Cultural geographies in practice: Some reflections on art-geography as collaboration

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Some reflections on art-geography as collaboration

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This short essay reflects on the practice of collaboration by a geography lecturer (Hayden Lorimer) and an artist (Kate Foster). During a three-year alliance, our collaborative investigations have taken different forms, led to different kinds of shared output, been enriched by the efforts of others, and resulted in independently produced work.[1]

As a cultural-historical geographer and an environmental artist we are keenly aware that the categories of 'geography' and 'art' encompass an extremely broad range of activities, meaning that these reflections are very much of our own making. The ways we have gone about collaborating have suited our circumstances and preferred ways of working, and have emerged out of our personal combinations of skills and experience. But collaboration has also challenged some of our assumptions and habits, and forced us to articulate something of the ongoing process of work, as well as some of our differences. Accordingly, our reflections are illustrative of one kind of dynamic, of how different rhythms and routines for work were set, and of the ways we found our learning shaped by circumstance and context.[2] While these evaluative remarks take the form of a 'self-crit' they are intended to have wider relevance. We hope they may help other geographers and artists currently considering the prospect, practice and politics of joint work, and might assist them in thinking more generally about its possible scope and limitations.

Good grounds for coming together

Coming together, it seems, is the mood of the moment, for certain communities of geographical and artistic practitioners at least. Presently, we are alive to our affinities, shared interests and values, and alert to the opportunities that exist for their fuller investigation. Of course, this fusion has been bubbling away for some time now and has taken diverse forms: geographers look to artists to help their research 'outreach' to communities;

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geographers have been curators of art exhibitions; artists exhibit and perform at geography conferences, as well as offer papers; university departments host artists' residencies; artists contribute to geographers' research projects; geographers evaluate the social impacts of public art projects; artists employ a spatialized vocabulary to label, describe and explain their work that geographers recognize as their own. As well as close working relationships, the ways that art and geography look to each other continue to include more distant or detached critical interpretation and commentary. Enriched by these different points of contact, artists and geographers now gather at seminars and symposia and enthuse about affinities and overlaps. Seldom is time spent charting opposite edges or defining areas of significant difference. In fact, ethics of practice and intention *can* widely differ, between and within these collaborating cohorts. Informal guides – or guidebooks perhaps – are needed to explain each other's disciplines and protocols. Some instructive precedents for joint-work have been set elsewhere. 'Sciart' projects, funded by bodies such as the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation and the Wellcome Trust, are designed to initiate theory-making and practice in both directions.[3]

Increasingly, different kinds of joint art-geography venture are underwritten by schemes, initiatives and mechanisms arranged by research councils and charitable trusts, each offering financial, institutional and infrastructural support in different combinations. Two key terms of reference are especially worthy of note. First, for the time being, schemes for the provision of funding are geared towards the receipt of applications for 'one-off' projects, rather than for sustaining in the longer-term any existing collaborative setup. Second, while for geographers such applications are still something of a niche area, among artists they are a substantial means of support, and thus competition is stiff. These limitations accepted, conditions seem set fair for still more creative, inter-disciplinary exchange involving geographers and artists.

Beginning and focusing down

Fundamentally, we would insist on the importance of *not insisting* on an ideal formula for work involving geographers and artists. Collaboration should not be rendered programmatic, either in tone or tempo. Our particular association is best characterized as a working relationship that established itself organically through a shared interest in the lives and deaths of animals, gradually expanding into a joint concern about creating means for remembering in an age of species loss and extinction.

It was an exciting process to discover substantially overlapping themes, and then find different ways to articulate and present them in joint-work. There are certainly dividends to be gained from freeing up time so that mutual interests take shape and develop texture. For us, this also involved becoming aware of different disciplinary spectra and within them, our own respective shadings. The task of articulating shared interests meant spending time together talking, sharing thoughts and favourite books, and finding ways to animate ideas through experimental sorts of practice. By 'nosey-ing about' in others' worlds we learned, for example, how to blow birds' eggs, and video-documented the exercise. Other forms of ornithological 'fieldcraft' become a

preoccupation. In such a fashion, small incidents, overlaps, accidents and coincidences that on their own didn't amount to anything much, slowly began to cohere.

Coaxing out an identifiable 'project' – and thus finding greater conviction and purpose – can also be an exercise borne of necessity. Finding ourselves located in two different cities for spells while working on 'Cross-Bills' we enjoyed an old-fashioned correspondence, mailing off words, images, objects and ideas. We also managed to coordinate diaries for a week of intensive fieldwork, done outdoors and in. 'Cross-bills' had us go off in search of a bird, often accorded special significance as the only species unique to Scotland. We scoured remnant pine forests and coniferous plantations in search of signs of life. In the company of experts, we discovered how the study of crossbills can be a matter of sitting, watching, shifting, collecting and displaying; oftentimes in less likely kinds of habitat.[4] In its early stages, our work was exhibited in an artists-run gallery space where we could experiment in presentation, and seek out critical response. It is pertinent to note that our initial commitment to let things evolve meant that experimental and tentative kinds of collaboration were done 'on a shoestring'. Developing a 'backstory' to document can be strategically advantageous to gain external funding and recognition.

Sharing values and patterns of work

In establishing a collaborative relationship, shared interest in conduct can matter as much as a shared vision for content. It can be instructive to explain preferred patterns of work to each other, or to 'shadow' aspects of practice, perhaps by paying visits to studio and office spaces. Learning about others' protocols, techniques and skills can show up aptitudes *you* all too easily take-for-granted: illuminating the points and places from which research leads are taken; showing how seemingly disparate things are pieced together; and, how material builds, and gathers coherence or momentum. Finding complimentary aspects of practice in each other's ordinary activities can be reassuring, and offer entry points to interleaved activity. We were fortunate in discovering respective modes of working that seemed to share a methodological sensibility based on resourcefulness ('making-do'), and to align interests in narrative, form and composition. This meant aspects of joint-work could become – to greater or lesser degree – enmeshed into our respective individual work, and skills and roles could be at times exchanged. Our selection of images and aesthetic decisions taken about presentation have been shared exercises, while the development of texts and bookworks has followed shared reading and discussion. Other collaborative relationships might be borne on entirely different understandings of what 'research' is, and what it does.

Expanding and contracting

The presence of an artist – something sanctioned by a residency – can produce cumulative effects. In our case, residence created a meeting point for different networks and points of reference, as well as ongoing exchange between two individuals. New points

of connection were established with zoologists, taxidermists, museum staff, historical and cultural geographers, and artists. The size and breadth of the university meant that inter-disciplinary reference points could be explored; most productively with the institution's own zoological museum. In part this meant discovering how collaborative art-geography could feed into to the research work of the museum. Ultimately, a joint investigation emerged – 'Blue Antelope' charted the diverse lives of an extinct animal, remnants of which are held by the Zoological Museum[5] – and fresh arrangements for research required the co-ordination of a small, informal and inter-disciplinary team simultaneously at work on parallel investigations, each with different roles. That same network offers support and the potential for critical review. There being no ideal formula, increasing the scale and the breadth of collaboration is by no means the only sort of accord to be struck. Collaboration is not ideal for everyone and, even for those so inclined, relationships do not *have* to be figured as long-term. Over a course of time, collaboration might not work out. For others, disquiet, disharmony and confrontation might well represent the very essence of a creative working relationship.

Being aware of difference and being different

Collaboration can also be used to ask awkward questions of your own conventions and accepted working practice. For a geographer, it is counter-intuitive to let images offer

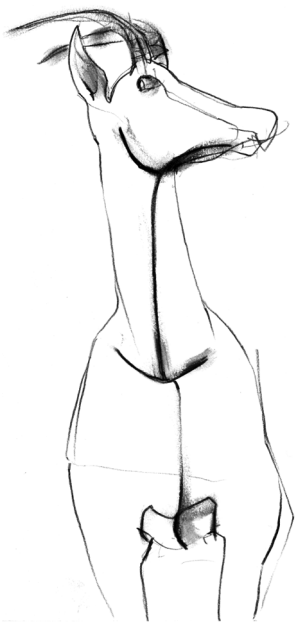

FIGURE 1 Image from 'A Geography of Blue' © Kate Foster and Hayden Lorimer

a lead and structure. So the simple process of sequencing images before writing text can change creative habits of preparing say, a presentation or bookwork. Working visually influences what you can say. Meanwhile, artists can become more fully aware of difficulties non-artists can have in finding points of entry to contemporary art practices.

For a geographer, learning how other practitioners put a place to work can be a salutary experience. One example is illustrative. In spite of a traditional disciplinary concern with spatial analysis (and accepting recent critical commentaries on the nature of the visual),[6] most often geographers dedicate little time to thinking about the physical spaces they use for display, presentation or performance. It's common to assume things will be 'alright on the night', only pausing to consider the possibilities having entered a room with minutes to spare. Or, through checkered experiences with institutional infrastructure, to just keep one's expectations low. Alternatively, benefits can be gained from walking the floors a while. Practical intelligence comes through the apprehension of fine details: observing the effects of how a room is lit; shifting around the furniture to explore the angles and effects created; noting the ways people move through a building as a means to tempt them to stop and look a while en route. Having designs on the fabrication of space, means learning how to be shaped by, and be a shaper of, workplaces.

Meanwhile, for an artist-in-residence, a university department poses other kinds of challenge. It can seem necessary to become an expert in something (as it happens, this did eventually happen). Not only is the diversity of expertise bedazzling, geographers themselves are highly competent at making and interpreting many kinds of visual image. Finding out how these are made was an obvious point of entry for an artist but, say, developing cartographic skills in relief pencil-shading could alone have consumed the entire residency. Rather than prompting any sort of conversion, the residency had the effect of affirming identity as an artist. Even so, it took considerable time to dream up work that responded to this context: the aim of new-genre public art to involve and consult – as well as challenge – the audience for or with whom it is made.[7]

Academia is notionally arranged into 'disciplines', each with specialist sub-disciplines and defined interest groups who contribute research. The practice of art usually lacks such recognizable organizing principles, at least while it is being made. What drives an artist towards occasional points of resolution depends on a 'self-discipline' motivated by an insistent attempt to articulate and describe an experience or way of being in the world. Through dialogue with different paradigms, cross-disciplinary work can also nudge at worldviews – aiding a transition towards a critical stance, moulding independent values, and sharpening skepticism about imposed targets or external markers of success. Being an artist can afford license to employ tools for subterfuge. Academia expresses itself through words – fluency of language and access to information affording power and profile. Competency in visual languages has less kudos. Sometimes people find art hard to criticize, but this means visual routes can deflect easy interpretation and polarized thinking. Visual expression engages senses which are not disciplined, are complex, and are not necessarily pleasant. The suggestion that 'There's art as activism, there's art as questioning, there's art as revealing'[8] smoothes over internal debates whether and when artists should act as communicators for scientists.

Invitations to be different can be produced otherwise and unexpectedly, in our own experience by the politicization of an academic setting. Amid a period of institutional restructuring, tied to a modernization agenda aspiring to new economic criteria, and with it the prospect of 'voluntary' staff severance, Kate realized that it was important to be both part of the institution *and* detached from it. Pushing this a little further, she sought to act against the current; getting to know the 'a's, b's and c's' (attics, basements and cupboards) of the university better than most since they offered spaces in which to operate more freely. The guardians of these valuable local repositories and unintended archives (sometimes rendered 'uneconomic') were most important allies. With trust fostered, free rein to use overlooked and generally outmoded resources was possible. This 'lo-fi' approach was also in harmony with a commitment made to the sustainable use of materials.

Structural situations and being institutionalized

Beyond the considerable individual effort involved, our setting for work had considerable influence on what we could do. Initial unpaid work helped focus the application to the Leverhulme Trust. Though this made the beginning stages of collaboration more taxing, a commitment to a pilot project did mean that both of us had something to take away, regardless of the outcomes of funding applications. Eventual receipt of a grant moved Kate into the hierarchical university setting, where the focus lies on academic education and research. Visible and measurable results are highly favoured here, although the parameters set by the Leverhulme Trust afford some latitude.

Beyond the familiarity and comfort of the Department as physical setting, the residency brought artist and geographer together as employees of the same institution, albeit with different perches. Both before and after that bracketed period, we had to negotiate greater kinds of asymmetry and inequality. A University Lecturer can depend on a monthly wage and work that follows a regular annual cycle. For an artist, income is usually scanty, short-term and unpredictable – certainly early on in a career. Typically for an artist who is not yet 'established' (as the terminology goes), Kate was

FIGURE 2 'Think what you like – a piece that can be completed by colouring in your own camouflage'. Original image by Kate Foster

responsible for all aspects of her work – its development, management, funding, publicity and administration, as well as securing a working space.

The different kinds of work impose their own separate pressures, but of the two conditions of labour, regularity and administrative infrastructures now too come at a price. Management structures in higher education are committed to academic professionalization and with it greater scrutiny of day-to-day practice. 'Open-ended', unfunded research activities are not always so easy to account for or fit neatly into audits. The institutional flipside is that as part of their civic vision university bosses attach a certain cachet to successful innovation, and like to be seen tapping directly into the new cultural economy and creative arts sector – itself subject to pressure to commercialize.

In such a climate it can be telling to push aspects of art-geography practice together, to see how long things hold, before they spring apart again. A geographer must conform to the pressures of publication and the RAE, while artists perhaps seek to be written about. Different sorts of affiliations, and different places where work respectively needs to be seen, might be construed as divisive but can also be used strategically. The university environment strongly influenced the form of the outcomes of the residency: a 'monograph' in the form of a website also doubles as a museum catalogue; the re-presentation of a valuable but previously under-exhibited museum specimen; and the co-authoring of a scientific paper. While all achievements in their own right, Kate also regards them each as expressions of environmental artwork.[9] We must also question who joint-work is for, what audiences might use it, and what debates it contributes to? It is relatively simple to place value on our shared work to date as investigation and research, but we aspire to develop other strategies and partnerships to take the work beyond the academy and museum.

Concluding thoughts

Our own collaborative work takes its very particular forms, but all kinds of art-geographical relationship make it possible to learn from each other's way of intervening in the world, and to offer better informed critique of respective practices. Recent commentaries have developed visions for an 'expanded form of collaboration': Papastergiadis through a helpful characterization of art, place and the everyday, and Kester by articulating a critical base for 'conversation pieces' termed 'dialogical art'.[10] We choose Kester's work as the endpoint for our reflections as he discourages conventional art criticism, diverting course from a 'canonical hierarchy of works' in favour of 'interrelated moments of discursive interaction'.[11] As an extension from own reflections, we hope the points they offer will assist practitioners in art-geography develop dialogues about shared work.

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Biographical note

Kate Foster (environmental artist) and Hayden Lorimer (cultural-historical geographer) collaborate. Their joint work was facilitated by an artist's residency funded by the Leverhulme Trust in the Department of Geographical and Earth Sciences, University of Glasgow, 2004–5. The residency centred on a series of works entitled 'BioGeoGraphies'. Examples can be found at: http://www.blueantelope.info; http://diffusion.org.uk; http://www.meansealevel.net Kate can be contacted at katefoster@meansealevel.net Hayden can be contacted at hayden.lorimer@ges.gla.ac.uk

Notes

[1] The specific content of our collaborative projects can be found at: http://www.blueantelope.info and http://www.diffusion.org.uk

[2] For comparable reflections on the nature of art-geography collaboration see: F. Driver, C. Nash, K. Prendergast and I. Swenson, eds, *Landing: eight collaborative projects between artists and geographers* (London, AHRB and Royal Holloway, 2002).

[3] S. Ede, *Strange and charmed: science and the contemporary visual arts* (London, Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation, 2000).

[4] Further details at: http://www.diffusion.org.uk

[5] Further details at: http://www.blueantelope.info

[6] Intervention roundtable led by: G. Rose, 'On the need to ask, exactly, how is geography "visual"?', *Antipode*, 35 (2), pp. 212–21.

[7] Lucy Lippard, cited in D. Harding with P. Buchler, *Decadent: public art – contentious term and contested practice* (Glasgow, Foulis Press, 1997).

[8] Michele Crimmins cited in A. Minton, 'Down to a fine art', *The Guardian*, Society, 10 January 2007, p. 9.

[9] David Harding and colleagues at Glasgow School of Art were influential in shaping a specific set of practices and attitudes for engaging with organizational structures. Working outwith the traditional confines of art practice, they encouraged opportunistic work that generates material from the context itself, insisting that all imaginable media, scales and locations should be considered. This responsive method is costly in time and energy, and institutions are habitually discomforted by having little idea in advance of what the finished product will be. Precedents include the Artists' Placement Group (APG) in the 1970s who were direct participants and observers in the daily activities of a range of governmental and commercial organizations. For a discussion of APG; see G.H. Kester, *Conversation pieces: community+communication in Modern Art* (Berkeley, University of California Press, 2004), pp. 61–9. Kester notes that it is unreasonable to claim that artists have special sensitivities, but that 'the latitude allowed to art in our society' (*Ibid*., p. 68) gave the APG room in which to move. Kate made use of the fact that, as an artist, she could move between layers of the hierarchy and different compartments of the institution. Models for such work include Mark Dion see L.G. Corrin, M. Kwon and N. Bryson, *Mark Dion* (London: Phaidon, 1997) with the direct influence of Snaebjörnsdóttir/Wilson, *nanoq: flat out and bluesome: a cultural life of polar bears* (London: Black Dog Publishing, 2006) and Andrea Roe, http://www.scottisharts.org.uk/1/artsinscotland/visualarts/features/archive/artistandrearoe.aspx.

[10] N. Papastergiadis, *Spatial aesthetics: art, place and the everyday* (London, Rivers Oram Press, 2006) pp. 198–9; Kester, *Conversation pieces*.

[11] Kester, *Conversation pieces*., p. 189.