

Situating skill: contemporary observational drawing as a spatial method in geographical research

cultural geographies

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Introduction

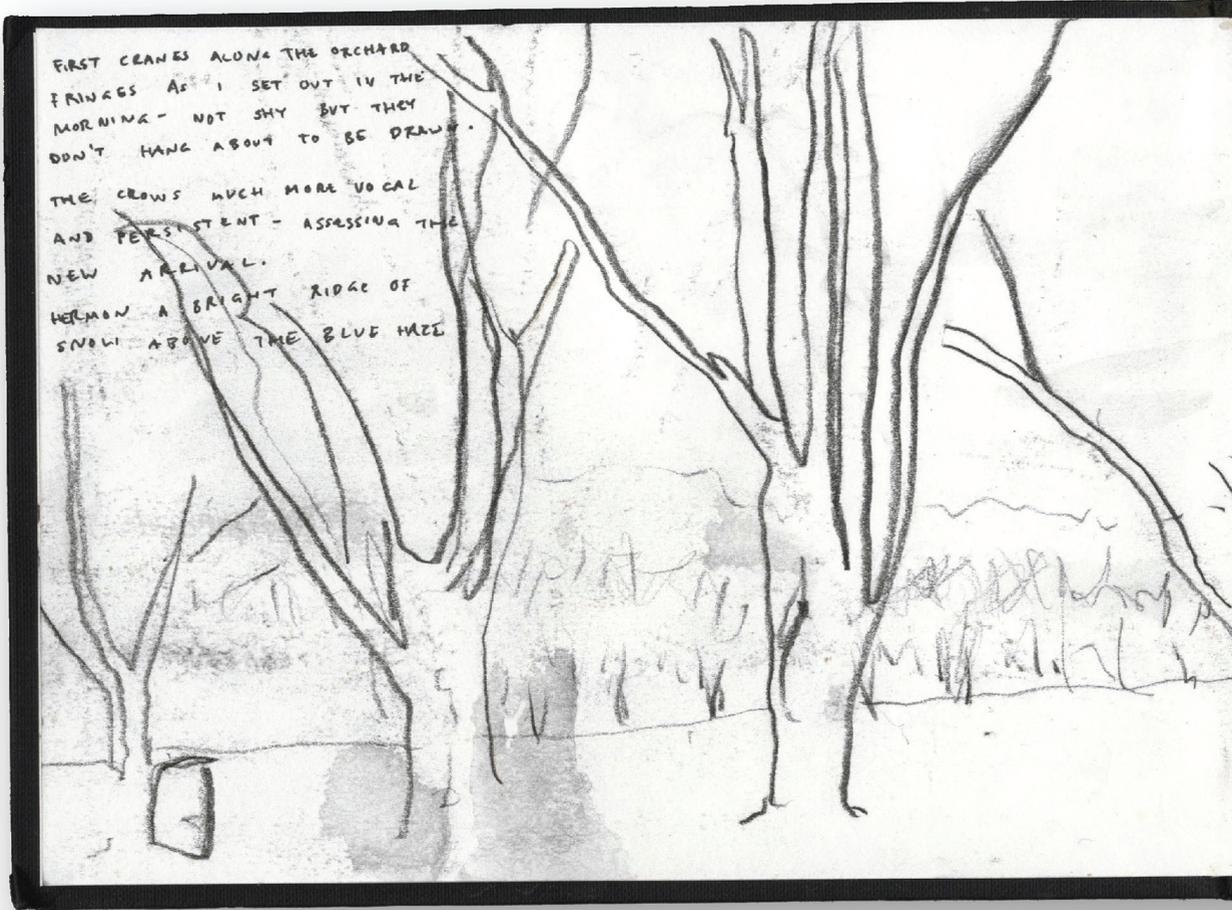
In this article, I review an experiment in posthumanist fieldwork. The purpose of the experiment is to draw out a multi-species politics of nature and land use in the Huleh Wetlands marking the northern tip of the Jordan Rift Valley.¹ Here, associations

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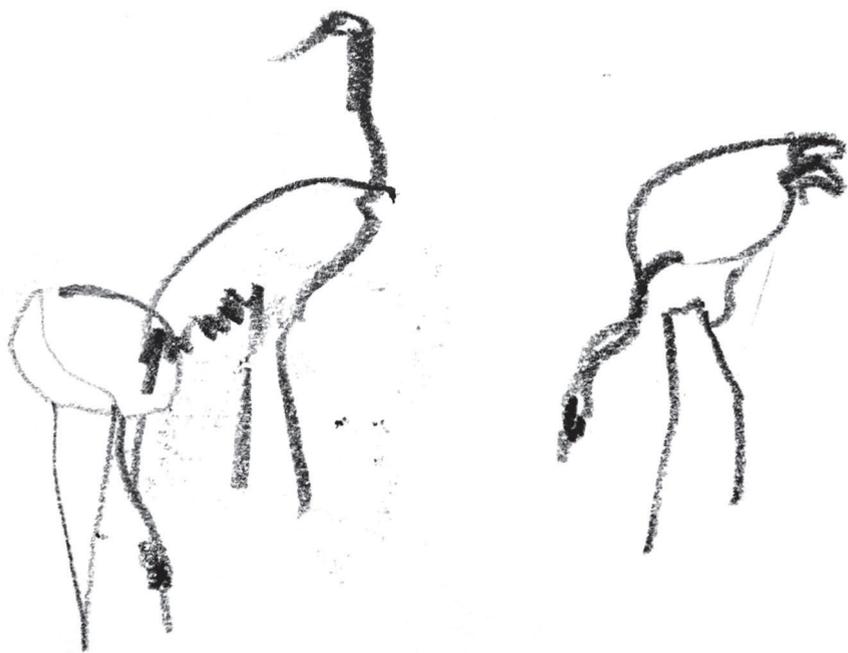
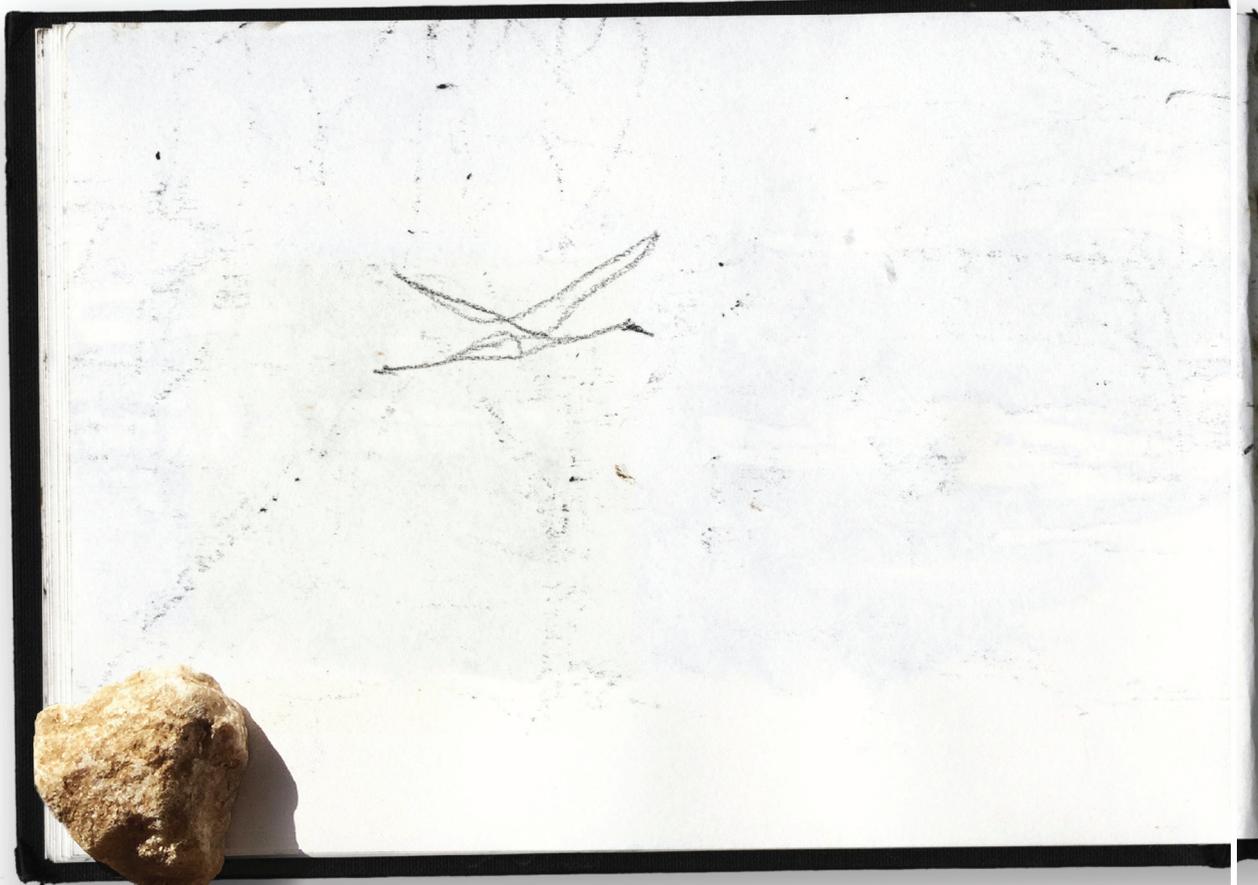
unfolding between text and image are presented as work in progress – a hybrid between traditional academic writing and the artists’ crit session.² My intention is to test out emergent ideas about the potential of observational drawing,³ as a method for attunement to spatial, temporal, material and cultural relations that play out in the ‘storying’ of a landscape. The experiment extends recent methodological invention in cultural geographical research,⁴ informed by an interest in art’s generative function of opening up a ‘space to reconnect’ with the nonhuman world.⁵ The specific skilled practice of observational drawing, despite its long history as a primary mode of research in geography and the natural sciences, remains underexplored in this contemporary context.⁶

While it is easy to think of drawing as an event taking place on the flat surface of the page, closer attention to the spatial, temporal and corporeal dimensions of



drawing *as a process* makes apparent the ways in which it is more than a one-way encounter. This observation raises the question of where 'skill' is understood to reside in the practice of observational drawing. Specifically, it suggests drawing might offer different possibilities when understood not as a system of replicable (and transferable) methods of representation, but as a particular mode of attunement, a way of opening up new spaces of encounter within a more-than-human world.

To be sure, this opposition of reiterative and generative impulses might to some extent be considered inherent to the employment of traditional skill sets. To characterise this opposition as a simple clash between 'conservative' and 'innovative' tendencies is, however, to overlook the ways in which these impulses are co-implicated in the creation of new possibilities.⁷ Furthermore, it overlooks the potential





of skilled practice for exploring parallel tensions at work in processes of worldly becoming. Thus, while I was interested in the potential rehabilitation of observational drawing as a skill for ‘more-than-representational’ research,⁸ I also wished to understand in what ways its internal contradictions could be mobilised, to hold representational and nonrepresentational logics *in tension* – in order to address what I understand as their mutual implication in the storying and playing out of particular landscapes.⁹

Here, these questions are addressed with reference to a period of preliminary fieldwork, observing the tangled cultures of humans and common cranes (*Grus grus*) in a contested and highly managed wetland environment. This fieldwork focussed on the bodies, movements and relationships of cranes and humans within the wider ecology of the Huleh Valley, and on its (in)visible histories of displacement, drainage, development and partial restoration. Running under and through these themes were tensions between farming, tourism, conservation and nation-building. Drawing offered me a way of addressing simultaneously both the immediate material relations, and the implicit narrative and representational forces, that play out in the storying of this landscape.

With its focus on human–nonhuman encounters, the experiment can rightly be read as a form of more-than-human geography. It is, however, primarily a methodological enquiry: the fieldwork is designed not so much to tell us *about* cranes, as to ask how we might begin to approach the point where it is even possible to open up space to relate differently with cranes and other nonhuman animals.

Framing and taming – the naturalist’s field journal

The blank, spread pages of the field naturalist’s journal frame a distinct orientation to landscape – consonant with familiar critiques of linear, flattening perspective and the colonial gaze.¹⁰ Historically, nature journaling is associated with the acquisitive world-making projects of modernity and colonial expansion – collection, description and classification.¹¹ As a practice, its effects could at times be quite literally deadening – much early naturalist drawing was of shot specimens,



rather than living animals which are notoriously difficult to observe closely in the field.¹² Seen within this critical framework, observational drawing has been understood as a means of ‘getting’ an accurate representation of a world ‘out there’. Such an account, however – with its necessary focus on particular historical functions of drawing as representation – nevertheless misses much of what takes place in practice, at the level of actual encounters in the field.¹³ Even within a traditional understanding of field drawing, there is more at stake than meets the ‘eye’ of representational analysis.

Experimental fieldwork – drawing as a way of opening spaces of encounter

The triad of field, observer and page marks a spatial and temporal configuration that is necessarily fragile and permeable – minor changes in orientation completely reconfigure its constituent relations. Becoming skilled in observational drawing is





a process of becoming attuned to the importance of spatial distribution, positionality, duration and change. It is worth taking a moment here to unpack some of the ways in which this process takes place.

First, a basic conceit of training in observational drawing is to take the attention away from the page, into (dis)embodied space. The process of becoming skilled in the discipline involves cultivating a 'flow' that links object, eye, elbow, wrist and hand (or the equivalent, where a non-manual technique is used). Skill involves entering a 'space' that is both off the page, and out of mind – the aim is not representation as such, but rather a process of putting aside projections and existing systems of knowledge, and becoming attuned to what is made available in a given spatial encounter.

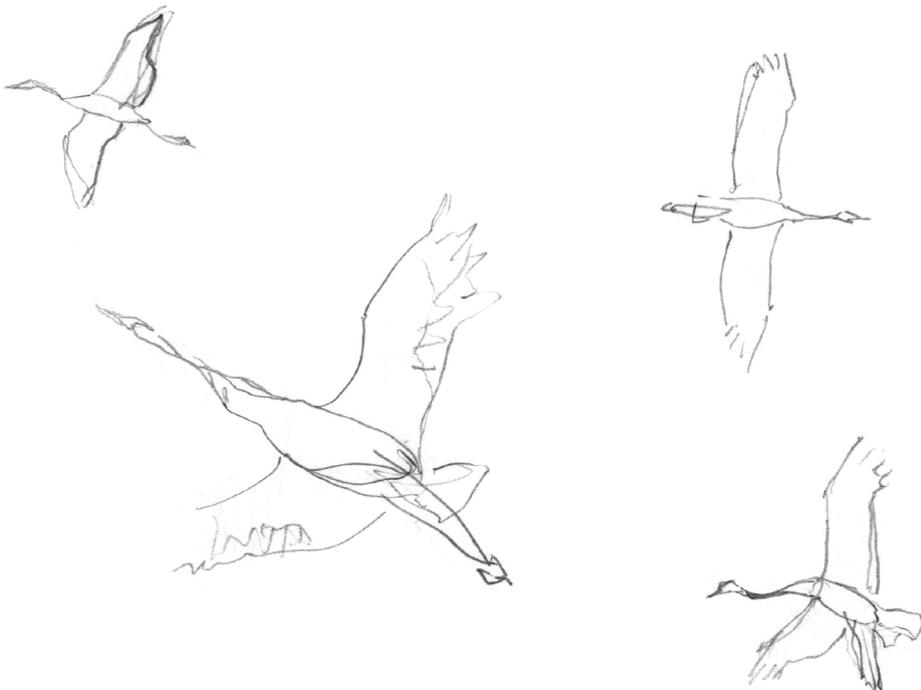
Second, observational drawing takes place within a field of spatial relations. To move, while drawing, is immediately to encounter changes in spatial distribution, with regard to both the object of attention and the wider field of observation. While techniques such as linear perspective and the use of 'negative spaces' can be argued to have a flattening effect – they are admittedly intended to translate three dimensions onto the flat plane of the page – the process of learning to draw confronts a person directly with this necessity: becoming skilled in observational drawing is a process of becoming attuned to spatial distributions. Furthermore, it is a process of becoming attentive to positionality – becoming aware of the importance of where you stand, and how you orientate yourself, in shaping what becomes available for observation.

Third, drawing is necessarily durational – it takes place over time. What is (re) produced is not an image of the ‘object’, but an image of the process of an object being observed.¹⁴ Through drawing, a person becomes attuned both to processes of change in the object and field of observation and to the processes of learning (and unlearning) that take place over the duration of the drawing event:

The cranes are not as shy here as in Somerset, but still it is difficult to get close enough and for long enough to draw. I begin to remember the frustration and excitement of drawing wild birds in the field – a world alive moves too fast to catch.¹⁵

Observation here exceeds perception: far from offering the fixture of a perspectival moment in time and space, marks made on paper become the trace of this process of attunement – of learning and unlearning through a lived encounter. This much is true even of individual drawing acts; the practice of drawing as fieldwork, however, necessarily extends beyond the observational event, requiring a person to spend time immersed within a particular relational landscape, becoming familiar with its lived spaces:¹⁶

In the soft mists of dawn, or among the orchards and eucalyptus groves at dusk, the valley speaks its spatial coordinates in the voices of cranes. On the flat valley floor, the visible world contracts easily to a circle of a few dozen meters, or soars far to the high





peak of the Hermon and the ridges and mountains that hem its sunken rift on either side. The clamour of flocking cranes at the feeding point on the Agmon lake, and the calls of individual birds and family groups scattered among the orchards, fields, and ditches, mark out the close and distant spaces of the valley.¹⁷

Working in the Huleh Valley was an opportunity not only to explore the three points outlined above, but to see how, as a method, drawing might open up further





spaces of encounter, at bodily, sensory, cultural and political registers. Here, I identify four different ways in which this played out in the field, at different scales:

First, the practicalities of fieldwork, and observational drawing in particular, generated an array of ancillary encounters: exposure to weather and climate; sensing sound, taste, touch and smell; and navigating the logistics and politics of access to site. These activities situated me in the immediacy of encounters exceeding visual principles and representational logics:

Looking up as I hear the cry of cranes overhead, I don't merely see – observe – their passing. Instead, I sense – in the ache of tired muscles, the taste of dew on the air, the warmth of sun on my back – a bodily echo of the cranes' striving presence, as their bodies rise and fall with each strong thrust of expanded wings.¹⁸

Second, the exercise of drawing at public sites in the Huleh Valley offered another way of being present in a social environment – one which opened up particular kinds of relational space both for conversation with other humans and for attention to a wider ecology. To draw in public can provoke curiosity – not only about the person drawing, but about what is being observed and, more importantly, *how* and *in what ways*. Drawing thus invites new and perhaps unfamiliar kinds of engagement and attunement, making more of what might otherwise be only casual and fleeting encounters.

Third, drawing offered a way of staying open while working in a conflicted landscape – one to which my own relationship is both intensely personal and inescapably political.¹⁹ Narratives and disputes around land-use in the Huleh Valley are highly charged; they resonate with larger projects of nation-building and ultimately with the complex politics of the



Two ables with young
fringe on new ables.

Time makes clearly an act
of stamping - what you
see changed the fact to
brown.

region as a whole. In a contested space, the temptation is often to shut down, or retreat to clearly bounded and defensible ideological positions – but I had an entirely different intention. Hasana Sharp, in the *Politics of Renaturalization*, writes of vulnerability to others as a condition of possibility for wisdom: it is in our very susceptibility to a distributed ecology of bodies and ideas that Sharp finds a route beyond the constrictive politics of sovereignty and towards the formation



of new kinds of reciprocal knowledge.²⁰ In this experiment, drawing served as a method for *becoming vulnerable* – for opening up spaces of possibility for different ways of thinking and understanding and for a fundamentally relational understanding of landscape. By finding ways to engage outside of representational logics, it becomes possible to resist the impulse to foreclosure – continuing to learn, and to elicit change, through lively and sustained encounter.



THAT SHAPE -
SO DISTINCTIVE YET
SO DIFFICULT TO CATCH...





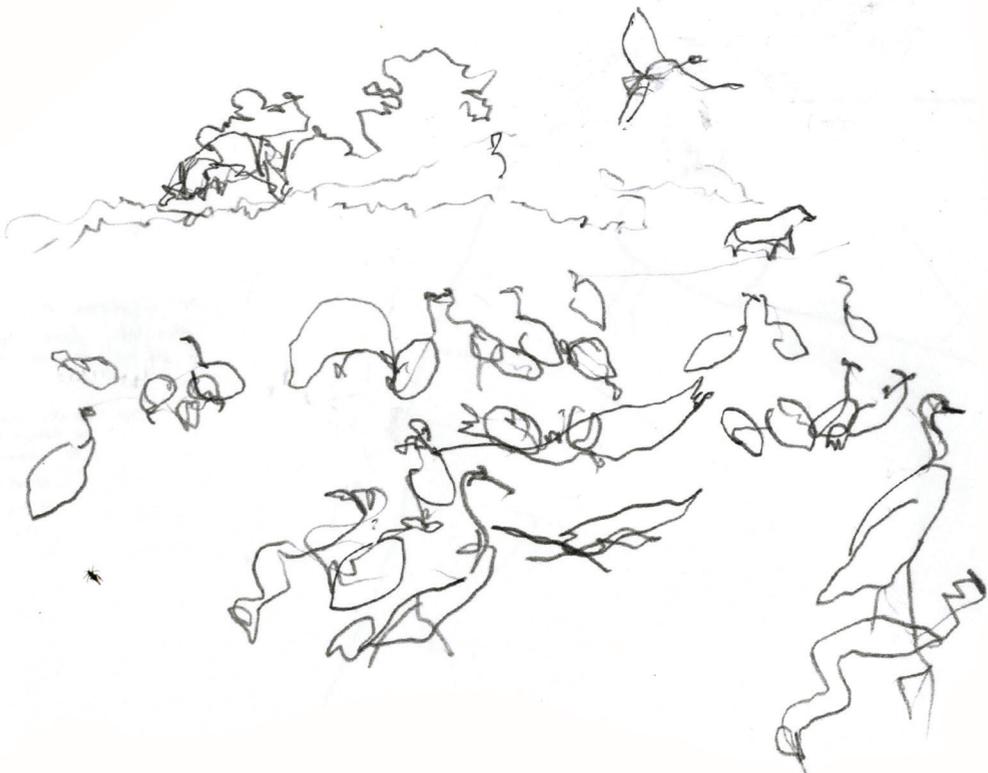
אדם גסלה די, אנו הולך
לעשות את העבודה שלי

Finally, these three modes of open-ness (corporeal, social and political) in different ways shaped my encounters with cranes in the field. Drawing became a way of relating to the lives of cranes and the different ways they play out in the landscape – how feeding and roosting habits, or the bodily excitements and fatigues of migration, interact with crop cycles, water management, tourism, and nation-building narratives. By holding these different registers in tension, drawing suggests a dissolution of boundaries between human and nonhuman, and between representation and non-representation – offering instead a space of mutual susceptibility and distributed agency in which the world speaks back to the processes of knowledge-making.

Conclusion – towards a ‘rewilding’ of wildlife art

In all these ways drawing is necessarily an encounter, negotiated at material, sensory, and affective registers, and one through which a person becomes attuned to

WILD BOAR + JACKAL AMONG THE CRANES





Speak with

1
They work on
the maintenance
and were involved
from the start

...ben 20 ... area facin 'ya m'lo bde2
...los lde b200 no e 212 rae21
de 25 m 222 2a 'ya se ...pds
to p20 m , 222

422 "That's man. wherever he goes
he makes a mess. And then I have
to come and clean up..."

shoots wolves and jackals
in the Adani; Coypu in
the Hulak; in the summer
it's parakeets

Coypu cause damage to the water levels
in the park - or is that a mis-
translation? Metsifin - could mean
simply that they are over-populating
it...

"Israel needs nice people like you, who want
to come here"

an expanded field of spatial and temporal relations. To a certain degree, the capacities of a specific drawing practice to exceed human-centred and representational logics depend upon the disposition and intentions of the individual practitioner, and the historic, cultural and political frameworks within which that practice takes shape and circulates. The techniques of drawing offer multiple possibilities, and can equally serve to edit out, or to open up space for, the messiness and conflicts of lived encounter in the field – and to reaffirm, or to unsettle, representational conventions. However, the *skill* of observational drawing as I understand it here is in many ways distinct from matters of technique. Skill becomes instead a mode of



JACKALS

COME IN FROM DIFFERENT ENDS; GATHER IN A Huddle OF FIVE; STOP TO DRINK
ONE CIRCLES THE ISLAND AND COMES BACK TO THE GROUP.

attunement, a way of opening up spaces of encounter that challenge the premise of individual sovereignty upon which representational logics are founded. This shift is an important contribution to more-than-human aspirations: to approach the possibility of engaging nonhuman voices in research, we must first be able to open up spaces in which we experience our knowledge-making practices as mutually susceptible with other bodies and ideas.²¹

While journal-based observational drawing has largely disappeared from the repertoire of academic field methods, it has been retained (and reworked) as a dynamic tradition within other disciplines, such as contemporary wildlife art.²² In the fields of conservation and in the popular politics of land use, much thought has lately been given to the concept of wildness, as a way of rethinking 'nature' in dynamic relation, and relinquishing the impulse to (human) control.²³ A more-than-representational approach to the skill of observational drawing offers space to draw together modes of attunement and critical thinking from these diverse fields, towards a more open mode of encounter and a multi-species politics – what might be tentatively termed a 'rewilding' of wildlife art.

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Notes

1. The study area falls within the boundaries of the State of Israel and of historic Palestine, and outwith the officially designated Occupied Palestinian Territories. To use these geopolitical designations without further elucidation would be irresponsible and I therefore avoid them here entirely. In the meantime, for discussion, see J.Long, 'Geographies of Palestine-Israel', *Geography Compass*, 5, 2011, pp. 262–74.
2. The 'crit' is a tool of peer pedagogy ubiquitous in art higher education and professional practice.
3. Many of these ideas were developed in conversation with K.Foster and others. See <<http://meansealevel.wordpress.com>>
4. S.Whatmore, 'Materialist Returns: Practising Cultural Geography in and for a More-than-Human World', *cultural geographies*, 13, 2006, pp. 600–9.
5. S.O'Sullivan, 'The Aesthetics of Affect: Thinking Art beyond Representation', *Angelaki*, 6, 2001, pp. 125–35.



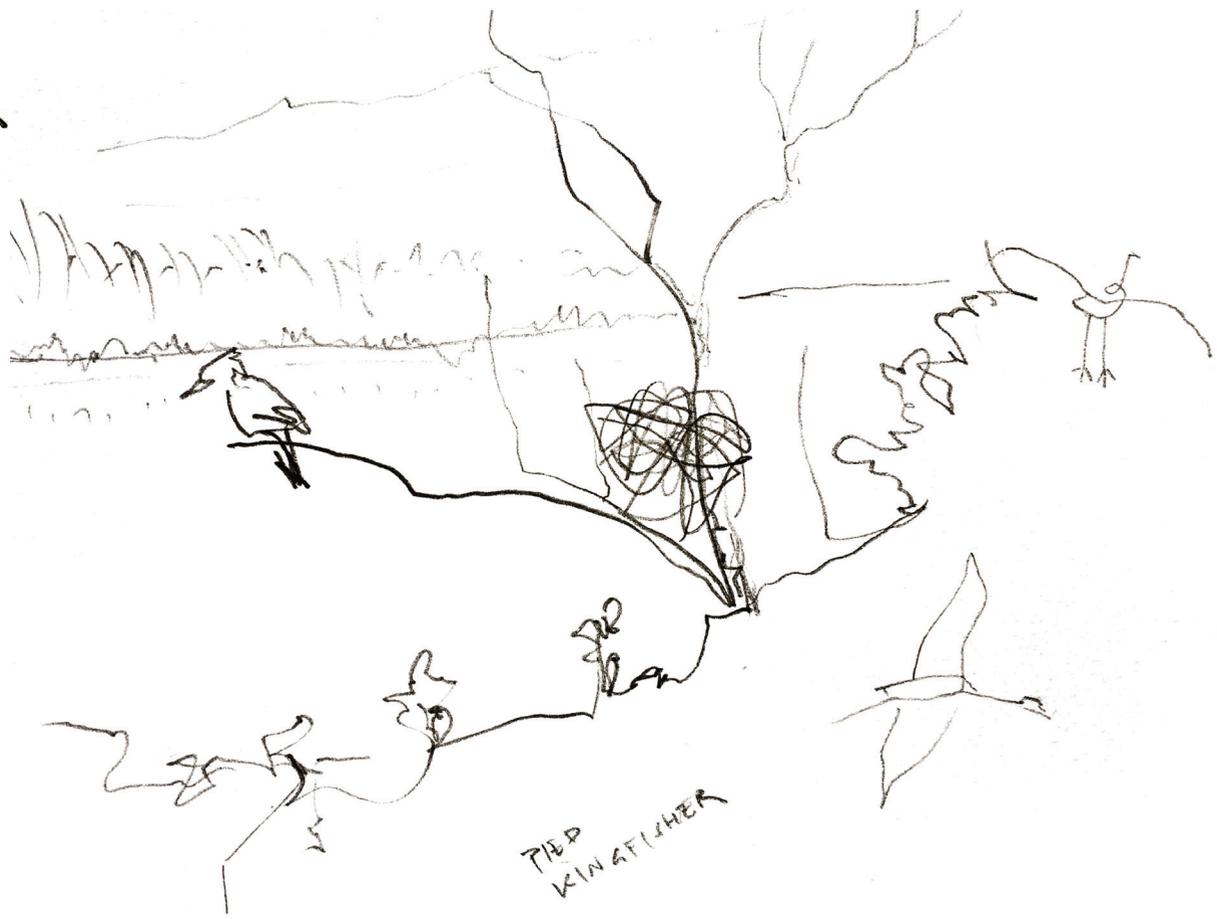


6. But see K.Foster and H.Lorimer, 'Some Reflections on Art-Geography as Collaboration', *cultural geographies*, 14, 2007, pp. 425–32; M.Root-Bernstein, 'Personal Reflections on Natural History as Common Ground for Interdisciplinary Multispecies Socio-Ecological Research', *Geo: Geography and Environment*, 3, 2016, p. e00015.
7. D.Bissell, 'Thinking Habits for Uncertain Subjects: Movement, Stillness, Susceptibility', *Environment and Planning A*, 43, 2011, pp. 2649–65.
8. H.Lorimer, 'Cultural Geography: The Busyness of Being 'More-than-Representational'', *Progress in Human Geography*, 29, 2005, pp. 83–94.
9. Recent research in cultural geography has done much to work through and beyond the representational overtones of the word 'landscape'. See, for example, M.Rose and J.Wylie, 'Animating Landscape', *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, 24(4), 2006, pp. 475–9; J.D.Dewsbury, 'Non-Representational Landscapes and the Performative Affective Forces of Habit: from "Live" to "Blank"', *cultural geographies*, 22(1), 2015, pp. 29–47.
10. M.L.Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* (London, Routledge, 1992).
11. K.Greer, 'Geopolitics and the Avian Imperial Archive: The Zoogeography of Region-Making in the Nineteenth-Century British Mediterranean', *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, 103(6), 2013, pp. 1317–31.
12. J.Busby, *Drawing Birds* (London; Sandy; Christopher Helm, 2004), p. 10.
13. Compare M.Patchett, 'Re-visioning the Hunt', *Annals of the AAG*, in press.
14. J.Berger, *About Looking* (London: Littlehampton,1980), pp. 43–4.
15. S.Brice, 'First Fruits', *Crane Cultures*, 4 February 2016, <<https://cranecultures.wordpress.com/on-becoming-immersed>>
16. J.Clarke and K.Foster, 'Field Drawing and Dialogue as a Form of Making Knowledge', *Tracey*, Drawing Knowledge, 2012, <http://www.lboro.ac.uk/microsites/sota/tracey/journal/edu/2012/PDF/Jen_Clarke-TRACEY-Journal-DK-2012.pdf>
17. S.Brice, 'On Staying Open in Conflicted Landscapes', *Crane Cultures*, 23 February 2016, <<https://cranecultures.wordpress.com/on-becoming-immersed>>

18. S.Brice, 'On Becoming Immersed', *Crane Cultures*, 11 March 2016, <<https://crane-cultures.wordpress.com/on-becoming-immersed>>
19. S.Brice, 'On Staying Open in Conflicted Landscapes', *Crane Cultures*, 23 February 2016, <<https://cranecultures.wordpress.com/on-staying-open-in-conflicted-landscapes>>
20. H.Sharp, *Spinoza and the Politics of Renaturalization* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011), pp. 41, 57. My reading of this argument as a methodological imperative is discussed in a forthcoming paper with Gwilym Sainsbury.
21. H.Lorimer, 'Forces of Nature, Forms of Life: Calibrating Ethology and Phenomenology', in B.Anderson and P.Harrison (eds), *Taking Place: Non-Representational Geographies* (London: Ashgate, 2010), pp. 55–78.



22. An umbrella term encompassing both traditionalist sporting art and critical, interrogative practices. See 'Society of Wildlife Artists', 2012, <<http://swla.co.uk/wp-swla/members-list/>>; 'Artists for Nature Foundation', <<http://www.artistsfornature.com/artists>>
23. P.Farley and M.S.Roberts, *Edgelands* (London: Vintage, 2011); J.Lorimer, *Wildlife in the Anthropocene: Conservation after Nature* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2015); G.Monbiot, *Feral: Searching for Enchantment on the Frontiers of Rewilding* (London: Penguin, 2013). For a cautionary note on this concept see also I.Allen, 'The Trouble with Rewilding', *Entitle*, 14 December 2016, <<https://entitle-blog.org/2016/12/14/the-trouble-with-rewilding>>



Author biography

Sage Brice studied environmental art (BA *hons* Glasgow, 2006) and human geography (MSc Bristol, 2015); she currently entwines a lively contemporary art practice with doctoral studies in cultural geography at the University of Bristol (www.sagebrice.com). Her research interests include politics of nature, displacement and belonging, posthumanist animal and landscape geographies, and the use of creative experimental methods. Recent exhibitions include *The Power of the Sea* at the Royal West of England Academy and *The Water Knows All My Secrets* at the Pratt Manhattan Gallery.

