

On The Trail of the Lonesome Pine

Art and the Natural World at CCANW

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The Centre for Contemporary Art and the Natural World (CCANW) was launched in April 2006 in Haldon Forest Park in Devon, the largest Forestry Commission plantation in the South West of England and just five miles south of Exeter. CCANW's aim is to use the arts to explore new understandings of our changing relationship to nature. It was initiated by its Director, Clive Adams, a curator who has been involved since the mid-1970s with the work of many artists addressing this theme, from JMW Turner to Andy Goldsworthy. The launch coincided with the Commission's introduction of new walking, cycling, and horse riding trails at Haldon, with the intention of increasing recreation and play opportunities. Both organisations have found that – in partnership – their objectives are complementary, targeting those who feel excluded from the arts and the enjoyment of our forests. The gallery has been part of the South West cluster for the first two phases of the enquire programme, researching democratic learning and choicemaking with young people.

As CCANW's education/community co-ordinator, I am fortunate to be working in an arts organisation where education is firmly embedded within its artistic objectives. Arriving one month after its opening, I immediately had to respond to the demands of school and community groups. These groups wanted to visit the forest park and take part in workshops and walks in addition to gallery talks. The very different views of a wide range of artists exhibited in *Forest Dreaming*, the ambitious launch exhibition (in 8 parts and including work by 50 artists in various media), helped me explore my own feelings towards the forest environment, which was inevitably going to form a big part of my work at Haldon.

The artists were not responding to Haldon Forest Park particularly, but their works explored the idea of forests and the feelings they can evoke, from fear and mystery to enchantment and wonder. I was also helped by the expert knowledge of Forest Rangers to broaden my factual understanding of Haldon Forest, including its history and the particular plant and animal species living in it.

During the *Forest Dreaming* exhibition, CCANW also had the opportunity to participate in the South West cluster of the enquire programme. The young people involved in the project particularly enjoyed the fact that they could look at the work of artists and immediately go outside the gallery to play with their own ideas and feelings about the forest.

Our third member of staff is Project Co-ordinator Chris Lewis, and we are assisted by a loyal group of volunteers. We operate from a 140m² Project Space, skilfully adapted from a 40 year-old



wooden shed. The Project Space is multifunctional – sometimes an exhibition space, sometimes a studio or space for film or performance, as well as being an office.

Understanding our relationship to nature is crucially important if we are to tackle the wide range of social and economic issues that run as a theme throughout history and carry over into our current ecological crisis. Clive supported the establishment of CCANW through working as a consultant curator, notably for the Lowry.¹ In 2002, he curated, what was for me, one of the most compelling exhibitions which explored these issues: *Love, Labour and Loss*, organised in the aftermath of the foot and mouth crisis.² Work chosen ranged from that of Claude and Gainsborough to Damien Hirst. A read of the catalogue essays gives something of an historical background to the ethos of CCANW.

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He writes that the exhibition explored 'how our sentiments towards the countryside and animals have been focussed by our art and culture', and that:

'these now conflict with the pressures that contemporary life puts upon them...our challenge today being how to reconcile the physical requirements of civilisation with the new feeling for nature that our culture has generated, to close the gap between modern, individual self-fulfilment and the general responsibility for future generations. In the period of radical change that is likely

*to affect the future of the countryside, artists will engage with new ways of working with and envisioning our relationship with the land, animals and, ultimately, with each other.'*³

Visitors to CCANW (which are estimated at over 45,000 since the launch in April 2006) continue to explore, enjoy and grapple with its aims. For example, we are often asked whether CCANW will create a sculpture trail such as those found in other parts of the country. It was never CCANW's intention to use the landscape as a convenient backdrop for works of art; rather to use it as a platform for a process of inquiry and engagement with ideas. The creation of an end product might follow, but doesn't always.

This type of process-driven work is exemplified by the recent residency of Shelley Sacks⁴ in 2006, which is being developed as a long-term project called University of the Trees™. Sacks states that:

*'although creative forms and practices are central to this project – the emphasis is on instruments of consciousness not objects of attention...on activating the holistic imagination as the basis for respect and joined-up thinking...on connective experience as the basis for self-motivated responsibility, or the ability to respond.'*⁵

The emphasis on enquiry and ideas does not prevent us from hosting permanent work or creating temporary trails. During the spring of 2006, Korean artist Seung-Hyun Ko⁶ made *Kayagum*, a large version of a Korean musical instrument by the same name, fashioned from an enormous beech limb. That summer, a trail was developed which comprised a series of spaces throughout the forest defined and connected by scavenger-hunt type clues, during a residency with German artist Heike Rindt. This was designed as a temporary work, although some remnants remain and have provided inspiration for numerous school and community groups.

The artistic programme since CCANW's launch 18 months ago has developed as a progression of themes. Although the focus is

primarily on visual art, cross-art form working and collaboration is positively encouraged. The programme has included exhibitions, artists' residencies and projects of all kinds, workshops, live events and talks. Yearly programming focuses on creating a number of exhibitions and projects around a particular theme.

Forest Dreaming explored a spectrum of very different feelings towards the forest environment. This was followed in our current year, 2007/08, with *Wood Culture* – a festival celebrating the beauty, usefulness and sustainability of timber in contemporary architecture and design. This programme was prompted by our awareness of the steady decline in UK forestry – in many ways similar to that of farming – which struggles to compete with cheap, and often illegal, timber imports.

Developed with a team of researchers, *Wood Culture* was conceived as a series of interrelated exhibitions. The first focussed on the history of this very ancient building material, its current stock in the South West, and the extremely important environmental role played by forests as carbon sinks which sequester CO₂ and mitigate the effects of global warming. The second exhibition *Inspiring Futures*, now on tour, featured CCANW's selection of twelve of the most inspiring and exciting examples of contemporary European timber architecture post 2000. The next exhibition will focus on design and feature the work of students from the innovative Wood Studio programme of Helsinki University of Technology. The final exhibition is a call for submissions from architects to contribute timber projects that have been built in the South West or by South West-based architects in other parts of the world.

Aesthetically, Haldon Forest Park is challenging to anyone's romantic notion of a forest as 'wilderness'. It is not a forest made up of ancient broadleaved trees, but largely a plantation of conifers which have been grown since the 1920s when the government bought up cheap farmland for timber production in response to the wood shortages experienced during World War I. For me, the forest here is unnerving because of its uniformity, the trees lined up in strict rows, on furrows, their lower branches 'brashed' off so that the trunks grow tall and straight. This 'natural' landscape is about as manmade as can be; it was designed using trees selected for the sole purpose of extracting timber as quickly as possible from the earth.

Admittedly, not everyone appears to share my initial reaction to the forest. After decades of forest management, the Commission is now, more than ever, welcoming visitors, and the response has been enthusiastic. If I struggled with a deep sense of ambivalence



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about the 'forest crop' during *Forest Dreaming*, I managed to explore the more positive side to it during *Wood Culture*, which highlighted the benefits of timber (and by implication, its production).

The public's enthusiasm for forests was something I considered again when CCANW had the fortuitous and unexpected opportunity recently to host the first complete showing of *Greenhouse Britain: losing ground, gaining wisdom*⁷, a major exhibition created by American ecological artists Helen Mayer Harrison and Newton Harrison who have been involved in the ecological art movement since the 1960s. Their view is that ecological art does not isolate and interpret aspects of nature, but integrates them into a total network of relationships. The Harrisons' practice includes extensive research into ecosystems and their study, meeting and working directly with scientists in the field and making proposals to those in governmental planning bodies on ways of creating 'eco-cultural' systems

which challenge the usual short term driven models of development. Their works represent a more socially orientated approach to integrating art and nature.

Greenhouse Britain is the artists' proposal for finding ways to restore an ecological health to our landscapes. Using the potentially catastrophic 'form determinant' of rising sea levels as a starting point, the artists generate new stories that offer an alternative and viable approach to creating a more integrated way of living which is not the 'business as usual' of wealth management and development with green spaces. To illustrate this story, the artists use topographical maps, which they see as 'fields of play' that are transactional in nature; that is, they invite responses from the field of thought – the text and culture – that operates in the minds of the viewers.

The maps show different versions of existing landscapes within Britain outlined by their watersheds. In the example of the Lea Valley watershed, one map shows the existing topography, its developments such as Welwyn Garden City and Stevenage, as well as the predominance of fields and tiny scattered patches of woodland. This is juxtaposed with a new version where nearly the entire available land mass is reforested creating sustainable biodiverse resources and habitats for animals. New 15,000 person 'settlements' are constructed vertically rather than horizontally as 'village towers' to meet additional housing needs and integrated sensitively into the landscape. This massive forest would also cleanse the air of CO₂ whilst its root systems would clean and filter water which could provide for London's needs. The same maps also seriously question the value of new housing development on the Thames Gateway floodplain.

The value of forests and reforesting the landscape is a huge part of the Harrisons' cultural response to the challenges of global warming. It is radical and exciting in its breadth of vision and ultimately positive. In hindsight, that would have been the aspect to concentrate on more when marketing the exhibition to schools. Instead, I focussed on the initial image presented in the exhibition proposal which showed how the borders of Britain were altered if the sea were to rise up to 15 metres. This then immersed me in a debate about the scientific 'facts', whether the exhibition was accurate in the rendering of those facts and whether its presentation of a worst-case scenario was simply scaremongering. Having not had the opportunity to see the exhibition before its launch at CCANW, I felt caught in the middle in relation to these concerns, and it was unclear how best to address them.

In fact, focussing attention too much on scientific details diverts attention away from the bigger picture of the problem which the artists feel it is their obligation to present and explore. That is, global warming is now an obvious, extremely serious situation requiring culture to take action in order to avoid catastrophe.

Education around the issue of global warming will continue to evolve and be a source of controversy. Stakeholders in the education sector are concerned that the subject does not overwhelm school children because of its scale and implications. When I spoke to the county curriculum advisor for geography and sustainability prior to the exhibition's showing, he was somewhat tentative in his support. He was concerned that the exhibition 'was not to make children and young people feel guilty about the state of the world.' The issue has also provoked deep suspicions from the general public as evidenced by the recent lawsuit brought forward by a parent on the use of the Al Gore film *An Inconvenient Truth* in the National Curriculum, complaining it was political spin.

Fortunately, I have been able to give talks about the work to groups of young people and have been inspired by their interest in and desire to understand the ideas within the exhibition. The maps generate many opinions and also encourage questions, leading towards an essential and empowering cultural discourse. It takes people beyond the many, and changeable facts about the subject, towards thinking both rationally and imaginatively about the challenges presented by climate change. Visitors to the exhibition have commented:

'This is a very interesting and affecting exhibition applying art and raising political issues in an instructive and inspiring way.'

'Nice to hear no berating or preaching to the converted and very good to get an insight into another attitude of mind and approach.'

'More projects like this needed. Too much cultural denial which this project may help break down.'

Greenhouse Britain tells the story of how our wasteful way of using the earth's resources is over and offers an alternative vision for the sake of our own existence, and that of other species. Engaging with the new frontier of global warming and climate change could well be one of the most significant and compelling movements in art of the 21st century.

In the current year, CCANW is largely funded by Arts Council England and South West Woodland Renaissance (a Regional Development Agency scheme). The current programme is downloadable from www.ccanw.co.uk.

Notes

1 One of the exhibitions, *The Impossible View?*, won an award for best UK temporary exhibition in 2003

2 *Love, Labour and Loss* was commissioned by Tullie House Museum and Art Gallery, Carlisle and was subsequently shown in Exeter.

3 Adams, Clive. (2002) *When Tillage begins, other Arts follow: Contemporary Life in Love, Labour & Loss*, Tullie House Museum and Art Gallery, Carlisle, pp.71-86.

4 Sacks studied with Joseph Beuys through the 1970s and 1980s and is currently Director of the Social Sculpture Research Unit at Oxford Brookes University. The University of the Trees™ project takes forward the social sculpture strategies embedded in Beuys' 'expanded conception of art', especially the awakened relationship to nature and the emphasis on ecological consciousness initiated with his 7000 Oaks project.

5 See www.universityofthetrees.org.

6 Ko is President of YATOO, the Korea Nature Art Association, which was established in 1981. In 2004, YATOO organised the first Geumgang Nature Art Biennale in Gongju, Korea.

7 *Greenhouse Britain* is touring to venues around Britain, including: Darwin Festival, Shrewsbury Museum and Art Gallery, 1 - 27 February 2008, Holden Gallery, Manchester Metropolitan University, 14 February to 14 March 2008, and Knowle West Media Centre, 7 March to 4 April 2008. Other dates and venues to be confirmed. Please see www.greenhousebritain.net for further information. The research and production has been funded by DEFRA's Climate Challenge Fund and Gunpowder Park's Bright Sparks programme. Key partners include the Tyndall Centre for Climate Change Research; the Landscape Department at the University of Sheffield; MIRIAD, Manchester Metropolitan University; and the Institute of Grassland and Environmental Research at North Wyke, Devon. More information can be found on www.greenhousebritain.net.

Images in order of appearance

1 *Greenhouse Britain* exhibition, 2007 at CCANW, Devon. Photo: Chris Lewis

2 The Harrisons speaking about their practice and the development of the exhibition at the CCANW launch event for *Greenhouse Britain*, Sunday November 25, 2007. Photo: Clive Adams

3 Students participating in the enquire project discuss their ideas with artist/educator Ruth Harvey Regan outside CCANW's Project Space, Haldon Forest Park. September 2007. Photo: Adriana Smejkalova

4 Shelley Sacks (Director, Social Sculpture Research Unit, Oxford Brookes University) during a workshop of the University of the Trees™ project. Photo: Chris Lewis