

## *Locative and Performative*

Sue Thomas  
Professor of New Media  
School of Media and Cultural Production  
Faculty of Humanities  
De Montfort University  
The Gateway, Leicester  
LE1 9BH  
United Kingdom  
Tel: +44 (0)116 207 8266  
sue.thomas@dmu.ac.uk  
<http://www.hum.dmu.ac.uk/~sthomas/>

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### ***Abstract***

### ***Introduction***

When envisioned as a special issue for *LEA*, “Wild Nature and the Digital Life” called for art and nature collaborations; single author works on embodiment theory, telematics and consciousness, natural magic and spirituality; and explorations of any type into connectedness studies, emergence studies, anthropology and social networks, and ecology and the environment — particularly those that combined art and natural history or looked at nature and the digital life from a historical context. In other words, we cast a big net far and wide in the search for unique projects that speak to the ways in which we reconcile and integrate the relationship between wild nature and the digital life; address the part that wild nature plays in our work; look at the ways the functionality of our body in the digital compares with the way it works in the mountains, in the ocean, or other physical spaces; and explore the changes the wired life has brought about to our domestic and professional habitat, how it may have changed our health, or shifted our understanding of ecosystems and of other species on this planet and elsewhere.

Because “wild nature” has traditionally been perceived as the preserve of the physical world and may seem to have little to do with the abstract spaces of the digital, the questions we asked in the Call for Papers were intended to problematize this assumption. For example, we asked: What can be described as wild nature at a time when much of the earth’s land is being annexed by cities, brought into production, and turned into tourist meccas or eco-excursions? How are humans reinventing “the wild” digitally? What is the relationship between humans and wild nature, and has it changed with the advent of computer technology? Is the notion of wild nature limited to the physical world, and if not, then where else can we find it? How do those who are most immersed in the digital integrate it with the physical?

While naturally we encouraged critical and academic responses to these questions, we equally invited both the wide-angle view and the intimate by asking for personal essays, interviews, reports, other genres of writing, and art.

Obviously the expansive nature of our call worked: Over 50 works of poetry, electronic writing, digital art, animation, academic research, and personal essays were submitted. Of these, 10 were selected for the special issue. Still a robust number, particularly in light of the computer intensive graphics many of them include, 10 made it obvious that a double-themed issue was needed. Interestingly, without any agenda or preconceived notion of what the final “product” should look like, we found that the essays, images, sound projects, and animations chosen through the rigorous peer review process set forth by *LEA* fell into two thematic threads.

The first section of the double special issue of Wild Nature and the Digital Life consisted of five works exploring a range of issues relating to the “Emergent and Generative” in nature, the digital, and art. This section features essays and art that are “Performative and Locative” in scope.

### ***Performative and Locative***

We ended our introduction to “Emergent and Generative” with the question: Why is it important to consider wild nature and the digital life? We proposed that doing so provides not only new ways of thinking about our physical environment and the systems that shape and emanate from it or new ways to create and envision art but also new insights *beyond* those entailing what it means to be human. Volume 2 returns the focus to the human and interrogates our experiences of ourselves as the other in landscapes that are at once both familiar and strange.

Adam Gussow’s “Kudzu Running: Pastoral Pleasures, Wilderness Terrors, and Wrist-Mounted Technologies in Small-Town Mississippi” [1] explores the moment when, during what was intended to be a 30 minute jog on Thacker Mountain, the author realizes he is lost. His foot-pod-based accelerometer records how far and how fast he is moving, but he has left behind the GPS unit, which would have told him his location. Fearfully, without his usual assistive technologies to rely upon, he contemplates his situation: ‘I have, for all practical purposes, disappeared. I’m off the grid. The jungle is closing in. If by some chance I actually did step on a cottonmouth and get bitten, I would die. I’m working that close to the edge right now. How did this happen?’

On a larger scale, in “Mapping the Disaster: Global Prediction and the Medium of ‘Digital Earth’”, [2] Kathryn Yusoff reports on the GIS modelling technologies being used to predict and report natural and human-induced disasters. Assembled from many different sets of data, the resulting concept of ‘Digital Earth’ provides a theatre where digital life and wild nature collide. Indeed, the application of such models has, she argues, given rise to unexpected emergent properties known as ‘wild data’, which themselves influence an ever-evolving ‘continuous organism of change, adjustment and reconfiguration’.

This technological scenario of continually deposited layers of information working alongside the changing body of the physical planet makes an appropriate counterpoint to Jeremy Hight’s “Views from Above: Locative Narrative and the Landscape” [3] that proposes “with the advent of locative narrative, it is now possible to not only augment physical locations with digital information, but to allow the places to be ‘read’”. Hight’s essay is a very personal view of the artist’s relationship to place as mediated by GPS technologies and draws upon his 2002 collaboration with Jeff Knowlton and Naomi Spellman, the locative media work “34 North 118 West”, set in the city of Los Angeles. He writes of the realization that ‘narrative could be composed not of selected details to establish tone and sense of place, but could be of actual physical places, objects and buildings. It was as though the typewriter or computer keyboard had fused with fields, walls, streetlights; the tool set was suddenly of both the textual world and the physical world.’

For the final piece we have chosen Brett Stalbaum’s “Paradigmatic Performance: data flow and practice in the Wild” [5]. Stalbaum’s work incorporates many of the areas discussed in this volume. He uses real-time data

modelling to explore ‘the intersection of data and the real via artist made technologies, with the goal of generating new configurations of exploration at time when it may be assumed that the Earth is already thoroughly explored. His projects are intensely physical, involving many miles of walking to predetermined coordinates where he collects samples of local soil and deposits geo-referenced resin tiles. The data are then processed by Paula Poole, who creates paintings with the soils and exhibits them alongside photographs of their sites of origin.

Stalbaum’s closing statement also expresses the philosophy behind this two-volume collection of works and essays about Wild Nature and the Digital Life:

“As artists, we seek to explore the mediation of the real by this relatively new regime of active digital representational forces, because these are now embedded parts of our socially distributed cognition, and constitute a significant, somewhat unexplored, and generative aspect of our wild nature. As artists, it is our job to discover what these paradigmatic forces can be made to do (including that which was not originally intended), and more importantly what these forces *might make us do* in configurations of paradigmatic performance.”

This double issue challenges those who have found themselves looking ever more frequently toward their screens and ever less often toward the uncertainties of Nature to remember that the world is still out there, messy, dangerous and unpredictable. We hope it is a provocation to view life in the digital not as a means to escape the wild, but to engage with it ever more profoundly.

### ***References and Notes***

1. A. Gussow, *Kudzu Running: Pastoral Pleasures, Wilderness Terrors, and Wrist-Mounted Technologies in Small-Town Mississippi*, Manuscript (2005).
2. K. Yusoff, *Mapping the Disaster: Global Prediction and the Medium of ‘Digital Earth’*, Manuscript (2005).
3. J. Hight, *Views from Above: Locative Narrative and the Landscape*, Manuscript (2005).
4. E. Giaccardi, H. Eden, and G. Sabena, *The Affective Geography of Silence — Towards a Museum of Natural Quiet*, Manuscript. 2005.
5. B. Stalbaum, *Paradigmatic Performance: Data Flow and Practice in the Wild*, Manuscript (2005).

### ***Author Biography***

SUE THOMAS is Professor of New Media in the Faculty of Humanities at De Montfort University (DMU), and an Associate Fellow of DMU's new Institute of Creative Technologies. She founded the trAce Online Writing Centre in 1995 where she was Artistic Director until going to De Montfort in January 2005. Her books include the novels *Correspondence* (short-listed for the Arthur C. Clarke Award for Best Science Fiction Novel 1992) and *Water* (1994), and an edited anthology *Wild Women: Contemporary Short Stories By Women Celebrating Women* (1994). Her non-fiction includes *Creative Writing: A Handbook For Workshop Leaders* (1995) and most recently *Hello World: travels in virtuality* (2004). She has published extensively in both print and online, and has initiated numerous online writing projects including *The Noon Quilt*, now an iconic image of the early days of the web. With Kate Pullinger she is launching a new online M.A. in Creative Writing and New Media at DMU, due to begin teaching Autumn 2006. Her most recent projects include NLab, a Narrative Laboratory for the Creative Industries — a series of seminars and a day conference for 2006, and Writing and the Digital Life, a blog and listserv about the impact of technology upon writing and lived experience. Her research interests include transliteracy and narratives of digital experience, and she is currently writing *The Wild Surmise*, a study of nature and cyberspace.

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*“... the highbrow hot spot of cyberspace ... a digital bible for the lowdown on the [hi-tech] art scene.” –Wired*

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Established in 1993, Leonardo Electronic Almanac is, jointly produced by Leonardo, the International Society for the Arts, Sciences and Technology (ISAST), and published by MIT Press, is an electronic journal dedicated to providing a forum for those who are interested in the realm where art, science and technology converge. For over a decade, LEA has thrived as an *international peer reviewed electronic journal* and web archive covering the interaction of the arts, sciences, and technology. LEA emphasizes rapid publication of recent work and critical discussion on topics of current excitement with a slant on shorter, less academic texts. Many contributors are younger scholars, artists, scientists, educators and developers of new technological resources in the media arts.

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- :: Artificial Ecologies: Second Nature Emergent Phenomena in Constructed Digital - Natural Assemblages - *Peter Hasdell*
- :: Butterfly Effects: Synthesis, Emergence, and Transduction - *Tara Rodgers*
- :: Digital Behaviors and Generative Music - *Dave Burraston and Andrew Martin*
- :: Bodies in Biotechnology: Embodied Models for Understanding Biotechnology in Contemporary Art - *Jennifer Willet*

#### **Locative and Performative**

- :: Kudzu Running: Pastoral Pleasures, Wilderness Terrors, and Wrist-Mounted Technologies in Small-Town Mississippi - *Adam Gussow*
- :: Mapping the Disaster: Global Prediction and the Medium of 'Digital Earth' - *Dr. Kathryn Yusoff*
- :: Views From Above: Locative Narrative and the Landscape - *Jeremy Hight*
- :: Paradigmatic Performance: Data Flow and Practice in the Wild - *Brett Stalbaum*

### **Wild Nature and the Digital Life Gallery**

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- :: Future Nature - *Karl Grimes*
- :: The Affective Geography of Silence - Towards a Museum of Natural Quiet - *Elisa Giaccardi, Hal Eden and Gianluca Sabena*

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