Black Rock is a multi-component practice research project that posed the question: how do you translate the experience of rock-climbing to an audience on the ground? The project was commissioned by Kendal Mountain Festival and The University of Leeds to celebrate the 30th anniversary of first ascent of 'Indian Face' with the technical grade 'E9 6c', one of the most significant feats of international rock-climbing history by elite climber Johnny Dawes.

<u>а</u>с Х

It explored and revealed the historical and cultural context of climbing in Wales and the UK, seeking to bridge two distinct audiences of climbing professionals and outdoor enthusiasts with non-climber and non-specialist individuals within an immersive theatrical context. It sought to translate, capture and represent the complex embodied pursuit of climbing. The piece addressed the limited context of live performance to tell mountain narratives. Black Rock explored notions of embodied translation through its immersive presentation and thematically challenged conventional masculine narratives of mountain experience documented in historical literature through the use of a lead female writer and two female lead dancers/partners.

The project was developed through mixed research methods, including detailed site surveys of Snowdon via research visits with specialist mountaineers, performance scholars and site-specific artists. It drew on one-on-one interviews with over 20 climbers, movement workshops with dancers and climbers, and historical and geological research edited into a newly commissioned script (Claire Carter), an 18-channel sound composition (James Bulley), choreography (Carlos Pons Guerra) and dramaturgy (Jonathan Pitches). As lead artist-researcher I directed, designed and coordinated the project and its dissemination.

Black Rock culminated in a new 50-minute performance event at stage@leeds (2017), that combined custom immersive design technologies (including new responsive lighting and sound array), ecological materials, multimedia design, choreographic practice and new writing.

Ø

Materials which comprise or support this submission can be found inside the box or on the USB drive ☐ embedded in the box's interior lid. Within this publication, references for components of the submission are found in the right margin using a lettering system A–I. Items marked with an * are components of the output, all other items are contextual.

- A* Documentary film: Black Rock
 Documentary □
- B* Director's cut artistic film: Black Rock
 Artistic Film □
- C* Black Rock, Unpublished Script (2017) by Claire Carter □
- D* Black Rock, Sound Mix (2017) by James Bulley □
- E Audience feedback □
- F Black Rock, Programme/Map for audience (2017) by Tessa Lyons
- G* Journal article: Shearing, David. 2019. 'Black Rock: Routes through Scenographic Translation, from Mountain Climbing to Performance', Performance Research, 24(2): 36–44
- H Display and exhibition of performance materials and documentary from exhibition at the V&A □
- I Interview on UK $\mathit{Climbing}$ website \square

David Shearing

BLACK ROCK

From Climbing to Performance

The Royal Central School of Speech and Drama, University of London BLACK ROCK: From Climbing to Performance

David Shearing

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I	Overview	4
II	Questions, aims and objectives	7
III	Context	9
IV	Methodology	11
V	Timeline	16
VI	Findings	17
VII	Bibliography	25

page

Overview

The research was situated within a larger examination of mountains and performance (Performing Mountains, a £250k AHRC-funded project led by Professor Jonathan Pitches, University of Leeds 2016–18). I led the practice research project titled *Black Rock*. The research took place between February 2017 and March 2018. *Black Rock* was presented in November 2017 with further showings of the documentary film and exhibition into March 2020.

Full Research Team

Director/Designer **David Shearing** Text Claire Carter Composition James Bulley Carlos Pons Guerra Choreography Digital Consultants Invisible Flock Dramaturge Jonathan Pitches Project Mentor Louise Ann Wilson Project Advisor Henry Iddon Climbina Mentor Johnny Dawes Production Manager Matt Sykes-Hooban Performer/Dancer Ariadna Saltó Mestre Performer/Dancer Marivi Da Silva Design Assistant Jonny Dowsett Film Maker Gavin Carver Map Artist Tessa Lyons

Black Rock is a multi-component output, comprised of:

1 Black Rock (2017), the main output. A full-length live performance event staged in Leeds to audience A-D of over 200 in November 2017.

Shearing, David. 2019. 'Black Rock: Routes through Scenographic Translation, from Mountain Climbing to Performance', in *Performance Research*, 24(2) G On Mountains, ed. by Jonathan Pitches and David Shearing, 36–44

The output is supported by contextual information. E,F,H,I

The project was funded by a Grants for the Arts award, £15,000 (Arts Council England); AHRC Fellowship funding, £10,000 and commission fee, £5000 (Kendal Mountain Festival). The overall value of the project was £55,000.

Kendal Mountain Festival is a multimillion-pound event held in the UK each year (http://www.kendalmountainfestival.com). It is one of the most diverse mountain festivals in the world with the vision 'to inspire more people to enjoy, respect and represent mountains, wilderness and their culture'. Working alongside this industry partner, we wanted to showcase the value of live performance to engage new audiences and to assess what value live experience could offer this field. The design of *Black Rock* was selected by jury for its innovation in design-led practice to be part of *Staging Places: UK Design for Performance* (2015–19) at the V&A in London between July 2019–March 2020; the exhibition has an attendance over 100,000 visitors.

II Questions, aims and objectives

The overall aims of the project were to consider how climbing can be seen as a creative act and what value live performance, specifically immersive theatre, has in telling stories of mountain-climbing culture to specialist and nonspecialist audiences. More broadly, the project engaged with mountains as places of 'great cultural importance' (Price 2015: 10). To date, performance has played a marginalised role in the articulation of mountain culture and climbing experience, evident in the lack of programming at major international festivals. Black Rock aimed to assert the value of scenographic and immersive practice, beyond established modes of literature, mountain dramas and film, to contribute to wider understanding of mountain climbing. An overarching question was formed to frame the research throughout the creative process: How do you translate the experience of rock-climbing to an audience on the ground?

The question enabled me to position immersive performance as a tool to consider the embodied pursuit of climbing and ask to what extent can you translate experience, and to test the thresholds of creative interpretation to bring about new understandings around climbing.

Further research objectives emerged throughout the process including:

- Articulating how we might counter dominant masculine narratives of mountain experience;
- Finding ways to open up the experience of climbing and mountain culture to a broader audience:

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Overview

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FIG 1 Full stage image of *Black Rock*. Audience seating is placed around a central performance walkway. Lighting, speakers, rocks, water and haze fill the space. stage@leeds, November 2017



- To bridge specialist climbing and non-specialist audiences;
- To assert the value of live performance to our industry partner Kendal Mountain Festival:
- To develop scenographic principles to invite participant participation. To engineer a new digital responsive design system that connected the light and sound together in order to capture Johnny Dawes descriptions of Clogwyn Du'r Arddu in his 2011 autobiography as 'electric' (151-2).

Context Ш

The project was situated within two core fields of study; the academic discipline of scenography and mountain culture. My research over the past five years has focused on immersive and relational encounters between participants and design. Black Rock was an extension of this deep enquiry into models of immersion through mindful engagement (2017), weather (2015) and journey and landscape (2014) set within a new contextual frame exploring the embodied pursuit of climbing. Black Rock was the culmination of my extended enquiry into audience immersion seeking to position the audience in new modes of embodied scenographic reception.

Scenography

Over the past decade, there has been a rise in immersive design-led experiences in theatre and art contexts that are inviting new modes of embodied engagement. While there has been a rise in immersive practices that often utilise an environmental frame to 'surround' and 'contain' performative and scenographic actions, theoretical perspectives on the shifting participant/space and participant/design relationships have remained largely underdeveloped. Black Rock sought to question the value of immersive design to reveal new insights both in terms of climbing but also the potential applications of scenography to engage audiences in their own embodied experiences of performance. One of the leading strategies I employed in this research was to use 'mindfulness/awareness', a concept I have developed from Varela et al. (1991) in order to consider how participants might build and sustain relational encounters with design material (Shearing 2015). 'Mindfulness/awareness' offers a distinct mode of embodied reflection that brings the mindful participant into a conscious self-awareness with



FIG 2 Central walkway filled with water and Yorkshire gritstone. Panoramic image of Snowdon is projected onto a screen

DAVID SHEARING BLACK ROCK

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scenography. In the case of *Black Rock*, the audience selects, engages, moves, reads, touches and reflects, a process that is mirrored directly in the experience of rock climbing. *Black Rock* therefore can be seen as a theoretical and physical positioning of the audience directly in relation to cultural activity of climbing, opening up new possibilities of scenographic reception and engagement.

The nature of translating the experience of climbing — the core research question — has been further articulated in a journal article. Here, I present a five-fold theoretical articulation as to the ways in which the translation of embodied practices with scenography might operate in performance.

Rock Climbing and Culture

Black Rock drew largely on the historical significance of UK rock-climbing and its international importance to the climbing community through Johnny Dawes, an elite climber who was a mentor and movement advisor on the project. The first ascent of 'Indian Face' by Dawes was given the technical grade E9 6c: the UKC Logbook description describes the technicality of this climb 'Exceptionally Severe (Excessively so)' (UK Climbing n.d.) and the first of its grade in the UK in 1986. The climb is a 160-foot route set 2500 feet above Lake Llyn Gwynant on the north flank of Snowdon: Dawes' ascent was such a pivotal moment in mountain culture, it was reported in The Guardian (25th October 1986) in film (Stone Monkey 2006), in Dawes' book (Dawes 2011), climbing guides, countless online discussions, articles and YouTube commentaries about this technical feat. Dawes holds legendary status in the climbing world, and his books, talks and workshops reach audiences of thousands across the globe.

The artistic challenge was to make this specific climb accessible to new and non-specialist audiences and to offer a counter narrative to often masculine accounts of mountain stories such as those of Doug Scott (2015), Joe Simpson's 'Touching the Void' (1988) more recently dramatised for the stage by David Greig (2018), and Dawes himself (2011); stories that promote notions of conquering, claiming and ownership of mountain landscape and masculine survival. Methodologically, the practice engaged with what Louise Ann Wilson (artistic mentor for *Black Rock*) calls a 'feminine material sublime' (2019: 109–19) approach to performance making: a process that engages specific tactics of making with landscape that finds wonderment in both the human and non-human and offering alternative physical and conceptual perspectives on mountain

landscapes. These counter positions offer up new sceno-graphic receptions of mountain landscapes through intimacy, touch and a material sensitivity. Dramaturgical narratives of partnerships through female lead, explorations of loss and intimacy, offered a marginalised perspective to the current discourse. These narratives matter as they are essential in shifting dominant masculine narratives of conquering mountains and claiming of territory. These urgent narratives sit alongside a boom in tourist climbing in which peak bagging, such as those with Everest, are causing serious environmental damage and risk to life. *Black Rock* steers us towards a shared, more equitable approach to being with the natural world.

ıv Methodology

The main research method was to use performance as both an outcome and as a process to explore the tricky act of embodied translation. Overall, this drew on a number of diverse methods including site visits for research and artistic surveying, studio work between the creative team, specialist sessions with climbers and dancers, workshops on climbing walls, one-on-one interviews with non-elite climbers and deep access to Johnny Dawes via new interview materials and first-hand movement insights into Dawes' methods and techniques. Black Rock was developed alongside a series of research seminars 'Mountainsides' (https://performing-mountains.leeds.ac.uk) that paired climbers, academics and artists around themes (Training, Risk, Light and Composition) in order to help develop the research context of the piece.

Over an intense nine-month period, I structured a rigorous series of workshops and site visits. In total, four site-based examinations of the region where conducted, focusing on different approaches. An initial three-day examination of area and context was conducted with the dramaturge (Jonathan Pitches), mountain guide (Phil Jones), climber (Johnny Dawes), Kendal Mountain Festival advisor and artist (Henry Iddon), site-specific artist (Louise Ann Wilson) and myself as lead artist-researcher. Our approach here was to extract the deep knowledge of the environment from those who have significant and lived experience of the landscape. This provided the contextual ground for further artistic surveys and mapping of the landscape with the artistic team (myself, James Bulley and Claire Carter).

DAVID SHEARING

First-hand research enabled us to gain direct insight into the deep and layered knowledge of this community.

I worked with two dancers and a choreographer in order to explore the potential movement language of climbing. Climbing shares many natural affinities with choreographic practice, such as how bodily knowledge of a climbing route can be translated and communicated to others. Climbing notation such as 'crimp, smear, palm a heartline' all express bodily actions understood by climbers that provide the key for a particular climb. In the studio, we explored this language by collaborating with climbers via an open public call. These activities sought to unlock the potential of the shared movement language to communicate meaning. The script also used the kinaesthetic quality of the language to offer both knowledge and feeling of the climb. This highly technical and crafted process offered a multi-layered readership of Black Rock to specialist climber audiences who can make sense of the experience through this technicality.

Extensive interviews and recordings with Dawes were made throughout the process that informed the poetic script and wider creative development — sections of verbatim material were presented throughout the performance. Dawes is a master of climbing with a distinct poetic and technical ability. The edited verbatim material offered piercing insights into both the technical and philosophical conditions of climbing. These insights, such as our ability and need to feel ourselves, offered a much wider access to the nature of being and taking risk.

An important part of my research involved including non-elite climbers. I travelled to key climbing sites across the North of England in order to conduct interviews with individuals. I hoped the discussions would reveal more about why people climbed and to gain an insight in the philosophy of climbing away from the elite climbs of Dawes. These interviews became embedded into the final section of *Black Rock*, a coda that returned us to a more accessible voice beyond the epic technicality of Dawes. This method allowed me to counter and compliment Dawes' voice within a more tangible context of the everyday.

The research strategy was to network different types of knowledge, forging connections between researchers in theatre studies, a sound artist, a site-specific artist, digital engineers, dancers, a writer, mountain specialists and climbers. The project used performance to express different forms of knowledge about rock climbing, specifically around Snowdon, Llanberis and the Dinorwic Slate Quarry by engaging with local geology, climbing techniques, theory and climbing literature and to understand the personal philosophy of climbing to unpack the shared cultural



FIG 3 Up-close image of performer as she walks the precious rocks during 'Indian Face' sequence

FIG 4 Side view of performer as she walks on water into the darkness \rightarrow



DAVID SHEARING BLACK ROCK

significance of this sport and the mountainous region. By designing the project to include climbers, the artistic director of Kendal Mountain Festival, Claire Carter as writer and academic Jonathan Pitches and Dawes himself, I sought to create a network for ideas to be shared across different modes of knowledge exchange.

Audience reflections were collected after the performance and used as part of the evaluation process. These comments have been incorporated into the thinking and impact behind the ideas presented in the journal article.

Timeline V 2016 Invited speaker for 'Performing Mountains' - a mini symposium to explore the territory of mountains and performance, University of Leeds. 2017 Development of four research seminars to map context (Risk, Training, Composition, Light). https://performing-mountains.leeds. ac.uk/mountainsides-talks/ Archive research and site visits to Snowdon in March, August and October. Devising and creation of project. November The live staging of Black Rock at stage@leeds, to an audience of 203. Sharing of film documentary and ticketed panel discussion of Black Rock at Kendal Mountain Festival, part of a literature event. Audience 117. 2017-18 Talks and presentations (TaPRA, UEA and Banff: see vi. Findings). 2018 March Film sharing and discussion of project at self-hosted international symposium at which I was co-curator. https://performingmountains.leeds.ac.uk/symposium-reflections 2019 May Publication of Shearing, David, 'Black Rock: Routes through Scenographic Translation, from Mountain Climbing to Performance'. 2019 July-Project selected for Staging Places: UK 2020 March Design for Performance V&A (exhibition of film and objects, June 2019-March 2020,

V&A, London).

vı Findings

Black Rock, the main output, was staged in November 2017 at stage@leeds and performed to 203 audience members. It was presented in a large black box studio to a mix of industry professionals through Kendal Mountain Festival networks, public audiences, climbers and dance and performance students from Leeds University and Northern School of Contemporary Dance. In total, 15 core team members were involved. Eight climbers took part in movement workshops and 20 one-on-one interviews with climbers were conducted. Four site visits to Snowdon were carried out, 117 public audience members attended the documentary film screening and panel discussion at Kendal Mountain Festival (2017), consisting of myself, Johnny Dawes, Jonathan Pitches and Claire Carter. A pre-performance interview 'Black Rock - Performing Mountains with Johnny Dawes' on UK Climbing Online has received over 10,000 views. The 'Staging Places' (2019) exhibition at the V&A which includes documents of Black Rock has had over 100.000 visitors.

Practice Output

See artist film of *Black Rock*. The artist film is edited by myself and includes a mix of projected material from the live performance alongside documentary footage. The artist film seeks to capture the artistic experience of the piece. The documentary film outlines the piece as whole with interviews from the creative team; this was made by Gavin Carver.

В

Black Rock was a 50-minute experience designed around a central structural catwalk filled with over 4 tons of Yorkshire gritstone at one end and a thin layer of water on a high-gloss black reflective surface at the other. At the foot of the gritstone was a fluorescent pink 1980s-style climbing rope salvaged from equipment left over from the old University of Leeds climbing wall. On top, perched a small radio that projected the voice of Johnny Dawes into the space during sections of the performance. Surrounding the central catwalk, there were eight large wooden benches for the audience to sit on, each one made of railway sleepers. At either end of the space were two panoramic projection screens, which worked to continuously shift the audience's attention between different perspectives.



The screens displayed distant horizons and up-close surface textures gathered during fieldwork. Scattered around the space and surrounding the audience were 20 six-foot-tall LED strip lights providing bursts of brilliant white light engineered by performance company Invisible Flock — an image inspired by Dawes describing Cloggy in his 2011 autobiography as 'electric' (151-2).

A newly commissioned sound score was created by artist and composer James Bulley. 18 sound channels were used to immerse the audience using audio recordings of streams, gates, climbing gear and other ambient sounds captured in and around Snowdon. Central to the spatial composition was the creation of a vertical ascent through space, marked by seven small handmade concrete speakers hung on ropes (FIG 7). This simple speaker array provided a way to project the flow of running water, the voices of different climbers recorded during interviews and the sound of Dawes' actual breath as he climbed Quarryman (see folder of documentation from V&A exhibition and audio file of Black Rock sound mix), taken from a video recording and used within the performance. The piece did not aim to represent climbing through literal recreation, but to radically reconceive it through scenographic translation. The performance explored how we might create the sense of verticality without direct representation of vertical structures. Recordings of breath were used as metaphorical evocations both of a life and death pursuit and the breathtaking effects of physical height.

Working with choreographer Carlos Pons Guerra and two dancers, Ariadna Saltó Mestre and Marivi Da Silva, the core creative team explored how we might translate climbing into a physical text. Guerra invited climbers to create imaginary climbs with us in the studio, building short sequences that unpacked the embodied language of climbing. We gave ourselves permission to interpret and not to recreate, so each climbing move became a gesture for inspiration in our own performance vocabulary. We explored climbing on a physical indoor climbing wall, working with weight, balance, risk and support. We watched videos, read guidebooks and explored the essential nature of 'partnership' in mountain climbing.

Claire Carter, artistic director of Kendal Mountain Festival, was writer and poet for *Black Rock*. Carter wrote the expressive and poetic text with dramaturgical input from Jonathan Pitches. Structured much like an album, the piece journeyed through different movements: *Orientation*, *Deep Time*, *The Call of the Mountains*, *Quarrying*, *Indian Face*, *Black Peak*, *Brilliance* and finally a coda end section titled *Return/Parting* using the voices of everyday climbers





FIG 5 Flashes of light capture the 'electric' feeling of climbing. Performer demonstrates climbing moves as part of chorographic composition
FIG 6 End sequence of *Black Rock*. Dry ice rolls across the floor and creates a 'cloud inversion' over the rocks

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DAVID SHEARING

discussing their own insights into why they climb to broaden the scope of the project away from Dawes' elite endeavours. The narrative text was spoken in three disembodied voices who aurally guided the audience through the performance. Dawes offered piercing insights that revealed a deep awareness and understanding of the body, a brilliance in decoding geology and profound observations into wider philosophies of climbing — ultimately philosophies for living. Alongside Dawes' actual voice were two more theatrical voice-overs, conceived as male and female mountain guides. Our intention was to weave Dawes' voice with narratives of deep time. Arthurian myth and the hero together with concepts of partnership and loss. A map was developed to guide the audience through the experience and orientate them towards the location of the climb. The result was a meditation on climbing, a reflective journey attempting to open up multiple readerships and access points.

Research Findings

There are six distinct areas in which new knowledge has been generated in the field of performance and climbing:

- 1 In the development of scenographic techniques in order to translate the vertical act of climbing to an audience on the ground, to transport the audience to a similar liminal state to that of climbing, even if momentarily.
- 2 Revealing how the embodied language of climbing through written notation can operate within a performance composition.
- 3 The ways in which performance design can be used to reveal the scales of mountainous environments, exploring deep time, geology and ecology.
- 4 New representations of female lead climbers onstage via narrative voice and physical partnership. This opens up alternative and marginalised perspectives on climbing partnerships that challenge conventional summit bagging and elite mountain narratives (see above for more detailed examination).
- 5 Developing new audiences for performance through a reimaging of the significant cultural moment in UK/World climbing history and via the retelling of myths and legend surrounding Snowdon in a contemporary context.
- 6 Black Rock has inspired further interdisciplinary research by occupational therapist Marlisse Elliott (Integrated Clinical Academic Programme, Sheffield Hallam University), who has adapted methods developed during the process including interview and narrative





FIG 7 One of seven custom-made concrete speakers is suspended on climbing ropes from the ceiling

FIG 8 Headphones and maps laid out for individual audience members on benches made of railway sleepers



FIG 9 Light shines behind performer as she performs on rocks

BLACK ROCK

storytelling to address career transitions in elite climbers and mountaineers, either due to illness, disability or age. Elliott attended rehearsals and engaged with the artistic outcome and demonstrates how performance methods can be adapted to address clinical needs. I presented on this aspect of the research at an Arts & Health symposium at the University of Leeds (2018).

Research Value

Through the practice, I was able to orientate the audience to a spatial encounter akin to that of reading and making sense of the climbing as a strategy for audience reception. Five 'routes' through the act of scenographic translation have been theoretically articulated as part of a journal article about the project. This theorisation on the practical application of scenography will be useful for theatre makers, scholars and those interested in the intersection of climbing and performance. The routes offer tools for making devised and design-led performance practice. These insights offer practical application to others exploring the translation of other physical and sporting pursuits into performance.

For the first time, we were able to test out historical claims made by the likes of Jim Perrin (1990) and Dawes, as to the choreographic potential of rock. Dawes, referred to as a 'Nijinsky of the rock-climbing world', suggested that rock faces, particularly that of Clogwyn Du'r Arddu, 'make you dance' (1990: 71). This project enabled us to make detailed examination of this choreographic potential. *Black Rock* presents a new way to understand and use climbing notation as composition with multiple levels of readership (see 'Route Three: Language and Movement' in the Performance Research journal article and documentary film).

G A

Site surveys of Snowdon enabled material gathering that included video and sound recordings. The outcome operated as an artistic archive of the site (see artist film of Black Rock). Scenographic innovation was made via a new custom-engineered lighting system that was created in order to capture the 'electric' (Dawes 2011: 151-2) feel of the climb, using midi control to connect the light with the pulse and rhythm of the sound, in a fine-tuned spatial composition (see artist film of Black Rock). The custom speaker array sought to explore the verticality of sound composition thus presenting an original sonic spatialisation that is understood vertically as well as horizontally — as with most presentations of sound design in performance. This furthers the field of scenographic reception and 'world building' (Hann 2018: 71-96) potentials.

DAVID SHEARING BLACK ROCK

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Audience comments gathered after the event — a method of reflective practice developed in my earlier research — offered an insight into the significance of the production. Written reflections gathered after the event sought to understand the value of the performance. One member described their experience as 'transformative', with some climbers making deep personal connections to the work: 'Black Rock moved me to tears, as it conveyed an approach to climbing and a sensibility that my dad pursued his whole life' (see audience comments).

The research has also been disseminated through various invited talks and conference presentations:

Invited Talks

2017	November	Presentation of the <i>Black Rock</i> documentary film and panel discussion at Kendal Mountain Festival Literature Festival, 2017, with panellists: climber Johnny Dawes, writer Claire Carter, artist David Shearing and academic and dramaturge Professor Jonathan Pitches.
2018	December	D. Shearing and J. Pitches, 'Translating Vertigo: Practice-led research and Mountain Studies', University of East Anglia.

Conference Presentations

	Conference Presentations		
2018	March	D. Shearing, 'Translating mountain experience: Black Rock and practice-led research', <i>Performing Mountains Symposium</i> , School of Performance and Cultural Industries, University of Leeds.	
	July	D. Shearing, 'How can methodologies encourage artists and scientists to explore ideas?', Arts & Health Symposium, University of Leeds.	
	September	D. Shearing, "Scaping" scenography: translating mountain experience into performance', TaPRA 2018, Aberystwyth University.	
	October	D. Shearing and J. Pitches, 'Forming Black Rock: Practice-led research and Mountain Studies', Thinking Mountains, Banff Centre for Arts and Creativity, Alberta, Canada.	

24

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