

***DOWSER*, notes on  
artists' moving image  
in Scotland.**

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**5.**

**\_BEATING\_**

**Seán Elder**

**Edited by Marcus Jack**

DOWSER

Issue 5 (Summer 2021)

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Frontispiece: Charlotte Prodger, *BRIDGIT*, 2016.

Back Cover: Charlotte Prodger, *SaF05*, 2019.

All images courtesy of the artist, Kendall Koppe, Glasgow,  
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**DOWSER**



**DOWSER** is a series of newly commissioned essays, interview transcripts and archival materials which makes available, for the first time, a collated set of resources from which we might begin to plot a history of artists' moving image in Scotland. Conceived as the necessary groundwork for a critically underreported field, this series hopes to share fragments, positions and testimonies that articulate the development of a now ubiquitous artform with a vivid and unique history in Scotland.

This fifth issue comprises a new work of autofiction, *\_BEATING\_*, by curator and writer Seán Elder. Departing from personal experiences of rural labour in the North East of Scotland, Elder turns to the recent work of artist Charlotte Prodger who grew up in the same area—where I too was born—to communicate an intimate set of relations between queerness, class and the landscape of *Roinn a' Mhonaidh*.

Brought into seasonal work as a grouse beater by his family, Elder was at once enlisted in the negotiation of a harsh terrain and a suite of behavioural codes. Leaving both behind, to some degree, years later, he remembers late-night viewings of Prodger's trilogy of single-screen works: *Stonemollan Trail* (2015), *BRIDGIT* (2016), and *SaF05* (2019). An index of her deserved ascendancy, the first was commissioned for the Margaret Tait Award 2014, the second claimed the Turner Prize 2018, and the third represented Scotland at the Venice Biennale in 2019. Taking their namesakes—an historic coffin road on the West Coast, a Neolithic feminine deity, and the last maned lioness documented in the Okavango Delta—as symbolic cores, each is

orbited by fragments of autobiography, quotation and myth in the form of voice and image. In this shared structure, atom-like, each particle articulates the other.

Prodger's trilogy commonly imparts a queer reading onto its subject, but in exchange something of the self is confessed, some privacy is forfeited. Each of these works forms a mutualistic pact, combining body, histories (personal or otherwise), landscape and metacommentary in a whole that is greater than the sum of its parts. So too does Elder's writing. As a corollary to this offering, honest and deeply felt, he motions a counter to enduring artistic representations of Scotland's northern landscape of moors and glens as a romantic, elemental or empty expanse: these places, we mustn't forget, are as used, cruised, confused and abused as any other.

Marcus Jack, Editor



Charlotte Prodger, *Saf05*, 2019. Courtesy of the artist,  
Kendall Koppe, Glasgow, and Hollybush Gardens, London.

**\_BEATING\_**  
Seán Elder

I was once stuck in peat. For a few minutes I was up to my waist in it. It was a small patch of bog in one of the long stretches of moorland hills that down here they'd call mountains. There was something about the height at which I was swallowed that made it less scary.

The bogs that scared me most were the long and flat stretches of Flow Country glimpsed from car windows on the way to see Grandmother's family. The great expanses of flatness bordered by mountains far away in the distance seemed more damaging in the way they swallowed people up. You hit water and then, nothing. There was no undulating rhythm to the land there, no hill contours on which you could find yourself. Just a flatness which somehow made its vistas even more dramatic. Even more terrifying. I imagined falling under the surface and being discovered many years later, lying in the underneath, waiting.

Where I was stuck I wasn't scared. At least not after the first few moments. There were crags and rocks and boundless heather that reassured me for some reason that I wasn't going to sink down

endlessly. The Flow Country could swallow me, but here I had hills and footsteps and voices near me.

We were there with plastic flags. I was still holding onto mine, stuck. They were small things, with a plastic sheet attached to a wooden handle, the noise of the *ffffrrRRRRRP-PPPPPPPPP* against the wind was the key. It was like a cracking whip. Those cracks sent the birds further along the ridge from where we were to the shooting butts. It was there that people with unimaginable wealth sat and stood waiting, in tweeds and with flasks of tea, coffee, often something stronger.

They had people, *loaders*, there to reload their arms when needed. They were paid more than we were and rightly so. It was a skilled labour to both load a gun for a toff and, I would imagine, to hold your tongue around them for several days in a row. For the niceties they were also tipped well. The others, people with labrador retrievers and spaniels, waited patiently for the beginning of each drive.

This was the moment an entire industry existed for: *The Glorious Twelfth*. Not the Glorious Twelfth that meant a different thing, a kind of horror to my Irish Catholic family, that begins in July, but instead the one that begins in August; the first day of the shooting season. Everything led up to the first few shots, if the skies were full with prey for those shooting it meant a good day. That was what mattered—the shots and the ones that followed. These shots were fired by landowners and those rich or influential enough to either be invited there or to pay for themselves to be part of the party. Everything was lined up for this to happen. The grouse population had to be doing well, dependent on the activity of the keepers: shooting, maintenance, their burning of the heather moors at different times of year—this always came to some kind of peak in April. I would walk from home to the beach and cross the bridges at the river, and on hills in the distance plumes of smoke would be visible. I used to think it was the hills' cold breath. There was shooting year-round, hares and rabbits and pests that carried diseases that could harm the bird population, reduced by previous

shoots, then deer in stalks. Then there were the poisonings. You always heard about them. Sometimes they made the paper, and if they didn't make the paper they were circulated freely by loose-lipped locals whose mouths would suddenly grow tight as soon as any authority figures were involved. Dead golden eagles and buzzards, poisoned, trapped.

These years, months of preparation and then the morning. A keeper describing the route to young people on the ridge. Spitting and shouting through the noise of the wind, gesturing towards a sight somewhere in front of you that wasn't exactly visible, with clouds and mist eating up the land a few feet from the group of you. An arm and hand extended into the grey you were about to walk through.

*That way. Stay in line.*

And so, I walked. I'd done it, beating, many times before. I didn't particularly enjoy it and in fact part of me resented all of it. From the expectation that I would do it to earn some money over a summer I'd prefer to spend reading, fulfilling

this dual expectation of masculinity and family duty, when the smell of the heather and sweat on wax jackets would stick with me for a day and a night afterwards. So too did the glances of young men, the thoughts I knew they were thinking, the words unsaid about the way I held myself or the way I moved. But I always did it. To not to do so was an outing in itself, and an outing was the last thing I needed. So, I'd brought myself there, made it through the first few drives of the day and just for a few moments found myself stuck in the bog.

I remember hearing the wet marsh almost slurp as my legs slid into it. I was wearing covered waterproof trousers and a pair of walking boots filled out with two thick socks. They were still too big for me. *You'll grow into them*, my mother had said to me, feigning that she had got the wrong size accidentally, when I knew that she really just needed them to last. I expected to feel soaked but didn't. Something about the porosity of the marsh held the water back from rushing all at once. Writing now the squelch sound of the peat swallowing me reminds me only of a slow-motion fuck. Of a cock or a fist lubed up

and pushed into, and out of, and into, a waiting, patient hole. The sound connects formally in a way to a quicker and repeated pattern of similar sounds that I heard the first time I found myself in the darkroom of a bar, with men fucking, grunting, breathing heavily, not far from my own nervous body. I know there are some men who like to be in peat, soil and slurry, perhaps this is why I now connect them.

I was stuck there only for a few moments, but when I heard shouts and screams of *KEEP IN LINE* I remember panicking about rupturing the imaginary boundary that was moving slowly across the *monadh*. The line of beaters, if it broke, gave opportunity for the birds to fly away from, instead of towards the rich. With a gap in the noises of cracking and flapping flags, I heard the keeper's voice again and I cannot remember what he said. I wondered how to get out briefly, my legs felt like lead under the surface but above the ground everything was moving in real-time, if not faster. I saw the line of bodies moving slowly away, as I grew further from it. I leaned forward, my weight pushing against the pressure of my trapping.

I felt air escape where my back had once been, and with this gasp from the earth I climbed out, *weightless*.



Charlotte Prodger, *SaF05*, 2019. Courtesy of the artist, Kendall Koppe, Glasgow, and Hollybush Gardens, London.

## INTER

Water defines Scotland, not just in its infamous rain, but in the forms of the land that were eroded by rivers, carved by glaciers, and where there still rest lochs and lochans in the scooped-out hollows of mountain sides. The deepest interior of the North West Highlands in particular is never that far from the coast. The firths of the East Coast and the long sea-lochs of the West are only stopped from meeting one another by a small, mountainous waist of land. And further north and further east, here, the water takes the form of small pools on a shallow, flat stretch. From the sky the land might look like pock-marked skin: lesions, repeated patterns, a trypophobe's worst nightmare. I look at the bogs as we cross them on thin roads, water on either side, and I remember

watching a documentary about Isle de Jean Charles, a bayou community in southern Louisiana along the Gulf of Mexico, where the networked coastal villages are slowly being lost to the Gulf. The Gulf expands, swallowing up the coastal wetlands, eroding and changing them irreversibly. The freshwater of the rivers, bayous and wetlands become transformed with salt. Drilling for oil and gas in the area has made this geologically slow process much quicker. The land is less red and more green, the pools probably warmer, the sky thicker with humidity but the long snaking lines of road bordered so closely by water remind me of the Flow Country.

There are differences but sometimes when I find myself sitting in the landscapes of home I wonder if I could be anywhere.



Charlotte Prodger, *BRIDGIT*, 2016. Courtesy of the artist, Kendall Koppe, Glasgow, and Hollybush Gardens, London.

## THE DRIVE

I am remembering times I have encountered Charlotte Prodger's work. In a building in Glasgow I had never been inside before, just along from the now burnt out corpse of the Mackintosh, small monitors on stands and cables, serpentine across the floor. Another time, at Inverleith House, with monitors of text and a voice reading letters that refused one sound, heavier and thicker cables than the one before, or maybe after, the chronologies are lost to me now. But I remember moving through this elegant space, feeling at once out of place and trying to work out how it was to walk through these spaces with confidence and ease, as well as comforted or at least drawn to these objects and their many voices. The girth of the cable, exciting. Then, mostly recently, late at night or early in the morning, a lockdown. What number we were on then or what number we are on now, I am not sure. It might have been recent, or it might have been long ago, but I remember booze on my breath, all the wine in the house

drank, only whisky left. So, with Laphroaig, peaty in my mouth, I described the closeness of the hills sometimes, when they filled the windows of the car, that feeling of intimacy within them, a small car passing through them. And then we watched it, images of the Okavango Delta, and the Drumochter Pass, close and snowy and with scars and stretch marks on the sides of each of the mountains you passed. Watching again recently, to write this, it is recommended that headphones are used for the sound. And I remember being sat there late at night, early in the morning, with my housemate's speakers on either side, with rich sounds filling space and being close to us, like the hills you can pass through.

The sounds across this trilogy of films that ends with *SaF05*, preceded by *BRIDGIT* and *Stonemollan Trail*, are layered, evocative and return often. At points it is muffled conversations behind the camera, clothes and movement filling the audio with *ffffRRRRRPPPPPs*. In *Stonemollan Trail* we hear two people talking behind the camera as Charlotte's hands shift the camera swiftly in different directions around

a loch and surrounding foliage. In *SaF05* we hear some quiet rumblings of a conversation, something technical being discussed as a drone shifts further and further from a termite mound, with silvery tree roots snaking across the dusty soil of their surrounds. You can feel the heat not just from the images but the ambient noises surrounding this almost-heard dialogue.

Similarly, Charlotte's feet walk across sheets of ice and snow on rock, pock-marked and ugly snowy rock, creating sharp cracks and crunches, quickly accompanied by a droning bagpipe, and a detailing of her—or at least someone's—experience in a North East kirk. The smallest details of frosted tips, flicks of a cigarette by young men visiting the church, and a general sense of somewhere, the Cold War rumbling on, are spoken of slowly. Yet with the movement and rhythm enfolded in these works, they always bring more questions than answers, more possibilities than closed doors. And yet Charlotte is honest in her remembering, and the instability of it all, *I don't remember because it was thirty years ago*. To not trust your own memories perfectly is to perhaps delve deeper

into their own material reality. This is both a tension and a pleasure within Charlotte's work. These dialogues and conversations are not only whole and beautiful things within themselves—stories, narratives, anecdotes—but they are also a component of these larger things. The films have a quality of leading you from the very small to the very large, a story to a history. These rhythms take us from images of landscapes, textured musical scratches like Joe McPhee's *Cosmic Love*, intimate letters from artists, curators and writers sent to Charlotte, and readings that sound like recollections, recollections that sound like readings, stone circles, lesbian separatism, junctions between streets where the artist once lived. It is the diversity of the materials at her disposal that make these films such a beautiful and complex thing to engage with, as well as making the weight of doing justice to them much heavier. The forms of correspondence and address that are brought together do not themselves hold one defining narrative, and neither does their being together across these works.

I'm asking how it is to write about something that feels so \_\_\_\_\_.

Or just, feels so.

\*

This is neither the time nor the place for an expansive or comprehensive study of what we might term *Queer Rurality*, an impulse within recent contemporary art, and particularly within artists' film to link queer subjectivities with landscapes, instead of the metropolis, the usual and assumed home of queer life. This is partially because of the constraints of the size, the smallness of what I am writing, but it is also because I want to talk about things which have made echoes with my own understanding of what rural life is or might be. This primarily is because not all ruralities are the same. Just as the audio of Charlotte's work sometimes takes the form of clear-cut dialogue and other times ambient noise—almost sculptural in its dimension—the ruralities tackled hold similar complexities. Whilst other artists might look to being within the landscape as a simple act

of escapism, or of it as a place with liberatory potential, Charlotte's landscapes are difficult to conceive of as just places of rest or repair, they are instead as alive, as worked, as part of human activity as the city. Whether it is her blurry image caught in the reflection of a train window as it passes along the North East coast, or the aforementioned voices muttering behind a camera having walked through snowy, frozen gorse, Charlotte never at any point tries to remove herself from these places, to make herself invisible with the intention of showing these hills, mountains, deltas, expansive plains, without using her body. Her position within these spots as observer and active agent are not mutually exclusive.

Whilst much has been made of Charlotte's use of the iPhone camera as appendage or prosthesis, we must also think about what it means for this extension of her to be both documenting and documented through a history of the spaces she installs herself within, however momentarily. I re-read earlier in this text when I describe hills having stretch marks, and this is my weakness. I am desperate to personify these landscapes

somehow. But within Charlotte's works this isn't necessary, because she presents to us a landscape that is alive because it is peopled, because it is not empty, because it has had many years of human and non-human life making its mark on it. It is alive because there is life in it and on it.

The ways in which rural life appears within Charlotte's work is instantly recognisable to many who have lived lives in places like these. Across this trilogy of films, the artist describes different stages of childhood, adolescence, maybe early adulthood, it is hard exactly to say, but they all bear hallmarks of rural pubescence at the least. Sexual exploration emerging through the personal ads in the backs of local newspapers; experimenting with drugs as an escape of monotony; dull work undertaken in local homes and castles that speak of class as it exists outwith the city proper. Whilst within these memories there is beauty, a clarity of thinking that draws lines between personal experience and the worlds of others. When Charlotte talks (reads) about her (Samuel Delaney's) cock and a sexual encounter passing from body to body to

body by the waterside, where vehicles stop and men get out to fuck, it is not the waterfronts of New York that I think of, but instead a number of the images shown to me before come to mind. Now, writing about it, I think of the *standing stones lesbian separatism*, and imagine a kinship between Delaney's cruising spots and the gathering places of picts, with their rocks set against Aberdeenshire's purple heather, I think of the coyness of the maned lionesses, creeping back slowly into the grey granite of black and white grainy footage, and Charlotte's attempts to capture them. The transformative way that she weaves her own life and the lives of others together is a gesture almost sculptural in its handling. It makes the spaces that her gaze (or voice, or hand) falls upon somehow ready to be thought of as the site of an infinite number of potential acts.

Despite this beauty, this incredible artistry and gentle hand of filmmaking, there is little romanticism in her films. Neither is there much pessimism. Instead every component and whole part of these films is presented in its complicated form, rather than being made complicated by

the artist. I find myself again and again feeling bodily reactions to Charlotte's work. Sometimes it is in a moment of echo between memories and embodied rememberings.

When Charlotte details a girl's mother making pavlova for the Laird, *because it's his favourite*, I think of my socialist great-grandmother, working at the stately home of our local Laird, in what she called gleefully *the easiest job she ever had*, with porridge and a cooked breakfast every morning, no less. These specifics of class and feminine work that others forget still linger in these places. The landscapes are treated here with just as much interest and diversity as the metropolis. We see landscapes and their being home to ancient stone circles, we pass oil rigs on the Cromarty Firth, with snowy hills behind them—a spot I know well but where my father tells me to visit, calling it *beautiful*—and I wonder how it can be beautiful with these huge structures being brought in from the North Sea for repair and renewal, these huge man-made things which feel so much more man-made than the nearby mountains, also *made*, often by man, and always by animals, by nature. And yet despite their

metal, their huge scale, their grime, their harm, their violences, they do hold a kind of beauty that both confuses and scares.

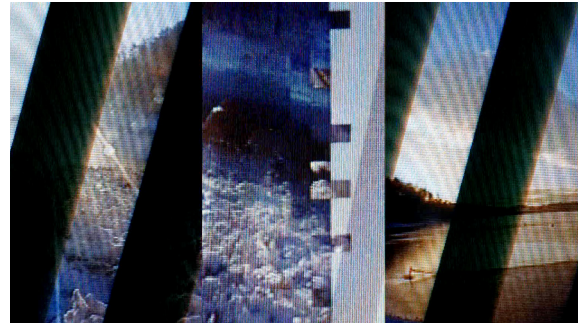
All land is relative and what here they call mountains there they call hills. I have a familiarity with grouse moors, endless swathes of land owned by individuals, and whose borders are traversed by those in caravans in search of what they might also call 'wilderness' when what they mean is 'emptiness.' Nothing is truly empty in the landscape, nor are their presentations in Charlotte's work. The land is home to maned lionesses, pagans, picts. It is used for gatherings, for pissing and fucking in, and perhaps in its most horrifying form, for weapons. The military's use of natural environments offers another process of gazing and wanting. The lurking and manoeuvring of one submarine and the latent, desiring waiting of the other, moving slickly through lochs and obscured from view by mountainsides, within which the United Kingdom's nuclear weapons are stored. The way these subs use the black loch to hide themselves as they move along, how sensors embedded in the bottom of the loch track magnetic strength

that augments with maintenance at the base reminds me of the types of rock in some mountains in Scotland that send your compass haywire—corrupting its ability to find north.

I'm wondering when and how to finish this small bit of writing about a number of works I hold so close, by an artist who I admire very much and maybe it is best to leave this here. Ending hopefully not briskly, but with things unresolved. Unable, unwilling to find north.

**Seán Elder** is a curator and writer currently based in Birmingham, originally from the Scottish Highlands. Elder works with artists to develop events, exhibitions and text for organisations which have previously included: Jerwood Arts, London; BALTIC 39, Newcastle upon Tyne; Grand Union, Birmingham; and LUX Scotland, Glasgow. Previously Associate Curator at Grand Union, and Writer in Residence at Cooper Gallery, Dundee, Elder was named the inaugural recipient of the Stuart Croft Curatorial Award in 2020 to support a new project, The Birmingham Critical Film Forum.

**Charlotte Prodger** is a Glasgow-based artist working with moving image, writing, sculpture and printmaking. She was the winner of the 2018 Turner Prize and represented Scotland at the 2019 Venice Biennale. She received the 2017 Paul Hamlyn Award and the 2014 Margaret Tait Award. She is represented by Kendall Koppe, Glasgow and Hollybush Gardens, London. Forthcoming solo exhibitions include Kunstmuseum Winterthur and Mercer Union, Toronto. Recent solo exhibitions include *Charlotte Prodger SaF05*, Stedelijk, Amsterdam (2020); *SaF05*, Scottish Pavilion, Venice Biennale (2019); *Colon Hyphen Asterix*, Hollybush Gardens (2018); *BRIDGIT/Stonemollan Trail*, Bergen Kunsthall; *Subtotal*, SculptureCenter, New York (2017); *BRIDGIT*, Hollybush Gardens, London; *Charlotte Prodger*, Kunstverein Düsseldorf (2016); *8004-8019*, Spike Island, Bristol; *Stonemollan Trail*, Temple Bar Gallery, Dublin (2015); *Markets* (with The Block), Chelsea Space, London; *Nephatiti*, Glasgow International (2014); *Percussion Biface 1-13*, Studio Voltaire, London; *Colon Hyphen Asterix*, Intermedia CCA, Glasgow (2012) and *Handclap/Punchhole*, Kendall Koppe, Glasgow (2011).



Charlotte Prodger, *Stonemollan Trail*, 2015. Courtesy of the artist, Kendall Koppe, Glasgow, and Hollybush Gardens, London.

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REVELATIONS

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