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Journeys Through Time, Space and Memory.
Susie Olczak
Written in Isolation, May 2020

“Mappers really of networks of mutual relation, endeavouring to stitch their thinking into unfamiliar scales of time and space... the possible means by which people might move and think together across landscapes”

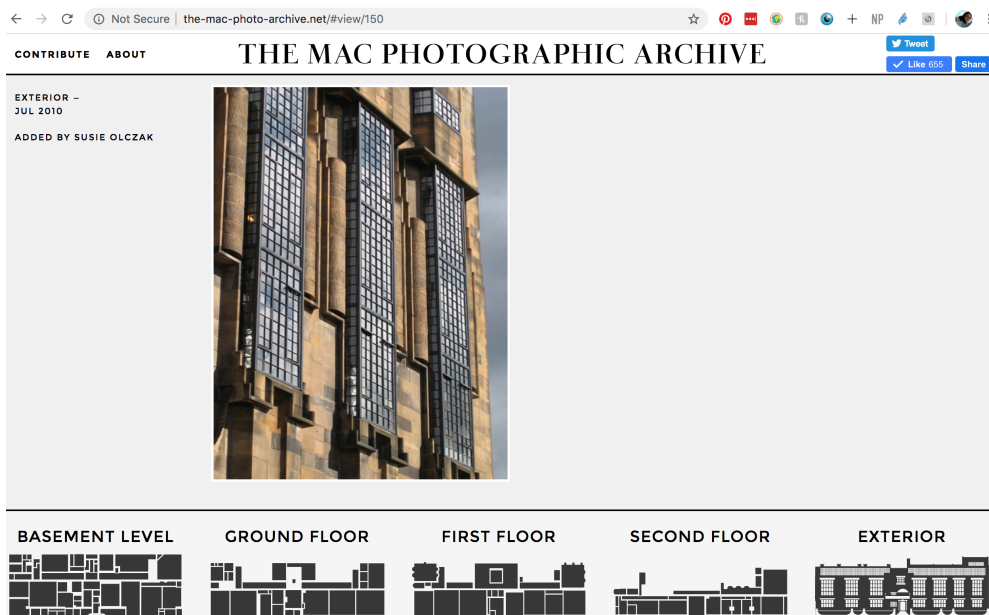
Robert Macfarlane. *The Underland*. Read during Isolation, April 2020

As I sit here in lockdown, unable to travel and as an artist who gets most of my inspiration from this I am left to reminisce about past journeys or to consider the possibilities of travelling within the digital and the screen. The possibility to zoom, to scroll and to situate myself within different worlds simultaneously has great appeal, however I wonder what that would be like if I hadn't already amassed a wide range of experiences of moving through physical spaces. Whether in the countryside I've grown up in, the cities I've lived in or the new places I've ventured to.

Growing up in Lincolnshire, the experience of moving through landscapes was always so dominated by the horizon, the flatness around means that sky seems larger than in other places I've been to. Though this is certainly something that is even more exaggerated in parts of America. Driving from Salt Lake City to Nevada a few years ago, I was struck by the vastness around me. I find it interesting as a result how different people view scale, depending on where they grew up. Most in the UK would consider a five hour drive a long trip, but over In the USA those kind of journeys are done without much question. Scale and time seem to contract, to expand and condense depending on the context. Time is also something I've thought about a lot during the last few weeks, as at first it seemed to go very slowly and now it feels perhaps faster than normal weeks would pre lockdown which I find disorientating. I'm yet to understand why this is the case, but I know that our perception of time alters with the seasons so perhaps the unprecedented nature of what is happening now also has an affect. I often wonder what can be learnt through disorientation. As Hito Steyerl speaks about in her essay *On Free Fall*, it often feels like we are all unable to find stable ground but in that I feel there is so much potential.

Another experience that universally unites people is their search for the sun, or for that moment where its rays first appear to hit the ground, or fade away into the night. In 2006, studying at the Glasgow School of Art in the Mackintosh building in Glasgow, I never tired of making sure I was in the hen run at sunset, a space at the top that is designed to maximise on light. Walking through the doors with a sign saying staff and students only with a sense of pride and moving through the stairways and corridors lined with casts is an experience of architecture I will never forget. Now as a result of the two fires, the imagery created throughout its history acts as both a memorial to the building but can be

used to try to stitch together reality and to rebuild the structures. The digital has such an impact on the physical in this way. It becomes intertwined as do the layers of experiences that the building once held, the fragments from the collective documentation of it.



This piecing together of experience of moving through spaces is fundamental to my interests as an artist. I believe that through this we can make sense of the disorientating nature of the bombardment we have of media and of sensory experiences. Visuals shifting between time periods, places and the virtual and physical. Times when I can lose myself away from the screen have been most significant in my life thus far. I am lucky to have been able to spend a lot of time in the mountains, particularly in The Alps, but also the foothills of the Himalayas and the Andes.



Photo: Darjeeling, India.

In all of these situations, whilst moving through these spaces, compared to my experience growing up, the verticality is of course a key factor to the experience. The vastness of what is around and the way that history and geology seems to be stacked up but at the same time breaking away around us. When down the mountain especially when off the marked terrain you face your mortality in a way that is not experienced in any other setting. One wrong step or turn and you could potentially fall to your death or down a crevasse. I've been inside snow caves and underneath glaciers in ice caves and in both situations it's incredible how little you can hear of the outside world. You enter a world within the physical world where you are sensory deprived.





Around seventeen years ago I was fortunate to be able to go to Venezuela, where my mum was born and grew up. We spent time exploring the jungles and undertook an epic adventure to Angel Falls involving a flight in a small plane and many hours going up river before spending the night sleeping in hammocks waking up with the view of the waterfall. I remember distinctly although I was quite young, the experience of water from above, feeling the power even though I was so separated spatially whilst looking down on the cascades like a bird.



Photos: Caimana, Venezuela from above



Photo: Angel Falls, Venezuela .

Contrasting this with the different experience of then spending so long on the water to reach the final destination, winding through the small rapids and forging through the landscapes. I wonder what it would have been like for my paternal grandfather as a navigator in the war for the Polish regiment of the UK airforce, having to learn to find one's way from above and how different that is to navigating through spaces by foot, air, boat or by bike. As a result of that trip to Venezuela I have also thought a lot about the journeys of my maternal grandmother and how she was so courageous for that time, as she used to travel back to England from South America alone on ships. My great aunt on my mother's side too was an intrepid explorer. She travelled alone to far flung parts of the world, amassing a vast collection of photographs now currently awaiting archiving. My mothers side of the family all have some connection with travel and navigation, her father, my grandfather who I never met as he died before I was born was a cartographer. I often think about him when I look at maps, both the digital and paper versions and wonder what it must be like to draw them up. about the process of understanding the surrounding environments in such a way, piecing together sections of it and I think about how you can connect with someone through a relationship to landscape and space, even if you don't connect in that present moment. The way we orientate ourself using different viewpoints and frame aspects of the world is another key interest for me within my art practice.



I am very conscious of the elements when I'm moving through spaces, the wind in the city as it howls in-between buildings, the way that in the mountains the weather can completely change in a matter of seconds and before you know it you find yourself having to navigate down the mountain without being able to see further than your arms reach away. The sea too can change from calm and tranquil to volatile and aggressive in a matter of minutes, an experience I once had in Brazil where I came quite close to being lost at sea during a storm whilst I was in the water. I am interested in how the surrounding materials retain a history, the rocks around you can tell so much about the past enclosed within them and the trees and plants have a network that allows them to communicate with each other and possibly also us.

Photo Angel Falls, Venezuela.

Experiences of hot and cold are also so important, I once climbed an active volcano alone in Iceland and at the top I took off my shoes, digging my feet deep into the group and feeling the warmth beneath them.



Photo: Heimaey, Iceland.

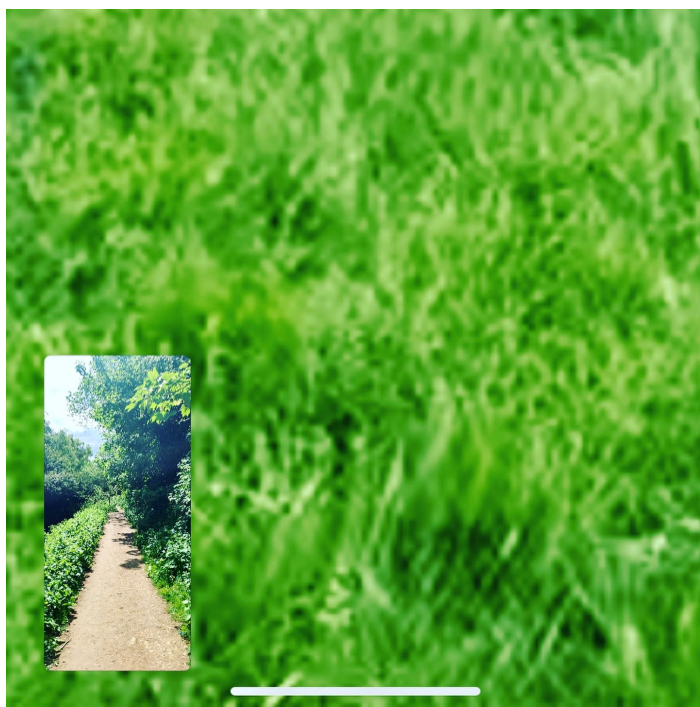
I'm also increasingly more aware of the way that nature creeps into urban space and how it finds a way to grow despite all odds. During lockdown the experience of nature seems heightened when I'm out on my daily walks or runs, the colours seem more vivid. I wonder if it is because I'm seeing it less or is it because of the reduction in emissions? I distinctly remember in the deserts of Nevada being aware of how much colour was so vibrant in contrast to the dust of the ground and the flatness around. Maybe this is what nature is for us during these times. A sense of vibrancy, hope and of salvation.



Photo: Hackney, London.

Understanding materials as I walk or move through spaces is an inspiration for my work, I love the way that materials within architecture often feel like they are suspended above our head or have a sense of movement even within the densest structures. I often listen to Material Matters by Grant Gibson as I walk and since reading Stuff Matters by Mark Miodownik I am even more obsessed by what we can learn from the materials that surround us. I think it is so important to try to take notice of the things around us we might normally take for granted and to question how they are made. When living in Kyoto when I was twenty I became fascinated by the way that the Japanese pay appreciation to the things within nature like the changing seasons and turning of the leaves that we may enjoy but not pay homage to in such a way in the west. I also used to visit Kiyamizudera often to investigate the way that the wooden structures within architecture were constructed without any fixings, the forms slot together and the temple structure is poised over the hill without any other support. I wonder what this construction method could tell us about how we can live as society? How can we support and fit together and how can we construct in a way that allows for flexibility and adaptation.

During lockdown I have experienced adaptation like never before, I've been alone for the longest time in my life, before I've travelled alone and I feel it's important to do this especially if like me



you find it intimidating but even then you meet people quite often. As a result of the isolation I've been experimenting with going on virtual walks with fellow artist Sally Stenton, we have been taking each other on split screen navigations through places on google maps and video calling each

other whilst walking on the walks we go on outside In the 'real' world (whatever that means) on our allocated daily walks. During our walks we have been talking about significant journeys and discussing the importance of getting lost. I've also been working on collective projects where people send me videos of the sea and I'm going to make work based on collective experiences of places I don't currently have access to. I'm going to try to do a couple of things using video conferencing platforms. One where we live stream people filming the sea at different places in different time zones simultaneously. I think the live aspect is important. The other is I'd like to host an exhibition within the different rectangles of our screens. So that the viewer is able to see into individual curated worlds whilst pushing the format of the platform.

Photos: Digital Walks in two parts of Cambridgeshire with Sally Stenton.

I've been thinking a lot during CV-19 of the journey we are all going on and the things that the situation we are in has highlighted. The fragility but at the same time strength of the society we live in. On one hand the disconnect within humanity, racial issues and the rich poor divide. As although we are all going through this experience we are not experiencing it equally and on the other the way that humanity has come together, shown compassion and strength. I've also been considering the effects of climate change as although hardly anyone is travelling we still haven't reached the correct reduction in emissions, which is quite frankly a terrifying thought. As is the fact that globalisation, increased travel and the human intrusion on nature, the cutting down of forests and therefore the way we have forced animals to be in closer proximity to us has most likely exacerbated the likelihood of this pandemic and indeed that of future ones. What will it mean to experience this again in years to come when the effects of climate change and mass migration are already present? Or how can we learn from this and make changes for the better?

The experience of the digital is also incredibly pertinent to our current situation. I am definitely someone who sees some benefits within technology but who loves to be as present as possible in any given moment. I have been thinking a lot about how technology can be used creatively and to add layers of experience to augment the non digital world rather than to detract from it. How can the digital increase inclusivity and how can it be used safely and without increased narcissism and rupture between people. For as much as it has helped people connect during these times, the polarisation between people has certainly been heightened further really recently. As has the impact of fake news including false statistics. I don't think anything should ever detract from seeing things IRL, but how can it add value?

Finally, I wonder about the journey we are all now on, collectively and individually. How can we navigate through turbulent circumstances and how close are we at any one time to a catastrophe? How do we learn to live in a precarious world? Questions Anna Tsing asks in *The Mushroom at the End of the World: on the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins*. How can we use nature as a tool to understand how we can come out stronger at the end of this experience? For surely that is the main aim of any journey.