



Laura Harrington Hearing from Artists



Laura Harrington in Utsjoki, Finland, April 2016.
Photography by Laura Harrington (self-timer)

*Laura Harrington's cross-disciplinary practice examines how humans understand and relate to natural landscapes. In 2019, MIMA co-commissioned her moving image work *Fieldworking* and she developed a series of fieldtrips with publics and artists as part of Fragile Earth: seeds, weeds, plastic crust. Laura lives and works in Newcastle upon Tyne. She is in conversation with Helen Welford, Assistant Curator in July 2020.*

HW: Your film *Fieldworking* 2019 was shot during a five-day camp at the remote Moor House Upper Teesdale, National Nature Reserve. You collaborated with five artists, an ecologist and two filmmakers to collectively explore this site. What attracted you to this landscape and how did the group experience it?

LH: Moor House and its boggy ecologies help me to better understand my place in the world. It has been a site of interest for many years, ever since I first came across this huge reserve in February 2011. I had never set foot in anything quite like it. I clearly remember having to adjust to new sensations, weather, ways of moving and negotiating space. There was something edgy and challenging about it that I found impossible to ignore. It sparked an intense and persistent curiosity that has motivated several works over the last decade. By repeatedly returning to a small section of its vast terrain, I have come to know and understand the place relatively well.

Moor House is part of the North Pennine moors, straddling Cumbria and County Durham. Over the last sixty-five years many people had, and still have, important and memorable working relationships with Moor House, which was one of Britain's first National Nature Reserves (NNR), designated in 1952. It has an important social and biogeographical history. From here the sources of two great rivers begin their journey to sea – the South Tyne and the Tees – and it has a rich history of experimentation and research in the fields of physical geography, climate and environmental science.

The *fieldworking artist camp* was about sharing this place with others, to understand it further through the perception and methods of different artists. To observe and be part of a collective experience of interacting and engaging with a very wet climate and place. For some years I have been interested in artists' fieldwork and what happens in that process of engagement, partly as a way of questioning my own approach to working with landscape and specifically, remote places.

Moor House and its blanket bog ecosystem were largely unknown to the camp participants, providing an opportunity to experience an unfamiliar context, with the intention of exploring a rawness of perception in relation to artistic practice. I think it would be fair to say that for some of them it was initially quite a shock. We were given the quintessential Moor House welcome – wet,



Fieldworking, artists camp, August 2019. With Chris Bate, Ludwig Berger, Sarah Bouttell, Luce Choules, Simone Kenyon, Fiona MacDonald, Meredith Root-Bernstein, Lee Patterson and Moor House. Courtesy of the artist

windy and bleak. However, as we camped, walked, shared experiences and food, we found multiple ways to exist in such a place. Having arrived from multiple geographies and professional contexts, we came to refer to our collective endeavour as ‘The Upland School of Art’: a temporary institution focused on finding ways to comprehend, subsist and work within such a climate and landscape.

HW: Cross-disciplinary collaborations and the meeting of different forms of knowledge are key to your work. How do you form collaborations and platform different knowledge systems in your work?

LH: Being human/artist is never a solo endeavour. Inter-human and non-human collaborations are intrinsic to my working process. Over many years this has unfolded in a fairly undisciplined but intuitive way. What I mean by that is that I’m guided by a somewhat chaotic and unpredictable way of working which feels right, with one meeting tending to lead into another, perhaps moving sideways, backwards in a non-linear way.

The camp was a culmination of years of visiting and working at Moor House and building important relationships and

trust with individuals and organisations. An important moment in the trajectory of my work and its relationships with the landscapes of the region was through a year-long residency with the Environment Agency in 2009. It wasn’t the easiest project but was certainly a game changer. Through communicating with ecologists, scientists, engineers, marine biologists, planners etc. both in the office and in the field, I was exposed to new thinking around the environment. Through greater understanding of systems, upstream storage, fish migration, flooding and water I began to understand and think in a more multi layered way. At the start of the residency I visited the North Pennine moors and squeezed some sphagnum moss. Eleven years later I’m still there.

More recently I have drawn on aspects of ecology and geomorphology, which is the study of the Earth’s surface and the processes that shape it, as different ways of thinking and collaborating. I have examined the subject matter of these fields including environment, climate, surface, degradation, changes over time, weather, human, non-human etc. but also looked to the different methodologies and principles that are inherent in them. I have thought *through*



Fieldworking 2020. Video still. Courtesy of the artist



Untitled 2014. Sandals, 7000 year old birch wood found at Moor House. Photography by Colin Davison

concepts such as ecosystem, interconnectivity, interdependence, flux, time and symbiosis to think *with* landscape/bogs/Moor House. My encounters have been a meeting point of human and non-human activity in a process that is both relational and emergent.

Every aspect of *Fieldworking* was grown and shaped with others; from the artists, the weather, the surrounding bog, our moods, our equipment, what we ate, the damp in our chest and how it then permeated through clothes to how we slept. These very material characters played a fundamental role, individually and as a collective. This work was part of a wider exploration around interdisciplinary ways of thinking about fieldwork as complex and performative acts of engagement and a material of knowledge. A way that not only thinks between artistic, academic and scientific disciplines but also between different ways of knowing. The ideas and knowledge that come from these multiple disciplines have the potential to inform and shape thinking through its dissemination in numerous forms, filmworks, printed matter, drawings and the like.

HW: What techniques or ways of working do you adopt to draw attention to the ongoing climate emergency?

LS: A focus on locality is important; paying attention to where I live and how I can move and exist there and in connection with other places. Like the Atlantic salmon, some of which are born in the gravel beds of the North

or South Tyne rivers, I venture out but return to the source of where I am from.

Thinking about connectivity plays an important role. Since my residency with the Environment Agency I have been exploring this through an idea of *upstream consciousness*, which stems from ongoing interests in physical and relational connections to place, connecting back to what sustains us. It's a term I use to think about different ecological relations by looking to cause rather than effect; the source instead of the mouth. Moor House and the uplands of Upper Teesdale are upstream and are situated at the source of the South Tyne and Tees rivers. It is also upstream to many people's downstream activity. Upstream is both the origin of the water that sustains downstream communities and industry, and a giant stratigraphic sponge that locks carbon deep within its peat and slowly acts as a natural floodwater buffer. I have spent the last twelve years exploring elements of this in various forms. It's an interest which, like the peat itself, doesn't stop, but just gets deeper and more layered.

In a recent online event organised by Culture Declares, I heard academic Dr Eirini Saratsi talk about artistic expression and creativity as the unique capacity of humans, which reflects not only our ability to see things how they are but also how they should or could be and then have the ability to change them. She uses a metaphor of stage lighting to think through art practice. Saratsi refers to the process as illuminating and focusing but also a process



Don't just do something, sit there 2020 as part of ArtHouses Inverted. Photography by Rob Smith

of giving meaning and changing atmospheres. I think this analogy is very useful. Like stage lighting, art plays an important role in directing our attention but it isn't necessarily the problem solver, we all have a part to play in this emergency. Understanding the plot, being open to different forms of knowledge and creating an atmosphere and a space for thought is vital so that it can be shared with an audience to open up multiple dialogues. My intention within the work is for the responsibility of resolving issues to move into the consciousness of the viewer.

HW: With so much of your work rooted in specific places and collaborations, how are you adapting to the changes brought about by Covid-19?

LS: These are incredibly challenging and complex times. Covid-19 has revealed a lot. It feels like we are straddling two different epochs and the scale of things can feel overwhelming at times. I have adopted coping strategies but I'm not sure I've had time to adapt yet. As far as work is concerned, last year was busy and this year was always going to be a lot quieter, so I feel grateful. I feel very lucky and privileged in lots of other ways too. Since March I've been at home with family, two small children and a neighbour who isn't well, so I have been living in the present. It has at times felt reminiscent of maternity leave and being at home with a baby, living repetitive days of micro activities, only this time everything has felt more accessible and available. While I have missed physical

connections to more people and places, I've never been so connected through technology. Right now working away from the city and where I live doesn't feel right. Instead I've adapted to what is in my locality and attempted to find some groundedness within that process.

Two artistic responses I made within the last few months have been for *ArtHouses Inverted* and sound artist Ludwig Berger's *Blue Hour Observatory* project. Both asked for an unlearning of the habitual space and a repositioning of oneself within it. The project *Don't just do something, sit there* for *ArtHouses Inverted* was a series of contemplative meetings with multiple landscapes through the online portal of Zoom. These meetings involved no speaking or human interaction with the host or others who joined. Instead they were invitations to participate in exercises of attention, body stillness and sensory awareness with multiple biogeographical locations. For *Blue Hour Observatory* – where four wind players, four poets and four filmmakers in different locations observed and documented the blue hour (the period directly after sunset) one evening through their respective mediums, I lay on my studio floor with my camera and body as an undulating topography and observed the unfolding exchange of day into night.

In many ways the film *Fieldworking* is about aligning with the landscape that we are one small part of, and in collectively understanding and being with a specific context. Obviously, we are now in a position of having to do this in a far more serious and restrictive scenario. However, I now reflect that moments of connectivity found during the camp were small gestures of what can be possible when we allow our patterns to alter, our focus to shift.