

# “With Love. From An Invader.”: An Exploration of Landscape and Identity

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**Abstract.** *With Love. From An Invader.* is a multi-screen audio-visual installation created during the Covid-19 lockdown in 2020-2021. The work explores notions of invasiveness, identity and migration. The soundscape and landscape were documented during this time using the invasive rhododendron prevalent around Sheddon Clough in the north of England as a symbol not only of the pervasiveness of COVID-19 but also as a means of exploring the political and xenophobic backlash surrounding Brexit.

**Keywords:** soundscape, photography, audio-visual, covid, invasive species.

## Introduction

*With Love. From an Invader.* is the start of a long-term project investigating the complex connections between landscape representation, identity, migration and the environment. For this piece, Yan Wang Preston walked every other day to the same love-heart-shaped rhododendron bush at Sheddon Clough, Burnley, Lancashire, UK (see Figure 1), from 17th March 2020 to the 16th March 2021. A photograph of the rhododendron was taken every two days, in an identical manner, always at half an hour before sunset.



**Fig. 1.** Rhododendron bush at Sheddon Clough. ©Yan Wang Preston.

The rhododendron has been selected for the project for many reasons. Introduced to the UK by colonial botanists in the late 19th century as an ornamental plant, it is now often seen as a non-native and invasive species by ecologists. It is the particular species, *R. ponticum*, that is invasive. Many of the rhododendron species currently grown in Britain are originally from China, Preston's motherland. Living as a foreigner in a country going through Brexit, Preston feels a strong personal connection with such foreign plants. They remind her of her homeland as well as the complex perceptions around nature, national identities, landscapes and migration.

The area, Shedden Clough on the outskirts of Burnley, was an open-cast limestone mine 400 years ago. Nearly 200 years ago the local landowners planted rhododendron and beech in an effort to change it to a hunting estate. Now it is an 'ecological wasteland', colonised by these non-native plants and by sheep-grazing farms. Hidden in the heartland of the South Pennines, the local landscape is simultaneously post-industrial and post-colonial. Yet the ecology can also be said to be cosmopolitan. The particular rhododendron bush photographed for the installation film happens to have the natural shape of a love heart. An alien species sending out love—it is a rich metaphor to anchor the investigation towards the installation's issues around landscape and identity.

## Vision and Contested Landscapes



**Fig. 2.** *With Love. From an Invader.* Walk No. 130. 04 December 2020. ©Yan Wang Preston

The photographic vision and modern science share much in common. Both emphasize a human-centric and linear perspective. Both share a naturalised yet mythic authority in being detached, rational, and objective. The long-established notion of the photograph as a document implies to us that to see is to witness and to photograph is to provide evidence. Meanwhile, just like the privilege and power enjoyed by scientific knowledge over other forms of knowledge and knowing, the visual has been given the absolute priority over other senses, such as hearing, smell, and touch. The latter are typically relegated to the 'tribal', the 'feminine', and the 'less intellectual' (Cosgrove, 2002; Howes, 2004). Such emphasis on the vision, the view, as well as the scientific knowledge has largely influenced our ways to perceive, construct and manage the physical landscapes.

*With Love. From an Invader.* takes the mythic objectivity of the vision and the photograph into consideration, utilising their contestable function as a document to investigate the possible disputes behind an ecological (therefore scientific and authoritative) term: the 'non-native and invasive species'. The project began by taking

notice of the changing attitudes towards certain plants and animals in the UK, for example, the rhododendron, which began to be introduced to the country from the late 18<sup>th</sup> century onwards. In 1849, Joseph Hooker, the soon-to-be Director of the Royal Botanic Garden Kew and President of the Royal Society, stated that “[p]erhaps with the exception of the Rose, the queen of flowers, no plants have excited more interest throughout Europe than the several species of the genus rhododendron” (Hooker, 1849). Yet in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century, rhododendrons have become a significant issue in British national forests and other areas of uncultivated land. In The Guardian newspaper, rhododendrons have been portrayed as “a spectacular thug out of control” (Simons, 2017). Forest and Land Scotland state on their website that:

In 2010, we set out our vision to remove rhododendron from Scotland's national forests and land [...] Since then, we've been using chainsaws, herbicides, heavy machinery and considerable human muscle power in the battle against this unwelcome alien. (forestryandland.gov.scot, 2020)

Such public dislike towards the foreign species can be echoed within a social-political context, such as the xenophobic backlash surrounding Brexit, and the worsening racism towards east-Asian people during the COVID-19 pandemic. Given that the development of botany and then ecology as scientific disciplines has been intimately intertwined with Western colonialism, one questions whether the same politics are in place in scientific claims and social attitudes. For example, how has the sense of British national identity changed since its heydays of colonial expansion in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century? Are there parallels to be found between the national opinions towards residential foreign species and foreign people? Finally, how can we explore these questions by investigating Britain's physical landscape and its pictorial representation?

To answer these questions, *With Love. From an Invader.* fixes its obsessive photographic and sonic attention onto a contested land called Shedden Clough—a one-square-mile post-industrial wasteland transformed by lime-mining and then ‘infested’ by the notoriously ‘invasive’ rhododendron *ponticum*. For a year, the project set out to discover and collect first-hand information about the rhododendrons and the ecology around them. For Preston, working almost as an amateur naturalist, the primary method was to look, discover, and document with various cameras. The project had an anchor—a large rhododendron bush that happens to have the shape of a love heart icon. The symbolic meaning of this shape and the ecological disputes about the species provided the title of the piece. The project also had a timeline and an itinerary—the photographer was to walk to the bush every other day for an entire year and to photograph it in an identical manner each time, always at half an hour before sunset (see Figure 2). Each trip involved a one-hour walk through this wasteland at the spine of the South Pennines, whatever the weather. Such pre-conceived planning therefore framed the project as embodied research through a complete cycle of the four seasons.

The duration of an entire year had the potential to expand the momentary photographic exposure to the contemplation of a deep time, therefore, connecting the life of one plant to a celestial history. Visually, this sense of deep time is suggested by the extremely slow pace and the stillness of the time-lapse with 182 images. Each picture is presented for 12 seconds—a long time to stare at one still image. The transition between two pictures has a gradual dissolving effect spanning five seconds, resulting in an extremely gradual and subtle merging of the days. The photographs themselves are edited so that they do not completely align—small mismatches happen here and there in a quasi-random manner, making visible the presence of the artist while steering the work away from a strict scientific time-lapse study.





**Fig. 3.** A fox filmed by the infrared camera in between two rhododendron bushes, 17 November 2020.

Imaging technology, from the microscope to the telescope, has greatly expanded the capacity of human vision while helping to advance scientific research. It has also helped the artist to see other elements of the land beyond a conventional vision. Two infrared and motion-sensitive cameras were placed inside and around the rhododendron bushes in the area, which then captured movements in front of them when triggered. What they revealed was what a rich community of animals thrive in the area including badgers, foxes, deer, rabbits, hares, mice, pheasants, magpies, woodcocks, curlews, and herons (see Figure 3 and Figure 4). Such insights into the wildlife of the area transformed the photographer's perception towards the site's landscape and its ecology. Instead of a wasteland, it is in fact a land full of life and opportunities. The presence of the animals also helped to decentre the photographer's (and by extension, humans') position within the land. We share it with the animals and the plants. We do not own it, neither should we have the sole voice over it.



**Fig. 4.** The animal footage displayed as a grid. ©Yan Wang Preston

The badger that digs in the same rhododendron bush each night and the fox who patrols between two rhododendron bushes everyday help to challenge the claim that the rhododendrons are non-native and invasive with negative values for British ecology. On the contrary, the questions to ask are: Who defines a 'good' ecology? What is meant by 'good'? For whose benefit is a particular ecology considered 'good'? The 'discovery' of such a 'rhododendron habitat' agrees with the concept of a recombinant ecology in which species from all over the world form a recombined habitat offering novel ecological values. (Mabey 1973; Maris 2011; Rotherham 2017; and Gandy 2021). Such ideas also challenge the prevailing environmental concerns within contemporary landscape photography that frames its criticism on the damage of a pristine and native wilderness (Preston 2020).

If the 182 still photographs of the love-heart-shaped bush serve as a visual meditation of the cycle of life, then the thousands of animal footages collected during the year firmly provide evidence to support the rhododendron's positive value as a valid part of a British ecology. Staying consistent to an editing without 'hierarchy', all of the video clips were included in the final edit. With a grid of 16 small sections on a single screen (see Figure 4), the videos reference to surveillance cameras and our desire to watch and control nature. The appearance and disappearance of the individual pieces of footage has no overall structure to orders them—much like the sudden appearance of the animals themselves on screen having triggered the cameras. This multi-sectional video screen provides a stark contrast to the time-lapse and its strict rhythm, providing a subtle aesthetic experience between stillness and movement for the installation viewers.

Responding to the increasing level of disembodiment within contemporary landscape photography, this project specifically sought novel ways to symbolically and literally place the photographer *within* her subject. One macro lens was attached to a film camera, which was focused on one single rhododendron flower for 10 minutes. The view, approximately one square centimetres in size, is projected onto a wall that is several meters wide, revealing the details of a flower beyond the capacity of human vision at a disorienting scale. The observer is almost like a bee or insect inside the flower. In this way, the flower is disturbingly autonomous from the human world with its intact structure and intense beauty. Yet it is painfully venerable, trembling with each tiniest vibration of the air. Such hyper-real vision is exploited to bring the rhododendrons closer to our physical bodies, to encourage a sympathetic emotional response towards these plants that are so much more than 'non-native and invasive'.

One way actually to embody oneself within the rhododendrons is simply to become a child again and to play inside the bushes. Many people in Britain and other countries have such fond memories with these foreign plants as they grow up. To contrast with the imagined embodiment within a single flower, Preston embarked on a small 'expedition'—to crawl through a large rhododendron area from one side to the other. It took ten minutes and the 'crawler's vision' was recorded with a GoPro camera, which was fixed on Preston's helmet. The result is a highly unstable footage with no fixed viewpoints or direction of orientation. One is simply lost in the world formed by the rhododendrons.





**Fig. 5.** *With Love. From an Invader.* Installation view at Jeddah Photo 2022.  
Image courtesy of Jeddah Photo 2022.

The four ways of looking described above are all anchored within the documentation function of photography. They all make use of contemporary imaging technology, from high-resolution digital cameras to low-budget infrared and motion-sensitive cameras, to 1:1 ratio macro-filming camera, and to the APP-controlled action cameras. Yet each camera's human-centric and linear views form a multi-angled vision that helps to dislodge the observer from the central stage. Instead, they provide an intimate experience in which the viewer is firmly placed inside the rhododendron bushes. Meanwhile, the content of the images and films serve as visual data and evidence, presenting a thriving ecology and habitat rich in fauna and flora.

Resisting the temptation to quantify such information, the work aims to provide a sense of knowing instead of concrete knowledge. The presentation of these visual components, ideally as a four-panel projection, provides an aesthetic experience beyond 'data reading'. This is achieved by the careful choreography of contrasting scales, rhythms, and colours. Designed to form a physical and immersive space, the installation aims to decentre the human body and its viewpoint. One key artistic element that unifies the diverse material is time—the year-long observation helps to place the project into a season sense of time. Meanwhile, the 182 ritualistic walks add a strong sense of performativity and intentionality to the work, while aligning the work more towards land art and beyond conventional photographic documentation.

## **Sound and Constructed Landscape**

Another key artistic element in the work is the soundscape, with each walk becoming a heightened experience of not only looking or touching, but also listening. The sound of the land is drastically different from its visual appearance, often with richer textures. Different weather conditions and surface qualities create different sounds with indefinite changes. Invisible elements, such as hidden water channels as part of the industrial heritage, can be heard rather than seen. Tactile experiences can generate different sounds, and similar to the infrared camera footage of the animals, sound recordings of birds, sheep and bees give further evidence of a land rich in life. In traditional Chinese philosophy, the sound of the land, particularly wind, is given the most significance as the physical manifestation of the energy flow between the external world and the internal human

body. The land is appreciated not from a visual point of view, but also sonically. That is why so many Chinese landscape paintings feature a human figure 'listening to the wind'. This flow of energy can be understood by the aliveness of the land, 'wasteland' included, which is highlighted more effectively in the soundscape of *With Love. From an Invader*. Meanwhile, different from the visual, the soundscape can be literally felt by the visitors' bodies within the installation space, providing a further sense of embodiment.



**Fig. 6.** Monty Adkins recording the sound of touching rhododendron leaves. Photograph by Yan Wang Preston.

The sonic element of *With Love. From an Invader* is constructed from field recordings at Sheddon Clough combined with synthetic sine tones. The recordings were collected throughout the year-long project and comprise environmental sound samples in the areas surrounding the *rhododendron ponticum* bush as well as from within it, and include wind, rain, snow, autumnal dry leaves, rubbing the bark on trees, ice cracking, pheasants, owls, sheep, robins, blackbirds, curlews, cuckoos, geese, magpies, and bees. The studio construction of these sonic elements to create a recombinant representation of a sensorially experienced landscape was heightened by the unnerving anthropogenic silence of the COVID-19 pandemic as for many of us “the pandemic [...] offered us a unique opportunity to listen to our surroundings in novel and unprecedented ways” (Louro et al. 2021, 3).

The sonic element of the installation uses a similar technique of temporal concentration as Luc Ferrari used in *Presque rien no. 1, le lever du jour au bord de la mer* (1967–1970). Just as Ferrari’s piece uses sounds recorded across a whole day edited into a 21-minute form, in *With Love. From an Invader*, the sounds were recorded across all four seasons of a year. In the work there is a deliberate fragmentation of the practice of field recording into its constituent elements in terms of the sound recordist as bodily-present in the recordings themselves (the manipulation of ‘objects’ in situ – such as the ice recordings), location or spatiality (expressed through recording techniques and microphone placement to create either intimacy and expansiveness), time (the editing of recording taken across a year into a 38-minute installation), and representation and contextual signification (expressed through the transformation of environmental materials and the use of sine tones as ‘other’ – a signifier of the rhododendron as an invasive species).

The environmental recordings are not simply re-presented as field recordings but are isolated from their original context by using noise-reduction techniques, significantly edited, processed, and then recombined to form a simulated ‘natural’ space. The resultant ‘environmental recordings’ presented in the installation comprise multiple versions of soundscapes recorded at different times but are often deliberately long, of many minutes

in length, to give the impression of a documentary field recording rather than highlight compositional intervention. The work creates a reconstruction of space through layering of materials rather than a documentary recording of the locale. The recombinant approach to create a sonic landscape and the transformations of each layer independently that this allows is reflective of both the ways in which an invasive species affects other wildlife and fauna in an ecosystem and how identity, memory, and perceptions of landscape are constructed both personally and societally. Mark Graham writes that:

All places are palimpsests. Among other things places are layers of brick, steel, concrete, memory, history, and legend. The countless layers of any place come together in specific time and spaces and have bearing on the cultural, economic, and political characteristics, interpretations, and meanings of place (Graham 2010, 422).

Fabricating a recombinant sonic landscape enables recordings from different times, spaces, and transformations that evoke memories or impressions of place as well as technically focusing in of different constituent elements within the environment that may have gone unheard. Such fabrication facilitates multiple sonic perspectives to be superimposed that would never be possible within the landscape itself—such as the close recording of streams counterpointed by ambient recordings of wind whistling through trees and dry-stone walls and isolated birdsong. Sound transformations further emphasise the ways in which the invasive species has an effect on the environment and the wildlife within it.

The transformation of the environmental sounds through spectral freezing techniques provides an additional abstracted sonic layer that imbues each section with a sense of stasis or timelessness redolent of the temporary suspension of everyday life that COVID-19 brought about. These transformed sonic layers, although they are spectrally derived from the environmental sounds, are perceived as neither emanating from the environment itself nor entirely foreign to it. The result is what Ambrose Field terms a hyper-real soundscape—one of the four landscape typologies he identifies (Field 2000). Dani Iosofat writes that it is possible to convey a sense of experienced place through the combination of real and constructed sound and that our understanding of place,

[...] does not depend upon its materiality [...] The effect of combining [...] this expression [of place] with evidence of material reality creates an ambiguous state, a model of some heightened perception that can occur in what Baudrillard dubs the hyperreal, 'sheltered [...] from any distinction between the real and the imaginary' (Iosofat 2009, 50).

As such, the recombinant sonic landscape of *With Love. From an Invader*. "is a sonic representation of place as an expression of a mental image, which is a result of sensory experience and is causally unrelated to spatial materiality" and involves "the reception of the stimulus and the subjective reconstruction of a poetic image, complete with any mental transformations" (Iosofat 2009, 48). The subtle transformations, transpositions, and spectral freezing of the recorded sounds are balanced against a foreground of more explicit environmental sounds. Here Michel Chion's discussion of 'rendering' and 'reproduction' is useful. In 'rendering' a recombinant landscape Chion notes that sounds are recognised to be "truthful, effective, and fitting not so much if they reproduce what would be heard in the same situation in reality, but if they render (convey, express) the feelings associated with the situation" (Chion 1994, 109).

The spectrally frozen bee, bird, and wind sounds create drone-like tones, seemingly encouraging deep listening and reflection, that impart their own spatial, atmospheric, and temporal qualities to the work that bridge the elements of the recombinant sound-world. The transformation of these environmental sounds mirrors the static quality of the sine tones. This behavioural kinship symbolises the invasiveness of *rhododendron ponticum* and its effect on the indigenous environment—for example, the nectar of the plant is poisonous to bees. As such, an understanding of the installation's subject matter results in a different signified reading of materials and their transformations.

## Sound in Installation Setting

In film we are traditionally accustomed to sound underpinning visual action. In audio-visual installation art this relationship is fluid. Julio d'Escriván extends the traditional relationship in many films writing that "sound on



film is there to coexist with the visuals, any understanding of its workings needs to be viewed in the context of intermedia; that is to say, coexisting media that conform, complement or contrast with one another (d'Esquiván 2009, 65) In *With Love. From an Invader.*, rather than illustrating the image of the film, the monocular field of vision of the 'love heart' film and the triggered wildlife footage, and the macro-footage of the rhododendron flower is complemented and contrasted with a polyaural recombinant soundfield. The sonic landscape informs our perception of events outside of the field of vision. In this way the experience what Bill Viola terms 'field perception' is presented sonically rather than visually. For Viola "field perception is the awareness or sensing of an entire space at once" (Viola 1995, 151-52). Holly Rogers writes that for Viola 'field perception' is "a combinative concern that aims to create neither musical images nor visual music, but rather a musico-visual simultaneity" (Rogers 2006, 199). In *With Love. From an Invader.* the musico-visual simultaneity is achieved through a multi-screen format presented alongside a recombinant soundscape in which the 'time-lapse' of the love-heart and the soundscape follow the same timeline but the other films are asynchronous to this, leaving the installation viewer to reconstruct a sense of place.

Although the landscape at Sheddon Clough is predominantly open and barren, the unique topology of the landscape is a result of its use during the industrial revolution and it includes numerous mounds that create sheltered gullies. This changing quality of the landscape from the open to the shielded is reflected in the quality of the sound in terms of how certain sounds were recorded. Whilst the sounds recorded during Spring and Summer denote an openness and expansiveness, those of winter display a sense of isolated intimacy. Peter Batchelor writes that installations can explore intimacy in a number of ways and that:

[...] various acousmatic compositional techniques relating to intimacy might be brought to bear on and operate as a way of drawing a listener into a work [...] in particular as they relate to the consideration of space and spatial relationships. These include recording techniques, types of sound materials chosen, and the creation of particular spatial environments and listening conditions. (Batchelor 2019, 307)

Whilst wind sounds provide a sense of large-scale landscape, there are also very close recordings of breaking ice, the movements of rocks at the site, and capturing insects from within the *rhododendron ponticum* bush itself. Such changes of sonic perspective enhance the transition from season to season. The sense of 'intimacy' demonstrated in the 'winter' section by focusing on very closely recorded breaking ice correlates to the sound dampening experienced due to heavy snowfall in the area. This sense of intimacy is further emphasised by the spatial characteristics and unique topography of the environment—the ice formed on streams at the bottom of gullies. Coupled with snowfall there were few auditory reflections from the hard dry-stone walls around the site.



**Fig. 7.** Topography at Sheddon Clough. Photographed by Monty Adkins.



**Fig. 8.** Aerial topography at Sheddon Clough. Photographed by Yan Wang Preston.

It is clear in the ice section (at c.25-32mins) that there is human intervention in which surface ice on the stream is broken. The sound recordist becomes bodily-present in the installation through causal action rather than passive quasi-neutrality of the recorded environments. In the studio these ice recordings were further isolated from their environmental context and recombined with low and high frequency sine tones to clear out the middle-ground sonic space to give a sense of isolated emptiness. The deliberately close microphone techniques used in the ice recordings,

[...] allow the capture of acoustic cues associated with such conditions – an absence of reflections [...] and [...] low frequency bias where dynamic mics are involved. The microphone thus affords us access to this intimate space, whose nature can be deduced from the spectromorphology of the recorded sound, and which is preserved irrespective of how it is later played back. (Batchelor 2019, 309)

More so than ambient environmental recordings, the ice recordings encourage a surrogate ‘presence’ in which the audient hears through the ears of the sound artist recording in situ, thus giving the heightened sense of intimacy at this point of the installation.



**Fig. 9.** Yan Wang Preston at Sheddon Clough, Winter 2021. Photographed by Monty Adkins.

## Conclusion

*With Love. From an Invader.* was completed during the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic. The absence of 'normal' human generated sound, such as traffic noise, created a unique soundscape. Meanwhile, the backdrop of the pandemic created an interesting experience while walking in the open (and safe) environment—a heightened and sharper awareness—which was perhaps influenced by the survival threat imposed by the virus. The land appeared to be more alive and autonomous, while human life appeared to be more fragile in comparison. To place the project in this very specific time, two COVID-19 daily statistics counters, one for the global infection numbers and another for global death numbers, are incorporated in the visual projection's entire duration. They are intended to create a sense of unease within a space that is otherwise calming and meditative.

*With Love. From an Invader.* is the first phase of a long-term artistic investigation towards the politics of landscape, identity, environment and migration within post-colonial Britain. The project selects a contested post-industrial wasteland and its abundant *rhododendron ponticum* plants—a notorious species reputed as being 'non-native and invasive'—as a case study. The awareness of the (colonial) history of the rhododendrons in the UK and their current ecological controversy enables viewers to read the work beyond the surface aesthetics of the work itself—a deliberate parallel to the beauty of the flowers themselves and their 'invasive' quality. The installation critiques and deconstructs photography's function as a means of providing 'first-hand evidence' and sound documentary techniques highlighting and questioning human-centric ideology and documenting of the landscape. This critique of landscape leads to the installation utilising diverse imaging technologies and sound techniques to observe and present the landscape and its ecology from multiple angles and layers in a recombinant manner. This recombinant approach to materials is underpinned by theoretical writings on recombinant ecologies and provides a framework for reconsidering approaches to landscape photography and documentary sound recording. As such the work provides an embodied aesthetic experience for audiences to contemplate the intimacy, beauty and strength of nature and the eternity of time within an ecological and political frame.

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