

New Processes for Digital Devices in Wild, Green Spaces by Jo Scott

Audio Transcript

Key to text:

Italicised text: more distant voice

Bold text: closer voice

Underlined text: voice in space

Red text: prompts for activity in the space

I was never one of those people who felt a deep connection with their interior self, as physically and spiritually and cognitively and affectively manifest.

This is an audio walk of sorts, but you don't have to walk if you don't want to and it's up to you how much you respond to the prompts offered. At points, you will be asked to pause this recording to complete activities – again it's up to you if you choose to do this. Perhaps the only real request I would make is that you take your phone, with this track into a wild, green space of your choosing.

I think it is important that you are alone with your phone and in your chosen place – head there now if you haven't already done so. Remember that the only condition is that nature is in charge here – it's doing what it wants, it is dominant. It could be urban woodland, a riverside, a wasteland abandoned for lack of capital and full of growth instead – it could be edgelands, moorlands, open countryside, an overgrown city park, the wild end of a garden. Pause the recording if you're not in the space yet and play it again, once you get there

I'm here on my own. This is Kersal Dale - a local nature reserve in East Salford - and it always feels a bit intimidating really, because this is a quiet, quiet place. I don't usually see people here, which is great, but there's also this vulnerability, attached to being – let's face it – a woman in this isolated and hidden place.

Where are you now? A familiar place? Somewhere new? What is wild about it? How is it contained? Over the course of the next 20 to 30 minutes, you will be prompted to move around and interact with the space and the device. At any point, you can stop the recording and re-start it again, follow its prompts or resist them, remain still or walk as you listen – it's up to you.

For the moment, don't connect with others through the phone's data tendrils into the wider world – use the device as part of a present encounter with what is here and now – resist its desires for you to be elsewhere.

So here we are in a place dominated by organic processes and, I guess, here is where we bring our own organic processes, as entwined with the processes of this digital device.

How might those threads of action and computation, of growth and renewal, of sensation and calculation, meet here and now?

This is and is not an open question. I want to prompt consideration of the type of landscape that is created between us in such moments. According to John Wylie (2007), landscape can be seen as 'a charged background of affective capacities and tensions acting as a catalyst for corporeal practice and performance' (p.214).

Sounds like my phone – full to the brim it is of tensions and affective capacities, holding feeling in its pop-up badges and notifications and banners and thrums of vibration and sharp, sharp sounds. A landscape for corporeal practice.

And of course this place too catalyses and prompts, with its winding path wishing for me to enter, with its leafless branches poking the sky above, forming patterns and shapes here and there, with its hidden and inaudible, present and beyond reach happenings and events and shapings of things to be, things to come. Somewhere calm, somewhere riotous.

Take a moment now to move around and explore and look at the space you are in, including the digital space of your device. What is visible as actions and movements? What is hidden? What can you hear and what do you think is inaudible? What patterns can you see and feel in the wider natural landscape and in the contained, but endless landscape of the device? Pause the recording and come back to it when you're done.

Now you are part of these affective capacities, part of the affective force around, which again, according to Wylie (2005), 'exceeds, enters into, and ranges over the sensations and emotions of a subject who feels' (p.236). You know, that sounds like my phone too – its subjectivity, its wants and needs are correlative to mine and to those of this place. Is it really so different? Might we re-think ways of being and intersecting here? Here we are – here you are - in this space, with this device

Device - Middle English: from Old French devis, based on Latin divis- 'divided', from the verb dividere . The original sense was 'desire or intention', found now only in 'leave someone to their own devices' (Harper 2019).

...which is of course what this is all about, being left to our own devices and in turn, being devoured by them, by their desires and intentions, all muddled up with ours and those of so many others. No clean lines cutting through the sky, no single taproot breaking the ground – just a big, tangled mess of things.

Let's engage with what we can do here to form some different types of relationships between us, in space, in time, with sound, with movement and with voice too.

Mark a movement or journey through the space in an unusual way. Strap the phone to your arm, point it behind you, resist the urge to look through it for the moment – let it do what it wants and try not to be bothered with what this produces. Pause the recording while you play with this for a little while. You can come back when you're done.

Jack Turner (2013) says 'there are ten times as many bacteria in and on us – our teeth, the residual web between our toes, our gut, our eyelids, everywhere – than there are human cells in our body, and they are wildly autonomous, active ecosystems nested and integrated within the larger ecosystem we designate as me' (p.46).

The other day, on the way back from a holiday in East Anglia, I followed Google Maps to avoid a traffic jam and ended up at the most snarled up, grinding impossible junction onto the A1 – a repetitive game of chicken with two high speeding lanes of dual carriageway traffic and I looked behind and we were all there – all following the algorithm, leading us to a situation uncontrollable and impossible and perhaps in the end, this is what is not reflected in the bland screen and mapped representation - what it feels like to be at the mercy of a set of processes that cannot know or care, that operate autonomously and place us all here and now. Robert Macfarlane (2007) connects wildness to the disinterest of the world in us and for us - its continuing fecundity and flaring futurity with or despite of us, or indeed in our absence. I felt something similar when encountering that disconnect between the prescribed route and its actuality in the world – a hovering nothingness at the heart of things, unseating and dislocating experience in a somehow horrifying way.

Find one thing here that you want to encounter more closely and use the phone to help you form this encounter. Try it the other way around – can you see your phone through the moss, through the branches of a tree, through the ivy? Pause the recording and come back to it when you're finished.

I walked into Kersal Dale about a week ago, after I hadn't been there for about a month – I was overwhelmed by its ferocious growth and greenery, how it had become utterly other through the warm early summer months and when I dropped off the path into it, I felt enclosed, beyond. I was also bewildered as to in what way I could capture or express or respond to that change using the mobile digital technologies and software available to me. David Berry (2011) discusses the endless processes that happen between the devices we carry and ourselves. Networked software, he says, 'encourages a communicative environment of rapidly changing feedback mechanisms that tie humans and non-humans together into new aggregates'. I wonder if we can create a new aggregate here, or whether we are already tied into the models and feedback and affordances that are already there. He also says evocatively, 'computers run software that is spun like webs, invisibly around us, organising, controlling, monitoring and processing...software is a tangle, a knot, which ties together the physical and the ephemeral, the material and the ethereal, into a multi-linear ensemble that can be controlled and directed' (p.3).

Who is in control here? Who or what is directing this?

Put the phone into the environment – somewhere where it doesn't fit and make it do something – record or play sound, image, video. Place its automated happenings in relation to all the other processes happening here. Don't look through the device – look at it in this space. What does it look like? Why is it here? What is it hiding? Record your responses to these questions, if you want. Pause the recording and come back to it when you're finished.

Contemporary digital culture and devices embody contradictions and dualities – a felt restriction and framing of the world that if it does not deny the expansiveness of landscapes around and within us, at least frames a version of them on a screen or through an algorithm, restricting, shaping and reformulating experience. On the other hand, there is a continuous process to the digital - a boundless present of the constantly updating, shifting digital sphere – the information that is being made and presented, the endless data and slotting up news feeds and images, images, images, that are overwhelming, burgeoning, beyond the scope of our capacity to see and to respond.

I trudge into the close up natural wildness to sample its qualities in 0s and 1s – through a system I will never really understand and which is literally beyond me, because of what postdigital theorists such as Berry and Dieter (2015) call 'agnosis' or 'the way in which computation facilitates a systemic production and maintenance of ignorance' (p.5). Indeed, there is a consistent beyondness – a precipice I feel when interacting with software, apps, programmes, of which I understand so little and which seem to extend so far beyond,

below, around and beneath me. In this sense, digitality is other, apart, wild and beyond, despite its desperate and quick-formed familiarity and intimate positioning in our lives and the fact that, like wildness, it is everywhere, permeating spaces, affects, relationships, actions, interior landscapes. Equally, there are nonhuman agencies at work in digital spaces, as there are in wild green spaces.

Leave the phone somewhere in this space to film. Feel its pull on you as you walk away from it to another part of the space, then run towards it fast, pick it up and turn it out into the space. The image will move with your breath, which is good – that will change how the environment is. Feel the breath of the body in the image, the impossibility of stillness, the movement formed between body, device and place. Come back to me when you're done.

Let's not make this place perform for the camera – let's not ask it to lay itself out to the demands of digital capture. Let the camera be the one to perform, let the device do what it can to hold its own here. As for you and I, there is no space to be seen here – to be separate, gazed upon, witnessed. Let's fold ourselves into this place and try not to stand out too much, let's be led by the patterns and the shapes that are already here.

Walk with the device facing backwards to a part of this space you can't see, that perhaps you've just seen, that you've passed through. Let it be the eyes in the back of your head, your back, your feet, without ever seeing, without ever looking. Does the place look back? A circumspect tilted appraisal of the body and device. You don't need to look at this until you get home. You don't need to look at it at all. It's not a document – it's part of a process that is happening now. Pause the recording and come back to it when you're finished.

Robert Macfarlane (2007), in his book about wild places, describes sleeping in a meadow: 'I could hear the ongoing business of the meadow – the shifting of grass stalks, the shy movements of animals and insects – and again I felt a sense of wildness as process' (p.234). David Berry (2011) describes a different type of wildness that happens when we sleep: 'networks of machines silently and repetitively exchange data. They monitor, control and assess the world using electronic sensors, updating lists and databases, calculating and recalculating their models to produce reports, predictions and warnings. In the swirling constellations of data, they oversee and stabilise the everyday lives of individuals, groups and organisations' (p.1).

Think about all the things happening in this space at this time. Try to position yourself and the device in relation to just one of these tiny, ongoing, infinitesimal processes, so you really see it, so you stay with it for longer than you should – a drip of water from a leaf, wind pushing a single branch somewhere, the movement of the shadow of something. Try to hear and engage with the processes of the device too – its

tiny, repetitive and continuous actions, working in and shaping the world. Pause the recording and come back to it when you're finished.

*Encounter. Noun circa 1300. Meeting of adversaries, confrontation, from Old French *encontre* "meeting, fight, opportunit. Noun, use of preposition/adverb *encontre* "against, counter to" from Late Latin *incontra* "in front of," from Latin *in* – "in" + *contra* "against" (Harper 2019).*

Are we adversaries then? Perhaps we are and maybe that's what I feel in the gnarled and knotty senses of me and it here, us and them here, this and that and there, us all as processes happening – as John Wylie (2005) describes in relation to the encounter of his feet with the South West coastal path: 'Pain occurs neither 'in me' nor 'in that' – the externalized body – but 'between me and it', in this step, and the next step. And so the landscape emerges as malignant' (p.244). Malignant? Well, perhaps not in this case, but there is a wariness, an unknowingness and an ignorance between all of us and perhaps that's worth remembering.

Play with the shadows of things in the space – yours, the shadow of a tree, a branch, a loose leaf shivering, grasses brushing against each other, the presence of the phone, as sensed and thrown into the world but not actual – no selfies, no posing or framing or forming of something for later, but a chasing through the space and through the device. Pause the recording and come back to it when you are finished.

Perhaps it is something about the form of the thing – its insistence on my craning neck and looking through to who knows where, the swallowing up of my more clumsy form into its neat parameters. When I look at it here, it is surprising, anachronistic - a shock, a reminder. What it sits in defines it, rather than how it can frame, report on, exaggerate, filter, process and ultimately shift what is happening here.

Take three pictures of the same part of this wild, green space – try to stay still, try not to move. Put the phone, showing the pictures in the space and scroll through. What do you see? Is there a shift? How do these streams of numbers visualised on your screen look when they are nestled in the space? What do you see? What don't you see? There is so much more happening here, so much to contemplate, to celebrate, to fear. Pause the recording and come back to it when you're finished.

Do you trust your device? Is it doing all that you ask of it? Some of it? Is it making decisions on your behalf? How would you know if it was? Does it know you? Does it understand what you want? When it takes its hidden affordances into this space, full of its own hidden processes, where does this place you? Perhaps it's not something to worry about, perhaps it is.

Gary Snyder (1990) says that a ghost wilderness hovers around the entire planet. In this he sees the futurity of our abandoned planet, but in his exhortation, I see the gossamer digital cloak – light but strong and mesh-like, covering and sticking to and attached to everything we see and do. An insistent wild beyondness that I will never understand.

Sing a song to your device, sing it so that only it can hear what you say – no hugging of trees but a lullaby for the 0s and 1s, for the silicon and code.

One day you'll look and I'll be gone cos tomorrow may rain, so I'll follow the sun

One day you'll find I'm not the one and tomorrow may rain, so I'll follow the sun

(Lennon and McCartney 1964)

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