

Some Distance from the Plant World

'There is another world, but it is in this one.'

Paul Eluard

For the last dozen or so years the artistic practice of Matthew Dalziel and Louise Scullion has pursued an unusual course, producing a body of work which speaks to sections of both the mainstream art sphere and the green-arts world. In video works such as *Raptor 2002*, *Genus 2003*, and within *Home* - the 2001 gallery-based touring retrospective, as well as various others, the working partnership have engaged in observing, highlighting and underlining aspects, oddities and characteristics of 'our kind' - the human species - in ways both beautiful and tragic. Through abrupt, striking and poignant imagery - reminders of our human creature relationships to the larger 'natural' environment within which we live - they remind us how removed and distanced we have become towards the animal, vegetal and even mineral realms we inhabit.

Dalziel + Scullion manage to combine themes, which are central to the backdrop of environmental thinking, with questions about universals, which come with the territory of being human. Yet throughout all their work, what remains unstated is the means by which these themes are communicated, mainly through hi-tech media and communications technology, and often, though not always, video as well as sound recording. The use of this current technology suggests another side to their work: that of the technological sublime, which, while acknowledged by them and the norm for their generation of artists, throws Dalziel + Scullion into stark relief against traditional ecologically-hewn art.

The first generation of recognisably environmentally minded artists emerged during the seventies and eighties. Most visibly represented in Britain by Land Art, its commonly identifiable mind-set was a re-found attachment to the land, and to living and treading lightly. In many ways the ethos was a cultural mirror to the nascent Green movement. The sensibility of authenticity, symbolised by an apparent rejection of the indoor gallery, of a practice based in the land, drawing from nature-derived materials, and creating the organicist and ephemeral body of work, is today well known through the likes of British artists such as David Nash, Richard Long, Andy Goldsworthy, Ian Hamilton Finlay, and Peter Randall-Page to name a small handful. The vision being expressed, through both the Land Artists and others trying to uncover an ecologically sensitive aesthetic, was, to many, an essentially romantic relationship with a non- or pre-modern, anti-technological past. For these artists, as for the Zeitgeist of much of the generation they were a part of, the future lay in the past.

For the Land Artists, this unifying element of an implicit (and not so implicit) critique of the Modernist sensibility - including the allure of the future - focused to a greater or lesser extent on the role recent technology (we're talking the last three hundred years here) has played, and continues to play in transforming land, our kind's relation to that land and to the natural world, and that of the more than human 'nature.' A critique of technology was a central part in the wider Green cultural critique, its pervasive presence implicated in society's deepening disconnection from the more than human world.

In contrast with the new eighties generation of artists with which Dalziel + Scullion began, this emphasis on the past was seen as old thinking, irrelevant to changed, harsher times. Amidst a tougher economic, social and cultural climate, from Thatcherism through to Punk, this nascent eco-sensibility fell from art favour. The vast majority of younger artists defined their practice against the Land Art generation, looking around for new languages to explore and with which to work. Keen to rip up the rulebook and start again, technology, modernity, the urban, were all ripe, relevant and apparently radical canvases, while the ecological was

increasingly off-limits. Not surprisingly, for those who remained interested and involved in ecologically related issues around the natural world, to feel relevant in the changed Zeitgeist the challenge was how to explore the environmental terrain without resorting to the sensibilities of the previous generation. While much of this new art generation ignored the environmental as irrelevant, (which is a probable source of the dearth today of any significant artistic response to Climate Change, and other environmental crises), there was a minority of artists who emerged exploring aspects of the environmental within the currencies and forms to which their generation was already committed. Dalziel + Scullion's exploration of estrangement and disconnection from the natural world fits such a micro-sociology of Zeitgeists. Just as Land Art can be understood as reflecting the wider cultural forces at play during its time of inception, so alienation was very much a cultural watchword during the formative years of Dalziel + Scullion's emerging practice. Similarly this also finds expression in the forms in which their works have been realised: site-specific installation investigations, the use of non-natural materials, for instance, mainstream metallic alloys for sculptural installations, alongside recording and sensor technologies. And it has meant video and, increasingly, the application of video film or stills in specific gallery or other 'art' contexts. Where Dalziel + Scullion depart from their generational practitioner colleagues, is in the fascination with species and their attempts to explore species-ness. This bio-evolutionary perspective, taken together with using contemporary technology, distinguishes them as far as I am aware – in Britain at least - from any other art practitioners working currently.

The technologies to which Dalziel + Scullion can be said to have returned repeatedly, are media with a specific optical dimension. This includes video and varieties of camera based art, although the resulting pieces reveal a further interest in the prospects of projection. Their recent contribution to *Northern City*, (see page 11) part of Glasgow's Lighthouse sextet pairing of artists with architects, was a collaboration with architects Sutherland Hussey, in which they presented a series of short panning films of Edinburgh's houses, buildings and skylines, on a screen which revolved in a darkened chamber. This work extends their experimentation with projection, found also in *Storm* 2003, and *Genus* 2003, in which a repertoire of photographs moved relentlessly across seven screens in Bradford's National Museum of Photography, Film & Television.

While these video pieces speak of the estrangement, loss and disconnection of modern societies from the natural world, this is highlighted in some by references to the animal world, (*Raptor* 2002, *Habitat* 2001), and in others to our human selves (*Another Place* 2000, *The Pressure of Spring* 1999, *Genus* 2003, *The Earth Turned To Bring Us Closer* 2006 – see above right). In the video work *Some Distance From The Sun*, alongside their latest work, a series of six prints, *Unknown Pines*, that examine the surface of trees, can each be seen as recalibrating the balance of these estrangements from nature with a changed relationship to the natural world. The video documents the key plant species from the beginnings of life, through to comparatively recent evolutionary times, with the arrival of flowers. The allusion to botanical studies in the work and classification of species, relates the piece to earlier, less techno-dependent, nature studies. What the viewer sees are only plants, species by species. With plants as the central focus, estrangement is replaced by a window into the vegetal realm, stripped down to the plant's own world / kingdom. The world of the plant's self reveals its species-ness to us, almost, from the other side of the screen. That may be too far a move for many, but by opening that window onto the strangeness of, rather than focusing on 'our kind's' estrangement from, nature, Dalziel + Scullion seem, in part, to be beginning to apply the media to the sorts of questions those, who view technology as only a threat to our perceptual connection with the 'natural' world, have argued it diminishes.

Species-ness, Artificial Boundaries and Future Cartographies

Watching, attending to and observing *Some Distance From The Sun's* slow parade of the vegetal species world as plant form after plant form crosses the screen, can be interpreted from a variety of ways. Certainly I felt none of the sense of alienation and disconnection that has been a leit-motif of so much of their work in the past. Rather, at a tacit, visceral level, what this one-hour video can do to the onlooker is to return him or her to the wonder, strangeness, and even surreal qualities of the natural world. The accompanying *Unknown Pines*, hi-definition photographs, convey similar qualities, with the intense detail of the different barks reminding us of the acute subtleties and varieties in the natural world, and how these subtleties hardly begin to register in our day-to-day lives. That the photographs don't move is the key technical difference, imbuing an inevitably different relationship with the viewer; there is no change in the images, however long one looks at them.

Formally *Some Distance From The Sun* documents the key evolutionary moments (moments being hundreds of thousands of years in evolutionary terms) in the plant world's journey from its sea-borne beginnings onto land, and through a series of evolutionary developments, to the emergence of 'dry seeds' and the earliest flowers.

There is also the allusion to traditional nature studies, implicit in such a document. At the same time, the way in which this botanical survey is conveyed, through the current generation of video-related hi technology (i.e. high definition video, file rendering, electronic camera mounts, digital processing etc.), leads to further questions about the relationship of modern technology to the natural world and indeed species-ness. One of these questions relates to what kinds of differences emerge with each specific wave of technological change (including here the use of high definition video); what are specific to any particular technology, and what is not changed in the broader relationships between technologies, human beings and the natural world. Finally, as this is an artwork, there are questions to do with the relation of such a piece of video to the ecological strand of the art-world, touched on in the first part of this essay, using technology to document a scientific/botanical work in a world where, because of current and continuing technological change, the means of documentation are exploding in capacity and variety.

In the roll call, plants take their turn, passing before our eyes and moving ethereally either down or across the screen. Divided into eight categories, the video begins with the first forms of life from nearly 4 billion years ago: life's very first algae, red, brown and green seaweeds. Next, further non-vascular and then vascular plants are introduced; mosses and lichens and then ferns, and after these the first airborne and reproducing sporing plants. From this period of vascular development on, we have the imagery of the beginning of dry seeds, the product of flowerless conifer plants, and trees such as pines and cedars. The revolution of flowering plants, broad leafed trees, through to the first very 'primitive' flowers comes next, followed by the insectivorous plants: orchids, rhododendrons, and lastly, the magnolia. It is an epic journey, carefully orchestrated, emphasising to the human viewer the centrality of plants in both our lives and the life and long history of this small planet, some distance from the sun.

Part of its richness and tacit quality is due to the pace at which the video film moves. The slowness of the filming hints at the much slower, and semi-invisible world – to human faculties - of the pace at which plants do things. In a period of accelerating lifestyles, time-based media's capacity to vary pace, and particularly the process of slowing down the filming and tracking of imagery, returns the viewer to tempos with which many in the Western World appear to have lost contact. *Some Distance From The Sun* is an instance of how video technology may be used to slow down our cognitive processes. There is something paradoxical here, as one of video's most visible consequences is how it – along with other technologies - has contributed to the accelerating media culture. Think only as far as 24 hour MTV, and its world of endless rock videos. By contrast, a video working at the pace of *Some Distance From The Sun* enables us humans to connect to realms we have lost touch with, and to uncover and provide an insight into an aspect of another reality: how plants are, the pace at which plants live. Even if the video offers only the skin or surface of the plant,

something of their secret lives is revealed. Set in contrast to the mainstream application of technology, such use can feel as if technology is almost being used 'against itself'.

That technologies may have autonomous direction of development (evolution even) challenges the oft-held orthodoxy of their neutrality, and that their use for good or ill depends on how they are used by the human player. For most within this spectrum - from the techno-sceptics' unease at the disconnection to the natural world, to technophiliacs involved in the myriad new possibilities that technologies enable – this is beyond the point.

A video such as *Some Distance From The Sun* provides food for thought for either end of this spectrum. As a botanical study, plant life is transformed from the static representation of traditional botanical illustration, to a dynamic study, revealing plants in ways which were hitherto technically impossible. Both lens and screen have long moved discussion beyond both naked eye observation and human scale, into technologically mediated or augmented ways of seeing. For instance, how the plant turns in space and is revolved before the lens and changes perspective, without our needing to move. Or how we are able to apprehend these plant realms at, potentially, the click of a button, in any scale. The plant is enlarged for the screen in the gallery, but could technically be enlarged to drape an entire building or reduced to invisibility. Direct unmediated eye experience is subsumed by technology. Human scale can be, and is being, blown away.

This is not completely dissimilar to the electronic soundworlds with which Dalziel + Scullion invariably choose to accompany and augment their video and screen pieces. Mark Vernon's, minimal, muted and sharply alien electronica, which was composed expressly for *Some Distance From The Sun*, believably conjures land plants' possible interior sound realms, their root systems, as well as their visible trunks and flowers, as well as the more primitive seaborne algae and seaweeds. Such a soundscape, deliberately used for this purpose, suggests that electronica, ambient and other recent electronic music, can evoke myriad sound worlds far more powerfully than can be admitted by those who are quick to dismiss electronic music as a whole, including, often, many who connect themselves with the 'natural world'. That said, I could easily imagine Vernon's soundtrack for any number of other mind-films; maybe the soundworld is in the ear of the beholder.

As a complete work, *Some Distance From The Sun* may also be construed as, in part, another path towards ends similar to those held by the sceptics: closer apprehension of the natural world(s), and the species-ness of plants. If this is part way effective, pulling us into life's vast evolutionary time scales, and towards imagining, knowing or thinking like a plant, it acts as eco-sensitisation, rather than further eco-desensitisation. There is perhaps, an acknowledgement of nature programmes, such as Richard Attenborough's *Life On Earth*, or the remarkable French Natural History film, *Microcosmos*, which recorded a day in the life of an orchard. Here technology has augmented ways to apprehend the natural world.

If this sounds conservative, the apparent simplicity of watching plants pass by on a screen in front of us can feel conservative amidst the repertoire of visual worlds that screen and time based technologies competing for our time and attention present to us. From the World Wide Web, and its virtual realities, emergent MUDS, such as *Second Life* (an entire alternative virtual world with economies, businesses and professions), to artists working with A-Life or the artificial natures of virtual worlds, these are on modern nature's art continuum as much as Land Art or video art.

What is needed is some form of new cartography, re-making the boundaries, extending beyond the divide between the pre-modern and the modern. Cartography may be considered a form of visual classification – and classification a form of mapping. Each are ways of rationalising the world we find before us. Even so, what feels as if it is needed is some way of moving beyond the binary simplifications of Modern and pre-Modern, embracing each within a broader apprehension that acknowledges photography, video, and new media, though also the artificial or second life nature of virtualisation. They might also include the instruments, which offer up entrance into the hidden worlds of the very small and very large. Each is

inaccessible to observation by the naked eye. Rather they are the result of technologies, which extend the reach of the eye. They range from microscopes, in one direction, to telescopes and satellite imaging, alongside others using technologies working with the invisible worlds of the electromagnetic spectrum in the other. All reveal astonishing visual wonders. And all may be interpreted as within the realm of 'nature'. A starting point thus, to any re-making, would turn on a shared definition of that simple six-letter word, 'nature', amenable to these differing and contradictory communities. Through their exploration of the more than human natural world, and of species-ness, encapsulated in a work such as *Some Distance From The Sun*, Dalziel + Scullion are providing a singular pathway into such a future cartography.

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Oliver Lowenstein has, since 1996, run the green cultural magazine, Fourth Door Review. His.....

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