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The covert and overt role of art in landscape partnership

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ABSTRACT

Although in recent history the arts have received substantial attention as a conduit for memorable artworks to draw attention to issues that may be coincidental to the artists original intention, this does not acknowledge the arts as equal partner in a shared enterprise but more to facilitate the accessibility of difficult concepts. This essay explores the capability for the visual arts to increase understanding of issues as disparate as the loss of rural landscape to urban development and the incremental effects of sea level rise upon coastal communities. With increased specialisation of disciplinary practice there is an incapacity to address the multi-dimensional character of practical challenges, particularly in the matter of the societal impacts of environmental change. This demands greater flexibility in approach to policy and an understanding that the increasing frequency of unforeseen events beg the question of our cultural preparedness to evolve a new paradigm for knowledge sharing.

KEYWORDS

Art; Community;
Landscape; Environment;
Climate change

Introduction

The multi-dimensional character of current environmental challenges, particularly the societal impacts of environmental change, demand a new paradigm for knowledge sharing, embracing trans-disciplinary working and greater flexibility in policy and decision making. For many artists, this may be a common and welcome experience, even though it often means becoming immersed in disciplinary territories remote from their normal practice. This was my experience when, from a longstanding involvement with coastal and estuarine landscapes, I became embroiled in their management on behalf of my immediate community.

When an arts component is mooted for a project, it is normally expected that the artist will operate in a way that uniquely and overtly corresponds to accepted orthodoxies of art. There are however circumstances such as the need to collaborate in a community or multi-disciplinary partnership, when it may be unwise to foreground the standpoint of artist, since it risks becoming compromised by its own stereotypes. An alternative is to strive in an understated or even covert manner for a balanced exchange of views to mitigate institutional dependence upon simplistic problem-solving approaches. The use of overt and covert in this context does not imply any intention to deceive, but more the difference between an emblematic function for

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art and one where it is an active but immanent presence in a social exchange. Although the obvious and tangible way of engaging an artist is to commission artwork, I also advocate the recognition of the arts as a community of thought and praxis to enrich public understanding as much through its processes as its product.

Arts research and its specific methods and practices, can reframe issues, reveal values, and enable an ethical and aesthetic discourse that wouldn't otherwise exist. It opens up questions and brings in new views, producing knowledge that goes beyond systematised data and verbalised insights that often dominate social science methodologies. (Saratsi et al., 2019, p. 4)

Once an artwork is in the public realm, any meaning attributed to it may be subject to appropriation to represent issues that may never have been the intended by the artist. In his essay 'the Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction',¹ Walter Benjamin describes this dilemma as an aspect of the evolution of the work of art away from the circumstances of its inception, which he terms its '*aura*', to serve another purpose, when its original '*ritual*' function is abandoned in favour of a more expedient approach to meaning. (Benjamin, 2008, pp. II–V)

In this essay, I will examine levels of arts engagement from awareness building to community empowerment and, citing my own practice, I will recommend a more embedded approach to the generation of landscape policy and its implementation. Although there is currently no paradigm to meaningfully incorporate artists in public decision-making processes apart from the assumption that opinion can be expressed as an artwork, there are alternatives: by reference to contemporary art theory such as the Conceptualist movement of the mid to late 1960's (Tate, n.d.), I will discuss the integration of creative practice into systems of landscape governance through the intuitive processes and methodologies artists routinely deploy.

I will bring my experience as a visual artist and academic researcher living on the UK's East Anglian coast to the discussion over adaptation to environmental change in my immediate area and will consider the legacy of art and its continuing use to reflect the challenges that our landscapes currently face.

I will use case study examples embedded in western and particularly British discourses of belonging and relationship with place to discuss the use of artists to promote greater public engagement in the environmental debate and will suggest the value of an integrated use of the arts to link tangible landscape decision-making with an intangible sense of emotional attachment and cultural ownership.

Giving art a voice

In December 1939, as Britain was bracing itself for war, Sir Kenneth Clarke, Director of the National Gallery recommended the British Government should employ watercolour artists to record the changing face of an English landscape under threat from outside by enemy action and inside by industrial development and urban expansion. Starting as the 'Scheme for Recording the Changing Face of Britain' (V&A, 2011) this was enthusiastically adopted by the Council for the Preservation of Rural England (CPRE) as an active ingredient of the political campaign to preserve the integrity of British rural landscapes (CPRE, 1939, p. 21) (Figure 1).

Other than giving much needed support to artists during particularly hard times, Clarke's project, and specification of the medium of watercolour signified the continuity of a quintessentially English engagement with the rural landscape. For Clarke the value of painting was its capacity to evoke the intangible genius loci of quotidian British landscape, Herbert Read, art historian and advocate of the scheme was more explicit, writing in *The Listener* in 1941:

-it shows us what we are fighting for-a green and pleasant land, a landscape whose very features have been moulded in liberty, whose every winding lane and irregular building is an expression of our national character. (Read, 1941)



Figure 1. Kenneth Rowntree: Grainfoot Farm, Derwentdale, Derbyshire 1940. The site to be flooded for Ladybower Reservoir. Commissioned for Recording Britain. Collection V&A. Courtesy V&A.

Given the patronage of Clarke, it is no surprise that many of the artists commissioned for this project were already prominent exponents of the avant-garde and were to continue to exert profound influence upon British cultural life after the war.

Although modest in form, this project was massive in scale: one thousand five hundred topographical watercolour paintings were produced between 1939 and 1945, reflecting the status of rural landscape in the British psyche and making the potential loss of national landscape heritage tangible. This project represents an incipient engagement of the arts with landscape decision-making via the agency of networks of individuals and organisations instrumental to setting it up, including CPRE and the good offices of Patrick Abercrombie, who became key to post-war reconstruction as Council Member of the Town and Country Planning Association.²

In 1939, the War Artists Advisory Committee, also chaired by Sir Kenneth Clarke, was established within the Ministry of Information. Its primary purpose was propaganda and keeping up public morale through art exhibitions to be staged at the National Gallery, secondarily it was Clarke's hope to safeguard artists from conscription and guarantee employment at a time of hardship. In 1941 the works were exhibited at the Museum of Modern Art in New York to reinforce awareness in America of the struggle in Europe and encourage continuing economic and military support for Britain.

In 1937, the social research project Mass Observation was started by three intellectuals, anthropologist Tom Harrisson, film maker Humphrey Jennings and poet Charles Madge to record contemporary life in Britain by persuading up to 500 volunteers to keep diaries of their lives and that of their immediate communities. This study acquired greater significance through the participation of the documentary photographer, Humphrey Spender and Painter, William Coldstream both of whom joined the artist printmaker Julian Trevelyan in Bolton Lancashire in 1938, to record daily life in a typical northern industrial town as part of the project (Hall,



Figure 2. William Coldstream: Bolton 1938. Oil and graphite on canvas 71.3×91.3 cm. Gift of Maxey Collection of English Painting 1946. National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa. © Estate of Sir William Coldstream

2023) Serendipitously, Mass Observation continued through the war years giving valuable insight into the impact it had upon ordinary lives countrywide (Mass Observation, [n.d.](#)) ([Figure 2](#)).

Although all three projects were driven by distinct if complementary agendas, they signal the potential for the arts to be a catalyst within national policy and command an unaccustomed level of attention from mainstream society. This gives a glimpse of an expanded role for the arts, albeit, for the Recording Britain and the War Artists programmes, serving a pre-determined and circumscribed agenda, sometimes at variance with the personal direction of travel of artists more preoccupied with contemporary modes of cultural expression and discourse (Harris, [2010](#)).

Assuming certainty

Since those earlier projects from a time of national crisis, examples of the use of art to bridge the gap between civil society and policy have proliferated and correspondingly, the will of the arts community to effect policy has shifted gear with the realisation that the climate crisis is more than a logistical challenge, but an existential threat that strikes to the heart of culture defying the inherent belief in our ability to control change. This increased level of awareness has spawned a generation of artist-activists from within the avant-garde that has achieved prominence and even a level of notoriety in mainstream culture.



Figure 3. Newton Harrison: *Survival Piece 3: Portable Fish Farm*. 11 Los Angeles Artists, Hayward Gallery 1971. 'Courtesy of the Helen and Newton Harrison Family Trust.'

In 1971 the American sculptor Newton Harrison participated in an exhibition, *11 Los Angeles Artists at the Hayward Gallery in London*, with *Survival Piece 3: Portable Fish Farm* (Tuchman & Livingstone, 1971). This comprised a suite of rubber-lined tanks containing live catfish, lobster, and crayfish, destined to be electrocuted at the end of the show and served up as a fish banquet. At that time the prescience of an artwork taking sustainable food supply as a theme was not appreciated, and it caused a public outcry that went all the way to parliament (Harrison & Harrison, 1971) (Figure 3).

In 2007 Newton Harrison and his wife Helen Mayer Harrison (the Harrison Studio) were invited to Britain by DEFRA (the Department for the Environment Food and Rural Affairs) to contribute to a study of the predictable impact of global warming at selected locations in Britain³ and to consider strategies for adaptation. (Greenhouse Britain, 2007–2009) In an exhibition and symposium at Gunpowder Park, Enfield, *Losing Ground, Gaining Wisdom*, the Harrison Studio represented estuary and coastal waters rising in increments of 2m up to 16m above ordnance datum as a light projection on a 4m relief model of Britain. Given that the rate of change would be measured in decades, the artists suggested this process would be graceful rather than catastrophic, and that withdrawal might be enacted with 'equal grace' (Harrison & Harrison, 2007–2009).

This is just one of a life-long series of consultations undertaken by the Harrison Studio to restore green infrastructure to landscapes degraded through urban expansion and industrial exploitation. These 'bioregional' works include *The Green Heart of Holland* (1994–1995) (Harrison & Harrison, 1994–1995) to restore an 800 square kilometre area in the centre of the Netherlands, and *The Shape of Turned Earth: A Brown Coal Park for Sudraum Leipzig* (1996) (Harrison & Harrison, 1996) to create a new lake district from 300 square kilometres of excavation left by open mining outside Leipzig, Central Germany. These projects could be attributable to a landscape consultancy were it not for the claim that by operating in the domain of art and treating planetary

change as sculpture, they could better teach the ecological dimensions of the human condition better than operating in the domain of science.

For all the intentions of the Harrison Studio to transcend the orthodoxies of fine art production and dissemination, the legacy of discourses in art that make ideas conceivable or acceptable is unavoidable: between 1960 and 1965 Newton Harrison studied at Yale University School of Art and Architecture where he was influenced by the American critic Clement Greenberg and the ethos of abstract modernist painting (Greenberg, 1961). A key tenet of Greenberg's argument was that the material characteristics and processes of the artwork are instrumental to its autonomy. This departure from the artwork as a vehicle for meaning in favour of the integrity of the work itself chimes with the Harrison's belief in the fundamental importance of natural processes and the living landscape.

Although tacitly acknowledged by the Harrisons, the Conceptualist movement, launched in 1965, resonates strongly with their practice, proffering a broad socio-political significance for the artwork as concept and repudiating the perceived annexation of art by a capitalist hegemony. According to the exhaustive account by the writer Lucy Lippard: *'Six Years: the dematerialisation of the art object 1966-1972'* (Lippard, 1997), Conceptualism afforded a radical departure and a rebuttal of an art world in the thrall of Clement Greenberg.⁴ By denying the primacy and commodification of the art object, it offered new freedoms and emancipation for artists from conventional frameworks for the production and dissemination of art, generating an expanding sphere of influence that became for Lippard, *'ideas in the air'*.

It is difficult to imagine the trajectory of the Harrison's career without awareness of these discourses, but they insisted that theirs was a knowing relationship driven by an overarching sense of purpose:

Our decision was to deal with survival and allow all the forms we used and all the activities we pursued to spring from that single decision. (Adcock 1992)

Their unabashedly aesthetic vision exploits the freedoms of an arts partnership to advocate a concept for an entire continental landmass without having to make it happen. Newton Harrison considered his role to be that of a stalking horse for ideas that would be unthinkable for a scientist and beyond the scope of any single authority; but the artist, whose currency is concepts and ideas, has licence to sow the seed that can only take root and flourish through the agency of local, regional, or national partnerships.

Staying close to the vision that art must go further than deploring systemic ecological decay, the Harrison Studio proposes the rehabilitation of entire landscapes that have been subject to human misuse and fosters an integrated ecosystems approach to living with natural systems undergoing radical change. This vision underpins their proposal that the arts have a duty of stewardship for the evolving relationship between society and the natural world:

Why Artists?-Why not Artists? Art is the court of last resort-and our best hope.
-we saw a crying need to find ways
To talk about the problem at the scale it is occurring. That can be terrifying and discouraging.
But for us it opens the door to creative possibilities. (Harrison & Harrison, 2022)

Given the engagement of the Harrison Studio by a British Government Department for their Greenhouse Britain project and the Dutch Government for the Green Heart of Holland proposal, the Harrison Studio is unique in its ability to persuade national or municipal administrations that an existential threat such as climate change demands audacious solutions. For the Harrisons, the enormity of global warming is a *'Force Majeure'*, universally felt but, if subject to an agreed global strategy, it can be viewed as *'ennobling, poetic, or even graceful'*. Theirs is a messianic vision of impending change and a compelling if tenuous argument for a philosophy of working with a dynamic future by continuous adaptation.

Like an oncoming storm front, the Force Majeure is a fluid frontier of heat moving across the planet; a frontier of water advancing on land; a frontier of extinctions touching all lives. It is a frontier from which we retreat, yet within which we must also adapt. (Harrison & Harrison 2022)

Harnessing celebrity

Distinct from the Harrison's reliance upon the power of poetry to frame infrastructure projects on a landscape scale, the strategy of *Cape Farewell*, a British project established in 2001 by sculptor David Buckland, harnesses the charisma of celebrated artists and performers to lodge awareness of climate change in the public psyche. On the premise that the creative community is well placed to command public attention and to communicate difficult truths, his inspiration was to take a team of artists and scientists on a series of boot-camp expeditions to environmentally sensitive global destinations, initially the Arctic ice cap, and subsequently the Amazonian jungle, and the north Scottish islands, to reflect upon evidence of climate change first-hand. The expectation was for the artists to interpret their experience on site or produce work upon their return that would reach a broad audience corresponding to their respective networks or fan base. This consciousness-raising exercise testifies to the audacity of the organisers to entice a heterodox group of well-known artists to join a small ship, destined beyond the Arctic Circle for an intensive period, living and working together to focus their knowledge, experience, and skills upon an unfamiliar and fragile environment.

The duration of each expedition was sufficient to create a bond between the arts and science participants and generate an intense and insightful experience, but not enough to dispel its unfamiliarity. Although it would be a difficult ask for the participants to be more than gifted messengers for an experience of change out of sight to the rest of the world, or exposure to exotic but fragile landscapes, no-one was left untouched by the experience, and all came away with something. Each artist's response was characterised by their individual practice: Chris Wainwright extemporised work on the spot: *Red Ice-White Ice Disko Bay 2008–2009* comprises two series of photographs of icebergs taken at night using flash, one eerily stained red and the other white to reflect fragility and vulnerability (Figure 4).

Others took a more literal approach to known aspects of climate change: on the 2005 Arctic expedition, architect Peter Clegg and sculptor Anthony Gormley constructed an ice obelisk of 0.54 cubic metres to represent the volume of one kg of CO₂. (Gormley, 2005) On the 2008 expedition, Francesca Galeazzi took a 6kg cylinder of CO₂ out to the snowfield of Jakobshavn Fjord releasing its entire contents into the atmosphere. To justify such transgressive behaviour, she took the preliminary measure of offsetting it through an online Gold Standard Carbon Offsetting scheme, thereby highlighting the hypocrisy of business as usual so long as you pay (Galeazzi, 2008).

Those who didn't expect to make artwork on the spot, gathered reference material for future interpretation. Joining the 2005 expedition, the novelist Ian McEwan ruminated upon his experience for 5 years before publishing his novel *Solar* in 2010 (McKewen, 2010). Comedian Marcus Brigstocke gathered material to be performed at public venues such as the Latitude Festival, Royal Society for the Arts, (Brigstocke, 2009) and the Eden Project over the next year, in the belief that by bringing climate change to the public as performance, he could raise its visibility and extend its currency.

The Cape Farewell initiative has enjoyed success as an arts-driven strategy to improve the level of climate consciousness, engaging 300 artists on 10 expeditions spread over 11 years. But by starting from an expectation of what the artists would contribute, it limited the potential for the arts to enlarge upon a dimension of experience foreign to other disciplines, which David Buckland discussed in an interview for the International Centre for Climate Governance where he commented that, aside from their wonder at the first-hand experience of an extreme



Figure 4. Chris Wainwright: from Red Ice-White Ice 2008. C-type colour photographs on aluminium. Source Cape Farewell.

landscape, the artists were able to use their skills to get the public engaged with in a way that scientific analysis cannot (Buckland, 2012).

Cape Farewell contributed to awareness of climate change by inviting artists and climate scientists to reflect upon the evidence of change and consider how the story of fragility, preciousness and loss might become a memorable cultural experience. It has focussed upon the ability of the arts community to imaginatively interpret and communicate unpalatable truths. Where the desire is for the message to enter the mainstream, the arts are well practised in public engagement which, with some exceptions, the sciences are not. In response to climate change, there are no rules for how the arts might influence decision-making in the landscape, and Cape Farewell continues to promote the spread of knowledge and respond to the conditions of a debate in continuous transformation. Since 2019, with a new base on a redundant trout farm in Dorset, Cape Farewell has varied its programme and, although undertaking '*Kōmij Mour Ijin*' (*Our Life is Here*), an expedition to the Marshall Islands in August 2023, it has embraced a more local embedded strategy for the arts, which resonates strongly with the work of the British environmental organisation, 'Common Ground' (*Our Life is Here*, 2023).

Integrated strategies

Common Ground is rooted in traditions of environmental activism through the earlier involvement of its founders with *Friends of the Earth* (Friends of the Earth, 1971), it takes a located view of awareness-building in the belief that broad environmental insights can be achieved via familiar local landscapes. Given our feelings of helplessness in the face of the enormity of global environmental challenges, the principle of starting from the familiar makes sense. For Common Ground, art is a gateway to an imaginative experience of landscape; artists operate on a singular, human, and often unpredictable level that can reinvigorate our own common-place, and prompt us to reach beyond an ecosystem services definition of its value to reinvest in the profound sense of belonging that we derive from our own landscape.⁵ Founded by Sue Clifford, Angela King, and Roger Deakin in 1983, the credo of Common Ground, is to foster community engagement in environmental wellbeing through its immediate environment and identify what makes it distinctive. '*Local Distinctiveness*' (Common Ground, 1983) is a guiding principle for an initiative that merges the arts and environmentalism and signals the importance of belonging in a landscape as a prerequisite for understanding and accepting the responsibility of caring for it.

This working-from-the-inside strategy has been rolled out across the UK with the agenda:

-to promote the importance of common plants and animals, familiar and local places, local distinctiveness, and our links with the past; and to explore the emotional value these things have for us by forging practical and philosophical links between the arts and the conservation of nature and landscapes- (Clifford & King, 1984)

The significance of Common Ground lies in the value placed upon '*more ordinary and everyday landscapes that did not show up as endangered on national surveys or that were outside the remit of scientifically designated areas*-' (Smith 2016) and empowering communities to care for their own environment in their own terms.

The strategy for working with artists was designed to complement an energetic public engagement programme. For Sue Clifford, interventions by artists must be direct collaborations with communities, owned by them and in due course, seamlessly a part of the identity of a place. This was the principle behind the stone revetment works for the *New Milestones* project by the sculptor, John Maine at Chiswell on Portland 1987–1994, where the community proposed to celebrate the completion of its sea defence works in 1986 by commissioning a sculpture. Supported by Common Ground, they conceived the project, were instrumental to commissioning the artist and continue to maintain the finished work (*New Milestones* 1987–1994) (Figure 5).



Figure 5. John Maine: Chiswell Earthworks 1987–1994. Commissioned by Common Ground. Copyright: John Maine.

In their *'Holding your Ground'* publication of 1985, Sue Clifford and Angela King made a proposal, the uptake for which became viral: starting as a commission in 1987 for 18 artists to map their home parish and participate in a national touring exhibition called, *Knowing your Place*.⁶ It was quickly realised that this was too good an idea to waste, and was expanded to become *The Parish Map Project*, perhaps one of the most memorable projects undertaken by Common Ground. Inspired by the exhibition, local communities across the country mapped their own parishes according to what they believed to be most significant. By 1996, there were several thousand maps, which prompted an exhibition at the Curve Gallery at the Barbican Art Centre in London and led to the publication of *'from place to PLACE'* (1996) (Bender, Deakin, Grove-White, Lewty, & Mabey, 1996) featuring essays by Barbara Bender, Roger Deakin, Robert Grove Wright, Simon Lewty and Tim Robinson.

Common Ground's work is a profound demonstration of how the arts can enable communities to feel more in touch with their own environment and therefore better equipped to play a part in local decision-making. In 1985 they published *Holding Your Ground an 'action guide to local conservation'*. This was aimed directly at communities, full of useful tips and information for them to get to work (Clifford & King, 1985). Theirs is more than an art-in-the-landscape exercise, by drawing attention to local distinctiveness, it is a reminder of the aspirations of the 'Recording Britain' project and its links to the CPRE's campaign to preserve the integrity of Britain's rural landscape in a period of dramatic change driven by internal pressures and external influence. Similarly, Sue Clifford addressed a sense of disempowerment by communities who felt that change was forced by circumstances beyond their control by seeking to realign the bonds that tie people to place.

In contrast to her relationship with Friends of the Earth, this is not so much an activist political stance as a bid to promote a sense of community ownership. This happens on many levels, leading from the premise that identity is rooted in place and the culture of place: for Patrick Devine Wright and Susan Clayton: *'...the environment, when conceived as 'place', is more*

than just a backdrop to personal and social phenomena, but a distinct way of seeing the world that plays up self-environment relations' (Devine-Wright & Clayton, 2010). The activities of Common Ground seek to enhance awareness of those aspects of our immediate environment that enrich our understanding of who we are and how we belong, endorsing our own landscape narratives and fostering a renewed sense of ownership and responsibility.

Treading carefully

Within the environmental debate where there are difficult truths to negotiate, the arts can engage the imagination and emotions in a way that facts and figures cannot, which begs the case for a paradigm for interdisciplinary exchange that acknowledges the essential porosity between discrete disciplines. Alternative strategies that eschew certainty in favour of a more provisional and adaptive conversation with natural systems benefit from a hybrid approach to disciplinary input, which can only happen if the arts, sciences, and policy sectors reconcile their distinct orthodoxies. In their study of the desirability of equitable interdisciplinary research, *'Valuing Arts & Arts Research'* (Saratsi, 2019). Eirini Saratsi et al., recognise reservations over how this may be accomplished and outline potential frameworks for integrating disparate forms of knowledge. The frequent assumption by the scientific community that the artist's role is to make difficult data accessible (Saratsi, 2019, p. 18) does not reflect the skills and insights that the arts can bring to interdisciplinary collaboration, there are other ways that art combines disciplinary knowledge and experience than its public-facing, awareness-raising capabilities.

Diego Galafassi in *'Raising the Temperature: the arts on a warming planet'* recognises that the threat of global warming is as much a cultural as a scientific challenge:

Claiming that arts have an important role to play in transformations does not mean to approach art in an instrumental way. On the contrary, what makes art a unique contributor is its freedom to pursue open-ended explorations of any topic through an ever-expanding set of practices not wedded to finished 'outcomes' or 'solutions'. (Galafassi et al., 2018)

When there is not a stated requirement for an artist to perform a specific task, a more provisional and speculative approach may be suitable, befitting an artist with aspirations to work beyond the confines of a studio practice towards a more collaborative ethos. This is where I found myself having relocated from London's docklands to the Deben Estuary in 1980: from the baseline of an orthodox studio practice, I became increasingly immersed in the systems and management of the estuary itself and, when in 1997 the Environment Agency undertook a study towards a new management plan for our estuary, I needed little encouragement to volunteer to represent the interests of the estuary-based community in the consultation process. To orientate myself, I instinctively started a large-scale hand-drawn map of the estuary, which subsequently became my key resource for documenting the progress of the enquiry and as a reference for shared discussions (Figure 6).

Visualisation is second nature for artists just as it is a vital tool for other disciplines, it is therefore no surprise that my strategy for gathering information is through drawing and the canonical place that it holds in the theory and practice of art. Two significant exponents of drawing who immediately came to mind are Paul Klee (Klee, 1953) and Johannes Itten (Itten, 1963), who both taught at the Bauhaus school in Weimar after the 1st World War and crystallised an approach to drawing as *becoming* an idea through the making process, rather than illustration. This has served me well for landscape-based research projects, where map-making has been a tool for understanding, communicating, and imagining; it is a pause for thought, a neutral ground open to interpretation where issues might be resolved, and opinions shared.

It is one thing to be informed and have an imaginative grasp of estuary processes, but another to secure active community engagement; it is a fundamental misapprehension that the responsibility of a benign authority to manage the landscape on behalf of the community.



Figure 6. Simon Read: The Suffolk Coast between Aldeburgh and Shingle Street and the Shoreline Management Plan of 2010. Ink, pencil and watercolour on paper ©Simon Read.

Although the Deben is within the Suffolk & Essex Coast & Heaths National Landscape and promoted as a visitor destination, there is limited public appreciation of how the estuary works. To promote greater understanding of estuary processes, we explored the potential for tangible community-based projects, and in 2009 agreed upon a restoration project for Sutton Saltmarsh, a vulnerable intertidal site on the upper estuary. With the help of local volunteers, we built a 90m timber and brushwood structure to attenuate the effect of tidal scour across its frontage and encourage the deposition of sediment (Sutton Saltmarsh, 2009) (Figure 7).

This has since led to further projects to restore intertidal habitat using similar soft engineering techniques: since 2014, I have collaborated with Suffolk Yacht Harbour on the River Orwell Estuary preparing intertidal sites to receive and sequester spoil from its annual dredging operation. Each year the yacht harbour must clear up to 300,000 m³ of tidal sediment for which my task is to install coir and brushwood groyne works to retain pumped liquid sediments across degraded saltmarsh. To capture spoil on-site requires an open-ended conversation with the flow and settlement of estuarine mud, which in turn improves the condition of existing saltmarsh and reinforces its function as a carbon sink (Suffolk Yacht Harbour, 2014–2024). A conversation with a natural system is for me consistent with the reflexive give and take of any studio activity, where the main difference lies in the context of the activity.

In 2009, with encouragement from the Environment Agency, the Deben Estuary Partnership (DEP) (Deben Estuary Partnership, 2015) was founded to represent community stakeholder interests towards the development of a Deben Estuary Management Plan. The guiding principle for this is 'Integrated Coastal Zone Management'; *'a dynamic, multidisciplinary, and iterative process to promote sustainable management of coastal zones'* (Integrated Coastal Zone Management, 1992) which precipitated a lively debate over what an estuary management plan should look



Figure 7. Sutton Saltmarsh Tidal Attenuation Barrier 2009. ©Simon Read.

like beyond such statutory obligations as flood risk management, safeguarding water quality, and protecting habitat. As one of the founder members, I served on the steering group for the plan, agreeing its overarching vision and acting as co-author. In April 2015, the Deben Estuary Plan was formally adopted by the local planning authority, signed off by the Environment Agency and published (Deben Estuary Plan, 2015).

How overt or covert the influence of an artist may be in the decision-making process depends upon how embedded (s)he is in its framework. Although all decisions for the Deben Estuary Plan were necessarily by consensus, abstract principles such as what is meant by an integrated system in an estuarine context and the challenge to achieve a balance between competing stakeholder interests require the subtlety and insight of shared vision, where the key value of an artist's voice is to help make the conceivable achievable.

This resonates with the activities of the Artists Placement Group (Artists Placement Group, 1966): founded in 1966 by the artists John Latham and Barbara Steveni to initiate and organise 'placements' for artists in industry or public institutions. Their strapline *'Context is Half the Work'* encapsulates the principle that the placement of an artist with an institutional or industrial partner will generate a reciprocal relationship. In Latham's words, the artist becomes an *'occasional person'*. One significant placement is of Latham himself with the Scottish Office 1975–1976 where amongst the issues he addressed was the restructuring of the post-industrial landscape in Glasgow and Edinburgh, and in particular the question of what to do with the large spoil tips known as the 'bings' around Edinburgh. For Latham, these should be monuments to Scotland's industrial past and therefore conserved as works of art, obviating the need for their removal: identifying a group of five tips which he called 'Niddrie Woman' for their resemblance to a female form from above, he proposed they be conserved and promoted by the Scottish Office for tourism. Although this was not acted upon at the time, the seed was planted and, with no acknowledgement of Latham, two of the bings became listed as monuments in the 1990's (Artists Placement Group, 1976).

In its report of 2012 *'An Approach to Seascape Character Assessment'* Natural England offers a perception of the relationship between communities and the coast:

Seascape, like landscape, reflects the relationship between people and place and the part it plays in forming the setting to our everyday lives. It is a product of the interaction of the natural and cultural components of our environment and how they are understood and experienced by people. (Seascape, 2012)

By 'cultural components' I understand the connectivity between people and their environment including the attraction it has for its visitors. Until 2023 The Suffolk & Essex Coast & Heaths National Landscape was known as the Suffolk Coast and Heaths Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB) and although the word 'beauty' in the designation never received more than cursory consideration, it would be perverse not to consider aesthetics (AONB, 2023). This brings us back to the role of art and whether it should promulgate worn-out ideals of beauty in landscape when there is a need to forge a less anthropocentric and more integrated relationship with natural systems. Is this where the question is going, or must it remain in a limbo zone of aesthetic value and cultural memory encumbered by the Sisyphean task of keeping the coast where it currently is? Having worked with communities and scientists for several years, I have learned to tread carefully over what an artist can bring to a discussion that combines community stakeholder interest, science, engineering, and government policy and when it is best to keep counsel.

Negotiating collaboration

Through this essay I have explored the uneasy relationship between art and policy including its application to climate action and would guard against treating art as a blank slate upon which policy can be written. The use of art for purposes that the artist never intended is

endemic, particularly when, in an art-science partnership, the divergence between artistic surmise and scientific fact fails to recognise the unexpected dimension latent within the spirit of collaboration. For each case study discussed, there are quite different views upon the role of art, but for each there is a common tendency to reach beyond the artist or the work to signify a purpose that might not otherwise be so evident. Although this may not represent the best use of an artist, each project has achieved a measure of success by raising public awareness through the conduit of art and its capacity to capture attention.

I have discussed the hurdles to be negotiated and benefits that accrue from interdisciplinary collaboration. Visual artists may be adept at engaging people by firing the imagination and offering unconventional solutions to familiar problems, but it is doubtful they can directly influence decision-making through their product as much as they may through their process, making the combination of an artist's resourcefulness and a scientist's rigour a powerful tool to expose the unpredictable dimensions of an enquiry. It does little service to the spirit of collaboration to engage trophy artists to produce signature artworks (Saratsi, 2019); aside from the use of art to give scary abstractions such as climate change imaginative purchase, the need to seek a new paradigm for disciplinary specialisms to work together is too urgent to allow lazy cultural stereotypes to hamper integrated response to complex challenges.

Notes

1. First published 1935 in Germany as 'Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit'.
2. CPRE was founded in 1926 by Patrick Abercrombie who had profound influence upon government planning policy during the interwar years and subsequently during the post-war rebuilding Britain period and was instrumental in drawing up the Town and Country Planning Act of 1947.
3. First written by John Chandler and Lucy Lippard published as 'The Dematerialisation of Art', *Art International* Feb (1968). New York.
4. A project to explore the potential adaptation of three case study locations in Britain to climate change: a village in the Pennines, Bristol, and the Lee Valley in London.
5. Ecosystem Services are defined as the goods and services provided by ecosystems to humans, as defined by the UN Millennium Ecosystem Assessment, ratified in 2006.
6. *Knowing your Place*. (1987). The participants in this exhibition were: Norman Ackroyd, Conrad Atkinson, Adrian Berg, Helen Chadwick, Hannah Collins, Gary Fabian Miller, Stephen Farthing, Tony Foster, Antony Gormley, Pat Johns, Balraj Khanna, Simon Lewty, Ian Macdonald, David Nash, Roger Palmer, Judith Rugg, Len Tabner and Stephen Willats.

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