

Listening to the forest.

Video essay script.

Text by Ellen Røed.

As a visual artist working with moving images, I am deeply indebted to artists such as Mary Lucier, Steina Vasulka, and Nancy Holt. As soon as video cameras became available to them, they explored what happened between their camera, their body, and the images they made, of and in their environments.

From late 1960ies these pioneers had an approach to moving images that you would also find in what is called structural films in the sense where there is an underlying tension between image, subjectivity and machine that is explored in terms of how technology structures perception.

What was different though, was how these video artists saw the camera both as an extension of their body and as a way of engaging in a social relationship with someone, some place or something through the camera. They treated objects as active and co-creating rather than revealed, as part of a visual and performative ecosystem. This had a lot to do with the technology of video, which was significantly different to that of film. Film, back then, consisted of singular images captured onto strips of film in a chemical process that required development in a lab. The images could only be seen later. Video on the other hand, was a live, continuous electronic signal. It could be seen immediately, in the camera, which they often operated handheld so as to incorporate gesture. It provided reference, and enabled relationships that connected image, experience and space, in real time.

Through the work of these artists, video art developed as a performance practice, visual as well as embodied and also as a practice of inquiry. It was a mode of research that rendered the world knowable by paying attention to material and social conditions of the encounter. Video was a network, occurring in the now, linking the world and the image through process. Video could enable fields of attention *between the world and the image*. It offered a remarkable mode of conducting artistic research by enabling this particular form of inquiry, obtained through wave-like fields of interaction and negotiation – material fields where vision, body, land and image were weaving into one another through the electronic circuits.

In a reflexive way, video enables attention to be modulated through the gestures of the camera operator, who engages in adjusting the image and controlling its movements.

The experience of movement in video also depends on a range of conditions. In technical terms, we speak of groups of pixels renewed at a certain rate, or more traditionally, frames per second. Anything less than 25 images, or frames, per second will be experienced as jittery, or not moving at all, as a sequence of still images.

In the video based virtual social here and now that we recently found ourselves in, a significant condition was the bandwidth of our internet connections. Depending on our bandwidths, the images that I was sharing did not always appear as moving. Mostly they were moving to a certain degree. And sometimes not at all.

I would like to invite you to pay attention to such conditions and what they produce, in terms of your experience of this material. After all, these images are not artworks, designed to be experienced in a certain way, but examples of research material, generated as part of my practice as a means of enabling and paying attention to the kinds of infrastructures and movements that I am interested in.

These images are recorded in an area called Vestmannland, which mainly consist of industrial forest.

Forestry is the backbone of the Swedish economy and 58 percent of the land area is covered by so-called productive forests, in which mainly spruce and pine are farmed for industrial purposes. This industrial forest has been cultivated for centuries.

Know a plantation, Peter Larkin writes, *by what it does to plurals*.

In 2014, the largest forest fire in Sweden in modern times occurred in this area of Vestmannland. In the aftermath, agreements on land exchange were made with the private owners so that the state could protect a portion of the burnt land as a rare fire-affected forest ecosystem. I have been visiting the area on several occasions, engaging in a form of camera-based listening.

I know this must sound like a contradiction. To listen after all, is something ones does with one's ears, not a camera.

I am borrowing the term to indicate that I am concerned with continuity between the image, the framed representation of the world, and the world that I am part of, behind and around the camera. I am departing from both the aesthetics of the avant-garde, where the materiality of the medium is in a separate position disconnected from the relations of the world, and the more phenomenological attitude where the artist registers impressions. At the same time, I am attempting to leave both approaches behind and treat images as immanent in the world depicted in them, both materially and socially a part of the world.

Sound cannot be cut out, extracted or abstracted from the ongoings of the world. Sound is not discrete, framed, like an image. It is always both in and of the world. Like the electronic circuit of the analog video signal in the 70ies, sound is waves, ongoing. Also, it consists, like air, of movements that we are unseparable from. It happens in our ears. It is part of us. In this sense, listening, is more a question of attention and ethics than of aesthetics.

Two cameras are mounted on a bar balancing on a tripod. They are set in a fixed relation to each other, on a fulcrum that enables them to pivot and pan on the vertical and horizontal axis according to gravity and wind. Their framing is more or less the same, but they have different optics, mechanics, electronics. Assembled into a single picture, the meeting point becomes a rupture as well as a joint.

When there is only very little wind, the camera remains silent. Stronger winds push or pull on the cameras in a way that offsets the balance, thus creating pivoting as well as panning movements, expanding the arc of vision in a sweeping pan offering a more circular view of the scene. Reproducing a perspective on the world established centuries before, the movement echo the panoramas of late 19th century's cinema of attraction, as Tom Gunning has named the first decade of the history of cinema. This moment in history when people went to the cinema not to be told a story, but simply to experience movement through images, their bodies remaining in their seats while world unfolded around them in a way they had not seen before. Moving landscapes. Inheriting its form from the painted panorama, the early use of the camera pan would pick up locations familiar from landscape painting and offer '*Panoramic Views*' of such sites, sometimes upgrading the field of vision to a full 360 degrees pan, anchored in a central, fixed point never to be revealed, as if the camera was man himself.

When the winds are strong, a full circle is sometimes obtained also with my rig, but never it seems, in the burnt forest, where the scarcity causes the movements of air to be distributed in a more diffracted way and the wind dissonantly pull and push the camera as if on open sea.

Sometimes, the motion reminds me of Michael Snow's camera In *La region Centrale*, from 1972. Snow left the camera on its own, to be moved by an automated crane system governed by algorithmic parameters, thus freeing "the eye from the condition of relative immobility" as Giles Deleuze has articulated it, as if our cameraman was now bodyless, no longer bound to the ground by gravity.

Snow's film renders a dehumanised landscape, captured by automated devices, and somewhat disconnected from human agency. My site on the other hand, is deeply intertwined with human activity, inseparable from the mesh that conditions it's making, hundreds of years of human management. The density of trees modulates the wind, the wind negotiates gravity.

Between each particular take, white balance, angle and aperture are adjusted by the camera operator. Then she is on the ground, trying to be still, to ignore the mosquitoes, intensively engaged in attending to what is going on inside the frame, outside the image, the light, the life of the forest itself. Hearing the wind approach through the trees, she is anticipating how its impact will mobilize the inert system, clumsily constructed to be portable as well as cheap, and acutely aware of how any movement she makes, will impact on the sound, as the extremely sensitive microphones developed by Signe, her collaborator, pick up and amplify the deep, almost imperceptible vibrations caused by their bodies on the forest floor, not to mention the rustling friction of their clothes.

I am approaching the forest as a landscape but also as an industrial site, or as a ruin of an industrial site. It is a kind of blasted landscape, its disturbances being a constant reminder of the mesh I find myself in, through this approach to moving images as a form of field recording; a particular mode of camerawork that is based on paying attention to the active connections the image forms through various processes of tuning. I am thinking of image as

a site in itself, formed by transient events. Adding and stripping away symbolic structure, plot and affect, I am doubling the scenes, wrapping the image around itself, reinforcing and contradicting the visions, movements and sounds occurring in the recording situation.

Field recording is a methodology I am borrowing from sound art, and learning from my collaborators, in particular Signe Lidén and Trond Lossius, with whom I have been developing this practice as a way of paying attention to the image and its entanglements. From between the trees, a thick materiality is brought on by small differences between each movement, each rustling leave and the images seem to become more singular and more impure the quieter the forest is.

Filming trees will not open up onto more forest or more world. Any relation between human and non-human tightened through attention is precarious. Human desire for more is too much and nature's capacity to provide too little.

It is perhaps as Peter Larkin suggests 'by means of scarcity, however, that the human *can* attach itself'.

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