CONTOURING WITH ALISON LLOYD

A place-specific conversation in dialogue with Hugh Nicholson

Still from: My Punk is not Dead

Date: 30th July, 2022

Location: Barbrook Reservoir, Big Moor, Derbyshire, U.K.

Grid reference: 53:16.8859N 1:35.2327W

Wind Direction: South-southwest

The lane turns the corner, and the dark pines thin, giving way to birch and willow. There is rough grass and sedge, and a crumpled Pepsi can lies beneath the dry-stone wall, caught deep in willowherb. All around, the bracken smells thick and glossy, and from somewhere nearby there is the sharp flick and chack of a stonechat marking out territory.

Turning from the tarmacked road, the sandy path cuts through one gate, then another, crossing the A621, before striking out up the valley. Walking gently upwards, stoop stones appear on the horizon, dark hunched forms set within the heather, used to mark old drovers' routes across the moor. The ground is well trodden, bordered by vetch and trefoil, but in the valley beneath, the stream is silent. Cattle graze in the cotton grass. A raven moves south. The wind gusts and there are voices. Ahead, a teenager in a tank top appears talking on his phone. Two small dogs run behind him, before they too vanish into the distance.

Around a spur, Little Barbrook Still comes into view, a small body of water bordered by close-cropped grass. From here, the reservoir was used to supply Chesterfield, some fifteen miles away.

Beyond, to the east, is low grey stone bridge, thick with lichen, and from here, the artist Alison Lloyd and I look back to where we have walked.

Rough moorland rises up on either side.

Beneath the bridge, water flows.

Hugh: Perhaps, to start, can you say something about the history of walking as artistic practice?

Alison: I began to consider walking as an artistic methodology about fifteen years ago. Since then, my research has really focused on women artists working in the U.K. and

U.S. during the 1970s, who walk as part of their artistic practice. Many are now quite well known, such as Marie Yates or Michelle Stuart, but at the time these artists were really ignored in comparison with their male counterparts. And today, we still often speak of Robert Smithson over Nancy Holt.

Initially, I thought about myself as a solitary female artist, walking across moors for miles and miles in dreadful weather, carrying a heavy Bolex camera and camping on my own. This was a response to artists like Smithson, or Hamish Fulton, or Richard Long – examples of what Kathleen Jamie might describe as the 'lone enraptured male'.[1]

On Featherbed Top. 2020

H: Could you expand a bit more about your current approach to walking as an artistic methodology?

A: I'm keen to contest these patriarchal ways of being in the landscape – both through the photographs that I make, and the ways I make them. During my PhD, I developed the idea of 'contouring', which I appropriated from navigation or mapping. 'Contouring' reflects a desire to resist a Munro-bagging mentality, to follow the contours in the land, to enact a more sympathetic relation to landscape.

This began when retracing one of Richard Long's works – *Two Straight Twelve Mile Walks on Dartmoor* (1980).[2] The clinical violence of the straight line, cutting through land, is perhaps indicative of a certain maleness, or at least practically, the walk is only

achievable by someone with a certain physical ability. So, I decided to retrace Long's route from a distance, but instead chose to follow the contours of the land. As a method, 'contouring' does not aim to erase the history of maleness in Land Art or Conceptual Art, but instead seeks to rethink these practices. So now when I walk with my camera, I explore the hollows between peat hags, the cloughs where the streams are, the more hidden places.

I think I am much more introspective in my own approach. There is a younger generation of women artists that have been vital for my research, who approach walking from a quieter, more convivial perspective. In particular, the collective project w*alkwalkwalk* by Gail Burton, Serena Korda and Clare Qualmann, the *Walking Women Symposium* organised by Clare Qualmann and Amy Sharrocks, and the practices of Dee Heddon and Cathy Turner among others.

H: 'Contouring' raises interesting questions around the construction of 'landscape': both when considering land as shaped by specific power relations and processes of extraction, and also when considering 'landscapes' as images designed according certain conventions, whether that's the rule of thirds, or the role of the horizon. Could you tell me more about the composition of your photographs?

A: In my compositions, something often disrupts the image. When filming, I often aim to get a low shot of vegetation, or the cable-release snaking across the ground. I've always used a narrow depth of field, so at times I'll be in focus, but the landscape will be out – or vice versa. Sometimes, once I've made the image, I look back and see myself blended in, so I'm somehow part of that landscape. It's never a self-portrait, where I'm placed in direct opposition to the landscape, but instead a sort of coming together of figure and ground.

Big Moor. 2020

Ridgewalk Moor before Grindah Stones. 2020

H: These strategies are interesting in relation to the historical function of landscape paintings. John Berger describes landscape paintings, such as Gainsborough's *Mr. and*

Mrs. Andrews (1750), as functioning not so much as a window onto a world, but as a safe set into the wall, produced for wealthy landowners or patrons.[3] Could you say something more about how your research questions these historically received notions of land and property?

A: Over time, I've become more interested in historical boundaries on old maps: whether these designate the limits of the water-boards, or parishes, or counties, or landed estates. I'm not sure whether the land here is owned by a charity, or the National Trust, or by the Duke of Devonshire...because Chatsworth House is just over there...

(Gestures)

I'm interested in thinking about my artistic practice and labour alongside these histories of cutting peat, and walking, and acts of collective resistance such as the mass trespass up on Kinder Scout. Of course, I'm choosing to be here, whereas lots of these things were necessary to live, and Kinder required a tough working class to proclaim themselves, to take back common ownership of the place.

(The rough sound of a helicopter grows from behind the hillside)

Perhaps that's the bastard Duke going off in his helicopter...

(Laughter)

On Featherbed Top: Orange Winter Walking Boots. 2020

A: *In The Book of Trespass* (2020), Nick Hayes writes that twenty-four non-royal dukes own four million acres between them, and that we're excluded from 92% of the land.[4] And this does make me angry - angry about the relationship between land, and patronage, and art. I don't see why artists should have anything to do with Chatsworth and the collection there...

Documentation of Kinder in Colour. 2022

H: Right now, there seems to be a certain desire for artworks to be very direct and politically legible. I know you're involved in lots of activism. Could you tell me a bit more about the extent to which this political engagement informs your practice as an artist?

A: Throughout my life, my activism has had peaks and troughs, relating to class struggle in the world. When I was young, I joined Anti-Nazi League 'Rock Against Racism' demos. And then later, I was very involved with the big surge of class struggle across the country, with miners and the pit-closures. But then I had children, so this dropped off. More recently, I have been organising again with the SWP and the strikes. There are lots of conversations around activism that have informed my approach to making work, but often this activism isn't explicit in the artwork.

I could write a slogan, and I could take that slogan with me out onto the moors. And sometimes, I do wonder: why isn't politics more explicitly foregrounded within my work?

On one level, I admire a lot of artists' more politically legible approaches, but I sometimes wonder either whether I can, or if I really want to do this. The trouble with certain forms of legibility is that they risk narrowing the artwork. Instead, I feel artworks are more complex than simply operating as a device to communicate a message. Or I certainly hope so.

H: How do you understand the representation of yourself within your work?

A: When studying art at Cardiff during the 1970s, before I began walking as an artistic practice, I would take photos of myself, documenting how a woman chooses to be in the world, how she gets ready to go out at night, how she is engaging with sex or relationships. However, while I was depicting a young woman, I never thought of that woman as me exactly, but instead as a generic young woman.

In some ways, this approach to using the form of my own body is echoed in my more recent work. But, for me, it's not really about a return to the 'personal as political', so to speak. Instead, I have always been drawn to collective action as revolutionary action. The problem of the world is capitalism.

Romilly Crescent, 1979, I

H: To what extent do you consider that you perform for the camera?

A: In the 70s, 'performance' was not thought of as being 'narrative' in the way it sometimes is now: a performance might be walking about, drinking a cup of tea. There wasn't the same choreographed or theatrical quality to performance in the sense employed by some practices today.

I certainly don't consider my practice to use performance, although there are elements that are definitely performative. I'm not looking to produce stylised images or romanticise, but to foreground practicalities: reading maps, making compass bearings, measuring out space. Although, there is definitely an interest in image-making and colour and composition, there is also an interest in chance.

(A small bright party of goldfinch flickers off, calling to one another. Somewhere, a dog barks.)

I'd never take a photograph of me posing. In fact, I think I'm really trying to find the thing that isn't a pose; I'm looking for that unpredictability – a moment in between a moment.

Hands in Water near Overwood Moss. 2021

H: Some of your photographs remind me of fragments from a narrative. To what extent do you think of these images as individual artworks?

A: Yes, I have thought of my photographs as almost like frames from a deconstructed film. But that film may have happened over several years, rather than a period of thirty minutes or an hour. And I like the illusion of movement and time that's created between the images.

I think I find it quite strange thinking about artworks as resolved or finished articles, because my practice is process-orientated. For me, the question of whether images exist as individual works or as a series often happens at the point at which these images enter a book or an exhibition, where they are temporarily finalised. I use the word 'temporarily', because in my archival practice. I often return to my old images and reuse them, giving them a different title each time. Through this, there's a constant reshuffling, contextualisation and then recontextualisation of material, so although there's definitely an indexical time-based quality to my images, this time is far from linear.

Shall we go soon? It's getting cold.

H: Yes, but just before we go, this question of foreclosure is interesting, particularly because you have recently opened *My Punk is Not Dead*, a new solo exhibition at TG Gallery in Nottingham.[5] Could you tell me more about the show?

A: Well, thinking in these terms, many years have gone into this exhibition! The show brings together two moving-image works, and while both are made using specific structural constraints, they each have a very different quality and feel.

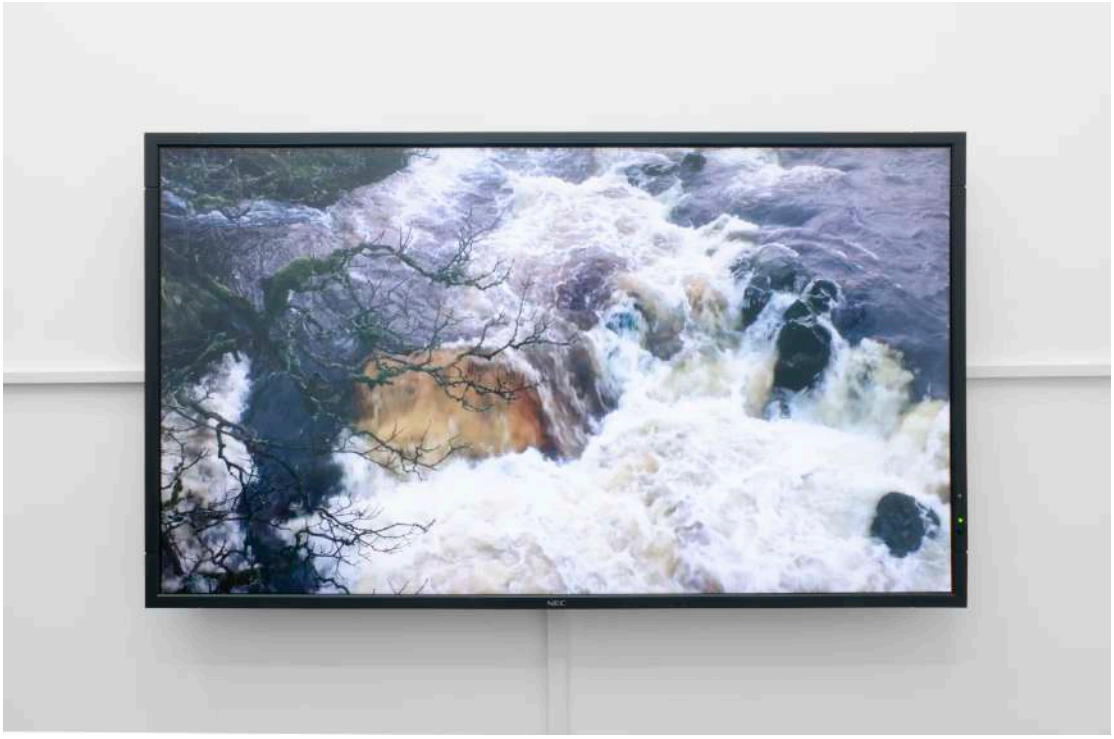
My Punk is Not Dead. 2022. 6mm transferred to digital film [04:03]

My Punk is Not Dead (2022) is a short 16mm film shot up here on 'Big Moor', and around an area of Nottingham I call 'The Meadow behind Bars'. For this, I invited friends to walk with me, some of whom appear within the work – my sister, artist Leomi Sadler – so the artwork has the quality of a dialogue, of filming and of being filmed. When filming, I used a single 100ft strip of film and made almost every mistake possible, so it captures all sorts of accidents – juddering, flickering, changes in colours. It's actually very painterly. And doing it myself, inadvertently recording this activity of learning and thinking, feels like a very important part of the process.

My Punk is Not Dead (Installation Shot). 2022. 6mm transferred to digital film [04:03]

The other is composed from one hundred and forty-four, 30-second video-clips shot on my iPhone between 2016-2022. Some record moments of enforced isolation during lockdown, when I was unable to get up to places like this, while others capture snippets of music, or sniffing, or dialogue. While they're ordered chronologically, they mark different ebbs and flows over this period of time - a bit like a fragmented journal.

I guess I make work out of what I am.



144 x 30 seconds, 2016 – 2022 (Installation Shot) 2016 – 2022. iPhone footage [01:17:57]

Alison bends to pick up her raincoat and OS map from the top of the bridge. I gather my rucksack from down among the pale grasses, slipping my notebook and voice-recorder inside.

We leave. As we walk, the path contours away, quietly following the edge of the valley.

Overhead, swifts hunt for midges high above the heather.

Hugh Nicholson

Hugh is an artist and writer, whose work examines the commodification and capitalisation of 'nature'. Previous projects and presentations have been hosted at spaces including: Deptford X, Pump House Gallery and Somerset House. He has also contributed to publications including: Art Monthly, the Contemporary Journal and Hospital Rooms.

Later this year, Hugh will begin as artist-in-residence at the FRAC Grande Large, Dunkerque in order to develop new work for the Dunkerque Triennale 2023. He is a current PhD candidate at the Slade School of Fine Art, University College London, where his research investigates the relationship between ecology, finance and artistic form.

Alison Lloyd

During the 1970s and 80s, Alison Lloyd's artworks delved into the hidden interiors of bedsits and bathrooms; her photographic images appear like film stills, snapshots from a movie that was never made. Since 2010, her practice has refocused on remote moorland and mountainous areas, examining how experiences and techniques from walking can be rethought as artistic process and method. In 2019, Alison completed her practice-led PhD, *Contouring: Women, Walking and Art*, which situated her practice alongside a critical, analytical discussion of walking women artists from the 1960s and 70s.

Previous projects and presentations include: *My Punk is not Dead*, a solo exhibition at TG Gallery (2022); an image/text collaboration with poet Linda Kemp for SoAnyWay Journal (2022); a residency at Hospitalfield Arts, Scotland (2021); and *The #MeadowBehindBars* for The Edgeworker (2020-21). Later this year, Alison will return to the peaty gullies of Featherbed Moss and the Kinder Plateau to walk and camp.

All text by Hugh Nicholson and Alison Lloyd All images courtesy of Alison Lloyd and TG Gallery, Nottingham.

Notes

[1] *Kathleen Jamie, A Lone Enraptured Male* (vol. 30, no. 5, London Review of Books, London, 2008) www.lrb.co.uk/the-paper/v30/n05/kathleen-jamie/a-lone-enraptured-male
[2] Richard Long, *Two Straight Twelve Mile Walks on Dartmoor, England 1980* (Tate Collection, U.K.) www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/long-two-straight-twelve-mile-walks-on-dartmoor-england-1980-t03161
[3] John Berger, Ways of Seeing, (Penguin Books, London, 1972), p.109.
[4] Nicholas Hayes, *The Book of Trespass: Crossing the Lines that Divide Us* (Bloomsbury, London, 2020).
[5] Alison Lloyd, *My Punk is Not Dead*, TG Gallery, Nottingham, 2022. www.tgal.co/alison-lloyd-2