

Working in Public – Parliamentary Meeting

Kate Foster – Presentation: September 2007

Image: BioGeoGraphies / Blue Antelope / body politic



body politic: matter matters

*“politics might not be so much about opinion as about things —things made public”
(Weibel and Latour, Making Things Public, 2005)*

Animal and human lives are inextricably entwined, as people are realizing in many different ways. We are ‘bodies in the midst of things’ - shaping the material world as well as being shaped by it. BioGeoGraphies is an artist’s project about entangled lives - teasing out geographies of the ways people and objects are bound together, and selecting which connections to draw to others’ attention. It is about our relationships to things - questions of nature that belong in the foreground of cultural and political discussion. Matter matters.

About the image: body politic

Doing research about blue antelopes, I learnt new nations have developed military camouflage patterns to forge identity. Apart from killing each other, people have hunted deer and antelope for millennia. Scientific illustrations of these animals habitually have them facing right. In this drawing of ‘deer of the world’, each sports its national camouflage.

Introduction

BioGeoGraphies is an artist's project which scrutinises networks of relationships around specific animal's lives that have become entwined within my own life - animals that are good to think with.

The entangled relationships between people and things can be seen by looking at assemblages of things, at technologies - and not just human activity in isolation.

This extends ideas of what should be included, when thinking about working in 'public'. But for more on why 'matter matters', I defer to the theoretician Bruno Latour.

Here, briefly is something about BioGeoGraphies.

About BioGeoGraphies

This is a process of teasing out geographies of animal existences through time and over space and selecting certain connections to draw to other people's attention.

Interventions (like transporting a museum specimen, building a website) open up discussion about ways people and things are bound together.

These projects have an eye open towards environmental politics, for example much of Scotland is managed as moorland used for hunting, and some landowners are implicated in killing birds of prey. This is not just a land management issue but an arena where questions of 'nature' turn into political and aesthetic issues.

BioGeoGraphies is about letting affairs become more complicated - not letting issues polarize. This can mean that it doesn't necessarily fit easily into organizational remits.

I set out to find people with shared interests, and am deliberately disrespectful of disciplinary boundaries. The main point is to make conversation.

Material 'outcomes' are relatively slight (small-scale exhibitions, bookworks, a website) but there is a gradually extending network - involving people with different kinds of experience and knowledge of topics in question - such as a museum curator, a South African archaeologist, a poet, RSPB staff, taxidermists, the late Duchess of Westminster's salmon ghillie, research biologists, and in particular, cultural geographers, notably Hayden Lorimer and Merle Patchett at Glasgow University.

Now for a little about the Blue Antelope. Glasgow University has one of only two skulls in the world of this extinct animal, exterminated in 1800 soon after Cape Colony was established in South Africa. The other skull is in Amsterdam.

I am going next month on an artist's residency near where it used to live. I will find scientists who have studied it but I am unlikely to find an African name for this animal - as the culture of the people who knew it when it was alive has also been exterminated.

Perhaps I will find out more about why it was called blue.

For good curatorial reasons, I cannot take the blue antelope skull. But I will travel with the replaceable skin of a common swallow, a bird that is not extinct - though it is heading for the endangered list.

It took more than a few phonecalls to clarify its status regarding import licences.

Swallows fly to and from South Africa from Britain, keeping climatically to zones of summer. I want to know its name in the other 12 official languages of South Africa. Yes, there is reference to environmental politics - expansion of Durban airport for the 2010 FIFA world cup may possibly knock out reedbeds vital to the birds' migration.

I expect to find a whole range of sensibilities and priorities current in South Africa - and to scrutinize my own attachments to these two specimens.

In summary, to return to the idea that 'matter matters', I have touched on how in all sorts of ways, animal and human lives are inextricably entwined and suggested people are 'bodies in the midst of things'.

Doing BioGeoGraphies is an oblique way of developing sensitivity to the complexities of environmental injustice - simply one way to work creatively with disparate approaches and relationships people have with the non-human world.

This is not activist art - though working creatively with others helps to engage. But in practicing as an artist, I advocate a shift of aesthetics towards 'make-do' - opportunistically using local resources and materials and working on local connectedness.

I pay attention to the technological apparatus of putting work out in public. I also have a recently bought a long-haul plane ticket.