

A Belgian Transect: Field Broadcast in the expanded field of ecology.

Bram Thomas Arnold, Rebecca Birch and Rob Smith

bramthomasarnold@gmail.com

birch.rebecca@gmail.com

robsmithrob@gmail.com

Abstract

This article sets out the notion of a Field Broadcast from the dual perspective of Rebecca Birch, one of the developers of a bespoke version of Flash Media Live Encoder and Bram Thomas Arnold, an artist who uses a case study from Sideways Festival, Belgium, 2012. Field Broadcast enables an artist to be in a field, suitably equipped, and stream live footage to an audience. It is an experiment in place, site and the notion of a field. It is a new method of making work in the space between site-specific performance and the digital realm: a way of working that enables artists to generate new artworks within the non-place of the Internet. Birch introduces the technology from a number of perspectives before it is fleshed out with evidence and experience from a live project that took place in Belgium in 2012. Sideways was a festival that traversed Belgium over four weeks and 400 km, with artists walking and generating work en route. The possibilities offered by Field Broadcast are explored in relation to the expanded field of ecology amidst Bourriaud's *The Radicant* (2009), Guatarri's *The Three Ecologies* (2005) and Morton's *Ecology Without Nature* (2007).

Keywords: ecology, broadcast, performance, fieldwork

1 A Belgian Transect: Field Broadcast in the expanded field of ecology

Field Broadcast is an artist-run live broadcast project, commissioning artists to work with live broadcast as a medium.¹ The Field Broadcast software delivers live broadcasts direct to the viewers' desktops outside of a web browser. Times of the broadcasts are not announced, offering the potential for audience members to encounter live broadcast artworks as unexpected interruptions to other activities. The broadcasts are not transmissions of live events that also take place offline,² they are artworks devised specifically for broadcast, live events that occur at the point of reception, rather than at the site of transmission; each viewer receives a slightly different version of the work, depending upon their specific surroundings. To explain how the software of Field Broadcast works, it is easier to begin with a story; a story told from the point of view of Ana, an imaginary Field Broadcast viewer:

Ana is sitting at her desk. It faces the wall. A window is to her right. Focused on the laptop screen she maintains a consistent awareness of the presence of the window, aligned directly with an ignorance of the events outside of it. In the corner of her laptop screen a dormant black circle displays the words 'NOT LIVE'. (She isn't really sure what this circle will do, but her friend, an artist involved in the project, sent her the link to download the software and assures her that it 'will be good')

She is writing an invoice, adding up several receipts for replacement batteries, taxi fares and cables and trying to remember purchases she may have forgotten. It's 8.47 pm, but she is not aware of this, and isn't intending on moving, a cooling cup of coffee beside her and a long evening of admin ahead.

A ping. A window opens on her screen, obscuring cursor and most of the invoice.

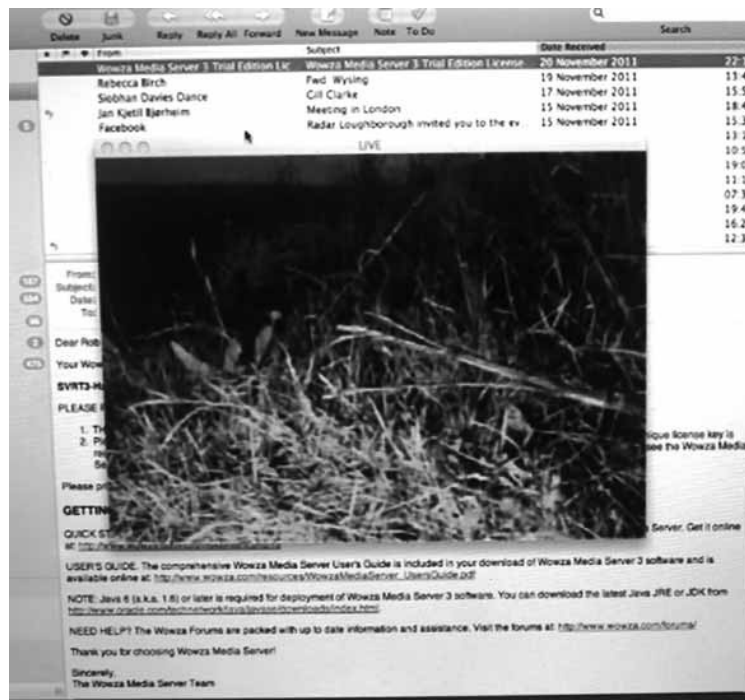
She is momentarily confused but realises that the grey button is orange and this is a field broadcast.

She looks directly through the screen, framed by her own invoice, to

green grass against a petrol blue sky. It's dark in the image, and she realises it is dark in her room. An off-camera light illuminates image, screen, and reflects back to her face.

This light is exploring this grassy green space (which we know, but Ana doesn't, is a field in Somerset) whilst illuminating a portion of Ana's screen, her darkened room and reflecting onto her face. A field in Somerset and a room in London are compressed together in this newly created digital light-space. The computer screen and its associated terminology – 'window', 'view' – suggests a transparency, and this window that has opened certainly seems to encourage Ana to look through it. It could be described as a portal, a portal that bridges the gap between room and field, between audience and the artist, between the domestic and the remote.

And through this portal Dan Walwin, the artist. No need to imagine him, he is real, I invited him to make the broadcast, as part of Field Broadcast West: Seven Sunsets (2011) where seven artists³ made broadcasts that were transmitted at sunset on different days across a two-week period.



Dan is in a field with a 3G dongle, video camera, Firewire, and a mic

picking up a tape recording of birdsong (the natural surroundings become an active agent in a Field Broadcast; there is of course a contingency in this, and Dan protects against it by supplying his own birdsong) and an actress who is performing, sitting in the car that comes into view in the frame; who is in the car right now, at the same time as Ana is watching the broadcast. This particular broadcast, made by an artist working with the cinematic form, has a narrative, there is a sense of an unfolding event, delivered live, occurring at sunset, in correspondence with Ana's sunset.

The 3G dongle is streaming Dan's sunset to Ana. So this is a low-tech portal, using consumer technology, the software that opens it developed through Adobe Air, and the video streamed using 3G, encoded using Flash Media Live Encoder and a rented Wowza Media Server. This technological lightness is an important element of the project; it allows the emphasis to be upon the development of the artworks, on experimenting and playing with live digital broadcast as a medium. For each Field Broadcast, project artists are invited to make works which use the liveness of the broadcast is an inherent part of the work. In selecting artists to work with, we do not focus on those who work digitally, but rather look at those who have a practice that is enquiring and curious, who would enjoy the challenge of working with live broadcast. Through this open approach Field Broadcast has offered artists a way of working that opens new potentials within their practice, and several have approached us to collaborate on other projects – for example, a walk across Belgium with live broadcasts sent on the way.

2 A field report from Sideways Festival

A Belgian Transect was a series of Field Broadcasts produced by Eleanor Wynne Davis and myself in 2012 as part Sideways Festival.⁴ Over the period of a month, commissioned artists and members of the public traversed a 400 km line from west to east across Belgium. The thirteen broadcasts were the first time this technology had been used over a given period in this manner. This field report aims to introduce what we learnt through that process, and through this set out the technology's potential to arts practices that are of an ecological disposition.

Davis and I met whilst studying for an MA in arts and ecology run collaboratively by Dartington College of Arts and Schumacher School of Holistic Science.⁵ In his work *The Three Ecologies*, Guattari (2005) expands the scope of ecology to encompass the whole breadth of human endeavour, and so by 'ecological' in the above paragraph I do not intend to refer to arts that deal with the 'land and environment' as set out by Kastner and Wallis (1998), but to practice that is open to the notion 'no discourse is truly objective' (Morton 2013, 4). Here, the term 'ecology must stop being associated with the image of a small nature-loving minority or with qualified specialists' (Guattari 2005, 52), for here I intend ecology to be 'a vast, sprawling mesh of interconnection without a definite center or edge' of which we are all a part (Morton 2012, 8). Ecology is the study of a natural system, and what is humanity but a natural system fuelled by hidden connections, immense in its complexity. It is from traditional ecology, however, that I have built upon the notion of a transect, where 'transect' is taken to mean 'A line used . . . to provide a means of measuring and representing graphically the distribution of organisms (Allaby 2004, 409). In this article, the scale of the line is expanded to that of a distance walked across a given area, in this case Belgium; the samples then taken in this transect measure a culture and the interplay between two selves, Davis and I, within that culture. Thereby constructing a transect, a line 'in a sense that is more visionary or metaphysical' than the physical presence of a length of string across a field in as in ecology fieldwork (Ingold 2007, 47). It is a line drawn first on a map, then walked, talked and performed into being by, in this case, the participants, coordinators and audience members of Sideways Festival.

So to the field guide: firstly, an equipment list, for no true field guide is complete without its technical specifications.

In order to undertake a Field Broadcast one will need the following; though these particulars may vary for each Field Broadcast project, they formed the core of the experience at Sideways Festival upon which this field report is based:

- 1.laptop equipped with appropriate software;

- 2.3G dongle (on the same network as your phone);
- 3.video camera with Firewire/thunderbolt capability;
- 4.Tripod;
- 5.smartphone with Speedtest app;
- 6.Zoom H1 or equivalent portable audio recording device × 2, long mini-jack cables;
- 7.still camera with remote control.

2.1 Laptop equipped with Flash Media Live Encoder and the Field Broadcast Live Pinger application

The broadcasts produced during Sideways were undertaken at various times throughout a 200 km journey that was made on foot. All equipment was carried alongside the standard equipment one may require on a thirty-mile walk through variable terrain: food; water; maps; clothing; etc. It is essential to have all the equipment charged to full capacity, with backup batteries if possible. Items were eventually packed, with all their leads, in dry-bags within our rucksacks.

These last two points were learnt the hard way, stood under the baking sun in a high Belgian summer, whilst trying to find a particular lead that had fallen to the bottom of a bag, whilst all the batteries are fading fast and time is running out to make it to camp. I was able to negotiate the use of the software for this project having previously worked with Field Broadcast in 2010 and 2011.⁶ Davis and I arrived in Belgium with two laptops enabled with Field Broadcast software.

2.2 3G dongle (on the same network as your phone)



On arrival in Belgium we sped through the centre of Brussels, attempting to obtain a wireless dongle before being transported by train and minibus to the western edge of the country, where we were finally deposited in a farmyard near Polygon Wood just outside Menen, a provincial town. This displacement, left us in a situation whereby the only certainties we were left with were each other, causing us to turn in on our relationship in the first instance, before being able to confront the place and places we found ourselves. As Trigg posits in his treatise *The Memory of Place*, 'places are defined in their relationship with the particular subject who experiences them' (2013, 5): as Davis and I were bound up together in this, it was back into our togetherness that we originally retreated whilst in Belgium. A previous collaboration of ours saw us set out to walk across Wales in the shadow of two power lines that traverse the country. We returned to this work in Polygon Wood, enabling us to reconnect with each other whilst forging a direct link with this new place from which we found ourselves broadcasting.

Polygon Wood was a significant battleground in the First World War, and it was here that we commenced our transecting. *Notating Despair*,⁷ a performance for violin and voice that set out to annotate our previous failed attempts to traverse Wales, became in this new place something altogether different. The place around us, a military cemetery in a small triangle of woodland, seeped into the performance through its presence in and around us.

2.3 Video camera with Firewire/ thunderbolt capability

As it happened, this first broadcast failed to broadcast. Technical ineptitude in the field was the first hurdle we had to surmount, and it was our lack of understanding of the technology here that failed us. The Flash Media Live Encoder (FMLE) sends a signal to a server to enable the broadcasts: we had, in our eagerness to stream before we had to leave the area, failed to account for this simple detail. A broadcast is not something to be rushed, and the intricacy of broadcasting combined with our aesthetic disposition forced our hand in Polygon Wood, causing the error. The performance of Davis's violin-playing shadow falling on a cenotaph was lost in the digital ether, FMLE unable to communicate with the wider world; fortunately the event was captured on DV tape.

'Failure is what we learn from mostly' (Solnit 2006, 107), and that evening we stripped everything from our second broadcast other than the broadcast itself, easing the technology into this new realm of long distance walking and foreign lands. Introducing ourselves to the viewer through a broadcast in which we sat, directly eyeing the camera, and faced our audience, breathing gently in the evening sun, a day's worth of dust on our faces. The scene was set, and it was the two of us in and with Belgium, and with the limited facts we knew, or thought we knew, about it.

2.4 Tripod

As I type this I am being interrupted, for I have become an audience member in a current Field Broadcast project.⁸ I am sitting at my desk in Cornwall, and through the technology sitting dormant on

my desktop I am connected suddenly to a precise location in Suffolk, to a concurrent now (see Figure 3). I know that on the other end of this broadcast, behind the tripod nestled amongst the equipment, are Rebecca and Rob, coordinating with an artist on location somewhere in Constable country. In Belgium it was somewhat different. El and I, after closing the Field Broadcast software, collapsed in a heap in a foreign field, together alone in the wake of a performance, with no audience to acknowledge us, nor company to keep us.

Field Broadcast in this sense is a logical progression from Richard Long's *A Line Made by Walking*. As with Long's work whereby 'scarcely any material was removed . . . and none was added', nothing is made during a Field Broadcast, the broadcasts exist between place and time, but if you miss the moment of their broadcasting, there is no way of retrieving this 'work', all that can remain is a recording of a live performance, and this is an altogether different prospect (Ingold 2007, 43).

2.5 Smartphone with Speedtest app⁹

According to the United Nations, as shown on the website of its Department of Social and Economic Affairs Belgium is one of the most urbanised countries in Europe, and its rural pockets have been constructed by centuries of agriculture, war and civilisation. Taking the notion of the journey-form discussed in *The Radicant* (Bourriaud 2009), where he posits that we now live in a world that is so over-mapped that all geography has become psycho-geography, Davis and I were able to open up the multi-faceted places that Belgium has to offer, and seek to find our selves amongst them. For individuals bring structure to places just as places bring structure to individuals, and this cycle (Entrikin 1991, 6 – 23) is highlighted in the methodology of Field Broadcast by its presence between several places, that of the broadcaster and those of the multiple and unknown viewers. Place is neither realist – it does not exist purely without us – nor idealist – it does not reside solely with us – but is formed between these two in a state of constant flux (Trigg 2013, 6). Probing places and thereby the notion of place itself with Field Broadcast enables artists to add another layer of complexity on top of an already slippery concept that in the internet age has, along with our concepts of time and space, been both undermined and simultaneously expanded by a new and seemingly endless web of connections. The flat climes of Belgium, engulfed by a 3G wireless network, meant we were able to use the SpeedTest app before switching on the bulk of our equipment. The 3G network offers the opportunity to map a country in yet another way, and through the experiences of Field Broadcast the best coverage outside urban centres has been found along motorway corridors and waterways, coastal and mountainous parts of the country proving more problematic.

2.6 Zoom H1 or equivalent portable digital recording device × 2, long mini-jack cables

The Flemish landscape was wholly new to me as a reality, although I inevitably arrived carrying my own baggage, a baggage from an arts education distilled through myself: half-remembered art history; trips to the National Galleries in Cardiff. Walking across Belgium the depth of landscape painting is apparent in the sky, minor scenes appear from forgotten paintings in the courtyards of farm houses, cows languish under the shade of grand trees, dusty clutter pokes out from barns. I saw Constable, and those he had seen before him, Ruysdael key amongst them (Clark 1961, 86 – 91).

'Sounds lend intricate texture to experience' (Lorimer and Wylie 2010, 7), and our third broad-

cast released the potential of carrying multiple high quality portable digital recorders. One was kept on record from the start to the end of a broad- cast recording our conversations and ideas, the other, in combination with a mini-jack-to-mini- jack cable, was used as an external microphone to enable high quality audio broadcasting via the laptop. For a broadcast from a field near Ronse (see Figure 2) we were able to capture not only 'shadows cast by clouds in a large windy sky' (Clark 1961, 87), but also the wind itself, rustling through the papery poplar leaves and the sound of the nearby church, chiming an hour out of sync with the majority of our audience.

2.7 Still camera with remote control

Alongside Ruysdael and Constable, Brueghel was an enduring presence on the path across Belgium, transecting past the only extant church that appears in a Breughel painting, that of Sint-Anna Church west of Brussels. At 4 pm Belgian time, after broad- casts at 11 am, and 2 pm from previous churches, we broadcast the live countdown to a silent 4 pm, our- selves as yet uncertain as to whether the bells would chime. Through the correct application of a remote control we captured a number of stills whilst broadcasting from in front of the spire and clock face, finally capturing still documentation of a broadcast as it was happening. The church appears in

Breughel the Elders' *The Blind Leading the Blind*, *The Parable of The Blind* (Claessens and Rousseau, 1975), and its appearance was a fitting conclusion to a body of broadcasts that were an experiment. I had previously been into the field with the Field Broadcast technology, but the scale of the project increased the problematic nature of taking such equipment for a walk and this report came to fruition in the wake of *A Belgian Transect*, a work born of practice and research, experiment and failure. Davis and I learned from each other whilst trying not to stumble blindly into the landscapes before us, navigating by the three ecological registers set out by Guattari – the environment, social relations and human subjectivity (Guattari 2005, 28) – with Field Broadcast as our key instrument. Field Broadcast has recently launched its next phase through becoming an app available on both Android and Apple devices and is an ongoing project; in the autumn of 2014 the next sequence of broadcasts will be developed by commissioned artists in collaboration with the Lux archive in London.

Notes

- . ¹ Field Broadcast developed from the practices of, and is co-directed by the artists Rebecca Birch and Rob Smith.
- . ² For example, the Royal Opera House live transmissions to nationwide cinemas.
- . ³ Field Broadcast West took place in 2011 with artists Bram Thomas Arnold (live from Devon, UK), Sarah Bowker-Jones (Somerset, UK), Dan Coopey (Gloucestershire, UK), Hamilton and St Amand, (Quebec, Canada), Steve Rowell (Washington DC, USA), Matthew Tickle (London, UK) and Dan Walwin (Somerset, UK).
- . ⁴ Sideways Festival took place 17 August – 17 September across Belgium, walking from Menen to Zutendaal; see <http://www.tragewegen.be/nl/about> for more details.
- . ⁵ The MA in arts and ecology ran at Dartington College of Arts, Devon, England, from 2006 to 2009. A new version of the course is accepting applications from autumn 2014.

- . ⁶ In 2010 Field Broadcast first undertook a project at Wysing Arts Centre with 40 commissioned artists. In 2011 a project called Field Broadcast West took place internationally. For more on both of these projects see <http://www.fieldbroadcast.org>.
- . ⁷ Notating Despair was first performed at 'Desire Lines: The Ecologies of Language' held at Dartington Hall in 2007, a joint venture by Dartington Arts, Dartington College of Arts and Schumacher College.
- . ⁸ Scene on a Navigable River, with live broadcasts from Dedham Vale, ran from 9 to 15 July 2014.
- . ⁹ Visit <http://www.speedtest.net> for more details; other apps are available.

References

- Allaby, Michael. 2004. *A Dictionary of Ecology*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Bourriaud, Nicolas. 2009. *The Radicant*. New York: Lukas & Sternberg.
- Claessens, B., and J. Rousseau. 1975. *Our Bruegel*. Antwerp: Mercatorfonds.
- Clark, Kenneth. 1961. *Landscape into Art*. London: Penguin.
- Entrikin, Nicholas, J. 1991. *The Betweenness of Place: Towards a Geography of Modernity*. Baltimore, MD: The John Hopkins University Press.
- Guattari, Felix. 2005. *The Three Ecologies*. London: Athlone Press.
- Ingold, Tim. 2007. *Lines: A Brief History*. Abingdon: Routledge.
- Kastner, J., and B. Wallis. *Land and Environmental Art*. London: Phaidon.
- Lorimer, Hayden, and John Wylie. 2010. "Loop (a Geography)." *Performance Research Journal* 15 (4): 6–13.
- Morton, Timothy. 2007. *Ecology Without Nature*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Morton, Timothy. 2012. *The Ecological Thought*. Harvard, MA: Harvard University Press.

Morton, Timothy. 2013. *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology after the End of the World*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.

Solnit, Rebecca. 2006. *A Field Guide to Getting Lost*. Edinburgh: Canongate.

Trigg, Dylan. 2013. *The Memory of Place*. Athens, OH: Ohio University Press.

Bram Thomas Arnold is an artist who started with walking whilst studying fine art at Oxford Brookes University in the Social Sculpture Research Unit. He went on to undertake an MA in arts and ecology at Dartington College of Art before commencing a PhD at Falmouth University in 2011. He has exhibited widely both in the UK and abroad, including the Parasol Unit in London, Artisterium in Tbilisi, Georgia, and the Conflux Festival of Psychogeography, New York. He has published with the *New Statesman*, *This is not a Gateway's* series *Critical Cities*, and has a forthcoming essay to be published by Ashgate Press in 2015.

Rebecca Birch (<http://rebeccabirch.net>) is an artist and lecturer in Fine Art at Lancaster University, UK. Recent exhibitions include *Lichen Hunting on the West Coast*, at Fig-2 at the ICA, London and *The Thing in the Middle* (with Francesco Pedraglio) at Modern Art Oxford. Alongside her individual research she is co-director, with artist Rob Smith, of Field Broadcast, a live broadcast platform that developed through their independent art practices. Recent Field Broadcast project partners include; LUX, Bournemouth University, Camden Arts Centre, *Near Now* at the Broadway Cinema, The National Trust, Office of Experiments, *In Certain Places* and Wysing Arts Centre. For more information visit <http://fieldbroadcast.org>

Rob Smith (<http://robsmith.me.uk>) is an artist and independent researcher. Recent projects *Revisiting the Quarry: Excavation Legacy and Return*, a symposium at Yorkshire Sculpture Park and *The Quarry*, an exhibition at IMT, London (with Charles Danby). Alongside his individual research he is co-director, with artist Rebecca Birch, of Field Broadcast, a live broadcast platform that developed through their independent art practices. Recent Field Broadcast project partners include; LUX, Bournemouth University, Camden Arts Centre, *Near Now* at the Broadway Cinema, The National Trust, Office of Experiments, *In Certain Places* and Wysing Arts Centre.

For more information visit <http://fieldbroadcast.org>