Field works

Field works: Wild experiments for performance research

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Abstract

This article reflects on a series of wild experiments in literal field sites. It develops a practice-based methodology that aims to identify, perform and assert wild presences and unruly processes, playfully and creatively engaging with vibrant and dynamic ecologies. To explore these concerns 'in the field', a series of research trips were undertaken in the United Kingdom between 2017 and 2020, including repeated visits to Knepp Wildland Project in West Sussex and Bamff Estate in Perthshire. These locations were chosen due to their engagement with rewilding as an experimental mode of ecosystem management. Rewilding is explored here as a process-driven approach to conservation that offers a potential model for transdisciplinary artistic research. Adopting and adapting its methods through a combination of place writing, collaborative performance making and site-specific art, a creative practice is developed that prompts collaborative ways of working in response to the ecologies, conceptualisations and performances of these field sites. Aiming to bring something back from the field into the academy, the article argues for a (re)wilding of disciplinary knowledge exchange. It concludes with a model for a wild epistemology, proposing that research in specific field sites can be informed by an artistic practice that is *entangled*, *unsettling* and continually *practiced*.

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Field Works: Wild Experiments for Performance Research

I can only tell you how it felt. How it was to work and watch a field and be connected to everything that was in it, and had ever been. To rationalise it… is pointless. (John Lewis-Stempel)

… are fields already a kind of machine? (Timothy Morton)

Introduction

For centuries, the British countryside has been cut up, hemmed in, and divided into fields: clearly delineated sections of cultivatable land. This now ubiquitous partitioning of the landscape for grazing and crop rotation gathered pace during the Middle Ages and burgeoned through the Industrial Revolution of the 18th and 19th centuries.[1] Fields have transformed the environment and established hierarchies of ownership and labour. They have also determined myriad relationships between human communities, the land that is farmed to support them, and the non-human worlds that co-exist there. Our rural spaces have come to be defined by an iconic patchwork of rolling green fields. It is easy to forget that they were created through the imposition of privatisation and division onto once common lands. Moreover, as agrarian organisation units, fields are key components of an approach to ecosystem management that has ultimately contributed to a catastrophic loss of biodiversity. Their cultivation has often involved the suppression of wild processes in order to control productivity on a massive scale. This has been implicated in an escalating change in the climate that continues to damage the planet, perhaps irrevocably (Lewis and Maslin 2018). From this perspective, heavily farmed, industrialised and monocultural fields might be recast as the building blocks of the Anthropocene – our current, contested, geological epoch.

This article focusses on fields as productive sites for artistic research. It develops a performance-based methodology that makes creative interventions into literal field sites. The

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[1] The Enclosure Acts were a significant agent in this ongoing history of land reform and governance (Burt and Archer 1994, Turner 1984). Over 5000 were passed in England alone between 1604 and 1914.

aim is to identify, perform and assert wild presences and unruly processes, playfully and creatively engaging with vibrant and dynamic ecologies. This research is situated within fields in order to move through and across them. Fields are encountered as demarcated and enclosed spaces; policed at the edges and maintained through regulation and conservation. At these sites, the border zones are often the most problematic and challenging, and consequently the most revealing places to work. Edge effects are created at the intersection with adjoining woodland or waterways – *ecotones* where ecologies 'meet and mingle' (Kershaw 2007, 19). Fields are then explored as loaded spaces, comprised of multiple actors and diverse ecologies, in which every square inch is overflowing with life and meaning. They can then be performed as creative spaces for collaboration, imagination and coproduction.

To explore these concerns 'in the field', a series of research trips were undertaken in the United Kingdom between 2017 and 2020, including repeated visits to Knepp Wildland Project in West Sussex and Bamff Estate in Perthshire (Overend and Lorimer 2018, Bissell 2020). Our core research team included two performance researchers (myself and Laura Bissell), a geographer (Jamie Lorimer) and a Quaternary scientist (Danielle Schreve). We were also joined at various points by others working in cognate areas, including ecologists, conservationists, educators, guides, landowners and farmers, musicians, writers, theatre makers, and visual and live artists. Over the course of this ongoing project, approximately 30 people have joined us at various points, during several short visits and four weekend workshops. This is a dynamic, evolving network of collaborators working in different contexts, entering into new configurations and interdisciplinary exchanges. Working in unruly and unpredictable environments has also required us to develop multi-species methods that have engaged with and contributed to the ecological assemblages that are present in our chosen field sites (Tsing et al. 2017). As I have noted elsewhere, this requires us 'to be open to the environment and alert to entanglements with nonhuman phenomena of many kinds: receptive to chance and perceptive of change' (Overend and Lorimer 2018). Our methodology aims to utilise and respond to these conditions through a combination of place writing, performance making and site-specific art, in order to prompt creative and collaborative ways of working in response to the ecologies, conceptualisations and performances of these field sites.

Knepp and Bamff were chosen due to their engagement with experimental models of ecosystem management, including the reintroduction of wild species such as beavers, pigs

and large herbivores, alongside more traditional farming methods (Tree 2018, Ramsay 2018). This was an opportunity to work in fields that were already changing and opening up to new ecologies. Both sites are examples of specific versions of 'rewilding', an approach to nature conservation that is gaining prominence in scientific and policy circles and in popular culture (Monbiot 2013, Lorimer et al. 2015, Pettorelli, Durant and du Toit 2019). It is important to note that rewilding is a contested idea that can have different meanings in different contexts. One version is to restore places of human inhabitation to an idealistic 'pristine' wilderness that may never have exisited in the first place, and which too often involves the suppression – sometimes violent exclusion – of human communities (Ward 2019). We are concerned with a more 'hybrid, open-ended, and "borderland" version of "wildness"', which is common in those European rewilding initiatives that aim for greater sensitivity to existing environments – including human and nonhuman livelihoods (35). This form of rewilding constitutes a movement in conservation 'towards ecological processes – especially predation, grazing, succession, dispersion and decomposition' (Lorimer and Driessen 2014, 172). Engaging with these processes, this article explores the potential of rewilding as a model for performance research in the field.

Over the last decade, both Knepp and Bamff have undergone a process of relaxation of previously rigid internal boundaries. The Knepp Wildland Project began in 2001 the same year that beavers were first spotted in the Tay, having escaped from private enclosures. At Bamff, beavers began breeding in 2005. Since these initial introductions, the environment at both estates is unrecognisable and the fields that previously dominated the landscape have been transformed. This has been achieved through various means, including the encroachment of hedgerow and the expansion of waterways into previously strictly bordered spaces. This ethos has also informed approaches to human access. This was one of the key factors in determining the choice of sites – an openness to unruly and unpredictable methodologies and creative processes, including artistic experiments in the field. The teams at both sites have made significant efforts to engage local communities, and to invite wider publics to visit and engage with their conservation initiatives. However, at the same time, external borders have had to be carefully managed, preventing intrusion into neighbouring farmland and protecting species from external antagonists with traps and shotguns – both legal and illegal (Scottish Natural Heritage 2020).

As privately-owned estates, these projects are also implicated in 'questions of land ownership, access rights, and elite power' that have complicated arguments for rewilding (Ward 2019, 47). Private land still holds the most potential for the development of large-scale rewilding projects (Donlan et al. 2006). Notwithstanding, these sites serve as important and influential models of ecosystem management that exemplify the potential of rewilding for 'maintaining, or increasing, biodiversity, while reducing the impact of present and past human interventions through the restoration of species and ecological processes' (Lorimer et al. 2015, 40). These wild potentialities have not necessarily been at the expense of human inhabitations, although this tension remains a key point of negotiation in conservation research (Lorimer 2015). Rather, they serve to illustrate how rewilding can flourish alongside other modes of existence – enhancing civilisation rather than abandoning a sophisticated economy with high crop yields (Monbiot 2013, 10).

Our engagement with rewilding as a method, model and site for performance research responds to unpredictable processes involving multiple participants. Rewilding constitutes an ongoing negotiation between humans and nonhumans, established environments and novel interventions, often leading to unexpected results. It is always in process, never complete, and always open to new methods and applications. Our use of performance was driven by the parallels with devising practices that resonate with this process-driven approach, working with entanglements, collaboration, and multi-authored texts – longstanding concerns for many of the performance researchers on our team.[2] Drawing on the methods and practices of the full team, we initially invited participants to explore the area – sometimes led by ecologists, sometimes by artists, and sometimes guided by their own instincts and interests. We then facilitated a slow, tentative and small-scale process of artistic experimentation, resulting in fragments of text, performance, sculpture and drawings that might then instigate new processes of coproduction in our field sites. With a sensitivity to the existing environment and an openness to the co-presence of the other inhabitants, we gradually brought these disparate pieces together into temporary and contingent groupings, curating readings and performances, movements through installations of artworks, and digital repositories (see makingroutes.org). Importantly, while many of these outputs have been

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[2] For example, in the 'tangled flora' of Goat Island – the Chicago-based performance group co-founded in 1987 by our collaborator Karen Christopher, whose work continues to explore ecologies of practice (Bottoms 1998, Christopher and Grodin 2016). More recently, see our collaborator Sarah Hopfinger's (2000) practice-based research in performances of wildness.

documented and will serve to illustrate important aspects of our work, our most valuable insights were derived from the process of making together in these places. The primary aim is not the creation of artworks: it is the new forms of understanding that emerge from working collaboratively and creatively in the field. In the final section, I turn to the question of how far this process of 'making together' can involve nonhuman participants.

In writing this article, I am enacting a movement from one type of field (agricultural, arable or pastoral) to another (academic, conceptual, institutional). By these means, the fields of Knepp and Bamff have the potential to reveal and inform an approach to interdisciplinary artistic research that is informed by the processes of rewilding. The article therefore explores the intersection of diverse disciplinary fields, placing our research within recent practical and conceptual developments in academic field work. This is to take a more-than-metaphorical approach to fields, through which field-specific practice might reveal and develop methods that can usefully inform interdisciplinary research and knowledge exchange across academic fields. However, the field analogy risks collapsing the ecocentric into the anthropocentric. A cautious approach is required, which considers these experiments critically in their original context. As Michelle Bastian *et al*. point out in their collection of *Participatory Research in More-than-human Worlds*, working in this way raises 'a whole suite of conceptual, ethical and practical challenges' (Bastian et al. 2017, 8). This article therefore aims to acknowledge inevitable missteps as well as potential openings, critically reflecting on those moments when we may inadvertently or insensitively prioritise humanist concerns at the expense of the established ecological relationships of the sites.

The following section aims to establish a critical genealogy by differentiating between the various types of field that our work takes place within. Examining the organisation of academic fields, it acknowledges different approaches to the production and organisation of knowledge in academic field work. This prompts a discussion of field sites, which have been extensively examined as alternative locations for knowledge production and exchange (Gieryn 2018, Kohler 2002). Field work is employed here as a 'richly resonant term' evoking a wide 'repertoire of experiencing, knowing and imagining landscape and environment', and which can be 'develop[ed] in imaginative ways' by performance researchers (Daniels, Pearson and Roms 2010, 2). It is important, therefore, to pay attention to the 'histories and memories' of this broad area, as they apply directly to this research. The concept of wild experiments is then introduced to explore some of the ways in which these particular

epistemologies of field work can be brought into a formative relationship with the unpredictable, unruly processes of performance research.

Fields of knowledge

Focussing on artistic activity in fields, this article proposes working methods that aspire to a genuine transdisciplinarity, in which knowledge is no longer limited to constituent parts of a research process, but rather emerges through a radical openness to their convergence. As our collaborator Baz Kershaw has asserted, the value of working in such spaces is that 'you are entering into a relationship with your surroundings that potentially leaves you more open to what is happening in those surroundings and the forces, energies, and so forth that are circulating there' (Heron and Kershaw 2018). This requires a process of unlearning and an embrace of the condition of not knowing certain things. This is not to argue for the dissolution of fields (although that may have its benefits in certain contexts). But there are fields and there are fields: borders can be impermeable or porous; edges can be fixed or blurred.

When we talk about fields in academic contexts, we are really talking about cordoning off distinct areas of knowledge and understanding. There are plenty of good reasons to do this. Within clearly defined parameters, expertise can be nurtured, ideas can be organised and efficiently disseminated, and precarious methodologies and subjects can be protected. Fields *per se* are not a bad thing. But there are also significant problems with organising knowledge in this way. Ideologies become entrenched, research takes place in esoteric silos, and working methods can be limited and inflexible. This is why the modern university has frequently sought to engender exchange and collaboration across departments. Interdisciplinarity has become a buzz word in contemporary scholarship, promoted for its ability to solve big problems by combining complementary approaches. Rewilding is an example of this aspiration playing out in a real-world context. As Nathalie Pettorelli *et al*. suggest, it potentially 'opens a fresh perspective on the practice of ecological conservation, challenging our relationship to the natural world, encouraging a more interdisciplinary approach to environmental management' (Pettorelli et al. 2019, 5). Within the academy, the systems and structures of our institutions are not always open to the forms of innovation and collaboration

that are necessary to move us beyond disciplinary boundaries (Moran 2010, Frodeman, Klein and Dos Santos Pacheco 2017). In the field, such divisions can be difficult to justify.

As Roberta Frank points out, the term *discipline* has very different connotations to *field*: 'unlike fields, with their mud, cows and corn, the Latinate *discipline* comes encased in stainless steel: it suggests something rigorous, aggressive, hazardous to master' (Frank 1988, 100). If fields can be understood as *muddy* spaces, lacking in rigour and somehow less hazardous to control, they are also unequal and political, the site of power struggles and unevenly distributed capital (Bourdieu 1993). Fields, in both senses, contain the quantifiable, the logical and the graspable. But they also admit the uncanny, the irrational and the unknown. This is in contradistinction to the hard-edged discipline, which usually controls or suppresses these forces.

When research takes place *in the field*, this tends to refer to a place-based approach, rather than the academic organisation of knowledge. In the final decades of the 20th century, anthropologists such as George Marcus and Michael Fischer called for a reconfiguration of 'traditional' methods of field work, which tended to involve 'intensive participant observation in a single bounded location' (Marcus and Fischer 1986, Marcus 1995, 168). Responding with 'multi-sited' or 'multi-locale' ethnography to a capitalist political economy, field work was expanded to incorporate mobile studies of dispersed (multiple) locations and routes. The aim to was adapt site-based research practices in response to a world system that was constituted through 'the circulation of cultural meanings, objects, and identities in diffuse time-space' (Marcus 1995, 96). This shift was influential across disciplines – including performance studies and the environmental humanities – and has informed the design and practice of field work in a variety of contexts. More recently, there has been a reappraisal of the 'tyranny' of the multi-sited approach (Candea 2007, 174). In his defence of the bounded field-site, Matei Candea argues for the avowal and acknowledgement of 'processes of bounding, selection, and choice', which can be obscured in studies that purport to 'follow' everything (169). Candea does not advocate a return to 'traditional' conceptions of field sites as natural entities. Rather, he suggests that the arbitrary selection of contingently bounded sites might allow researchers to eschew holism, recognising the messiness, complexity and multiplicity that disrupt coherent meaning, and opening up field sites to their inherent inconsistencies and incompleteness. It is significant that Candea's essay ends with a

call 'to recapture the value of *not* knowing certain things' (181). Candea refers to this as a 'new experimental moment' (180).

Examining ambiguous definitions of 'experiment' in environmentalism, Lorimer and Clemens Driessen (another of our collaborators) propose the concept of 'wild experiments' to account for 'open-ended, uncertain and political negotiations between people and wildlife' (2014, 169). Wild experiments 'occur in inhabited places and involve multiple forms of experience, not all of which are human' (169). This formulation extends Thomas F. Gieryn's discussion of field sites as 'found' spaces, which he contrasts with the 'placeless' artificiality of the laboratory setting (Gieryn 2006). Field experiments are characterised by 'tentative procedure adopted in uncertainty', but they are also 'much more public and visible than laboratories and interventions will have real-world consequences' (Lorimer and Driessen 2014, 170). Problematising binary distinctions between laboratory and field, Lorimer and Driessen position their concept of wild experiments within the complex ecologies and politics of the Anthropocene, tracing productive negotiations between 'found' and 'made', 'order' and 'surprise', and 'secluded' or 'wild' epistemologies.

Focussing their analysis on the Oostvaardersplassen – a large-scale rewilding project in the Netherlands – Lorimer and Driessen propose the development of 'hybrid fora', which would involve 'a more-than-human collective of sociable actors and emergent forms of expertise' (2014, 178). These fora are ideally located in the tangled ecologies of rewilding projects, the selection of which is guided by specific, local and political considerations. The found/made dichotomy is relevant here, as the wild experiments of the Oostvaardersplassen complicate distinctions between 'the laboratory as a "made" space for controlled experiments', from which findings are presented as universal, and field sites as 'specific authentic spaces "found" by scientists' (173).

The field sites for our own 'wild experiments' at Knepp and Bamff have been selected with Candea's rapprochement in mind. Agricultural enclosures are quintessentially bounded field sites. Working within fields is an opportunity to contain research practice within a specific demarcated space. In this case, they are places where a deliberate attempt has been made to (re)introduce wild processes. This provides an opportunity to focus a research enquiry: the processes of rewilding are central to our work here and we constantly return to the question of what they can teach us about transdisciplinary artistic practice. However, importantly,

bounding our work in this way does not preclude wider application. Candea argues that 'the arbitrary location allows one to reflect on and rethink conceptual entities, to challenge their coherence and their totalizing aspirations' (2007, 180). This is very much our intention here and we approach Knepp and Bamff as testing grounds for the wider possibilities of (re)wilding knowledge exchange.

1. Knepp Castle Estate, West Sussex

I first visited Knepp Castle Estate on a wet day in July 2017 with my collaborators Lorimer, Schreve, and the walking artist and researcher, Phil Smith, whose work on *Mythogeography* (2010) has been influential in shaping our methodology (for example, see Overend, Lorimer and Schreve 2019). We met with the owners, Sir Charles Burrell and Isabella Tree, and heard the story of the Wildland Project – a version of the account that Tree has subsequently published in her book, *Wilding* (2018). Knepp is a former dairy farm, the fields of which have been gradually taken out of production in favor of 'a "process-led", non-goal-orientated project where, as far as possible, nature takes the driving seat' (Knepp Wildland Project). The project is informed by the model of grazing ecology promoted by the Dutch palaeoecologist Frans Vera (2000). Populations of 'hardy' breeds of domesticated large herbivores (Old English longhorn cattle and Exmoor ponies), along with Tamworth pigs, were introduced and are allowed to roam freely alongside nonnative fallow deer, and native roe and red deer. They are encouraged to generate a 'naturalistic' grazing regime that fosters habitat change and has led to such unexpected outcomes as the only recovering population of turtle doves in the UK and over thirty species of butterflies, including the rare Purple Emperor. This ecological movement towards unruly processes has significantly informed our emerging methodology.

After generously answering our questions and entertaining our somewhat leftfield approach to conservation thinking, the owners took their leave, issuing us with a map and inviting us to explore the Estate by foot. The rain poured down around us. As we walked through water-logged fields in search of the animals that inhabit the site, following muddy paths past tangled meadows, we encountered signs: gaps in the hedgerow where pigs may have passed; various hues and textures of dung on the ground in front of us; unusual patterns of plant growth and density. But, as rainwater ran down our backs and mud caked our poorly chosen footwear, the possibility began to offer itself that we would be disappointed. We climbed up

one of the lookout points and saw… nothing. As we trudged round what seemed to my undiscerning eye as surprisingly similar terrain (strangely uniform in its diversity, ostensibly empty of animal life), we became increasingly lost, wet and anxious. For some time, all we saw was damp undergrowth and a defiant absence. And then, the long horn cattle revealed themselves. We experienced them as Simon Barnes (2015) describes them: 'enormous, uncompromising and emerging from the bush with a formidable set of horns'. We looked at them, and they looked at us, the rain beating down on us all. At this point, my clothing had lost any semblance of waterproofing. But I didn't care anymore, because I was in the presence of – perhaps even an awkward and uncomfortable part of – an unusual, alluring wildness.

This initial encounter in the sodden fields paved the way for a larger event at Knepp. In October 2017, we arranged a return visit with a sixteen-strong group of theatre practitioners and scholars, human geographers, palaeoecologists, conservationists, visual artists, and journalists (Overend and Lorimer 2018). One of the performances that emerged from the creative workshop that we facilitated that weekend took place in a large field beside the camp site. Following a series of prompts towards collaborative performance-making from practitioner Karen Christopher, I took part in a group performance that tangled together diverse fragments of responses to the ecologies of the site. This proved to be an effective way of bringing disparate disciplinary perspectives into a dialogue, as well as opening up the possibility of collaboration beyond a human frame of reference. Another participant, Sarah Hopfinger (2018), describes this performance in her blog post about the event:

> David is sitting on a chair at a distance from us (the 'audience'). He is out there towards the field where there are grasses-hedges-horizon-and-what-I-cannot-fully-see. His far away-ness feels important. David, sitting on his chair, faces us with a stare that arrests me closely, yet I cannot make out his expression or bodily position: he is not fully clear. I am drawn to this far-away-close-David-chair. He watches us watching him. After some time, he slowly brings his arms up towards his head, his hands carrying two long sticks that end up resting on his head and protruding out-upward into the sky, echoing a knowledge of long antlers. He does not change his continued looking at us, even as he is changed by this simple movement and collaboration with two sticks.

Hopfinger's use of hyphenated descriptors ('grasses-hedges-horizon-and-what-I-cannot-fully-see', 'far-away-close-David-chair'), which are employed throughout this post, gently challenge the autonomy of objects and bodies in this field. In positioning myself in the middle of the field, I was aiming for distance from the locus of human activity – the actions of the wider group performance. But Hopfinger's eye also takes in the borderlands beyond, suggesting that my performing body was placed into a relationship with the edges of the field as performance space. At the same time, I wanted to play with representation, loosely imitating a stag that I had encountered earlier that day. Hopfinger detects an 'openness to partiality in this David-stag performance', which is to understand my intention. This particular spectator experienced 'a sense that it is OK not to view things in full', and her reflections on the event suggest a wild epistemology that usefully informs our subsequent experiments at these field sites:

> David's physical distance from us spoke to me of a significant partiality, a half-hidden and not-fully-see-able wildness. Perhaps animals, environments, people and ecosystems need to not be fully seen, grasped, understood, in order for them to be what they are, where what they are always contains something unknowable. This brings me to the thought that if we are part of environmental ecologies, as opposed to somehow separated or separable from them, then we cannot ever see them in full view, we can only ever participate in ecologies and 'see' and 'do' from the partiality of our entangled perspectives. (Hopfinger 2018)

Engaging with *entangled* perspectives is an important ecological methodology (Ingold 2011), which has particular resonances with the devising methods of contemporary theatre practice (Hopfinger 2020). Following Carl Lavery (2016) to ask what theatre can *do* ecology, Hopfinger explores the possibility of 'producing unpredictability in performance 'as well as structuring dramaturgical connections between 'human and nonhuman performances' (2020, 2). These aspirations align with the processes of rewilding, as unpredictability of outcome and human and nonhuman entanglements are integral to the reintroduction of natural processes at specific sites such as Knepp.

Donna Haraway reminds us that 'critters interpenetrate one another, loop around and through one another, eat each other, get indigestion, and thereby establish sympoietic arrangements that are otherwise known as cells, organisms, and ecological assemblages' (2017, M25).

Making with these *sympoietic* assemblages, we need to find the right kinds of stories to tell, which involves challenging ourselves to move beyond anthropocentric and discipline-bounded perspectives. This can be practiced through 'science art worldings', which Haraway describes as, 'holobiomes, or holoents, in which scientists, artists, ordinary members of communities, and nonhuman beings become enfolded in each other's projects, in each other's lives; [and] come to need each other in diverse, passionate, corporeal, meaningful ways' (2016, 69).

In working with ecological scientists, our aim was not simply to know as much as we could about the site: it was to enfold our own diverse knowledge practices with those of others. In so doing, we aimed to respond to the entangled ecologies of rewilding with appropriately entangled knowledge practices. Hopfinger's suggestion that 'what [animals, environments, people and ecosystems] are always contains something unknowable' has been influential in developing this practice. The performative events that took place at Knepp serve to illustrate the ways in which we were drawn to those aspects of the field sites that took us into new, unexpected territories, where we were often working with unsettling or uncanny processes at the edges of the fields. This is exemplified through an analysis of one of the participants' contributions to a creative writing task: a poetic response to the death of a rabbit.

Hammer rabbit

We experienced a sense of 'dark ecology' (Morton 2016) on our most recent fieldtrip to Knepp in September 2018. A small group comprised of three returning participants (myself, Lorimer and the musician Scott Twynholm), along with two new visitors (cultural geographer Sofie Narbed and performance maker and researcher Jenny Swingler), were guided through the Estate on foot by environmental manager, Tom Forward. Forward's enthusiastic knowledge of the birds that inhabit the site allowed us to tune in to the soundscape in a very different way, further enhanced by Twynholm's concern with the musicality of Knepp.

Rising early, we joined Forward on a walk through the fields. His ability to read the environment by ear was astonishing. On one occasion, he correctly predicted the appearance of a buzzard, signified by a change in the call of the tits in distant bushland. Forward brought the indiscernible wildlife of the estate into sharp focus. The 'tick-tick-tick' of robins' alarm calls ushered us into this new world, offset by the 'teck' of the wrens and the 'tack' of the

black caps. We recreated the latter by knocking together two stones, prompting a 'tack-tack-tack' response. We were already entering into a sort of dialogue, but were unsure whether 'conversation' was possible beyond this call and response dynamic. Forward referred us to a study by Toshitaka Suzuki (2014), which suggests that birds vary the type and frequency of notes to convey information about different predators (for example, the Japanese great tit uses 'jar' calls for snakes and 'chicka' calls for crows and martens).

We considered the value of the word *bio-abundance*, the importance of ecologies that are thick with diverse processes of life and death, rather than the targeted species-specific approaches of most conservation initiatives. As we extolled the virtues of rewilding, a scream cut through the birdscape, sending a cloud of escapees into flight from an oak tree at the far end of the field. Another distinct cry was a magpie as various corvids were excited by the incident. Amongst the cacophony of alarm calls, it was difficult to pinpoint the location. We were guided by the chilling squeals of a dying animal. This was accompanied by a soft 'tss' sound, an alarm call used by great tits, blackbirds, and robins. Was this a rabbit being strangled by a stoat? Or a mink, perhaps? It continued for what seemed like an eternity. By the time we had homed in on the area in an excitable state of pursuit, struggling through the thick undergrowth that dispersed the edges of the enclosure, the rabbit had breathed its last, and we were unable to find the remains. Not that we were sure we really wanted to. Later that day, we found a dead rabbit floating in the nearby hammer pond.[3] Surely not the same one, but perhaps this was the macabre trophy we were looking for?

These experiences affected us profoundly. They enhanced an existing concern with the darker dimensions of rewilding – the processes of decay and rot that accompany more palatable versions of conservation (Lorimer 2016). Everything we devised and wrote from this point was haunted by these rabbits, which prompted a concern with other temporal scales at Knepp. This is exemplified in a textual response to these events, written by Swingler as a constitutive part of a collaborative performance text:

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[3] Hammer ponds were once used in the local iron industry 'to drive both the "hammer" which crushed the ore and the bellows to fire the furnace' (see image at https://www.geograph.org.uk/photo/4704191).

Hammer Rabbit is dead

She is lying in the pond under the branches-
A furry Ophelia.

Hammer Rabbit shares her grave with an industry
That also gnawed and scratched at the surface
And burrowed deep.

But just as Hammer Rabbit tries to catch her last eternal breath
A new industry is moving in.
It is as if the men who battled with this landscape have risen up
From the swampy depths and are reincarnating into microbe form.

This band of microbes has no union,
And has abandoned all workers' rights,
They toil without breaks.

A small community has gathered in her stomach.
They fight hungrily through her kidneys, liver and lungs.

Guided by the light of her eyes
They plough through her retinas
And begin to strip her of her skin.

Hammer Rabbit undulates-
Decaying is ticklish.

Her bones settle on the sludge and she gives in to the suck of the mud.
Beneath she feels the hot breath of what has been and what will be.

Her bones become entangled with the beginnings of a Mammoth.
Her ribs form an arch that shield this impossible baby,
As the Mammoth breathes warm winds,
That melt the boundaries of time.

Its body not yet grown or born,
It leans into a landscape not yet formed.
Imprinting future ground with heavy step,
And drinking from rivers not yet full.

This verse was written quickly, during a workshop activity in which participants were invited to spend some time writing on their own somewhere on the estate. Swingler wrote this piece *in situ*, sitting at the hammer pond beside the eponymous corpse. The text was later performed as part of an evening event with our small group, and subsequently recorded as a key part of a multi-authored poem, which eventually found its form as an audio track (Lorimer et al. 2018). It is a textual record of a multi-species, multi-disciplinary approach to entanglement, and it suggests, following Kershaw, how 'literature and performing arts equally might evoke quotidian natural processes re-experienced through the prisms of human creativity' (2016, 286). In this case, the quotidian natural process in question is that of decay.

In this poem, the protagonist is a decomposing animal body, interpenetrated by a community of 'critters' (Haraway 2017). This moment of bodily collapse is positioned on temporal and geographical vectors. It embodies David Farrier's concern with the poetics of 'deep pasts and deep futures' (2019, 17). One trajectory moves through the recent industrial past – symbolised by the hammer – into quaternary history. However, the Mammoth appears to be in utero and the 'boundaries of time' are melting as its grotesque birth is the genesis of an alternative future trajectory. This is envisioned as an ecological movement, which is very much of the Earth. The ending opens up to a rewilded future that carries a potential for fuller rivers, reformed landscapes, and wilder presences. But like John Clare's 'Mouse's Nest' – the poem that prompts Timothy Morton to call for us 'to stay right here, in the poisoned mud' – this can only be realised by giving in to the 'suck of the mud', folding ourselves into the community of decay in order to birth new futures (2008, 193).

The muddy, collapsed temporalities evoked by Swingler's verse are revealed through a combination of environmental, palaeoecological, geographical, performative and literary entanglements. We became attentive to these processes (predation, decomposition) and subjects (dead rabbits, quaternary histories, rewilded futures) as a result of our exploration of the peripheries of Knepp's fields, and by venturing into the dispersed borderlands of encroaching hedgerow. These findings informed our subsequent wild experiments as we expanded our focus to work in other fields where borders were shifting and blurring as a result of rewilding processes.

2. **Bamff Estate, Perthshire**

While Scotland's rugged, mountainous terrain is naturally resistant to enclosure, much of the country is now a patchwork of privately owned, intensely farmed monocultures. Many of these were established during the Highland Clearances of the 18th and 19th centuries, during which thousands of people were evicted from their homes to clear land for sheep, cattle and deer (Richards 2012). Today, around 19% of the land area is used for grouse shooting, which leads to a range of negative environmental impacts (Armstrong 2019, 4). A significant part of Scotland is controlled by private landowners. It was estimated in 2014 that half of the country is owned by 0.008% of the population (Land Reform Review Group 2014). Today, with a population of 5.5 million, this would be approximately 440 people. As such, progressive conservation initiatives often rely on ecologically minded owners, such as the Danish billionaires Anders and Anne Holch Povlsen, who are behind an initiative to restore tens of thousands of hectares of the Scottish Highlands to diverse habitats, including the cultivation of healthy woodland and pine forest (Carrell 2019).[4]

On a much smaller scale than the Holch Povlsens' project, at just over 500 hectares, the Bamff Estate in Perthshire is nonetheless an important site for rewilding in Scotland. Bamff hosts the country's longest established population of reintroduced beavers and is located amidst the growing population of beavers in the Tay valley. The Ramsay family, who own the estate, are key players in current debates about beaver reintroduction in Scotland. The fur trade eliminated beavers from the UK 400 years ago and none were returned until the beginning of the 21st century. An official trial was planned in Argyll but stalled for several years due to opposition from farmers and fisheries' interests. In 2001-2 some beavers escaped from a wildlife park and from enclosed demonstration projects, forming a wild living population in Tayside. In the meantime, the official trial also got underway. After great public excitement and debate the beaver was granted official leave to remain in 2012. In May 2019, beavers in Scotland were given European Protected Status, with control subject to government license, the terms of which have already proved highly controversial (Brooks 2019).

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[4] Concurrently, enabled by the Scottish Land Reform Act (2002), the Scottish Land Fund has supported communities to take ownership of their land including buy outs from private owners. This community-driven approach is an important alternative to the current monopolies of land ownership in Scotland.

Beavers are particularly interesting in the context of field-specific practice. When beavers inhabit a body of water, they cut channels into the adjoining land, transgressing natural boundaries by creating pathways for quick and direct routes between feeding grounds and underwater sanctuaries. Furthermore, their damming and gnawing practices can radically alter farmland, redrawing boundaries and redirecting waterways, as described by Amy Clarkson during another creative workshop at Bamff:

> A blurring had occurred; no longer a clearly defined dichotomy of plantation against sheep field, but a habitat in the state of becoming beyond human design. Trees lay in abrupt horizontal intersections; water channels had been widened and cleared. The fields – no longer the domain of sheep – were flooded, reeds usurping grasses to weave new layers across the peaty banks and the submerged architecture of these beaver lands. (2019, 16)

Our first visit to Bamff took place in June 2019 and involved twelve participants from a range of disciplines, several of whom had also accompanied us to Knepp. A small group approached from Glasgow by car, as we drove towards the Estate's main residence – the 13th century 'tower house' where we would meet our hosts. We could immediately see the impact that the beavers had made on the landscape. Documenting the event, Bissell (2020) describes the road as 'a visual divide between two opposing ideas of land management':

> On the left, the neat, flat, familiar fields of green and yellow of a traditional agricultural farm. To the right, the tall, leafy, dark green trees of the Bamff estate loom above the road, swaying in the wind. The buzzards flying overhead seem to favour the airspace over Bamff.

This contrast is also apparent within the estate as the organically farmed fields are contained behind fencing, while those parts of Bamff given over to wilder processes are notably different, lacking in definable boundaries and notably more complex in their composition.

On the first night of our fieldtrip – the longest of the year – I stayed on my own in the 'hideaway' accommodation beside the main beaver pond. Long after the others had retired for the night, as one day blurred into another, unpunctuated by darkness, I walked downstream with the beavers swimming beside me much of the way. This seemingly

carefree, playful moment of beaver-human proximity is what makes Bamff unique in the context of beaver conservation. Beavers have become a flagship species for rewilding, delivering cost-effective 'nature-based solutions' to flood protection (Lorimer 2018, Woelfle-Erskine and Cole 2019). At Bamff, this rationale is replaced by a desire to create a protected habitat for beavers to simply be beavers without the requirement to serve a particular purpose for human stakeholders. Here, beaver conservation is a project of passion, and of resistance to profit-driven monocultural farming practices that preclude the recovery of vibrant ecosystems (Ramsay 2018). In line with the Ramsays' approach, rather than the instrumental introduction or relocation of beavers for water management agendas, our methods aimed to generate intimacy, embrace unpredictability, and prompt Harraway's 'science art worldings' in coproduction with the beavers.

Performance methods have the potential to produce collaborative ways-of-knowing (or unknowing) that do not demand that the beavers work for us. But here, as with any form of 'more-than-human participatory research', there is always the risk of anthropomorphism (a charge often levelled at those who talk of non-human agencies (Bastian et al. 2017, 7)). Our approach follows ecofeminists such as Val Plumwood in 'recognising agential capacities of specific nonhumans' (Bastian et al. 2017, 9). We use terms such as 'collaboration', 'obligation' and 'reciprocity' to suggest the possibility of coproduction, not only as an analytical strategy but also, as with the wild fora of rewilding, as a process of active engagement with more-than-human subjects.[5] However, this may be to project human concerns onto indifferent (or often – as our collaborator the playwright Lewis Hetherington pointed out – more precisely, *unaware*) participants. This is a challenge and a tension that needs to be constantly attended to if we are then able to cross the threshold identified by Bastian *et al.* in order to develop 'methods that might enable [nonhuman's] active participation in research processes' (Bastian et al. 2017, 9).

Fieldscaping with beavers

'Fieldscaping' is an activity that the Bamff beavers have been involved with for 15 years or so, and many of the fields bordering the waterways are now intercut with beaver-constructed

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[5] For a discussion of the divergent history of co-production in more-than-human research and participatory research respectively, see Bastian *et al.* 2017, 5-7.

streams, providing escape routes and access to feeding grounds and building supplies. By following these routes from the fields into the water and back again – both physically and imaginatively – a mode of wild performativity was generated through a series of *crossings* between human and nonhuman positions, which often take place at literally muddy points of convergence between distinct ecosystems. Building on our work at Knepp, which revealed the possibilities of performative entanglements, and situated our practice within the dynamic processes of rewilding, our field work at Bamff set out to respond to the provocation put forward by Bastian *et al.* – to coproduce research with more-than-human participants. In the 'wild performative' typology that Lorimer and I previously put forward, we suggest various means by which we might develop a more-than-human model of ecological practice (Overend and Lorimer 2018). These modes of wild performativity will be used here to frame an account of our performative fieldscaping work at Bamff.

One of our aims (after Despret 2004) is 'learning to be affected' by the nonhuman inhabitants, processes, and forces within a site. Another, which poses more difficulties, is to go beyond the representational imperatives of field work to establish reciprocal relationships with nonhuman creatures in the field. In relation to the first aspiration, we have been interested in situations in which human participants seek to attune to and enact dimensions of the wild. In performance artist Christy Gast's 2014 film, *Castorera (A Love Story)*, in the Patagonian Tierra del Fuego, two human-beaver symbionts cross between worlds, playfully mobilising an assemblage of cultural associations, ecological processes and interspecies exchanges (Gast and Marambio 2014). The performers wear large beaver costumes and carry out a series of basic human and beaver tasks, such as gathering and transporting wood. In conversation with our collaborator Laura Ogden, Gast and her co-performer, Camila Marambio, have suggested that these performed actions counterintuitively reveal more about being human than being beaver (Ogden 2021). Here, performance functions in accordance with Lavery's argument that 'theatre's success may be found in the exposure of its own artifice' (2016, 233). But this suggestion of the ecological value of theatre arising from a failed mimetic act is not entirely satisfactory. This work also has the potential to engage with other ways of knowing that take us beyond an anthropocentric worldview.

At Bamff, conscious of the ontological space between human and beaver worlds, we set ourselves the challenge of sensing the environment as beavers in ways that might move us beyond the artificial. Moving at ground level, I followed one of the various beaver paths from

an adjoining field, down the muddy embankment to the edge of the beaver pond. In this mode, on land, I felt ungainly, slow moving, cautious. Plunging into the water, I felt a fleeting sense of dispossession of those muddy, bodily calibrations. Shocked by the cold of the water and surprised by the tangled network of solid roots structuring my passage through the wetlands, I sensed the world, if not quite as beaver, at least as more-than-human. For me, that small transgression seemed real enough to have some value beyond the mere exposure of artifice. Afterwards, as I sat shivering, I worried that my human scent may have marked this particular passageway; that my act of crossing might have prevented others from crossing back along that route. This particular experiment felt uncomfortably intrusive, and it reminded me of the importance of maintaining distance and distinction, as well as hinting at the complex potentialities of imaginatively transgressing interspecies boundaries.

On a return visit in March 2020, days before the Covid-19 lockdown began, Lorimer, Bissell, Hetherington and I donned neoprene and attempted to move further into the beaverlands. This time we selected our location more carefully, ensuring enough distance from the beaver lodge to avoid disrupting established behaviour patterns, but close enough to establish a connection to their aquatic realm. My reflection on this event indicates that the value of this exercise may have emerged from its limitations:

> Immersion, plunging, crossing… What I felt today was none of these things: it was the shock of the cold, the task of endurance, and the feeling of suddenly having to cope with something difficult. […] I so wanted to cross – to *chew on things* and then to cross back. But the beavers were always on the other side – a place that I could not reach. With neoprene skin, a cautious dunk, a frantic scramble to find a sure footing on the squidgy, shifting pond bed. With these things, I would never *be* beaver, I would never *see* beaver, I would never know what beavers know. Nor could I aspire to.

Like Gast and Marambio, the aim here was never to pretend to be beavers. Rather, it was a cautious and tentative attempt at learning to be affected by nonhuman sensibilities.

Regarding our second aspiration, in our wild experiments, we have also made attempts to 'coproduce' with nonhuman species, processes, or forces. The Bamff beavers are generally hidden from sight, save for a few evening hours when they can be observed grazing on the beaver lawns, and building in the beaver pools around their main lodge, itself hidden beneath

a dramatic bloom of rhododendrons – an invasive, non-native species that has been well established in the UK for the duration of the beavers' absence. On our first visit, this situation led some of our group to instigate an exchange across time as, over the course of an afternoon, they set up a series of sculptural installations, each of which proposed a different mode of engagement for our nonhuman collaborators (Bissell 2020, Ogden 2019). In one instance, a row of sticks with apple segments skewered on the ends reached out to the beaver world. Returning the next morning, to our delight, we found that the offer had been taken up. Not only had the apple been eaten, but the majority of the stick had disappeared, and the part that remained bore the clear impression of gnawing. The group responding to this task explored the potential of human-animal exchanges. This 'gift' to the Bamff beavers is a playful response to a sense of multispecies obligation, which is offered here as a performative action of reciprocity. Importantly, unlike my initial clumsy plunge into the beaver pond, this particular experiment established the right (the likelihood, even) of nonparticipation, which Clara Mancini refers to as the 'right to withdraw' – an established principle in participatory research with humans (Bastian 2017, 31). While claims of reciprocity and obligation are by no means straightforward in this context, a certain level of willful nonhuman agency completed this performative exchange.

To make sense of the ecological dynamics of our field sites, we have explored the analytical potential of concepts from performance studies and cognate fields. Working with musicians was particularly revealing in this sense. On our first visit to Bamff, Twynholm created an audio track that layered a recording of the flow of water through a beaver dam with the gentle invitation for the listener to project themselves into that elemental realm. This was available as a looped track, played through headphones as part of a collection of performances for individual audience members, created in and around the estate's former stables. This experience offered an immersion in the sense in which Josephine Machon uses the term in the context of immersive theatre: 'the action of plunging your whole body into an alternative medium and its subsequent sensations' (2013, xiv). This plunge – a moment of crossing over into other realms and other ways of feeling – offers an alternative way of engaging with rewilding at Bamff.

The plunge suggests a mode of exchange between disciplines, and between human and nonhuman collaborators, that has been revealed through our work with beavers: that of crossing (Woelfle-Erskine and Cole 2019, 307). Crossing is a process of exchange in specific

situations between particular modes of knowledge and experience, which characterised much of the exploratory field work that we have undertaken in this project. Such performative transitions always contain the potential of crossing back again, often repeatedly, and of temporarily inhabiting the literal and conceptual spaces between entities. This continual agential movement between fields (in all senses of the word) allows us to create and encourage the kind of wild exchanges that will help us live together on this damaged planet. After all, as Cleo Woelfle-Erskine and July Cole remind us, 'a beaver crosses, swims from one side to the other, and chews on things on both sides' (2019, 307). Perhaps that is exactly what we need to do too.

(Anti)conclusion: A wild epistemology

Kershaw notes that 'given the intrinsic importance of indeterminacy and unpredictability to its workings, [transdisciplinarity] tends to create states which are not easily accounted for in terms of cause-and-effect' (Heron and Kershaw 2018, 29). This means that traditional artistic outputs and discernible research findings may be inimical to the open-ended, partial and experimental practices that are required to move within and across fields. As a result, following Kershaw et al. (2011), this is an anti-conclusion, which aims to keep vectors moving and resists definition. Nonetheless, our field work has sharpened our thinking and methods and provides a series of potentially useful concepts for future research in this area. One of the contributions of this article is to bring something back from the field into the seminar room. The result might be a rewilding of disciplinary knowledge exchange: a wild epistemology.

What are the features of such a mode of knowledge production? And how does performance research of the type disseminated here suggest a model for (re)establishing wildness in the academy? A wild epistemology would be *entangled*, *unsettling* and continually *practiced*.

The aspiration to become enfolded in each other's projects emerges as a central rationale for our work at these sites. In fact, all of the activities that prompt the discussion in this article can be understood as attempts at entanglement. This is always a contingent state of being, but there are particular ways of knowing that emerge from such practices, which cannot be found within discrete disciplinary environments. This work necessitates an openness to difference

and diversity and an acceptance of the limits of knowledge. In aspiring to a transdisciplinary way of working, we undertook a careful process of enfolding ourselves within the performative processes that determine the sites, revealing and animating these through our creative practice.

Many things might be productively unsettled through this work, both in the sense of enacting the uncanny, and by posing a radical challenge to previously stable entities. A willingness and an active effort to work with the unknown is integral to this project. This can be challenging, and it does not guarantee an enjoyable, meaningful or sensible experience. In embracing the processes of entanglement, the unpredictability of outcome is necessary, even – perhaps especially – if that causes discomfort to those who conduct and encounter the work.

Our concern is with the effect of performance, which is to cut across disciplinary boundaries as a 'trans-disciplinary [ecological] vector' (Kershaw and Nicholson 2011, 7). This is an inherently process-based approach, which recognises the 'ever shifting constellation of trajectories' that determine the places that we work within and become part of (Massey 2005, 151). This work is never complete, and we continue to look for new collaborators and places to continue our wild experiments.

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