

Biodiversity After the Global

Nicholas Ferguson

Abstract

In 2012 the airport authority Heathrow Holdings Limited launched an enterprise it named Heathrow Biodiversity. *Biodiversity after the Global* investigates this enterprise through fieldwork and creative methodologies that incorporate visualisation techniques, camping, foraging and storytelling, as well as interdisciplinary studies across art history, botany and political philosophy.

The investigation focuses on an environmental heritage site, Orchard Farm, that formed part of the initiative. Representations of both the farm and the wider enterprise are brought into conversation with first-hand experience of the site, a territory marked by layered and intersecting histories of quarrying, horticulture, human habitation and eviction, waste disposal, terrorism as well as attempts to erase it from public consciousness by returning it to nature.

These encounters are also framed within philosophies of art and nature. The text traces in particular how Heathrow Biodiversity is wrapped in a classical liberal view of nature as a harmonious and self-regulating system that is a model for aesthetic and economic thought. This discourse valorises the enterprise but, counterintuitively, in order for its users to licence themselves to destroy it.

Keywords: aesthetics; Bedfont Court Estate; border ecologies; Heathrow Biodiversity; botany; urban nature

An earlier version of this piece took the form of an artist's talk, *Airport/Wilderness*, at Shiv Nadar University, Delhi, Jan. 16, 2023.

“The industrial society exists on the basis of the enclosure in its own power.”

Martin Heidegger. *The Provenance of Art and the Determination of Thinking*.

Cited in *Art and Cosmotechnics* (Hui, 2021, p. 188).

Two Views

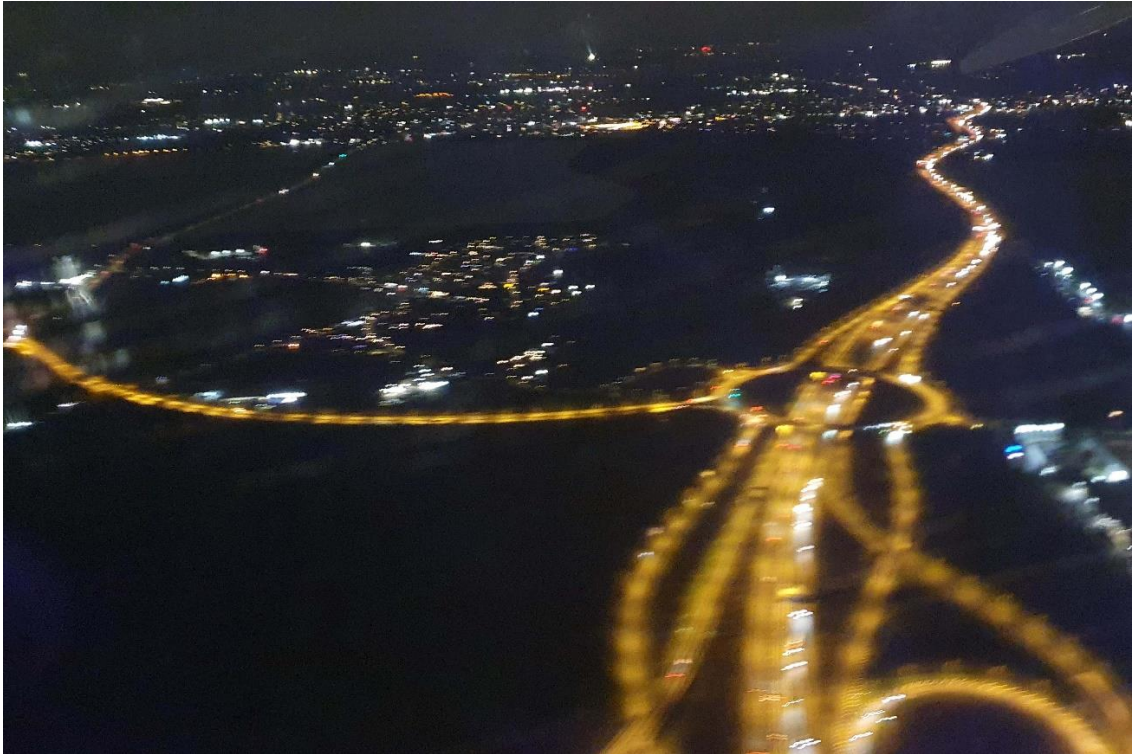


Figure 1. Figure. Nicholas Ferguson. 2023. Take off view, LHR.

This is a view of the ground immediately to the west of Heathrow Airport, London, UK (Fig.1). The line of lights running up the righthand side of the frame are the London Orbital Motorway and those going left to right are the link road to the airport. The Western edge of the securitized zone follows the lefthand edge of the photograph. Before you is an image of infrastructure space visible from the air. But it is also my neighbourhood.

The next few images represent the same territory seen by day and from within (Figs. 2-4). Bramble cloaks the higher ground, denying the satisfaction afforded by a vanishing point. Water and treacherous bog punctuate the remaining surface, over which a lattice of willow has woven itself, rendering it as impassible as the stretches where the

brambles have taken over. The growth forms thickets so dense that, if it were not for the aircraft screaming hysterically towards me as they ascend from what I know to be the East, it would be impossible even to get one's bearings, let alone negotiate the terrain.



Figure 2. Nicholas Ferguson. 2023. Thicket

The views from above and within are suggestive of standpoints within different worlds. From the first, the ground is experienced from a distance and mediated technologically, from the second, up close and in its immediacy. One view is authorised, the other forbidden. One alienates me from the material, biological reality of the earth. The other necessitates my belonging. We could think of them as opposite sides of a closed door, perhaps the kind of door Bruno Latour imagines in his witty and timely ecological reinterpretation of Franz Kafka's novella *Metamorphosis*. For Latour, Gregor Samsa's experience of becoming an insect reconnects him to Earth, while, on the far side of his bedroom door, his parents remain 'locked-down in their little selves' (Latour, 2021, p. 20).



Figure 3. Nicholas Ferguson. 2023. Thicket 2.



Figure 4. Nicholas Ferguson. 2023. Thicket 3.

Only here at the edge of Heathrow Airport there is no door. As the images convey, nature has taken care of access. If Latour has offered us a point of theoretical departure, my discovery of the foreclosure of the possibility of oneness with the earth by nature would seem to represent a critical issue ripe for investigation.

I am here on the Early May Bank Holiday, 2023, in search of a real estate holding by the name of Orchard Farm. Some artist friends and I are thinking of setting up a kind of observatory for the study of the airport environment. We have in mind a kind of culturally inverted air traffic control tower (Fig. 5). The farmhouse or an outbuilding might be just the ticket.

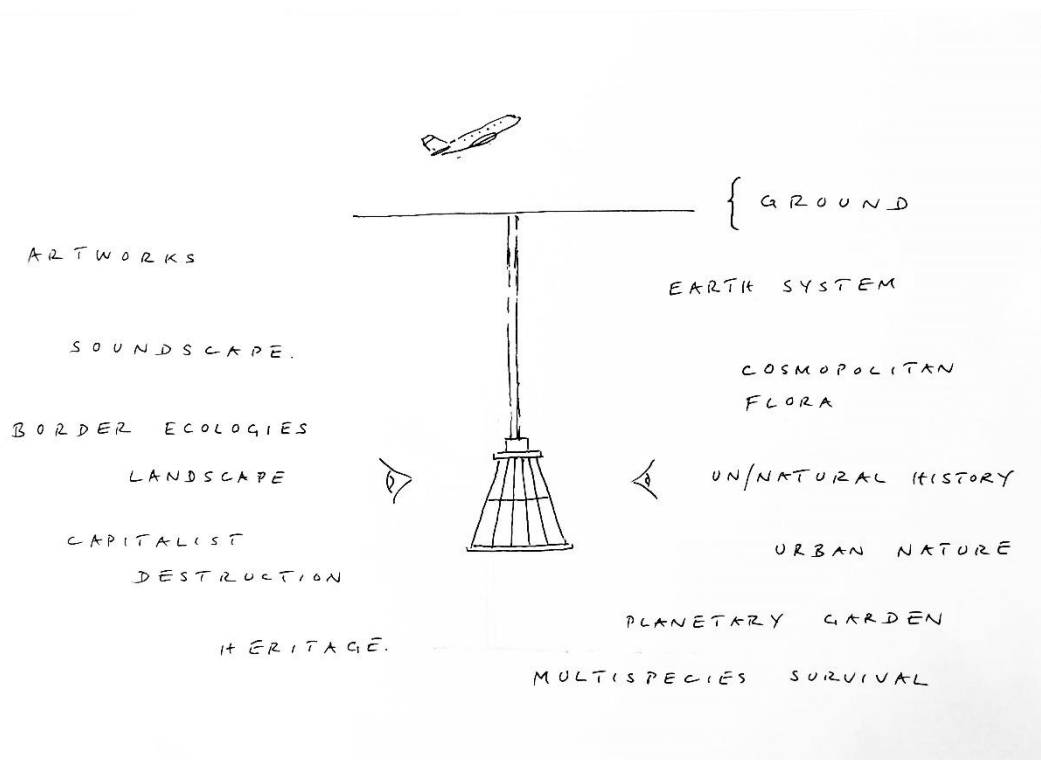


Figure 5. Nicholas Ferguson. 2023. Inverted air traffic control tower.

Heathrow Biodiversity

The community page on the airport’s website explains that the farm belongs to an environmental heritage initiative that goes by the name of Heathrow Biodiversity. The next image shows a map of the sites that make up the initiative (Fig.6). You see the airport in the centre and the parcels of land to the south and west of the airport perimeter, 13 all told and, according to the legend, amounting to some 170 hectares,

about 10% of the airport's property (Murphy, n.d.). The original from which the image is lifted forms part of a document celebrating 10 years since the airport won the Wildlife Trust's biodiversity benchmark award in 2008.



Figure. 6. Heathrow Biodiversity Sites.

“Heathrow Biodiversity?”, you might ask. Are airports and biodiversity not a contradiction in terms? Doesn't everybody know the former have to do with the triumph of science and technology over nature, the latter its emancipation? At Heathrow, this reality is exemplified in local histories of land use. Before the construction of the airport in 1946, the hamlet of Heath Row stood among market gardens and nurseries that were the fruit basket of London. The village of Colnbrook less than a mile to my west, was the original home to the premium desert apple Cox Orange Pippin first cultivated by Richard Cox in 1825 (“Heritage apples,” 2022). In the immediate post war period, Coxes accounted for some five million of the UK's fruit trees. Who knows? Perhaps they were the staple produce of Orchard Farm. Whether they were or not, in 2009 the spectre of Cox became an emblem of flourishing resistance against airport expansion plans when political leaders, including future Prime Minister David Cameron, planted and/or sponsored apple trees in the nearby village of Sipson on land earmarked for a new runway (Stewart, 2009). Today Cox continues to haunt the landscape from his resting

place in the churchyard of St Mary's, Harmondsworth, less than half a mile to the north of the airport perimeter (Fig. 7).



Figure 7. Nick Ferguson. 2021. The Grave of Richard Cox. St Mary's, Harmondsworth.

Now, you might object that fruit farming today was never synonymous with biodiversity. The manicured orchards were the Heathrow of their day, former instances of the subjugation of nature by science. Or, that fruit farming in this area was doomed because of competition from abroad. But that's just it. The global marketplace is a function of world connectivity whose condition of possibility is the airport. In horticultural terms it means ever larger farms, stronger pesticides, cheaper labour, faster movement of produce through the supply chain and, as we now also know, an intolerable burden on the planet. The ground is nothing if not fabulous. There are no longer any orchards around Heathrow – they have mainly disappeared under concrete, and even where they have not, they are no longer viable. For it is now too warm to grow Cox Orange Pippin here commercially (Horton and reporter, 2023).

Lessons from Art History

Yet, within the arts, the designation of an airport hinterland ‘biodiversity sites’ strikes a chord. There is a long tradition in fine art - in Europe it goes back at least one hundred years - of discovering miraculous ecologies in industrial wastelands. The explorations of unplanned vegetation by Paul-Armand Gette in the bomb sites and unkempt streets of post war Berlin are among the better-known examples (Fig. 8).



Figure 8. Paul-Armand Gette. 1980. Photograph of a Berlin street with *Ailanthus altissima*. From the exhibition ‘Exotik als Banalität.

There is an even older convention – it predates art’s separation from craft – that brings recognition to ordinary ecologies. In its European vein, Albrecht Dürer’s *The Great Piece of Turf*, 1503, is a seminal example (Fig. 9). The vegetation in Dürer’s watercolour painting - plantain, meadowgrass, dandelion and saxifrage - might belong to any patch of ground. The work’s power lies in the staging of an inversion whereby the artist dares take as his subject a scene that demands no acknowledgment and, with uncompromising realism, tells it as it is: spectacularly mundane. This is no cosmic tree, sacred river or holy mountain. The rendering deploys no highlights or deep shadow, no vivid colour, no pronounced form, no warmth no cold, no clever foreshortening no enticing backdrop. To this list of absences might be added desire and interest. A mere clod of earth and clump of grass, but which, by an act of honest and sincere depiction,

is nevertheless transfigured. Objectivity was never just a way of representing. Rather, it had to do with what gets noticed.



Figure 9. Albrecht Dürer. 1503. *The Great Piece of Turf*. Digital Commons.

What if the designation ‘biodiversity site’ for a parcel of land choked with common brambles and besmirched with unremarkable bog were also to kindle a flame for creative thinking around the commonplace in nature?

Today, biodiversity is a privileged theme in art across the globe and highly marketable. In 2018 it was the governing theme of the nomadic, Europe wide, biennial Manifesta that convened in Palermo, Italy, under the title ‘The Planetary Garden. Cultivating Coexistence’ (“Manifesta 12 Palermo Concept,” 2017). Countless collectives, organisations, museums, research centres, are rallying to discover botanical and zoological knowledge lost or repressed through histories of modernity. Recurrent themes include the life-giving possibilities of plants, opportunities they offer for spiritual healing and access to psychic realms. There is also wide recognition of the botanical world as an arena for politics. Advertisements for Art and Ecology international degree

programmes find their way into my Instagram algorithm as routinely as images of aircraft.

My own orientation within this scene is thorough and longstanding. I live in a neighbourhood that lies beneath the flightpath. For those of us who reside here, the airport is definitive for our sleep patterns and employment, the guests we receive, the friendships we form, the bylaws that condition our public spaces, the places to which we travel, the air we breathe. Whether or not I fly, I am the airport, and it would be quite impossible to disentangle myself from this ontology. Accordingly, I fully acknowledge my contribution to the border ecology the airport marks and any critique of it I might launch is hereby prefaced by this admission. Equally, the art I make lies within the airport's forcefield. *Capsule*, a work from 2019, explored the mobilities of seeds, spores and insects which hitchhike from faraway places in the wheel housings of aircraft and parachute out as the aircraft prepare to land (Ferguson, 2022). Their discovery speaks to the possibility of botanical cosmopolitanism at this UK frontier that, like the planetary garden, could serve as a metaphor for alternative, counter hegemonic articulations of the ground in terms of movement and migration.

In the Footsteps of Richard Mabey

Beyond the disciplinary field of art, though very much adjacent to it, there also exists, somewhat buried today, a record of this very same point on the globe by writer and broadcaster Richard Mabey. Mabey lived across the valley during the 1960s and early seventies and would seem to have been the first to engage with its organicist and industrialist contradictions. The following excerpt from his book *Weeds* gives a flavour of what he thought:

“This was the Middlesex borderlands, a huge area of wasteland being slowly overtaken by hi-tech industry... [...] ... To the west [of my office] lay a labyrinth of gravel pits, now flooded, and refuse tips whose ancestry went back to Victorian times. [...] The whole area was poked with inexplicable holes and drifts of exotic litter. And most thrillingly to me it was being overwhelmed by a forest of disreputable plants.”

Mabey went on to argue that the vibrancy of this border ecology was a paradox born of a combination of liminality and the regenerative life force of nature. It marked the beginning of a lifelong thesis that industrial wastelands, railway verges and other urban edgelands were an 'unofficial countryside'. It also made use of artworks from the canon of art history to see and contextualise the visible regime. The Great Piece of Turf was among them - indeed my identification of its flora just now is taken from Weeds – and it is undoubtedly Maybe that artist Matt Collishaw is channelling in his digital rendering of Dürer, *Whispering Weeds*, (“Whispering Weeds · Mat Collishaw,” n.d.).

It is a line of thought and methodology that have been as influential as seductive. They undoubtedly inform the work of geographer Matthew Gandy, for example, the research project *Natura Urbana* (Gandy, 2022) and in a sense, my investigation brings this discourse back to its geographical starting point. Mabey’s detailed descriptions of the ecosystem that flourished “at the mouth of a V formed by two runways at the western edge of Heathrow Airport” (Mabey and Sinclair, 2010, p. 141) provide a ground zero from which it might be possible, so to speak, to ‘fact check’ Heathrow Biodiversity. Indeed, it promises critical readings of Mabey overlooked by Gandy. Can it really be, for example, that the prosaic requirements of industry, rather than public spirited planners, are creating the conditions needed to save this corner of England from ecocide? And what happens when a more empirical approach is scaled up, for example, by comparing findings across multiple airport ecologies?

Important though this line of enquiry may be, its pursuit is beyond the scope of this investigation. Instead, my focus is on what this landscape tells us about political and aesthetic dimensions of biodiversity after the global. In simple terms, I want to know: For what or whom does this borderland exist? How has it come to look the way it does? And what does it tell us about the art of landscaping? In the endeavour to ground these questions within the specifics of the site, I find myself slipping through a fence into a patch of scrubland at the western edge of the airport and preparing to camp the night (Fig. 10).

Going to Ground

I sleep in fits and starts, lulled by the hum of the motorway. One interruption is sustained. I have left the tent to pee in the small hours of the morning and my gaze is caught by the view through the glass frontage of a departure lounge. Bisecting the façade at around two thirds of its height, and running its full length, giant LCD advertising screens are beaming images of overseas holiday destinations.



Figure 10. Nicholas Ferguson. 2023. Camping.



Figure 11. Nicholas Ferguson. 2023. Heathrow Terminal 5.

They are the type filmed from a moving drone and looped: azure beaches with palm trees and white sands, forested mountain ranges, red deserts, and back again to the beaches. I submit to their lure and attempt to get nearer using the zoom on my phone now retrieved from the tent. The image blurs, pixelates and is gone, as if figuring the limits of metaphysical representation: the irreconcilable difference between the view from the tent and the terminal building (Fig. 11).

Orchard Farm

Orchard Farm is described by the airport authority's communication team as "a small grassland site that was successfully translocated across the river Colne from where the M25 spur road now lies".¹ It strikes me as curious that real estate could retain a title reflecting horticultural heritage and human settlement even when reduced to grassland. In any case, if it is grassland, what exactly was moved? Livestock? Even if we are to bracket the problem of cattle or sheep on a farm whose name celebrates a horticultural heritage, this seems an unlikely answer. Animals are quite capable of moving

¹ The communication cited has since been modified and the mention of translocation dropped.

themselves. The copy continues: “This was done principally because of some rare plant species present in an uncommon habitat, including Water Aven, a plant thought to occur nowhere else in the wild in Greater London.” A worthy cause for sure, but as every child who has picked a dandelion head in late summer knows, seeds travel locally on the wind. The feathery heads of Water Aven seeds have no need of a ferry ride across a waterway that is little more than a stream. In which case, the claim may refer to having moved the turf itself. Yet that endeavour seems a little conceptual for an airport, unless, in the unlikely scenario, one or more of its conservation team once took an Elective in Land Art and institutional critique and has thought to reenact, say, a germinating earthwork by Hans Hacker.

Bedfont Court Estate

Around 5 o’clock I am roused by a dawn chorus whose joy exceeds any that I have yet heard in the metropolis. An hour or so later, the vocalists are interrupted by the violent roar of a jet. The air splits, the tent vibrates, spilling rivulets of condensation down its sides. Another and another and another. By the time I venture out, the crisp morning air is soaked in Kerosene, oily and noxious.

The place in which I find myself betrays a recent history of settlement. In pockets not colonised by the brambles and willow, and even in those which are, there are cultivars: apple, pear, quince, but also ornamental shrubs of the sort bought from suburban garden centres. An apple tree adjacent to the tent – it can be little more than a decade old – sits atop a grassy mound, its trunk disappearing into an underworld of breeze blocks, wall tiles and gravel, its branches reaching towards the jaundiced sky (Fig.). If it feels any disenchantment over the conditions of its existence, you will not know this from the extravagance of the blooms. Unless, of course, you decide that, sensing its time is up, it is giving its all for the future of its genes.

An Ordnance Survey map dated 2012 names the area as Bedfont Court Estate. A web search on the name brings up photos on an urban exploration forum posted in the same year (Figs. 12-13).



Figure 12. Zombizza. 2012. Untitled.

The photographer, one *Zombizza*, states the existence of ten smallholdings built by the local government authority, Middlesex County Council, in the inter war period. To clarify a point of British cultural and political history represented in the view: this housing is provided by the state for those most in need, and to go with it, land extensive enough to support animals and grow crops. The tenants will have been members of the urban poor who had aspired to leave the city and reinvent themselves within the countryside. In 2012 the dwellings themselves were abandoned but standing and furnished.

A planning application to Hillingdon Council dated 2013 reveals that Bedfont Court Estate had been compulsorily purchased in 2002 for the purposes of gravel extraction and was to be filled with 'inert waste' (this was the purpose of the application) before being returned to agricultural land (2013). The same application is accompanied by a botanical survey of the Lower Colne dating back to 1987, maps and the note that in 2002 the plot was also bisected by a motorway spur road that ran to a new airport terminal completed in 2008. In other words, if the upload date of *Zombizza's* photos is taken as a guide to the chronology of events, the dwellings survived an extensive period of transformation that included the eviction of their inhabitants, land excavation,

subsequent infill, and road construction. Their demolition after survival against such odds is as remarkable as unfortunate.

Zombizza's photographs and my own exist in a temporal relationship that can be visualised through a technique known as 'before and after'. Two frames representing the same view separated by an event are juxtaposed side by side (Fig. 14). The first before the event, the second in the aftermath. Thus, the event is present as an absence that sits between the two frames, and we know it only through its effect. The technique is widely used in architectural documentation, particularly documentation of 'the architecture of disaster' (Weizman and Weizman, 2014). I have sought to draw on the tradition by juxtaposing images of Bedford Court Estate from 2012 and 2023 but have used it with a certain liberty, for the thicket has rendered a more scientific deployment impossible.

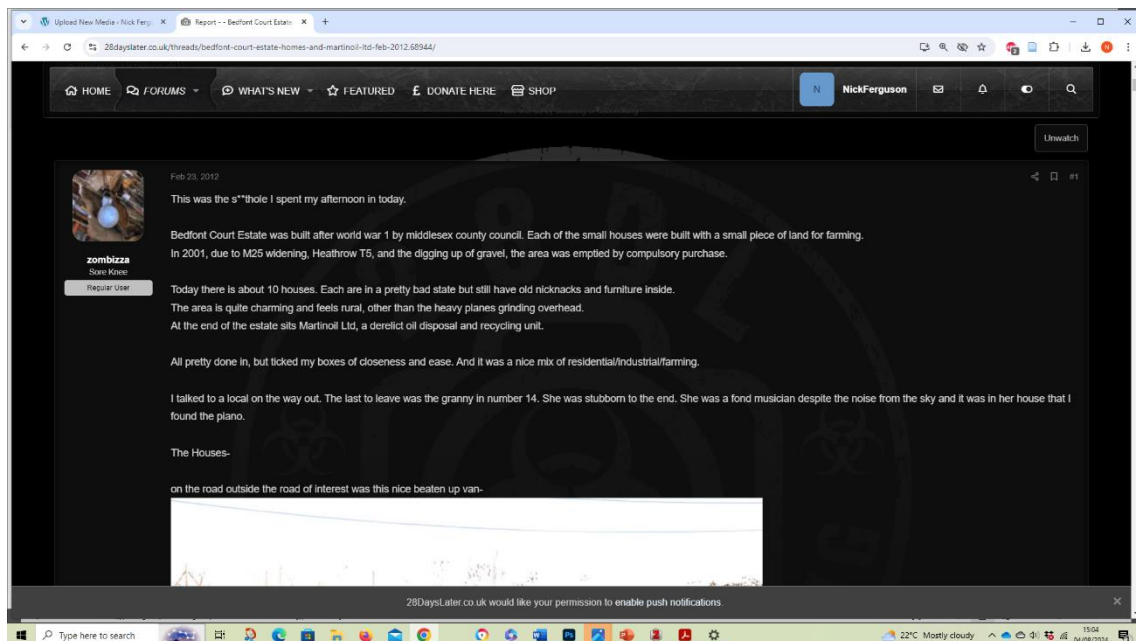


Figure 13. Nicholas Ferguson. 2023. Screenshot.



2012

2023

Figure 14. Nicholas Ferguson. 2023. Before and After: Bedfont Court Estate.



Figure 15. Nicholas Ferguson. 2023. Stanwell Moor.

The next photo is taken on a track that lies immediately to the west of the estate (Fig.15). They add a bit of context to the demolition, revealing it to be part in a wide reaching, systematic programme of depopulation. Unlike those on the estate where I've camped, the paths here can still be traversed – they remain enshrined in law as public rights of way – but access is restricted to all but pedestrians.

Art, Nature, Freedom

When in 1681 the regional representative of grain merchants met in Rouen, France, with the nation's Controller General of Finances, Jean-Baptiste Colbert, he famously replied to an offer of government intervention in the market "Laissez nous faire" (leave us alone) (Davidson et al., 2010, p. 20). Le Grand's response marked the emergence of a conviction in liberal economic thought that the market is a site of truth, meaning the true value of a commodity will surface if the market is left alone. It was a principle which would later also be theorised through the concept of an invisible hand, a form of divine governance that according to its author, Scottish economist Adam Smith, takes its model from the harmonious, self-regulating system of nature (Smith, 2023). This next section uncovers this history by way of a backdrop to the making of the ground where I am camped.

Around the same time as Corbert, or very shortly after, a new concept of landscape was introduced into the philosophical nexus he assembled. It would constitute a rival site of truth known today as the aesthetic. By landscape I mean the purposeful, interested articulation of the ground in the form of a cultural image, an image of what and for whom any given ground exists. It may be expressed in the surface of the ground itself, on the page by way of text or pictorial representation, or even in a conversation. The creation and interpretation of this image is an art. There are manifold, globally dispersed histories of such art, but the one that concerns us here developed specifically in contradistinction to agriculture on the estates of landed gentry as a means to cultivate sensuous pleasure among social elites (Ranciere, 2022). In England it found expression in the clearing of the rural poor from the land, enclosure and, not without paradox, the creation of natural looking parks which served the dual purpose of leisure and security.

Thus, landscape came to refer to both a regime of labour – the working of the land (its original sense) - and the eye (its new sense), which is to say, seeing the land as view. Yet, once elevated to the status of *image*, landscape became a mode of attention that permitted the suspension of moral judgement or, as art historian WJT Mitchell once put it, it has the capacity to distance us from any claim that the thing before our eyes may have over us (Mitchell, 2002). It would provide a model for the concept of disinterested attention and, in turn, a bid to recognise the equality of all things. The bifurcation in meaning thus rendered landscape a highly capable instrument within the liberalist toolbox. For it at once granted the landscaper a moral authority and enhanced the land's value as resource.

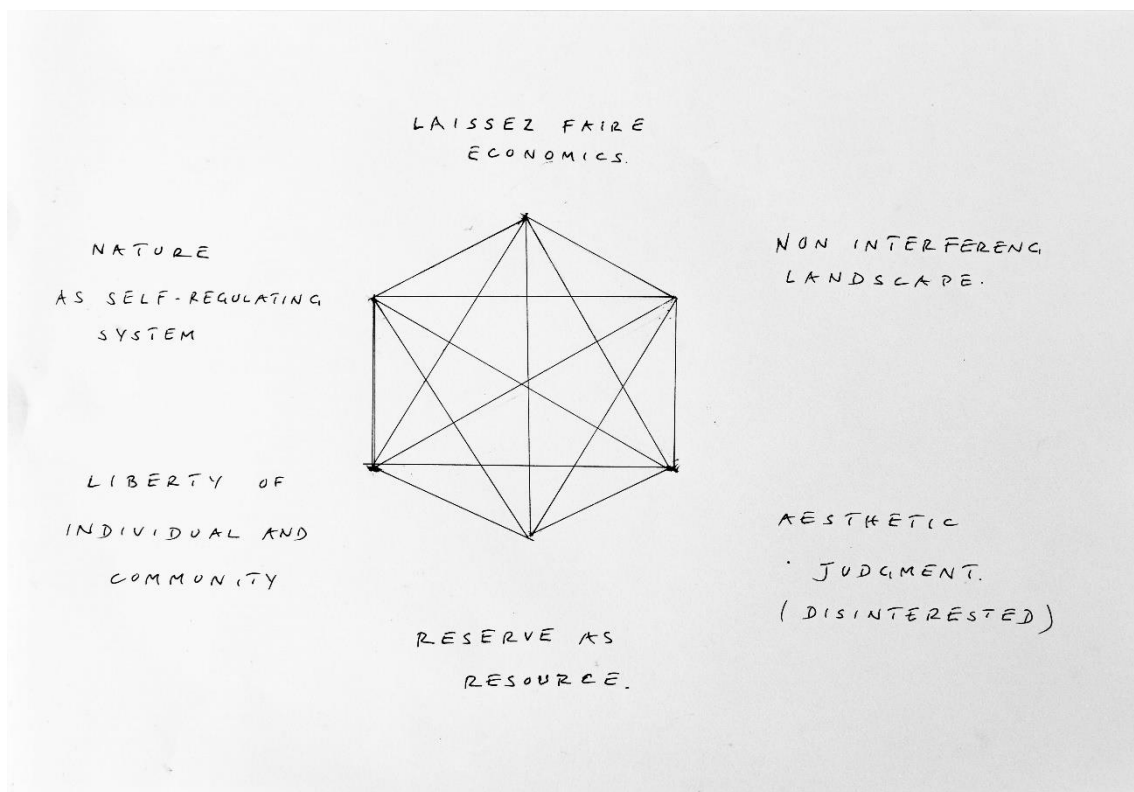


Figure 16. Nicholas Ferguson. 2023. Art, Nature, Freedom.

At the same time, landscape came to constitute a political and social order. Philosopher Jacques Rancière tells us that to the 18th century European mind, whose vision was undoubtedly coloured by the Revolution in France, there was all the difference between the mathematically laid out gardens of the Palace of Versailles, France, and the sheep-mown, parklands laid out by Lancelot Brown in England. The former reflected the

despotism of monarchical France, the latter the freedom of the English. It was precisely this conceptualisation of landscape that marks the origin of Europe's aesthetic revolution, a new beginning that would lead to a higher power of freedom and underpin a new world for Art and a new life for individuals and community (Ranciere, 2022). So it was that, by the end of the 18th century, a distinctly European version of aesthetic thought had emerged from a set of mutually constitutive relations between nature, aesthetic judgment, art, human liberty, laissez-faire economics. Each concept was philosophically connected to every other, enabling a flow of values and ideas that were mutually supportive. The concepts and their connections are represented in the diagram in Figure 16.

As liberal values took root, this nexus came to inform the way relations between art, nature, infrastructure and politics were conceptualised more widely. It is highly conspicuous, for example, in the concept of national park. Working on the other side of the Atlantic but within an ethos inspired by the European aesthetic thought of the previous century, American painter George Catlin put forward a landscape vision that would lead to the foundation of Yellowstone, USA in 1872 (Patin et al., 2012) and other nation states followed suit. Whether through the social democratic reforms that swept Europe in the post war period, the modernising initiatives of post-independence nation states, the communist inspired aspirations to publicness within the Soviet Union, national parks have come to serve as shorthand for a society that has overcome necessity, is at one with nature, and has already realised the potential of human freedom.

Biodiversity as Aesthetic Legacy

This representation speaks to Biodiversity at Heathrow. I will learn through email correspondence with the airport authority that Orchard Farm refers to a plot of land secured behind anti-climb fencing and a padlocked gate. Its enclosure invokes the aesthetic order of a 18th century landscape garden, suggesting, as did its predecessor, a giant artwork written into the ground to intimate that we are in the presence of wholesome political values. And just as such estates were private, it too is sealed off, its political message relayed through photographs uploaded to a website, 170 hectares of

pure abstraction that opens to the imagination the possibility of a glorious view by ignoring the partition of the land and the exclusions imposed on it.

However, the value of this backstory goes well beyond its capacity to shine a light on the political dimension of Heathrow Biodiversity. It also reveals a practical function. Enclosed land also served the purposes of reserve, so that in Britain, for example, land was enclosed during the Napoleonic wars to accelerate the restoration of woodland to mitigate shortages of timber (Cosgrove, 1989). Later, as nations industrialised, enclosed land was an essential part of a Romanticist imaginary in which the organicism of art and nature were perceived as an antidote to the ravages of the machine. It requires only a little digging to discover that biodiversity sites are a minor evolutionary mutation in this lineage. Coined in the US in the mid-1980s, the term biodiversity was used in environmental discourse in the context of the need to mitigate climate change by designing reserves with climate in mind (Sarkar, 2021). The cause had admittedly changed, but they promised, as the creation of natural looking landscape once did, a certain freedom borne of an alignment of politics, economics and land enclosure.

I opened this reflection with a quotation on enclosure from German philosopher Martin Heidegger which I encountered in Yuk Hui's philosophical treatise on art and technology. For me, it brings detail to the landscape I am depicting. For Hui, as for Heidegger, technical systems have become organic, in the sense that they communicate recursively between their various parts. Their objective is to problem solve in accordance with the logic of their makers, namely, to replace human intelligence with machine intelligence and to conquer standing reserves. In short, they facilitate a capitalist logic. They are, moreover, total, comprising not just machines but also living things. We can only live inside this system and submit to its rules (Hui, 2021).

This analysis articulates the biodiversity sites with uncanny precision. As reserves, they join the ranks of fire engines and snow ploughs, tanks of aviation fuel, stretches of parking apron. Where there are differences between nature as reserve and, say, a snow plough as reserve, these highlight their expediency. Note for example, that the biodiversity sites lie outside the securitized zone. Also, that biodiversity is not paid for by the airport, insofar as the airport does not remunerate nature for the life process of

rewilding, even though it capitalises on the outcome. Lowenhaupt Tsing's concept salvage accumulation - 'taking advantage of value produced without capitalist control' (p. 63) - is helpful in this connection. Furthermore, what gets accumulated is abstract rather than material, for it is not the rewilded hinterland per se that is of value, but rather its capacity to persuade people to *like* the airport, just as they might have liked the natural looking landscape garden. Thus, nature as reserve contributes an otherwise missing but essential component in a gigantic technical system that serves the liberal freedoms represented in the diagram, and whose primary purpose is to make possible and let prosper a global economy built on its values. Under this scheme, which we are bound to call neo-liberal, the art of landscaping has been reduced to instrument, land to mechanism, and nature to a calculation whose ultimate purpose is to secure the airport's political and economic power during a climate emergency.

Biodiversity Sites are the New Public Art and Architecture

It perhaps needs stating at this point that the airport has always made use of aesthetic principles for sensation management. Human geographers have noted that airports are emotive places, that emotions can be an obstacle to passenger flow, and that architects, planners and operators seek to mitigate this obstacle by the regulation of affect and sensation through built form (Adey, 2008a, 2008b). Artworks sited within and around airport terminal buildings undoubtedly also play a part in such modulation and it perhaps their omnipresence as much as anything else that attunes us to the strategic use of aesthetic principles in Heathrow Biodiversity. Yet, Heathrow Biodiversity marks a radical departure from these tried and tested uses of such principles on at least two accounts. First, it puts the clock back to what Rancière once called 'the time of the landscape', appropriating a classical liberal conceptualisation of nature. Second, it folds an early modern art form into the design of global infrastructure, which is to say, it coopts art into a technical infrastructure that renders land exploitable.

It is not difficult to see what is achieved in pragmatic terms. First, the purview of the airport authority is extended, so that the territory in which sensation can be managed now goes well beyond the airport perimeter. This development is highly advantageous for an organisation seeking to expand into it. Second, an existential problem of public

anxiety is mitigated. Both local and global publics have questioned the environmental impact of expansion, the former focused on noise pollution and landscape decline, the latter climate change. We may surmise that the value of the airport's rewilded hinterland, as facilitated by art, lies ultimately in its capacity to secure the politically possibility of airport expansion.

The IRA Dossier

Later in 2023 my search for archival traces of Orchard Farm will unearth a news article that will make me modify, if not fundamentally change, my understanding of the motivations and contradictions that underly Heathrow Biodiversity. I have been making blackberry and apple jam following a foraging trip to Bedfont Court Estate. It's simmering away on the hob and I'm wondering about whether some as-yet-undiscovered history could help with the choice of a name. I'm after something witty, a name that will cut to the heart of the Heathrow Biodiversity issue.

The story reports that on 9 March 1994, the Irish Republican Army, an organisation committed to the unification of Ireland and declared terrorist by the UK government, fired five mortar shells onto Heathrow Airport's northern runway ("IRA bombs on runway as jets land," 1994). In a second attack on March 11, a further four rounds were launched from woodland at a spot that cannot be far from where I am camped. Seven years later, in the attack that has become known as 911, Islamic militant group Al Qaida flew hijacked aircraft into the World Trade Centre in New York, USA. As part of its response, the UK government produced a 911 report, a secret Dossier of some 600 pages which amounted to a security review of Heathrow that focused on the vulnerability of aircraft to mortar grenade attack when taking off and landing (McGrory, 2024).

The papers, prepared by the Met's SO18 aviation security team, pinpointed 62 sites from which missile attacks could be launched. A report dated June 26, 2004, identifies a field near the airport with a firing point is just over the fence as an excellent site to attack departing aircraft. A recommendation also caught my attention: to patrol the area with dogs' (Gallop, 2005).

How do we know this? Because a copy of the dossier was found at a petrol station at LHR and handed to a tabloid newspaper who promptly published highlights under the heading “Dossier of Death”(Staff, 2004). At the time CCTV did not extend to petrol stations, so we will need to picture the civil servant in our minds eye with it tucked securely under his arm and reaching to placing it on the roof to free up a hand when removing the petrol cap. I have my name for the jam.

What can be learned from this anecdote? First, that, my choice of a public holiday for the Heathrow camping trip was surely considerably more fortuitous than I could have foreseen. I have, for the moment at least, been spared a confrontation with a Dobermann. Beyond this admittedly entirely selfish consideration (and this is my second point), it should be noted that if security has played a role in the systematic depopulation of the airport hinterland, it sits alongside expansion-motivated eviction as the real reason for returning land to nature. It follows that the availability of land for the purposes of creating nature reserves is more luck than judgement. To push the point, we could say, absurd though it may seem, that the threat of terrorism may be saving the airport’s proverbial bacon by necessitating a landscape that happens *also* to be conducive to good public relations. And should the bacon eventually be saved, and the expansion happens, then the threat of terrorism, perceived or actual, will need to be acknowledged as part of expansion history.

There are also lessons specifically for art. If, as I have argued, the creation of biodiversity landscapes is to be counted an art, security is its concealed economic basis. As the example of woodland during the Napoleonic wars has made clear, this is by no means an entirely new development in the history of landscaping. However, it represents a new and undocumented instance of art’s condition. Finally, whether or not biodiversity in this hinterland can be celebrated is impossible to know. The airport has secured near total control of the information space. Anecdotally, it is an encapsulated countryside at tipping point.

Convergences

Adjacent to the highway that runs between the aforementioned village of Colnbrook and the airport perimeter road, and a hundred meters or so from the field named Orchard Farm there stands a bricked-up building (Fig. 17). Could it have once been the premises of the translocated farm? I am immediately struck by the similarity between the interior and the one I had seen posted by the urban explorer. According to the airport's communication page, Orchard Farm is permanently closed due to antisocial behaviour. The justification exonerates management from all serious soul searching, yet the wider history of such images in the context of political struggle directs us to a more specific motive. At ND de Landes, Southwest France, during the territorial struggle against the plans to build a new airport, protesters vandalized the cars of staff belonging to Biotope, an environmental expert company hired by developers to conduct biological surveys. I have seen no photos but the image in my mind's eye prompted me to look up the details. I find among the archives the following words of an occupier:

“And we still don't know if it was bad faith or complete candour, but they refused to acknowledge that they were there to help build an airport. They believed they were there just to observe the newts and the frogs. (Troupe and Ross, 2018, p. 27)



Figure 17. Nicholas Ferguson. Bricked up building, Stanwell Moor.

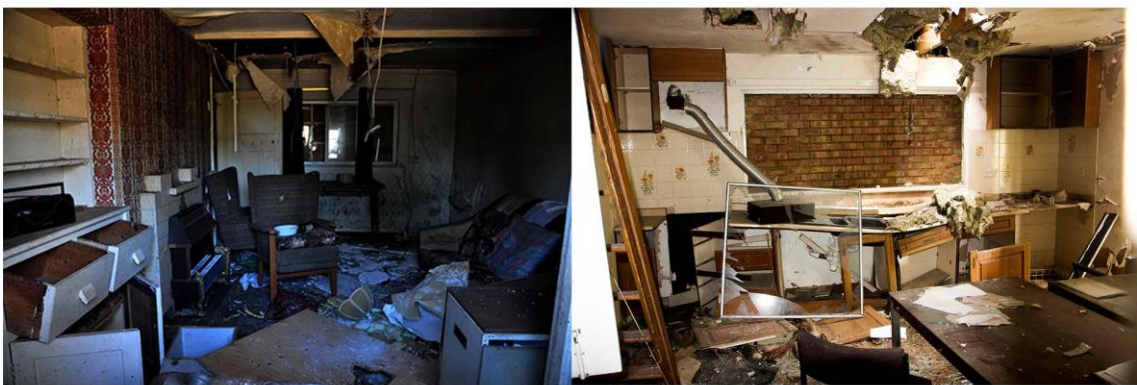


Figure 18. Nicholas Ferguson. 2023. Before and After: Bedfont Court Estate.

Lessons for Art and Ecology

The search for Orchard Farm has explored the environmental initiative Heathrow Biodiversity, using it to open critical issues around biodiversity after the global in aesthetic, historical and philosophical terms. At Bedfont Court Estate we have witnessed the removal of public access to airport land that once inspired Richard Mabey's concept the unofficial countryside through a series of measures both active and passive. Eviction, fencing, pathway blockading, policing with dogs have been supplemented by rewilding initiatives that have produced thickets that obstruct both physical and visual access. Here on private property, setting ourselves free like Gregor the insect is simply not an option. Nevertheless, trespass, both my own and that of others has, against the odds, has afforded reconnaissance, glimpses of a territory marked by layered and intersecting histories of quarrying, horticulture, human habitation and eviction, waste disposal, terrorism, as well as the attempt to erase it from public consciousness by returning it to nature.

These encounters have been framed within classical liberal philosophies of art and nature. We have traced in particular an 18th century view of nature as a harmonious and self-regulating system that is a model for aesthetic and economic thought, in order to argue that these ideas ultimately underpin Heathrow Biodiversity. In this connection, we have seen too how biodiversity functions like a carefully curated art object that forms part of a bid to advance, simultaneously, on the one hand, the airport authority's political legitimacy and cultural integration and, on the other, corporate interests in one of the world's most polluting industries. Our encounter with 'nature' has as much to do with its capacity to flag subscription to a liberal version of civility as with oneness with the earth, or conservation, or even its economic potential in the tourism industry.

In developing these themes, I have built on my earlier work to advance a methodology through which to identify, and think past, problems of a philosophically coherent ecological art after the global. Taking the international airport as a window onto the global, I have continued to visit the hinterland of London Heathrow, which also happens

to be part of my neighbourhood. My aim has been to assemble an aesthetic strategy through which to co-conceptualise environmentally engaged art practice and the aeronautical conditions within which it routinely works. For it seems to me that art after the global cannot engage meaningfully with ecology independently of this environmentally problematic condition.

It remains to reflect on the lessons this May Day fable holds for the larger discourse on art and ecology after the global. We may begin by noting that it has opened up areas for further artistic research. It would be expedient to explore, for example, the airport botany in empirical terms, as well as connections between airport botanies and the extent to which the appropriation of ecological discourse by LHR is representative of airport authorities more widely. Such knowledge will be valuable for the ongoing attempt to gauge the broader operating conditions of environmental art.

We may begin by noting that it has opened up areas for further artistic research. It would be expedient to explore in empirical terms the airport botany today. As noted, the terrain described by Mabey in the 1970s and the survey of 1987 has gifted us a point of comparison, enabling an evidentiary approach to the changing face of biodiversity in this landscape. It would also be expedient to explore the connections between airport botanies, as well as the extent to which the appropriation of ecological discourse by Heathrow is representative of airport authorities more widely. Such knowledge will be valuable for the ongoing attempt to gauge the broader operating conditions of environmental art.

However, and this is my second point, we will need to reflect on the problem that access raises for research in both practical and ethical terms. It has been easy enough for me, male, white, middle class, to slip through a fence, and presumably Mabey will also have exercised this privilege on occasion. However, if I were a person of colour, or less free to act in another way relating to demographic, the stakes in camping out alone or getting caught trespassing in an exclusion zone could be prohibitively high. The capacity for place-based environmental knowledge making is radically unequal. The problem of trespass also brings to bear upon what can and cannot be discovered when research is professionalised and collectivised. The methodology deployed here would be in breach

of ethical code of conduct for funded research, whether conducted individually or as part of a team. In the absence of access, it will be possible neither to formally confirm conclusively, nor wholly disavow, the claim to ecological diversity made by Heathrow Biodiversity.

Third, we must acknowledge that the privileged place held by the environmental cause in art and its discourses is not incidental. It is not like its place in, say, English literature, history or even geography, where the environment is one of many objects of investigation available within the discipline. Rather, it has to do with the umbilical cord that connects the construction of nature and the emancipatory promise of art within the body of modern European aesthetic thought.

Fourth, there is a corpus of art stemming from this philosophical tradition is grounded in statecraft, as well as in processes and institutions of capital accumulation. If it also promises freedom, then we must concede that the framework produces a Janus-like culture. The democratically deficient, self-interested use of ecology and culture by the global corporation is one of its faces. As witnessed in the example of Heathrow Biodiversity, nature performs a legitimising role, aided and abetted by art. The collective, globally distributed, call to action against climate change and ecocide prevalent in independent art and exhibition practice represents the other face. Integral to these initiatives are the methodologies of feminism, civil rights movements, and activism. The combination of horticulture with the 'democracy project' of socially engaged art, as witnessed, for example, at Documenta XV (2022), are exemplary, as are the trans-disciplinary explorations of multispecies futures.

It is important to recognise, however, that, whatever their intentions, these practices, nevertheless, end up doing legwork for liberalism's corporate face. The cri de Coeur to 'decolonise nature', to rewild, to embrace the practice and principles of cohabitation create 'oven-ready' soundbites for the corporation. As seen at Heathrow, the same biodiversity brought into the public gaze by visual arts exhibitions and their attendant public programmes are contributing a much-needed positive image for the airport. These histories suggests that, in the interests of a philosophically coherent ecological art, claims around the emancipatory potential of art in ecological discourse must be

cautious ones. Put simply, in debates on ecology, art and corporate enterprise may not be seated on opposite sides of the room.

Finally, the study has made it possible to comprehend art's ability to sit in conflictual relations to industry. This will be valuable in the ongoing attempt to co-conceptualise, on the one hand, environmentally engaged artistic practice and, on the other, the economic, extractivist, securitised, conditions within which it works.

References

- Adey, P., 2008a. Mobilities and modulations: the airport as a difference machine. *The Airport as a Difference Machine.*, in: *Politics at the Airport*. University of Minnesota Press.
- Adey, P., 2008b. Architectural geographies of the airport balcony: mobility, sensation and the theatre of flight. *Geografiska Annaler: Series B, Human Geography* 90, 29–47. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-0467.2008.00274.x>
- Cosgrove, D., 1989. *The Iconography of Landscape: Essays On The Symbolic Representation, Design And Use Of Past Environments: 9*, Revised ed. edition. ed. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.
- Davidson, A.I., Burchell, G., Foucault, M., 2010. *The Birth of Biopolitics: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1978-1979*, 2008th edition. ed. Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke.
- Ferguson, N., 2022. Migrating Landscapes. *Transfers* 12, 8–23. <https://doi.org/10.3167/TRANS.2022.120203>
- Gallop, A., 2005. *Time Flies: The Heathrow Story*, First Edition. ed. The History Press.
- Gandy, M., 2022. *Natura Urbana: Ecological Constellations in Urban Space*. MIT Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts London, England.
- Heritage apples: the parentage of Cox's Orange Pippin, 2022. . *Connecting Research*. URL <https://research.reading.ac.uk/research-blog/heritage-apples-the-parentage-of-coxs-orange-pippin/> (accessed 7.30.24).
- Hillingdon.gov.uk, 2013. *Report of the Head of Planning, Green Spaces, and Culture*.
- Horton, H., reporter, H.H.E., 2023. Climate breakdown could cause British apples to die out, warn experts. *The Guardian*.
- Hui, Y., 2021. *Art and Cosmotronics*. e-flux.
- IRA bombs on runway as jets land: Mortar attack at Heathrow - New [WWW Document], 1994. . *The Independent*. URL <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/ira-bombs-on-runway-as-jets-land-mortar-attack-at-heathrow-new-campaign-fear-terrorism-act-renewed-in-commons-1428076.html> (accessed 7.30.24).
- Latour, B., 2021. *After Lockdown: A Metamorphosis*, 1st edition. ed. Polity, Cambridge Medford.
- Mabey, R., Sinclair, I., 2010. *The Unofficial Countryside*, Revised ed. edition. ed. Little Toller Books.

- Manifesta 12 Palermo Concept: The Planetary Garden. *Cultivating Coexistence*, 2017. .
Manifesta 12 Palermo. URL <http://m12.manifesta.org/planetary-garden/>
(accessed 9.22.23).
- McGrory, B.D., 2024. Heathrow security rethink after secret dossier mislaid [WWW Document]. URL <https://www.thetimes.com/article/heathrow-security-rethink-after-secret-dossier-mislaid-gtt3c2dlmf> (accessed 7.30.24).
- Mitchell, W.J.T. (Ed.), 2002. *Landscape and Power*, Second Edition, Second edition. ed. University of Chicago Press, Chicago.
- Murphy, M., n.d. Heathrow's Biodiversity.
- Patin, T., Bednar, R.M., Bergman, T., Boime, A., 2012. 10. George Catlin's Wilderness Utopia, in: *Observation Points: The Visual Poetics of National Parks*. University of Minnesota Press, pp. 207–228.
- Ranciere, J., 2022. *The Time of the Landscape: On the Origins of the Aesthetic Revolution*, 1st edition. ed. Polity, Cambridge.
- Sarkar, S., 2021. Origin of the Term Biodiversity. *BioScience* 71, 893.
<https://doi.org/10.1093/biosci/biab071>
- Smith, A., 2023. *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, 1st edition. ed. Sanage Publishing House.
- Staff, 2004. Police investigate loss of Heathrow terror dossier. *The Guardian*.
- Stewart, A.J., 2009. Celebrities and Politicians Plant Trees on Site of Proposed Third Runway. URL <https://hacan.org.uk/?p=1092> (accessed 7.30.24).
- Troupe, M., Ross, K., 2018. *The Zad and NoTAV: Territorial Struggles and the Making of a New Political Intelligence*. Verso Books, London ; Brooklyn, NY.
- Weizman, E., Weizman, I., 2014. *Before and After: Documenting the Architecture of Disaster*. Strelka Press, London.
- Whispering Weeds · Mat Collishaw, n.d. . Mat Collishaw. URL <https://matcollishaw.com/works/whispering-weeds/> (accessed 8.4.24).