Essay from a collection of essays that emerged from a transdisciplinary arts project curated by London Fieldworks and Resonance FM.

Reference:

Gilchrist, B., Joelson, J., Warr, T. (Eds.), 2015. *Remote performances in nature and architecture*. Ashgate Publishing, Farnham.

***Notes after a week of wandering.***

**Bram Thomas Arnold.**

*i.*

nature */na-cher/ n* (often with *cap*) the power that creates and regulates the world; all the natural phenomena created by this power, including plants, animals, landscape etc as distinct from people; the power of growth; the established order of things; the cosmos; the external world, *esp as untouched by man*[…] Definition taken from Chambers 10th Edition, 2006 (that last italicization is mine).

*ii.*

The trouble with language is that it is the first barrier between oneself and the world. One can also however imagine language as a bridge, the only way off the small island of our consciousness and out there, into that swirling mass of world. The trouble is as soon as you label something, as you do with language, you inherently label it as something other, something over there, something not me, something else.

*iii.*

*Actions For And Against Nature,* whilst initially conceived as a way of crossing this bridge, is really about pointing at all these labels we have created and screaming “THERE IS NO GAP BETWIXT US!” It’s a part of me, and it’s a part of you, and it’s a part of that grass blade and it’s a part of that tree, a part of that building, and that town hall. The *Actions* are for ecology, and against the term *Nature*, pointing at its problems and the problems it has caused us.

*iv,*

Nature. The word hangs before us, an immediate separate entity that we then entrench with an almost endless series of synonyms and linguistic pirouettes: countryside, wildness, wilderness, *The Great Outdoors*, we further elaborate and name all the things within it from rocks to books, trees to brooks. Nature, as discussed by Timothy Morton is a great metonymic phrase that we have forgotten we are part of and Morton "…argues that the very idea of "nature" which so many hold dear will have to wither away in an "ecological" state of human society"1.

When you are physically there with it though, feet touching earth, pinned to mud by gravity, you are part of it, as Pollock once said in answer to a question “…I am nature”2. The atoms on your fingertips mingle with the feather you’re holding, you are entwined and deeply involved, you are together one, there is no barrier, no bridge. The case for ecology without nature is about trying to make us aware that the bridge off each of our islands was not built by us. It is neither a separate entity nor a separating force, it is more akin to a synaptic cleft that draws us out into the world, it is not there as a separate ‘thing’ at all. We are part of ecology, it is within us and around us, in our streets and homes, in the cities we’ve built and the industrial wastelands we’ve walked away from.

[IMAGE 1 – STILL FROM *SWEARING AN OATH…*]

*v.*

My work has burrowed my self into the web of arguments and propositions offered by quantum physics3. The lack of constancy of things, at the quantum level, has left me with so little certainty that even as an argument is released into the world it is countered and contradicted by my next action, my next phrase, my next move. As I finished *Swearing an Oath to a Scottish Glen,* a text that promises almost Tibetan levels of tranquility and peaceful presence…

I hereby undertake not to remove from Glen Nevis, nor to mark, deface, nor bring injury to in any way, any tree, brook, stream, stone or animal: to harm neither sentient being nor physical presence residing therein or belonging to its custody. I undertake not to leave in my wake any foreign body, nor kindly hostile fire nor flame within, and not to smoke within the Glen. I promise to obey all the rules of the Glen, to adhere to pathways, and respect the property and prosperity of others therein, to plan ahead and leave no trace behind.

…I closed the book from which I read the oath and accidentally kill an insect, immediately blackening the oath I have only just finished uttering. Later on I throw rocks at trees, and later on still, a friend asks me, with concern in her voice, “Do you hit them? Do you harm them?”4

*vi.*

All the while I am shouting from my childhood fear of the dark encroaching pines and their imported, plantation-like presence. Their socio-political cause, the disaster of these pine trees on these hillsides. And yet I know full well, as Thomas Wolfe author of the American dream put it, “you can’t go home again”5. That conservation is a flawed project, that it is really a conversation, for to which ‘natural state’ do you wish to return6?

[IMAGE 2 – STILL FROM *THROWING ROCKS…*]

*vii.*

“I hate these pine trees, I hate ‘em”. And I do, and I don’t. They make comfortable, quiet, dry spots for wild camping, a nest of needles in dark nooks, they are most entertaining to cycle through on a mountain bike. And yet, from a distant hillside, with their deep straight lines, I can’t help but be reminded of troops aligned for battle, or of colonial cartographers, divvying up Africa with a ruler and a setsquare.

*viii.*

Poetry. A way of wrapping the bridge, between the self and the world out there where nature supposedly is, in wry jokes and opaque riddles, and beauty, binding us to it and the beyond in knots of words that drip with incongruous honey. It is the *Romantic* in me who finally found time after *Reading Poetry to Rocks*, to climb a hill away and alone, to serenade the sky with half remembered lyrics from my favourite obscure pop songs. “A bird you would have loved brought the sky down, but it was worthless to hear it without you around…” or “say what you will, but you should understand there are things in this world, that you can’t understand, not in a million years…”7. All this could only happen after walking, clearing the mind, falling in a bog up to my thighs and dropping my digital recorder in a stream so that of this act, precisely nothing remains.

[IMAGE 3 – STILL FROM *READING PARTICLE PHYSICS*]

*ix.*

The *Actions* are Romantic, and yet the *Actions* are also conceptual. They are linguistically restrained in their titles: each A*ction (A)* having to be followed by a form of *content (C),* an instruction that is *directive (D*) and a *subject (S)* upon which this sequence can be enacted*.* But after a walk, and a day and a night on a mountainside at the end of a week spent in the Glen being too busy to look at it, new *Actions* announced themselves and took place, just between me and nature in a series of moments that were filled with contradiction and futility and yet somehow found space for hope. I blew raspberries at the bog which claimed me thigh deep whilst in between shouting profanities at it (“YOU CALL YOURSELF A BOG!! IA’VE SEEN BOGS THA’ COUL’ SWALLO’ A HOUSE! UPTA MA THIGHS, YOU’RE PATHETIC…”), and I said hello to the high heather moors, whispering sweet nothings to them and their bees high on the flanks of An Gearanach in the so called *Ring of Steall*.

*X.*

This melding, of Romantic disposition with Conceptual restriction, has been uncovered by Jorg Heiser in the work of Bas Jan Ader and a collection of other artists brought together in 2007 in an exhibition called *Romantic Conceptualism.* Heiser defines Romantic Conceptualism as holding an “interesting tension: using particularly few aesthetic interventions or conceptual instructions, it opens up a particularly large number of possibilities for thinking beyond this choice"8. The foundations of *Actions For and Against Nature* are bound up in this quote. The *Actions* that took place in Scotland are the start of a series that is as endless as the metonymic environment we continue to create around us and live in.

*Footnotes.*

1. All of Timothy Morton’s writing can be seen to build on this one footstep at the beginning of his work *Ecology without nature.* See also *The ecological thought,* and his most recent work *Hyperobjects: philosophy and ecology after the end of the world* all MIT press publications.

2. The question was “Why don’t you paint more from nature?” It is recalled by his wife Lee Krasner in a conversation that is available through the Smithsonian archives website.

http://www.aaa.si.edu/collections/interviews/oral-history-interview-lee-krasner-12507

3. I must confess I have not spent years in a library mulling over the intricacies of Quantum Mechanics, much of my understanding of the subject is provided by John Polkinghorne in his work for Oxford University Press’ Very Short Introduction series. It is the role of the amateur attempting to understand a subject from the outside here that is of interest to me, that “the powerful play goes on, and you may contribute a verse” as Walt Whitman put it.

4. It is a curious thing acknowledging that you are setting out to explicitly do harm to something, even though the very way we live in the world in Western society implicitly require us to do harm to our environment quite a lot of the time. Confronting these unacknowledged discomforts in a quasi-slapstick way is one of the jobs of the *Actions* as I see them.

5. I own a copy of Thomas Wolfe’s *The web and the rock* that I have locked inside a sculpture that will only be opened at the final showing of work from my ongoing research project *Walking Home* to take place sometime in 2015. The last line of the novel reads “You can’t go home again” which itself became the title for Wolfe’s last novel published posthumously. The last page of this novel, with the rest of the text blacked out was shown at a solo show in London in 2009 before I set out to walk from London to the house I was born into, near St. Gallen in Switzerland.

6. Here I am thinking of certain conservation projects in New Zealand that I explored whilst living there in 2004. The successful eradication of rodent pests on Matiu Island in Wellington Harbour has meant the island has become a refuge for non-native as well as native birds for whom it is a haven, however the more aggressive non-native birds were overpowering the native population forcing the conservationists to eradicate them through injecting their eggs during the breeding season.

7. *Serenading the Sky* is an *Action* that is yet to be fully resolved, these two lyric fragments are from *Raja Vocative* by The Mountain Goats, and *Day* by Tamela Glenn respectively. The lyrics from Tamela Glenn are mis-quoted as I remembered them, or interpreted them for the sky, the actual recording is: “say what you will, but you should understand, there are things that you say, that she won’t understand”. Available on the 1990 compilation *What else do you do?* Shimmydisc034. Misinterpretation, what you choose to remember, what you choose to forget are the foundations of my practice, and are nowhere more apparent than in this misremembered song lyric, sung to the sky in the dying light of an August day in 2014.

8. *Romantic Conceptualism* curated by Jorg Heiser was an exhibition at Bawag PSK Gallery in Vienna, 2007. Work included that of Ader, alongside Susan Hiller, Tacita Dean, Douglas Huebler and others. An Exhibition catalogue with extensive essays was also published.