

Esther Breslin

Are These Moose Mine?

Walking, tracing and learning what it means to own land, in Tyllidalen, Norway.

Master's thesis in International Master of Fine Art

Supervisor: Anne-Karin Furunes

Co-supervisor: Nabil Ahmed

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*Are these moose mine?
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How does owning land influence how one interacts with it over time? What does the process of getting to know a landscape look like? How can artistic practice aid our understanding of the relationship between humans and the landscape?

Abstract

In this thesis I aim to answer these and other questions relating to the experience of becoming a landowner, and how this informs and presents itself in my practice. Moving away from a dualistic view on our relationship to nature, to one that is more holistic, I take a closer look at the dialogue between humans and landscape. In this process my artistic practice evolves from painting into other more contingent forms in response to the land itself. Chapters 1 and 2 look at how grasping an understanding of the notion of cultural landscape, and addressing some of the ethical concerns of ownership, allowed me to contextualise my role as landowner. This instigated a long term project of getting to know the place for which I am responsible. Recognising knowledge as the key to successful stewardship I began documenting and mapping a specific location on my land through its seasonal transitions. In chapter 3 I discuss how I implement these methodologies in my artistic practice. Drawing on the theories of Tim Ingold relating to walking and mapping, I explain how walking develops as an integral part of my process, both as a tool for knowledge creation and as an aesthetic act. In chapter 4 I explore links between walking, time and weather and how these pertain to my role as landowner. In the final chapter I demonstrate how my research and methodologies come together in the physical manifestation of my master project. I refer to some of the contemporary artists that have influenced my process, and how I intend for the work to be experienced. I conclude with some comments on the progression of both the physical and conceptual elements throughout the project and how they have impacted on my understanding of landscape and ownership.

Prologue

A couple of years ago I entered into the world of landownership. Although this was something myself and my partner had talked about for many years, I don't believe I truly understood what it meant until it became a reality. In May 2021 we became legal owners of a 150 acre agricultural property spread over 4 separate piece of land. This land is situated in the valley of Tyllidalen, a small farming community of about 500 inhabitants in the mountain region of eastern Norway. The primary plot consists of a farmyard with two houses and a barn, an open field, a small patch of forest, and a corridor of trees that runs alongside the river that marks the border of this property. The second and largest plot is a 132 acre area of forest located higher up on the eastern side of the valley, about 10km from the primary property. The last two plots are smaller in size and mostly consist of forest, both are located within a relatively short distance to each of the main sites.



Satellite image of my land with each of the 4 plots highlighted.

Concerned by the scale of what I had become responsible for, and the lack of prior knowledge of this place, I was unsure how to relate to it as something which belonged to me. How would I ever know every tree, rock or patch of earth, and was I expected to recognise them as one recognises other possessions? More importantly, how would I ever be informed enough to make executive decisions regarding the well-being of all these natural objects? I decided to begin trying to answer these questions by focusing on the land immediately surrounding my home. In particular, on the patch of forest nestled between the open field and the river. How could I interact with this space in a way that would help me to understand this landscape as a whole and my role in relation to it?



My chosen research site.

A Resident Alien

A cultural landscape embodies a distinctive narrative, a story of its developmental stages and their significance. The story concerns the reciprocal relationship between its resident organisms (and in some cases alien species) and the land in which they are located. Humans are part of this narrative through their practices and activities, and the narrative is in turn a constituent of human identity. Today's humans have the capacity to relate to the narrative in either of two ways. They can disrupt the narrative, or they can somehow continue it.¹

In order to access my chosen research site I simply have to walk out of my house, cross the open field and navigate my way through overgrown vegetation to enter a small patch of forest. In winter, I walk diagonally right across the field, which is protected by a thick covering of snow. In the summer, I walk the periphery of the field. I do this deliberately so as not to trample down the crop of the local farmer who rents this field from us to grow feed for his cattle. When I reach the far edge of the field, where the tractor's workspace ends and the unkempt vegetation begins, I have various access points I can choose to go through. This also varies with the seasons. In the summer I have elbow high nettles and raspberry bushes to contend with. In the winter, tree branches weighed down so heavily with snow close off some of these openings entirely. Once in, however, an old tractor road which is kept well trodden by local wildlife makes it easier to move more freely. This trail runs parallel to the river, which is neither winding nor deep. We have been told that this is because it was rerouted from its original path, in order to avoid continued flooding of the farmlands along its banks. The field that is shaped by the activities of the cattle farmer, the old tractor road that has become a wildlife trail, and the straight and shallow river are among the elements that depict the narrative of this cultural landscape. The valley as a whole has largely been shaped by agricultural practices. At the same time, there remains pockets that are less influenced by human activity, in which wildlife is flourishing. It is thus, a landscape formed by the processes and activities of humans and non humans alike, in some ways harmoniously and in others opposingly.



The view across to my research site from outside my house, May 2021

The area I have described is a good example of the kind of dynamic landscape discussed in the essays that make up the book *Humans in the Land*. This book explores the cultural landscape through notions such as wilderness as a construct, landscape democracy and agricultural aesthetic. Departing from a view of “nature” as that which is not human or man-made, it creates an understanding of humans as an integral part of the landscape. This book highlights for me the importance of understanding my participation in shaping the landscape I now occupy. I cannot continue to observe nature and the landscape as “the other” - that which exists separately to humans, and unto which all human actions cause destruction. Nor can I assume that we can exist in complete harmony. Rather we exist simultaneously, forming environments together by trying to find ways to adapt to each others processes and cycles in reciprocal ways.

In the setting of the cultural landscape, nature is by no means mute or subservient. It is most often a partner, willing or unwilling, in the co-production of environments featuring an admixture of the natural and the artefactual.²

Many of the themes addressed in this book also touch on environmental aesthetics and how we perceive certain landscapes based on culturally founded beliefs and attitudes. This makes me wonder about how not being native to the land I own effects my perception and subsequent interaction with it. Does my lack of historical and experiential knowledge make me an uninterested observer? That is to say, do I see it from a visitor perspective, with no invested interest beyond that of enjoying it as an aesthetic experience? Or do I perceive it from a dweller perspective, with a sense of invested personal engagement that makes this place integral to my existence and identity?³ And how does my perspective as an artist play into this? Discerning this will require more time, exploration and experience. It has, however, become clear that I am already an instrumental part of this landscape. I am a resident organism (albeit an alien one) and as such I have entered into a reciprocal relationship with this land. I am now faced with the possibility of choosing to disrupt or continue the narrative of this cultural landscape.



My residence as seen from my research site, July 2021.

Are These Moose Mine?

Who really owns this property though ? Who really owns any land for that matter? How do you determine where the boundaries lie exactly while you are out walking, and if you happen to cross an imaginary line, (...) what does it matter ? The other living things of the tract, which I am informed by legal authorities do not as yet have any rights, freely cross and recross the property lines of this piece of earth.⁴



Photograph of moose captured by my wildlife camera, November 2022.

There are many ethical and environmental implications associated with my role as a landowner. The knowledge I have, (or lack thereof), the perception of landscape I hold, the cultural attitudes I impose on it and the choices I make in my activities, all have an impact on how my presence will form this land.

In the beginning of making routine trips to my research site my head reeled with thoughts trying to grasp the implications of what it meant to own the surface on which I walked. Did knowing this effect where and how I placed my feet? Was I to feel responsible for every natural object I came across? What about the animals that pass regularly through this landscape, are they not also inhabitants of this place? And are they mine for the duration of time they spend on my property? There is of course the obvious legal understanding of owning land, which involves complying with the rules of usage as designated by zoning laws. But I was more interested in what ownership meant beyond the static representation of this land as a demarcated area of natural vegetation. In his book *Should Trees Have Standing* Christopher D. Stone makes an argument for giving rights to natural objects, before this concept became more widely discussed. He explores the idea of granting legal rights to natural objects in order to protect them as autonomous entities and not just in the interest of how we may best benefit from them.⁵ This incited in me an interest in the ethical questions involved in ownership and indeed the ethics of care.

Caring for the land as discussed by Clare Palmer, is a phrase that can mean different things to different people and is often based on their experience, knowledge and relationship to a place.⁶ This returns me to the concern that I am not a native of this place. I lack the tacit and practical

knowledge held by the people who grew up here, or who have resided here for a large portion of their life. What then forms the foundation for how and what I care for? Of course I know that I do not own the moose that I discovered to be regularly frequenting the old tractor road trail, but it raises the question about how landownership differs from other kinds of possession. It strikes me as problematic to claim ownership of something that has many variables that are in a continuous state of transition.

In researching the history of landownership, one in which we see a transition from a narrative of the commons to one of individual, private ownership, it is becoming clear to me how I desire to relate to my role as landowner. I see it as one of stewardship. I don't intend for the exploitation of the resources of this landscape in a way that is entirely individualistic and destructive. I care for the well-being of this place and its inhabitants, both those long and short-term, now and in the future. I care for maintaining the cultural landscape in both material and immaterial ways and the sustaining the aesthetic of this place. It is my aim to work as much as possible with the features and processes of this place and not in opposition them. I want to *continue*, and not to *disrupt*, the narrative. Through invested interaction I aim to gain more insight into this land and to convey this process through my artistic practice.

Knowing as I go

As footprints are made in soft ground rather than stamped on a hard surface, their temporality is bound to the dynamics of its formation. These dynamics are a function of the weather, and of reactions across the interface between earth and air. Breathing with every step they take, wayfarers walk at once in the air and on the ground. This walking is itself a process of thinking and knowing. Thus knowledge is formed along paths of movement in the weather-world.⁷



Footsteps leading from my house to me research site, February 2023.

In exploring the idea of the cultural landscape and the implications of ownership, my concern about not knowing the landscape has been reinforced. It feels important to me that I should be more intimately acquainted with this land than any other place. I should know its borders, its vegetation,

its inhabitants, and its rhythms. I should know it not just in single static moment but be familiar with its changing characteristics across the different seasons. I should be an active part of it and not a detached observer.

In his essay *Footprints through the weather-world: walking, breathing, knowing* Tim Ingold discusses the notion of walking as knowledge with reference to the information gained through the bodily experience of a place. He mentions the concept of wayfaring as distinctly different from transport as a modality of movement. The wayfarer, he describes, “improvises a passage as he goes along” often actively engaging with the environment around him in order to determine his path *through* it. Transport, on the other hand is about travelling predefined routes *across* surfaces in order to get from A to B. The knowledge of the wayfarer then is not based on a static impression of a specific location, but rather it is the integration of knowledge through direct experience. It is an acute perceptual awareness that is developed by moving through an environment. “They know as they go”, as Ingold explains, in an open ended journey of discovery. Furthermore, he likens this idea of wayfaring to mapping. Not, importantly, the making or using of a physical map to navigate one's way in unfamiliar terrain, but the cognitive activity of situating oneself in relation to one's surroundings, based on the direct experience of the place.

*The traveller or storyteller who knows as he goes is neither making a map nor using one. He is, quite simply, mapping. And the forms or patterns that arise from this mapping process, whether in the imagination or materialised as artefacts, are but stepping stones along the way, punctuating the process rather than initiating it or bringing it to a close.*⁸

Thus, walking and mapping have emerged as an intrinsic part of my practice. As mentioned, much of the knowledge that I would have inherently had were I native to this place, must be learned. The act of walking – or indeed wayfaring, therefore has become a tool for knowledge creation, as well as an aesthetic act in itself.

Starting in Summer 2022 I began regularly meandering through my chosen research site carrying out various forms of documentation. As a means of passively monitoring the place, I also set up a wildlife camera. I tested out various locations and settings on this camera over a number of weeks before landing on the most optimal set-up. At which point the process became a routine. Every couple of weeks I would walk out to download the footage from the camera and check if I needed to change the batteries. I quickly discovered there was a host of non-human beings also frequenting this patch of forest, and it was a treat to discover the parallel, nocturnal narrative unfolding in my absence. While I transferred this footage onto my laptop I would take the opportunity to document the place in other ways. I would film the river in various states of frozen, photograph the freshest animal tracks, or record the sound of my feet crunching through snow. Sometimes I would simply just wander around and be present in the space, listening and looking. Often I would round off the routine with writing about any observations or thoughts that had occurred to me in the process.

07.01.23 -3°C cloudy, fresh snow, 13:00.

There seemed to be some sort of argument going on between the bullfinches and the magpies in the trees above my head today. At first I was enjoying the birdsong I was hearing, until I realised it didn't all sound like happy calls. That's when I looked up to see bullfinches being chased off by some typically arrogant magpies. I was, however, glad they had made me look up. I'm not always good at engaging in anything other than the anthropocentric perspective when observing my surroundings. As a result I ended up filming the treetops a little. This reminded me of a picture I took recently where I discovered, to my delight, that the trails used by me and the animals of this land seem just as apparent in the canopy above my head as they do in the vegetation at my feet.

Logbook entry, January 2023.



Treetop trails, November 2022.

As an aesthetic act, walking can be seen as physical interventions in the landscape. Lines drawn in the terrain illustrate my path of exploration and express the movements of my body in direct reaction to the space. The presence of snow 6 months of the year means many of these traces are ephemeral. At the same time, walking some of these tracks repeatedly throughout different seasons results in somewhat less ephemeral impressions left on the landscape. In collaboration with the animals that frequent this trail, I am indirectly sculpting the vegetation and contributing to shaping the place over time. In doing this I am simultaneously building up a large visual and audio archive. This enables me to record the changing narrative and transitory nature of this place as it is influenced by weather and the passage of time.

22.01.23 -18°C - bright, very cold 14.20
There were no obvious deer trails on my last visit here two weeks ago and now the place is an intricate patchwork of them. Had the fox who had made an agreement with the moose at the end of autumn now made an agreement with the deer? "From January, the place is yours." One possible explanation that occurred to me is how frozen the river now is. This was an observation I had made earlier in relation to the disappearance of the moose, who tended to enter my property via a fixed route through the river. At some point, although shallow, it probably got difficult to cross. Now though, it was frozen enough for the deer to make it across without falling through, or this certainly seemed to be the case going by their tracks. Who knows though, animals are resilient, especially wild ones, and perhaps such a river in any state is no challenge to them. I can only speculate as I try to make sense of this curious rotation of animals through the space.

Logbook entry, January 2023.



Photographs from my wildlife camera, August – December 2022.



Downloading footage, January 2023.



Photographs from my wildlife camera, January – March 2023

A Matter of Transience

To safeguard the earth or respect the weather, the wind and rain, we would have to think toward the long term, and because we don't live out in the weather, we've unlearned how to think in accordance with its rhythms and its scope.⁹

It has become increasingly evident that the notion of time is intrinsic to both my ongoing investigation of what it means to own land and my material practice. Getting to know a place involves experiencing it over time, living through its transitions. By walking the same route throughout different seasons I have been attempting to “live out in the weather” acquainting myself with the cycles and rhythms of this land. Each walk and each change has formed new knowledge. The traces created during these walks appearing more or less ephemeral depending on the weather. Time and weather - the space in which these walks take place and the narrative unfolds.

In his book *The Natural Contract* Michel Serres uses the French word “temps” to address this connection between time and weather. “By chance or wisdom”, he claims, “the French language uses a single word *temps* for the time that passes and the weather outside.”¹⁰ He reflects back on an era in which our activities and how we spent our time was to a larger degree dictated by the seasons. He believes that the less time we spend outdoors and the more removed we become from the rhythms and cycles of the natural world the more we lose the ability to think long-term. In my role as landowner I have been compelled to pay closer attention to time and weather, not only as a means of knowing the environment around me but also because certain duties I now have are determined by the seasons in greater capacity than before. Take for example the task of thinning trees and procuring firewood from my forest. All of the conditions that must be considered when carrying out each stage of this task are sensitive to time and weather. As such, this one task can quickly be equated to an annual cycle. Not only then can I relate to Serres' link between time and weather, but it has also begun to influence my perception on the passage of time and how I spend it.

Previously, I mentioned the sense of temporariness associated with renting. I looked forward to the permanency of ownership. However, throughout my process of walking and getting to know my land, I realise that there is a very transient nature to these circumstances too. While this place represents a permanency for me in my lifetime, I am not permanent to it. My ownership is temporary, this land will continue to transition and be shaped beyond my lifetime. This has given me a heightened awareness for how my treatment of this land today will impact on its future, a time succeeding my ownership. It can be said that in the same respects in which Serres discusses time and weather that land ownership has caused me to shift from a mode of short-term thinking to one of long-term thinking.

Walking in the Landscape through Weather and Time.

It is in the physical manifestations of my master project that I consolidate these ideas and links between landscape, walking, time and weather. The main piece is an installation in which a video is projected onto long rows of shredded paper that are hung from the ceiling. The rows vary in width and are hung at slight angles in a way that gives these otherwise linear objects a more dynamic aesthetic. The viewer is invited to experience the installation as an active observer, walking between the sections of paper. As such, they find themselves in a situation that echoes the act of ambling around my land. Engaging in bodily motion, they must react directly to their surroundings in order to minimise the interference caused as they navigate through the work. Their movement effects the paper, which gently flutters in their wake. Meanwhile, the video offers insight into my documentation processes. The footage depicts the features of the landscape, my activities within it, the changing weather, and other noteworthy observations and transitions. Interlaced with footage

from my wildlife camera it presents both the diurnal and nocturnal narratives of this place as they unfold over a period of several months. A subtle sound piece accompanying the installation adds an additionally immersive element. With an audio track that differs in length to the video variation is created in the experience of the sound and moving image together.



First iteration of my video and shredded paper installation, September 2022.

As a supplementary insight into this exploratory process I have created a book. The book is compiled of photographs and excerpts from the logbook entries I frequently wrote after each walk. It depicts the scope of this project, and provides a more detailed look into my methodologies, as well as a more personal response to my investigation.

These two pieces are the result of an experimental process in which I explored a range of mediums. During this exploration I looked to artists whose work is rooted in similar circumstances, materially or conceptually, to my own. Richard Long and Hamish Fulton are two examples of artists to whom walking as in integral part of their practice. Both embraced it as a sculptural gesture in the landscape as well as the documentation of these acts. However, I have also been inspired by artists who work more directly with the materials of the landscape to create ephemeral interventions, such as Antti Laitinen. In his series *Broken Landscapes* he works primarily with trees, visually disrupting their appearance through cutting, weaving, suspending, reforming and other such techniques. These impactful, yet mostly temporary visual interventions, are intended to create a dialogue about how we interact with landscape.

Additionally, I have been looking at artists who work more performatively with the landscape, such as Annette Arlander. Arlander describes her approach to her work as “performing landscape as artistic research”.¹¹ *Meetings with Remarkable and Unremarkable Trees* is a project in which she spends time with individual trees, either alone or with the public, in order to create video works. Her intention is to evoke thoughts about our relationships with other beings with whom we share the planet. I have also been inspired by artists who similarly use the documentation of a piece of land as the starting point for their work, for example Cecilia Danell. Her work takes the form of paintings and sculptural objects which she makes based on trips to her family farm in Sweden. There she engages in a processes of mapping and archiving akin to my own. Her work deals with

the idea of wilderness as a concept and the contemporary desire to return to a more authentic lifestyle in something resembling more of a primeval landscape.



A Line made by Walking, Richard Long, 1967



Broken Landscape VI, Antti Laitinen, 2019



Dear deceased – end, Annette Arlander, 2020



From the exhibition *In a Landscape*, Cecilia Danell, 2019 (RHA Dublin)

In my own practice my material choices have often been driven by a fascination about the relationship between surface and illusion. In the past I have primarily executed this through painting, but I find myself increasingly looking for ways of challenging the conventions of this

relationship. In this instance I have intentionally moved away from painting, which I experienced as too static in its expression and two dimensionality for a project which spans time, and to which change is intrinsic. Painting could be equated with the kind of knowledge Ingold describes as being gained from transport as a modality of movement: of a specific location and from a certain perspective. A painting can transport you to a place but may not tell you anything about the way there. Therefore, I chose to embrace moving image, a non-static expression. I chose to work with the kind of techniques more synonymous of the wayfarer, who knows as he goes. In the case of my installation, the viewer, much like me in my land, gains insight as they move through the work, in space and time. The surface of the work is spread out in over a 3 dimensional space which can be entered into. From within, the viewer experiences the moving image in several layers as it permeates the fragmented surface of each section of paper to reach the next layer. The passage of time is experienced through the seasonal changes, as well as the rhythms of night and day seen in the habitual movements of the human and non-human inhabitants of this land. The transient nature of the place is revealed, as is my role in being a part of this place and this change. In situating the viewer in the position of interacting with the work, I aim to reflect this notion of human participation in landscape, not merely as a removed observer.

The materiality of the piece also serves to emphasise my thoughts about time and transition. The use of paper is a reflection on the kind of transition that results from humans interacting with the land and its resources; the transformation of trees to paper. Much like the elements of a landscape it is a material that can be both fragile and robust. The time consuming process of collecting this paper, shredding it and piecing it together again reflects the long term scope of my project and the attention to detail applied in my documentation process. Most importantly, however, there is a significance to the impermanent nature of this material, as it draws a parallel to the notions I have discussed around ownership and transience. Unlike other material artworks that are intended to leave a lasting mark there is a temporality to this piece. When the projector is off the paper appears as a sculptural object but it does not reveal the narrative of the work. It is the sum of its parts and cannot be experienced in its entirety without the simultaneous participation of each of the elements – the paper, the video and the viewer that activates the work. It is synonymous of the relationship between humans and the landscape, rarely do they exist separately from each other, rather they are a part of the same environment in which they shape and influence each other.



Paper installation in progress, March 2023.

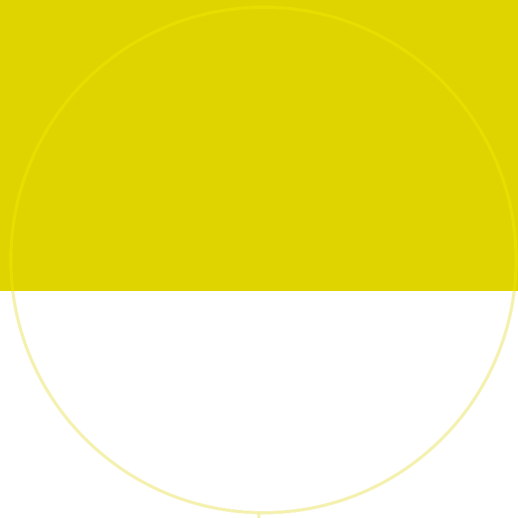
Epilogue

Throughout the course of my inquiry my understanding of how we interact with landscape, and the impact of these interactions has changed. To begin with, I saw myself as separate to the land. This was due to the dualistic perspective I held on humans and nature, but also due to being an alien in that specific landscape. Through both my research, as well as my actions, I now understand that I am becoming an integrated part of the place. I am gaining a better comprehension of my role and the significance it plays in caring for and shaping this land both now and in the future.

On reflection, it could be said that at its core my project is about change; the transition between seasons, the passage of time, the transience of ownership and the non-static representation of my land as presented in the material aspect of my project. As with anything that is in a constant state of change there is no ultimate conclusion to be found. My land will continue to transform physically and my relationship to it will continue to evolve as more of the narrative is revealed and formed.

In short, whereas the Kantian traveller reasons over a map in his mind, the wayfarer draws a tale from impressions in the ground. Less a surveyor than a narrator, his aim is not to 'classify and arrange', or 'to place every experience in its class' (Kant 1970: 257-8), but rather to situate each impression in relation to the occurrences that paved the way for it, presently concur with it, and follow along after. In this sense his knowledge is not classificatory but storied, not totalizing and synoptic but open-ended and exploratory.¹²

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- 9 Michel Serres, *The Natural Contract* - English translation by Elizabeth McArthur and William Paulson (United States of America, The University of Michigan Press, 1995), 29.
- 10 Michel Serres, *The Natural Contract* - English translation by Elizabeth McArthur and William Paulson (United States of America, The University of Michigan Press, 1995), 27.
- 11 Anette Arlander, <https://annettearlander.com/>
- 12 *Footprints Through the Weather-world: Walking, Breathing, Knowing* in *Journal of The Royal Anthropological Institute: Volume 16, Issue s1 Special Issue:Making knowledge*, (April 2010) 121 -139
<https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9655.2010.01613.x>



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