

# The Contemporary Remote

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Fig. 32 London Fieldworks, *Polaria Fieldwork*, Hold With Hope Peninsula, Northeast Greenland, 2001  
Source: London Fieldworks.

They rise from the fields like smoke in great, swirling currents, rising higher and spreading wider in the sky than one's field of vision can encompass. One fluid, recurved sweep of ten thousand of them passes through the space within another, counterflying flock; while beyond them lattice after lattice passes, like sliding Japanese walls, until in the whole sky you lose your depth of field and feel as though you are looking up from the floor of the ocean through shoals of fish.

(Lopez, 1999, p. 154)

We've been remote. Very remote. For some in our small group the alien nature and forbidding immensity of the looming black basalt cliffs and the ash coloured ribbon of beach we stood on immediately started to unsettle the mind: we have to stay in this barren wilderness for the next month? For me it didn't start off that way. Once we'd touched down, Hold With Hope Peninsula in Northeast Greenland initially appeared to me like a colossal version of a post-industrial wasteland. The colour of the terrain, its black and greyness, the crunch of it underfoot, reminded me of Lanarkshire shale heaps, 'bings' in the Scottish vernacular, that I spent my formative years playing on. It was weirdly familiar. The 'remoteness' became an aspect of scale appearing to my mind through a Lilliputian filter. Nature is anything that hasn't been constructed by the human mind; to say the same about remoteness, that it hasn't been constructed by the human mind is problematic, the mind clearly has something to do with it. The human mind continually searches its memory for symbolic associations to whatever it perceives. Even in sleep an external event can become symbolically incorporated into dream content.

Jo's experience on arrival was different: we had arrived in a desert landscape, familiar to her from formative years spent in the Middle East. For her, the feeling of a desert remoteness was compounded looking into the eyes of the animal residents: arctic foxes, terns, muskoxen, who probably hadn't come across anything like us before, had never been 'constrained by the schemes of men' and displayed no fear. It was a remote place through the discernible lack of human presence. The great nature writer and arctic traveller Barry Lopez describes time in the arctic wilderness as a passing animal, and how the creatures there display 'a calming reminder of a more fundamental order'. Through him we were able to imagine being on the edge of what he described as a 'corridor of breath' (Lopez: 1999), part of the planetary network of migration paths, a seasonal animal pulse of great breeding colonies,

which in the high arctic last only a few weeks. In the beginning we had 24-hour continual sunshine, a sky full of noisy, fledgling, migratory birds and abundant flora making the most of the brief high arctic summer.

Before we arrived in this relative terra incognita in August 2001, I remember anticipating profound feelings of remoteness from the urban centre that we'd temporarily left behind. But this wasn't immediately actualized on arrival. Perhaps because it seemed so 'busy', with all the wildlife activity. Walking back down the beach to the Twin Otter aircraft, the Danish pilots shouted out to remind us they'd be back to pick us up in a month. Perhaps the proximity to the effort of getting there – the weeks of logistics and days of travelling – and previous consumption of video clips and high-resolution photographs functioned as a buffer against the reality of the moment. The Inmarsat satellite phone stashed in its Pelican case created a safety net, along with the HF radio contact we knew we were about to establish with the Danish Polar Centre after building the antenna. We had a connection to the established Polar network as a result of having to feign being a scientific expedition, in order to leverage the necessary permit to access the protected territory to make our artwork, *Polaria* (Gilchrist & Joelson, 2001).<sup>1</sup>

Shortly after our arrival, the arctic terns disappeared, flying south towards the Antarctic, to environments more conducive to growth and survival, chasing the continuous daylight regime they seem to crave. More devastating, over one day the following week, was the endless gathering and departure of staggering numbers of geese. The geese, like all the other animals seemed to define the place through their presence, but the geese more so because of the sheer number and sound of them. Their sweeping departure south created an immense void that we all agreed was keenly felt. I can still feel the desolate tug of it, and remember the new soundscape: a pervasive uniform slab of unidentifiable atmospheric sound that seemed to bear down on us from even further north.

Animals are keyed-in to environmental cues and leave for good reason. After about three weeks of working, a stunning reversal had gradually set in. The sun was low now, tracking just above the horizon at its lowest point and small icebergs were starting to grind up onto the beach. This was a concern as the beach functioned as the landing strip, our only route out. We started to sense ice particles and sleet carried in the wind and soon after this our guide, a former Sirius dog-sledge patrol veteran, retreated into his tent for days on end as if suffering from a premature winter depression. We became neglectful and compromised our safety: bear alarms

weren't tested as often as they should've been and rifles weren't checked every day. The increasing cloud cover and precipitation also incapacitated the solar panels forcing us to break out the generator, a brand new model borrowed during the plane-hop at Mestersvig, a Danish military base in Scoresby Land in the south. It didn't work. But fortunately, using the trickle of power from the solar panels to keep the satellite phone working, we were able to call the Danish Polar Centre to schedule an early pick up by plane. It was while waiting for the return of the Twin Otter and feeling exposed in a window of vulnerability that the remote attained a fresh edge. This was a humbling experience – one that Timothy Morton might describe as a 'humiliating descent towards the Earth' (2010).

The remote had become reframed by the diminished infrastructure and sudden awareness of fragile safety nets. Something I had initially perceived as somewhat out of register – a preconceived notion of remoteness as a strange geographical and psychological dislocation within a social equation – how much one can hack one's own company – became focused through technological dysfunction brought about by a change in the weather. The experience of this project and others like it have been seminal to our reading of the remote as an enigmatic mesh of natural, technological and psychological factors that affect different people in different ways.

The *Syzygy* project in 1999, took us and another small team of people to an unpopulated southern Hebridean island. *Syzygy* preempted the remote, isolation narrative of the Endemol reality TV show *Castaway*. We chose not to utilise a video link-up, instead relying on evolving texts posted daily on a proto-blog where readers could interact, and through an animated sculpture employing a visual language of deep abstraction to translate weather events and physiology transmitted from the island into machine behaviour in the Institute of Contemporary Art gallery in London. *Syzygy* employed remote sensing technologies and computer controlled telecommunication to interrogate mediated experience. The activity on the island was opened up to the possibility of multiple perspectives and interpretations, questioning whether mediation can truly represent an actual event in the mind of the audience. The audience was at liberty to juxtapose one of a number of literary accounts of an event by one of several authors, with a highly abstracted physical representation of the same event. Through the *Syzygy* project, different ideas of the remote were at play: the distance created between the actual source event and the experience of the audience distilled through multiple layers of representation; the geographical separation between audience and event (over 500 miles).

Exploring modes of production and reception have always been vital to our practice; *Outlandia* as an ongoing creative experiment into how to connect an urban centre to its periphery is firmly rooted in that aspect of the practice. *Remote Performances* (2014) enlisted a portable radio broadcast setup, a natural development of the *Outlandia* ethos. *Outlandia* connected to the 'urban centre' through its engagement with local population while the broadcast medium exploded the 'periphery' into a polyphony of centres: nodes in a network linked to clusters of remote listeners.

London Fieldworks' *Outlandia* project has been described in various ways: an artists' fieldstation, a treehouse studio, creative cabin architecture belonging to the tradition of huts and retreats. However valid these descriptions might be we prefer to regard it as a form of performative architecture: that the actuality of the building is largely defined by the acts and performances it elicits from those who choose to engage with it. In this way it can be thought of as an actor within a heterogeneous association of humans and non-human things. *Remote Performances* radically extended *Outlandia*'s heterogeneous associations via a multidisciplinary radio art project in collaboration with Resonance104.4fm, involving both local people and a diverse range of commissioned artists. *Outlandia*'s off-grid mountain location came with very specific logistical problems including the provision of a reliable temporary electrical power source and the ability to connect with a stable communications network in order to stream live audio to a global audience via the internet and FM radio in London. Electricity was provided via a pair of BOC Hymera portable hydrogen energy generators that ran extremely quietly at 45 decibels and produced water as the only by-product. Connecting with a stable network initially proved more of a challenge. A Tooway satellite system was brought to the site in its component pieces, assembled and then securely anchored to an improvised platform constructed at the base of the cabin's supporting tree. This position would be more stable than mounting it onto the roof of the swaying cabin. The guts of the radio station were plugged into a laptop and router and then cabled several metres to the ground-based antenna below. To establish a connection to the network, the Tooway antenna was fixed in a SSE direction to establish line of sight with the geostationary Eutelsat Ka Sat satellite,<sup>2</sup> 36,000km above the equator. This band of space above the equator is termed the Clarke Belt<sup>3</sup> after *Wireless World* magazine published British Science Fiction author Arthur C. Clarke's 1945 paper, 'Extra-Terrestrial Relays – Can Rocket Stations Give Worldwide Radio Coverage?' (1945). Yes they can as it

turns out, but unfortunately for us our initial line of sight and access to the Clarke Belt was blocked by large pine trees nearby. Permissions were sought and granted and a local woodsman was summoned to successfully clear the sight line.

Our oscillatory urban-rural practice has eventually led to questions around the idea of a contemporary remote: is there a new kind of remoteness related to the proliferation of technology and technologically enabled perception that is just as likely to be found in the inner city backstreet or suburban living room as in the High Arctic, a Hebridean island, or Highland glen?

Nature? Whatever it is that has sprung up, whatever has been generated and comes to be. What is a wilderness? It has been suggested that wilderness doesn't in fact exist, that it is an invention of the human imagination, a state of mind. While some regard this as too extreme, it is accepted that wilderness does in fact have to be designated by someone. Society gives wilderness meaning and decides where to put it. Wilderness is a human environment, but not for humans, sometimes with legislation around it to restrict access. Roderick Nash writing about 'Wilderness and the American Mind' (2001) suggests that Anglo-American civilisation created wilderness to counter Western technological culture in the late twentieth century. A social construct.

Thinking about the future can become like a wilderness, and to survive it with any success we need to know what is going to be out there in the new world we are going to have to move through. The contemporary remote is informed by a technological projection of the future, big data analysis interpreted by media pundits and experts conjuring spectres of the near future. As a consequence of this, mainstream society begins to consent to a particular vision of nature as something which we were formerly able to turn to in order to find comfort in its symbolic continuity and dynamic permanence. But now when we reflect on it, it is 'with considerable doubt and hesitancy and uncertainty' (Metzger, 1996, p. 9).

Geological time, the oldest time on earth where the human race and everything it has ever achieved is little more than a glitch. If, in the remote future, some form of human or extra-terrestrial intelligence scans the Earth's geological record they will find 'anthropogenic markers'. These 'markers' will contain plastics that have disintegrated into fine particles, mixed and adhered to sediment, small rocks and organic debris such as shells to form a conglomerate that solidifies over time to become what is now being called plastiglomerate rock. 'Our results indicate that this anthropogenically influenced material has great potential to form a marker horizon

of human pollution, signaling the occurrence of the informal Anthropocene epoch' (Corcoran, Moore & Jazvac, 2013, p. 8). The contemporary remote is a watershed defined by juxtapositions and collisions between unimaginably slow things that have been happening and present over geological timescales, and relatively rapid, technologically enabled events.

'There is no human knowing that is not looking out from where we are, using our senses and our brains, from an anthropocentric perspective' (Chappell, 1997, p. 211). Speculative Realism has countered what it has identified as the Correlationist view, humans and the world inextricably tied together, the one never existing without the other. Things are imagined as aggregations of even smaller things and described as scientific naturalism, or as social relativism where things are constructions of human behaviours and society. There is current thinking that attempts to navigate a path between the two, giving equal attention to all things at all scales while contemplating their nature and inter-relationships as much as how they relate to us. Ian Bogost declares that 'all things exist, yet they do not exist equally', challenging the anthropocentric perspective, calling for an appreciation of 'the multifarious complexity of being amongst all things' whereby 'reality is reaffirmed, and humans are allowed to live within it alongside the sea urchins, kudzu, enchiladas, quasars and Tesla coils' (2012). Coming out of environmental philosophy and posthuman studies, Bogost promotes a mode of thought in which nothing exists any more or less than anything else – a flat ontology, where humans are no longer of central interest.

Barbara Maria Stafford describes how the emergent sciences of the mind are contributing to new ideas that challenge long-held assumptions about identity, how experience of first person presence in the psyche leaks out and becomes dispersed in the details of our surroundings, 'thought is lost in the automatic activity of fastening jewelry, eating leftovers at work, or holding a garbage can lid' (2007, p. 175). It is this view of something decentred, no longer being axial from which everything radiates that is germane to the concept of the contemporary remote.



Fig.34 Fixed 42 metre UHF parabolic antenna, Eiscat Svalbard Radar, *Fronteirs 8*, 2004  
Source: London Fieldworks.

A primary aspect of the contemporary remote is the ability to discern the invisible by means of technological augmentation to the human senses, and questions the assertion that 'human knowing' is set within the brainpan. The human artifactual world is busily employing its instruments to interrogate everything. The diminutive spacecraft, Rosetta spent 10 years travelling at 55,000kmh chasing a comet over 6 billion km away. On reaching it the spacecraft threw itself into the comet's orbit before deploying a lander to cling onto its surface to probe it and relay images back to Earth. People looking at the photographs could almost imagine touching the comet's rough, pitted surface with its whiff of rotten eggs. In contrast to the conventional idea of a detached geographical and psychological remoteness, the contemporary remote creates the appearance of access to places and things through which to engage the imagination. It draws them nearer.

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### Notes

<sup>1</sup> The *Polaria* project focuses on an experience of nature, which is both scientific and subjective and is interested in the ways in which we encounter nature phenomenologically. *Polaria* is an artwork that translates objective fieldwork data into an intimate participative experience. Inspired by medical research into the bio-stimulation effects of full-spectrum polarized light, it involved a month-long field trip to Hold With Hope Peninsula in northeast Greenland in August 2001. We recorded light and physiological data within a continuous 24-hour daylight regime, with its gradual transition towards a sunset emphasizing a seasonal as opposed to a diurnal rhythm. The recorded data was subsequently used to create an interactive virtual daylight installation for a touring gallery exhibition. Gallery visitors are regarded as both users and components of the work, being literally electrified by the installation interface in order to trigger representations of arctic light.

<sup>2</sup> The six ton Eutelsat Ka Sat satellite was launched on a Proton rocket from Baikonur in Kazakhstan in December 2010, the second European satellite dedicated to delivering broadband internet connections to Europe and the Mediterranean Basin; the first satellite, operated by Avanti operations of London was launched in November. A previous Proton rocket earlier in December 2010 had failed, dumping three Glonass satellite navigation spacecraft in the Pacific ocean. Once in geostationary orbit, the Ka Sat's spotbeams connected it to a network of ten terrestrial teleports centrally operated by Skylogic in Torino, a collective tributary to the larger body of chopped up data packets flowing through the cables of the internet. A finite operational lifetime means that Ka Sat will be Space Junk by 2024.

<sup>3</sup> Launching geostationary satellites into the Clarke Belt is creating a permanent ring of several hundred machines locked in orbit around the planet. Outside of an orbit that would eventually suck them destructively back into our atmosphere, these machines are allowed to die but never decay. Their futures will not be measured by Earthly geological epochs but in the times of planets and stars.

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