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Situating skill - contemporary observational drawing as a spatial method in geographical research

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In this paper I review an experiment in posthumanist field work, towards a multi-species politics of nature and land use in the Hulen Wetlands that mark the northern tip of the Jordan Rift Valley.ⁱ The written text should here be read as an accompaniment to visual presentation of work in progress - a hybrid between traditional academic writing and the artists' crit session.ⁱⁱ My intention was to test out some ideas about the potential of observational drawing,ⁱⁱⁱ as a method for attunement to spatial, temporal, material, and cultural registers that play out in the 'storying' of a landscape. The experiment extends a recent methodological branching out in cultural geographical research,^{iv} informed by an interest in art's generative function of opening up a 'space to reconnect' with the nonhuman world.^v The specific skilled practice of observational drawing, despite its long history as a primary mode of research in geography and the natural sciences, remains underexplored in this contemporary context.^{vi}

and public recreation. But it is not just through these themes that lessons are learned for policy, design, conservation and urban planning. Drawing offers the possibility of addressing simultaneously both the physical and material aspects, and the implicit narrative and recreational 'uses' that play out in the shaping of this landscape.

When it comes to human and non-human encounters, this can only be seen as a vision or more of human geography. It is however, fittingly, a methodological drawing that 'tells' work, a designation not so much to tell us something new, as to tell us what we get to begin to approach the point where it is even possible to zoom up close to what is at first fully visible and then often so hard to articulate.

Framing and taming - the naturalist's field journal

"To think, so every page of the field naturalist's journal frame a different relation to landscape - composition with form, or colours, or lines, fostering perspective and the colonial gaze.⁶¹ Historically, nature journaling was associated with the early drive towards making projects of modernity and colonial expansion - collection, classification and description. As a practice its effects could at times be quite literally sobering - much early nature drawing was of still specimens, rather than living in nature, when one notoriously almost froze to death in the field.⁶² Seen with this critical framework, observational drawing has been understood as a means of 'getting' an accurate representation of a site or lost there. Such an account, however - with its necessary focus on particular marks - functions of drawing as representation - never fully escapes much of what lives outside in practice of the level of actual

encounter in the field.⁶³ Even with a total oral understanding of field making, there is more to live than meets the eye of representation and gaze.

Experimental field work - drawing as a way of opening spaces of encounter

The lined of fold, observer, and page leaves a spatial and temporal design on that a necessary fragile and permeable - minor changes - or even overexposure - would give its own witness to a. Resulting skills include attentiveness, a moment of differentiation to the significance of signs, a slow but understanding, duration and change. Observation has exceeded perception far from chasing the nature of a particular moment in time the space made on paper becomes the trace of the process of a creation - of seeing and watching through a lived encounter.⁶⁴

That's what I'm saying an act
of despatching - what you
the thought was that we
know.

THAT STATE -
 IS DIFFERENT FROM
 IS DIFFERENT TO US...

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possible to resist the impulse of enclosure - continuing to learn, and to elicit change, through lively and distributed encounter.

Finally, these three modes of open-endedness (social and political) in different ways shaped my encounters with cranes in the field. Drawing became a way of relating to the lives of cranes and the different ways they play out in the landscape - how feeding and nesting habits, or the daily routines of and fatigues of migration, interact with crop cycles, water management, tourism, and nation-building narratives. By noting these different registers, in turn, it suggests a dissolution of boundaries between human and non-human, and between representation and non-representation - of origins, kinds, scales, stimuli, susceptibility and distributed agency in which the world opens back to the possibilities of knowledge-making.

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Conclusions - towards a 're-wilding' of wildlife art

In all these ways drawing is necessarily an encounter, negotiated at material, sensory, and affective registers, and one through which a person becomes attuned to an expanded field of spatial and temporal relations. To a certain degree, the capacities of a specific drawing practice to exceed human-centred and representational logics depend upon the disposition and intentions of the individual practitioner, and the historic, cultural and political frameworks within which it takes shape, and circulates. The techniques of drawing offer multiple possibilities, and can equally serve to edit out, or

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to open up space for the messiness and conflicts of lived experience and to reaffirm, or to practice, responsible engagement. However, the style of observation drawing as I have sketched here is in many ways distinct from the established techniques. It becomes instead a mode of attachment, a way of opening up spaces of encounter that challenge the claims of individual sovereignty and of the representative subject and reorient. This shift is an important contribution to move from human aspirations to appreciate the possibility of engaging non-human worlds in research. We must first be able to open up spaces in which we experience our knowledge-making practices as mutually susceptible with the worlds and lives.

While journal-based observation drawing has largely disappeared from the repertoire of academic field methods, it has been retained and reworked as a dynamic tool for wider disciplinary uses, such as contemporary wildlife art²⁰⁰ in the field of conservation and in the popular politics of land use. Much though I have been keenly versed in the concept of witness, as a way of reflecting instead of dynamic relation, and as receiving the impulse to draw in the field²⁰¹. A more dynamic and relational approach to the role of observation drawing opens space to draw together modes of encounter and critical thinking from these diverse fields, towards a more open mode of encounter and a multi-species politics - what might be tentatively termed a 'rewriting' of wildlife art.

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None to be declared

Notes

^[1] The study area falls within the boundaries of the State of Israel and of historic Palestine, and overlaps the officially designated Occupied Palestinian Territories. To avoid any potential ambiguity, and to avoid further political or ideological controversy, and therefore to refrain here entirely from using the term, for discussion see Liora Lior, 'Geographies of the State Issue', *Geography Compass* 16(2022), pp. 262–68.

^[2] The cliff is a site of poor pedagogy ubiquitous in all higher education and professional practice.

^[3] Many of these areas were developed in conversation with Arie Foner and others. See <https://www.arielfoner.com>.

^[4] G. Wainwright, 'Nationalism, nationalism, culture, geography', and for a more human world, *Cultural Geographies* 15 (2002), pp. 830–839.

^[5] S. O'Sullivan, 'The Aesthetics of Affect: Working Affect beyond Representation', *Geography* 116(2021), pp. 125–45.

^[6] But see K. Torkin and H. Lohman, 'Some reflections on anti-geography as subversion', *Cultural Geographies* 14 (2007), pp. 470–83; M. Ruckelshausen, 'Personal Reflections on National History as Common Ground for the Suspended Multicultural Society in Israel', *Geography and Geopolitics* 10 (2005), pp. 1–15.

^[7] H. Lohman, 'Cultural Geographies: The Subversion of Being in Motion? Representation?', *Geography and Geopolitics* 10 (2005), pp. 22–37.

¹⁸ The term 'landscape' is not and has been all over for its representational experience - this would be the focus of the next page.

¹⁹ Mary Louise Ryan, *Imperial Lyric: Travel Writing and Transnationality* (London: Routledge, 1992).

²⁰ John Ruskin, *Drawing Book for Children* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1904), p. 10.

²¹ Catherine Mitchell, *Walking with Camera and Or: The Victorian Era's Other than Visual and More than Literal Historical Geographies of the British World*, *Annals of the AAG*, forthcoming.

²² John Berger, *Between Two Women*, pp. 43-44.

²³ J. Clarke and B. Peasent, *Field Drawing and Dialogue as a form of Making Knowledge*, *Imagery, Drawing, Knowledge*, 2007.

²⁴ J. Brice, 'On Becoming Immersed: Crime Cultures', March 11, 2016, <http://artisticallab.wordpress.com/2016/03/11/on-becoming-immersed/>.

²⁵ J. Brice, 'On Being Open to Crime Cultures', *Crime Cultures*, February 18, 2016, <http://artisticallab.wordpress.com/2016/02/18/on-being-open-to-crime-cultures/>.

²⁶ Ursula K. Le Guin, *Spruce and the Politics of Resistance* (Chicago: UCP, 2011), pp. 41-57. My reading of this argument as one that is being challenged is a reflection of my own experience with the text.

XVI An umbrella term encompassing both traditional, sporting and social, integrative practices (see Society of Wildlife Artists, 2012, <http://www.societyofwildlifeartists.com/members/>, *Artists for Nature Foundation*, <http://www.artistsfornature.com/artists/>).

XVII As a Pacey and Michael Symmons Roberts, *Ecozones* (London, Virago, 2013); Jane Holmes, *Wildlife in the Anthropocene: Gazing after After Nature* (Minneapolis, UWP, 2015); George Monbiot, *Feral: Searching for Enchantment on the Frontiers of Rewilding* (London, Virago, 2015).