Artist

Field Notes Treescape project

Tree Planting at North West School 7th March 2023.

A close-up of a map

Description automatically generated with medium confidence

I had an early start and was driving at 6.20. The cold day felt dirty and everything was coated in particles from diesel engines. I drove down the M1 and the M62 it was 8.40 before I got to school. I couldn’t park as people were dropping kids off in cars with their engines running. I struggled to carry everything. I left my wooden ear trumpets I use for listening to trees in the car as it was one bag too many and an unneeded complication. I sorted them out when we could/couldn’t plant trees. Ethnographer passed me in her car and beeped her horn and it made me jump.

We signed in and I heard a member of staff in the office say that it was a day of visitors. I told him it was international school visitors day. I always like to talk about international days, I’m not sure why I like them the 8th is international women's day. I like international mud day and international speak like a pirate which falls on my mum's birthday day best.

I felt out of practice at going to school – I’m always ok when I get started but it takes me a few minutes to work things out. I feel a bit like I’m a kid again and often one of the students will make eye contact and smile and this makes me feel at home, one of the class. I get my camera out of its box. Philosopher starts to speak, and it sounds interesting, Philosopher always sounds interesting. By the time I have fitted the side handle and the screen and the microphone and set the frame rate and sound levels everyone is ready to go outside.

I have been deliberately avoiding thinking too closely about why I am here. Part of me is here to make a film but I’m not sure what this film will be like or what it's for. This is very bad if you are trying to make a film. The sun is out, and the light is fantastic, low and wintery a slight mist rises from everything human. I look down and I have trampled on some crocuses that were planted in a large semi-circle. I put my camera on a tripod and decide I will shoot cutaways I will hold shots longer than I want and will not try and use the camera handheld. This unifies the footage making it different from video captured on other devices and may help to slow things down. The day is magnificent now. The road feels noisy and dirty but somehow the grass and the wellies and the new trees and the sun counteract the dirt of the road. The noise penetrates everything though – I listen to it on my headphones as I monitor and inwardly shake my head.

The last time we planted trees the ground was a bit harder, and the kids really couldn’t dig a hole so we (the adults) helped them. Today the kids worked out technics to break through the top layer of turf. They either both jumped on the spade together or used a sort of kick kick kick foot hammer technique. Interesting how as an adult you can just use your body weight, but the kids are lighter so actually the ‘proper way’ to do it didn’t work. I had a sneaky feeling that we would not be able to use footage with children's faces on, so I filmed their feet and tried to record what they were saying and ask them a few questions. The questions were mainly about time and memory – I wanted to ask them to imagine the future and see if they could relate this to themselves, their parents, and the idea of generations. I wanted them to be fully aware they have been recorded but somehow capture something as it came out of their mouths – something that was not pre-prepared.

I then decided that I was going to try and capture something of the affective buzz of the day – the fact that tree planting feels like a real activity – it is doing something worthwhile in the world that involves learning. This made me feel positive about the trees project and committed to some kind of scaling. Perhaps the film we were making would be part of this.

I worried about all the data we were collecting the audio and the tablets and notebooks – I wondered if it would just become static – I wasn’t sure how we would use it or if it was more just about the process of collecting rather than anything else. This felt ok then as I did see children stop and think and reflect before they captured something – worm or leaf or sapling. Having a camera and making a film affords some kind of distance it is like looking after toddlers in that it allows you to be only partially present in the space. I like to engage with the world through a viewfinder, I recognised I was not familiar enough with my new camera – the technology got in the way – it needed to be seamless. I had a conversation with a child about the eucalyptus tree and told him to look out for Kuala bears. We stopped – someone got told off for sitting in the wheelbarrow. I hoped it would be better for sound at the other location and realised that filming was not about capturing the authentic feel of a moment, or perhaps it was but the clean sound is important when you watch the footage back.

We moved to the back of the school I helped move all the trees in a wheelbarrow. There were sheep grazing and the setting seemed very rural. I took a long lock-off shot of the row of established trees slightly silhouetted as I was looking into the sun. I then turned my camera and filmed the kids approaching - out of focus just in case. The tree planting talk was good and finished with the tree dance. I missed it on film so I made him do it again. I talked to Ethnographer and Educator about when I had hidden finds in a test pit dig in a school where we talked about archaeology. She thought it was just a Victorian half-penny but I had also added some blue and white pottery and pieces of clay pipe to spice things up. She had spoken to Johan about speculation so I thought she may now after a 7-year gap be more open to my intervention. Turns out she has still not forgiven me – she must have wanted the children to only find mud or perhaps authenticity.

I put my battery on charge and we ate dinner – I had to force a sandwich on Philosopher – it was cheese and pickle I had made too many in the morning in case anyone forgot. My German friend says cheese and pickle sandwiches are the best contributions the British have made to cuisine. Scientist talked about bringing out the laser scanner and Ethnographer encouraged him so the kids could see it in action. It is an iconic mounted godhead of science in the doing of the day.

I was taken by how nice the day had turned out and it was amazing to have the trees team together in one space – it felt like a good thing to be doing and even though the activity was quite straightforward it felt that there would be lots of things to share. I recognised that I would not be able to drag anyone away from the planting, but I did arrange to revisit the school when things were quieter and make a film with [forest school teacher] in the forest school. This took the pressure off a little. I talked to [ethnographer] about being a grandad and felt a little overwhelmed. I stole 10 minutes to ring my daughter who was in the hospital, but she didn’t pick up – my stress levels bubbled up in the nape of my neck, and I felt a bit like an overfilled perished hot water bottle. **Sometimes however professional you try and be the world comes howling in** – I took this thought into the afternoon as I observed the kids slip in and out of doing and thinking what they were supposed to be doing and thinking into being themselves.

The afternoon felt more relaxed. The class teacher seemed to organise the kids into a Fordist tree-planting assembly line – they all seemed on task and planted loads of trees and were able to talk and chat about other stuff while they were doing it. I think this is what you are supposed to do when doing a job like planting trees. I had a long conversation about super Mario and Luigi and the fact they were skilled plumbers – a conversation about a car going around and around a roundabout with a dog with his head out of the window. We talked about forest school and only being allowed to climb trees as tall as a teacher. One story I started about measuring worms and seeing how much carbon they contained and another one was about eating worms – I managed not to sing the worm song for a second time.

There was a significant moment when I talked to Philosopher about scientism and Geographer joined us. It is something running gently under the surface of the project. I spoke to Ethnographer about it earlier and suggested something about introducing the affective turn in social science into mainstream education but this is a speculative leap of my utopian imagination. Philosopher talked about science becoming dogma – this is the antithesis of what scientists think and within this is perhaps a real counter in that if science recognises itself as dogma within education it may self-correct as that is within its nature. Guattari tells us to take off the white coat of the scientist we wear on the outside but also the one we wear on the inside. This is where the film might go if it captures anything of the charged affective space beyond descriptive language - If I get this as context I can lay it into a visual subtext and maybe edit something interesting from the noise.

Packed up and left to drive home arrived at 6.00 ish a long day door to door – I am so not used to this now.