



*Nature is Actively Capturing Me*

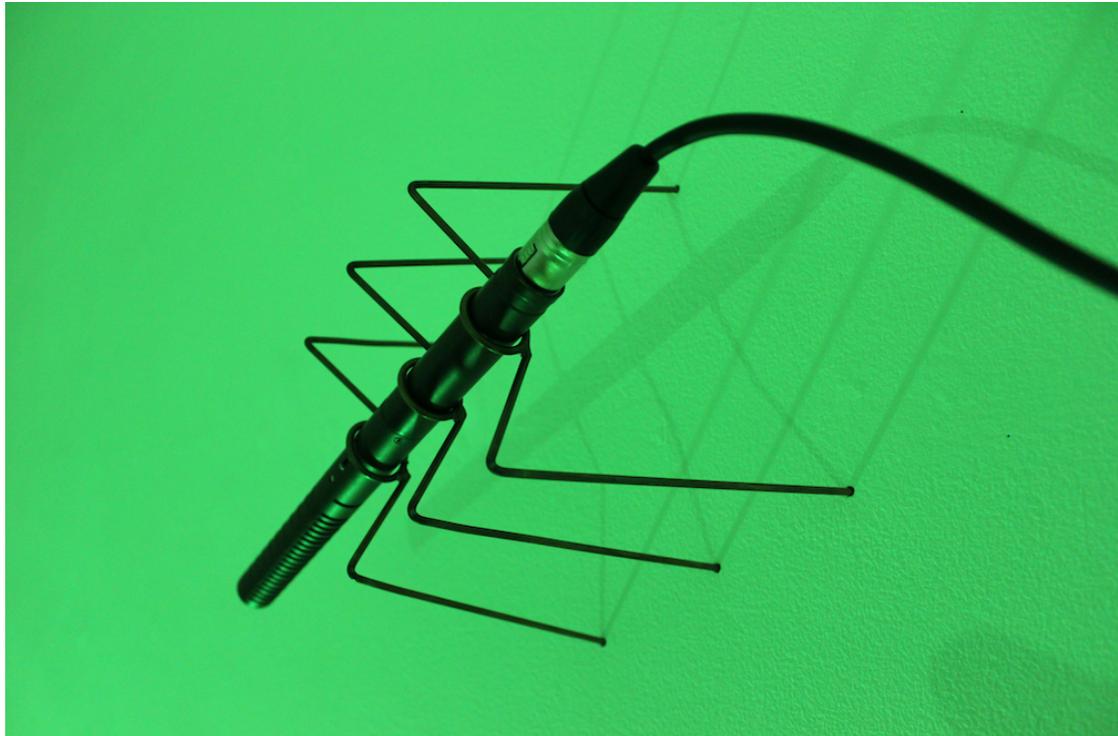
An Interview with Mark Peter Wright by Nathan Thomas

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Mark Peter Wright is an artist-researcher who grew up in North Yorkshire and now resides in London. In recent years his art has bent a critical ear to the ways in which the relationships between human and non-human animals, as well as their environments, are explored, performed, and represented. Nathan Thomas interviews him on what lies behind his current exhibition, *I, The Thing In The Margins* at IMT Gallery in London.



*NATHAN THOMAS: 30 Minutes of Listening (2012), your previous solo exhibition at the London gallery IMT seemed to focus on a particular place (South Gare in Cleveland, North Yorkshire) and on what happens to it when it is represented visually or aurally in a gallery space. I, The Thing In The Margins abandons reference to any specific geographic location and focuses more explicitly on the act of representation. What factors influenced this shift of focus?*

**MARK PETER WRIGHT:** As you say, *30 Minutes of Listening* focused on one specific location, but the exhibition was an attempt to fracture the notion of a literal “site-specificity”. So it worked across many registers and forms in an attempt to present multiple perspectives, truths and fictions out of a very onerous and controlled period of time and place.

Over the last few years I’ve become interested in the body as a site, particularly given the disembodied history of something like nature or field recording where the whole context is predicated on the paradoxical idea of being a silent, non-impacting presence.

*I, the Thing in the Margins* is an attempt to listen to that silent presence and re-imagine, in both horrific and humorous ways, whatever that thing might be. I think of it as listening to listening, or hunting the hunter, where the locus is distributed across a critical dredging of asymmetrical power relations found in histories of mediation. So

the main shift is contained in an imaginative attempt to re-cast the self-body and talk through aspects of agency within human and non-human recording encounters.

A second related shift comes out of a desire to problematise listening. Sound art contexts constantly affirm listening as a virtuous practice. We see this throughout field recording's altruistic history, and the idea that it can only be a good thing. Recording nature is based on a non-intrusive meta-narrative: that it's an activity that does no harm in terms of impacting species and environments. Of course this is ridiculous; listening, like recording, can be a form of violence and exploitation. Just because no visible trace or damage is done to a bird or site it doesn't mean the ear or microphone cannot leave its own idiosyncratic footprint. So again, going back to the show, I am trying to materialise the immaterial in order to open up ecologies around subjectivity and power, and to hopefully do so in a creative and vibrant way.

*NT: What forms do you see this “silent, non-impacting presence” taking historically – what archetypes do you associate with it? And, what kinds of violence do they perpetrate? I'm thinking here not only of the field recordist, but also of the plein-air painter or the nature documentarist.*

MPW: The idea of being a silent mediator within a nature encounter is extremely complex. Of course there's a genuinely empathetic desire to neither be seen nor heard as to not disrupt an environment. It's also built from an aesthetic legacy that strives for fidelity or, simply, a greater signal to noise ratio. So, I'm interested in re-imaging this negative/subjective/noise space: what exactly are we not hearing? What is being censored and why? What power dynamics are being enacted, not only in silence but also through the very act of silencing?



A history of “non-impact” has its routes aesthetically in camouflage and nature hides, which all come from military backgrounds. Hunting and stalking traditions also run in parallel. The discourse of “shooting” and “capturing” non-humans provides an

interesting link to how these histories of predation proliferate through language. There's a metaphorical death when preserving any moment through technology, as Barthes and Sontag have explored so brilliantly. The microphone is no different; it's a necromediator that always enacts a certain death drive.

*NT: You've recently completed a PhD at CRiSAP (Creative Research into Sound Art Practice), and sound plays a big role in your practice and thinking. Yet you make work in a range of different media: video, audio, sculptural installation, and so on. In what sense does your interest in sound relate to all these different outputs, and how has that relation changed over time as your practice has developed?*

MPW: I have a background in sound arts and one of the great things about that is that sound doesn't necessarily have a fixed home in terms of its representation. So it's allowed me to make work within fine art, radio art and broadcast, performance, site-specific installation and so on. More than the medium itself however, I would positively say that my background in sound has given me a sensibility above all. It's given me a process-based, relational focus where identities and categories can be creatively destabilised. In this sense, to work with sound, and its transgressive potential, has freed me up to explore a wide range of topics across many mediums and contexts.

*NT: The show introduces us to Patterson, a cryptid you invoke using explicit references to representations of Bigfoot. What does Patterson embody in relation to the practice of art and our experience of the non-human?*

MPW: Patterson represents a troubling doubling of the archetypal nature recordist, someone historically silenced as part of an overall desire to capture the cleanest sounds of nature, be it for science or more artistic purposes. Patterson is a speculative re-imagining of what that marginal identity could be: a cryptoid character — part shadow, part absurd doppelgänger — becoming microphonic, a bipedal assemblage of another 'I'. It is a haunting of the self, it is the self. Patterson is the noise in the signal, a parasitic oscillation reanimated in brute anonymity. We can never be sure if it is dead or alive, sentient or not? Human? Animal? Technological?

Like Bigfoot, Patterson, the historical other, is an elusive agent. A fiction of reality that speaks to a prepersonal body. It terrorises through obfuscation, haunts through absent presence. Its image, an appropriation of frame 352 from the 1967 Patterson-Gimlin film [a famous and controversial film claiming to show a Bigfoot] humorously horrifies in its frozen revelation.

*NT: In what ways did you encounter Patterson at work as you prepared for the show? How did he/she/it make his/her/its presence felt in the production and presentation of the work, separately from your representations of him/her/it?*

MPW: Process can be a big and messy thing. It's hard to pinpoint how Patterson emerged. A few years ago I was doing some night vision photographs of myself being caught in camera trap style representations. These blurred images became interesting to think through in terms of a non-identity, clearly present but somewhat obscured.

The Bigfoot image haunted me as a child. This familiar stranger returning the gaze in a moment of self-revelation was shocking. Somewhere in the process of making the

night images, frame 352 became re-etched in my mind. I should say that I'm not interested in whether Bigfoot is real, I'm interested in the artifice and construct that surrounds its identity and the lingering sense of simply not knowing. Going back to the body, similar to when I was focused on a non-essentialising exploration of site, I wanted to explore my body as a site of multiple transgressions, rather than a singular phenomenological identity. I can vividly remember drawing up speculative skins and costumes that "we" all wear to some extent in every walk of life. There's also a great description of the debated Bigfoot suit that I read in the book, *The Making of Bigfoot* (2004) by Greg Long. It's almost forensic in the way it meticulously catalogues this mythical object/skin. So, through Bigfoot, Patterson became a way to think through aspects of power and presence along within the artifice of recording nature more broadly.

I also re-read *The Invisible Man* (1897) by H.G. Wells around the same time. The book is all about the potentials and pitfalls of becoming a non-identity, but there's so much in there to read about performance and costume. The central character is constantly putting on different skins.



So these types of things, both practical and more text based, allowed Patterson to emerge. I needed to move towards my own specific skin or suit that grafted technology and the body as well as the animal, so a fluffy onesie that resembles a microphone windshield was developed. Around all of this process I had a very speculative question in mind: does the hand grip the microphone or the microphone grip the hand?

*NT: In all our efforts to encounter and represent nature, Patterson appears to deconstruct the assumed authenticity and transparency of the encounter or representation. In this way, I suppose he/she/it performs the same role as writing does in deconstructing the assumed primacy and immediacy of speech, as described by*

*Jacques Derrida in Of Grammatology. But I'm also interested in how things can work the other way round – how a sudden and unexpected experience of the non-human can unsettle and destabilise our sense of self. It has happened to me countless times, when I've been walking through a forest or some other outdoor place: suddenly I come to my senses and realise that I haven't a clue where I am. There's a sort of bewilderment that happens when the outside comes rushing inside and dislodges whatever it is in there that held itself separate and distinct. Not just the colonisation of nature by culture, but also of culture by nature. So is there a human inside the Patterson suit, or a Patterson inside every human suit?*

MPW: The underlying point with Patterson is that humans are more non-human than human. We're 90% microbe so we occupy a dual positionality with the ability to constantly encounter the non-human other, through the self. This can unsettle and provide that felling of the uncanny you mention. We are in some way both parasite and host.

I find your woods example really interesting. One of my favourite quotes is from Roald Dahl's *Danny the Champion of the World* (1975). Danny describes his experience of being in the woods:

I tried to keep absolutely still for as long as possible to see if I could hear anything at all. I listened and listened. I held my breath and listened again. I had a queer feeling the whole wood was listening with me, the trees, and the bushes, the little animals hiding in the undergrowth and the birds roosting in the branches. All were listening. Even the silence was listening. Silence was listening to silence.

It's a great reminder that going into the woods, or anywhere in fact, is not a singular, human-centered experience. In relation to listening and recording specifically, the quote helps to distribute subjectivity across multiple agents and, in doing so, destabilises the idea that nature is a resource to be drained for scientific or compositional purposes: nature is actively capturing me. This is a dislocating phenomenological revelation where my own flesh and skin begins to prickle and transform within the sensation of its own re-awakening.

The woods are a typical site in ecological art and discourse but for *I, the Thing in the Margins*, I was keen to bring the focus back into a domestic space. The gallery becomes the imaginary domestic abode of Patterson. It is not somewhere over there in the wilderness but close by, too close in fact. It is unbearably intimate, a place of return, monstrous in its familiarity. The room literally vibrates upon itself through Paterson's own feedback. It reflects, refracts and repeats constantly in a shimmering web of entrapment. The gallery space represents a domestic meta-wood, becoming a spatial uncanny valley submerged in revulsive feedback. So, those are the binaries or orthodoxies I'm interested in collapsing with this show: wilderness and domesticity, human and non-human, horror and humour, even skin and suit.

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*I, the Thing In The Margins* runs until November 22  
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