

**Paper presented at 'Mobile Bristol' conference at HP labs, 30 January 2002, Liz Milner**

***Background to the photographic project "The Woods – a year and a Day"***

The woods featured in this exhibition are in Failand, only a little way outside Bristol and close to my home. I'd been visiting them with family, friends or on my own, for about 12 years. We'd go there for walks, picnics and birthday celebrations or just to sit quietly. We'd dam up the stream, build shelters, stare at the bluebells in spring, collect holly and ivy at Christmas. As our sons grew older they began to go there on their own, walking across the fields from our village to build dens, cook sausages, hide from and probably scare ramblers. During that time I'd learnt how astonishingly different the woods could look, and feel, not just through the obvious changes from season to season, but even from day to day, and I decided I'd like to observe and record those changes more consciously. So on January 1<sup>st</sup> 1999 I began a project to photograph the woods for a year.

I didn't intend to take a scientific approach to the recording, but to visit as often as my other commitments would allow, and try to record as much variety in the weather conditions, as well as seasonal differences, as I could fit in. It was a project for my own satisfaction, and was as much about my experience of the place - why I found it so appealing and compelling – as it was about being a botanical record or a straightforward visual essay.

***Research and influences***

I also began to research the ecology, current use and management of the woods and its history and unearthed some fascinating information. One piece of research that proved to be very influential was the discovery that Roger Fry had lived for several years in Failand with his Quaker family in a house whose grounds included part of these woods. He became a painter, influential art critic and member of the Bloomsbury group, but, as Virginia Woolf recounts in her biography of Fry, as a child, he played here, amongst the trees and streams, as my own children have done in another century, and later named his own house after a favourite part of this woodland - Durbins.

His theories of artistic vision and the aesthetics of formalism laid the foundations for modernism in Britain nearly a hundred years ago. In a book of essays he wrote called 'Vision and Design', Fry explains about the importance of formal qualities within images - line, mass, space, light and shade, colour - and describes how some pictures, by meeting certain criteria, achieve a quality he describes as 'significant form'.

***Ideas for presenting the work – meeting musician Armin Elsaesser***

My discovery of this episode of art history with its greater emphasis on form -- led me to look at the woods through my camera lens in a different way and provided the impetus for many of the more abstract images that I took there. After I'd completed the year's project, an idea inspired by the Fry connection also began to evolve with input from friends in the artists group I'm part of, Ship of Fools. The idea was to create a CD ROM that would include my photographs, film clips and sound along with the research material and would borrow some of Fry's ideas on 'elements of design' to create a structure and interface for the piece. I felt that the addition of audio and the sequencing of images would help reflect the notion of the experience of being in the woods. Sadly, it's one of those many projects that's not been made, yet, but the proposal I'd written was selected for presentation at the ISEA International Symposium of Electronic Arts in Paris, December 2000 where one conference themes was the history of art in the digital era. I met up there with friends who were also presenting at the conference and it was through them that I met Armin Elsaesser. He liked the images I showed and was enthusiastic about the idea of creating some sound pieces that would fit in with my proposed CD project and we continued to talk about the idea for months but never found the opportunity to take it further.

## ***Exhibition***

Over the following few months I began to plan how to display the body of work that I'd accumulated over the year of photographing in the woods. There were well over 500 images, and editing them was painful. After completing my self appointed documenting task of a year and day, (as it finally turned out to be), I was still committed to the idea of trying to convey, through the display of the images, not just the dynamic 'vegetable' changes of the woods, but something of my personal experience of the place that had by then, thoroughly embedded itself in my life, so my final choice of images was governed by this, inexplicable but complex, criteria.

I also spent some time thinking about how I could introduce sound into the exhibition, but with very limited funds and time, I reluctantly concluded that I simply didn't have the resources to provide the hardware I'd need let alone the content, so I abandoned the idea. The original exhibition at Ashton Court in October 2001, contained more photographs than the version here, and included contextual information on the history, ecology and usage of the woods, as well as the journal I'd kept over the year, and photographs from the family albums showing the children playing, picnicking and latterly lolling about in the woods over a period of 14 years. The exhibition was about a personal landscape.

## ***Working with HP***

At the end of 2000, I had developed the piece of work showing here for the 'Six Small Screens' HP project at the Watershed. When I was planning the Ashton Court exhibition, I contacted Jo Reid to ask if I could borrow the same kit again for the show. She agreed, and came to the exhibition, and with Richard Hull also came on the woodland walk that I'd organised as part of the exhibition – a combination of exploring woodland, storytelling and an installation of some smaller versions of the photographs from the exhibition suspended in the trees, depicting the same scene at different seasons. After the show had finished Jo approached me with a proposal for creating some interactive soundscapes that would augment my pictures and allow them to try out a different method of testing their developing interactive sound technologies. I was delighted at the opportunity to finally add another element to the work and after the ongoing discussion with Armin, he was clearly the most appropriate person to work with on the project.

## ***Producing the content***

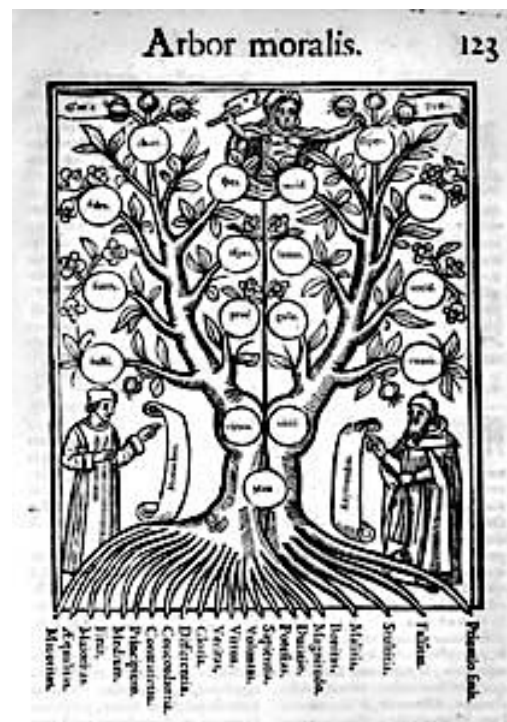
We began meeting as a team in early November to discuss the possibilities of sound, space and interactivity and the more we talked the more limitless the possibilities seemed – too much choice in a way. I had a number of ideas of sequences of sounds I'd like to include, some natural, some constructed, as well as some spoken word. Again, it was the idea of the experience of being in the woods which fed my thinking, but this time, I was looking at a more universal, or at least, less individualistic set of experiences. Armin and I spent some time collecting sound from the woods, and grabbing audio from past video footage I'd shot there at different times of the year, so we managed to build up a library of natural sounds that spanned the year. It was important to me, if to no-one else, that the sounds we used came from these woods, as far as was possible, and although we had to cheat on a couple of pieces, all the natural sounds are authentic. We also spent time working at his home studio, listening to what we'd captured, then mixing, editing and adding to it to achieve the results we wanted. Another strand of ideas led me to describe some of the qualities of constructed sounds or music that I'd like to accompany certain pictures and Armin composed them. Amazing! He also worked on his own ideas and produced some music that fitted perfectly with the mood I had imagined for parts of the exhibition. From my point of view it seemed like an excellent combination of skills and approaches, I hope it felt like that to Armin too!

## Process at HP

The support we received from Jo and the team at HP has been great - we'd have ideas - they'd realise them! (although the task of physically displaying the pictures has been almost the greatest challenge!) It appeared as though the process of developing the resources to deliver our ideas was a simple unfolding of technical virtuosity, although I know it hasn't been effortless achievement. What was fascinating and what really gave me a sense of creative collaboration, was when, one day a couple of weeks ago, Jo, Richard, Armin and myself met after having largely put together the strands of sounds we were planning to use, and began to work on the potential interactivity. While I suggested a possible set of experiences that a visitor could have, for example, hearing a sequence of spoken quotes from different locations, Richard responded by suggesting the programming behaviours that could be used to make that work. Armin or Jo would then add other possibilities and a further set of options were developed through devising rules that would operate in certain conditions. These in turn suggested different ways of presenting a situation. This collaboration of the complementary approaches of arts and technology, was a really exciting process and creatively very stimulating.

## Trees and woods as conceptual framework

In a way, what's happened to my representation of the woods in this project is that the photographs, in their specific physical configuration, are being used as a form of interface and it's intriguing to note that historically, trees and woods have re-occurred over the centuries as a conceptual framework to contain and convey information. In an early 90s 'Cyber-essay', "Techgnosis, Memory and the Angels of Information", Eric Davis explores the ideas of the archaeology and mythologies of information - how collections of knowledge have been ordered and represented in the past and he "takes us back to the allegorical heart of the mediaeval art of memory" describing the creation, by the Spanish alchemist and self taught popular philosopher, Raymon Lull, of the 'Arbor Scientiae' which were "visual charts that attempted to schematize the total encyclopaedia of knowledge into a forest of trees, organised under the abstract qualities of God - goodness, virtue, glory etc"



Davis continues, quoting Francis Bacon, to suggest that the use of allegory enables the poet to “measure countries in the mind”. Allegorical domains and imagined realms are still very much alive and well and inhabiting the infinite world of computer games but in describing the access to such imagined territory in this “new dimension of the space of information” he asks “how does one move through this space? What are its possible logics, cartographies, entities, connections? In constructing environments that mediate between brains and information space, computer interface designers are already grappling with the phantasmic apparatus of the imagination, for these questions are for the dreaming mind as much as the analytic one.” Maybe this project is an embodiment of that process.

### ***Themes of content – straying from the path***

Out of those thoughts emerged a number of themes to weave into the contents production and the planning of the interactivity, one of which was the importance in folk tales and fairy stories of not straying from the path through the forest. It’s a motif that comes from Northern Europe where forests were vast – in the mediaeval period you could apparently travel for many days in the forest that covered parts of what are now Germany, Poland and Lithuania, before emerging from the trees. This quote from an essay entitled “The Mystic Geography of the Woods”, by Boria Sax sums up the problem, “Space seems different in the woods, not a matter of fixed co-ordinates but of discontinuous points.....before the discovery of the compass all one could do was stick strictly to the paths ... if there was a path. Once this was lost, there would be no forward or back, there would be no east nor west, north nor south.”

The same mysterious, otherworldly qualities that come from those woods of the past or from storybooks, do exist sometimes, even in my tiny bit of woodland, although it would be difficult to get lost there. However, it’s still possible to get lost quite easily, even in English woods – I’ve done so myself in the New Forest. But it seems probable that a version of the technology that’s being used here in this recreation of a woodland experience could also theoretically be used to locate you to within a few metres in a large forest and so prevent the danger of being lost, or conversely eliminate the possible security of concealment and protection. These ideas fed into the creation of some of the content we’ve produced.

### ***Themes of content - experience***

Another concept that influenced the development of the content was the sense that I was left with after visiting the woods so regularly over that year. That was, that although my appreciation of the place *had* increased through the knowledge I’d acquired through reading, research and conversations, ultimately, the most important element to open up a deeper understanding of the woods, was the physical, sensory experience of it – the squelchyness of the mud and spongy moss, sun and mist on New Year’s Day, intoxicating bluebells and sour wood-sorrel, wrens trilling and deer-hooves thudding, and the stream - the thread that links the woods with my village where it joins the River - these were the keys to defining and locating its existence for, and, within me. Part of what you’ll find here is a kind of recycled version of my experience – this isn’t the real thing – go and visit, and value, a wood soon, but I hope you’ll enjoy your walk in this “Wired Wood” first!

Liz Milner  
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