

FIELDWORKING



A project by Laura Harrington

Fieldworking

with Chris Bate, Ludwig Berger, Sarah Bouttell,
Luce Choules, Simone Kenyon, Fiona MacDonald,
Lee Patterson, Meredith Root-Bernstein
and Moor House-Upper Teesdale Nature Reserve

conditions. The steaming bodies and dragon breath offer an insight into how cold the room is.

The work contains very little talking. Aside from a scene in which the group practise describing elements of the place, the film captures only distant chat. There is a sense that a temporary community has formed. Gesture takes the place of spoken word; ideas are expressed through activity rather than talking. This recalls Orcadian writer Robert Rendell's sentiment about shorelines of his island, that 'only those can know it intimately who do something on it'.³

At points the humans on film appear as very separate from the land, standing atop it, experiencing it through limited physical access, but at others, they seem to melt into the moist air, morphing with elements of the place. We are reminded that this site and its components are not a setting but active parts in this process and actors in this work. They are played with and expected to act back rather than treated as an opponent to lasso or govern. If the peat under Moor House is formed over thousands of years, holding layers of plant and pollen histories, Laura's approach feels like an apt response to the place.⁴ We need this kind of respectful kinship building between artists – people – and living environments.

3. Robert Rendell, quoted in Victoria Whitworth, *Swimming with Seals*, Head of Zeus Ltd, 2017, pp 149

4. See Donald S. Murray, *The Dark Stuff: Stories from the Peatlands*, Bloomsbury, 2018 for fascinating insights into the formation and uses of peat.

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The Science and Art of Fieldwork at Moor House

Meredith Root-Bernstein

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Tuesday. Arrived last night; it was much colder than in town. As we drove up to and through the moor, we rose to the level of the clouds at around 600m, and it was raining fitfully. Same in the morning. We walked along Rough Sike to a place called Moss Flats, where there is erosion of the peat down to a 8000 year-old layer of birch still preserved, including its bark. The terrain is very slippery due to the rain, and uneven with little pits and humps. On the moorland surface, in between the bouncy heather is spongy sphagnum moss, of uncertain depth.

I do not know what I am looking at. I have been in monotonous habitats covered in dwarf shrubs before, in Lesotho, but that was very dry, and on mountain slopes between 2000 and 3000m. Here, not far from Newcastle upon Tyne, we are lower down, and the landscape is gently rolling. I am on a moor. I am in a bog. It is very wet.

I am a drylands and Mediterranean-climate ecologist of anthropogenic habitats, so I am not used to wetness. I am overwhelmed by the dampness and the constant drizzle of rain. I am used to thinking about moisture as

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something that has to be carefully attracted, preserved and nurtured. I am not really familiar with the problems and solutions of plants and animals exposed to an excess of water. I feel ignorant and confused. I don't know what questions to ask of the shapes of the plants or the movements of the animals. I see lots of caterpillars sitting on the ends of grasses or tops of heather. Are they trying to get dry in the constant wind?

When I am trying to learn about a place, I look for patterns; things that often occur together.

Fæces—sheep, and some bird fæces that is shaped like long pencil-width macaroni and organ-like blobs (belonging to grouse). Also bigger, tubular; not sure whose. Flies—seen several kinds; wish I had my fly book. I always see tan flies on fæces.

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The other strategy is to figure out how other people, who have more experience with the landscape, categorise what you are seeing.

Martin says that the bright green vegetation I saw around the little sike that emerges from the peat is an acid flush. The flower is bog asphodel. Saw a peacock butterfly, lots of caterpillars, a frog. In the open water of the flush there were lots of water striders and flies. Some had fallen in.

Next, to start understanding things you have to go back and look at them in different moments and conditions, as often as possible. This way you start to understand how they change, in what ways they stay the same, what do

they react to and what their parameters of reaction are. Over a couple of days I started to understand what the water did in the landscape, and how it shaped the relationships between things.

Thursday. This morning I went down to Trout Beck to photograph the fossils in the stone. It had rained a lot the previous evening and in the night. The river was a lot higher, so that some of the fossils I saw yesterday were covered by water—probably a 40-60cm rise in the water level. The river was rushing and loud, black with pale brown froth. All the heather and grass and moss were saturated and dripping onto the river banks. The water was running down the rock surfaces, dripping, running in a slick, forming little waterfalls between arm-shaped grooves in the rock. You could see the water making the riverbed and shaping the landscape. It was very intense. As I edged along the rock shelf next to the water, the little river seemed to be very alive, overexcited, charged with purpose, rejoicing, powerful, proud.

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Ludwig, Lee and I walked further upslope to where the meander area becomes wider and the stream snakes back and forth and splits and forms pockets where the water mills around and hardly moves, networks of anabranching arms.¹ It is hard to understand where the water decides to cut a channel, since the whole grassy and reed-covered area is entirely waterlogged. The heath separates out into buttes, or islands, 3m high, with bare peat sides. Thousands of years

1. An anabranch is a branch that separates from and then rejoins the river.

of peat! At a puddle at the base of one hagg, I stepped into the edge and almost couldn't pull my foot out. The peat has an inscrutable, finalising gravity. I climbed on top of the hagg and saw more in the distance as the fog came rolling in fast all around me. The sheep who had been watching us had disappeared. I felt like the lone explorer of an alien planet.

On the way back, Ludwig found a place where the channel narrowed to half a metre and poured downwards, welling up again immediately and releasing lots of little bubbles with a hissing noise. I watched the pale white lines from the sky's reflection spilling and scattering across the black surface of the water, over and again; always different. Ludwig recorded the hissing sound of the water and Lee and I watched. Infinity seemed to be contained in that little water-elbow. As we turned back, I wanted to climb on top of the heath but when I put my hand into the heather to get a grip, I heard a sss-sss-sss. Lee said it might be a shrew.

I later learned that the white foam that collects on the surface of the water, especially after rain, is formed by humic and related fulvic acids. Humic acid comes from the decay of plant material as soil is formed and helps plants with nutrient uptake. When I think about it, I have no memory of having seen humic acid foams in rivers and streams in central Chile. Noticing it here helps me to notice its absence elsewhere.

Feeling the agency of the water and how it shaped the moor also allowed me to sense directly some ideas I had been developing with environmental historians. What I call the

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'mirescape' is the land-and-waterscape, the conception of landscape as fundamentally made by movements of water, and grading inseparably from dry to wet. The water rises and falls, expands and contracts, making channels and ponds. Dynamic mirescapes bring many opportunities for life and complex ecological interactions.

2

A moor is an upland area covered by dwarf shrubs – such as heather – and grass. In the Pennines where we are, 7000 years ago, this used to be an open or patchy forest of birch, hazel, willow and pine, later succeeded by oak, elder, ash, lime and perhaps elm. Following a few centuries of the activities of sheep, fire and tree clearing, these forests have settled into their current form. Many moors also have patches of conifers that were planted for forestry purposes.²

Moors form over specific types of base rock, including outcrops of limestone, sandstone and shale.³ Limestones erode into basic soils; other rocks richer in silica form more acidic soils. Moors can be drier or wetter, depending on the draining capacity of the underlying rock. When the soil of the moor is waterlogged, it is anoxic and degrades very slowly. This results in the accumulation of peat. The kind of wettish place that we find

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2. Simmons, I.J. (2003). *The Moorlands of England and Wales: An environmental history 8000 BC to AD 2000*. Edinburgh University Press.

3. *ibid.*

on moors are bogs: they are rain-fed, have no trees, and are nutrient-poor.⁴ But a bog can also be other things: moderately wet and wooded, or open water and not wooded.

Sphagnum moss is found in many bogs, including this one, and deserves attention because it is very interesting. Mosses have a strange life history. The large plant that you see is haploid, as our gametes (eggs and sperms) are. The diploid, sexually reproduced organism lives on small organs on the haploid plant.⁵ Mosses are thus a weird reorientation of the life cycle: our haploid parts (eggs and sperms) are hidden, private, brief-lived and small, while their haploid part (the body) is the ecological actor, public, long-lived and large. They have no roots and capture nutrients not from the soil but from the rainwater, as it filters through their structure.⁶ The vascular plants, such as grass and heather, or bog asphodel, that also grow in bogs have to make do with the nutrients that filter through the mosses into the soil, or that result from the decay of the mosses or other plants when they die. The grasses and flowers may also risk being overwhelmed by the large sphagnum mosses, and lose access to sunlight. The competition between shrubs, grasses and sphagnum mosses results in the dense patchwork that is so funny to walk over, making you bob, stumble and spring.

4. Rydin, H., & Jeglum, J.K. (2013). *The Biology of Peatlands, 2e*. Oxford University Press.

5. Haploid is when gametes (egg and sperm cells) contain a single set of chromosomes. Diploid is when a cell or organism has two copies of each chromosome, one from each parent.

6. *ibid.*

Bogs change over time. Many have been drained. The peat soil of a dried-out bog starts to degrade more quickly, and may erode. This can lead to an end to peat accumulation, and loss of the characteristic flora of the bog. Some theories suggest that dry moors are dried-out bogs; that all moors were once entirely bogs.⁷ But bogs also undergo succession towards other ecological forms. While succession is usually associated with an increase in species richness (number) and ecosystem complexity over time, bog communities tend to get simpler over time. That is, they tend to get drier over time.⁸ Wetter habitats are usually more nutrient rich, while drier ones are more nutrient-poor, which probably accounts for the simpler plant communities found on drier sites.

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Our assorted orange and red coats punctuated the pale greens of the moor and the black water beautifully. Like different species of flies with their different niches, each of us had a different practice of engaging with the landscape. These came together in a community of practice. Did the wetness indeed make this community richer, in a different sense?

Luce's practice of slow walking up the path allowed me to appreciate texture of the ground, the wind, the business of the

7. Pearsall, W.H. (1989). *Mountains and moorlands*. Bloomsbury Books, London.

8. Rydin, H., & Jeglum, J. K., *ibid.*

clouds. It was more interesting than standing still, because while I had time and attention to give to observation, I felt like I was part of the slowly moving cycles of nature, rather than some separate observer. Similarly, the 'cleambering'⁹ put me in a completely different observational position. My poor bare feet, on the point of cramp from the cold, made me feel terribly exposed and precarious. Their careful pitter-pattering and sliding along the slick and pitted rocks of the riverbank felt like a fleeting register for the endless. I imagined myself as a transitory version of the razor clam fossils that I walked across.

During the game of Babbling,¹⁰ we found a suitable curve of the sike and settled around it. Instantly, we seemed to all be mesmerised by the silent conversation with the sike, which we managed to organise almost entirely without speaking among ourselves. It was as if we were in some kind of commons with the sike. We would make a proposition with a rock, or a plant, or some peat, and then the sike would change its tune a little bit. I felt that the water was paying attention to us. Our spontaneous orchestra of potshards, led by Lee, was also magical. Each shard had its own sound, or sounds. As we played with the shards and experimented with them, they took on all kinds of dimensions I never suspected. They became alive and spoke to us.

9. *Cleambering* is a combination of clambering and meandering that Laura and I had previously developed as a way to interact with rocks and rocky landscapes.

10. *Babbling* was an activity led by Ludwig Berger where we listened to a stone or another thing, inside or close to the water emitting a call to the human player. The human player places, replaces or removes the thing into, or out of the running water. The water responds to the action by changing its sonic expression.

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If we thought of science as an art, we would understand that behind the scientific publication, which is proof of work, there is a long process of actions in the field, or in labs, actions on data, actions of narrativisation. We might think of field ecology as one of the most demanding genres of performance art. In the field, your practice must be canalised into a specific performance of selecting sites, taking samples, making measurements and recording them. This performance is supposed to be repetitive, mastered, logical and rule-following, like the movements of a master printer. This is a very physical, embodied process, and a very social one. The prejudices and tastes of others must be incorporated into the work from its inception if it hopes ever to become part of the public record.

I envied the artists because the formal demands on making sense and being interesting are relatively lower. Not that artists make work that is less interesting, quite the opposite—more things are admitted to be of interest. I was not sure, and I am still not sure as I write this, how to immediately work into science all the things of interest that artistic practice brings to the attention, into science. But perhaps this is asking too much. First of all, science need not – and cannot – be the master transcript of the world. Secondly, inevitably the things I notice and come to understand through art practices will filter slowly through the moss of my mindset, and change my scientific practice without my noticing.



Sediments, Between Moor and Me

mirko nikolić

*"Actually, it's not ground at all.
It's only water, cleverly held by the architecture of
moss.
I am walking on water"*¹

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In this moor of yours, where i visit
each step matters, a move that leaves the
certainty of a terrestrial animal,
surrounded, by you, of a billion names,
known and unknown to the two-legged
visitor
i wonder: did you make the first step, or did i,
i am being moved, carried along
with your sedimentary rhythms,
layered through centuries in care and
meaning
listening to you, i am awash with
the unforgetting of water, air and vegetal being,
while
ground and figure play through each
others
this dance is a gift, a promise,
a jagged circle on way of
reassembling

1. Robin Wall Kimmerer, *Gathering Moss: A Natural and Cultural History of Mosses* (Corvallis: Oregon State University Press, 2003)
Above, L-R, top to bottom: *Sphagnum papillosum*; *Sphagnum cappillifolium*; *Sphagnum magellanicum*

Ankles, knees, hips, and lungs, inside
foot remembers how to pat stone,
how to meet peat, soft and warm
revel in memories of heather, moss,
cotton-grass
whispered in shades of soil,
salmon, light and dark
scents of a spring long gone by,
and many that preceded
you and i unrework the membranes,
sponges that spread and retreat
in understanding that whatever
shapes between
you and me, you and you,
it is for a little while
a while can stretch in many directions
for a leaf, a scar in time
or almost forever, deepening the mucky
common

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The surfaces of my protections,
moving geometries of flesh bone technology
reattach themselves to the surrounding
through wet rustlings
as it gets a bit tiring to breathe
through these lungs,
a remembrance condenses
we have never left the ocean

Seeing touching wading through jets,
streams, filaments,
your body of water
from above, from below, upwards,
downwards,
adsorbs, spills through walls,
as thin as they can be
almost not there, subtle

delineations
come together in concert
roofs and fundamentals to giant and
minuscule beings
a village of sphagnum shares events of
another wet day

Amidst this mellow roar, i reach out
touching desires waver along
cupriferous filaments
disowning the defences in hugs of
porosity
transits through me
passing on the refrain
word for world is hisss hummm²

Herstories and futures of this moor are known
to you,

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you remember well
quest for progress,
the lead squeezed out from the rocky ones
insinuated in your crevices
the mines had come and have been
moved elsewhere
you are still here
giving in, letting in, resisting
not turning away
reanimating carbon oxygen water
throughout the pluriverse
i step in your steps
thank you for keeping this passage open
for
many more than your kind,
i am seeking how to reciprocate
through my pores

Let us share a story, dance it out slowly as it
comes,
before stepping forward, please, let us agree
what is it that shall remain between our
bodies,
before and beyond these vibrancies of
touch, joyous
lands of proximity that resist
formulation in bits and bytes
the beckoning of radical hospitality,
outsides nestling insides,
inhalation, preceded by an exhalation,
swinging between one end and the other
once again, we start something like this:
once upon a gully, a spore took flight...

Even with my eyes shut,
the background is scintillating
thousand little fires dot their way through
the dark, echoing
field is not a place we go to, it is a
summoning
in a most walled-off space it may perchance
you
when you shut your eyes wide, brim
with yearning
wind brings about visions from within
i crawl through grass
sun filters through tissues of the one
who was here before
who brought me here

How many spores do i carry now,
in the seams of my shell
committed to re-enact ancient agreements
fruits of aeons of giving and taking,
returning spirals, "honourable

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harvests"³

at this present, i still squash
many of you, as much as i try
to become light, i am a landslide
are you too kind to cast me away, or too
weak to resist
or are you absorbed in altogether other
matters
a knowing rises in me, trying to care is not
good enough
out here in the open we see each other
fully
embodied intentions and responsibilities
yet, across this terrifying inadequacy,
can we mould together
without me being me,
what had thought itself singular,
turns now into this dependency
on each and every one of you
learning how rhizines and shoots
thread through each others
tip-taps on a shared drum, syncopated⁴

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Memories of a brook on a late summer day
feet and plastic among your waves
swirling around my bones glazed over by
skin
hairs dangling in your wavy quiver
we play a game of 'getting involved' in
each other's paths⁵

3. Robin Wall Kimmerer, *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge and the Teachings of Plants*. Minneapolis: Milkweed Editions, 2013.

4. Echoing Karen Barad, *What is the measure of nothingness: Infinity, virtuality, justice* | (Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz, 2012), 9.

5. After Carla Hustak and Natasha Myers, *Involutionary Momentum: Affective Ecologies and the Sciences of Plant/Insect Encounters*, *differences* 23, no. 3 (2012): 77.

upstream befriends downstream
downstream waves to upstream

Sometimes it feels like
you have been waiting, or that i have been
invited,
as i sit between sun and your skin,
i feel more and more distinctly, calls
from the pond
touching blobs
beautiful sways, like at the bottom of the
sea,
you've come a long way to these hilltops
traveling along drenched bodies
that do not admit to clear cuts between
ocean sky land
intricate weaving within weaving⁶
i will have been an algae, a fungus, a lichen
over solar circles to come, i will spread
out as tiny little arcanes
of life, death, and other herstories

In a circle, reassembled, our bones are
turning
into clay, returning rethinking
the decisions, the feelings, when my
ancestors
parted genetic constellations from the
earth ones,
this facing away is not irreversible,
in this future past now
boundaries may yet reunite and
reshuffle,

6. Speaking with Arendse Krabbe and our ongoing interplanetary
trans-temporal drifters...

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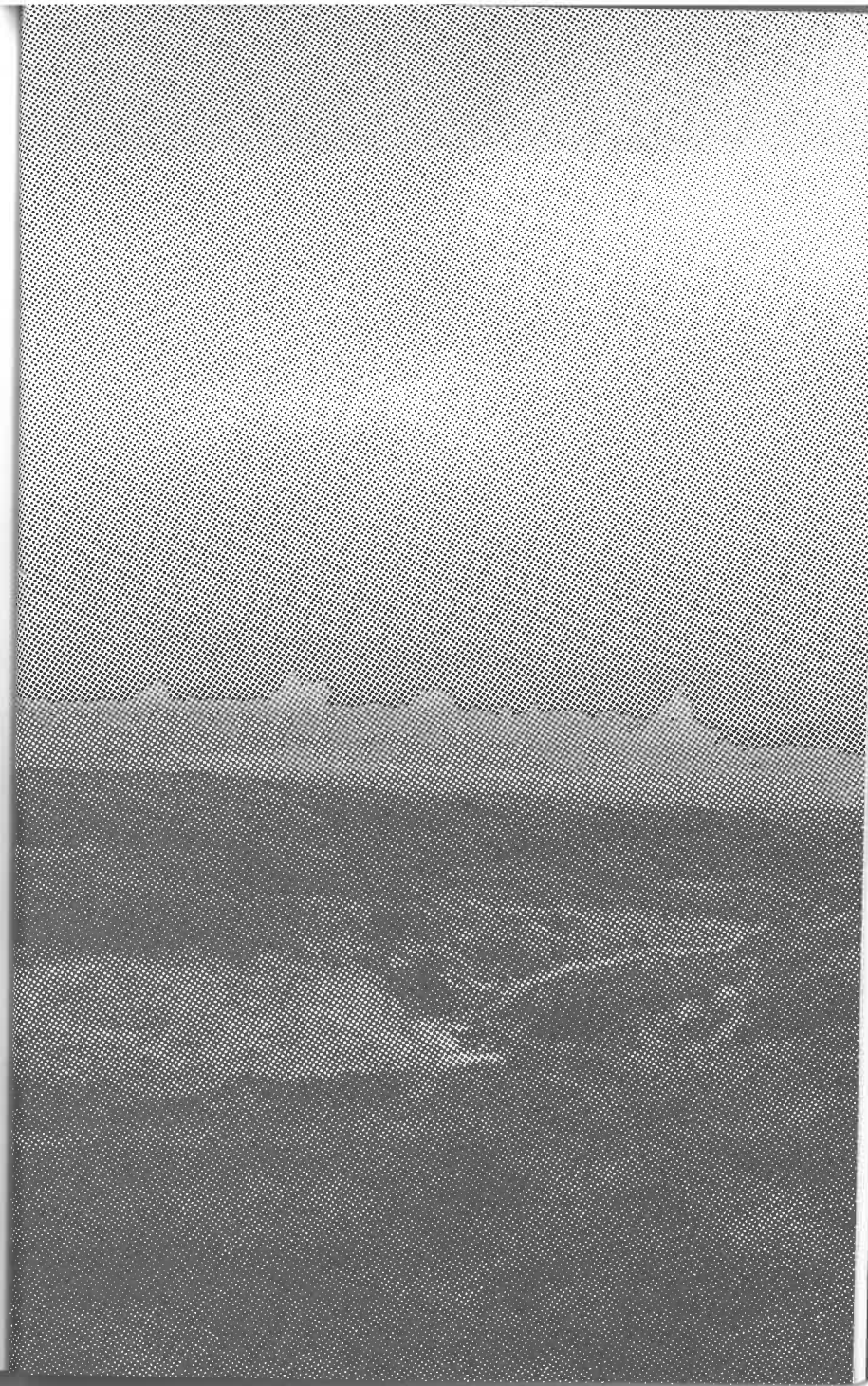
nothing fits perfectly but it may be
a melody
harmony and chaos are fleeting
transitions
many more ripples are to come
to pass
murmur along

In this land of moors, who knows that
it is not a territory, it is a field
with no beginning nor fence
decay and renewal twist and turn
leeward and windward, and in still
intermezzos
we share meals and hungry times
coexistence vines
sometimes a cloak of boredom gathers,
as it does,

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that is fine
we persist and wait, sink in tiny
puff closer
each breath is once and different
Light is fading after this long day, in
indistinct season,
bodies dress in metamorphic greys
the strata get redder
i ask you for permission, to resurface
chthonic energies
reanimate our tired joints
and to invite the neighbours,
come along without fear
ectotherms endotherms and all the
others
the laboured carbon will crackle about
warmth,
a craving wedded with a
longing

for the tapestry of clouds
a crisp sensation in early dawn,
a regathering trust
the leafy, the four- and the
two-leggeds, thirsty
we will reawaken as amphibians,
permeated by the same world
of quenching encounters,
some of which will be remembered
as stalks, wood, peat, pebbles,
invitations extended to yet-unseen creatures
who might
tippytoe in our prints, in fresh moss,
now we sediment
before you



As I did not come equipped with fancy instruments, the things I could measure as part of a scientific method consisted of counting things I could identify, such as plants or flies, faeces, caterpillars, frogs, water pH, and so on. Then I would have to work backwards from what I could measure to a well-formed question that that was the answer to. I did not manage to come up with both a theoretically valid and original question and a way to answer it by counting things. I was doing research, but I did not complete an entire project. There are also parts of science practice that are just about observing, learning, and thinking, part of the invisible process not reported in publications that is easy to overlook or even skip altogether. Moors and bogs, I learned, are a good learning laboratory, a 'living museum', for understanding better the slowly evolving, simple habitats of the world, and our place in the panoply of environments made by, but not exactly for, humans.

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Materiality, bodies and space

Laura Harrington and Danny McNally

Artist Laura Harrington and cultural geographer Danny McNally have been collaborating since meeting on a panel discussion about *Fieldworking* at MIMA. With shared interests in the relationship between art and geography, they are currently developing ideas on interdisciplinary approaches to encounters with the landscape around Moor House. What follows is a conversation exploring the new moving image work *Fieldworking* and the context of Moor House-Upper Teesdale National Nature Reserve, in which it takes place.

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Danny: Moor House has a rich history of exploration, experimentation and research conducted from a number of related disciplines including physical geography and environmental science. More recently, through your work, it has also hosted artistic endeavours. What is it that initially drew you to Moor House—do you see any commonalities between your work and the historic fieldwork which took place there?

Laura: I would say the biggest commonality between my work and previous research at Moor House is curiosity and also exposure. Something drives us to work there. It has to. I don't think we would return otherwise. It's a site that takes time to know, takes time to get to, a commitment to be there, and you