Postdigital Place-Mixing in the Wild City by Jo Scott

Preamble: The Wild City

This city is wild.

Not in the ways you might immediately imagine, though those are there too…wild, code breaking, 'free-will' asserting, spontaneous human acts.

There are also the wild processes that ferociously destroy and re-shape the lived environment. The vertiginous lift towers, looming moodily into the sky to indicate another space of development. The cranes and cranes and cranes, loping above us. The churning lorries and HGVs carving up the streets. Of course, these are human processes, made up by us, dreamed and designed by us and built by us, but somehow, it all feels a little beyond what we have control of – more like what Jack Turner calls the 'ceaseless process of the ever new, the generative power of autonomous processes and self-organisation' (2013: 49).

Perhaps it is understandable to feel this sense of edgy unsettled fervour in the face of mass redevelopment – that which is out of control, that which is beyond. Michael Taussig describes wildness as 'the spirit of the unknown and the disorderly, loose in the forest encircling the city and sown land' (1987: 289). No longer encircling the city – its wild and ferocious energy emanates from within, arises from the pavements, coalesces and releases in the swirling air around the lift shaft, the low ominous groan of the machinery, the slap of mud and grit.

And yet…here and now, that wildness – the ferocious hunt for capital and the scraping of pockets of land to find it – is somehow distant. Here, on the litter-strewn streets, with the overflow of human life, everything remains the same. The tendrils of that pioneer spirit, breaking ground again and again, recede into boarded up buildings and overflowing bins. A different wildness here then.

Different again, those wild, green spaces, sunk by the river, lost in self-contemplation, echoing with ghosts of human activity, while sloughing off the past to revel in the rich processes of the present – growth, renewal, decay and ceaseless activity. Not the countryside, not the park, not the escape from the city or the ordering of nature, but wild spaces, where nature has us in its grip, reclaiming just a slice of what the ground-scraping automatons have left behind.

And between these spaces sits an entanglement of wild energies and forces, not battling, but intermingling and sparking and restlessly unsettling. Taussig claims that wildness 'challenges the unity of the symbol', that it 'pries open this unity and in its place creates slippage and a grinding articulation between signifier and signified.' He claims wildness as 'the death space of signification' (1987: 219).

Here, in the wild city – the city of wild and unfettered development, the city of overflowing waste and burning buildings and smashed windows, the city of sharp green Spring growth and the majestic overrunning of ivy and balsam and buddleia and all those inimitable plants that just *grow*. Here, there is no 'unity' of the symbol. It has been pried and forced and nail-splittingly heaved open - the city grinds against itself, failing articulation, failing in representation and exploding in its own ongoing, ceaselessness. It doesn't mean anything, it doesn't say anything – it is the 'death space' of signification.

Introduction

The preamble above evokes feelings and shapes of wildness that I connect with the experience of living in a city now. The preamble text 'walks before' this chapter in order to offer a flavour of the 'wild city' and the different ways it manifests, grows and re-shapes itself, through a range of human and non-human processes. It also insinuates itself into the arguments and practices

offered below – an insistent growth in and through the forming of my thoughts about the work I am making in this area. These are ideas I am writing with and there is an instability inherent in that act – particularly the wish for the wild ideas to flow through and interrupt the neatly serried ranks of letters on the page. This connects to Kendrick and Shyldkrot's opening question as to how voices manifest through writing in their chapter. Their roaming voices at large feel like wild forces such as those characterised above, escaping confinement and singular form, making insistent incursions into our thoughts, our ears, our imaginations, 'always already there' and ready to 'burst through'.

This chapter offers an account of practices that I have come to think of as 'place-mixing' in wild urban landscapes. These practices have a relationship with wildness – the wildness of the city, nature and the digital processes that underpin and inform how they are made. They also have an oppositional tinge or flavour, if not a particular force or intent. They are made in a questioning way – a way that queries how the digital device and its computational processes meet the processes of the city and those of nature in urban spaces. As such, they sit within an emergent postdigital lineage of practice that attempts to unpick some of the relationships between the material and the digital, the computational and the world it represents and re-shapes. In this writing, I want to open up the processes that constitute postdigital place-mixing and particularly its relationship with the wildness of contemporary urban landscapes.

As part of this opening up of very current making processes, I propose a positioning of this practice that is distinct from place-*making*, particularly when that making is understood as a process 'by which we can shape our public realm in order to maximize shared value' (Project for Public Spaces 2018), with a focus on 'beautifying, cleaning, and regenerating public spaces for promoting development and attracting investment' (Bedoya in Toolis 2017: 186). As Alesia Montgomery points out in her study of 'market-driven place-making' in Detroit, such

practices are aligned with a commercial agenda, through 'increasing commerce and rents in an area by crafting vibrant streetscapes' (2016: 776-777). As outlined below, the various activities of place-making in cities often exceed and counteract such agendas, but their intent is still often about making places better, and not always for current residents. Place-mixing has a different intention and focus. It constitutes a series of encounters with city-places as a 'set of processes, meeting and weaving together at a particular locus' (Massey 1994: 154). The curious, but broadly sceptical approaches to digitally mixing wild elements of that urban landscape are a way of feeling and thinking through those elements in active and interrogative ways – it is a way of finding out. As a practice, place-mixing is longitudinal, speculative, searching – it takes place over time through a series of encounters and crucially, it does not seek to make or re-make the places in question; rather it seeks to discover and to question the forces and processes at play in the wild city.

The chapter also works to engage and combine a number of discourses, mirroring the ways in which the practices in question enact an exploratory mixing of elements to 'rupture, unsettle, animate, and reverberate' (Vannini 2015: 5). The lines of inquiry range through theories of wildness, ideas of place-making and postdigital theory, practice and philosophy, led by a non-representational perspective and interest in relations between these ideas and practices – 'associations, mutual formations, ecologies, constellations, and co-fabrications' (Vannini 2015: 8). Both the writing and the practices seek 'affective resonances' or 'novel reverberations' between materials and movements, feelings and perspectives (12). In this way, the chapter echoes the 'affective resonances' that happen in my repeated encounters with the city as an entanglement of wild energies and forces, meeting and mingling in the vast computational energy and 'reverberations' of a digital device.

Intermedial Practices and Place-Mixing

We begin with the practice – its actions, directions and perspectives. I have been making what I broadly term intermedial practice for the past eight years. Arising from a dissatisfaction with what my body provided in its capacities to perform and create, this dissatisfaction was aligned with a wish to disrupt, outsource, re-direct and re-form creative responses to the world through technological interfaces. I became particularly drawn to using such interfaces to mix a range of materials in real time – video and sound, voice and song, text and object – and the fleeting feelings that this mixing practice generated between the materials, my actions and the technological processes in play. From experimentation with how to mix materials in live events and in conjunction with those present, I then started to explore how these mixes might be employed to respond to particular ideas, contexts and frameworks.

My move to the city of Salford (see Scott 2017) was the catalyst for using these acts of mixing to address place, specifically this new, urban place I had made my home. The practices started to reach out into the city through digital mixing workshops for local residents, fixed media installations, performances and online artworks.[1] Here, sound, song, video and text were combined to offer an unsettled perspective of the contrasts, grafts and uncomfortable counterpoints I experienced in the city between rapid redevelopment and urban decay, between riotous green spaces and the slew of human waste, between the wild imaginings of the future and the echoes of the past – regeneration, tradition, heritage, abandonment.

The practice is inherently restless. Arising primarily from improvised live events, the mixes I make are still formulated through live processes of recording and capturing sound, text, song and image, and are rarely refined or shaped in any meaningful way beyond their mixing in live events or the initial combinations I create on my laptop. This rough, always-forming, never-quite-finished approach to making is led by chasing affects that manifest initially in the

encounter between me, a digital device and a place/subject and then shift, rupture and re-form in the live mix with other materials and actions. This resonates with understanding affects as forces, arising from and passing through various human and non-human forms as 'properties, competencies, modalities, energies, attunements, arrangements and intensities of differing texture, temporality, velocity and spatiality' (Lorimer in Vannini 2015: 5). In relation to this practice, it means understanding feeling, not as something that is experienced by and contained within a singular human form, but as moving forces happening between the various elements in an encounter, mix or 'arrangement'. An example, evoked in the preamble, is walking through a city environment and encountering a void, ready for redevelopment. The space seethes with a strange energy created through both its emptiness and ferocious activity, through its textural carving out of the landscape, the velocity of its happening and the catch of breath in my throat, as I encounter the scale of the lift shaft that has shot up through the lens of a camera phone. As Massumi (2002) characterises, these 'autonomous' forces, escape confinement in individual bodies and emanate within and through particular shifting engagements and arrangements in the world. Crucial to this practice is engaging with affects as forming through active encounters and relations (Spinoza in Thrift 2008) between bodies and things. In the practice of 'place-mixing', these active encounters happen between digital devices, places and bodies, both in the initial meeting of these elements and then 'in the mix' of their reformulation through software and code.

My encounter with contemporary Salford (as referenced above) formed this interest in 'place-mixing' – how the digital-material mixes I was making might speak of and to the city, might find routes through its contradictions, might form a productive encounter with its feelings and materials. In particular, this most recent phase of place-mixing has focused on wild, green city spaces, also known as 'urban wildscapes'. This term describes:

> urban spaces where natural as opposed to human agency appears to be shaping the land, especially where there is spontaneous growth of vegetation through natural succession. Such wildscapes can exist at different scales, from cracks in the pavement, to much more extensive urban landscapes, including woodland, unused allotments, river corridors and derelict or brownfield sites (Jorgensen in Jorgensen and Keenan 2012: 1).

These spaces - exhibiting simultaneously human neglect and non-human abundancy - are dense with meanings and feelings. They are often celebrated and relished, alongside contemporary urban ruins, in writing that revels in their playful, wild and oppositional qualities (Jorgensen and Keenan 2012, Edensor 2005, Farley and Symmons Roberts 2012), particularly the alternative they represent to ordered and homogenised urban places. However, urban wildscapes are also often situated in deprived neighbourhoods, where they can be signs of ruination, poverty and neglect, existing in abandoned, devalued and unloved places. The complexity of these places and what they mean in the broader context of the city is of interest to me as a practitioner and researcher, along with the diverse affects that emerge in and through their material growth and symbolic decay.

This interest is represented in some early place-mixing that focused on a nearby 'urban wildscape' called Kersal Dale (see Scott 2020) and resulted in mixes such as *Sycamore* (2018).[2] The Dale is a lush, green, wild urban woodland, established as a local nature reserve in the wake of landslides in the 1920s that ruined the houses of rich industrialists who had settled there and effectively ended its time as a space of human habitation. My fascination with this place happens at the intersection of the ghosts of its past - in the ruins of grand houses, now

covered in moss, avenues of trees and ornamental ponds gone wild - and its present as a space of riotous green growth. It also happens in the duality of the dale as a peaceful haven in the city and the threat that is associated with wild, urban woodlands of this nature. As Jorgensen and Tylecote (2007) indicate, after a survey of residents' attitudes towards surrounding woodland in Birchwood, Warrington New Town, 'a quarter of those who identified local green and woodland spaces as their favourite places in the locality also said that they would feel unsafe if they were alone in them' (444).

As I articulated in a previous article, the practice 'occupies this 'ambivalent interstice', in its imaginings of the dale's captive past - enacted mainly through text and song - in combination with digital manipulation of the feral present of the woodland, through video mixing.' (Scott 2020). The initial mixes emerged from solitary walks in the dale, where I 'sampled' the environment through capturing video, images and sounds and then re-mixed these with refrains and scraps of layered vocals that were recorded quickly following each walk. The video mix was created in real time, using the software Modul8[3] to manipulate the footage, resulting in intersections between live animation and the footage, as well as 'tiled' images of natural growth in the wildscape that I reflect on below in more detail.

Though many of my place-mixing encounters emerge from urban wildscapes in my immediate vicinity, they also find echoes in the wider contexts of the cityscape (evoked in the preamble) – re-forming, resisting, ceaseless and careless – particularly the ways in which the cities of Manchester and Salford are currently in the throes of mass, corporate redevelopment. This political, social and material process of extensive change sits beyond the abandoned wildscapes of my practices and yet still rears and appears and interrupts the forming and thinking and feeling of the work - an affective echo or strain that passes through its processes and occasionally, as Taussig describes, 'encircles' its making in a more concerted way. This wild

feeling and its 'grinding articulation' are particularly evident in my work in places like the Meadow in East Salford - a teardrop wild green space, existing in a loop of the River Irwell and increasingly overhung and encircled by mass blocks of new development. In this mix,[4] the forces of capital and the processes of nature, the hazy pastel visualisations of the future buildings and the tangled present energies of natural growth and construction work meet uneasily (see below for further analysis of the mix).

At first, I was not engaged critically with the digital processes involved in the making and rather these were experiments in how my pre-existing live mixing practice might meet, explore and interrogate the complexity of an urban wildscape. However, all the work arises from experimentation with digital devices, technologies and interfaces – the mixes are made with phones, cameras, digital sound recorders, loop pedals, samplers and synthesisers. They are mixed with software and they are primarily formed of code. A growing recognition of my lack of awareness and understanding of the functioning of these devices has led to a new thread in the research. I am now engaged in thinking through and in response to the opaque computational processes of such devices in relation to the unknowable, wild, beyond and innumerable processes of city life and natural growth. This understanding of digital networked spaces as wild prompts consideration of how we intersect with the scale and speed of the 'ceaseless process of the ever new' (Turner 2013: 49) that is present in the endless, but minute by minute accretion of content made available to us, through mobile, digital devices.

For me, the 'spirit of the unknown and disorderly' (Taussig 1987: 289) also speaks to the autonomous and hidden processes that happen within my digital devices. As a proponent of the broad tenets that a postdigital perspective offers to an artist working with digital tools (see below), part of my practice is now in the process of turning in on itself, questioning the capacities of its technologies to represent and account for the wildness of the city and also

inquiring as to what is happening between the digital, organic and material processes present in a place-mixing encounter. As evoked by Taussig again, 'wildness is the death space of signification' (1987: 219) and as Jack Halberstam comments in relation to Taussig's characterisations, 'it cannot mean because it has been cast as that which exceeds meaning' (2014: 140). In this sense, exploring a common wild energy that is present within a digital device and a place is not a search for meaning, but a play with what arises at the points and moments when the computational meets the material, where the digital meets the actual. It also has some resonance with the 'itinerant voice at large' referenced by Kendrick and Shyldkrot in their chapter. This relocated, *moving* voice, which emerges from the actor's body in one space, but is simultaneously experienced in close proximity to the audience member in another, through headphones for instance, seems to me to have a wild and roving quality to it that exceeds the conditions of its transferral and exists in motion, at large, challenging 'the unity of the symbol' (Taussig 1987: 219) and occupying spaces between the voice as emanation, as digital process, as breath, as sound wave.

Finally and as referenced above, I have something to say about where this work sits in relation to what might broadly be termed 'place-making practices', a range of activities that often involve an effort to re-form or re-make a place or experience of that place, through material intervention or more ephemeral activity. In finding a positioning for the practice outlined here, I attempt some formulations of what place-making constitutes, how it is currently used and adopted and the ways in which the form and function of place-*mixing* represents a departure from these practices. Examples of the practice in process complete the chapter, accompanied by the thoughts and ideas that constitute a formulation of what postdigital place-mixing is and might be and some conclusions related to productive intersections of digital devices, creative practices and the wild processes of urban places

Discourses of the Digital and Postdigital in Theory and Practice

Postdigital place-mixing, as its name suggests, is a practice that is critically and practically engaged in what it means to be making creatively with digital devices after the advent of the digital, in a context where digital and computational processes are embedded in our lives. As such, the practice aligns with a set of contemporary ideas which attempt to wrestle with this context for making and engage actively in thinking through what it means.

David Berry has written extensively about the functioning of code and software, and the philosophical and practical implications of how we currently use and engage with computation. In his 2011 monograph, *The Philosophy of Software*, he lays out some key ideas about code and software processes that are not just relevant to, but active in my consideration of digital wildness in postdigital place-mixing. Berry describes the affordances of code and software which make them distinct from previous ways of organising and processing the world. He points to the increased 'speed' and 'volume' of computational processes, linking this to the convenient delegation of 'mental processes' to code, which in turn 'instils a greater degree of agency into the technical devices' than would have been previously possible. In addition, he argues that 'networked software' in particular 'encourages a communicative environment of rapidly changing feedback mechanisms that tie humans and non-humans together into new aggregates'. These new aggregates happen when our clicking and browsing combine with an algorithm to collectively decide what we might watch or listen to next, or when our sense of time is aggregated with the digital processes of a device, which might suggest when we set our alarm, how long it should take to walk to our chosen destination, or automatically remind us of memories that have drifted out of view. Finally, Berry points out that there is a now a greater use of 'embedded and quasi-visible technologies' (Berry 2011: 2) due to the fact that

computational devices have ‘an internal state which is generally withheld from view and is often referred to as a ‘black box’, indicating that it is opaque to the outside viewer’ (15).

Each of these distinctions is of interest to me, as a postdigital place-mixer and non-expert, who is not versed in the language of coding and who therefore interacts with technologies (as most of us do) through their ‘visible’ properties - interfaces, apps and the surfaces of devices. The lack of expertise is important, as it offers a flavour to the critical, exploratory and speculative practices, which is imbued with what Berry and Dieter call ‘agnosis’, a postdigital condition whereby ‘computation facilitates a systemic production and maintenance of ignorance’ and, in turn, directs us towards ‘passive trust in widely delegated, yet obfuscated actions’ (2015: 5). These practices work *from* that ignorance as a productive starting point for intersecting with computation, allowing the ignorance to be a leading, pushing, probing factor of the work that disrupts, if not reveals those ‘obfuscated actions’. This strand of my practice acknowledges that there is something to critically engage with - to encounter in a questioning way - in relation to the invisible functioning of code and software. With regard to the ‘agencies’ of the devices with which I work, the aggregates that are formed between us and the embedded and only barely visible nature of the computational processes being employed have become part of my place-mixing process (see below), particularly through my efforts to try to understand, if not with more clarity, then certainly with more thought, how those processes meet the places I am mixing and shape my embodied encounters with those places.

This is particularly interesting in relation to Berry’s articulation of software as ‘a tangle, a knot, which ties together the physical and the ephemeral, the material and the ethereal, into a multi-linear ensemble that can be controlled and directed’ (2011: 3). The querying and indeed the practising of different modes of direction and control in the practice is a core part

of place-mixing, particularly when the practice offers a space for considering those controls and directions within the creative output itself. For example, in my recent wanderings in Kersal Dale, I deliberately experimented with disrupting the flow of a smoothly panned digital image. The panning function on a phone camera allows for an unusually wide image of a landscape to be captured, through moving the phone smoothly and horizontally across the area you want to record. The simple control mechanism that the phone enacts is to direct you to keep the image even with a kind of digital spirit level on screen that you can follow as you pan and an instruction to 'slow down' when the phone cannot capture the panned imaged at the speed you are moving the camera. Through counteracting these instructions and erratically moving the phone around at various speeds and in a number of directions during the pan, a number of sometimes quite beautiful digital glitches appear (see Figure 1)

Figure 1 here: Glitched digital images of a wildscape, formed through 'incorrect' panning on an iPhone

Such simple practices are a playful intersection with the affordances and control mechanisms of the computational device. They do not undo or 'hack' those processes, but there is an inherent question about the digital residue, so often hidden in our crisp and clear high definition images, that comes to the fore in the act of creation and its result. Equally, it brings the wild, organic processes of the wildscape into discourse with the computational processes of the device, as I expand on below.

If we accept that 'devices are in a constant stream of data flow and decision-making which may only occasionally feedback to the human user' (Berry 2011: 14), then these practices draw attention to that decision-making and the '*hidden* affordances' (15) of the

device in its processing of experience. As referenced above, this is not quite the 'postdigital hacker attitude of taking systems apart and using them in ways which subvert the original intention of the design' (Cramer 2015: 20). Rather, I find methods and ways of working with the computational device (from a position of ignorance) that interrogate the visible workings on the surface, putting these into a playful mix with the visible, material surfaces of the places in question. Perhaps this is akin to 'challeng[ing] the unity' (Taussig 1987: 219) and smooth impenetrability of digital images, prying them open a little, so underlying processes are brought to the fore. It also links to Kendrick and Shyldkrot's discussion of 'voice-as-glitch' and particularly the precarity this induces, troubling 'the apparent fixity of theatre's acoustic ecology'. Kendrick and Shyldkrot explore glitches as 'intentional interventions in the aural sphere' that can 'resist, unsettle or problematise different structures of power'. In a similar way, I induce glitching in my image-making to make more porous the relationships between the processes I encounter and the digital processes of 'capturing' the natural world.

This deliberate 'unsettling' is also enacted in a mode of digitally 'tiling' natural environments that has emerged in my mixing of wild green spaces (see Figure 2)

Figure 2 here: 'Tiled' images of wild, green spaces (captured from video footage)

Again, this has involved engaging actively with a digitally enabled process of mixing an image or video, which is offered by my VJ-ing software, where images can be duplicated, 'tiled' and repositioned on the screen, so that they appear kaleidoscopic. In the video versions of these kaleidoscopes (see *Sycamore* (2018)), the images retain the breath of the natural energy of the landscape – wind moving the branch of a tree, sun darkening the shadow of the undergrowth - but that process is mathematically and precisely reformulated in the tiled version, so that

something of the growth, movement and materiality of the natural landscape is trapped in its digital form, existing uncomfortably and sometimes strikingly in conjunction with its computational re-processing. My fascination with these digitally patterned images of natural growth - which has its own distinct patterns and formulations - sits precisely at the intersection of the diverse processes in play and some of the uncomfortable grafts between them. These uneasy intersections are always present in the numerical code underpinning digital images, but often hidden, and are deliberately brought to the fore in this mixing process and in the glitched images discussed above.

Through such methods, a postdigital mixing practice emerges. Like computation itself - often conceived as ephemeral, outside or in opposition to materiality – the practice is actually 'experiential, spatial and materialized in its implementation, embedded within the environment and embodied, part of the texture of life itself but also upon and even within the body' (Berry and Dieter 2015: 3). Such practices aim to playfully mix and graft together the digital and the material, the organic and computational. However, underlying the creative play, sits a questioning of and unease with a world formed through digital-material intersections and modes of representation, particularly the hidden and coded forms of direction and control these involve.

This links place-mixing to an emergent lineage of postdigital art, including the work of Ingrid Burrington, who engages in practices that reveal the materiality of the internet, in projects such as *Networks of New York* (2014-16), described as 'a field guide to finding the internet on the streets of Manhattan', through documenting 'different signs of buried network infrastructure and easily overlooked network objects' (lifewinning n.d.). On the other hand, exposure and visibility, as practised through surveillance in various different digital forms, is a concern for Trevor Paglen. He 'make[s] visible the workings of the modern-day surveillance

system', through diving into the oceans to photograph 'choke points', where 'clusters of fibre-optic cables connect the continents to each other' and which are therefore the 'places that the NSA [National Security Agency][5] taps for access to international communications data'. Here, as Paglen outlines 'you are able to surveil a tremendous amount of the internet because you put a tap on the bottlenecks and everything's got to go through it'. Through photographing these 'choke points', Paglen points to the material places where the more abstract processes of 'dataveillance'[6] happen. He describes this photographic practice, in an echo of Burrington's concerns, as part of an effort to reveal that 'infrastructures of power always inhabit the surface of the earth somehow, or the sky above the earth. They're material things' (Paglen in Jobey, 2015). In another manifestation of what could be considered postdigital practice, the Critical Engineering manifesto claims 'Engineering to be the most transformative language of our time, shaping the way we move, communicate and think', outlining that 'It is the work of the Critical Engineer to study and exploit this language, exposing its influence' and the 'inner workings' of technologies, as well as looking beyond the 'awe of implementation' to determine methods of influence and their specific effects' (Oliver, Savicic and Vasiliev 2011)

All these practices are in a dynamic relationship with what is visible and over-exposed in our world through the functioning of contemporary digital technologies, as well as the 'self-surveillance' many of us practise through the sharing and imprinting of our lives in digital networked spaces. On the flip side, there is also a consistently critical relationship with what is hidden, what escapes us, what sits beneath our attention and indeed what is so deliberately complex as to escape comprehension in our interactions with digital code and technologies and where those technologies materially exist in the world. Samuel Arbesman argues that 'when faced with such massive complexity, we tend to respond at one of two extremes: either with fear in the face of the unknown, or with a reverential and unquestioning approach to

technology' (2017: 5), with the latter enabled by '*abstraction*' or 'the process of hiding unnecessary details of some part of a system while still retaining the ability to interact with it in a productive way' (23). This consistent hiding or abstracting of the actual and material processes of code and software that are happening at our behest, but also on our behalf and despite us – escaping control and comprehension - constitutes a core element of the 'wildness' of the digital. The burgeoning, ever-renewing space of process is also autonomous and self-willed – a place where signification consistently fails, breaks and falters in the wake of complexity; 'the death space of signification' (Taussig 1987: 219)

In these ways, I connect place-mixing to broadly postdigital approaches, and also perhaps to a postdigital gaze, which is adopted in relation to what is seen within a particular digital encounter with place, as well as what is not seen, but sensed and present within that encounter. Such a gaze is not predicated on seeing through the layers of obfuscation and abstraction referenced above, but on acknowledging this layered and stratified experience in the practice, along with the practices of control laced through my intersection with the visible surface of my digital device. This in turn links back to what is particular to the critical creative practice outlined in this chapter which is the link I form between ideas arising from the digital doings happening in the world and theories of wildness – this particular theoretical graft informs both the making and thinking associated with this work.

Digital Wildness

Wildness, Robert Macfarlane states, can be seen as 'an energy both exemplary and exquisite'; a 'quality of aliveness' or 'self-ablazeness' or 'continuous coming-into-being' to which Chinese *Shan-shui* artists gave the name *zi-ran* (2007: 31). Giving attention to the consistent newness of the natural world – its 'constant and fecund present' (177) - means also seeing wildness 'as

process, something continually at work in the world, something tumultuous, green, joyous' (234).

Conversely, a range of other ideas circulate around the term that have an altogether different and darker flavour. Taussig's evocation, referenced above, is of wildness as an encircling and predatory force, as 'the spirit of the unknown and disorderly', creating spaces of 'slippage' and a 'grinding articulation between signifier and signified' and finally, and most evocatively as creating 'spaces of darkness and light in which objects stare out in their mottled nakedness while signifiers float by' (1987, 219). This conception of wildness arises from Taussig's research into the violence inflicted on indigenous people by colonists in Colombia. Taken up by Jack Halberstam, as part of a reflection on the untimely death of Jose Esteban Muñoz, Halberstam reads Muñoz's writings through Taussig's ideas that 'Colonialism … projects a wildness, a violence, and a savagery onto the other and then seeks to counter the senseless brutality that it imagines inheres to this other order of being with a senseless brutality of its own' (Halberstam 2014: 139). In response, Halberstam transposes the vivid imagery of Taussig's accounts and re-casts wildness as 'a kind of queer-eco-critical endeavor' (2014: 138), specifically connecting these ideas to 'the modes of knowing and unknowing that emerge in the encounter between capital and chaos, privilege and struggle, myth and countermyth … those places of slippage between language and experience and life and death' (147).

It is in the rich confluence of Macfarlane's reflections on wildness as a tumultuous, green and joyous process and Taussig's references to 'grinding articulation' and objects 'staring out in their mottled nakedness' - as well as broader etymological associations with "self–will", meaning that '*wild* indicates autonomy and agency, a will to be, a unique expression of life' (Van Horn 2017: 2) - that real resonance arises with core elements of this research. The wild

tumultuous beyondness of the computational sphere meets the ferocious growth of a pioneer plant in an urban wildscape, pushing aside tarmac and concrete just to be. This in turn hits the ravenous force of urban redevelopment, swooping and sweeping, razing and raising, emanating with a quality of something more than human, in its ferocious formulations and re-shapings of the city.

I see the thread of wildness through the elements of this place-mixing practice, in the edgelands and urban wildscapes referenced above. These are places where human agency is not in charge - the disordered and naturally abundant places that do not exist in pristine separation, but which edge into and intersect with our managed, urban spaces, speaking of something beyond this imposed order – leaning us towards the slippage of the unknown. Also pressed up against us and sinuously entwined in our human doings is the 'network' described by James Bridle as an 'agential soup' (2018: 5) of knowing and unknowing created between us and our technologies. These quick moving, self-willed and expansive technological agencies with which we share our lives are also wild – beyond, unknowable, disorderly and unmanageable. Just look at the two evocations below of sleeping in a meadow and what computation is enacting as we sleep:

> I could hear the ongoing business of the meadow – the shifting of grass stalks, the shy movements of animals and insects – and again I felt a sense of wildness as process' (Macfarlane 2007: 234)

> Networks of machines silently and repetitively exchange data. They monitor, control and assess the world using electronic sensors, updating lists and databases, calculating and recalculating their

models to produce reports, predictions and warnings. (Berry 2011: 1)

The endless business of the meadow and the machines, of natural growth and computation, surrounds us, but often sits beneath our notice, unlike the more brashly evident sweep of the shifting built environment of the wild city, and yet all these processes meet through the notion of something that exists beyond our human capacities, that exceeds and swamps us in distinct ways. Equally, the notion that this quality of wildness exists, not as an opposition to order necessarily, but 'in the encounter between capital and chaos, privilege and struggle, myth and countermyth' (Halberstam 2014: 147) seems to speak strongly of some of the forces in play both in the contemporary city and more broadly in the network forming and developing between human actions and computational processes.

Place-making and Place-mixing

As referenced above, this confluence of forces, energies and activities is also reflected in viewing places themselves as 'processes' (Massey 1994: 155). In encountering and re-mixing the processes happening between places, bodies and digital devices, this practice has connections with place-making activities. Place-making itself is something of a slippery concept. Rethink Urban (2019) - a Canadian company 'dedicated to improving safety, wellbeing and quality of life in communities' - describes it as 'the process through which we work together to shape our public spaces', pointing to 'community-based participation' as being core to this. However, as the brief discussion in the opening of the chapter reveals, such practices can be co-opted for commercial means, as part of 'market-driven place-making' which aims to improve the look and feel of areas, so that they become more economically

valuable and investable, leading to increased rents for residents. This concern is echoed by Elaine Speight (2013) in a critical account of the role of place-making in the regeneration of UK towns and cities. She outlines:

> Although rarely defined, the term has become shorthand for the practice of 'creating somewhere with a distinct identity' (Cowan, 2005: 292) through an on-the-ground approach to urban design and planning. In particular, place-making advocates the involvement of communities and the application of local knowledge as ways to engender local distinctiveness and a strong sense of place within urban regeneration schemes. (26)

Her critique comes in how place-making - particularly its intersection with art-making - has been used in this context: 'Place-making became seen as an effective way to improve the external perceptions of blighted areas and to transform them into attractive places. The commissioning of art was regarded as an integral part of this process. (26). There is therefore an argument that a type of 'art-washing' is employed as part of place-making practices, alongside a nominal amount of community involvement in largely predetermined and commercially-minded development schemes – just enough of both to give the appearance of positive engagement in regeneration led by private companies, whose primary aim is to make a profit. This argument is taken up by Heather McLean (2014) in her consideration of 'arts-led regeneration' (2156) and the potential complicity of artists 'in naturalizing colonial gentrification processes at multiple scales' (2156) in such contexts.

Place-making activities have proliferated in recent years, perhaps specifically to counter the homogenisation of spaces impacted by globalised capital and culture. The wild underbelly of these practices though is the overflowing and ongoing reaches of corporate

development – the scooping up and scooping out of places to accommodate an increase in returns for investors. The arguably much more pallid, but entirely marketable response to any critique as to the ways in which our cities are 'up for grabs' is the promotion of practices where communities have at least some role in re-forming, re-making and re-valuing their own places.

It is important to say at this point that not all place-making activity is co-opted in this way and that there is a wealth of creative practice engaging with place which does not fit this commercial model. For example, Sally Mackey's research in this area uses temporary, ephemeral acts of performance in places, to offer participants 'new ways of considering, and dwelling in, the present' (2016: 121) of such places (see Performing Places n.d.). Equally, there are organisations, such as zURBS who address urban place through a 'socially-engaged artistic approach', focusing on 'an open participatory process that enables participants to articulate their experiences of their city on their own terms, and this way raise people's consciousness about the structural conditions that shape their lives' (zURBS 2020). In both these examples, playful, creative activities located in places prompt 'an additional layer of unexpected experience in the *same* environment' (Mackey 2016: 119), rather than looking to materially change it. According to zURBS, there is a role for imagining in these activities, where 'imagination can be seen as the first step towards collectively producing our cities, by playing a critical role in expressing desires for urban worlds that are radically better or different, and insisting that other worlds can be imagined and constructed' (zURBS 2020).

These practices are not necessarily engaged in any active re-making of a physical environment and rather look to creative activities in places as a way of re-viewing or re-forming a relationship with a present place or indeed imagining its future. Place-mixing also has different intentions from activities that seek to re-form and re-make, as well as those that engage participants with places to 'reveal, expose, heal, enhance and alter people's response

to their inhabitation and dwelling' (Mackey 2016: 107). This practice functions as a speculative, exploratory mode of feeling through those present relationships, opening up a mix of forces and drawing attention back to the affective and material processes in play within the encounter. The act of place-mixing is also one of resistance to any easy connections of place-making to positive affirmations of 'place attachment'. Place attachment is defined by Altman and Low (1992) as 'the bonding of people to places' (5) and they claim that 'we form a stronger bond to a place if it meets our needs, both physical and psychological, and matches our goals and lifestyle' (9). As Mackey points out, ''place-making and place attachment are phrases that have become popular as incitements to change in policy reports' (2016: 112). However, the idea of matching places to goals, lifestyles and identities, in the context of market-driven place-making, is problematic. As Montgomery argues, 'to secure public order and place capital, placemaking must do more than redesign streets – it must guide eyes and feet. To do so, it insinuates itself into private space, it monitors the poor and discontented, and it harnesses the memories and dreams of suburbanites' (2016: 788). As such, questions arise as to whose goals and lifestyles are being matched with newly 're-made' places and whose are discounted 'on the basis of dollar returns and enhanced city image' (787).

Equally, market driven place-making activities do not or cannot encompass or acknowledge the complex and contradictory forces in play and often seek to smooth over such troubled, elusive and immaterial forces through activity to make somewhere look and feel better. As Erin Toolis comments in her account of 'critical placemaking' in the US, 'the focus on commonality rather than difference can obscure the plural and often contested nature of communities, while 'Placemaking's "revitalization" efforts frequently focus on beautifying, cleansing, and regenerating public spaces for prompting development and attracting investment, while neglecting considerations of economic and racial inequality (2017: 186).

In contrast, an interrogative act of place-mixing is specifically aligned with the 'unfixed, contested and multiple' (Massey 1994: 5) nature of places. Place-mixing revels in the contrasting, incongruous, uneasy elements of a place, encountering what is present in a speculative way – whether that is the surface of a mobile device, the visualisation of a future development or an abandoned plot of land. Equally, the open, searching, 'live' nature of this roughly-hewn mixing practice aims to disrupt and reveal some of the forces of control and containment in the city and the device. The provocation of this practice, in response to the narratives of place aligned with particular, exclusive visions of their future, is to allow and invite a set of forces to be present and shifting in an encounter, opening up messy and uneasy relationships between these forces, with no movement to resolve them. In addition, the place-mixer in the wild city has a perennial interest in that which exceeds the senses, which is riotous, beyond signification and tumultuous in nature, culture, material and digital processes. This attention to the wild, urban world, as manifest in the built cityscape, nature and a digital device leads the explorations of place in an open and querying way, which is echoed in the subsequent mixing of materials through the types of lo-fi, intuitive and unfinished ways outlined above. The result exists in a perennially suspended, shifting space, where the materials and encounters in question rub up against each other and are not resolved.

By no means am I claiming that this work can completely escape any of the contexts I outline above in relation to the co-opting of place-making practices or that it has a particularly sharp critical voice in opposition to the wildness of regeneration agendas in our cities. What I am interested in is how the gaze, approach and actions of postdigital place-mixing constitute a resistant, speculative and interrogative act; how a feeling encounter with wild processes might prompt a reconsideration of such processes and how they meet, overlap and exchange. Equally, as Mackey points out, digital technology's 'connection with place-making is as yet

under-explored' (2016: 122). This speculative, inquiring practice is one way to start to unpick the relations between the materialities, meetings, disconnections and exclusions of a place and the insistent threads and practices of digitality as we engage them in processing what is happening around us. In order to articulate and ground these thoughts, I turn now to some of my experiments in this area in order to illuminate how these emergent practices happen, before completing the chapter with principles, approaches and ideas that have emerged so far from my postdigital place-mixing in the wild city.

Place-mixing in Practice

As referenced above, an early place-mix focused on a space in East Salford called the Meadow - a teardrop wild green space caught in a loop of the River Irwell and increasingly overhung by a range of new developments that fringe the outer edge of the river.[7] The Meadow sits right next to Chapel Street, an area where Salford meets central Manchester, and which is consequently at the very sharp edge of an aggressive redevelopment agenda on the part of the city council and attendant commercial developers.

In this case, the initial encounter with the meadow was a walk where snatches of video footage and text were gathered, particularly reflecting my engagement with the unfettered natural growth of the space in relation to the wild, energetic throwing up of buildings and eerie, disjointed sounds of construction echoing around. I also pulled in the strangely lonely, digital visualisations of the future buildings to intersect uncomfortably with my raw, shaky footage, while singing and speaking the text I had created on the walk and that from the marketing material for the new Adelphi Wharf developments that sit on one side of the river.

The echoing of wild and self-willed processes in the natural elements of the Meadow and the human-made actions surrounding it generated an unsettling and excited feeling, also

holding an edge of despair - the sense of things running through fingers, always-escaping and exceeding what is possible to capture. Part of the mixing of these materials was an engagement with those feelings and ideas through a rough editing process and also through some very deliberate digital processing choices, which highlight the mixing and reformulation of the materials. These include the tiling of imagery referenced above, the shifting of colour and the very deliberate moving and overlaying of the materials. The initial video mix was done live with little conscious thought and never really developed beyond that first edit in any meaningful way, manifesting in an eternal rough cut, never to be refined. This type of rough-hewn graft of digital materials is characteristic of my postdigital place-mixing, deliberately showing the edges of things and denying the ability of the digital edit to smooth them out. These types of mixes are also, as referenced above, deliberately engaged with showing the processing of the image, if not through revealing the code that underpins it, then certainly through accentuating the digital glitches and traces that emerge, both sonically and visually.

In a development of this work, a recent project aimed to share practices arising from a natural wildness that I experienced in Kersal Dale - the urban wildscape near my home referenced earlier in the chapter - as mirrored in the digital processing of my smartphone, when I attempted to use the latter to capture the former.[8] This particular mix is more engaged with disruptive strategies that can shift the initial encounter between digital and natural processes, as opposed to adding that layer in an edit. As such, and as referenced above, I played with forming glitched panned images of the trees and undergrowth, as well as employing the device in unusual ways in the space - leaving it to record without looking at what it captured, observing its visible processes, trying to listen for its invisible workings, singing to it... These represent attempts - without actually re-forming any of the underpinning code - to counteract and playfully intersect with some of the familiar ways I use the phone's digital

processes in relation to the environment, particularly more obvious affordances of capturing, sampling and digitally slicing the space into video and image.

These first attempts at mixing digital and natural wildness also include a set of musings, thoughts and musical responses, as well as proposed prompts for activity, thinking through both the device and place as sets of related processes, patterns, happenings and landscapes for 'corporeal practice' (Wylie 2007: 214). Two examples of these prompts for place-mixing activity are outlined below:

> *Put the phone into the environment – somewhere where it doesn't fit and make it do something – record or play sound, image, video. Place its automated happenings in relation to all the other processes happening here. Don't look through the device – look at it in this space. What does it look like? Why is it here? What is it hiding? Record your responses to these questions, if you want.*
>
> *Leave the phone somewhere in the space to film/record sound/take pictures, then run towards it fast, pick it up and turn it out into the space. The image will move with your breath, which is good – that will change how the environment is. Feel the breath of the body in the image, the impossibility of stillness, the moment formed between body, device and place.*
>
> (Scott 2019)

As both these prompts indicate, this emerging mixing practice focuses on the body, device and environment in a present encounter and the relationships that form in that encounter that might help us to re-think the positioning of each in relation to the other. It attempts to surface the shared wild processes happening within and between the body, device and natural space. It also creatively engages with what Berry calls the 'new aggregates' (2011: 2) that are formed between humans and non-humans in the software-soaked contemporary world. It attempts to bend and re-shape some of the practised relationships between these elements, where, for instance, we consistently view or engage with an environment through the phone's framing and hidden processing.

These initial experiments - arising from my intermedial practices, in combination with an interest in a postdigital perspective and a sense of wildness as present in nature, urban places and digital processes – represent the starting points for developing a postdigital place-mixing practice. Alongside these early experiments, I offer below, by way of conclusion, some emerging thoughts about the practices and ideas that circulate here, particularly the principles and approaches that underpin them.

Postdigital Place-Mixing Practices: Some Principles and Approaches

A live mixing practice is not able to offer a unified or singular perspective of a place and does not seek to – mixes hold the multiple in a suspension that is only temporary, before those parts fly apart and re-form into something else. Above, I describe place-mixing as a restless practice and indeed, even in its fixed forms, it is fleeing and chasing. Mixing is also about a first encounter and then a re-encounter. The mixer first meets the place through a digital engagement, often using a device to capture something of that. Such processes of 'capture', as discussed above, are deliberately unseated and shifted through a wild symbiotic

methodology, that seeks feral threads in all that it encounters and feels the bottomlessness of the ecologies of computation and natural growth; that revels in, but is threatened by what is beyond our capacity to see and understand and what is consistently happening on our behalf. In this first encounter, the place-mixer makes futile efforts to attune themselves to those processes, to what is actually happening when the fake red button is pressed, when the camera casts its digital eye towards the veneered brickwork of this new development or that intense green carpet of ivy or moss.

This is not an untroubled encounter. The place-mixer holds their device in their hands and feels a little queasy as to what it contains, how it exceeds, how it threads out into the world and what it can never account for. The place-mixer regards what is around them with a similar queasiness, with ignorance certainly, but also with a feeling, from which a querying and speculative encounter might arise. They then allow that encounter to result in a few lines of computational code to be made manifest in sound or image.

In the re-encounter with these digital materials through a mixing practice, the glassy exterior and dead-eyed look back of the digital image and footage belies the ferocious energy beneath, that is played out through the code and software, re-forming, re-ordering and re-calculating material into new shapes and processes. Though the non-expert place-mixer does not have the capacity to plumb the depths of the layers of code, they are consistently paying attention to how the computational processing might become active and visible in the ways the mix reformulates the encounter between the processes of the body, digital device and place. The mix itself is never that well-formed, it's never that beautifully shaped - it could be better - but what arises (either in performance or in a fixed media output) is a feeling encounter, opened up and pried to the surface by a particular wild imagining and querying, coming into being through a process of choice-making that acknowledges what is beyond

control. Like the 'postdigital gaze' I gesture to above, it engages with what is not seen, but sensed and present in the layers of the experience and the act of digital mixing, a precarious and unsettled engagement that resonates with Kendrick and Shyldkrot's account of *acousmatic* sounds that we experience 'without the visual presence of their cause or source'.

I have written before (Scott 2016) about being led by materials and environments in my mixing, being pulled by forces in the mixes as they are made manifest. I have reflected somewhat on the affordances of the technologies I use and what they offer to me. Up until this point, I have eschewed the layers and stratification and giddy drops and depths of code and computation that are made and formed and re-formed in this work. As a place-mixer, I now want these signs in the mix – the digital hiss of the microphone in the wind, the residue of an echo that disrupts the sound of bird song, the glitch that emerges when that is looped, the breath of wind in the tiled image and the sense that nothing is complete and fixed, but in a frustrating, moving amalgam, only a part of which I will ever touch or will ever touch me. In this way, nothing is ever completed. Materials are just pushed and pulled, stretched and poked, licked and tasted and then discarded or included. The mixes are inherently unsatisfying and always reach for something more - a better, truer representation of what is there. They fail, and in failing, they activate the stumbling and not quite formed encounters we have with the world, with the city, with nature, the digital and ourselves. They reach for and grasp at the wild processes of the city evoked in the preamble, in a sustained condition of 'uncertainty or relationality' which links the practices to the precarious subjectivities in play in Kendrick and Shyldkrot's account of contemporary vocality.

As this chapter reveals, these are emergent thoughts and practices. There is more work to do here, more encounters to form, more questions to ask, more approaches to test. However, what is arising distinctly through the thinking and making of this work is a collection

of resonant concepts and practices around the wild city. I am feeling towards a sense of what that means as a condition both of city dwelling and postdigital existence, where certain senses of vitality, powerlessness, excitement, fear and bewilderment arise in relation to the boundless processes happening in these spaces. If this wild synergy of disparate elements holds anything, it holds something of how it feels to be alive today and resident in a city, full of both stasis and rampant change, where computational threads meet the forces of capital which in turn lean over abandoned spaces of natural growth. Through postdigital place-mixing, some creative and critical engagement with this synergy is enabled; a speculative acknowledgement and recognition of that which is wildly beyond us.

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[1] Documentation of these practices is available at www.joanneemmascott.com – see Projects / 'Mixing the Irwell' and 'The Broughton Oratory' in particular.

[2] See https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=305&v=yjlUpmdHnng&feature=emb_logo to watch *Sycamore.*

[3] Modul8 is a piece of VJ-ing software, 'designed for live performance and real-time video mixing' (garageCube 2017). It allows videos to be manipulated and layered, as well as offering a range of effects that can be added to the footage.

[4] See https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GzIQHk6b8YI to view the resulting mix, titled *Adelphi.*

[5] The mass surveillance activities of the US National Security Agency (NSA) were brought to wide public attention through Edward Snowden's revelations in 2013.

[6] Dataveillance is the practice of monitoring and collecting digital data. Goos et al. (2015) note that the term was coined by Roger Clark in the 1980s 'to capture the spread of computers and the possibilities to process data that came along with that'. They explain that 'new modes of surveillance were added to a revised definition in 2003 which included 'Internet tracing, digital rights management, chip-based identification, biometrics, person locating and tracking' (72)

[7] See https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GzIQHk6b8YI to view the resulting mix, titled *Adelphi.*

[8] See materials published as part of the Theatre, Dance and Performance Training special issue on digital training in the Blog section: http://theatredanceperformancetraining.org/2019/07/new-processes-for-digital-encounters-with-wild-green-spaces-by-jo-scott/.