

A prolific digital and installation artist and a curator, Su Grierson's practice runs deep as I found out each time we have worked together over the last seven years. So when I was asked to write about the two videos *Catch* and *Fukushima* she created for the twenty two screens of the Threshold Wave I was delighted at the chance to take a really close look at her whole practice - it would be futile to consider these two works in isolation - and find out more about the common threads that run through it.

But to begin with, since the works were commissioned specifically for the Threshold Wave video installation, I should give the Wave as it is commonly known, some due consideration.

The Wave stretches the length of the foyer of the Concert Hall, a millennium build situated in the centre of Perth. It was designed as an integral part of the building and with its linear configuration it encapsulates the spirit of the Millennium like a timeline forever on the move. The long uninterrupted row of plasma screens cuts horizontally through the fabric of the building, high up where the mezzanine connects with the convex roof, its monitors poised to tell a story like the frieze of classical architecture and the metopes of the Parthenon. It is temporal from beginning to end, a merger of classical storytelling with twenty first century technology.

Its unfolding narrative has to compete with the diversity of activities constantly taking place in the bustling and energising multi-purpose space below as the glass bowl that is the Perth Concert Hall mixes together a busy public of conference participants, music lovers, theatre goers, art aficionados and craft enthusiasts or simply friends meeting for lunch. Each of these various groups whose memberships are interchangeable, have their own expectations and experience the space differently. This is a cultural and social hub and not a white space where art worshipers are immersed in the work. From the start Grierson felt that the challenge of making work for the Wave would be to capture the viewers' attention and hold on to it.

And indeed, as I sat in the cafe watching the videos, it struck me that I was in the middle of a heated conceptual debate between **place** with the Concert Hall's heterotopic character, **time** with the videos narrative and rhythm and

the **social** with the dynamics of the audience, in fact the same trinity that has fuelled cultural discourse since the latter half of last century. Up until then, time or history had on the whole dominated the world of ideas and space was deemed 'empty'. Then from the 1960s onwards as spaceflight became a reality, social theorists like Michel Foucault and humanist geographers like Edward Soja, Edward Relph and Yi-Fu Tuan among others, began to champion the cause of space and to define a new so-called postmodern era in their own distinctive ways.

To Foucault we owe the idea of heterotopia, the term he used to describe spaces that break from the normal by juxtaposing in one place such as the Concert Hall, several activities that are usually kept separate.

In Soja's theory 'Thirdspace' space is all encompassing

"the various forms of space lie within a continuum that has direct experience at one extreme and abstract thought at the other extreme."<sup>i</sup>

Whereas Relph counterbalances the extensiveness of space with the specificity of place imbued with personal relevance and identity:

"To be human is to live in a world that is filled with significant places; to be human is to have and to know *your* place."<sup>ii</sup>

Meanwhile, within the visual arts, space becomes social. Curator Nicolas Bourriaud who coined the term 'relational aesthetics', defined it as:

"A set of practices which take as their theoretical and practical point of departure the whole of human relations and their social context, rather than independent private space."<sup>iii</sup>

While musing however briefly, *pace* Lefebvre *et al*, upon the interaction of space, time and social relations all around me, it also occurred to me that these concepts are present throughout Grierson's practice.

Indeed space is central to her work in the form of the landscape and more precisely, as she explains, how each of us experience it and engage with it:

*If a group of people stand on a hill overlooking an expanse of landscape, each will see a different place. [...] What we see is always mediated through our knowledge and interests, through the information we hold in our minds, through our past experiences and the tendencies of our imaginations.*<sup>iv</sup>

And however complex this relationship between men and nature becomes, it has to start with a sense of place and it is significant that Grierson decided to set up her studio at the heart of the land that was farmed by her husband before being handed over to the next generation. She did work in Glasgow for a while after graduating with an MA in Fine Art from the Art School and was getting known for her vibrant videos of pure colours born out of her master's research but her commuting between Glasgow and Perthshire only intensified her awareness of the iniquitous relationship between the city as consumer and the country as provider and of the cultural divide between the gallery institution and the landscape.

Finally, the realisation that she was in danger of being typecast as “the-artist-who-makes-colourful-videos” convinced her to move her studio to her rural base from where she built her practice at the cutting edge of digital media.

As for time, video as an art form is the epitome of temporal narratives with the real time the film lasts, the artificial time it creates by slowing down or speeding up, and of course the time the viewer invests in watching it.

In terms of social relations, Grierson's commitment to the land has inspired in her an art practice motivated by strong social and ethical beliefs. She wants to make people open their eyes to their natural environment and if advocacy is about raising awareness, then she has been a cultural activist all her life - she admits to having been on committees since the age of seventeen. To counteract the feeling of isolation often experienced by artists based in rural areas, she has endeavoured to connect people together either through her own art projects or by helping set up and promote an impressive number of organisations over the years, such as the Perthshire Visual Arts Forum. She also served for two years as President of the Scottish Artists Union.

### *Catch* (2007)

“In making [*Catch*], I was concerned with issues of fluidity and impermanence and the superficial nature of much of our current experience of a landscape that is culturally and historically regarded as a base point of society. The way we ‘see’ landscape and relate to it, is conditioned by our total experience of it.”<sup>v</sup>

While the postmodern theorists drew our attention to space, time and the social, they also blurred the boundaries between them and similarly in *Catch*, the first of the two Horsecross Arts works, they are closely intertwined as we can see in the above statement by Grierson.

She chose to compose *Catch* with a series of seductively colourful images. The purpose of this visual seduction is twofold, first to capture our attention as viewers and then to make us aware of the part such vibrant colours play in our response to the landscape.

Colours have fascinated Grierson since long before her BA degree at Dundee Art College in the late 1980s. She had become interested in spinning and weaving some fifteen years earlier, and this had led her to look into the organic dyeing of wool as it had been practiced in Scotland for hundreds of years. She would collect plants and roots wherever she was, and experiment with various methods while carefully and methodically recording the many colour variations. This 'pastime' fitted in nicely with her life on the farm and with her young family. She eventually decided to publish her findings, even funding the book herself when she found that publishers were asking her to extend her research to North America - no less! - in order to appeal to that market.

The illustrated *Colour Cauldron: History and Use of Natural Dyes in Scotland*<sup>vi</sup> came out in 1986. The volume is now out of print and can only be found in libraries and collections worldwide but with its wealth of information and systematic approach of one code for each colour gradation, it continues to inform scientists, researchers and textile experts around the world. For Grierson this is the whole point of recording archaic practices like organic dyeing, not out of some nostalgic yearning for the past but for the purpose of informing future research.

During her master's years in Glasgow, Grierson had come across the writings of Semir Zeki<sup>vii</sup>, a neurobiologist and pioneer in the study of visual perception and neuroesthetics. When reading his early work *A Vision of the Brain*, she learned that the vision captured by the brain is incomplete because of naturally occurring obstructions like our blind spot for instance, and that the brain automatically fills in the missing fragments from previously stored information

to allow us to form a complete and consistent perception of our surroundings. This research triggered her interest in how our own background and conditioning influence the way we see the world around us.

Behind her in-depth study of natural dyes and her later approach to digital imagery lies Grierson's profound need to understand how things work, whether it is how colours are transferred from plants to wool or how the brain processes visual information.

She was therefore fascinated to discover that the brain does alter colours as Zeki explains:

“When we open our eyes at dawn or at dusk and look at leaves, we will see them as green, even though under these conditions they might reflect more long-wave (red) light. We cannot over-ride the brain-organizing principle, which creates constant colors in spite of large variations in the wavelength-energy composition of the light reflected from surfaces. We cannot, in brief, choose to see a green leaf that we know, through objective measurement, to be reflecting more red light as red. There is no free will here!”<sup>viii</sup>

It is precisely this lack of free will that Grierson challenges with her images when she manipulates the landscape with consummate digital artifice to piece together the elusive actual vision and reclaim it from the brain determinist override. This is not done with the intention to teach us, the viewers, how the brain works but rather to alert us to the fact that what we see could well be pure fabrication, an illusion engineered by the brain.

Grierson's digital deconstruction and reconstruction of the landscape rely on her thorough knowledge and observation of her environment, what humanist geographer Yi-Fu Tuan describes as the “intimate experience of place” that, in their desire to share it more effectively with others, artists translate into universal visual symbols, as he explains

“Languages differ in their capacity to articulate areas of experience. Pictorial art and rituals supplement language by depicting areas of experience that words fail to frame [...]. Art makes images of feeling so that feeling is accessible to contemplation and thought.”<sup>ix</sup>

In the same way that the motifs in Grierson's landscapes speak to viewers of the natural world around her, her coded system of the dyeing properties of Scottish plants also provides invaluable information to a wide community of makers and scientists.

This same socially motivated desire to connect people and places together is evident in *Marking Time*, an ongoing series she started in 1992. Here Grierson has put together a database of painted marks found on trees in Scotland and abroad. These glyphs that had been drawn initially for social or functional purposes, through her art become a form of language fascinating in its geographical range and similarities.

While making *Catch*, Grierson found she had to adopt a new way of working. The complexity of the software that operates the twenty two screens necessitates training and resources that are simply beyond most freelance artists' reach and remit, and therefore, the production of Wave specific videos relies on teamwork between the artists and the technician.

The artists create a series of videos and a written programming outline on their home computers and pass it on to the technician whose task it is, ultimately, to deliver the artists' vision. These various stages necessarily have an impact on the work and Grierson's solution was to aim for visual simplicity. The ancillary effects of such sophisticated video processes are many. They bring great visual impact but also impose restrictions on artistic choices that can in turn inspire new creative paths.

For digital media artists, having to "let go", in Grierson's words, is a recurring feeling they experience on many levels whether it is when working with others or when having to deal with equipment constraints, failure or discontinuity . Today's state-of-the-art electronic equipment will eventually become tomorrow's throwaway and as a result, much digital work gets discarded like Grierson's early experimental works with colour that are no longer available or even significant today as the technological challenges that prompted them in the mid 1990s have long been superseded.

Another contretemps brought about by technological advances rests in the necessity for the host institution to transfer and archive the works in their care before they become unreadable. The risk is that eventually they too have to let go of them as conservation costs become untenable.

This was the case of *Aerial Roots*, an Archive Live award commissioned by Scottish Screen in 2007, the same year she made *Catch*, where the original Flash driven website can no longer be sustained. For this work, she had paired selected footage from their agricultural archives with her own videos of contemporary farming practices to produce a unique synthesis of bygone and contemporary customs. While the video itself is still available, the wider project remains only as a simple web presence<sup>x</sup> and its lifespan is now very limited. The work will eventually be lost to future audiences.

We see here the temporal paradox of the digital medium, that technological advancement means greater access to the past but equally its ephemeral nature also means loss of data.

For *Catch* Grierson decided to make use of the cumulative quality of the twenty two screens and created a sequence of short tableaux all originally filmed in the landscape and digitally manipulated, each bathed in vibrant hues of shimmering gold, deep rose pink or fluid green, highly seductive in an eye candy fashion. So while we are allowing ourselves to be seduced by their superficial beauty, Grierson is really pointing out the frivolity of our engagement with the natural environment. This message is bolstered by the superimposition of commonly known phrases gleaned from the Bible or Antiquity, like *a mote in the eye*<sup>xi</sup> and *where beauty lies*<sup>xii</sup> over the images and across the screens.

This juxtaposition of text and image is a recurring trope in Grierson's work that is linked to her ongoing research into how the brain functions as she frequently experiments with various modes of representation to test if the visual impact of a text works as effectively as its meaning:

“Text can be a catalyst that directs towards new or obscure meaning, it can intensify the ‘experience’ of the work, it can be poetic or it can actively engage the brain with reason at the same time as the visual cortex is activated by the image.”<sup>xiii</sup>

In this context as each piece of text only lasts a few seconds on the row of screens, Grierson is making the most of the temporal feature of the medium to stop the Concert Hall visitors in their track and make them think about what they are seeing, and how the text relates to the image.

Throughout her practice Grierson has been using colour in the landscape to great dramatic effect. *Eyeshine* (2000) is one striking example where she photographed large industrial sites in rural locations in Scotland and Northern Europe to create panoramic prints, some over three metres long, that expose the brutal incongruity of the processing plants. Their spewing chimneys set against vast skies saturated with deep colours selected for their aesthetic quality, evoke the seduction that this industry exercises upon us. Emanating from the digital palette rather than from nature, these colours are both beguiling and threatening as they speak of the destructive nature of our dependency on non-renewable energy. The overwhelming feeling of power and awe alludes to the grandiose nineteenth century landscapes favoured by the Romantics in search of the Sublime, only here in *Eyeshine* they expose the unrelenting exploitation of Nature by Man.

Grierson explains that ‘eyeshine’ stands for

“the Australian name for the golden glint of a crocodile’s eyes when caught in the night-time beam of the hunter’s lamp”.<sup>xiv</sup>

Here again we recognise her fascination with vision and the eye as well as her engagement with ecological concerns. The special feature in their eyes that gives nocturnal creatures superior night vision and allows them to hunt by night and thrive, is also their downfall as it makes them easy prey in the dark. Here is an apt metaphor for the self-destructive behaviour that characterises our relationship with the natural environment.

*Un-erased landscape* (2003) makes another trenchant point about this relationship. For this piece Grierson retrieved some unwanted footage from erasure and working from the digital data that no longer resembled the



landscape, she transformed its flickering remains into a still image, a dense patchwork of geometric patterns. This is another unequivocal warning of the irreversible damage we are inflicting on nature.

This series was shown in the group exhibition 'Touch Down' that Grierson curated in 2003 in Sweden. Having her base in rural Scotland has never meant isolation or disengagement from the wider art scene for her and 'Touch Down' is one of many projects that have taken her out of her rural studio and abroad.

In 2001 Grierson visited Lithuania and was inspired by the resolve of the artists she met to overcome their difficult circumstances and build international connections. These encounters prompted her to initiate a series of reciprocal exchanges where artists from abroad would come and stay with her and meet other artists based in Scotland and exhibit. This ongoing rhizomic project called 'Looklook' has now spread wide and far but still operates on the same principles of reciprocity and goodwill. Without funding, the artists only pay for their travelling expenses, the project has remained informal and dynamic.

These exchanges organised either through her own initiative or through artist-in-residence programmes, make it possible for her to connect with artists across the globe and are crucial to her practice.

### *Fukushima (2013)*

Grierson's second piece for the Wave is in complete contrast to *Catch* where she engaged with the landscape through digital alteration. In *Fukushima* she uses instead a form of poetic reportage to give an account of the landscape and environment she encountered during a ten-week residency in the Fukushima province in 2013, two years after it was hit by the devastating tsunami of March 2011 and the subsequent nuclear plant meltdown. The project was called 'Spirit of "North"' and brought together Grierson and three other commissioned artists, one local installation artist and two Norwegians, a sculptor and an architect. March can be very cold in northern Japan, she

recorded temperatures down to -5°C in her blog and the snow fall was particularly heavy that year.

Artist residency models vary widely from self-funded schemes to government commissions, the 'Spirit of "North"' project was one of the latter. Funded by the Japan Foundation and by three local organisations, it was initiated by its local participating artist Maruyama Yoshiko who was also its curator. There was at the core of the project a strong sense of local involvement and cooperation as well as a desire to raise people's spirits and although it was ostensibly intended to bring together international artists from the northern hemisphere, 'Spirit of "North"' also endeavoured to reverse the negative perception of the region post 2011 both at home and abroad, and to boost the morale of its inhabitants.

This rationale is consistent with the broad purpose of residencies which is to benefit both the artists and the host institution, the artists by freeing them from everyday concerns to focus on their work and the host institution by supporting communities that are deemed in need of healing.

Grierson and her fellow artists visited several locations across the province. She was even taken on one occasion within the 10 km zone which is normally beyond the reach of outsiders.

She was driven around these now unoccupied areas where she was able to see for herself and take photographs and footage of the empty houses and abandoned vehicles:

*"The ghost towns with their traffic lights still working are an eerie and disturbing sight especially in near blizzard conditions."<sup>xv</sup>*

In this stricken environment, Grierson for once was not witnessing and reporting Man's destruction of the environment but the full force of Nature's devastating effect on Man.

The artists' simple brief was to engage with local people and local issues. Grierson made the most of her privileged access by filming, taking photographs and by talking to as many people as she could, refugees and locals alike, trying to overcome the language barrier with the help of local translators, all to get a sense of the impact the disaster still had on the community.

The correlation between the residency circumstances and Grierson's sense of place and rootedness is plain to see, for here she had the opportunity to engage with a population of some 300,000 survivors who had left their homes and life-long memories to relocate miles away in temporary accommodation and unfamiliar territory. They were given a space but it did not feel like home, it did not have a sense of place or identity. Where were they staying, what impact did this have on families, how did the older generations cope? Other perceptive observations delved into the way refugees spent their compensation money and with what consequences for them and the community.

These social issues are all associated with relational art and with the work of Tuan and Relph on the concept of place or the familiar, the local, the repository of our memories, of who we are.

Her decision to write a blog to inform her readers back home and elsewhere underlines the socially motivated side of her practice with the sharing of the information she was privileged to witness. In her introduction she states her intention of using the Horsecross Arts video "as a way of linking Fukushima and Perth". She certainly achieved this, not only with *Fukushima* but also with the visit to Scotland she organised in 2014 as part of 'Looklook' for Maruyama Yoshiko, the Fukushima based artist and curator of 'Spirit of "North"', who was able to show her work and make contact with Scottish based artists.

Grierson is very well acquainted with Japan having visited it seven times. She has many Japanese friends and enjoys working there. She has hosted reciprocal visits and fostered exchanges and dialogue between Scotland and Japan on many occasions.

She feels that art projects are less prescribed in Japan than in the UK where they are almost always focused on outcomes whereas in Japan, what you learn along the way is just as important, if not more so, than the end result. This looser approach again requires a certain release of control on her part, corroborated also by language difficulties and cultural differences. She has to

adapt and again just “let go of it”, the same feeling she experiences in the context of digital media drawbacks.

It seems that by “letting go” Grierson is able to open fresh creative paths and when finding herself removed from her familiar surroundings, she is also able to connect with a primordial perception of space that precedes her personal experience of place. This sense of displacement fosters renewed awareness not only of the Self but also of the Other, which is after all one of the objectives of residencies.

Having observed previously the way the Concert Hall public engages with *Catch*, Grierson decided for *Fukushima* to make full use of the linear quality of the Wave and to plan her composition so that the whole installation would be perceived as one long image rather than a fragmented one. For this reason, Grierson feels that *Fukushima* is the more successful of the two works. This linear and rolling approach also suited her experience of the residency and the feel of travel and reportage of the work.

Always bearing in mind the configuration of the twenty two screens, she filmed while looking sideways from a train or straight ahead from a car and selected her sideways shots to include some horizontal element like a fence. She timed the road shots when they were empty. With careful framing, all this ensured that the landscape would be seen as a continuous line when viewed across the full length of the twenty two screens.

These long shots are particularly effective as heavy snow has flattened the land and few details deter the eye from wandering into the far distance. Without its distinctive features the landscape acquires a generic quality. Place becomes space and time stands still. This is emphasized by the almost monochrome palette that allows few subtle touches of colour, the opposite of *Catch*. This sober approach is in total harmony with the sombre mood of the piece. The same long shots also afford the viewers a way into the landscape as perspective gives it a temporal dimension as Tuan expresses so vividly:

“Under the influence of landscape pictures, painted or captured by the camera, we learn to organize visual elements into a dramatic spatio-temporal structure.

When we look at a country scene we almost automatically arrange its components so that they are disposed around the road that disappears into the distant horizon. Again, almost automatically we imagine ourselves travelling down that road; its converging borders are like an arrow pointing to the horizon, which is our destination and future.”<sup>xvi</sup>

In *Catch* Grierson extracted the essence of place through digital processes to make the familiar abstract and spatial and similarly in *Fukushima*, the vast and nondescript snow landscape becomes space. In both works she provides us with a canvas that we can make our own.

Other moving shots are filmed from a still position like the view of the traditional Japanese building over which Grierson superimposed footage of people coming and going. She has faded the figures until they appear to us like ghosts, their evanescence and restlessness a poignant reminder of the tragedy that happened here.

Another almost static shot lingers over a wave-breaking structure made of concrete lattice. It is filled with water with just a hint of surface movement. The allusion to the devastating events here is all the more powerful for its restraint.

In amongst those continuous shots, there is one dramatic hiatus when we are suddenly confronted by twenty two different frames for just a few seconds. These are stills of abandoned houses and vehicles from the disaster areas. There are too many to take in. They strike the viewers with great force. The disruption is overwhelming.

The only text in this work is its full title *Travelling through Fukushima Province on the 2<sup>nd</sup> anniversary of the 3/11 disaster* which appears once and is repeated twenty two times on each of the screens in white against a black background. And indeed in *Fukushima* the images alone speak for themselves.

*Fukushima* lasts just over 12 minutes. Its smooth and aesthetic composition and its poignant subject matter combine to hold our attention throughout.

It would be hard to imagine Su Grierson's works today devoid of the landscape and we can only speculate as to how her practice would have evolved if she had carried on working in Glasgow with abstract colour-field videos instead of making her studio at home, at the heart of the countryside.

For her the landscape is not simply an object of aesthetic wonderment and an inspiration, it is also a means of continual ontological enquiry that allows her to probe wider issues of place and identity. Through shared experience of nature and the environment she is able to connect with others near and far, and with her chosen medium of digital video and photography she can transform the landscape to explore space and time.

Throughout her practice, Grierson has expressed her need to 'make sense of things' through experimentation and by setting herself new challenges and her next project shows that this yearning is as strong today as ever before. She has just received an award from Creative Scotland to explore movement within the landscape with performer Brigid McCarthy. This exciting cross-platform project 'Track and Trace' is experimental and may even involve some innovative role reversal between the two protagonists.

*Martine Foltier Pugh 2015*

## Acknowledgements

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## Endnotes

<sup>i</sup> Relph, E. *Place and Placelessness* (1976), Pion (London) p8

<sup>ii</sup> Relph, E. *ibid*, p1

<sup>iii</sup> Bourriaud, N, *Relational Aesthetics* (2002), *Les Presses du Réel* (Dijon) p113

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<sup>iv</sup> Su Grierson on 'Slice', a 2004 installation, in *[Intersections]*, a book accompanying the Horsecross Arts exhibition of her works since 2000 (2013) p20.

<sup>v</sup> *[Intersections]*, ibid p30

<sup>vi</sup> Grierson, Su *The Colour Cauldron – History and Use of Natural Dyes in Scotland* (1986), McPherson Ltd (Angus)

<sup>vii</sup> Semir Zeki is a British neurobiologist and a professor of Neuroesthetics at the University College of London.

<sup>viii</sup> Zeki, S, *Splendors and Miseries of the Brain. Love, Creativity, and the Quest for Human Happiness* (2009), Wiley-Blackwell (Chichester), Cha 3 'Inherited Brain Concepts' p26.

<sup>ix</sup> Tuan YF *Space & Place*, pdf online publication, cha 10, p147  
<http://danm.ucsc.edu/~dustin/library/tuan%20space%20and%20place.pdf>

<sup>x</sup> 'Aerial Roots' is available at <http://www.sugrierson.com/aerial.htm>

<sup>xi</sup> "Why do you see the speck that is in your brother's eye, but do not notice the log that is in your own eye?"  
Matthieu 7:3

<sup>xii</sup> "Beauty lies in the eyes of the beholder", a paraphrase of a quote by Plato.

<sup>xiii</sup> Quote from *Text Works* in *[Intersections]* p34

<sup>xiv</sup> Quote from *Eyeshine* in *[Intersections]* p2

<sup>xv</sup> extract from Su Grierson's blog 'Fukushima Province' available at  
[https://ecoartscotland.files.wordpress.com/2013/04/su\\_grierson\\_corresponding\\_from\\_fukushima\\_province\\_japan\\_hi\\_res.pdf](https://ecoartscotland.files.wordpress.com/2013/04/su_grierson_corresponding_from_fukushima_province_japan_hi_res.pdf)

<sup>xvi</sup> Tuan YF *ibid*, cha 9, p123