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Faculty of Education
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Introduction

The outdoors has always been considered to evoke some kind of aesthetic experience for those who explore it. The claim of art to do the same is something that has been argued for centuries. The question posed by this module is: can the two compliment each other in this respect? The writer describes a project that looks at the relationship between the two.

Site-context and description

Zimmerman (2002) believes that it should be the intent and responsibility of public art programs “to help transform an otherwise inhospitable and anonymous public indifference to the local environment into concern and care for it” (Zimmerman, 2002, p4). It was clear to the writer, from an early visit of the site, that the general regard for an area of potential beauty was at best haphazard and at worst unethical. The place where this project took place, Ardmore point, was heavily littered and the initial reactions of the writer to the site were not particularly positive as a result. The writer’s initial sketches revealed the kind of response it evoked (See Appendix 1).

However, as further explanations of the place were given it was obvious that the people who were involved directly with this place were not necessarily responsible for the rubbish that had been washed up by the river Clyde. The writer became aware of the impact of other people’s choices on the environment. For example, the people in the city of Glasgow who casually deposited their litter in the river had deeply affected this site of beauty much further up the river. Due to Ardmore point’s shape and position, it collected what was dumped further down the Clyde, nearer the city, and was unable to deposit it elsewhere. It was symbolic of the impact each of us can make on our natural habitat and the habitat of those with whom we have little involvement. There is a delicate relationship between man and his environment and one must be quick to maintain an existential involvement that leaves a positive impact on a place.

Furlong & Gooding (2002) describe environmental art as “a new art of direct interventions in the landscape, of diverse actions on the land and of workings within natural objects” (Furlong, W & Gooding, M, 2002, p 10). It was clearly the purpose

of this project to interact directly with the site, working with the natural objects available and creating a response to the place out of the relationship with that place. As Jokela (1999) points out “*these works of art force us to think deeply about nature itself, about our relationship to nature and about nature’s relation to art*” (Jokela, 1999, p 17).



The initial visit to the site was therefore paramount to the writer’s development of ideas. During this visit, the writer was able to ascertain the availability of materials, get a sense for the place, and sketch some ideas and thoughts that would be valuable to the development process. Jokela believes this stage of the process is vital to: “*understanding nature in its relationship to the culture of the place*” (Jokela, 1999, p 17)

The writer was unable, due to time limits, to carry out a thorough cultural mapping of the site and relied heavily upon module tuition. However, the writer was able to undertake a physical mapping of the area during the visit.

The state of the site affected the writer deeply and left them with feelings of frustration and anger. The disregard for a natural place of beauty affects everyone who visits the place and hinders the aesthetic response one may have with it. These

reactions sparked off several ideas in the writer as they considered how the ‘Creator’ of this place might feel to how it is being treated.

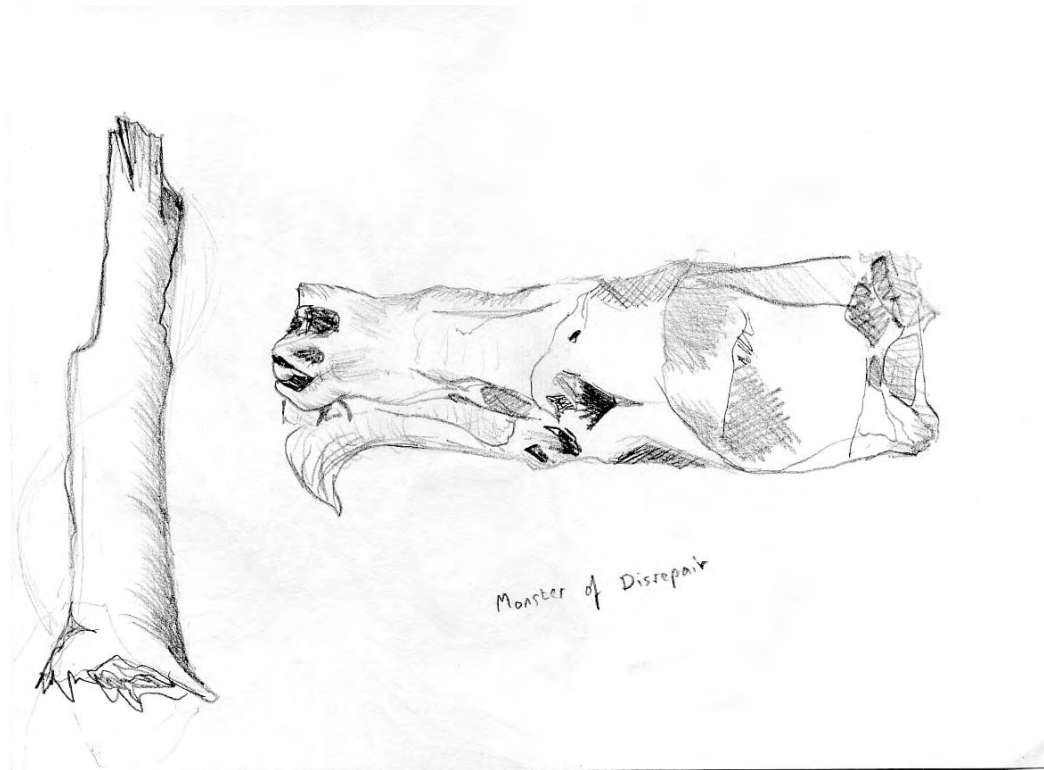
Justification for the artwork

Describing the works of art created on the Northern Arts environmental project Jokela (1999) writes:

“Nature, its being and well-being are, in some sense, our responsibility. Through these works of art it became apparent that it is not a question of reproducing nature but of responding to it and actively letting it be” (Jokela, 1999, p 17).

It was important to the writer to respond the natural works of beauty that were already present on the site rather than trying to reproduce something from scratch. Consistent with the site were several large dead logs that were distributed around the shoreline. These had caught the writer’s eye during the visit to the site as possible locations for the artwork. The intricate markings on the bark and the woven roots were works of art in themselves and the writer was interested in creating a piece that accentuated these (see below).





During the module the writer had gained experience of working with natural and synthetic material in response to a theme. These exercises enabled the writer to engage in the development process much more fully. They gathered skills in construction and working with a group to create a finished artwork. The writer was also able to process their responses using alternative art forms such as poetry. Some examples can be seen below:

Hurricane hell-spin
Ancient aboriginal
Staircase to heaven

The Chaos theory
Spiralling out of control
Spinning tornado

The process of writing poetry developed the skills of the writer to creatively respond to a given task and enhanced their ability to respond to a specific site.

The writer already had some experience of working in the natural environment. On a previous module they had undertaken the construction of a shelter using the natural materials at a different site. This experience also informed the project allowing the writer to discover new ways of responding to a site in ways that were specific to that place. The feelings of frustration and disappointment were unique to Ardmore point and the writer wanted to get this across in their artwork.

The writer had come across an artist that heavily influenced how their artwork might progress, Gilber Van Ryckevorsel.



http://www.greenmuseum.org/generic_content.php?ct_id=237 (accessed Nov 17th 2005)

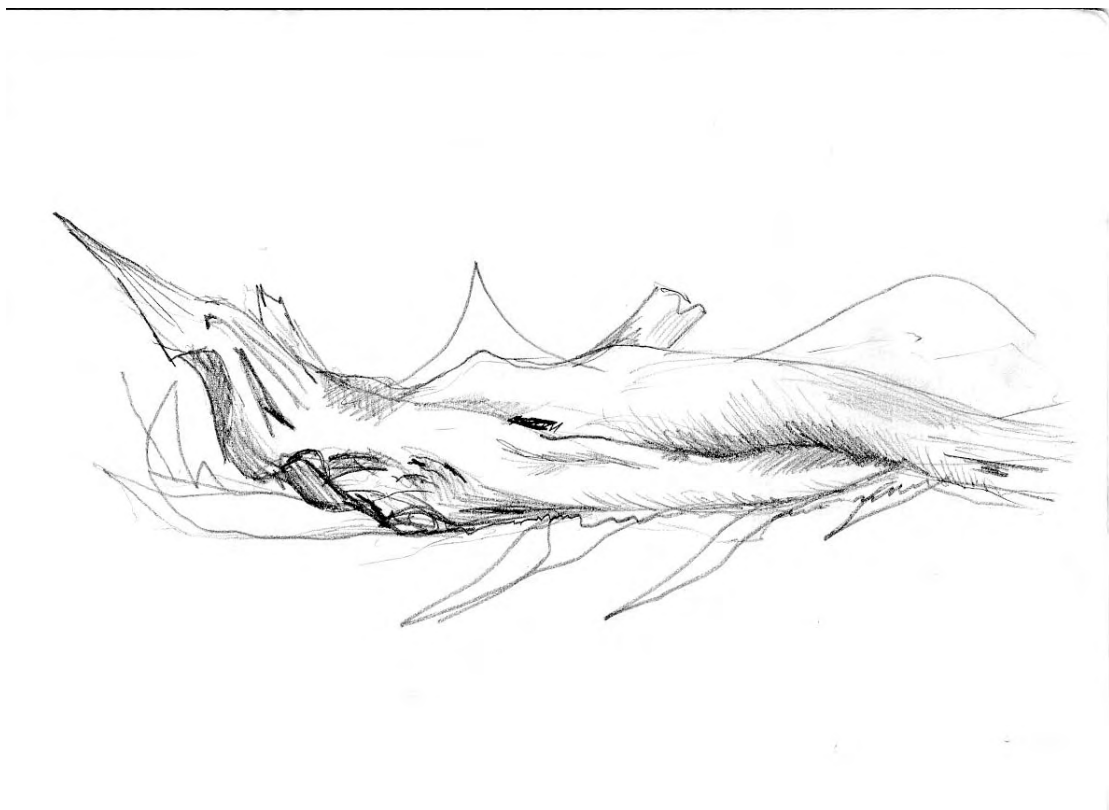
The piece featured above by artist Gilber Van Ryckevorsel is called ‘Juan, the Hurricane Monster’. A hurricane had swept through Mahone Bay, Nova Scotia, Canada, in 2003 and left the area in devastation. Gilber Van Ryckevorsel (2006) saw the image of a monster in a fallen tree and over the next year developed the idea

further, gathering driftwood from the bay to finish the piece. For the writer it captures the ferocious character of nature in the form of a hurricane (greenmuseum.org, 2006). The writer felt this captured the frustration that nature may feel at how little man cares for the environment. Consequently, an idea formed centred around the theme – ‘the monster of the Clyde’. The writer looked to depict the frustration and anger of the place towards those who had no concern for its beauty.

Once a concrete idea had been formed the writer looked for the most appropriate driftwood structure that could be built into a monster. (Several options can be seen below)



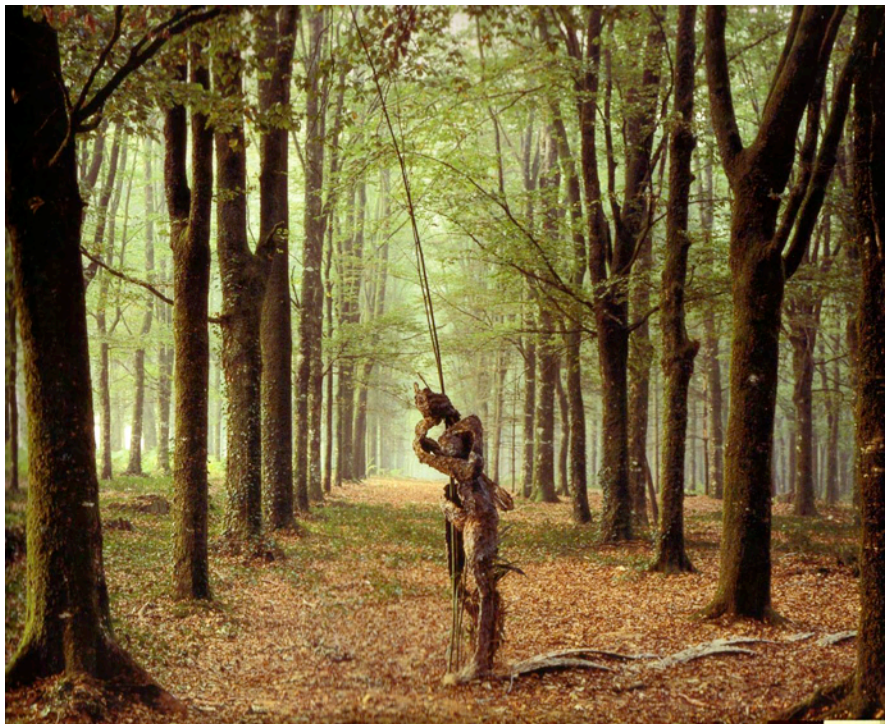
They then spent some time sketching how the structure might develop (see sketches below).



The next stage of the artwork was to collect the rest of the materials to create the piece. This included varying sizes of driftwood and dry seaweed. The writer then worked consistently until the end, manipulating and rearranging the design as they went (For final pictures see ‘Finished Piece’).

Research on Environmental Artwork

The work of the writer was also influenced by the work of artists such as Chris Drury (2000) and Andy Goldsworthy (1990) who manipulated wood to create artworks.



<http://www.chrisdrury.co.uk/> (accessed Nov 17th 2005)

One example can be seen above where the artist has created a soldier to guard the forest. This creates a mysterious response in the onlooker, questioning why there is such a figure and what their purpose is in being there.

An artwork that succeeds in ‘fitting’ with its surroundings has something mystical and majestic about it, which amplifies the ordered beauty within nature itself. It is obvious to the eye that someone or something has been at work; something has left its mark.

Nonetheless, the art piece still remains as much a part of the landscape as the living nature that surrounds it.

Made with the materials afforded to them by the surroundings, environmental artworks are able to blend into their locales. However, they are interesting and unique enough to the place that they merit investigation. Art that entices one's curiosity to investigate and meditate on, 'why' such an object is where it is, 'who' could have done this and 'what' is it here for, has accomplished a wonderful thing. It has drawn a person from within their own 'small story' to engage with the 'place' in which they are walking. They have caused one to stop and identify with the space in which they are standing. To place an art piece that stands against nature rather than within it would invoke an entirely different reaction. It would seem, for want of a better phrase, 'out of place'. The writer, therefore, set out to create a piece which accomplishes a mystery and wonder that causes one to stop and investigate.

Furlong & Gooding (2002) write:

It is perhaps the primary purpose of art to enhance our awareness of the true nature of things. The artist holds up to the world a lens through which is refracted a reality that is concealed from our everyday perception (Furlong, W & Gooding, M, 2002, p 6).

Environmental art should accomplish this. It is important that the art work challenges the onlooker to see the world differently.

Jokela (1999) described the variety of projects that took place on the Northern Environment and Art Education Project run by the University of Lapland. He describes how people tackled issues related to place, abandonment, identity and the power of nature itself (p 17). "*Others confronted issues of environmental pollution, the dumping of garbage and still others worked with the remnants that people had left behind when they moved*" (Jokela, 1999, p 17). This revealed to the writer that the variety of artworks done in the environment is large and complex and no single method is the 'right' one. In fact, the best pieces of work are those that best depict the

reaction of the artist to the place. This consolidated the writers desire to depict their initial feelings of frustration and disappointment through their artwork.

Enhancing the outdoor experience

It is vital that all outdoor ventures encourage people to engage with the environment and critically respond to it. Can artworks, created in the outdoors, stimulate us to critically evaluate the ecological issues of a place and even change our response to it? This question cannot be fully answered here but it is vital that the writer recognises the potential impact of artworks done in public spaces, be it positive or negative.

McWilliam (2005) suggests that it important for all creators of outdoor experience:

“to be aware of the impact which environments have on their clients, to understand why they are attracted, repelled or attach value to certain environments”

(McWilliam, 2005, p 1). He goes on to mention the need to develop an aesthetic language that allows clients *“to celebrate, reflect and make sense of the events they encounter”* (McWilliam, 2005, p 1). These aesthetic responses may or may not be created by an artist working in nature and it is important to recognise the impact such artworks can have on the public. Powerful aesthetic experiences can awaken feelings of awe, wonder, fear and empathy (McWilliam, 2005). The writer believes artworks have the potential to evoke such responses. As Coutts (2005) writes, interventions by artists are not *“neutral objects and events; rather they are ‘cultural echoes’”* (Coutts, 2005, p 2). In this case Coutts relates this to the narrative life of a city but this can certainly be true of the tranquil life of the outdoors.

In a society who engages little with the environment they live in, art can enable us to question, critically evaluate, and respond to places that may have otherwise gone unnoticed. McWilliam (2005) suggests that this kind of perception takes time:

Perception requires that we take time to allow sensations impinge on our senses, revealing the form and diversity of the places we visit, and time for the interplay with our attention, our accumulation of experience, expectations and metaphors which we utilise to explore the meaning and impact of these sensations (McWilliam, 2005, p 5).

In the case of Ardmore point, one might come across certain artworks that cause them to reflect on the place and question what the artwork is there for and why it has been created. The artist response to a place is a reflection upon the experience of that place and explores the world in which they are working. Such responses can encourage others to engage with the place in a similar way. These artworks can then force us to think deeply about a place and our relationship to it (Jokela, 1999).

Some may question whether environmental art has any value for evoking an aesthetic response and would much rather allow the natural beauty of the place to accomplish this. For them the artworks get in the way and hinder their enjoyment of the surroundings.

Nonetheless, as we have mentioned before writers such as Zimmerman (2002) and Jokela (1999) believe strongly that artists can promote a critical response to a site rather than hinder it. Zimmerman (1993) believes that engaging the public in environmental issues is fundamental to the practice of public art. Her hope is that:

By changing people's relationship to their immediate surroundings, art might operate on a direct and local basis, to help foster the changes in awareness that will be necessary if we are to come to terms with the larger environmental issues confronting us (Zimmerman, 1993, pp 2-3).

However, the artist must work sensitively with the place they are in. Goldsworthy (1990) when working on Hampsted heath assured the public that it would be a response to the site and sensitive to the site (Goldsworthy, 1990, p 57).

There are certain questions, then, that arise for the artist working on a site:

- Should every artist be required to carry out an 'Environmental Impact Assessment'?
- Is the artwork only valid if it uses natural materials?
- Does the artist encourage the onlooker to engage with the site or prevent them from appreciating the place?

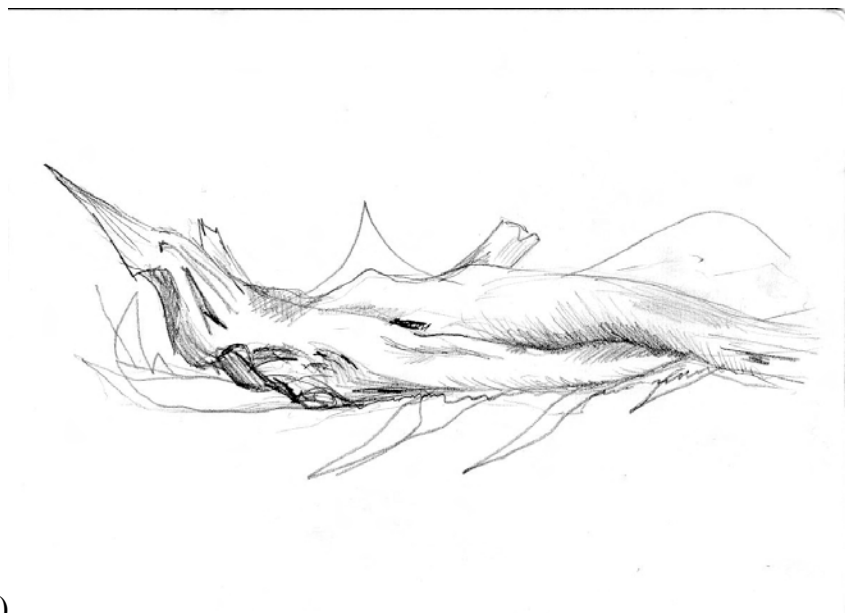
- How can an artist ensure there is no damage caused to the site?
- Should the work always be ephemeral in order to preserve the natural habitat?

These are worthy considerations for any artist it was important for the writer to undergo an investigation of how they might work sensitively on the site before completing the project.

Finished Piece



(Log before any work was done)



(Sketch of design)



(Finished Piece A)



(Finished piece B)



(Finished piece C)



(Finished piece D)

References

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Websites

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