

## Airport/Wilderness

### Abstract

In 2012 the airport authority Heathrow Holdings Limited launched a landscaping initiative it named Heathrow Biodiversity. This photo essay charts the part played by art in that initiative and reflects on what our discoveries contribute to discourses of art in the Anthropocene.

I take as a point of departure the search for Orchard Farm, a site of special scientific interest (SSSI) that formed part of the initiative. Though I fail to locate the farm with any certainty, I uncover much else of interest, not least layered and intersecting histories of quarrying, horticulture, waste disposal, terrorism, human habitation and eviction, as well as an exclusion zone in which thickets perform a strategic role in enforcement.

The search also gives rise to theoretical discourses, notably cross readings between aesthetics, economics and natural history. These help us locate the origins of biodiversity within a tradition of 18<sup>th</sup> century landscaping in Europe, and above all in its capacity to legitimize capital accumulation and conceal expulsions from the land. Drawing on this history, I argue that at Heathrow nature demised resurrects as reserve. Indeed, rather than putting the airport into a better relationship with the environment, as the name might suggest, Heathrow Biodiversity facilitates the ever further extension of the airport into the landscape.

Keywords: aesthetics; border ecologies; decolonising landscape; Heathrow Biodiversity; botany; urban nature.

An earlier version of this piece took the form of an artist talk 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).

## Heathrow Biodiversity

It is the first May Day holiday, 2023. I have set out in search of a real estate holding by the name of Orchard Farm. Some artist friends and I are thinking of setting up an observatory for the study of the airport environment. We have in mind a kind of culturally inverted air traffic control tower, somewhere from which to survey, unofficially, the ground that gets the planes in the air (Fig. 1). The farmhouse or a barn might be just the ticket.

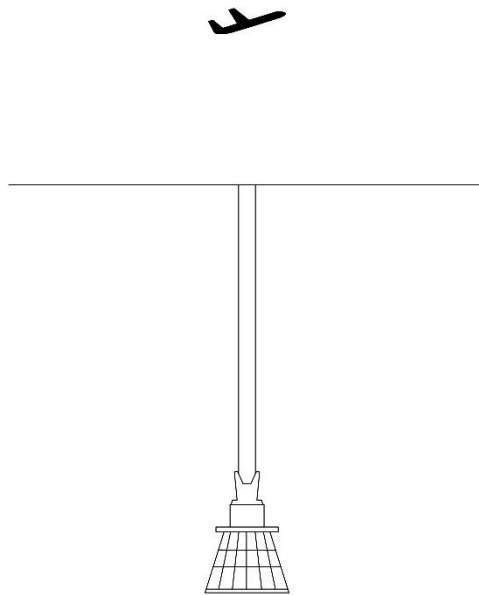


Figure 1. Nicholas Ferguson. 2023. Heathrow Observatory.

The area I am scouting lies in the Colne Valley that passes to the west of the airport. The northern edge is bound by Harmondsworth Moor, the southern Stanwell Moor and the western the M25 London orbital motorway. The valley is designated London Green Belt, a positive vision for a recreation zone that buffers the sprawling metropolis from the

countryside beyond. There are footpaths and fishing lakes, a golf course and sports fields.

Yet landscape contestation is everywhere. Take, for example, the small guidebook I've brought along, *Walking in the Footsteps of an Edwardian, Nine Fascinating Walks Through the Colne Valley Park* (Colne Valley Regional Park, 2022). It comprises maps, anecdotes, quotations and images that are both historical and contemporary, and presented in the manner of a before and after, as if by way of documenting a disaster. The cover bears the logos of Heritage Lottery, Ordnance Survey, Colne Valley Regional Park and Groundwork, a third sector organisation that describes itself as taking 'practical action to create a fair and green future in which people, places, and nature thrive' ("Groundwork," n.d.). These representations tell us that in producing the guide, organisations large and small, local and national, want us to hear and contribute to a story of the landscape that balances the needs of people and nature.

The guide cannot help but highlight the fact that the area of the Colne Valley that can be walked is decreasing. Indeed, in 1998 a sizeable chunk of Harmondsworth Moor was made over to British Airways for the purposes of a new headquarters, Waterside (Niesewand, 1998). In other places large swathes of land, mainly those closest to the airport, have been fenced off and are slowly returning to wilderness. Over coffee at the Colne Valley Regional Park Visitor centre, I hear how the airport is rapidly and systematically eating the ground. Within living memory, locals would build rafts and sail them down the Colne at West Drayton. Now it is too polluted. The whole lower valley is an encapsulated countryside at tipping point. But in the law courts everything is denounced as suppositional. Could we collate evidence of landscape decline? Could we produce analysis of linear infrastructure and its effects on landscape quality?

According to a community page on the airport's website, Orchard Farm belongs to an environmental heritage initiative, Heathrow Biodiversity (Murphy, n.d.). There is little detail about the farm itself (it is not even marked on the map that accompanies the text) but the initiative itself is framed up in terms as superlative as they are intriguing: it is ten years since the airport won the Wildlife Trust's biodiversity benchmark award; there are 13 biodiversity sites amounting to 170 hectares, about 10% of the airport's property.

“Heathrow Biodiversity?” Is a biodiverse airport not a contradiction in terms? Doesn’t everybody know that an airport represents the triumph of science and technology over nature, biodiversity its emancipation? Yet, within the arts, the epithet ‘biodiverse’ for an industrial landscape 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 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. 2). These are stories of survival and resilience against the odds. Of potent liminality.



Figure 2. Paul-Armand Gette. 1980. Photograph of a Berlin street with *Ailanthus altissima*. From the exhibition ‘Exotik als Banalität.

There is an even older convention that seeks to bring recognition to ordinary ecologies. In its European vein, Albrecht Dürer’s *The Great Piece of Turf*, 1503, is a seminal example (Fig. 3). The vegetation in Dürer’s watercolour painting - plantain, meadowgrass, dandelion and saxifrage - might belong to any patch of ground. The work stages 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. 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.



Figure 3. Albrecht Dürer. 1503. *The Great Piece of Turf*. Digital Commons.

What if the designation ‘biodiversity site’ for a parcel of airport land choked with common brambles and besmirched with 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. 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.

### **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. He lived across the valley during the 1960s and early seventies and would seem to have been the first to engage with the area's 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, 2012, pp. 1–2)

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’ (Mabey and Sinclair, 2010). Furthermore, to tell his story, he made ample 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 the painting's flora just now is taken from *Weeds* – and it is undoubtedly Mabey that artist Matt Collishaw is also channelling in his digital rendering of Dürer, *Whispering Weeds*, (“*Whispering Weeds · Mat Collishaw*,” n.d.), exhibited in 2024 at nearby Kew Gardens on the far side of the airport.

For cultural traditions alarmed by the ravages of industry on the landscape, Mabey's revisionism has afforded much needed reassurance that things are not as bad as they

might appear. His line of thought and methodology have been as influential as seductive. The acclaimed publication 'Edgelands. Journeys into England's True Wilderness' (Roberts and Farley, 2012) acknowledges Mabey's lineage. The research project *Natura Urbana* (Gandy, 2022) would be unimaginable without them, both the thesis and the use of art as lens. In a sense, my search brings this discourse back to its geographical starting point. Indeed, in the longer term, it would be interesting to take Mabey's description of the Middlesex borderlands as a biodiversity baseline from which, so to speak, to 'fact check' some of the core concepts of urban nature. Can it really be that the prosaic requirements of air transport, rather than public spirited Green Belt visionaries, are creating the conditions needed to save this corner of England from ecocide? And what would happen if the checking process were scaled up, for example, by comparing findings across multiple airport ecologies?

For the present, however, I'll need to limit my enquiry to the more manageable task of reconnaissance. To establish in broad brushstrokes the ecological contours of the Colne Valley as it comes in contact with the airport. To locate Orchard Farm. This is not to say that I'll be working within the register of a 'general idea'. Rather, it is to claim value for knowledge gleaned through the soles of ones feet and brought into conversation with traditions of speculation, storytelling and aesthetic theory. In this endeavour, I'll be placing art firmly within the scene, but not quite as Mabey did. If for Mabey, art was an interpretive lens, for me it seems also to be a protagonist. This will be one of the central contentions of my account. The expectation is to complicate the history of art's relations with ecology. With these ideas in mind, I find myself slipping through a fence into a patch of scrubland immediately west of the airport and preparing to camp the night (Fig. 4).

### **Going to Ground**

I sleep in fits and starts, lulled by the hum of the motorway. One such 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. 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 draw nearer through 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 that within terminal building (Fig. 5).



Figure 4. Nicholas Ferguson. 2023. Camping.

### **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”.<sup>1</sup> It strikes me as curious that grassland should retain a name reflecting horticultural heritage. Until I realise that the farm, like the Harmondsworth Barn, is yet another mediator of oppositions. 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 was the original home to the

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<sup>1</sup> Since its citation in an earlier version of this publication the communication has been modified and the mention of translocation dropped.



premium desert apple Cox Orange Pippin first cultivated by Richard Cox in 1825 (“Heritage apples,” 2022) and Cox’s grave lies in the churchyard of St Mary’s, Harmondsworth, less than half a mile to the north of the airport perimeter (Fig. 6). In the immediate post war period, Coxes accounted for some five million of the UK’s fruit trees. Perhaps they were even grown at 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).

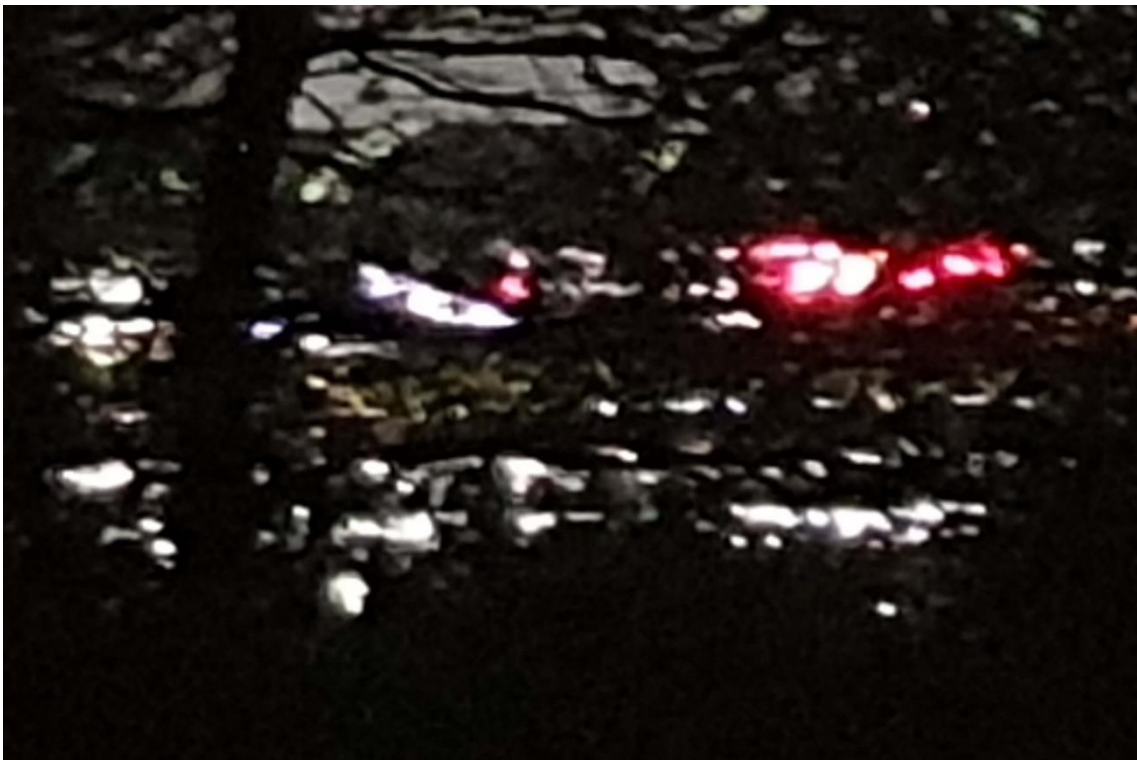


Figure 5. Nicholas Ferguson. 2023. Heathrow Terminal 5.

The apple and its story is undoubtedly a powerful emblem, but the tendency to the romanticisation of this horticultural hero masks a larger truth. The manicured orchards were undoubtedly the Heathrow of their day and could never have been an emblem of biodiversity. They belonged to a global marketplace that was a function of world connectivity whose condition of possibility would soon become the airport. In horticultural terms it would mean ever larger farms, more effective pesticides, cheaper

labour, faster movement of produce through the supply chain and an even greater burden on ecosystems. 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).



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

Yet there is another problem. If by the twenty-first century the farm had defaulted to grassland, what exactly was moved? Livestock? Even if we are to bracket the problem of cattle or sheep on a farm whose name has to do with fruit, this seems an unlikely answer. Animals are quite capable of moving 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.



Figure 8. Nick Ferguson. Bedfont Court Estate.

The place in which I've arrived betrays a recent history of settlement. There is a beech-lined road leading away towards the airport, though I recall no entrance on the perimeter road. There are collapsed homes and still-standing sheds. Here a child's slide, there a milk crate. 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



Figure 9. Nick Ferguson. Bedfont Court Estate.

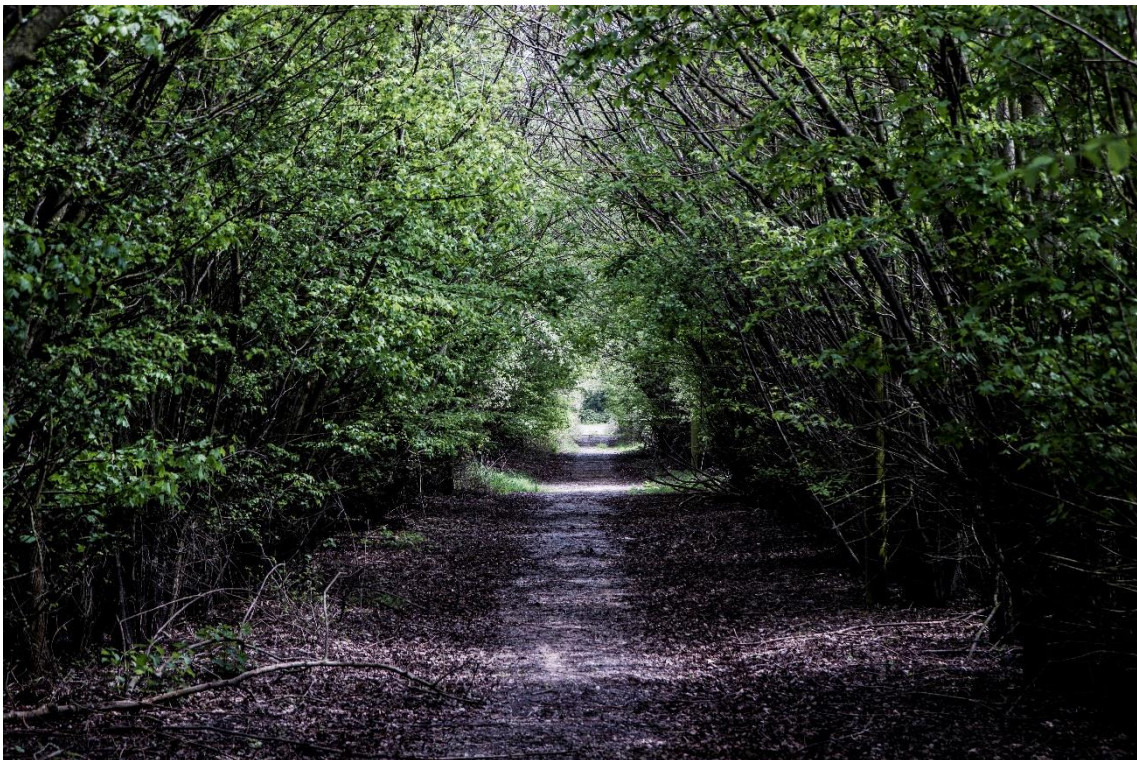


Figure 10. Nick Ferguson. Figure. Nick Ferguson. Bedfont Court Estate.

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 for the jaundiced sky (Fig.). If it feels any disenchantment, you won't know this from the extravagance of the blooms. Unless you decide that, sensing its time is up, it is giving its all for the future of its genes.



Figure 11. Nick Ferguson. Bedfont Court Estate.

An Ordnance Survey map dated 2012 names the plot as Bedfont Court Estate. A web search on the name brings up photos on a clandestine urban exploration forum posted in the same year by one Zombizza. Among the images captured are ruined interiors. There are curtains (still drawn), furniture and personal belongings as if to suggest hurried departure. In one scene a bathroom cabinet with a set of nail art designs; in another an armchair and a newspaper on a Persian style rug and in the background a piano, its lid lifted as if waiting to be played (Figure 13). In keeping with the forum's niche travelogue genre, the photographs are accompanied by a note whose tone and content treads a line between bravado and research. Zombizza states the existence of ten smallholdings



Figure 12. Zombizza. 2012. Untitled.



Figure 13. Zombizza. 2012. Untitled.

provided in the inter war period by the local authority, Middlesex County Council. To clarify a point of British cultural and political history represented in the view: the housing was 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. Zombizza also lets us know that the last to leave was “the granny at number 14... stubborn to the end....a fond musician despite the noise from the sky and it was in her house that I found the piano.” (“Report - - Bedfont Court Estate - Homes and Martinoil Ltd - Feb 2012 | Other Sites,” 2012).<sup>1</sup>

### **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, economist Adam Smith, takes its model from the harmonious, self-regulating system of nature (Smith, 2023). Around the same time as this now infamous meeting, or very shortly after, a new concept of landscape was introduced into the philosophical nexus he assembled, one which departed from the schematic principles of the formal garden and embraced the aesthetics of wilderness.

My suggestion is that laissez faire economics and the wilderness aesthetic are linked. In what follows we’ll explore this link, finding at its centre a notion of landscape as conceptual artwork. We’ll hear too how these ideas account for the appearance of the landscape where I am encamped. Suffice to say, Bedfont Court Estate was not always a zone of inattention but has become one as a consequence of its proximity to the airport, whose free-market economic principles are long established.

First, a firmer definition of landscape. By landscape I mean the purposeful, interested articulation of the ground and which takes the form of a cultural image of what and for whom any given ground might be. 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 of this image is an art. The version of landscape that concerns us here is that which is written into the ground, which is to say, is a form of extra mural art.

Landscaping practices are manifold, globally dispersed, and geo-spatially contingent. Yet there is one whose history and theoretical analysis would seem to resonate with the core elements of our story so far and, therefore, merits closer attention. Its best known apologist today is philosopher Jacques Rancière, who tells us that in the early eighteenth century a version of landscape evolved in England, in contradistinction to agriculture and on the estates of landed gentry, as a means to cultivate sensuous pleasure among social elites (Ranciere, 2022). Landscaping involved 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.

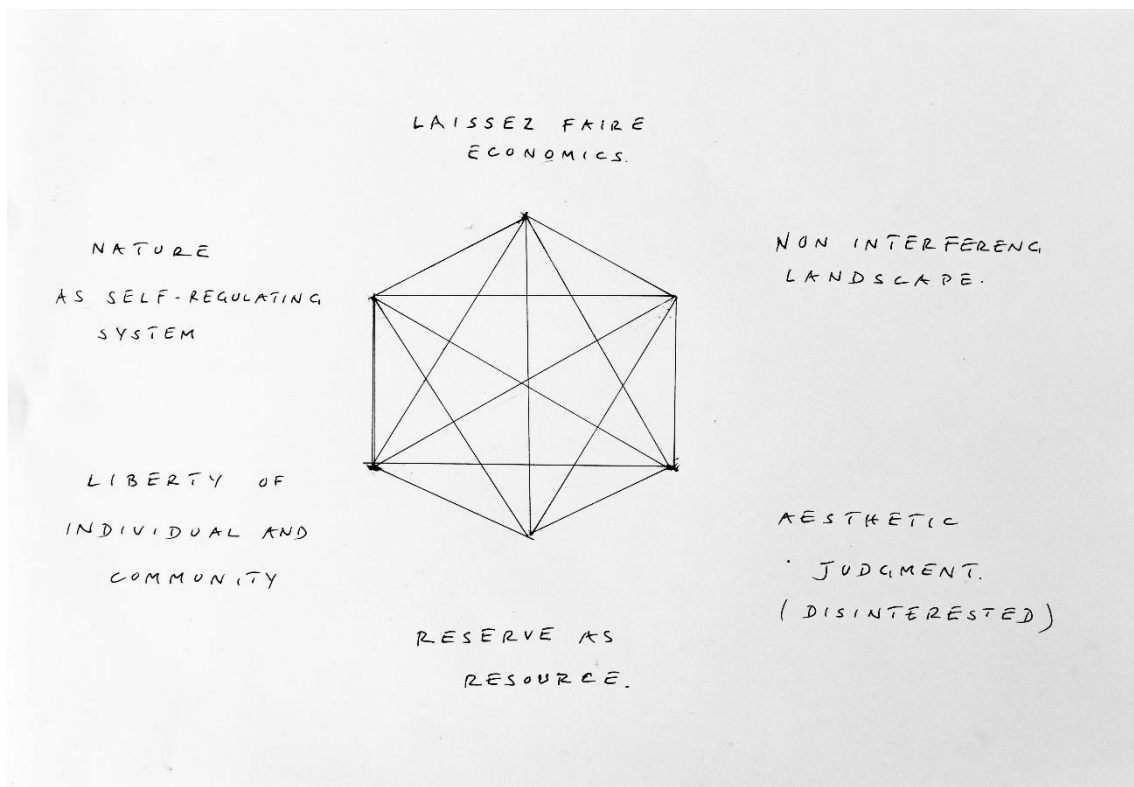


Figure 14. Nicholas Ferguson. 2023. Art, Nature, Freedom.



Yet this imaginary quickly came to constitute a political and social order more widely. To the 18<sup>th</sup> 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. Rancière narrates that this conceptualisation of landscape 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 18<sup>th</sup> 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 14. It forms a polyhedron, in which the concepts stand around the edges and the lines between them represent two-way flows of influence.

As liberal values took root, this nexus came to inform the way relations between art, nature, infrastructure and politics were conceptualised more widely. We find in the concept of the national park, the landscape vision of painter George Catlin that led to the foundation of Yellowstone, USA in 1872 (Patin et al., 2012). The national park, like its parent concept liberalism, is now global. 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.

### **Debris and Thickets**

Venturing from my tent, I head west towards the motorway along a track. A deer bolts for cover. Soon my course is obstructed by water and treacherous bog. Over them a



Figure 15. Nicholas Ferguson. 2023. Thicket



Figure. Nick Ferguson. 2023. Thicket. Bedfont Court Estate.



Figure 16. Nicholas Ferguson. 2023. Thicket 3.

lattice of willow has woven. Bramble cloaks the higher areas, denying the satisfaction afforded by a vanishing point. The growth forms thickets so dense that, if it were not for the aircraft screaming hysterically overhead 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. The thickets are extensive. The brambles especially have begun traversing the network of roads and paths. They run along the top of sealed surfaces, putting down shoots where they find a break. Before long, I'd estimate a year or two, the entire estate will be an exclusion zone for those on foot. This means that it will soon be impossible to know anything about the present here let alone the past. The airport will have secured near total control of the information space. It is perhaps surprising, though, not to find it listed among the airport's biodiversity sites. Does it mark an entirely separate order of inattention management? Whereas the biodiversity sites are spaces of managed neglect, the former Bedfont Court Estate represents unmanaged neglect. Which is also to say, hyper-managed, in the sense of *laissez faire* to the extreme. The thickets are coopted as strategic enforcers of exclusion.

A planning application to Hillingdon Council dated 2013 reveals that Bedfont Court Estate was compulsorily purchased in 2002. The planning application was for a purposes of a new phase of gravel extraction and the spaces were to be filled with ‘inert waste’ 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 to connect up a new airport terminal completed in 2008 (ref.). 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.

The next photo gives context to the demolition we’ve witnessed, revealing it to be part in a wide reaching, systematic programme of depopulation (Fig.14). It is taken just beyond the estate and the paths here can still be traversed because they remain enshrined in law as public rights of way, but access is restricted to all but pedestrians.



Figure 14. Nicholas Ferguson. 2023. Stanwell Moor.

## **Biodiversity as Aesthetic Legacy**

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 18<sup>th</sup> 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 historical backdrop goes well beyond its capacity to shine a light on the landscape at Bedford Court Estate. It also reveals a practical function. Enclosed land also served the purposes of reserve. In Britain land was enclosed during the Napoleonic wars to accelerate the restoration of woodland and 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 represent an evolutionary mutation in this lineage. Coined in the US in the mid-1980s, the term biodiversity was first 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 the effect is the same, a certain freedom born of an alignment of politics, economics and land enclosure.

Back in my tent and browsing the web, I am tickled by the thought of the piano at number 14. Of the old woman banging away on the keys in defiance. Of an out of time and out of tune ragtime (or was boogie-woogie?) resonating against the whine of jet engines. Of her banging it out louder and louder, holding on, holding out. Of an acoustic utopia rising into the aether as the din descends on the land. Of melody as refusal: refusal of eviction, the machine, airspaces. Of the Anthropocene.

## Aerial Land

I opened this account with a quotation on enclosure from German philosopher Martin Heidegger which I encountered in Yuk Hui's philosophical treatise on art and technology. The passage would seem to bring detail to the ground on which I am camped. 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 that of the machine, 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 beams a light on the estate. As a reserve, it joins the ranks of other airport assets on standby - fire engines and snow ploughs, tanks of aviation fuel, stretches of parking apron. And where there are conceptual differences between nature as reserve and, say, a snow plough as reserve, these highlight their expediency. We might 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 back in the day they might have come to like 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 is the New Public Art**

It perhaps needs stating 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 aerial logic of 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.

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).



Figure 17. Nick Ferguson. 2024. Heathrow Jam. Dossier Edition.

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 an Esso petrol station on the airport perimeter road 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/her/their 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 (Fig. 17).

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 been spared a confrontation with a Dobermann. Beyond this admittedly entirely selfish insight, we also learn that security has played a role in the systematic depopulation of the airport hinterland, and as such, sits alongside expansion-motivated eviction as the 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 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, Heathrow's biodiversity landscapes are to be counted as artworks, security is their 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.

### **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. 18). 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 18. Nicholas Ferguson. Bricked up building, Stanwell Moor.



Figure 19. Nicholas Ferguson. 2023. Before and After: Bedfont Court Estate.

### **Lessons for Art and Ecology**

The search for Orchard Farm has opened up critical issues around biodiversity after the global in aesthetic, historical and philosophical terms. We have witnessed the removal of public access to land that once inspired Richard Mabey's 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 in the landscape 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 18<sup>th</sup> 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 have ultimately shaped this landscape. 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 also sought 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 visited 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 lessons this May Day fable holds for the wider 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 in empirical terms the airport botany today. The terrain described by Mabey in the 1970s and the survey of 1987 has gifted a point of comparison, enabling an evidentiary approach to the changing face of biodiversity in the 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, the excursion also highlights the problem that access raises for research in both practical and ethical terms. It has been easy enough for me - male, white, professional - to climb through a fence, and Mabey may also have exercised such privilege. However, were I 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 issue also brings to bear upon what can and cannot be discovered when research is professionalised and collectivised. The methodology deployed here would undoubtedly breach ethical codes of conduct for funded research, whether conducted individually or as part of a team. In the absence of access, it would be possible neither to formally confirm conclusively, nor wholly disavow, the claims around ecological diversity made by Heathrow Biodiversity. At large is a case for taking research outside the academy and its funding conditions.

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. Nature performs a legitimising role, aided and abetted by art. The collective and 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 must inevitably work.

#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Every effort has been made to contact Zombizza. If this is you and you would like to be credited for your photographs, please get in touch.

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