

A Study Room Guide to Remoteness

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1. Introduction

In 2014 the Live Art Development Agency commissioned writer Tracey Warr to create this Study Room Guide on Remoteness. The Guide complements and contextualizes LADA's 2014 collaboration with London Fieldworks and Resonance104.4fm on *Remote Performances*.

Taking place between 4 and 9 August 2014, *Remote Performances* was a series of specially commissioned artist performances and programmes created with local residents and broadcast live from Outlandia, a unique artists' field-station in Glen Nevis, Lochaber, Scotland.

With Resonance104.4fm's mobile studio 'in residence', Outlandia became a portal between Lochaber and the rest of the world, a context in which participants transmitted experiences of place to diverse audiences through art, music and performance.

Artists from England, Scotland and beyond responded to Outlandia's distinctive and remote geographical forest location overlooked by the UK's highest mountain, Ben Nevis, in the Scottish Highlands. Taking place at the moment when Scotland voted on the continuance or dissolution of the 300 year old Acts of Union the broadcasts and blogposts acted as a timely reflection on contemporary ideas of remoteness, capturing and transmitting creative interactions with the land, its history and people and the tensions between nature, industry, tourism and heritage.

Tracey Warr wrote a series of blogposts responding to *Remote Performances* which were published daily throughout the project [on LADA's blog](#). In this Guide Tracey considers wider issues of remoteness and art through a range of artists' practice with "the odd deviation into literature and theory".

2. Introduction – Where is Remoteness?

Solitude

Many artists, writers and others seek remoteness as an effective place to generate ideas and make work. Numerous artists' residencies in remote places attest to its effectiveness for focus and reflection, and for inspiration from nature. There is a tradition of artists' and thinkers' huts, shacks and bothys, places for withdrawal and generation: Goethe's Gartenhaus in Weimar, Henry Thoreau's cabin at Walden Pond, Ludwig Wittgenstein's cabin at Skojlden in Norway, Dylan Thomas' writing shack in Laugharne. These remote creative cradles and nests are in turn related to an older tradition of hermit monks and desert fathers seeking solitude to contemplate and praise Creation. London Fieldworks' Outlandia¹, an off-grid treehouse studio in Glen Nevis in the Scottish Highlands, was the prompt for this Study Room Guide, and is in this tradition of retreat - a small secluded space immersed in a forest and mountain landscape, enabling the generation of creative work by visual artists, live art practitioners, filmmakers, musicians, sound artists and writers. But what is remoteness, where is it, why might you need it, and how can you get there if you do need it?

Distant, Inaccessible, Natural Environments

Perhaps remoteness is geographically distant, but distant from what? Is Fort William in the Scottish Highlands distant from London or is London distant from Fort William? And how distant does remoteness need to be? Rural areas have their own microcosms and networks of connection – physical or technological. A geographical definition of remoteness is relative to the locatedness of the person doing the defining, or it assumes the notion of centre and periphery. This definition of remoteness is subjective and individual. A city dweller might find most rural areas remote, but a person from a rural area may need something more extreme to register as remote for them. A few years back I was travelling on a Greyhound Bus through the Painted Desert in Arizona contemplating the sublime view out the window of vast skies, table mountains, cacti and desert, and was taken aback to overhear my fellow passengers from Las Vegas describing the same view with disgust (and anxiety) as 'a bunch of dirt'.

In Middle English remoteness meant 'far apart' and in Latin *remotus* was 'removed'. Is remoteness at the edge, distant from the urban; is it at green, wild places: mountains, forests, rivers, islands, where there is little sign of human intervention? Robert Macfarlane writes

¹ <http://www.outlandia.com>

of a place where there is no human trace 'except the rim of my own eyes'².

In 1900 the human population was 1.7 billion and by 2010 it was 6.9 billion³. E.O. Wilson claimed that 'The pattern of human population growth in the twentieth century was more bacterial than primate'⁴. Although human population overall is flourishing, some indigenous, often peripheral, populations are endangered. Macfarlane describes how 'In Britain, over sixty-one million people now live in 93,000 square miles of land. Remoteness has been almost abolished.' He writes that there are 30 million cars and over 210,000 miles of road. The landscape was damaged by mass agricultural methods, and is now threatened with pollution and climate change. Nevertheless, writes Macfarlane cheerfully, in the UK there are 5000 islands, 500 mountains and 300 rivers to explore⁵.

Does a place have to be difficult to access to be remote? Must it be inaccessible by car, without public transport and facilities. Yet walkers, cyclists, river swimmers, boaters, and mountain climbers, might have a different sense of what is inaccessible than an habituated motorist.

Technology Disconnect

Remoteness can also mean operated at a distance by means of radio or infrared signals. Does a place have to be technologically disconnected, off-grid, to be remote? A solitary recluse on an otherwise uninhabited island offshore, may have his or her radio, mobile phone, wifi connection, and water, wind or solar powered electricity. Is anywhere truly remote now? Connectivity and disconnection depend on material and economic factors as well as geographic and topographic ones, on the infrastructure of phone lines, pylons, mobile signal masts, satellites and various sources of power.

Being 'cut off' now means a new thing and is as difficult and as possible to achieve in rural areas as in urban. Being cut off occurs less and less because of technical infrastructure failure, although there are of course still signal black spots, and more often for economic reasons, or by choice. The type of disconnection an artist might seek is now as likely to be technological as geographical: a

² Macfarlane, Robert (2008) *The Wild Places*, London: Granta, p. 60.

³ See Steffen, Will; Grinevald, Jacques; Crutzen, Paul & McNeill, John (2011) 'The Anthropocene: Conceptual and Historical Perspectives', *Philosophical Transactions of The Royal Society*, 369, pp. 842-867.

⁴ Wilson, E.O. (2002) 'The bottleneck', *Scientific American*, February, pp. 82-91.

⁵ Macfarlane (2008), pp. 9-11.

need to disconnect from the daily grind and demands which mostly come down a wifi connection, to escape from letting those demands allow us to endlessly procrastinate about making some art.

Macfarlane argues that there is a human need to connect to wildness. Remoteness can also mean having very little connection with or relationship to something; something unlikely to occur; or being aloof and unfriendly in manner. Why do artists seek remoteness, to be at least temporarily 'aloof and unfriendly', solitary and disengaged? For focus, to disable procrastination and because creative generation loves a vacuum. Removed from daily routines and networks, the self becomes a strange new locale for exploration, reinvention, and reportage. Yet a division of human and technological is a false dichotomy. Our technologies are prosthetic by now, a natural part of the human animal.

City Made Strange

Is it possible to be remote in a city? Might remoteness be a psychological state as well as a geographical or technological one? City remoteness might be in the suburbs, in the view from high above, in the middle of the night, on the river, in a prison, in the canopy of trees in a park, or in some process of defamiliarisation, of well-worn ruts made strange. During a London tube and bus strike, I witnessed people navigating to work on foot above ground, with maps, traversing terrain made suddenly as unfamiliar as the Antarctic.

Remote Time

Remoteness is temporal as well as spatial. We talk of the distant past and the remote future, and of a different sense of time in remote places: slower, more considered, more humane perhaps, away from the urban pulse. In both rural and city environments seasons can impact on a sense of remoteness: with winter bringing more 'remoteness', more risk of disconnection.

Considering the past: the history of engagement with remoteness encompasses Enlightenment voyages of discovery and colonialism, and the need for the Romantics to escape rapid changes in the city and the country wrought by industrialisation. The Romantics developed a polarised view of human versus nature, urban versus rural and remote, recuperating wild and wilderness as positives. Carolyn Merchant argues that our foundational mythologies concern either a return to, or a progress to, the Garden of Eden⁶. The notions of dystopia and utopia also revolves around these myths.

⁶ Merchant, Carolyn (1980) *The Death of Nature*, New York: Harper Collins.

Now we see that the human is part of nature and not separate from it.⁷

Considering the future: a new term, The Anthropocene, has been proposed for formal acceptance into the Geological Time Scale.⁸ The Anthropocene is a period of time when the collective activities of human beings have profoundly altered Earth's climate and environment including global warming; changes in the atmosphere, oceans and soils; species invasions and extinctions. The term is also being used to refer to a point of no return in relation to human impacts on the environment and a radical questioning of representations of the world, including the borders between nature and culture, science and politics, facts and values⁹. In the humanities The Anthropocene represents a paradigm shift challenging notions of human progress, human capacity for technological and scientific control and solutions, the dominant economic model, and the human place in the natural world. Climate change scepticism or denial is one of the phenomena resulting from paradigm shift; but climate change is not a remote possibility.

The 2014 Fifth Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change notes 'unequivocal and unprecedented warming of Earth's climate system': atmosphere and ocean have warmed, amounts of snow and ice have diminished, sea levels have risen, concentrations of greenhouse gases have increased. 'Most aspects of climate change will persist for many centuries even if emissions of CO₂ are stopped. This represents a substantial multi-century climate change commitment created by past, present and future emissions of CO₂.'¹⁰ With rising temperatures and rising sea-levels, Contemporary Remoteness incorporates a sea-change in our attitudes towards nature.

⁷ See Morton, Timothy (2007) *Ecology Without Nature: Rethinking Environmental Aesthetics*, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, and Morton, Timothy (2013) *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology After the End of the World (Posthumanities)*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

⁸ Working Group on the Anthropocene
<http://quaternary.stratigraphy.org/workinggroups/anthropocene/>

⁹ See Latour, Bruno (2013) 'Thinking the Anthropocene', Draft Lecture
<http://www.bruno-latour.fr/sites/default/files/131-ANTHROPOCENE-PARIS-11-13.pdf>

¹⁰ Working Group Reports for the Fifth Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change 2014 <http://www.ipcc.ch>

Contemporary Remote¹¹

Is remoteness simply an urban dream? In the city there is the illusion of human control and there is distraction. Our daily issues, work, routines seem so significant and we can fool ourselves into not thinking about our own mortality, or the legacies we will leave behind us. In natural environments a different perspective emerges where we can feel dwarfed and awed by the forces of nature, put back in our place, fearful even. Rather than imagining that we are all-powerful custodians of the planet, we might see ourselves instead as destructive parasites, like woodworm invisibly destroying the fabric and structure from the inside, so that one day it may suddenly collapse. Along with the predicted extinctions of a third of species in climate change, human extinction is also a potential outcome. (And then there is the not gone threat of nuclear wars and accidents.). A nexus of issues confront us: the tensions in dense urban populations, global economic shifts and inequities, conflicts fuelled by identity, religion, resources, and their refugees, and climate change. Contemporary Remoteness has a new role to play in helping artists, curators and writers contemplate, represent and mitigate those issues.

¹¹ The nascent term 'Contemporary Remote' has been developing through a series of recent projects by artists London Fieldworks focussing on the proliferation of objects and technological colonisation which they see as central to an idea of the contemporary remote. <http://www.remotep performances.co.uk/post/90462180644/post-digital-contemporary-remote> The Contemporary Remote will be further explored in London Fieldwork's forthcoming book with Tracey Warr, *Remote Performances in Nature and Architecture*, to be published in 2015 by Ashgate.

3. A Guide to Remoteness

This armchair or library chair Guide to Remoteness meanders through selected artists' practice with the odd deviation into literature and theory. **[Letter numbers]** indicates the Live Art Development Agency's Study Room catalogue reference and **[web]** indicates a website listed in the Bibliography.

Unfold your OS Explorer's Map of Remoteness. Study the words on the map and turn them into a prose poem. This will give you a good idea of where you are heading. Marsh, Burrows, Dunes, Danger Area, High Water Mark, Low Water Mark, Cliff, Mud & Sand, Forest, Ford, Sheepfold, Cairn, Gravel Pit, Ridge, Waterfall, Stepping Stones, Ruins, Shelter, Observatory, Gully, Serpentine road, Steep gradient, Chair-lift, Nature reserve, Glacier, Hamlet, Deserted place, Interesting place, Open air bath, Bird colony, Lighthouse, Frontier crossing.¹² A map as Robert Louis Stevenson said, is a mine of suggestion. Imagine your way into the map. Peter Turchi **[P2513]** remarks that, 'Each of us stands at one unique spot in the universe, at one moment in the expanse of time, holding a blank sheet of paper. This is where we begin'¹³.

Cross the frontier and then finding the **Path** is the first challenge as it is not clearly signposted. Look out for Katherine Harmon's *You Are Here: Personal Geographies and Other Maps of the Imagination* **[P2506]** to get you started. Eventually you will see the path opening up before you, bending out of view and beckoning you on. Follow it around towards **Solitude**. Climb over the stile and move up the muddy gravel path to the Artist's Shed, Shack or Hut. Read the chapter 'Nests' in Gaston Bachelard's *The Poetics of Space* **[P2504]** to understand why you might want to spend time here. Consider undertaking one of numerous isolated artists' residencies at Resartis **[web]** and Transartist **[web]** such as Skaftfell in Iceland **[web]**, the Scottish Sculpture Workshop **[web]**, Cove Park **[web]**, or the NIDA Artist's Colony outside Vilnius **[web]**. See *Colm Cille's Spiral*, a project where contemporary artists responded to the experiences of 6th century hermit monks who circumnavigated the British Isles and made their solitary homes on islands and remote shores **[web]**. Look at artists' work in remote and rural places in Adam Sutherland and Jenny Brownrigg's *Roadshow: Grizedale Art Projects* **[P0614]** and Wysing Arts Centre **[web]**. Follow the grassy

¹² From my favourite OS Explorer maps of Carmarthen Bay, Wales; Glen Nevis, Scotland; and northern Norway including Lofoten Island.

¹³ Turchi, Peter (2009) *Maps of the Imagination: The Writer as Cartographer*, San Antonio, Texas: Trinity University Press, p. 236.

embankment around to Alec Finlay & Ken Cockburn's *The Road North* [P2601] and Richard Long's *Selected Walks* [P0946].

The next stretch takes you to the **Coast** where Emma Cocker, Sophie Mellor & Simon Poulter's *Manual for Marginal Places* [P1623] is a handy thing to have in your pocket, as it takes you from American deserts to English coasts, exploring peripheries, considering marginal acts and marginal places. There is, they say, no definitive way of defining what is marginal.

Follow the road along the beach front, then bear right up the hill. The view stretches endlessly away towards the mouth of the estuary, but only the first few metres are publicly accessible due to a military range.

Continue across, keeping left then turn right and cut through Jeff Kastner's *Land and Environmental Art* [P0530] which includes a wealth of material on artworks by Michael Heizer, Robert Smithson, Christo and Jeanne-Claude, Ana Mendieta and others, along with a selection of pertinent texts including Henry David Thoreau, Guy Debord and Nancy Spero. Further contemplate the **Desert** with Ruth MacLennan's *Anarcadia* [P1742].

Bear left on the last bend to follow a path through the trees and enter the **Forest**. The trees are packed so tightly that if you were a squirrel you could leap from tree to tree without touching the ground as Italo Calvino's delightful hero does in *The Baron in the Trees*¹⁴ After arguing with his sister and father because he refuses to eat snails, the 12-year old Baron-to-be takes to the trees and swears never to leave them for the rest of his life. "You want to withdraw!" a friend tells him. "No, to resist," he replies. His adventure leads him to assert that anyone who wants to see the earth properly must keep themselves at a necessary distance from it. In *Marcus Coates* [P0319] the artist perches up a tree attempting to embody the experience and view of goshawk, and Qui Zhijie draws maps of the *Bird's Eye View* [web]. A residency at Mustarinda [web] at this point would take you further in amongst old trees.

Eventually the path emerges from the woods and opens out to an enormous sky. Follow the route across squelchy salt marshes to the estuary. You can see an **Island** off shore. Find a way to get there. Bruce Gilchrist & Jo Joelson's *Syzygy/Polaria* [P0615] can take you or Daniel Vais' *The Remote Island Tour* [D1939]. Nomeda and Gediminas Urbonas' *Uto-pia* [web] will guide you around the

¹⁴ Calvino, Italo (1959) *The Baron in the Trees*, New York: William Collins.

Archipelago and Tracey Warr's 'Circuitry' **[A0044]** lands on an island, or go to Atlas Arts **[web]** on Skye. When is high tide? What phase is the moon?

Back on the mainland, head west for half-a-mile turning right on a dead-end road up the hill towards the **Mountain** and take with you Bruce Gilchrist & Jo Joelson's *Little Earth* **[P0761]** which twins mountains in Scotland and Norway and investigates mountain observatories for weather, clouds and Aurora Borealis. Plan a mountain residency at the Centre d'Art i Natura in the tiny Catalan mountain village of Farrera **[web]**.

At the next trees, follow a narrow path up to the left and skirt the top edge of the field. The path is obvious as it drops steeply down to a pretty sort of little **Wilderness** on your left. Consider the ground between Carolyn Merchant's *The Death of Nature* **[P2509]**, and Robert Macfarlane's *The Wild Places* **[P2507]**. Macfarlane's book is a prose map of wild landscapes. Keep going, you have a lot of ground to cover before nightfall. At the intersection choose the track to Dystopia or to Utopia with Whitechapel Art Gallery's *The Spirit of Utopia* **[web]**.

Cross the road, keep going along the path which is straight as an arrow here until the ground starts to climb steeply towards the **Uplands**. Take in NVA's *Half-Life* **[P2601]** and Timespan **[web]** who investigate the concept of North through their art projects. From there you will reach the **Moor** where Richard Skelton **[web]** sounds nature. Cross a couple of streams.

Pause to take in lunch and the stupendous views from the top of the hill and consult this small cairn of books and journal articles on walking and other forms of mobility: Karen O'Rourke's *Walking and Mapping: Artists as Cartographers* **[P2510]**, Dee Heddon & Cathy Turner's 'Walking Women: Interviews with Artists on the Move' **[A0354]**, David Evans, *The Art of Walking* **[P2107]**, *Performance Research's 'On Foot'* **[P1911]**, Lu Jie's *Long March* **[P0462]**, Cynthia Morrison-Bell's *Walk On: From Richard Long to Janet Cardiff 40 Years of Art Walking* **[P2239]** and Fiona Wilkie's 'Site-specific Performance and the Mobility Turn' **[A0512]** on Mike Kelley, Mick Douglas and National Theater Wales, and alternative mobilities. At this point you will discover that you are lost. Consult Rebecca Solnit's *A Field Guide to Getting Lost* **[P2512]**. Check on the position of the sun and the compass in the heel of your shoe, and set off again.

Now you are travelling along an interesting and varied route with rugged cliffs and salt marshes at the mouth of the estuary. The

route soon doubles back to rejoin the **River** on its opposite bank. Get your swimming kit out and follow Roger Deakin's *Waterlog* [P2505] for a frog's-eye view of a swum journey through the UK and keep these to hand too in a water-proof bag: Urbonas' Studio's *River Runs* [web], River Tamar Project [web] and Charlie Murphy's *The Art of Tickling a Trout and Other Sensual Pleasures* [P0378]. Move gently on the water, looking at the Canal & River Trust' Arts on the Waterways [web].

Clambering out on the opposite bank, you are **Off The Grid**. Nevertheless there are still signals, satellites, radiowaves, village drums and pigeon-post here. Listen in to Claireandanna's *Radio Dreaming* [web] for a magical journey through caves, across bogs and into country kitchens. Listen to *Field Broadcast* [web]. And Listen to *Remote Performances* [web] - artists' radio broadcasts from Outlandia including *Sounds of Lochaber* by Mark Vernon and London Fieldworks, Sarah Kenchington's sound performance in collaboration with the sea, weather music from Lisa O'Brien, sounds and lyrics of the Glen from Geoff Sample; two stories set in the Highlands and Islands from Tony White, Clair Chinnery building a nest, Bram Thomas Arnold's series of absurd interactions with nature, Lee Patterson's sound work, Alec Finlay and Ken Cockburn's performance of *The Road North*, and works by Michael Pederson and Ziggy Campbell, and by Goodiepal.

A couple of miles along from here there is a **Pond**. Sit down and read an extract from Henry David Thoreau's *Walden* in Kastner [P0530].

Alan Smith's *Parameter* [web] takes you **Underground**. In the darkness use all your other senses. Listen to resonances, feel textures underfoot, snuff at air that is musky with soil or sharp with metals. Use your fingertips on the damp wall, sliding over silky moss and lichens, as a guide. Keep following the path. You will eventually emerge somewhere.

Keep going straight and you will come to the outskirts. Zigzag down the steps to reach the **Dump** in David Williams's 'Underworld, Underground, Underhistory: Towards a Counterhistory of Waste and Wasteland' [A0356].

Turn left here, rejoin the main path that bends round to the right and you can see the welcome haven of the **Village** up ahead. Sit down in the charming pub with refreshments and Tracey Warr, Helen Ratcliffe, Alan Smith & Ele Carpenter's *Setting the Fell on Fire: Allenheads Contemporary Art* [P2514]. Take a tour of Deveron Arts [web]. Over the bridge turn immediately right.

Bear right through a metal kissing gate. Cross the stream and bear diagonally right across the fields beyond. The track becomes grassy and follows the left-side of a hedge up the hill. Over the top, aim for a large stand-alone tree in the far corner. Follow the quiet lanes for a couple of miles. The route can be soggy. Make an offering of pins at the well. After a short stretch of narrow verge, fork right and follow the lane as far as a junction on top of the hill where you will see the **City** laid out before you in the valley. Pass to the left of some barns to cross a stream and enter the edges of the metropolis. Keep going.

Locating the path to remoteness in the city can pose difficulties. Peruse Coline Milliard's 'Walks of Life' **[A0346]** discussing Francis Alys' walking performances to give you some pointers. She describes making it different, weaving your way through a multiplicity of codes, getting a grip on the incomprehensible. Michel de Certeau theorises two possible attitudes when confronted with urban immensity: be a voyeur, looking at the city from the top of a building; or be a walker or flaneur, tackling the city at ground level. Being a walker is an estranged position. 'In the world, but apart from it,' writes Rebecca Solnit, 'with the detachment of the traveller rather than the ties of the worker, the dweller, the member of a group'¹⁵. The position of the stranger is remote. Disconnect. Read Georges Perec's *Species of Spaces and Other Pieces* **[P2511]** to learn how to study the city until it becomes strange. Stephen Hodge, Simon Persighetti, Phil Smith, Cathy Turner & Tony Weaver's *A Mis-Guide to Anywhere* provides an essential guide to city remoteness **[P1016]**.

Keep right to join the promenade lapped by the sea taking you towards the charming ruins of **The Past** perched on the headland above. Rebecca Solnit's *Wanderlust: A History of Walking* **[P0400]** will help you here, and Susan Hiller's *The Last Silent Movie* **[P1335]** is an artwork about what is lost - extinct and endangered languages and their speakers. Doreen Massey's *For Space* **[P2508]** explains that maps might show time as well as place. Robert Smithson's 'Spiral Jetty' **[web]** and Mark Dion's *Archaeology* **[P0627]** contemplate the crossroads of time and space. Up ahead Urbonas Studio's *Zoetics* **[web]** swirls around **The Future**.

Maps tell stories of what we know and what we don't know. 'As travelers ... we need to distrust the urge to scoop up theme and meaning, as if the things we can neatly pack are necessarily the

¹⁵ Solnit, Rebecca (2001) *Wanderlust: A History of Walking*, London: Verso, p. 21.

things we came for,' writes Peter Turchi¹⁶ **[P2513]**. Remoteness is fluid. It is spatial and temporal, psychological and geographic.

¹⁶ Turchi, 2009, p. 97.

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5. Acknowledgements

Cover Photograph: Kristian Buus, *The Path to Outlandia*.

My guide phraseology is indebted to many guidebooks to many places, but especially to Christopher Goddard & Katharine Evans (2014) *The Wales Coast Path: A Practical Guide for Walkers*, Cardiff: St David's Press.

This contemplation of remoteness has been enriched by my involvement with many art projects in remote places with Alan Smith & Helen Ratcliffe, Bruce Gilchrist & Jo Joelson, Nomeda & Gediminas Urbonas, Marcus Coates, Rob La Frenais, James Turrell, He Yun Chang and Amino, Artscape Nordland, HIAP on Soumenlinna Island, Centre d'Art I Natura in Farrera, but especially by London Fieldworks' *Remote Performances*.

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