

## CONFERENCE REVIEW

# Sharing the Field — Art in the Landscape and Landscape Archaeology

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In November 2013, the conference 'Sharing the Field — Art in the Landscape and Landscape Archaeology' was held at the UCL Institute of Archaeology. The conference, organised by the APERTURE Project, was a collaborative venture between the UCL Institute of Archaeology and an international arts organisation, RED EARTH. The aim of the conference was to explore the value of artistic approaches to the interpretation of archaeological landscapes and, conversely, how the practice and results of landscape archaeology inform artistic approaches to urban, rural and industrial landscapes.

The first to present was Robyn Mason, who, using a highly detailed 17th century map of the Irish city of Galway, gave a paper on how to engage an obsessed generation of game players with archaeological heritage. The map was superimposed to a virtual model of the city as it stands today, allowing the user to move through the streets and change the 'scene', between today's and old Galway. The possibilities this software offers are enormous as its interactive features can be a powerful tool in heritage management and city planning, as well as in teaching and the development of commercial initiatives in virtual reality. The modelling also offers a new way of engaging people with the city's landscape, giving the viewer a total freedom of movement (virtual walking), creating their

own experience and therefore, creating their own meanings about the city's rich heritage.

This notion of 'walking as a way of engaging with a landscape' was further explored by Rachel Henson. Henson creates flick books with a sequence of pictures that evoke a movement across a particular space. Through the use of the flicker book and walking, the audience is invited to enter the artist's narrative but also create their own meanings of specific landscapes. Henson's artistic creation has big potential in the heritage sector, in particular, as it is an avenue for communication of past narratives about a particular space.

The act of walking – virtually or in reality – seems to be key in the engagement with a given landscape. Gavin McGregor and Ingrid Shearer discussed the 'reconfiguring' of the Stroan Viaduct in Scotland through the use of poetry displayed on signboards within this landscape. The interactive nature of the project enables audience to create their own interpretation of the landscape and, as such, promotes greater engagement of the landscape with the audience. This paper touched upon the notion of habitability, explored by James Dixon. Taking Edinburgh as a case study, Dixon explored how archaeological perspectives can inform our understanding of the relation between the concepts of *legibility* and *habitability* in the context of art and archaeology in urban and public landscapes. Dixon examined the ways public artworks commissioned by developers and councils produce institutional frameworks for the relationship between art and daily

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urban lives. This formally endorsed form of public art can be identified as 'art of legibility'. Public art produced by people and manifested in the form of graffiti or street art, on the other hand, can be identified as the 'art of habitability', which reveals the ways people relate to their urban habitat and sits in opposition to institutionally produced narratives associated with art of legibility. Dixon argued that whilst institutional art allows us to study lived daily lives, art of habitability gets us closer to the study of different discourses associated with the same urban landscape. As such, art of habitability embraces different identities and different experiences of people that occupy the same space.

David Fine presented a paper on the mapping of crashed WWII aeroplanes across the British landscape. This process of mapping/marking effectively transforms landscapes from being unnoticed into places of contemporary pilgrimage, highlighting that every landscape is political. Creation of the landscapes of crashes would provide an avenue through which people and communities remember, while generating new narratives, and continuing the history of places. Accessing this information digitally further plays with the idea of *virtual landscapes*, which can be explored and experienced by broad audiences.

Simon Kaner discussed how landscape can be transformed and continuously reinterpreted through archaeology-inspired artworks featured at the Etchingo-Tsumari Triennale in Japan. Contemporary artworks are displayed within the archaeological region where the Jomon pottery (including the Flame Pots) was produced (c. 3500-2000 BC). The use of ancient pottery as inspiration for contemporary artists has been key in a renewed way of looking at Jomon culture. Caitlin Easterby and Simon Pascoe talked about their projects, which engage archaeological landscapes with theatrical performances, inspired by archaeological knowledge of these landscapes, but reinterpreted form an artistic point of view.

For the artists, this landscape plays a role far more important than a mere stage, offering a temporal framework of reference that the artists, consciously or not, are incorporating into the performance. Although the authors were emphatic in that they do not try to 're-create' ancient rituals or activities, it is hard to think that the audience will not associate the performance with that temporal dimension given by the archaeological record. The speakers argued that archaeologists could use this kind of intervention in the landscape as an inspirational tool, as a new way of looking and living the landscape. In this sense, we agree with the fact that archaeological interpretation, as a scientific discourse, requires a certain kind of inspiration. Nevertheless, the phenomenological approach proposed can be highly problematic if used as an interpretation tool. Different works have argued against an extreme phenomenological approach towards prehistoric landscape, as the ways we perceive the landscape are intimately related to the social and cultural context in which we are immersed.

Sharon Morris performed a poem inspired by specific landscape and archaeological remains/knowledge. *For the Oak* is the artist's interpretation of the area of Gospel Oak as a discursive relation between Hampstead Heath and the City of London. This highly engaging performance was accompanied by a visual narrative of the landscape in the form of an image slide show. The poem takes the audience on a journey through the artist's imagined dystopia, past and present times and different histories of the landscape of Gospel Oak. Morris's non-linear narration of the site's history particularly emphasised the complex ways through which the practice and outcomes of landscape archaeology inform artistic approaches to different forms of contemporary landscapes. As with Rachel Henson's, Sharon Morris's work engages with artist's personal experience of the landscape.

Lia Wei presented her work produced in collaboration with the calligrapher Zhang Qiang. Inspired by the impressive work of

Monk An Daoyi in the sixth century A.D. — a calligrapher who engraved massive Buddhist sutras in the mountains of Shandong Province, China — Wei and Qiang create art pieces by writing simultaneously on both sides of silken scrolls. The continuous unfolding of bifaced scrolls creates long pieces of silk with calligraphic expressions. Disclosed in open-air sites, these scrolls temporally impact the surrounding space thus creating new landscapes. The silk is eventually torn apart by the natural elements, and the space returns to its original state. Wei offered a dynamic approach to landscape and the past, incorporating it in new and innovative ways into her artistic production.

Lastly, a short film presented by Onya McCausland investigated the use of landscape in artistic production. Focusing on the physical and raw properties of the earth, parts of a landscape are transformed into pigments. By tracing the journey and history of individual pigment, she is able to relate it back to specific landscapes and events, people and histories associated with this specific space.

The conference prompted discussions of a variety of topics: art that relates to the past; the relevance of old practices and contemporary creations; archaeological and historical knowledge as a source of inspiration for contemporary artists and the use of technology

for bringing past landscapes into the present. The most remarkable outcome of the conference was the fact that, from very different perspectives, the speakers dealt with the need of the non-specialist to create their own experiences about the past. This is particularly interesting for archaeologists, who have tend to isolate their work from other interested members of society, and is perhaps related with post-modern ways of understanding one's place in society. Key to most of the presentations is the relevance of empowered citizens, who neither want nor need to be told what to know, but who instead wish to build their own sets of knowledge, and become architects of their own experiences.

The papers also demonstrated diverse ways in which archaeology informs artistic approaches to landscapes, and how artistic approaches to archaeology would be particularly relevant to public archaeology and heritage management. The organiser and the presenters offered an engaging and diverse display of knowledge and as such the conference would have benefited from additional opportunities for discussion – e.g. round tables. Nevertheless, the conference revealed the potential for future collaborative engagement between archaeologists and artists and was a stimulating experience for both of the reviewers.

**How to cite this article:** Armstrong-Bruzzone, F and Vucetic, S 2014 Sharing the Field — Art in the Landscape and Landscape Archaeology. *Papers from the Institute of Archaeology*, 24(1): 10, pp. 1-3, DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.5334/pia.460>

**Published:** 30 July 2014

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