'Queer Constellations': Reflections on Curatorial and Creative Practice at the Museum of English Rural Life

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ABSTRACT

Drawing from our independent disciplines of queer theory and photography, this paper examines the creative and curatorial practices, and the theoretical frameworks that structure them, in relation to 'Queer Constellations: Artistic Trespass and Rural Gay Histories', an art exhibition that took place at the Museum of English Rural Life (MERL) between July and September 2021.

As the exhibition featured within a museum whose focus is grounded in the practices and culture of agricultural life, our paper explores queerness as an affective form of 'dis-orientation' within such spaces, asking the question: is there queerness in rural life? This is then reflected upon through Epha's practice, exploring how photographs can function as a form of blending of worlds.

KEYWORDS

Queer, Rural, Dis-orientation, Trees, Photography

Introduction

This paper is a co-authored review of 'Queer Constellations: Artistic Trespass and Rural Gay Histories', an art exhibition that took place at the Museum of English Rural Life (MERL), Reading, UK, between July and September 2021. Among the eight artists that took part in the exhibition (James Aldridge, Daniel Baker, Claye Bowler, Gemma Dagger, Emma Plover, Oren Shoesmith, and Eimear Walshe), two PhD candidates at the University of Brighton, Joe Jukes and Epha J. Roe, were involved in its development; Joe as the curator and Epha as a participating artist.

As both of us were part of the exhibition but took on different roles, this paper examines the curatorial and creative processes that took place, a grounding of these processes in theory, as well as reflections on an exhibition that uniquely combined the place of a museum dedicated to the lives and practices of people within rural areas, with our curated space that explored and posed the question: is there queerness in rural life? As both Joe's curatorial methods and Epha's creative processes took place independently but also as conversations, and as many of our observations relate to one and other, we have chosen to split the body of this paper in two in order for us to deepen our individual explorations of our related practice. The format is therefore presented as two columns to mimic this relationship and to highlight their inter-relation.

Joe's section of the paper will highlight aspects of their curation related to queer scholarship and suggest how one might curate queerly or curate objects that queer. In particular, dis-ori-

entation becomes the form that queerness takes in the exhibition space and Joe's text explores how this relates to notions of rurality, as well as how the terms queer and rural are combined and expanded within certain artists' work.

As an exhibiting artist, Epha's section of the paper is dedicated to the creative work exhibited, its background, processes, intentions, and relations to theory. This is then explored reflectively as the work is re-contextualised through an exhibition that considers queerness and rurality, and how one might think of 'queering' as a form of mixing between two seemingly opposing worlds, such as the vegetal and the human, rather than reinstating their differences.

To further highlight the conversational format through which the exhibition was created, reflected upon, and how this paper was organised, we refer to each other, when applicable, with our first names

Queer Curation

Joe Jukes

To curate is to impose a certain kind of narrative upon a group of things, to order those things (Foucault 2005) and in doing so to shape a certain kind of (exhibition) space such that particular themes become more felt or obvious in its context (Smith 2014; Church et al. 2021). This is the work of juxtaposition and composition, to manipulate artists' work in the service of the imaginary viewer. Because of this, curation runs the risk of enacting a disciplinary function on artworks and by extension their artists by naturalising, and consolidating dominant reiterating. conceptions of 'otherness' through the use of equally dominant and familiar 'exhibitory grammars and articulations' (Toila-Kelly and Raymond 2020, 3; see also Bennett 2018). For instance, curation might group works together under a certain rubric and in doing so flatten or obscure the differences or tensions between them. It risks turning what one knows to be expansive approaches to art, say, photography or sculpture, into exemplar forms of some greater category - for example 'queer art' - even when the artwork itself might be concerned with pushing at the boundaries of that same category: calling an artwork queer, for example, is different to noticing how an artwork queers (Katz and Söll 2018). This is one entrance point to the impasse of what might be termed 'queer curation'.

Arboreal Encounters

Epha J. Roe

Part of the project I submitted for 'Queer Constellations' was a series of tree portraits titled Arboreal Encounters (2018-present). In my section of the exhibition these three portraits were assembled in the centre, flanked above and below by their sister projects. Organic Impressions (2019), a diptych of two framed photographs made using soil gathered from the roots of the Queen Elizabeth I Oak, the subject and focus of this display, drew the viewer quite literally down into the earth from which the oak tree originated and continues to thrive. Above, sat an early iteration of Perceiving Phytochrome (2020) hung frameless and attached to the wall with bulldog clips, a project born from imagining how tree's might 'see' by the use of a protein in their leaves that are used to detect light in the far-red region of the visible spectrum (Micaleff 2011).

In the centre hung the tree portraits: three A4 cyanotype prints on A3 watercolour paper and hand toned with tea, all depicting the Queen Elizabeth I Oak, an ancient, heritage oak tree within the grounds of Cowdray Park, Easebourne (Figures 1 and 4). Tinged with hues of earthy brown that varied from print to print, the use of tea was not just an accidental nod to childhood memories of ageing handwritten documents, but was instead a cheap and preliminary experiment in the effects of



Figure 1. Epha J. Roe's section of the exhibition with the sub-projects *Perceiving Phytochrome*, uppercentre, *Arboreal Encounters*, diagonal row, centre, and *Organic Impressions*, bottom, as part of the group exhibition 'Queer Constellations', Museum of English Rural Life, 2021. (Photo: Epha J. Roe)

As David M. Halperin (2012) has discussed in the context of gay studies, queer might be a term used to describe a particular cultural practice that is slippery, ironic, humorous, radical, and uncapturable. Inasmuch as one would rightly resist the collapsing of some curatorial practices over others into a standardisable practice of 'queer curating', there remains nonetheless a certain generic playfulness (Halperin 2012), a certain perspectival anti-normativity (Warner 2000), that can lend curation a queer ethic or feel. Eve Sedgwick's well-known framing of queer as the space where everything doesn't 'always mean the same thing' (1993, 6) provides a helpful starting point for the queer curator.

What would it mean to bring works together not to provide examples of an artistic style, historical movement, or tradition, but rather to constitute 'an open mesh of possibilities' (Sedgwick 1993, 7)? Such a practice would use, and refuse to resolve, the 'gaps, overlaps, dissonances, and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning' (Sedgwick 1993, 7) in

dying prints with a substance derived from plants and trees, known as tannin.

The word 'tannin'allegedly takes its origins from the Mediaeval Latin word 'tannare', derived from the earlier form 'tanna' meaning oak bark (Lewis-Stempel 2018, 54; Miles 2013, 211-15) – a reference to its frequent human extraction from oak trees for the practice of tanning leather to produce wearable clothes and shoes (Miles 2013). Found commonly in the bark, wood, and leaves of trees, tannins function to protect them from fungal or bacterial infection, or from being consumed by insects. When oaks are growing and find themselves under attack from predators, the volume of tannic acid flowing throughout their bodies can prevent excessive, and potentially fatal, grazing (Oakes 2021). In brief, the history of tannin is dually constructed in the vegetal and human realms – helping to both protect the oak and the human from climactic or animal invasions— and is just one example of many in which the oak tree and English cultural heritage are intertwined.

and between the works in an effort to bring about 'a space within which to rethink the very idea of boundaries, within which to explode categories, multiply centers [sic], and begin imagining a desirably queer world' (Hutcheson and Blackmore 1999, 13). I want to take seriously Jack Halberstam's (2005) naming of the queer body as 'out of place', alongside the observation that queer bodies and artefacts have been consistently excluded from the museum space (Sullivan and Middleton 2019; Vanegas 2010). For Halberstam 'what has made queerness compelling as a form of self-description in the past decade or so has to do with the way it has the potential to open up [...] alternative relations to time and space' (2005, 2), or as Epha explores in this paper with reference to 'plant thinking', an alternative framework by which to think those relations. Hence, curation might queer precisely when it owes less to the normal ordering of time and space, here, in a museum, and instead begins

Heritage trees, and indeed the concept of them, are arguably another example of this co-construction and in this sense act as a kind of crossover entity; squished together in the cultural imagination as both an artefact of human history and mythology, while at the same time existing independently as a living organism. Their ancient and cultural status are the foundation point upon which even conservation efforts are built, which are themselves arguably informed by folkloric and mythological viewpoints (Forestry Commission 2013; Woodland Trust 2020). As natural phenomena, they also form part of the wider debate on plant-intelligence which, among many other things, explores how plants develop symbiotic relationships with other plant species through the use of mycorrhizal networks (see Wohlleben 2015; Sheldrake 2018; Simard 2021 as examples). However, networks can be thought of not just as physical webs of fungal and vegetal roots, but also as cultural ones (see Actor-Network-Theory scholars such as



Figure 2. Flo Brooks. *War Trousers*, 2020. 186 x 227 x 4.5 cm, acrylic on wood. (Photo: Rob Harris. Courtesy the artist and Project Native Informant, London.)

to bring about dis-order (Halberstam 2020). If queer stories have been and are 'out of place', then the curatorial hand ought to turn place inside-out.

Dis-ordering rural

In curating 'Queer Constellations' I became interested in working with an ethic of disorientation. I was inspired by artist Flo Brooks' 2021 exhibition 'Angletwich' which encouraged me to shift focus away from an ethic of representation or neat visibility. 'Angletwich' comprised several paintings of rural life on cut board that emphasise the daily contests of country life, which are negotiated at all scales. The exhibition platformed not discrete rural identities, but chaos, suggesting that rural places are comprised not just by semiotics and simulacra, but also material flows, labour relations, migration, and the nonhuman environment (Woods 2010). Like Epha's use of tannin in the photographic development process, here the social and nonhuman environment is depicted through the materials by which it is constituted. Brooks' rural is one that is plural (Heley and Jones 2012), and always in motion, a view afforded through the asymmetrical and leaky shapes of the paintings, which in turn speak to the slipperiness of rural as a container of geographic and cultural meaning (McGlynn 2018).

In refusing to condense rural to a neat image of country life, Brooks' paintings instead prise apart the multiple ways in which the rural is written, lived, and felt, producing something closer to an open mesh of possibilities. I therefore wanted to begin curating with the observation that what we know as the rural is a contested space even for those queer people who, like Brooks, reside, work, grew up or create within it. It is with a marginal relation to rural life, like Brooks' queer relation to it, that a view of the whole (hooks 1989) opens up to the outside-d onlooker, a queer orientation to space (Ahmed 2006) that isn't beholden to optimism but operates with a wry pragmatism, as much a friend to abjection as re-imagination.

Latour 2004 for example).

Where heritage trees sit differently to ordinary trees at large is their particular individual histories linked to the human realm and in some cases even to specific humans. One example of this is the naming of the Queen Elizabeth I Oak, so called due to the Queen having allegedly leant upon one of its great boughs while taking aim at a deer within the Cowdray Estate in West Sussex in August 1591 (Questier 2006, 170-174). Of course, it is entirely possible that the oak she leant upon was the other grand oak that stands not ten feet up a small incline from the one that bears her name, or indeed it may have been one that has since passed, or perhaps never was. The mythology, however, persists, and in 2002 she and many other trees of varying genus and age were signposted as 'Great British Trees' by the environmentalist organisation and tree charity, The Tree Council, in order to commemorate the current Queen Elizabeth's golden jubilee. This list, and specifically those that are oaks within England, forms the basis of my research and are the subjects through which my PhD discusses how photography, particularly as a light-based medium, might be able to illustrate how concepts of plant-intelligence can be made both visible and tangible.

Theory and Method

My interest in the study of plant-intelligence is primarily an outcome of my desire to explore how trees might be included in the process of their visual representation. In part, my argument is that if one wishes to examine the concept of vegetal agency it is not enough to view or depict the tree just through photographic means, but to discover ways where the plant is 'invited' to participate in the process of its own imaging (Gibson 2021). In order to do this, one must learn about the subject and overcome what the botanists James H. Wandersee and Elizabeth E. Schussler describe as a kind of plant-blindness. This materialises, they argue, in part due to 'the misguided anthropocentric ranking of plants as inferior to animals and thus, as unworthy of consideration', but also more broadly as 'the Brooks' leaky rural landscapes (Figure 2) evidence a world, perhaps normally or normatively buried under the surface, that is queer itself. A rural defined by dis-order and mobilities helpfully resonates with Massey's (2005, 9) framing of space as 'the sphere of co-existing heterogeneity', a constant emergence. It was in this context that 'Queer Constellations' became an effort to allow different relations to rural, different queer rurals, to co-exist in, through and because of their difference. This was a curatorial strategy to work with incommensurability. I proceeded with an ethic to feature artists whose sense of self resonate with queer, and who live, work, and create rurally. But it was more important to me to focus on their particular perspective on rural, and how their creative practice queers dominant understandings of rural.

Presenting a variety of queer-rural perspectives without justification or explicit linkage, the exhibition space was a product of this co-existing and differentiated queerness, rather than the presentation of some unified queer comment on rurality. The primary

inability to see or notice plants in one's environment' (Wandersee and Schussler 1997). In part, this argument is a resistance to notions that plants lack knowledge, independence, or intelligence. Michael Marder in his 2013 book *Plant Thinking*, defines such vegetal modes of thought as 'the non-cognitive, non-ideational, and non-imagistic mode of thinking proper to plants' (Marder 2013) – to imagine plants thinking one must first imagine thought without the same systems, processes, and networks that humans require and associate with thought.

Elizabeth Howie directly addresses these theories in her essay titled 'Contesting Plant-Blindness with Photography', noting that 'counteracting plant-blindness must include both education about plants as well as sensitivity to plants and their biocommunities, and philosophical recognition of the subjectivity and profound otherness of plants' (Howie 2021). To do so, she argues, evokes what Marder refers to as an 'interactive, if not always symmetrical, relationship' (Marder 2013), suggesting that combined philo-



Figure 3. Daniel Baker. *Copse*, left, 2006, 170 x 90 x 50 cm each, enamel on wood; and *Canopy*, right, 2015, 600 x 600 cm, gilded camouflage netting. (Photo: MERL, courtesy the artist.)

challenge in this work was to invite not just a diverse group of rural artists, but also a diverse variety of rurals to include themselves – like Epha's arboreal environs – in the process of their own representation, and in this way to surrender much of my own agency in the curation process.

Artistic Trespass

'Queer Constellations' presented eight differently queered rurals on its walls, with only one of the featured artworks depicting a body explicitly marked as a queer body. It featured video work, sound art, installation, organic matter and photographic prints, quartz, workbooks, and reclaimed wood. By superseding all these works with the title 'Queer Constellations', I wanted a visitor to know that any item, any theme, any medium in the room could reveal a queerness to them, if they wanted or could interpret it as such. This is a condition of queer possibility, which Margaret Middleton (2020) has described as 'an interpretive strategy' for museum curation to uplift the voices of marginalised groups. Middleton highlights how queer might be considered 'inclusive in its ambiguity', involving visitors in the act of curation as 'it asks museum interpreters to question who is considered an expert and what is considered evidence' (2020, 433).

A visitor to 'Queer Constellations' would first see the shininess of Daniel Baker's *Canopy* (Figure 3), an eye-catching gold coloured length of camouflage netting, strung up across one wall and providing a backdrop to Baker's other installation, *Copse. Copse* comprises five pieces of signage, made from wood reclaimed from an abandoned Gypsy site, left behind after an eviction. Baker, a Gypsy artist, displays these signs with common countryside messages that denote property and exclusion: 'KEEP OUT', 'PRIVATE', 'NO TRAVELLERS', 'NO ACCESS' and 'NO ENTRY'.

Beginning with these violent invocations and defying the signage by nonetheless entering the exhibition space, I wanted to involve visitors in an act of trespass themselves, to sophical and physical engagement between humans and natural phenomena can create a form of interaction which is itself a form of recognition.

Unfortunately for me, heritage trees raise particular challenges when dealing with direct, physical engagement, as many of them are fenced off to prohibit such close interactions which may contribute to soil compaction or damage to the trunk by animal grazing (see Figure 4 for evidence of this), both of which may seriously harm the tree (Miles 2013; Farjon 2017). Because of this, and as many of the trees are ancient and are therefore more vulnerable than younger trees, some of my photographic encounters with certain trees in my study perform a symbolic interaction where I am unable to gain direct access, or choose not to in order to minimise further impact on the tree's health.

As such, my research gathers together photography, biology, and cultural history in an attempt to place the tree, its organic functions and biology, alongside its humanoriented identity. Methodologically this has produced a series of photographic prints that combine the process of making and bleaching cyanotypes, a method of exposing a photographically sensitive solution to the sun (symbolising photosynthesis), with the extraction of oak leaf tannin for use in toning. By using watercolour paper, each print acts as a kind of semi-permeable membrane, one that contains both a human oriented view of the tree – an image of the tree itself – but also one that is contextualised by, or viewed through, the tannin extracted from the oak leaves. This mixture of photography and organic matter results in a view which is no longer singularly produced by the photographer, but is instead co-constructed by both myself and the tree; one that is guided by and contextualised through an element of the tree itself. Although it feels somewhat superficial to call this mixture a 'collaboration'— the word implying a conscious working together, from both parties, towards a mutually beneficial aim – it may, however, be considered a symbolic form have them feel, or empathise with, being 'out of place', and for this to happen as a spatial gesture (entering the room by crossing a threshold).

Baker's *Canopy* provides a complementary framing for this entrance. It suggests that in addition to a primary exclusion of some bodies from the countryside, its margins might also be navigated through the interplay of concealment and visibility. Whilst camouflage is typically used to disguise that which is underneath, Baker redeploys the material to expose the very act of concealment as something queer (see Baker 2011), a kind of closet epistemology (Sedgwick 1990). The shininess of the material which typically hides something emphasises the perverse visibility of those who try to hide, and their failures to successfully blend in with their surroundings, as well as reflecting and multiplying the faces of those who look at the piece.

On the one hand, Canopy speaks to the experiences of Gypsy, Roma, and Traveller (GRT) communities who have long lived in and across the countryside, yet who are marked with a troubling visibility by non-Traveller cultures. On the other hand, the paradoxical camouflage evokes a rural queer experience, whereby a material that makes everything look the same is reproduced in error, and with a certain joyous visibility. This interplay of exclusion and belonging as experienced by queer GRT populations is something that Lucie Fremlova (2021) has described as non-normative queer belonging and that Baker has reflected on in his own artistic and writing practice (Baker 2015).

In both pieces, and as an opening vignette to the exhibition, Baker offers a way of understanding concealment and failure as a queer critique of normative ways of seeing and being rural, emphasising the persistence of difference in the country in a practice he calls 'dislocation' (Baker 2015, 90). I sought throughout the exhibition to replicate this double gesture. Simultaneously offering: i) an educative lens by which viewers can under-

of human/non-human connection.

Despite the fact that the prints displayed in the 'Queer Constellations' exhibition were not toned with tannin derived specifically from oak trees, I have had success with extracting tannin from fallen leaves and branches collected from my home in rural Herefordshire and using it to tone smaller prints. In the coming years this will be developed and applied to larger, A3 prints on A2 watercolour, to emphasise the scale, detail, and individuality of each of the twelve trees I have visited, worked with, and photographed.

Queer Reflections

Although my photographs are specific and contextualised within the grounds of my PhD research, their presence within the Museum of English Rural Life and an exhibition focussed on the lives and experiences of queer people within a rural setting, allowed them to be re-contextualised and interacted with through a queer lens. This re-contextualisation has also caused me to reflect on and notice connections between my creative methods and queer identity, which had until then been buried under the surface.

Some criticism of a body of work which seeks to re-centre the tree within their own visual narrative might well question the use of monochrome, a visual form that removes colour – particularly green – from the natural world, which is arguably one of its defining characteristics. However, representing nature authentically or as it is, if there is such a thing, has never been my intention. To Paul Grainge, black and white's association with old photographs helps to 'configure subjects within a certain depth of historical meaning' which even imbue contemporary photographs with a quality of pastness (Grainge 1999, 384-5). Speaking purely photographically, as black and white images can never be 'truly realistic', to strive for 'superficial realism' is therefore a waste of time (Jussim and Lindquist-Cock 1985, 40). Although my prints are not strictly black and white, they were made on black and white film and were originally intended



Figure 4. Epha J. Roe, *Queen Elizabeth I Oak, Cowdray Park, Easebourne*, from the sub-project *Arboreal Encounters*, 2021. 21 x 29.7cm print on 29.7 x 42cm cotton paper. Tea-toned Cyanotype on watercolour. (Photo: Epha J. Roe)

stand 'other rurals' through the deployment of symbolism, as exemplified here through *Canopy*, as well as ii) generating a new sensitivity, or feeling of 'profound otherness' (Roe, in this article), through which to engage with the artworks and those dominant representations of rurality that they speak to or against. Just as Epha works with plants and organic matter in the process of developing images, the act of trespass that *Copse* stages invites the excluded into conversation from the beginning, after which the other may either haunt or enliven the visitors' experience.

With three pieces to the left of Baker's installations, and four to the right, it was my hope that the visitor found themselves pulled between many ways of viewing the countryside, thereby feeling the incommensurability of these ways of seeing. They might have empathised with some perspectives over others, they might not have 'got it', and ideally, they wouldn't have

to be printed as such. Their origins, therefore, still reflect these discussions and don't just contrast notions of authenticity, but actively resist them.

To place these thoughts in relation to conditions of heterotopia (Foucault 1986) and more broader contexts within the discipline of queer ecology (see Mortimer-Sanilands 2005 for an introduction), the monochrome prints could in this way perform a visible sense of otherness (or being 'other-ed') through the absence of colour. There are interesting similarities to be drawn here between the othering of queer and vegetal bodies within places they inhabit and live out their lives, and the historical lack of social and scholarly agency given to both parties. The removal of colour may also be thought about by what Joe refers to in relation to Daniel Baker's Canopy installation as the 'interplay between concealment and visibility', something Baker conceptufound any perspective particularly satisfying.

I wanted the visitor experience to be one of dis-orientation, a feeling that Sara Ahmed (2006) describes as occurring when one's own orientation to a given referent appears to fail. Disorientation, she writes, is 'a bodily feeling [that] can be unsettling, and it can shatter one's sense of confidence in the ground' (Ahmed 2006, 157). Through presenting the great variety of media, locational perspectives, and identities associated with the artworks, I wanted a viewer to feel dis-oriented by rurality, to feel as if they were getting lost, or bewildered. Bewilderment, relatedly, is the affect Jack Halberstam (2020) attaches to dis-order, the moment at which order falls away from spaces, and a feeling of wildness is introduced. In the act of trespass, the wayward visitor needs to look to ephemera and gestures in the exhibition 'as indicators of queerness' somehow beyond the physical plane 'to interpret queer possibility in an imaginative way' (Middleton 2020, 433).

Constellations

Beyond the ordered spaces of the typical curation space, 'Constellations' sought to create the representative but also the affective conditions for heterotopia (Foucault 1986), a space we most definitely inhabit in a given moment, but which draws us out of ourselves, our lives, our time and history (Soja 1996), producing a sense of otherness. This heterotopic effect holds in tension the fiction and the realness of the exhibition space. The rurals presented are experienced as uncanny. They cannot uncritically be evidenced as queer, but could be experienced as such through unseen or hidden aesthetic codes, which might at any rate only be detected after viewing all the pieces together. Indeed, Epha's reflections in this article explore precisely this sense of what they call 're-contextualisation'. This search for meaning in the inexplicit, and the foreignness that I had hoped to imbue in the space between each artwork, constitutes an invitation to cruise this space-of-rural-spaces (Muñoz 2019), a challenge to find the queer between it all.

alises as a kind of queer act (Baker 2011). However, the desire to conceal one thing to make another more visible could also be considered a distinctively photographic act. In removing colour there is an emphasis drawn to form without potential distraction from the various wide-ranging hues of the human and natural worlds (Plicata 2013), monochrome flattening them into a visual form of equality wherein, for example, in Figure 4 the tree and its humanly-constructed fencing are blended together through the use of rippling shadows, rather than visibly separated by their distinctive colours, had they been rendered as such.

In short, the visual narratives of the tree, whether constructed by the human or non-human, are shown alongside each other as equal parts of the story – neither one of them collapsing to give way to the other but instead becoming unified through the use of shadow, form and tone. This creative method of unifying the human with the non-human is explored further within the printmaking process, as organic matter is then absorbed into the physical make-up of the print itself, the visual and material outcome of which is literally held together by its component parts, co-constructed by both the human and non-human.

Can, then, queerness portray a radical sense of blending between worlds as much as it may perform (or expose) a sense of othering? In this sense, my invitation to the Queen Elizabeth I Oak to participate in their own visual representation is also an invitation for our worlds to simulate a kind of blending together. To take the time to learn, to study and to invite the other into conversation — especially the subject of your photographic interest — in the face of dominant narratives, is its own form of queer resistance which may even open up new forms of co-belonging, rather than reinstating pre-existing forms of opposition.

Curating queerly might constitute taking seriously each artwork on its own terms, but also attending to its extraneous ephemera, that is, the affects, linkages, 'entrances and exits' (Berlant and Warner 1998) that spill beyond the artwork, connect or depart from the pieces adjacent or opposite, and that collectively constitute the exhibition space as a 'simultaneity of stories so far' (Massey 2005, 24). For 'Constellations' was not a project that produced a clear or coherent rural, but rather one that staged rurals produced either through exclusion from, or the perversion of, the ideal of rural itself. Its aim was not to display the rural but to ask how we might queer it, or what queers might do with and despite it, even when separated from each other by great distances. The word constellations was included in the exhibition title to explain this long-distance collaboration.

As Jack Gieseking (2020, 946) explores in their work on lesbian-queer geographies, constellations comprise not just stars – which accumulate 'brightness through experiences, ideas, nostalgia, and desire in places, on bodies and/or in memories' - but also the 'lines of network [... and] absences that fill the space between' (942, 950). Using this title to remind the visitor to attend not just to the pieces in isolation, but to the ways in which all eight artists are put in relation and conversation with each other, is to remind oneself that it doesn't matter just where an artist is based, or where rural is, but also how one gets there, where a piece might take them, what connects them to these other rurals and how this particular position relates to other positions in a great queer-rural constellation.

Put in its place

Our following conclusions are written collaboratively and no longer are divided between columns to reflect our individual perspectives.

For all the dis-orientation, queer possibility and nonhuman agencies that came to enliven the exhibition space, the exhibition 'Queer Constellations' still became an attraction in itself. Some visitors came to the MERL specifically to visit the exhibition space, others may have seen it as part of the Museum's whole. Whilst for us, the bringing together of artworks in one space was a starting point to get lost in the category rural, or with rural materials, for others 'Constellations' was a destination or end point. This raises questions about the limits that bound our collaboration.

By inviting those queer or creative perspectives that would otherwise be excluded from the Museum space in to the Museum, 'Queer Constellations' operated with a form of queer resistance that, to paraphrase Epha's earlier remarks, 'took the time to invite the other into conversation in the face of dominant forms of narrative' (Roe this article). The 'Nook' of the Museum made space for the queer imaginary and the material rural to be included in the processes of their own visibility. This could be considered a troubling of the kinds of rural norms that over time systematically 'congeal' (Butler 1990) through Museum practices such as tagging historical ephemera in such a way that records come to indicate little to no queer presences in the countryside (MERL 2021).

We are, however, also mindful of the ways in which this exhibition's politics could be considered self-defeating. Staging queer stories within the Museum implies that the project is somehow restorative, that it aims to lift the diverse experiences of queer people in the countryside up to the same recordable and worthy standard of becoming museum knowledge. In this scenario, we will have unintentionally produced an exemplar form of queer-rural that could be considered representative of its time, despite Joe's noting that a homogenising of these artists and others still would be a mistake, if not a possibility.

Subsequently, we run the risk that the story of this exhibition will itself become absorbed into the history of the institution in which it took up space. In this gamble, 'Queer Constellations', rather than staging an intervention from within the Museum, could be in future resignified as an indicator of the institutions enduring virtuousness, when it comes to telling 'other' rural stories, which would be to overlook how the Museum and others like it might historically have produced that very 'otherness' to begin with.

Constellated consistencies

Between our individual writings above exist several points of resonance. Indeed, the benefit of writing collaboratively in this way is that we have been able to notice consistencies in our thinking, and more beneficial still, how these consistencies can arise out of very different approaches.

JJ: Epha's practice constitutes to me an education on how plants live (making both their form and their vital processes visible on paper), as well as a burgeoning sensitivity to 'co-belonging', appreciating the qualities that plants share with us – symbolically, organically – and that they do not. Seeing that plants exist as 'human history and living organism[s]' (Roe this article) without destroying that very concept 'plant' is an effort I hope 'Constellations' replicates with rural. What we know today as rural is a human achievement, and has changed in meaning over time in relation to different socio-economic modes of production (Woods 2010), but it is also a

vital ecosystem, as evidenced in Brooks' 'Angletwich'.

Epha describes the watercolour paper of their prints as a semi-permeable membrane, through which a perhaps-familiar image of a rural scene is developed through the 'human-oriented' practice of image-making. Yet because of Epha's use of tannin-wash in this process, the material oak is also the substrate through which this image must pass and be constituted by, a radical contextualisation that at least recognises, if not yields, agency to nonhuman matter. It strikes me that this is the exact outcome of my curation also.

Only by nestling in the comfortable and authority-bestowing environment of the Museum of English Rural Life could such familiar and human-oriented images of rural life be displayed and played with by the contributing artists. These artists, in turn, use their own experiences of queer rural life, through which to expose a new rural, one suffused in queerness, circuits of desire and subjugating social exclusions. In other words, queer does the recontextualising work of the tannin in Epha's prints, and in this way bends the lessons of *Plant Thinking* into a new shape.

Embodying the act of trespass, adopting a cruise methodology, curating for dis-orientation, 'Constellations' sought precisely to promote the kinds of 'non-cognitive, non-ideational, and non-imagistic mode of thinking' (Marder 2013) necessary to take visitors away from those images of rural life they already know and into new queer worlds. Rather than present or explain queer rural histories, what does it mean to resist the representational function of the museum space and in its place 'create a form of interaction which is itself a form of recognition' (Roe this article)? Does this recognition enact a kind of justice, or reconciliation?

ER: The word dis-orientation has punctuated our paper as a phrase to discuss a deliberate curatorial method, a kind of creative mirror for how queer people might feel growing up in the countryside, or indeed the feeling they may have when interacted with by those who, perhaps, find their presence dis-orienting. This is exemplified within the grounds of the Museum of English Rural Life, due to its exploration of the 'skills and experiences of farmers and craft-speople, past and present [...] and the ongoing relevance to the countryside to all our lives' (MERL 2022). Of course, this specialism does not necessarily imply the absence of queer people. In a blog titled 'Uncovering LGBTQ+ Rural Histories in Archives', written by collections researcher Tim Jerrome and produced alongside and in relation to the art exhibition, evidence of queer people within rural areas before the de-criminalisation of homosexuality in 1967 was present in the historical records of the museum, however only in reference to their crimes.

As a means to shift the perspective on this, the museum's response was to search for objects in their archives that related to specific men who were charged and/or sentenced for homosexuality, invoking their stories through artefacts that symbolised their rural occupation in an order to demonstrate, in the museum's own words, that 'these men were more than just a conviction. They were ordinary people living ordinary lives' (Jerrome 2021).

This placement of the exhibition within MERL, its interaction with the museum's re-contextualised objects as symbols of the occupations of rural gay men – a reference to the past experiences and challenges of living rurally and queer – alongside the many iterations of, and interactions with, what it means to be queer and to live rurally, exemplify the exhibition's focus on constellations. To think of queerness as itself a constellation, or what Joe describes as 'what queers might do with and despite of [the rural], even when separated from each other by great distances' (Jukes this article), is to define queer by its heterogenous or diverse qualities.

This speaks to the innate plurality of the experience of queerness which exists even when the boundaries are specified within a rural context. In short, queerness is never bound by one thing, however it has bound us together.

For 'Queer Constellations' it could be said that we asked the audience to both trespass and be trespassed. In contrast to urbanity, rural life can be felt as quiet and expansive and in that beholden to endless, unfolding creative opportunity, uprooted from feelings of social surveillance experienced in the town or city. The countryside in this sense is never just the backdrop to queer life, but a participant in the constant unfolding and discovery of it (Ingold 1993). In part, evidence of this unfolding was revealed upon the walls, in vitrines, in objects and ideas, and as such has acted as active invitations into different modes, models and migrations through queer and rural life.

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