

Creative Corner

Researching the second coming

Matt Baker has worked on site specific arts projects in Galloway Forest and the Forest of Dean. He was lead artist for the Gorbals Project in Glasgow. How does he see the relationship between artwork and research?

I should start by introducing myself as a 'process-led' artist. This little piece of artworld jargon means that I have no loyalty to any particular medium: instead I work by immersing myself within a situation or place through a process of multilayered research. Out of this I create an artwork entirely specific to the place.

'The context is half the work' is the mantra of much site-specific art practice, meaning that the artwork cannot exist separately from its surroundings. It derives its power from the web of relationship between the place and the artist's intervention in or with that place.

When considering artworks as a part of interpretation practice, this relationship is particularly pertinent. An artwork is by definition subjective and will therefore contain many layers of potential interpretation; in order to achieve this within a contextual work it is necessary for the artist to understand a place as a multileveled entity.

Experience

My research begins with direct experience, spending time alone in a place, sensing an intuitive response. Often this will take the form of an idea of scale, a characterisation in terms of texture (hard/soft, stable/mobile, loud/quiet etc) and a relationship to surrounding features (buildings, landforms etc). The intuitive response is then a foundation of the work and crucially the sounding board against which all further research is tested.

Information

The second research phase is a gathering of factual, anecdotal and experiential information about the place. Much time is spent walking in and about the place and speaking to people connected with it (a place exists as the sum of the thoughts of those who live there, those who used to live there, those who have visited and those who have never been there). These conversations form another key foundation to the work; a mixture of personal anecdote, history, opinion and conjecture. More often than not each conversation will throw up more suggestions of people to talk to: following this seemingly random sequence can uncover a chance remark or story that becomes an essential generator for the work. Alongside this

work is a similarly chance-informed trail through maps, text and images related to the place.

Experiment

At this point in the process the work has begun to suggest a material form, and the third stage of research usually starts in the studio with experiments with materials and imagery. Materiality, and the technology inherent in shaping and joining materials, are fundamental to the reading of the work and often an idea demands research into unfamiliar processes or design precedents: for example a recent project led me into working with the artificial sea used by the wave energy research group at Edinburgh University to test the buoyancy and movement characteristics of a floating section of an artwork.

Observation

The final aspect of research in my work is to consider each work as an experiment in its own right. As I see the purpose of my work being to contribute to the changing identity of a place, I assess the evolving relationship of a work to its context. Often this is impossible to assess through my own observation; instead I rely on a process of hearsay and observation from a distance (there is often nothing less helpful than the comment of someone made in the knowledge that they are talking to 'the artist').

Often the way a work enters into the mythology of a place can take unexpected and frankly bizarre forms. A suspended bronze figure that I made in Glasgow's Gorbals began to seep a ruddy liquid from the centre of her outstretched palm: in a predominantly Catholic area this was rapidly passed round as a miracle (with a bit of a Glaswegian twinkle). The result was that I fulfilled a long cherished personal ambition of being featured in *The News of the World*, while the sculpture figured on several esoteric websites as a harbinger of the second coming of Jesus Christ! Probably more significantly, the episode has contributed to widespread local adoption of the artwork as a good luck charm for the neighbourhood. It is this kind of experience that informs my approach to practice, a practice that in its entirety can be seen as a process of research into the role of identity and memory in public space.

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The end of all our exploring / Will be to arrive where we started / And I know the place for the first time.
TS Elliot, Little Gidding