

## The Field: An Art Experiment in Levinasian Ethics

*Alana Jelinek, with Juliette Brown*

### Foreword

**Juliette Brown:** This piece describes *The Field*, an artwork by Alana Jelinek, and its relationship to the philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas. For reasons described below, the description of *The Field* as artwork will be undertaken by myself, Juliette Brown, and the philosophical basis of the project will be described by Alana Jelinek.

*The Field* is a complex and subtle artwork that expresses some of the difficulties of negotiating theory and practice. It is concerned with difference as a positive force and with an ethical engagement with Otherness.

Why I will be describing *The Field* as artwork derives from debates on the classification of art as such, settled in some sense by philosopher George Dickie's (1974, 1984, 2001) institutional definition of art. Dickie contends that that which is proposed as art must be accepted as such by an art world. He doesn't explain what constitutes the art world.

Not a practising artist, I have been an observer of Jelinek's work and involved in the production and dissemination of contemporary artwork through the terra incognita art organization for fifteen years. This means I have worked with numerous artists and arts institutions and write about art. As the institutional definition deems, the artist is incapable of legitimating their work. This role falls to me, as part of the wider art world. Subsequently, references to *The Field* relate to a field and the objects and activities therein which are the proposed artwork. *The Field* includes both physical space (12.9 acres, Essex field and woodland) and a series of encounters which take place in and in relation to the site.

Conceptually difficult for some may be the notion that both a space and the activities taking place there, including those that take place without human involvement, can constitute art. My understanding is that these aspects form the material of the work, which stems from and generates thought and understanding in the participant or

observer. As a conceptual piece, the artwork itself resides in referencing a wealth of ideas and a history of thought, even in a brief experience of it. Each aspect of the artwork, *The Field*, demands that we consider the negotiation of different subjectivities, be it the group who come together to 'conserve' the natural world, those who aim to grow food together and separately, those who debate ideas or the human individual confronting unwanted wildlife.

The idea, the concept behind this conceptual piece, is that as individuals we struggle to contend with other subjectivities, or that which is outside of us, and not only in the ways we usually imagine. An ethical engagement with the Other (through Levinas) involves examining false assumptions on which we have built a culture of the same. This means we have suppressed difference. We can attempt a more ethical engagement, a face-to-face engagement, by recognizing the ignorance, prejudice, assumptions, desire to repress difference, ill-considered notions, cultural heritage, personal demons, systemic biases, defended anxieties and desires that constitute our usual approach to that which is not us. In a conceptual piece such as this, these contestations will be clear in some sense from even a brief engagement.

The development of the work is important, as is its place in the history of the discipline of art. Jelinek has written that the discipline of art includes a knowledge of and reference to art history (Jelinek 2013). *The Field* sits in relation to a number of reference points, particularly Land Art, as manifested in the United Kingdom (for example, Richard Long and Hamish Fulton), 'microtopian' practices (Bourriaud 2002 [1998]) and Conceptual Art (Osborne 2002).

Jelinek's work has for some time considered relationships between individual subjectivities mediated by preexisting, often contradictory narratives (*you-me-them* 2001–4; *Tall Stories: Cannibal Forks* 2010, 2011; *The Fork's Tale* 2013). Some of her work with the Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, University of Cambridge, sites itself in a form of institutional critique, which challenges orthodoxy from within.<sup>1</sup> As with *The Field*, in her museum work she allows herself to range in scope from the minutiae to the entirety of the museum and also what takes place there. The work also alludes to ideas about how knowledge is constituted.

As an artist whose intellectual interests and training lie in philosophy, Jelinek is disposed to discuss ideas, sometimes directly, with others as part of her work, for example in Moot Point, described below, which forms part of *The Field*. Of note, Jelinek also proposed the first moot on utopias. While interaction with others is an important part of this work, it is not to my mind in the sense of relational aesthetics (Bourriaud 2002 [1998]), which is more interested in the quantity of shared experience generated than in the quality of debate and communication. Some of the practices described within relational aesthetics have modelled politically inspired utopias. Methodologically, *The Field* tends to expect the failure of its many experiments rather than attempting to satisfy a desire for utopian models. In this aspect, it also contrasts with antecedents found within Conceptual Art of the 1960s and 1970s. Again, this follows the philosophical intentions of the artwork, the point being that failure generates opportunities for reflection and reflexivity.

Both Land Art and Conceptual Art grew from notions of active refusal of market ideologies of their time. Heir to this tradition, Jelinek's work with *The Field* refuses commodification by privileging concept. One of the pivotal concepts is the idea of rules-as-art. *The Field* operates with a set of rules, drawing on the work of artists On Kawara, Hanne Darboven and Sol Lewitt. In contrast to the fixity and intentionally random or trivial aspect of the rules maintained by these artists, often over many years and common to the *modus* of 1960s Conceptual Art, the rules of *The Field* are reflexive, and practice can inform and change theory. Finding Conceptual Art now also subject to commodification through the sale of ephemera and documentation, the strategy Jelinek employs is to avoid documentation wherever possible, maintaining the work as an ongoing process without end in sight, and generating many momentary, minimal, unmediated encounters.

One of the most striking aspects of *The Field* as an artwork—its site, its location in the natural world—would suggest some relationship to Land Art. The British tradition of Land Art, in particular, recognizes and quietly reflects on the artist's impact on the land (e.g. in the art of Richard Long and Hamish Fulton) as distinct from the US tradition, which is generally monumental in scale and grandiose. It is the subtlety of the British tradition that is an antecedent to *The Field*. There is more to be said on this subject, beyond the scope of this chapter. Truly, nature can never *not* be political, but in the case of *The Field*, nature both represents a set of challenges that demand collective action and generates all of the difficulties inherent in collectivity.

What is important to note here is that, as an artist, it is not Jelinek's duty to substantiate a claim to any particular tradition or worth but to propose and, if so desired, to discuss her work.

## Introduction

*The Field* is a location for art, conservation and outreach projects, but it is more than the mere physical host for such activities. In itself, *The Field* is a long-term, collaborative, interspecies art project. It is a physical, geographical location at a specific moment in time with a set of ethical and aesthetic propositions attached. It is hoped that *The Field* affords the opportunity to engage mindfully and reflexively in relationships with other humans and other nonhuman species, both plant and animal, making a contribution to a history of such art practices.

Behind this project lies the philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas, who observed that Western knowledge (philosophy) has been based on an assumption, and an alarming paradox, that knowledge is universal, while knowledge stems from, and is confined to, the particularity of the Graeco-European experience and tradition. Levinas understands that knowledge, based on this *philia*, a system of likeness, on the exchange of the same with the same, is a system of knowledge, of thought, of culture that inherently has a horror of the Other. This horror can only be minimized when the Other is assimilated as part of the same. The Other is not allowed to be other; it must be an

extension of the self or the same (Critchley 1999 [1992]: 31). Orientalism, primitivism and, in the case of animals, anthropomorphism can be understood as cultural manifestations of the extension of the self.

*The Field* was purchased in 2008 by Alana Jelinek and Juliette Brown of terra incognita, a small arts organization based in London, generating exhibitions, catalogues, publications and educational or outreach events since 1997. It was Jelinek who initiated *The Field* as an artwork in Levinasian terms and set up the 'rules' of the artwork. It is also just a field, and some participants are not aware that the field is viewed as part of an artwork. While this is understood by us as positive and pluralistic, in that anyone can engage with *The Field* according to their own educational and cultural backgrounds, needs and desires, for Jelinek, in order to consider certain questions and values pertaining to the experience of *The Field*, it must be understood as art, in dialogue with other artworks and created with a history of art practice in mind. In other words, because certain values and precepts are attached to the experience, and participants or audiences are invited to understand the experience through these values and precepts, it is art.

From the beginning, *The Field* was understood as an opportunity for those who generally have restricted access to the outside or 'natural world', and particularly those in inner London who live in flats with little or no access to gardens or allotments.<sup>2</sup> Activities include monthly conservation days at which hedge-laying, coppicing, creating dead hedges, scything and fence-building occur. These activities are performed solely with hand tools both as a strategy for minimizing fossil fuel use and as a strategy for understanding our impact on the environment through the extension of bodies with hand tools, understood as the more responsive, communicative technologies. These technologies are contrasted with the insensitivities and disconnection seemingly inherent in power tool use.<sup>3</sup>

*The Field* was conceived in naïve terms, symbolically as 'bees and trees': a shortcut for the predominately urban paradigm of endangered, subjugated nature requiring human action against destructive human exploitation. Most of the initial participants had a background in ecoactivism or other forms of activism and an interest either in gardening or food sustainability. These ideas were from a decidedly idealistic point of view as none had access to land in any form, none owned property in any form and none had educational expertise in these areas. Some of us had been girl guides or scouts.

### Physical Aspects of *The Field* and Encounters Therein

*The Field* once formed part of an estate owned by the landed gentry, and this history has to a large extent determined its current composition, although there is evidence that the woodland is ancient and therefore predating the estate. When it was sold to Broadland Properties Limited in 1973,<sup>4</sup> the adjoining Elsenham Hall was divided into flats, and the area of *The Field* was divided into four gated areas: field one is

pasture or meadowland with a broad border of mostly indigenous or naturalized 'amenity' trees, including ash, lime, oak, beech, sweet chestnut, holly and, more recently, sycamore; field two is woodland including birch and overgrown hornbeam coppice with oak standards; field three is a meadow with ancient anthills enriched by overgrazing so that it subsequently lost some of its character; field four is woodland with a strip of cherry laurel planted by the Hall as ground cover for game birds, dividing it into two distinct areas. To the south there is a continuation of the neglected hornbeam coppice with oak standards, and to the north there is an area with mature oaks and a great profusion of young sycamores (less than twenty years old). The woodland area has been neglected for at least fifty to seventy years, and since 1987, the meadowland was used to keep horses with the erection of stables at its western edge. The stables now form an art studio and sometime meeting room, a shed to store our communal tools, plus a relatively undefined general storage area shared with swallows in the summer when we remember to open it up in time.

With its conceptual transformation into *The Field*, allotments were introduced to field one plus an apiary, an orchard, a compost toilet and a green wood working area. Immediately, certain precepts were put in place. *The Field* was to be shared with as wide a range of people as possible; it was going to be an environmentally-friendly engagement which, given our idealism tempered by ignorance, meant we were going to be organic, and have bees and work broadly from permaculture principles. We collected a range of books on what is termed 'self-sufficiency'. *The Field* was also to be a continuation of the projects and values that informed our work through terra incognita arts organization. Diversity, a value at the heart of our projects, continued to be a central value for *The Field*, both in terms of biodiversity and human diversity.

The value of diversity was enacted initially in ways already familiar within terra incognita projects. We knew from the outset that we'd host outreach projects for those who don't ordinarily have access to the countryside, both physical and psychological; that those offered allotments would, at least to some extent, reflect the diversity of our chosen neighbourhoods in London as distinct from the local Essex norm; that we would host at least one contemporary art event per year that engaged across academic and practice disciplines: making and thinking, arts, humanities, social science and science. These early goals were easily achieved. It was familiar territory: staging moments of diversity, as we had done through other terra incognita projects, though without the box-ticking cynicism that New Labour policies for the arts had fostered (Wallinger and Warnock 2000; Jelinek 2013). Having said this, the eight allotmenters reflect age, gender, sexuality and ethnic diversity in a way that any publicly funded body could proudly boast and at times this mix was somewhat forced: at one stage, it seemed all too easy to ask yet another woman to have an allotment but, instead, and slightly self-consciously, we chose the apparently riskier option of inviting a (white, heterosexual) man into our fold.

Outreach projects have included projects with young mothers from Coram Fields Trust, London, Bangladeshi young people from London Borough of Tower Hamlets and members of London Borough of Newham Mental Health Trust user groups.

Each of these projects, in their own ways, were not only appreciated by the participants as instances of access to ordinarily restricted or unattainable experiences but, more importantly, from our point of view, each of the projects did something new and innovative within their type. For example, the Bengali young people were a group of Bollywood dance students, and our project, *Bolly-woods*, brought them in contact with ideas of environmentalism and ignited reflection, memory and discussion with their own families about an agricultural heritage 'back home'. This then fed into a new dance choreographed and performed at a local arts centre.<sup>3</sup>

A different type of diversity is enacted and explored at the annual event Moot Point. Moot Point focuses on process, on being there, in that space, with those people, at that time. Different people, largely strangers to each other, are invited each year to propose a subject to 'moot'. The subject is then interrogated through a variety of practices and disciplines. There are practical engagements and discussions on the subject; different people lead the discussions, 'mooting' for ten minutes, after which time discussion is opened up to the group as a whole and the mooter is gently interrogated. In 2009, through Moot Point we interrogated the idea of utopia; in 2010, it was string theory or 'difficult science'; in 2011, revolution; in 2012, failure. Moot Point in particular is the project that most overtly brings together making and thinking, foregrounding methodologies common to contemporary art practice. It typically involves academics and nonacademics, scientists and artists, in an attempt at a type of interdisciplinary dialogue and operating within the rules of art practice.

The main inclusive event to facilitate human-nonhuman engagement is the monthly conservation days, although less mediated, more personal engagements also occur when engaging via the allotments. The monthly conservation days, to which a wider range of people and theoretically the general public are invited, are advertised on a few websites, including the Trust of Conservation Volunteers and the BBC's 'Things to do' activities. The days usually involve encounters with plant species, and usually we are chopping them down or digging them up, and sometimes, more rarely, we plant them. For many in our group with our previous ideas fixed from road-protest activism and antilogging protest, where cutting down trees is seen as an aggressive and destructive act, this type of engagement with nature seemed brutal and contrary to our core values in attempting ethical engagements. It took many practical conservation courses and a leap of faith to believe in coppicing (which seems like chopping down whole swathes of trees). It was even harder to believe in the ethics of digging up whole species just because they were alien or invasive. The racist or xenophobic rhetorical overtone of this practice is apparent, and it has been described by social scientists (Warren 2007) and scientists (Carlton 1996) and explored by artists such as Erika Tan (*In-Situ*, 2003: site-specific artwork in which an 'invasive' bamboo species was introduced to the English 'native' environment of the Forest of Dean, Gloucestershire).

These shifting understandings are present within scholarly communities concerned with ecology (Simberloff 2003) and debated internally within the project.

There are no simple answers and no 'good practice' that is always already 'good'. We have reconsidered herbicide use, cutting down trees, using piped clean water for uses in addition to human consumption and even the use of hydrocarbons as fuels. Lines drawn in the sand have blown away with the winds of new knowledge and experience, and, yet, we remember that they existed and where they were. We have beliefs, values and standards that we are trying to achieve, and no question is settled for all time. We are not travelling in a direction from bad to good, from complete ignorance to outright knowledge; instead it is a continuing dialogue where uneasy, temporary settlements are made.

Anthropologists Bhatti and Church write that gardens permit 'opportunities and possibilities in relation to nature that may not exist elsewhere either in the rest of the home or in public spaces' (2001: 380). For those without gardens in the urban environment, opportunities for engaging with nonhuman others, both flora and fauna, are mediated through authorities, or they are passive, occurring through parks or zoos for example. In the city, there are also unexpected and unwanted encounters with nonhuman others, with what must be perceived as pests given the conditions of city living: rats, mice, flies, bedbugs, fleas. Because all of the allotment holders live in flats in central London with little or no outside area, for each of us, the allotments at *The Field* fulfil those opportunities for relations with nature that are active, unmediated and not entirely dominated by those feelings of intrusion, trespass and threat that pests inspire. Pests also occur in the context of gardening, and, similar to anthropologist Cathrine Degnen's informants (2009), most of us who have allotments at *The Field* speak about the allotment experience using human tropes including demonizing the unwanted, nurturing the desirable and attributing intentionality and sentience to plants and other nonhuman animals including spiders, ants, slugs and snails. Even those who have read permaculture tracts and agree with its principles or who have a self-consciousness about any tendency towards 'purification' tend to view some plants and animals favourably and others as destructive aliens, unwanted interlopers or, more charitably, as vagabonds. Some admire or curse these animals and plants for what we perceive is their nature.

One rule is that we garden our allotments organically. As far as we're aware that means that no one uses pesticides or fertilizer except for compost, made onsite or bought, although other choices could be made within the letter of organic law. Organic pesticides exist, including the universally acceptable liquid soap formulations and sticky insect traps, particularly for fruit trees, and, at the more contentious end of the spectrum, Monsanto's glyphosate has been understood as a permissible herbicide in some circumstances by some parts of the organic industry. The lack of herbicide and pesticide use is thus far an unexamined consensus across the allotmenters, although in early 2012, consequent of some hot discussion, a paraffin-burning flame-thrower was bought and used twice against some of our abundant nettles (and everything else living within the nettles). This attempt at controlling certain species was unsuccessful, but it was successful as a team sport and a treat for visitors. It may

be repeated again next year as the issue of 'weed control' hasn't shifted for those who understand allotment-gardening in these terms.

Horticulturally, there are distinct differences between the allotmenters. Some seek advice from traditional authorities including television experts, some have been on Royal Horticultural Society courses and others have an active interest in permaculture principles. Most maintain an uneasy admixture while balancing principle with the practicalities of gardening approximately thirty-five miles away from home. The rules of the artwork state that each participant is autonomous and can make free choices within the confines of their allotment while also abiding by the overarching rule that each must engage ethically with the other, which is generally glossed by all as 'organic'. Tensions have arisen not only in discussions about how to treat the commons 'organic'. Tensions have arisen not only in discussions about how to treat the commons and areas around each individual allotment, but simply because there is a tendency for each of us to feel our understanding of gardening, food, and nature is the right one. To state the obvious: an ethical engagement with the Other is easiest when there are no tensions. When there is no palpable tension, when the Other is no longer other in a contested way, we are released to imagine they are the same, if temporarily. It is when the Other asserts his or her Otherness that the project's Levinasian ideals are tested.

### Levinas and an Ethical Engagement with the Other

Simon Critchely, Levinas scholar, explicates the issue at the heart of the problem of knowledge, ethics and engagement with others:

[Philosophy tells itself a story which affirms the link between individuality and universality by embodying that link either in the person of Socrates or by defining the (European) philosopher as 'the functionary of humanity,' but where at the same time universality is delimited or confined within one particular tradition, namely the Graeco-European. (Critchely 1999 [1992]: 128)

We Europeans cannot appreciate, even see, the face of the Other because our entire knowledge base is built on Greek *philia*, on 'the exchange of the Same with the Same' (Critchely 1999 [1992]: 260). In practice, our horror of the Other is transformed into Orientalist and primitivist fantasy, where the Other is understood and engaged with within the terms (positive and negative) of the same.

In limited space we cannot possibly do justice to Levinas's philosophy, let alone point out where the aims of *The Field* project and the engagements fostered through it veer from his ideas, but the following is a point to note. Levinas does not use the term 'Other' in the ways that disciplines like gender studies, queer theory, art and anthropology tend to use it. 'Other' does not here refer to everyone who is not European, male, heterosexual and so forth—that is, the dominant or privileged side of an existing dichotomy. Other is everyone who is not the self,

irrespective of social tagging or apparent proximity. His philosophy describes the difficulties of engagement even on this level, between two selves—that is, the self and the one who is not the self—and this difficulty is irrespective of custom, culture, language or position in an existing hierarchy.

The discipline of philosophy in the Anglo-American tradition has, at its conditions of knowledge production, the imperative to abstract ideas from their social context. This is done because, as Levinas (1981) points out, the test for the philosophical knowledge or truth lies in its universal validity. A thing can only be true in philosophy if it is true at all times and in all spaces, and today many philosophers approach this disciplinary value with great degrees of subtlety. In this sense, philosophy seems to be the polar opposite of anthropology. Social anthropology embeds knowledge in the local, in social relations that are manifested in particular places and times. Extrapolations are treated with caution in social anthropology, while in philosophy extrapolation within the rules of logic is the very foundation for knowledge. *The Field* is an attempt at combining these modes of knowledge within the rules of contemporary art making by both interrogating ideas in abstraction and with their local manifestation as it is experienced. Our project's methodology can be phrased as 'philosophical praxis' (while acknowledging that philosophers would likely find this paradoxical): we act on ideas, values or perceptions that are true in a philosophical sense, in that they must stand up to a salvo of hypothetical and theoretical assaults, but the values, ideas or perceptions are also only true if there is empirical, lived evidence, as fraught and contingent as this necessarily is. We navigate these values with knowledge of the history of art and in reference to other art experiments.

### Explaining the Levinasian Other

Alana Jelinek: My aim for *The Field* is to understand just how embedded is the preponderance for hierarchy within a culture of the same: ideas of inferiority and superiority, better and worse, one species instead of another, one being preferred over another, one human or culture over another, one time period over another. Levinasian ideas that 'we are born into a world of social relationships which we have not chosen and which we cannot ignore' (Hutchens 2004: 19) underpin this project not just because Levinas's observations are interesting philosophically, but because they are empirically true.

When I read a piece by Marilyn Strathern, I was struck by how well it seemed to demonstrate Levinas's point about European or Western knowledge and its presumptions to universality with all its subsequent, inevitable unethical engagements. It concerns a negotiation between a mining company in Papua New Guinea and a local pressure group (PPG).

One side acknowledged that the knowledge set of the other existed even though they did not believe in it: '[L]ocal people for their part "don't believe in science."' The other side, rooted in Graeco-European systems of thought, 'found there was no

scientific case to answer'. The disagreement from the point of view of the Western mining company could only be resolved by a universal truth: either there was damaging to the local environment, or there was not. The Papuans, by contrast, were able to countenance a different type of negotiation, not dependent on agreeing or on demolishing disagreements. Strathern goes on to observe:

[T]he kind of 'accountability' to which the Papua New Guineans [PPG] subscribed does not require agreement about what each side wants from the transaction; each may have their agenda. But the PPG did wish to make that lack of agreement explicit. And if they were forced to accept the CM [mining company] story, then it should be acknowledged that they were going along with it for the sake of a settlement, not because they had been convinced. (Strathern 2004: 94)

Each of us within *The Field* project, like the mining company, understand ourselves and our engagement with each other unthinkingly from within our own paradigm. We know that other people know different things, but we act without reference to those other paradigms, both known and unknown, and cannot imagine a form of negotiation that can account for more than one truth.

Each of us has suffered from an inability to negotiate across differences in values and culture. We demonstrate an inability to negotiate different horticultural knowledges and priorities, which has meant that we successfully ignore differences in maintaining autonomous zones, despite the knowledge of interconnectedness of each allotment and with wider field environment. This imagined truce enacted through imagined autonomy breaks down when we argue over definitions of 'weed' and 'pest' and strategies for their control in the shared, neutral or wider environments.

We are each of us sure, to varying degrees, that our knowledge is right and that therefore it should predominate, informing all our collective actions. An example of this is that we tend to imagine that the noncultivated spaces (fields two, three and four) are a type of *terra nullius*, always available for our designs and without any reference to an 'Other', human or otherwise. So far, we have lacked the skills to negotiate with other humans as different from ourselves, let alone other nonhuman species. There have been times when individuals have imposed their vision or their action without reference to any others. The only other strategy has been to withdraw completely. Neither of these strategies can be said to be an ethical engagement with the Other.

I use Marilyn Strathern's description of the encounter between a Western mining company and a group of people from Papua New Guinea because it demonstrates neatly the inability of we who are brought up within the Graeco-Western tradition to begin to approach the Other in terms other than our own. I do not imagine, on the other hand, that the Papuans have an ease of communication, or an inherently ethical engagement, with the Other. I am not saying the Papuans themselves either avoid or suffer similar pitfalls to those inherent in Graeco-European thought. I do not know.

I do not wish to fall into the traps of primitivism by imagining the Papuans have an ease, be it cultural or innate, where I do not. Instead, I wish to observe Levinas's point that it is at the very core of our Graeco-European knowledge that we have an inherent problem of imposing the self as the same and attempting an engagement with the Other as other. The point of anthropology to me is that it attempts to create an understanding of a culture in its own terms, while also understanding that this may be impossible because we can only understand a culture, an Other, through our own cultural framework. This is my understanding of an ethical engagement with the Other informed by, but also in an extrapolation of, the philosophy of Levinas. If we are to experience anything, it is that there are limitations to our understanding due to our philosophical and knowledge origins.

### Levinas and 'We'

Writing 'we' throughout this chapter has contained a slippage between we, the authors, and we, the participants of *The Field*. Having written 'we' throughout this chapter, some qualification is required in an attempt to do some justice to the philosophy of Levinas. More accurately, 'I plus at least one other person in the group' should have been written, and even then, it should read 'I plus my understanding of what at least one other person in the group said at the time'. The inclusion of all implied by the word 'we' is unethical, in addition to a misrepresentation of events as they occurred. By using the term 'we', even self-consciously, the difficulties of an ethical engagement with the Other are exemplified. Moreover, this Other is not just any human other but friends, colleagues, and still we trample on the possibility of perceiving them as different to ourselves, instead imagining us in a relationship that is side-by-side and not face-to-face. Hutchens writes: 'Levinas is wary of the word "we", which is the original instrument of the ontology of power, in which individual selves stand side-by-side, not face-to-face. "We" is not a vehicle of justice, but a result of injustice, that is, there is no collective moral consciousness that is not initially a response to injustice' (2004: 105)

*The Field* project was started in 2008 without articulating its Levinasian aims to anyone. In the beginning, Jelinek didn't describe it as art either. We told friends, colleagues and fellow activists about those aspects of the project we imagined would be interesting to them: conservation, allotments, its proximity to Stansted airport and so forth, but we never attempted to tell participants about the project's aims. This was partly to attempt an ethical engagement on another level: to allow people to have the field experience they wanted without reference to another's aims or understanding. We believed we knew of the needs and desires of our fellow London-based ecoactivists and wanted to allow for the diversity of their needs and perceptions.

*The Field* is an art experiment that self-consciously explores ethics. It may or may not, in itself, be ethical. The aim of *The Field* project is to imagine difference in

a nonhierarchical way, including differences across human and nonhuman species, and to engage ethically with these Others understood as other. What we have tried to describe here is how difficult is this aim, that face-to-face human relationships are fraught with difficulties in terms of responsibility. *The Field* is an attempt at understanding and appreciating those differences in a way that is nonhierarchical.

## Notes

1. Institutional critique is an important strand within contemporary art practice since the 1960s. In summary, it is the artistic practice of reflecting critically on the institutional underpinnings in a site-specific artwork. The various institutional norms and practices that have been the subject of institutional critique include the funding of art institutions, art world normative structures, art world hierarchies and exclusions and the assumptions which maintain these.
2. Allotments are primarily a British phenomenon. They are areas of land set aside for growing food, which are subdivided into plots for individuals. Beginning in the late 1800s primarily as a means to supplement the diet of working-class families in urban areas, today they are also a middle-class pursuit and often understood within discourses of sustainability, food security and environmentalism.
3. To contrast hand tools with powered tools, power tools tend to have a distancing effect on the user. With the vibrations, noise and smells that are the by-product of powered tools, the latter type of technology tends to create a distance between a person and the object with which he or she is working because by-products must be actively ignored or controlled so the feeling of extending one's body through the tool becomes lost in the confusion of other sensations. In addition, the swiftness and harshness of the impact of power tools makes a mindful engagement between human, tool and tree or grassland more difficult to achieve.
4. 1 April 1960 the Letters of Administration of the estate of The Honourable Dorothy Wyndham Paget (died intestate) granted to the Honourable Lady Olive Cecilia Baillie who gifted it to Sir Gawaine George Baillie on 31 March 1965.
5. 'Bolly-woods' performed 1 July 2010, The Brady Arts Centre, 192–6 Hanbury Street, London, E1 5HU.

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