

Time Portals, Love Machines, Land Oracles: Situated Digital Relations and the Art Practices of Furtherfield

By Tim Waterman

“Death Collapsing Into Life” was the title for a walk I led in July 2014 as part of the activist digital art collective Furtherfield’s program to accompany the exhibition of the SEFT-1 Abandoned Railways Exploration Probe in their gallery in London’s Finsbury Park. The walk followed the route of the Parkland Walk, itself an abandoned railway and now a route that links Finsbury Park with Highgate, not just for walking humans but a dark corridor for teeming bats living in the old brick tunnels, among many other urban species. Applying notions of ecology alongside a bit of Lefebvrian Promethean utopianism, the walk sought to situate ideas of dying, decomposing, fertilising, making, and being and becoming in infrastructures, technologies, society, culture, and nature.

[Image: SEFT-1]

[Image: Parkland Walk]

That same summer I, along with Furtherfield co-founders, Ruth Catlow and Marc Garrett, inaugurated a reading group called ‘Reading the Commons’ (see Catlow and Waterman, 2015) involving artists and scholars from a range of backgrounds including law, landscape architecture, and Wikipedia to explore similar ideas of how the commons flower, die, and become again. Here though, we were concerned in particular with mapping ideas of the digital commons onto the physical and historic commons, in the process confirming that such a project was a) difficult; b) vitally important in a future in which the virtual and physical worlds will be ever more embroiled; and c) models of social ecology, such as those developed by Murray Bookchin, and of posthumanism in the spirit of Donna Haraway and Rosi Braidotti, are powerful tools to explore nature-society relations, technology-society relations, and place/landscape relations.

Our explorations led us into realms of what Owain Jones and Paul Cloke in their book *Tree Cultures* call ‘hybrid geography’ (2002, *passim*), a concept they have extrapolated from the work of Sarah Whatmore (2000), who strives

to join others in exploring ways of recognising and accommodating the presence of non-humans in the worlds we inhabit [and] is concerned with the spaces of social life, relational configurations spun between the capacities and effects of organic beings, technological devices and discursive codes within which people are differently and plurally articulated (266).

Such different and plural framings have increasingly become important for Furtherfield’s wider mission, which has from its inception been focused upon social change, but which has become enriched by theories of embodiment and embeddedness which insist upon the situation of sociality in substantive, lived landscapes. The commons as another organising frame, occupies, for us, the centre of a triad of social life constructed by Whatmore, that of ‘hybridity, collectivity and corporeality’ (ibid.:267).

The summer of 2014 was important for Furtherfield, as it was still in the process of adapting to new spaces--two separate buildings in Finsbury Park, one a small gallery, opened in 2011, and the other a meeting space with a kitchen, opened in 2012, which we would decide to call ‘Furtherfield Commons’. Further, a whole framework for upcoming activities began to gel at that point, a framework which would become the initiative ‘Platforming Finsbury Park’: this was recognition that Furtherfield’s work extended beyond the internet and its buildings into the park itself and the surrounding neighbourhoods. The milieu of Finsbury Park helped Furtherfield connect with many more and more varied people through artworks that invited them, as Marc Garrett says, “to question the innocence of the devices in their pockets and the intentions of the private corporations that run our online social spaces.” Then it was natural to ask the same sorts of questions of the park itself and the human and more-than-human relations held within and around it.

Platforming Finsbury Park

Furtherfield started developing the concept of Platforming Finsbury Park in 2017 as a response to extensive research, of which 'Reading the Commons' was part, into the unique issues surrounding its urban and social ecology; its hybrid geography. Finsbury Park, one of London's great Victorian-era parks, is at the boundary of three London boroughs, and has historically served as a recreational space for lower income people. The park was conceived and built after agitation from the area's working class. Then as now it has been a contentious space; in the 1800s about the appropriateness of the provision of a grand park for the working poor; and now about how to share communication and maintenance between the three boroughs in a time of relentless pressures for privatisation and the slashing of budgets due to the ideology of austerity.

Through consultation with park users and stakeholders, artists, techies, researchers, policy-makers, and other local arts organisations Furtherfield devised an approach to their programming that would focus on developing the cultural value of the park, in the interests of all its diverse users and life-forms, via digital art activities that centre around placemaking and landscape.

[Image: Ortiz passport]

[Image: forest flag]

Platforming Finsbury Park has become a frame not just for understanding Furtherfield's future directions, but also a useful lens for casting back to look at past work, key examples of which are illustrated here. This work in total examines forms, modes and products of world-making (or worlding), nature-society relations; technology-society relations; and place/landscape relations. Relations may also be spoken of as *relationships*, and the powerful little suffix *ship* has been extremely useful to us as a tool for thinking. Kenneth R. Olwig's (2019) philological examination has been foundational, and he describes how

[t]he suffix *schaft* and the English *ship* are cognate, meaning essentially 'creation, creature, constitution, condition'. *Schaft* is related to the verb *schaffen*, to create or shape, so *ship* and *shape* are also etymologically linked. [...] [T]he condition of being a good townsman or citizen, like the condition of fellowship, is expressive of more abstract notions of community values. In times past, the English language included other words like *countryschip* and *folcschip* (meaning nation) in which the suffix *-ship* functioned much the same as *schaft*. (25)

The *relationship* between form, communication, values, and the performance of belonging are also embedded in landscape (*landship*). In the research we conducted around the idea of the commons, it becomes necessary to scaffold between *landship*, citizenship, and the digital realms of netizenship or netship. All these are both separately and mutually constituted, and are increasingly interpenetrating to form an ever-widening ecology of the situated digital.

Ruth Catlow explains how these concepts, of the commons as *landship* and *netship*, are also held in a platform: "The concept of the online platform is familiar to most people. Through the webpages of social media platforms we "share" private details of our lives. We add and retrieve records of daily experiences. In recent years we have been taught to mistrust the ways in which our interactions are monitored, our communications tracked, and their value mined for profit or for corrupt political ends. The commons is an invaluable idea because communities steward and organise the resources that they most value, on their own terms." The commons as both platform and relationship is a vehicle to build solidarity and resist exploitation from without. In a very local way, this helps prevent the slow erosion of access to the things people and other species need in order to prosper. "We are inviting people to think about the fields of our public park, and the people at play in a similar way. When we visit a park we create new connections and shared memories. Through artworks like Elsa James's *Circle of Blackness* [commissioned for their exhibition Time Portals (2019)] we are inviting people to dig into the histories and lived experiences of local people. The artists of the Transfeminist Rendering Programme will be working this Summer with park users to create 3d scans and build intimate pictures of the outlandish society of creatures that live in, and maintain, the soil of the park."

Citizen Sci-Fi

Between 2019 and 2022 Platforming Finsbury Park is delivered via a 3-year programme called Citizen Sci-Fi, the aim of which is to crowdsource visions for a Finsbury Park of the future. Like citizen journalism and citizen science, the emphasis is placed on mobilising a distributed group of, in this case, local communities, to engage in data-gathering and sharing activities, building shared imaginaries for alternative realities. Each year has a theme, 2019's being 'Time Portals' and coinciding with the 150th anniversary of the park. In 2020 the theme 'Love Machines' will consider the well-being of both people and machines, and in 2021 'Land Oracles' will focus on the key issues of the situated digital and its futurity elucidated here. The first project to kick off the first year of the programme, the Future Machine, saw artist Rachel Jacobs working with climate scientists and park users to test different ways of gathering data on the park's climate, and to co-design a machine to relay that data in meaningful ways.

[Image: turning the handle]

Several women are crucial influences for Citizen Sci-Fi. Donna J. Haraway (2016), who writes of the importance of understanding the epistemic and cultural frames from which we create imagined and possible worlds, is one, and her examining of the concepts of figuring and figuration helped us to think through the imaginative possibilities of imaginaries (figuring) on the shaping of the world itself (figuration). Great creators of science fiction imaginaries, especially Ursula K. LeGuin and Octavia Butler helped point to the transformative power of such worldings. How much more power for real emancipatory change, we figured, can there be in collective imaginaries? Especially if these collective imaginaries are generated simultaneously in the entangled lived spaces of netships and landships.

In 2013 Furtherfield Gallery hosted *Seeds Underground Party* by Shu Lea Cheang. That same year the European Union adopted a new seed policy, which favoured the global agribusiness through intellectual property, making all seeds subject to strict regulation, and restricting seed exchange by seed farmers and savers. What more fundamental destruction of customary landships could there be than a disruption of the generative impulse to plant and to save for the future? Shu Lea Cheang invited park users to a seed exchange party where packets of seeds change hands and go underground in the fields around Finsbury Park and beyond. People came and swapped all kinds of seeds from their gardens. Charlotte Frost, Furtherfield's Director explains, "This prefigured our platforming programme by creating a convivial event to which all visitors of the park were invited, and using this as a way to alert people and encourage discussion of the creeping restrictions on important freedoms of exchange and trade."

[Image: Cheang with fruit]

[Image: YAMA Project]

[Image: phone booth]

Networking the Unseen in 2016 was the first exhibition of its kind to focus on the intersection of indigenous cultures and zeitgeist digital practices in contemporary art. Curated by artist Gretta Louw and featured work resulting from many years of collaboration with Neil Jupurrla Cook and Steve Jampijinpa Patrick, artists of the Warnayaka Arts Centre in Lajamanu, Australia this show brought together concepts and experiences of remoteness and marginalised cultures, with art-making in contemporary society. Once again, it drew attention to the inequalities developing across globalised cultures, and the social and "cultural impacts of the networks that remain somehow invisible, eroding clearly felt boundaries of geography, place, culture and language." Further, it draws out importantly that learning from the traditional ecological knowledge of indigenous cultures holds significant potential to shape sustainable digital futures.

[Image: heat-sensitive dance]

In 2017 the same programme featured commissions such as *We Help Each Other Grow*. In this, a Tamil dance for women, learned in secret and performed by a man, recorded on a heat-sensitive camera more commonly used for border surveillance. As though this dancing refugee Thiru Seelan is only seen for his cultural and geographical transgressions, the work becomes about the policing of public space and traditions. Thiru Seelan's transgression of both gender boundaries and border boundaries is a driver of precisely the sorts of transformations Furtherfield seeks to propose.

References

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