

Elective: Art and the Environment

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Programme dates: 26th to 30th April 2004.

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Question:

Discuss; the relationship between **cultures** as represented by works of art and the environments in which they are **located**, the ideas which provided **inspiration** for the work(s) of art, the **construction** of the works of art, and a discussion of ho engagement in this project has contributed to the **understanding** of the student.

Analysis:

• Each individual owns his/her own **culture** and establishes this within their environment, how? Why? Outcome?

• **Location** of said individuals art dramatically affects the art piece itself. Does this over rule pre-supposed thought? Can location affect negatively as well as positively?

• **Inspiration** for art works lies both in the location, pre-supposed thought and includes culture within this realm. Can the artwork therefore be original? Is it possible to form pure located art with an unbiased view of the landscape?

• **Construction** of the artwork –for the art to become 'located art' the construction must cohere to its location -an alien body within a landscape strongly affects the passer-by. Is the art in the construction or in the finished result? Is the construction good/healthy or is it a disruption? More so is the finished work good for the environment or is it a disruption?

• **Understanding** of art holds the key to all of the above questions. If we become afraid of the unknown we loose sight of the purpose of art, if this purpose is non existent we must question the art piece, if a passer-by cannot understand a piece can he/she appreciate it fully? Will the art shun or embrace the visitor? Does a visitor need to understand an artwork to feel entranced by it?

Introduction:

The above questions have been subject to scrutiny and discussion since a time when man first built the primitive hut. Because it is not certain when or where human beings first began to question the impacts of their

behaviour within an environment we must first recognise that what is important is the questioning itself, and secondly understand that art in the environment differs strongly from the fine art that we socially accept as pure. The Art and the environment elective, for me was a reminder that not all art works need a frame and further more re-enforced the belief that the 'message' behind the work does not have to be a visual one but more so because it has its own environment it holds a stronger 'A priori' for the visitor, i.e. it is art as a visual and spatial reasoning rather than solely visual. This and more I hope to discuss in my report of events during the art and the environment class, in which I constructed an artwork based on my impressions of Ardmore point and its impact on the visitor.

'The void of Thresholds'

As we move through the landscape of the world we carry the places we pass through on the soles of our walking shoes. In any language and in any culture this sentence alone holds together a truth shared by everyone, it is much the case that with every new place visited we interact and gain an experience of a sort. In sharing such a truth we begin to accept the world as a shared space and recognise that there is more

surrounding us in our daily lives than the construction of our own universes through the drone of everyday life. Everyone understands and senses the same feeling of awe, discovery and trepidation when arriving in unknown environments but the difference between individuals is greatly reflected in the method by which they react to this environment or by whether they react at all. The first thing to consider in any case is the 'sand' that has been carried there on the 'soles of the visitors' shoes', in other words the individuals' background, culture and wiliness to interact with their surroundings. As everybody has a name and an individual fingerprint so to have they an individual identity. This identity in some cases can guide the individual through a landscape without any need of adherence to the surroundings and deliver them safely through that environment with little experience of the place they have visited, whilst in other cases identities can stimulate responses to an environment so strong that they compel the visitor to create art in some form of celebration of this experience, albeit a positive experience or an negative one.

Environmental art does not have to be organised or worked at, in fact the best works are sometimes the most spontaneous

ones and fortunately for us, the subconscious mind exists to produce this spontaneity. The subconscious, which contains everything past and present, can show us our own culture and identity in an instant work of art - which in turn reflects aesthetic responses to certain characteristics of a site. It is within this immediate response that we become inspired to create art. When an aesthetic response occurs, I believe that the barrier between the 'world' of the visitor and the 'world' of the site for a time becomes removed and the visitor catches a glimpse of the soul of the landscape in which he/she is passing through. In all cases the visitor does not arrive at the site with a blank mind with which to fill with an aesthetic response. Because the subconscious is always working, the individual must wait for the aesthetic response to come about through a connection of a sort, this being a connection between something in the mind of the individual (albeit conscious or subconscious) and some characteristic of the landscape.

'The work of art sums up and reflects the discoveries the artist has made about his environment and about himself.'
-Unesco, 'the arts and Man'.1

If we read the introduction by Professor Timo Jokela in the reader for this elective

we will find that the first subject he begins speaking of is his own background and his identity. What is interesting is how he describes his identity as being 'Dynamic' and ever changing. In the same manner we can all recognise this because with every landscape we pass through natural or built up we become subject to aesthetic responses and so grow from them and carry with us something that we have taken from an experienced site. It is also important to remember that we leave behind us a feeling in place of what we have taken. Personally I would describe this as 'the void of thresholds' and it, along with other environmental aspects became part of my art piece at the end of the programme. I explain it as such; to move forward we have to leave something behind and to leave something behind we must cherish that which we have taken.

Visiting Perth

As an introduction to the understanding the role of Art and the environment we visited the Perth sculpture trail. Along the trail we encountered many wonderful art works from metal moulded dustbins to bronze sculptures, stone works and even musical percussion instruments cut from industrial waste pipes. The excursion was intended to

begin broadening our minds to the world where aesthetic responses met artistic realisations. From this visit I found myself breaking down the barrier surrounding my own world of work and I began to appreciate the atmosphere of the trail in the context of the city, the river banks and the large tree covered hill tops rolling in the distance.



The art pieces in themselves were beautiful and strongly conveyed the characteristics of the site, I found myself staring through a giant sectioned picture frame at images of Perth's skyline realising only when I moved that the picture moved also.

Later I sat on benches designed to further ones appreciation of the crossing of the river running through Perth and contemplated the method by which I might use stepping stones –like the benches to mentally overcome the rushing waters. Another piece reminded me of my childhood by evoking the feeling I got as a tiny child staring up at a table which towered above my head with giant potted

plants on top of it –for a split second I was three again and completely immersed in my childhood memories. The sculpture trail in itself was clearly laid out. There was a large map to greet us at the edge of the car park and this informed us of the locations of the sculpture pieces along the trail. The walk took us along the riverbank, across a footbridge and over the river. When we met the end of the trail we returned to discover more works that we had previously ignored and just by returning along the trail once again I found myself rediscovering features of the art pieces that I had not at first recognised. The trail, though beautifully designed held for me only one flaw; there was too much. I personally found myself overwhelmed by amount of art works within the one site.

Because of this I took longer to finish the walk, as each piece demanded my attention. In terms of aesthetic responses I found the sculpture trail hugely successful, each piece –including the waste bins scattered about the park evoked in me a personal feeling, reawakening my personal identity and my cultural background. Later that afternoon we visited a Scottish Natural Heritage centre and learnt about techniques used to explain a locations and artworks. We looked at the use

of natural materials in the production of follies and playgrounds both for adults and children alike.

In all, I found the Perth visit visually exciting and artistically informative. It explained much about the versatility of man within his environment and inspired me to use natural local materials in the construction of my own artwork. In terms of aesthetic responses I found the sculpture trail hugely successful, I left Perth having decided that art in the environment can serve a purpose, it can elevate the visitor, diminish the passer-by or even stop them in their tracks to stop, stare and react. If art can do all these things then surely it can hold a purpose and a meaning –not just within a place but also for a place.

*“To be alive is to be aware, active, involved. Art increases our state of aliveness by expanding our state of awareness. Art discovers, heightens and refines life experiences. Art serves to clarify our feelings. Until we express emotions we do not know what they are.” Unesco, ‘the arts and Man’.*²

Ardmor Point is situated at the place where the river Clyde meets the sea because of tis there is a heavy slowing of water flowing from the Clyde and the point seems to catch all of this water in a large bay before

allowing any of the rivers’ debris from reaching the ocean.

On visiting the site we first encountered the bay of the lugworm. It was a large but shallow bay situated just before the first turning point along the coast of Ardmor and for me became the most predominant feature of the coastline. Here was a bay where the simplest of organisms worked day and night to breakdown the rubbish and waste running from the Clyde. Here was an example of nature healing itself. Here was a working landscape –alive and active. I began walking across the bay photographing all the organic shapes left behind by the earthworm, soft squiggles and lumps peeking out of the shallow water. I felt the need to record them and this I realised was my first aesthetic response.

*“The work of art stands as a summary and chronicle of human experience. Man has need of recording this experience, Unesco, ‘the art and Man’.*³

As we rounded the first turn on the point we encountered some seals basking on the rocks of the bay. This for me was a personal surprise as when last I encountered seals I was very young, again I realised that the landscape was beginning to evoke emotions.

Picking up on the trail we discovered red

sandstone in waves flowing down to the sea, the sheer brightness of the stone and the fluid-like movement in which it had formed seemed to most to be a little out of place amongst the darker granite that surrounded it. Here was colour in a dark background. Its influence opened me up to all other colours in the landscape.

I began searching, exploring the area for anything that matched its brightness –my second aesthetic response- I found Bright yellow gorse bushes and recognised that smell was just as important as sight, after them I found rusted car wheels and began photographing them in strange places. Suddenly I began to ask which was the art the wheels or the photograph? Either way I decided that it was the landscape that was the inspiration behind the photograph and therefore one couldn't be 'the art' without the other.

"When it is the key stone that holds together the line of stones in the arch then why do you describe to me each individual stone when it is obvious that the keystone is the most important? -Asked the king, and Marco replied; "But your majesty without the line of stones there would be no arch." Calvino, Italo 'Invisible cities '4.

Another strong influence to the site was for me the closeness of the industry towering

across at us from the other side of the bay. For a time I was in the wilderness and then suddenly I became diminished by its presence, it seemed intrusive and unfair to place heavy industry in such a serene area. The buildings stared at me as a constant reminder that man was taking from nature and not replacing enough. It dampened my spirits and I realised that the crushing affect of the towers on my enthusiasm was much like stepping on the home of a lugworm; so long it would have taken in its creation. I was going through yet another aesthetic experience, I was angry, frustrated at environmental damage and eager to explain something in the form of art which recognised nature and explained the situation it was in, not as how it was before man or as it should be afterwards but a raw reality. (see sketch book)

'Sean baisteach, sean deora.'



Translating as 'Old rain, old tears' my art piece was a reflection of many emotions. What I have previously described as 'the

void of thresholds' the artwork was an attempt to achieve a spontaneous aesthetic response drawing from my own identity, culture, the characteristics of the site, its influences and finally –most importantly– evoke an emotion in the visitor. This emotion is personal to each individual and I had hoped would not trigger the question 'What is it?'

The form of the art piece for me had to have a depth. I wanted to attract the attention of the passer-by and so for this reason I placed it in the middle of the bay to catch the eye of the visitor. In realisation this was the most appropriate location for the piece as it was originally inspired by the lugworm, and so by drawing the visitor into the bay I was forcing them to carefully pick their way through the pools of water and observe the shapes left by the lugworms that would have gone previously unnoticed. The verticality of the three towers achieved this. I wanted to create a piece that when viewed up close held a deeper message. To do this I used very fine/small materials; flower petals, sand, thin seaweed and mussel shells. I used all natural materials from all over Ardmor I brought mussel shells from the opposite side of the point and gathered flower petals from the gorse bushes. The main body of the piece

was to be constructed from sand as the message here was; through construction we take from the environment and rarely give back. Using the sand beneath our feet was a visual attack on the lugworm that we have abused for so many years. (Please note that no lugworms were harmed in the making of this piece) Orientation of the piece was towards the industry on the opposite side of the bay, which originally inspired the work. The sand blocks or pillars explained on a personal level that even though the industry was far away it was still present and shadowing the beauty of Ardmor.



Poetically flower petals were scattered in the 'voids' or holes created by the sand blocks. Between the pillars swam an organic sea of blue mussel shells and even the individual shells stood upright to face the bay. The seaweed draped on selected branches reflected the lugworm, though small in reality it towered in the art piece to show that it nature would out live the damage done to it and therefore master the destruction of man.

"We must give back to nature that which we have taken away, if we take the ground from nature then we must give back the roof tops" 'Kundhauswein' Hunderwasser.5

The piece was constructed by the placing of four plywood boards in a box form. The sand was dug from the marked out voids and only the volume of sand taken from the void was used in the construction. –this was an important construction detail as it informed the message of the piece. The sand was compacted down in layers and then left to dry. If by taking the wood away too early the blocks would slump. And holes had to be made in the wooden boxes to allow water to flow out. The level of water in the bay was previously considered and I knew that by digging a hole the water level would raise to meet itself, this was a perfect condition in which to apply the flower petals as they then had something to stick to avoid movement by the wind.



Reactions to the piece were exciting. One

passer-by told me that the piece was very entrancing, others asked me what it was and furthermore how it was built. Most were surprised when they came close to the piece and it revealed bright yellow flower petals in a bay of murky sand but in all none –I hope considered it an intrusion upon the landscape.



Understanding

The understanding of art holds the key to many questions. For some art works it is enough to just to understand them, but in my opinion an art piece must serve a purpose further than understanding. We are here to question our environment, react and live in it, it is not enough to convey a message as we can do this through writing.

Environmental art must inspire a movement within the person, induce a feeling, and evoke a passion. In my own piece I had hoped to evoke anger and love within the visitor, anger towards the destruction of nature and a love to heal it, or at least understand it. Unfortunately for the artist not all art pieces have lasting impressions on the

visitor and for this reason I called the piece 'Old rain, old tears' reflecting directly that the visitor has 'heard it all before.'



Reflections

The Art and the environment module, for me proved a new experience in the realm of art. It helped me recreate a new sense of awareness and it reminded me that art does not need to be within a picture frame to convey a message. Much more than this the practical approach to design fascinated me completely. There was planning in a spontaneous form, which art produced within a days work and after an evenings' reflection. This elective brought home at first hand the role of art and its function. The future of art is no longer about a simple visual context or study, it is now a functioning living form designed to release within us senses that daily life ignores.

Bibliography:

- Hunderwasser 'Kundthauswein' Cologne : Taschen, 1991
- 'In Invisible cities / Italo Calvino ; translated from the Italian by William Weaver. London : Vintage, 1997.
- 'the arts and man' Unesco, United nations 1969, Paris.

Internet sites referred to:

- www.strath.ac.uk/Other/DEGAS/Projectfiles/ArtEnv.html