

Transparent Modular Specifics: the AA Road Atlas 2018

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Why go to all the bother of printing, when we could have just released it onto the internet?¹

In response to vast increases in data storage and computational capacity in the last decade, the amount of energy used by data centres has doubled every four years, and is expected to triple in the next ten years.²

Ecology is the study of a natural system, and what is humanity but a natural system fuelled by hidden connections, immense in its complexity.³

Ecological impacts, creative activity, digital technology: over these three terms this paper will throw pages from an AA Road Atlas, salvaged from the plaster dust and chaos of the boot of my car, in order to form a sort of quadrat with which I will introduce an ongoing body of research called *Transparent Modular Specifics*.

- *Transparent Modular Specifics* (TMS) is a performance installation. Housed in a modular timber-framed geodesic dome clad in opaque plastic, it features an assembly line of performers making moulds and plaster casts. An audience interface enables visitors, staff, crew and itinerants at the festival to input their data into a solar-powered tablet. The data is then processed by a bespoke algorithm that generates a number representing the physical cost in CO₂e (CO₂ equivalent) of each individual.
- This algorithm has been designed by the artist in collaboration with a programmer using research from Defra and numerous tables and databases, and takes into account how they arrived, where they arrived from and the rather more abstract question: What have you come here to do? Each question triggers calculations of approximation and discord, the hidden secrets of the new dark age.
- The assembly line staff take a physical imprint of each participant's footprint and use this to make a plaster cast. Staff then embed into the plaster cast a native sapling for planting after the festival. The species chosen will be pegged to the individual's cost as produced by the algorithm. The higher the ecological impact of an individual, the higher the carbon sequestration capacity of the tree species embedded in their footprint.
- TMS aims to be a work engaged with aesthetics in a binary with their opposite *anaesthetics*. To be aesthetic is to be engaged with all the interconnected aspects of one's being: from the impact of your shit, to the strength of your convictions, to the

burden of your server space; and your presence in a web of delicate and ultimately unfathomable interconnections across space and through time. To be engaged in *anaesthetics* is to be dead to the world.



Figure 1 Transparent Modular Specifics, Installation view, National Trust South West Great Outdoors Festival. Bram Thomas Arnold, 2018.

Ecological Impacts

I am not an expert, at least not in ecological impacts: it is good to be clear about things, the project title foregrounds the *Transparent* for exactly this reason. As shown in figure two, the dome is clad in opaque horticultural polythene to introduce an intentional quantity of contradiction, to confess to our uncertainties, our lack of expertise. (Indeed, even this paper is another player in the game of opaque transparency that we begin to play whenever we engage with digital technology, for ‘more information does not correspond to more understanding [...] rather, it confuses and conceals, becoming a spur to further complexity’⁴.) I have, however, undertaken a postdoctoral fellowship under the umbrella of the National Productivity Investment Fund (NPIF) working with the National Trust in order to explore whether creative practice can engage festival audiences in ideas around the ecological impacts of the festival they are attending, using digital technology as a medium.

To begin with, the basics: how do we carbon-footprint a festival? What would you need to measure and account for? When talking about ecology Timothy Morton talks of the mesh to describe the delicate interconnectedness of everything. Morton goes on to suggest that ‘if everything is interconnected, there is less of everything. Nothing is complete in itself.’⁵

In other words, there is no way of extracting an individual thing from its environmental conditions and fully accounting for its physical being; there is no way of extracting an

individual thing from its environment and fully accounting for its carbon output, or for its ecological impact.

However, I came across PAS 2050, a process published by British Standards International that offers a method for 'how to carbon footprint your products, identify hotspots and reduce emissions in your supply chain'⁶, and in particular, on page eight I found a flowchart that identified the particulars one would need to focus on if one's product were a litre of orange juice.

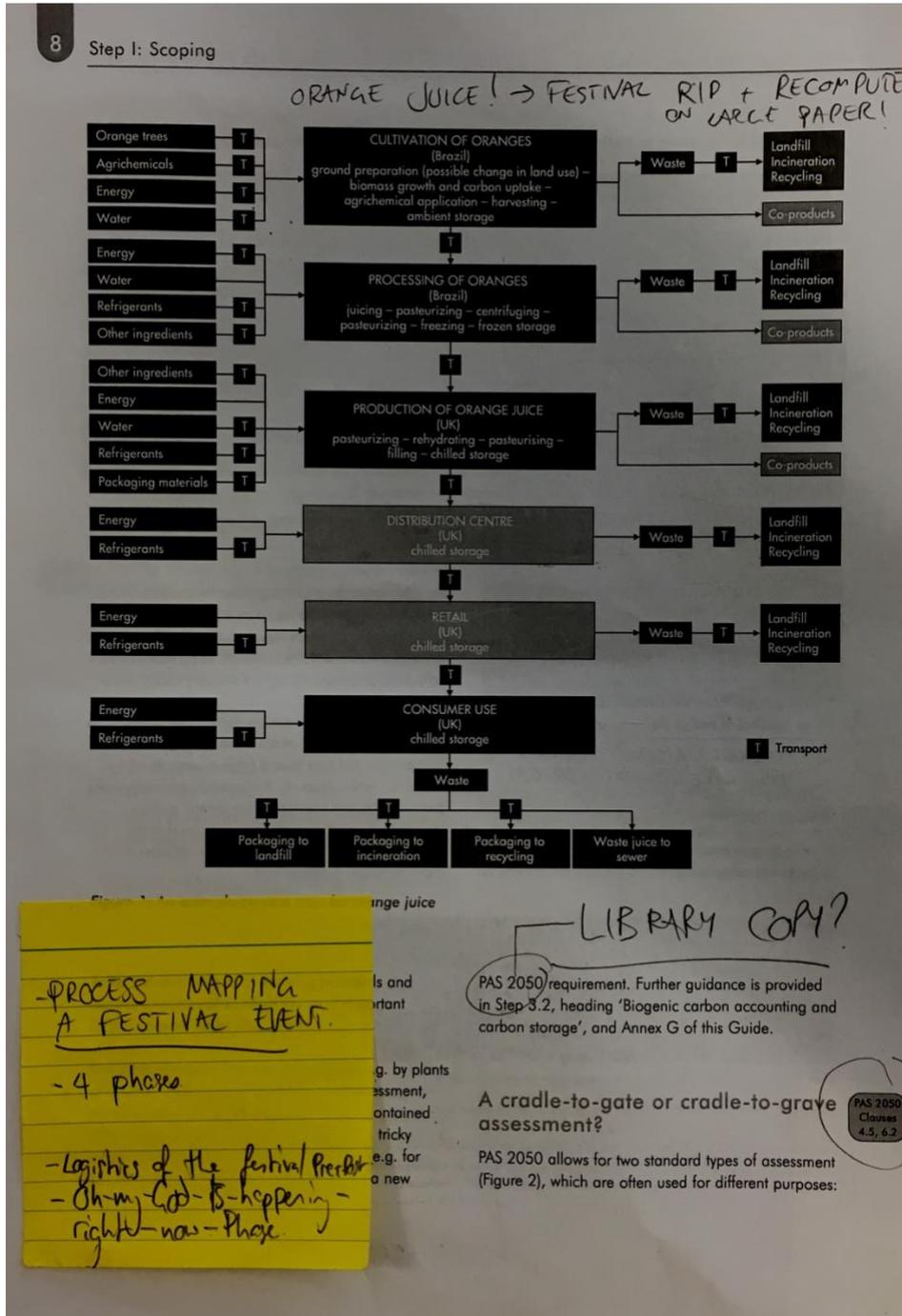


Figure 2 Defra Paper 2050, page 8, with notes and post-it. Bram Thomas Arnold, 2018

Practice-based research tends to produce work that can perhaps best be seen as a thought experiment played out in the real world⁷, and as such the thought experiment currently in play is: can I map a festival onto this flowchart?

Game for a Conversation

The road atlas for this journey is a combination of stumbling in the dark and excessive levels of planning. Both are intermittently happening all the time, overlapping each other, pulling together and falling apart. Gertrude Stein once said, 'I know what I think when I see what I say'⁸ and Jorge Luis Borges once wrote a short story only the length of a paragraph during which an entire generation of people became so horrified by mapping that they eliminated the discipline of geography from their lives⁹. Somewhere between these pillars something called a *Game for a Conversation* emerged: a game for which no one knows what the rules are and therefore the only way to play the game is to talk about it.

The game was founded on the schematic diagram in figure 3, blown up and reconfigured to attempt to calculate all the potential inputs and outputs if the product under analysis were a festival, as opposed to a litre of orange juice. In this case the festival was Tropical Pressure¹⁰, a gathering with a disposition for world music held at Mount Pleasant Eco Park near Porthtowan, Cornwall, where I ran a workshop in July last year. *Game For a Conversation* broke the Defra flowchart into four categories, with each assigned one of four colours; the flowchart became a board game set under corrugated plastic sheet and pierced with flags in each colour. The audience's suggestions were added to the board over the course of the game, with the conversation flowing around which category people thought would contribute most to the overall carbon impact of the festival. The flags and lists and issues and revelations became the foundation of a performance lecture.

But we've got a Carbon Neutral Website. The single-use plastic wrist bands – oh my god, we've all got one!

All the me emailing you, and you, emailing me, every attachment another cigarette on the pile of our addiction.

Oh no! We got takeaway for tea ... shit food, air miles, the poor Deliveroo driver, destabilising social conditions and labour rights.

Local bands? Foreign bands? Planes ...

Fun ... fun is so expensive.¹¹

This game, while leading to further avenues for developing the work, was primarily about field-testing the idea, and finding out whether an audience out for a fun weekend would be interested in a conversation about that weekend's infinitely problematic ecological impacts. Outcomes from it were used to build the algorithm that is at the heart of *Transparent Modular Specifics*.



Figure 3 *Game for a Conversation*. Tropical Pressure Festival. Bram Thomas Arnold, 2018.

Creative Activity

Angelika Nollert says of performance installation that ‘artists work in this grey area in order to intertwine different levels of presence, temporality, space and experience’.¹² The grey area she refers to is the space between ephemeral action and static constant, or the space between being and doing, while philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy once said that *being* or existence is *with*, otherwise nothing exists¹³. It is this delicate complex interconnectivity that TMS aims to play among.

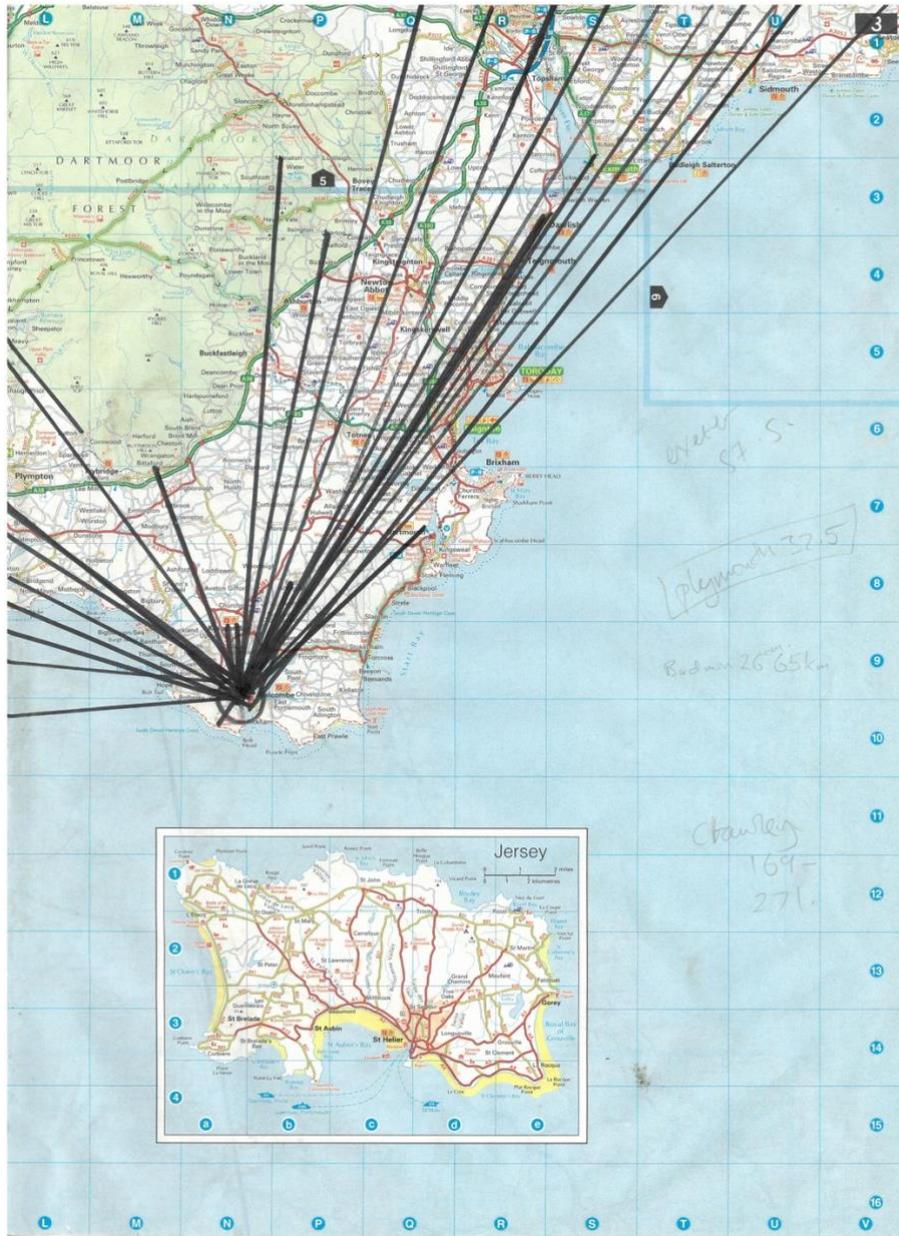


Figure 4 AA Road Atlas, permanent marker, pencil. Bram Thomas Arnold, 2018

At some point during the course of the game, the lines of the AA Road Atlas – and the gaps on it – became entangled in this grey area. Gaps can be used as pauses, they can speak in the same way that silence can sometimes be more powerful than speech. At Tropical Pressure, *TMS* was placed in a dip in a field in Devon, the only place on the clifftop festival site that did not have a direct line of site to the nearby 4G data aerial. We were offline, in a blackspot – a gap. And so we were forced to work out the algorithm through an amalgamation of manual and automated, analogue and digital processors. In simple terms, two of our analogue processors, Emily and Johanna, used the AA Road Atlas and a permanent marker to manually calculate distances, straight as the crow flies, from all the participant's starting points to the festival from across the UK. Digital processors – a Raspberry Pi, MacBooks – crunched the numbers. And Alex, Phylly and Mat took clay imprints of participant's footprints, turned them into plaster casts and embedded a native tree therein.

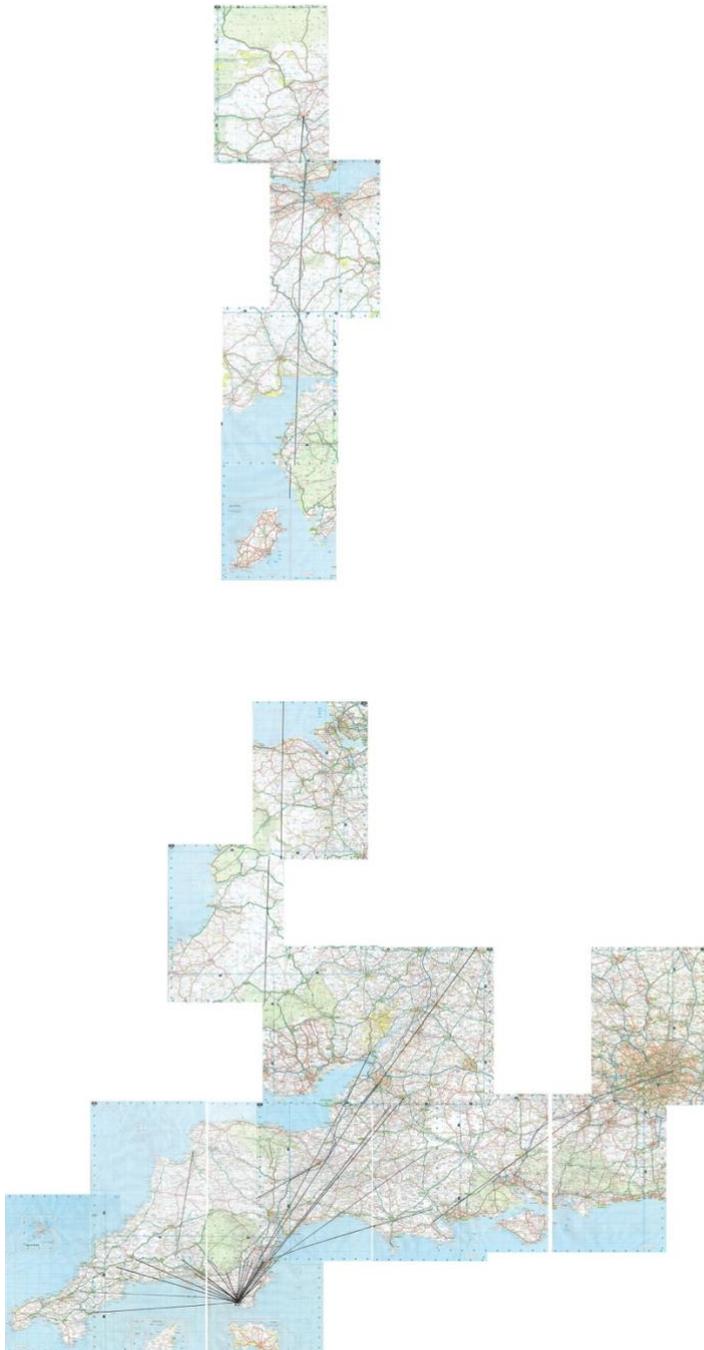


Figure 5 *Transparent Modular Specifics*. Bram Thomas Arnold, 2018

Taking technology into the field for live performative experiences is never straightforward, but failure is what we learn from, mostly, and one approach buried within TMS is an exploration of the notion of appropriate technology.

Digital technology

Advanced technologies create dependency: they take tools and processes out of the hands of individuals and put them into the hands of organisations, metaphorically, or increasingly, digitally¹⁴. Adam Greenfield notes that these days ‘our very selfhood is smeared out across a global mesh of nodes and links; all the aspects of our personality we think of as constituting who we are – our tastes, preferences, capabilities, desires – we owe to the fact of our connection with that mesh, and the selves and distant resources to which is binds us’, and goes on to state that ‘we suppress whatever qualms we may have about the conditions in the mines and factories, the environmental footprint, the energetic cost of the extended supply chain, or the authoritarian governments we ultimately support through our act of purchase’¹⁵.

The very title *Transparent Modular Specifics* is an amalgamation of three words that recur across the plethora of terms and conditions I have had to agree to through the process of this research project.

The project, right down to the AA Road Atlas, in the back of the car, that I bought as part of the process, of doing a research project for a university, at a field-testing site in another county, has been intrinsically bound up with critiquing from within the issue of whether or not digital technology should be used without prior consideration being given to its use: or, better, when I started looking into digital technology, ecological impacts and festival sites, ‘I suddenly felt a bit like Dr. Malcolm in Jurassic Park, I sat there for a moment and declaimed quietly to myself, you’re all so busy with this digital technology, busy trying to figure out whether or not you could, you never stopped to think whether or not you should’¹⁶.

TMS is not about providing an answer, for there can be no singular answer to a problem as multifaceted as the ecological impact of a festival site. What is a festival but a microcosm of society, which is in turn ‘a natural system fuelled by hidden connections, immense in its complexity’¹⁷? TMS is a suggestion, a way of engaging an issue and redrawing the map of interrelationships, and an opportunity for an individual to plant a tree in such a way that you can sit beneath its shade in years to come, think about what you’ve done and maybe feel a little better about all of this.

As Dougald Hine asks, why go to all the bother of printing, casting, writing or performing when we could just have done all this on the internet? It is simply because data will let you down, the signal will fail and you’ve already signed over your ownership of anything to someone else anyway. But you plant a tree, put pen to paper or talk to someone, these things endure. They become myth and memory, they become a forest that takes 300 years to grow, 300 years to live and 300 years to die. You score an AA atlas with a permanent marker and you know exactly what happened and where it is – in an archival sleeve in a drawer, safely waiting for the next iteration of *Transparent Modular Specifics* due in 2019.



Figure 6 *Transparent Modular Specifics, Foot 36, Oak.* Bram Thomas Arnold, 2018

- 1 Dougald Hine and Paul Kingsnorth, *Uncivilisation: A Manifesto* (London: The Dark Mountain, 2013), p.xii.
- 2 James Bridle, *New Dark Age* (London: Verso, 2018), p.63.
- 3 Bram Arnold, Rebecca Birch and Rob Smith, 'A Belgian Transect: Field Broadcast' in *The Expanded Field Of Ecology*, 26:1 (2015), p.42.
- 4 Bridle, p.184.
- 5 Timothy Morton, *The Ecological Thought* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2012), p.33.
- 6 *The Guide to PAS 2050* (London: British Standards Institute, 2011).
- 7 Angelika Nollert, *Performative Installation* (Cologne: Snoeck, 2003), p.8.
- 8 Chris Crickmay and Miranda Tufnell, *A Widening Field: Journeys In Body And Imagination* (Hampshire: Dance Books Ltd, 2004), p.58.
- 9 Jorge Luis Borges, 'On Exactitude in Science' in *A Universal History of Infamy* (translated by Norman Thomas de Giovanni) (London: Penguin Books, 1975).
- 10 <https://www.tropicalpressure.co.uk/>
- 11 Bram Thomas Arnold, *Towards Eco-Logical Footprinting*, performance lecture at National Trust South West Great Outdoors Festival, 2018.
- 12 Nollert, *Performative Installation* p.8.
- 13 Jean-Luc Nancy, *Being Singular Plural* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2000), p.4.
- 14 Paul Kingsnorth, *Confessions of a Recovering Environmentalist* (London: Faber, 2017), p.125
- 15 Adam Greenfield, *Radical Technologies: The Design of Everyday Life* (Brooklyn, New York: Verso, 2017), pp.19-28.
- 16 From a recorded conversation between Bram Thomas Arnold, Paul Chaney and Lauren Holt at *Beyond The Fields: a Transdisciplinary Conference* in 2018. Contact Bram Thomas Arnold for a copy.
- 17 Arnold, Birch and Smith, *Expanded Field*.