Movements at Knepp

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During Phil Smith’s workshop, we collaboratively created outdoor performances in response to the idea that wild animals are often thought to have been sighted in places where they feasibly could not have been. Below is my response to one of those performances.

Baz Kershaw lies face down in a woodland, his head between two sticking-out-slanting branches. He seems oddly comfortable. His bodily position is bold yet at ease. Straight arms and legs with subtle bumps of torso and angled feet and hands are all held uniquely by the shape of the earth-stones-sticks-and-other-things-that-I-do-not-know-are-there. The movements of the trees around him, of myself and the others walking past him, are made more certain by his odd-at-ease-antler-human-face-down-stillness.

This image moves me, I am not sure why. It requests my attention. It does not ask for me to make meaning of it as an image of ‘an antler man’ but asks for a quality of attention. I am not Sarah watching another human being ‘a stag’: rather, I am part of a performance of attentiveness. This attentiveness is not merely mine nor the ‘antler man’s’ but seems to be an attentiveness that belongs to the ecology of here, of bodies-stillness-sticks-watchers-wood-wind-air-performers-and-more. However fleetingly, this more-than-human performance has opened up a mode of attention - of attending - that is somehow slow, soft, curious, surprising, vulnerable, alert, and, perhaps, wild.

During Karen Christopher’s performance workshop, we created collaborative pieces inspired by movements, sounds, images and ideas from our time so far at Knepp.

In one of the group performances Danielle Schreve walks, and at the same time she moves her arms. Her arms are a waving-curving-up-and-down-preciseness. There is an everyday-ness to this performance: she walks on concrete, she is wearing boots, her expression is unforced and open, her walk is certain and relaxed. Yet this is an unusual performance: her arms are moving up and down and there is something more-than this movement in this movement. Her swooshing curvature of bending arms is neat, satisfying, definite. It seems less that she does this movement, and more, that she takes part in it: as if the movement is moving her.

The evening before I had listened to Danielle’s presentation on her specialism - paleoecology. She spoke of ancient ecologies, of the noisy place that the UK would have been due to the intensity of its species. She explored how we might ‘see’ ecological processes and how do we know when we ‘see’ them. She talked about how species’ behaviour does not get neatly fossilised and she gleefully discussed how hippo remains were found at Trafalgar Square in the 1950s.

Danielle’s words and energies that I encountered during her presentation now merge into these walking-arm-wavering movements. Her way of moving seems to be full of a deep history: a paleoecological knowledge expressing and speaking itself through the simplicity of two arms going up and down. I do not think she could do these movements without the specifics of her embodied intellectual understanding of paleolithic animals and ecosystems. Earlier on in the workshop, Karen Christopher had said something along the lines of: we cannot fully know what we are doing, what the effect of something we do might have, what knowledge is carried in the movements of our bodies.

In another group performance, David Overend is sitting on a chair at a distance from us (the ‘audience’). He is out there towards the field where there are grasses-hedges-horizon-and-what-I-cannot-fully-see. His far away-ness feels important. David, sitting on his chair, faces us with a stare that arrests me closely, yet I cannot make out his expression or bodily position: he is not fully clear. I am drawn to this far-away-close-David-chair. He watches us watching him. After some time, he slowly brings his arms up towards his head, his hands carrying two long sticks that end up resting on his head and protruding out-upward into the sky, echoing a knowledge of long antlers. He does not change his continued looking at us, even as he is changed by this simple movement and collaboration with two sticks.

I overhear a conversation later and I learn that David was attempting, in this performance, to recreate the experience he had had of watching a half-hidden stag watching him. Later in that performance, David walks towards us, lessening the distance between us, coming into view more and more. Yet even as I see him more fully, I cannot help but feel that he is not fully see-able, and neither is the ‘stag’ that he was performing. I sense something worthwhile in this not-fully-knowable-not-fully-graspable way of experiencing things. There is an openness to partiality in this David-stag performance: I experience a sense that it is OK not to view things in full. David’s physical distance from us spoke to me of a significant partiality, a half-hidden and not-fully-see-able wildness. Perhaps animals, environments, people and ecosystems need to not be fully seen, grasped, understood, in order for them to be what they are, where what they are always contains something unknowable. This brings me to the thought that if we are part of environmental ecologies, as opposed to somehow separated or separable from them, then we cannot ever see them in full view, we can only ever participate in ecologies and ‘see’ and ‘do’ from the partiality of our entangled perspectives. What matters, then, is how we participate in environmental ecologies: what our ethics, aesthetics and practices are of participation. Experimental performance practice, with its methods of openness to the unpredicted and unknown, may be a particularly unique way in which to not only communicate but to phenomenologically experience rewilding processes.