. Indeed there is almost habitually a fall backwards following a lot of life-rocking terrible dramas. Looking back to the 60s, which chimes with aspects you highlight, especially the Black Lives Matter and more, it is a stark reminder that not all the world followed in Martin Luther King and LB Johnson’s ideas, let alone actions; of what happened to Russia after the USSR was collapsed; Bhopal and more. I do think that we/they might reflect critically on whether, how, and to what extent their actions, arguments, positions have affected things in the world; their collaborators in research and publication; their own actions in local and national culture and society, economy, environment, human life and health. That much they can reflect upon critically. Backing up this collective self-reflection is a need to review, critically and openly, such matters as metrication and values in funding, making ‘outcomes’ for local collectivities and national voluntary intervenors or NGOs no less valued than working for business and so on, if not a whole lot more.

Rather, inside our human lives, void of exploitation of course. Listening to what matters, feeling empowered to cast aside numbers, statistics, except where it is proven to be relevant as in the spread of plague, and engaging much more up-close. Fortunately, we have the continuing lean and shift toward qualitative ways of engagement. Alas, power does not always empower. But there is huge room for much more inter-communication with people, all people, of an empathetic and equal character. Our focus must be drawn by what people at large do and think; an everyday, maybe subtle, gentle politics. Not crudely vox-pops; more slow steady encounters, engagement and participation.

A number of academics do reach out openly to ‘walk with a wide public’. In various ways I try to contribute, here noted merely as some possibilities we might all adapt to where we are in our own work. This includes contribution to TV films, I was invited to produce one for BBC2; written books that accompany TV programmes (one includes allotment locations as heritage); given talks to local groups, artistic, political, who may be explicitly or quietly interested and prepared to engage. It is necessary for those who seek change prompted by often dramatic events at this time to engage – and to listen to – the wide, popular opinion, nuanced, sometimes jagged though it may be. Our content may be reshaped in ways to be more engaging with our audience.

Thinking of openness, desire to change, creativity, the arts hold considerable ability for flexibility. I happen not to paint in ways that leap into explicit anger, hard politics, or opposition. Often I find such work brings merely despair – and leaves nothing to replace it. I paint my feelings in response to or in company with what I am finding, particular situations –

or how I am affected by what occurs about me: landshapes, organic shapes around me, 'life', often unfamiliar spaces sometimes ones long loved. The colours, the marks express these moments. The human in the other-than human. Sometimes I come across a sketch done a decade or more ago. It can prompt reminders and great feeling(s); I am affected emotionally, and new ways of expressing the relation with its marks and colours emerges in a new work.

Meanwhile, the triviality of metrics currently suffocating innovative investigations and connections, does little to encourage all of this at a human level of our work. I recall Raymond Williams in his book on Hope: 'To be truly radical is to make hope possible rather than despair convincing' (1989, 118). I am not outlining a 10-step way forward; no 'programme'. I am interested here to attend to resonances, atmospheres, attitudes that may serve us progressively. Gentle politics and a desire to speak, to communicate, combine well with a flexible approach to space and accommodation of gentle politics with a recognition of bricolage in peoples' living seem to be pertinent in our progressing ideas of hope, change. But shouting too loud, presuming responses, alienate. Quieter can often be heard and better considered. I must have been affected by my years of being a Quaker.

HP: The questions of how 'we' might see and listen, brings to the fore two particular chapters you cited within our correspondence from your recent co-edited publication *The Question of Space* (Nieuwenhuis and Crouch 2017). The first, "Knowing One's Place": Mapping Landscapes in and as performance in Contemporary South Africa' by Awelani Moyo (2017) where Moyo applies her experience as an experimental theatre practitioner and scholar to un-pick the 'social geography' of performance in contemporary Cape Town, South Africa. And secondly Yvonne Zivkovic's article 'bell hooks's. Affective Politics of Space and Belonging' (2017), where Zivkovic makes a direct call to bring the work of Black feminist, critical race theorist author and academic bell hooks to the centre of the study of space, a perspective that, as you outlined, is often overlooked. In a bid to push for the 'decolonization' of academia, still embedded in 'white dominator culture' which defines the lens through which many academics see, and goes on to influence societal norms, it would be great to discuss here why you believe these thinkers need to be acknowledged and centred in the consideration of space/place?

DC: With Yvonne Zivkovic, writing on bell hooks, I agree: 'both wonder and joy, at least the way they are described by hooks, are affective states that, by initiating expansion and connection, are not vulnerable to demagogic manipulation as other collective states of affect'(Zivkovic 2017, 77). Taking ownership out of belonging enables hooks to make a reset of memory and heritage, timely in times of debate and action regarding statues and pasts. Our own bricolage, gentle politics, and sensitivity to affectivities can be liberatory.

Kathleen Stewart expresses her own handling of a scale of research inquiry:

Writing through several small cases selected out of countless potentially describable moments and scenes in which the sense of something happening becomes tactile, I try to open a proliferative list of questions about how forces come to reside in experiences, conditions, things, dreams, landscapes, imaginaries, and lived sensory moments. How do people dwelling in them become attuned to the sense of something coming into existence or something waning, sagging, dissipating, enduring, or resonating with what is lost or promising? (Stewart 2011, 445)



Figure 4. David Crouch (2016) *dance* [gouache 51 x 34 cm]

DC: Other energies are at work here, starting from my sketching a woman at a life drawing event: she suggests making space[s]; the relation of body, bodies, in relation to all else that journeys, moving her body in the rhythm it makes; or even flirting with space! Her movements are rhythmic with her feelings and the surrounding spaces in response.

Awelani Moyo writes, starting with the response of a homeless woman of colour [the preferred term used by Moyo] at a carnival-like festival event in a public square in Cape Town to the starting-up of music playing, recorded and live, Limbo. The woman began to sing and dance with the music – or her interpretation of it. Moyo notes the ways in which human actions in spaces are tolerated in different ways. Here, in this moment, this space, the dancing woman created her own in, out of this square, this space. In a curious way, what Moyo interpreted makes me think of a modest yet powerful, quiet book *The Man Who Planted Trees*, by Jean Giono (1989), an exemplar of hope, somehow particularly in our time. He had watched an area decline through the First World War across France. He dropped and planted acorns after an area of rich natural and human beauty and hard-won lives had been damaged. The valleys blossomed, provided fruit and more cultivation. People, families, returned.

With these I include a sensitivity of appreciation for everyday creativity and generativity in human life: working out ways things can happen, or occur, maybe sketching something of what our approach might be. As we calm our pressure towards shouting it is necessary equally to be

calm and also to try and reduce the anxious urgency of intense expectations whilst holding our values. Not such an easy way to be, but hold on, as Michael Stipe sings.

References

- Crouch D. (2010,2016) *Flirting with Space* Ashgate, Routledge:London
- Crouch, D. (2017) bricolage, poetics, spacing. *Humanities*, 6(4), pp. 95.
- De Certeau M. (1988) *The performance of everyday life* University of California Press: Berkley
- Giono, J. (1989) *The Man Who Planted Trees* Peter Owen: London
- Fiske J. (2010) *Understanding Popular Culture* 2nd ed Routledge: Abingdon
- Hoggart, R (2004) *Mass media in a mass society: myth and reality* Continuum:London.
- Jay, Martin. (1994) *Downcast Eyes: The Denigration of Vision in Twentieth-Century French Thought*. 1. paperback print. A Centennial Book. Berkeley, Calif.: Univ. of California Press.
- Miller D (2008) *The Comfort of Things* Oxford: Polity
- Moyo A (2018) Knowing One's Place: Mapping Landscapes in and as Performance in Contemporary South Africa in Nieuwenhuis M., Crouch D. *The Question of Space: interrogating the spatial turn between disciplines* London; New York: Rowman and Littlefield. 23-42
- Ness, Sally Ann (2016) Choreographies of Landscape: Signs of Performance in Yosemite National Park. *Dance and Performance Studies* 8. New York: Berghahn Books.
- Nieuwenhuis, Marijn, and David Crouch, eds. (2017) *The Question of Space: Interrogating the Spatial Turn between Disciplines. Place, Memory, Affect*. New York: Rowman & Littlefield International, Ltd.
- Stewart, Kathleen (2011) Atmospheric Attunements. *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 29: 445–53
- Ward, C (1991) *Influences: voices of creative dissent* Bideford: Green Books
- Ward, C., White, D.F. & Wilbert, C. (2011) *Autonomy, solidarity, possibility: the Colin Ward reader* Edinburgh: AK
- Williams R. (1989) *Resources of Hope: culture, democracy, socialism* London: Verso
- Zivkovic Y. (2018) bell hooks' affective politics of space and belonging in Nieuwenhuis M., Crouch D. *The Question of Space: interrogating the spatial turn between disciplines* London; New York: Rowman and Littlefield. 63-80