

Northumbria Research Link

Citation: Holt, Ysanne (2013) A hut on Holy Island: reframing northern landscape. *Visual Studies*, 28 (3). pp. 218-226. ISSN 1472-586X

Published by: Taylor & Francis

URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/1472586X.2013.829998>
<<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/1472586X.2013.829998>>

This version was downloaded from Northumbria Research Link:
<https://nrl.northumbria.ac.uk/id/eprint/14463/>

Northumbria University has developed Northumbria Research Link (NRL) to enable users to access the University's research output. Copyright © and moral rights for items on NRL are retained by the individual author(s) and/or other copyright owners. Single copies of full items can be reproduced, displayed or performed, and given to third parties in any format or medium for personal research or study, educational, or not-for-profit purposes without prior permission or charge, provided the authors, title and full bibliographic details are given, as well as a hyperlink and/or URL to the original metadata page. The content must not be changed in any way. Full items must not be sold commercially in any format or medium without formal permission of the copyright holder. The full policy is available online: <http://nrl.northumbria.ac.uk/policies.html>

This document may differ from the final, published version of the research and has been made available online in accordance with publisher policies. To read and/or cite from the published version of the research, please visit the publisher's website (a subscription may be required.)

‘A Hut on Holy Island: Reframing Northern Landscape’

This essay explores the evolution and significance of a shelter constructed in 2002 by the artist Sally Madge on a remote beach on Holy Island, off the north-east coast of Northumberland. In the context of a legacy of cultural interactions with and representations of this island - a popular tourist destination - the concern is with how the simple structure might be understood in terms of a potential refiguring of a heavily prefigured location, enabling an alternative, even transgressive notion of place, disturbing preconceived boundaries between artists, community, insiders and outsiders and so engendering a new way of thinking about northern peripheries. In the process the essay considers recent examples of public art; from the increasingly design-practice led, spectacular structures at Kielder Reservoir Sculpture Trail, to Charles Jencks’ monumental earth sculpture, Northumberlandia constructed out of the top-soil excavated from an open-cast coal mine at Shotton. By contrast, the specific character of the Holy Island shelter and the nature of the practices associated with it unsettle some of our assumptions about place and the rhetoric underpinning art and creativity.

Ysanne Holt is Reader in Art History at the University of Northumbria and editor of *Visual Culture in Britain*. Her research engages with past and present cultures of ruralism and landscape, as well as with critical discourses relating to early twentieth century art practices in Britain

Keywords Lindisfarne, Sally Madge, shelter, spectacle, public art, preservationist discourses, refigured place

In 2002 on an isolated beach behind sand dunes on the north shore of the Northumbrian island of Holy Island, or Lindisfarne, artist Sally Madge began to construct a simple hut, a shelter made out of available rocks, debris and pieces of driftwood. In a part of the island described as ‘of such utter loneliness and space as to satisfy even the most ardent recluse’ (Mortimer 2002: 93) over time the shelter has drawn the attention of walkers, some avoiding the familiar, generally prescribed tourist trail. Fascinated by its mysterious evolution and the random collection of ‘treasures’ it has accrued, these walkers regularly leave behind objects, drawings and personal messages in the shelter’s visitor books and very often return with friends or family. As the artist has observed, the structure has survived winter storms and spring tides and increasingly gained status: ‘as a public artwork, site specific installation, museum and/or space for reverie, play, pilgrimage, parties, sleeping and bird-watching’.¹ Destroyed at one point and lately rebuilt, the shelter now has an ever widening reputation, and the artist has curated exhibitions of the found objects and handmade artefacts it has

accrued over time, so producing a sense of a hybrid space, with values and meaning dependent on the differing contexts within which and amongst whom it's engaged with.

(Fig. 1 and 2 here)

The interest here is in connections between the shelter, its development, the creative encounters and participatory acts it now engenders, and wider representations and experiential engagements with the tidal island of Lindisfarne. A particular concern is with how this one artist's own longstanding engagement prompts consideration of the possibilities for a re-defined, refigured relationship with place, and with how this might relate to other artists' practices in comparable peripheral locations in northern England. By peripheral I refer to geographical edges, borders, and boundaries, including liminal spaces such as the beach, a site that 'defies permanence ... provoking ideas of margins, exchange and openness' (Brown et.al: 2007, n.p). The purpose overall here is to contribute to the proper understanding of northern peripheries as sites that are continuously in process and resistant to the rigid conceptions endlessly perpetuated, and of a particular located artwork as a contributor to a potentially transgressive notion of place, one capable of disturbing generally preconceived boundaries between artists, communities, insiders and outsiders.²

An Island in the North Sea

North, of course, is a relative concept, but English / Scottish northern landscapes have been typically characterised (mostly by outsiders) as remote, harder places with an adverse climate, biting winds and driving rain. They have been often and variously perceived as anti- or pre-modern places of dearth and emptiness; uplands, debateable lands, untamed and unruly, alienating and abandoned, with a haunting, melancholic pastness, or as physically testing and questing, ascetic sites of solitary contemplation, regenerative retreat and escape, with an elemental purity; sometimes viewed as imagined elsewhere, places of mysticism and miracle.³ Certain of these ideas and ideals have been acquired at significant cost to areas of land or indigenous communities, areas often of social and economic neglect or hardship, of contested ownership, declining population and prone to pollution and damage. Many of these are highly pertinent issues for this small, 2¼ by 1½ mile island situated two miles from the mainland on the north east coast of England, close to Berwick upon Tweed and the border with Scotland.

(Fig 3 here)

In north-east writer Peter Mortimer's phrase 'a remarkable lump of rock and sand cast adrift in the North Sea' (Mortimer: 240), Lindisfarne/Holy Island, like other islands with monastic traditions (Iona, for example), has added interest in terms of those tropes of northernness with a heightened sense of seclusion and timelessness, place of myth, legend and associated spirituality, geographically extra remote and more difficult to access and seeming to possessing an epic isolation. As David Lowenthal writing on the condition of 'isophilia', for him akin to nostalgia, islands of different degrees of scale and remoteness (St Kilda is his UK example), allow 'sojourners to shut out the oppressive present', the 'insistent drum beat of modern progress' and suggest an intense and immediate authenticity (Lowenthal 2007:210).

Access to Lindisfarne - not always an island - is controlled by the tides, adding an element of risk to arrival and departure. This allows for the thrill of tide-racing for those who possess special knowledge, or the foolhardiness of the ill-informed who recklessly drive their vehicles into the north sea. Geographical and historical circumstances all mediate the response to place and impact upon the subjectivities of the location's diverse visitors – walkers, bird watchers, castle-visitors and priory faith tourists – as well as its own population of around 90 full-time residents for whom the location is familiar and every-day. In reality that notion of Lindisfarne as a remote, far away and 'cut off' periphery is of course immediately problematised by a single moment's reflection on the extent to which across the centuries it has acted as a central point of interconnection (spiritual, religious, educational etc) for diverse networks and communities from across the world.⁴ This location is and, indeed, has long been globally connected and multi-and time-layered with heritage, history, imaginary geographies, real and constructed identities. Sacred and touristic values, long-held ideas about wilderness and environmental concerns all intermingle and at times conflict, and boundaries are nebulous and often difficult to define. Lindisfarne also clearly underlines for us the recognition that both nature and culture are socially constructed ideas, not facts; that nature is indeed defined and shaped by culture.

In typical tourist guide parlance this tidal island, which attracts in the region of 600,000 visitors each year, is a location with 'something for everybody', 'stunning natural vistas', 'centuries of captivating history' and a site of religious pilgrimage and retreat; both a 'short jog off the beaten path' and yet 'hauntingly removed'.⁵ Its atmosphere is seen to transcend

modernity and to transport visitors through the shadows of its extraordinary past. As the ‘cradle’ of Celtic Christianity in England, the legends of St Aidan and St Cuthbert underpin the Easter Saturday crusade across ‘Pilgrim’s Way’ by Christians bearing wooden crucifixes, performing through ritual and repetition notions of hardship, endurance and ultimate spiritual purification believed by some to be achieved through journeys to extreme northern edges. Lindisfarne mythologies abound, and island gift shops attest to the popularity of legends like the cult of Cuthbert, later a humble hermit on the tiny nearby island of Inner Farne, renowned for his nature-loving egalitarianism and miraculously un-corrupted corpse eventually carried by monks to Durham in advance of marauding Danes.⁶

Historical and Cultural Representation and Experience

An enduring legacy of aesthetic discourses and visual representations developed as Lindisfarne emerged as a site of both religious and cultural tourism from the end of the seventeenth century, aided by the greater availability of maps, journals and guides enabling the production of antiquarian histories, topographical literature and proto-Romanticist categories of the Picturesque and the Sublime. Thomas Girtin toured the north in pursuit of these categories in 1796, producing studies of the melancholic decay and dilapidation of Lindisfarne priory and, following Girtin, Turner, on his picturesque tours at the time of his illustrations for the ‘Life and Work of Sir Walter Scott.’ Turner’s view of the sixteenth century castle perched high on Beblow crag, a 100 ft outcrop of molten dolerite rock, provides the most iconic view of the island. Here in the painting the depiction of torrid weather conditions and the precarious landing of the evening boat from Bamburgh suit the turbulent, spontaneous experiences characteristic of early Romanticism and what William Gilpin termed ‘the rough-hewn matter’ of northern scenery. (Hill 1996)⁷ Turner also sketched the priory for his *Liber Studiorum*, but his representation of the castle exceeds picturesque decay to convey a deeper quality of experience through the dramatic effects of light and weather conveying mood and atmosphere, as registered upon the shivering bodies of the presumably traumatised travellers.

(Fig 4 here)

From the mid to later-nineteenth century, developing mythologies of the wild and violent frontier county of Northumbria focussed upon its many castles and heroic battles, underlined by the cult of Walter Scott and the Border Ballads and the self-conscious construction of

Northumbrian cultural identity which incorporated tales of sturdy endurance and tragedy, key features of its folk song and poetry.⁸ What travel writer A.G. Bradley termed in 1908 *The Romance of Northumberland* had, five years earlier, encouraged Edward Hudson, the wealthy proprietor of *Country Life* magazine, to acquire the castle and commission Edwin Lutyens to redesign the interior and Gertrude Jekyll to plan a walled garden on the bare surrounding land. The result, for architectural historian and 1920s *Country Life* journalist Christopher Hussey, was ‘romance without period’,⁹ which clearly chimed with a national taste for the past and pastness, for ancient buildings and monuments which, in 1897, had already given rise to the formation of the National Trust, the Castle’s present day proprietors. Subsequent preservation and conservation societies from the early twentieth century coincided with a nostalgic interwar impulse towards the reassurance of heritage and versions of ancient history, and the Castle has continuously dominated popular representations of the island in prints, paintings, postcards and photography appearing, by turn, tranquil, atmospheric, moody or dour.

In a prominent post-war cultural field, Lindisfarne Castle featured as the setting for Roman Polanski’s 1966 film *Cul de Sac*, where a journey took place that was emphatically not into spiritual purification or restorative respite from modernity. Peter Hutchings has explored a particular strain of post 1945 cinematic representations of rural spaces that were underpinned by contemporary anxieties about modernity and technology.¹⁰ In the context of *Cul de Sac* the entrance of outsiders from a cosmopolitan centre into alienating landscapes emphasised by leaving the mainland and entering into a bleak, seemingly abandoned landscape, underpins, he argues, a narrative of dislocation and unsettled relations. This chimes with Lowenthal’s recognition of those particular islands culturally represented at times as sites of desolate despair and nightmare, as much as of dream. (Lowenthal: 202)¹¹ The same regressive landscape of *Cul de Sac* - alienated and dehumanized - characterised Polanski’s *Macbeth* of 1971 also filmed on the island with its ‘blasted landscape of scrub and lonely beaches’, its ‘startling grimness’ doubling for ancient Scotland; ‘a land of mud, mire, rain and misery, and drawing upon that cultural construction of a wild Northumbria. All of this underlines the simple point that representations of this particular location have continuously mediated wider social and cultural preoccupations over time, resulting in a powerful over-layering of preconception and expectation.

‘Conservers and Preservers’

Polanski's imaginary constructions aside, however, across the same period Lindisfarne and its once predominantly fishing and farming community was particularly affected by contested debates about access and ownership.¹² Through the immediate post-War years and beyond, emerging conservation organisations - including the Northumbrian National Park, later the Heritage Coast, accompanied by the island's designated AONB status - intensified their efforts to plan, protect and control. Following the easier crossing to the island after the construction of the Causeway in 1954, all of this was paralleled by the increase in tourism.

Today Lindisfarne is heavily looked after; the castle by the National Trust, the priory by English Heritage, the beaches, marine and wild life by Natural England, and overall a strong moral and aesthetic sensibility is maintained, with regulation a key watchword. As Lowenthal observes in general:

Today islands, like the past, command the assiduous devotion of conservers and preservers. Heritage is a global crusade, every surviving relic treasured, guarded, restored, re-created, commemorated, memorialised, bitterly contested by rival claimants... Imperiled by both man and nature, their fragile ecologies and societies are held, like pandas and Parthenons, to merit special aid. (Lowenthal 2007: 210-11)

Special aid comes in the form of the intensive management of movement and resources that is often contested by indigenous communities of varying kinds.

Throughout holiday seasons Lindisfarne, or 'Cradle Island',¹³ tourists congregate in sites in and around the priory and the heritage centre with its interactive page turning fascimile of the 8th century Gospels, and coaches drop visitors at the base of the pathway up to the castle via the much-photographed, picturesque up-turned fishing-boat sheds, returning them to the village in good time for tea and the tide. It is a well-planned operation with a focus on dutiful observation, all of which takes place in the southern corner of the island.

The north shore, the site of the shelter, is as I've said, wilder, more barren and, less frequently visited. Sally Madge's drystone structure hunkered on the rocky beach there inevitably suggests a refuge, a dwelling place, a Hebridean 'cleat' or hermit's hut – with an ironic allusion to Cuthbert. Shelter however evolved in ways that seem especially suggestive in contrast to the dominant representational history/narrative of the island I've just described and prompt different ways of thinking about and being in landscape. In this context and in relation to the non-representational, performative approach of a number of artists from the period of the 1970s onwards, the term 'environment' has often seemed more useful than 'landscape'. The latter generally implies the static gaze of the surveyor of scenery, the former

a more active, sensory immersion in an all-encompassing nature - a more alert and attentive response to weather, temperature, sounds, touch and smell.¹⁴ For social anthropologist Tim Ingold, landscape, thought properly, is not a backdrop to activity, or a 'picture in the imagination, surveyed by the mind's eye'. Ingold rejects the division between 'inner and outer worlds – mind and matter, meaning and substance'. His concept of 'dwelling' underlines a conjoined sense of land and everyday life and emphasises a heightened, multi-sensory, relational engagement, (Ingold: 2001) with the potential to produce an alternative notion of place – especially relevant distinctions for this discussion, and here largely at odds with those priorities of management and preservation.

The focus with shelter is on a dynamic engagement with nature that is much more than mere observation. In terms of the environmental aesthetics associated with such figures as Allen Carlson and Hugh Berleant, the emphasis is upon the qualitative responses conjured through active dialogue with the stuff of nature and with an experience of existing in and amongst the residue brought in by the winds and tides (Carlson 2010). This leads us to an unpredictable, performative view of nature-culture that is at odds with those areas of environmental planning, policy and regulation that tend to be 'dominated by static ideas about nature and nature-human relationships', ideas, as Bronislaw Szerszynski et.al point out, that might be usefully disrupted by the application of notions of performance, with their emphasis on an on-going 'doing' and 'making' (Szerszynski, Heim and Waterton 2003: 10).

Refiguring place

Shelter clearly underlines a collaborative process of doing; it resists ownership and regulation and invites participation and interaction from whoever happens along. As stated, on this less visited and wilder shore, walkers are free to enter, explore and physically engage; to leave messages and objects – often everyday flotsam and jetsam –or hand-made artefacts produced from things washed up on the shoreline or brought in from elsewhere and now assimilated and transformed into new kinds of island relics. Within the shelter they're arranged and attributed new meanings, mingling personal identity, memory, experience and an individual response to place. The very form of the structure itself fosters a process of working with nature and surrounding found materials and the use of skills such as dry stone walling with rocks from the beach, or weaving with washed up rope and netting to secure the interior of the construction. Following cultural geographer David Crouch, nature here can be regarded as not wholly prefigured, but refigured; not a fixed entity, but as felt, experienced, renewed

and reconstituted through activity –through engaging with found objects, with experimentation, improvisation, through processes of creative activity merging with everyday life. (Crouch 2009) Not every spontaneous visitor interaction with the shelter, it should be said, has been entirely welcome; contributions such as a large wooden crucifix rammed through the roof and a ubiquitous traffic cone, for example, have been edited away.

(Fig 5 here)

To those already familiar, to walk to the shelter after a period of absence involves a marked sense of anticipation. Will arrival there match memory and expectations? What transformations will have been made by winds, tide and other visitors? Experience is framed by chance and uncertainty, and visitor book comments constantly emphasise the magical qualities of a special place. Return trips are often made on anniversaries of varying kinds. One visitor describes a ‘good luck hut’, another leaves a memorial card for a departed loved one. Most notable amongst the comments is the appeal of the random nature of the objects ‘rescued’ and ‘placed here’, all of which contribute ‘a little bit of fantasy in a strange old world’; ‘a wonderful reminder of what life can be like if you should want it enough’; ‘every item in here will tell a story, sit and listen to it’; ‘a proper folk history/art ... if the place was discovered by visitors from a distant planet in centuries to come they would get a far better impression of earthlings’; ‘forget the tourist haunts –this is a lot more fun’. All of these comments underline those values of play, informality, unpredictability and the imagination. Creative writing skills often come to the fore:

I found this hoose of sticks and stone, with gaps enough to chill your bones. But sat inside amongst the treasure ... felt warmth and wonder of equal measure. What manner of man lives here methought ... a pirate – oh! My nerves were fraught, what should I say if he came back and found me sitting in his shack.

For other visitors, the shelter is just a perfect site for a snooze after a ‘night on the toon’ or a ‘great escape from all the god squad in the village’, and the window looking out to sea and the stone bench outside provide an ideal vantage point from which to hear the wind and waves, to watch eider ducks diving for fish, to count and listen to seals ‘singing on the rocks’.¹⁵

The artist herself has become both caretaker and archivist over time. Those objects associated with the shelter which have now appeared elsewhere in exhibitions and installations reference something like the ‘non-site’ of Robert Smithson’s terminology. (Alloway 1979: 6) In the

form of their arrangement in galleries they also share qualities of the ‘low-archaeology’ associated with American artist Mark Dion’s methodology and his wunderkammers or cabinet of curiosity display systems. Dion’s wide-ranging interests in archaeology and ecology, in diverse categories and taxonomies and in the ideology of museums, as witnessed in his 1999 Tate Thames dig and the accompanying exhibition, all resonate here and contribute a wry element of critique, upturning our habitual assumptions about what merits both collection and display and directing our attention too to the surprising character of those objects that find their way to peripheral coastal locations like Lindisfarne. These seem generally to possess an element of sea-side surrealism and include, typically, washed up false teeth, random bits of fishing paraphernalia - fisherman’s rubber gloves, parts of fishing nets and lobster pots, wide awake plastic frogs and dead birds; dolls with an uncanny presence and uncertain gender; fake body parts and so on. Play and humour here run counter to the strictures of both curatorial and preservationist discourse.

Land, Environmental and Public Art

These features of shelter are in interesting contrast to what at first sight might appear a very similar structure - environmental artist Chris Drury’s much visited *Hut of the Shadows* constructed in the 1990s at Sponish overlooking Lochmaddy on another northern island, North Uist in the outer Hebrides. Part of the Uist Sculpture Trail (Road Ends Project), this hut is a stone tumulus with a curved passage-way which leads the visitor into a small chamber. By means of a lens and three mirrors built into the wall, the chamber acts as a camera obscura and projects the landscape around it onto the opposite wall. Like many land art structures, Drury’s hut requires bodily interaction to be meaningful, but the character of the experience it offers is similar to that of the high cultural landscape tradition of the early nineteenth century Romantic movement in art, with which the camera obscura is especially associated. Here, fundamentally, nature is a phenomenon to be observed, apart from and outside the individual. Drury’s own practice here has clearly shifted from his earlier one of spontaneous making without necessarily seeking permission to creating works that are pre-planned and commissioned as part of a broader regional arts programme.

Another of Drury’s huts appears at another northern edge, back down on the English-Scottish border in Kielder Forest, an area witness to such marked historical processes of change in social, cultural, environmental and economic use that it provides a perfect example of the multi-and time-layered landscapes that concern me here. Roughly 65 miles inland from

Lindisfarne in prime Border Reiver's country between the Cheviots and Hadrian's Wall, Kielder was planted in stages either side of the Second World War by the Forestry Commission who had acquired it from a local land-owner escaping death duties, and was to become one of the largest man made forests in Western Europe - 239 square miles of primarily tall, monotonous rows of sitka spruce. Originally intended to provide timber for wartime use and pit props for the northern coalfields, following the decline in coalmining through the 1970s the vast Kielder reservoir was finally opened in 1982, created by flooding sections of the North Tyne Valley in order to secure water supply for other forms of industry in Tyneside and Teeside. It was a process which inevitably and for ever dispersed generations of the local farming community. After whole-scale de-industrialisation of the north-east however throughout the 1980s, tourism and recreation emerged here as the most important economic resource with accompanying car-parks, information centres, cycle routes, nature trails and designated beauty spots. As Environmental Geographer Christine McCulloch has observed, in the spirit of post-industrial versatility Kielder now 'liberates visitors from the noise and pollution of the city streets, and allows them vigorous exercise amongst controlled nature, which has been produced as a spectacle, simplified and only sustainable by continuing intervention by man'. (McCulloch 2011)

From 1995 and with the Lake District's Grizedale Forest as a precedent, a sculpture commissioning programme and later an architectural one was developed by the then Kielder Partnership (now Kielder Water and Forest Park Development Trust). Not surprisingly, the theme of shelter has tended to dominate both programmes alongside that of look-outs and vantage points. Here in 1996, Chris Drury constructed *Wave Chamber*, the first of his camera obscura shelter structures for this particular location and in 2009 six shelters for Lakeside Way were especially commissioned through an international artists' competition at a cost of £250,000.

Because the Kielder Partnership required no local planning permission and after a rejected proposal by local residents at Killhope Law on the Durham, Cumbria and Northumberland border, Kielder became the chosen site in 2000 of American artist James Turrell's *Cat Cairn: the Kielder Skyspace*, located on a rocky outcrop on Bewshaugh Moor looking down over the reservoir and forest. Skyspace consists again of a tunnel through which visitors, at dawn or dusk ideally, enter into a circular room with a ring of seats and a central opening overhead. To be perceived perhaps in the category of the modern sublime, Turrell's work uses both

solar and wind power and fibre optics to manipulate perceptions of light and space in order to convey a celestial experience.

(Fig 7 here)

Notable here is the combination of natural energy sources and sophisticated technologies in order to manufacture or create the possibilities for the solitary reflective contemplation Turrell's comment implies. As art critic Simon Morley points out, in the present day it has become hard for painting to evoke the 'visual sublimity' associated with the Romantic painters such as Turner, James Ward or John Martin. It is now with the aid of technology, and often in the form of installation, that artists seek to provoke sublime experiences and effects such as heightened feeling or self-transcendence. Morley sees Turrell as providing an 'affirmative experience of sublime nothingness', using light 'to dematerialise an environment and to propel the spectator into a state of sensory confusion that isn't so much unsettling as ecstatic'. (Morley 2010) The degree to which spectacular, often immersive experiences, some with their origins in American land art practices from the 1970s, have become standard fare for heritage and cultural organisations looking to enhance visitor, or consumer, numbers is widely acknowledged. All of this confirms McCulloch's point that Kielder has 'become akin to a municipal park on a grand scale' and that since the 2008 building of the Kielder Observatory by Charles Barclay Architects, 'Even the night sky has been commodified' (McCulloch 2011).

The use of advanced technology in relation to specific Kielder sites resulted in 2009 in designs for a bright orange steel structure entitled *shelter 55/02*, a reference to the longitude and latitude of its location on Lakeside Way. The structure, a series of steel panels or alcoves that can be turned into seats, windbreaks and a weatherproof pod, resulted from a collaboration between sixteen*(makers), a multidisciplinary architectural design network specialising in the creation of prototypes, and German steel manufacturers Stahlbogen GmbH.

There is considerable irony here that in this wider locality, the industrial north-east, once famed for its steel manufacture and usage, that in the present day association between technology and manufacturing is typically directed at the level of leisure, heritage and tourism and preoccupied with the possibilities of consumption rather than production.

A prime example of this current situation now lies further down from Kielder along the Northumbrian coastline on the A1 south from Lindisfarne, six miles north of Newcastle. ‘Unveiled’ in 2013 this is the vast reclining nude figure of *Northumberlandia*, weighing 1.5 million tonnes and measuring a quarter of a mile long on a 750 acre site conceived by artist, garden designer and postmodern architectural theorist Charles Jencks, for land belonging to Viscount Ridley’s Blagdon Estate. The sprawling female figure is constructed from the topsoil and debris resulting from opencast mining operations in the area, permission for which was initially won through assurances that following excavation the site would be made good in the form of green spaces for the local community. Interestingly, in relation to Susannah Thompson’s account in this issue of miners’ art from nearby Ashington, Jencks’ stated concern was to ‘utilise and celebrate the machinery and skills of the mining industry which has a long history in the region, whilst using the residual product of operations in a new and creative way’.¹⁶

Despite intense opposition to the initial request for planning permission for the giant ‘earth work’, the regional developer The Banks Group working with the Blagdon estate won their appeal and the construction work began in 2008. As Michael Hampton has observed, in general terms, ‘government national policy framework promises protection for [AONBs]...but still leaves a loophole for highly profitable mineral extraction granting contracts to companies with a very patchy record of restoring worked out sites ... or legacy, to use the buzzword’. (Hampton 2013: 10-13) Jencks himself speaks of his creation as an ‘iconic celebration of women and the human form’ echoing the lines of the distant Cheviot hills. More widely, comparisons have been made to Antony Gormley’s 1998 *Angel of the North* in Gateshead, another art work tangentially related to past, largely defunct regional industry – there, in the form of its steel construction. Those connections aside, what fundamentally unites *Angel of the North* with *Northumberlandia* is the instrumentalism of culture-led regeneration projects and visitor ‘attraction’ schemes which also act as marketing devices, helping to create a brand identity for a region otherwise in decline, and boosting the local economy, for however long a period.¹⁷ The novelty of rambling across an enormous, recumbent female nude has successfully drawn high visitor numbers to date, and Jencks himself has since been nominated for both local and national planning and regional regeneration awards. All of this provides a striking contrast the uniquely distinguishing features of Sally Madge’s spontaneously evolved and entirely unfunded construction / art work on the far less easily locatable north shore of Lindisfarne.

‘Gimme Shelter’

After the shelter was destroyed in 2011 by a Natural England warden with concerns over safety and the danger of collapse, the one-time ‘hermit’s hut’ might have remained a picturesque Lindisfarne ruin like those depicted by Girtin and Turner - acquiring a melancholic air, becoming absorbed into the local collective memory and accruing new and evolving meanings as time passed. With a more contemporary approach perhaps, to have left the ruin to crumble further would have corresponded with the ephemerality and transitoriness of works by those artists such as Andy Goldsworthy who embrace processes of decay and degradation as an inevitable characteristic of life, art and nature, or with Robert Smithson’s conception of entropy in relation to both natural and man-made structures. The popular decision however amongst islanders and visitors alike (e.g. those ‘devastated to have found it vandalised’) was to rebuild, and a new structure has since evolved with the aid and enthusiasm of a highly-skilled dry-stone waller and the support now of Natural England.

The process of rebuilding and negotiating procedures for securing the structure more firmly against the weather has necessarily changed its character to some degree, and raises interesting questions about an inevitable departure from some of the motivations that underlay its gradual construction. Preservation now as an artist’s installation requires a discreet information plaque making clear to visitors it is indeed an art work. That requirement might of course remove some of the mystery and speculation experienced by those walkers who encounter the shelter for the first time. The key issue however is the now widely shared acknowledgement of visitors, residents and island wardens alike of the real value of a structure which has variously engaged and captured the interests of so many, as the visitor’s book comments alone make clear. In some respects too the voicing of support from particular local residents who took to the structure early on has amounted to something of a test case for those keen to assert some degree of resistance to preservationists who appear reluctant to countenance any unplanned or spontaneous gesture.

Unlike the other examples of monuments and artworks discussed here, generally reliant above all on the respectful gaze of observers at commodified spectacle, the reclaiming of the shelter on the far northern shore of Lindisfarne demonstrates the importance to many of seeking an alternative to those dominant narratives of particular locations, of official heritage, of both the need for and anxieties over visitors and the broader culture of tourism, and provides a powerful example of the possibility of a reframing or refiguring of place.

¹ <http://www.sallymadge.com/work/shelter.html#eleven>. See also Tom Jennings, 'Art in Ruins', *Freedom* magazine, London, Vol.72, No.3, February 2011 (<http://libcom.org/blog/lindisfarne-shelter-sally-madge-23022011>). Sally Madge's art practice has very often been concerned with the creation of informal, often ironic or humorous dwelling places, grottoes and refuges – in both urban and rural, indoor and outdoor spaces, and often with an emphasis on appropriation and/ or a radical repositioning of place. She also has a life-long interest in creating objects and structures from random objects and interactions with the beach.

² On transgressive place, see especially the work of human geographer Tim Cresswell, *In Place/Out of Place: Geography, Ideology and Transgression*, University of Minnesota Press, 1996 and his more recent works, *On the Move: Mobility in the Western World*, 2006

³ On these characterisations see Peter Davidson, *The Idea of North*, Reaktion Books, 2005. See also essays and introduction to 'North', themed issue of *Visual Culture in Britain*, Vol.11, no. 3, Nov, 2010

⁴ These issues were very usefully discussed in conversations at a research seminar presentation at the University of Newcastle's Centre for Rural Economy, delivered by Julie Crawshaw from their AHRC Northumbrian Exchanges knowledge exchange project and David Suggett from the Holy Island Partnership, 11 June 2013

⁵ Population information from the website of the 'Holy Island of Lindisfarne', <http://www.lindisfarne.org.uk/general/welcome.htm>

⁶ On the 'cult of Cuthbert and general history of the island, see for example, Kate Tristram, *The Story of Holy Island, An Illustrated History*, Norwich: Canterbury Press, 2009

⁷ For discussion of both Girtin and Turner's representations of Lindisfarne, see David Hill, *Turner in the North*, Yale University Press, 1996

⁸ On cultural constructions of Northumbrian identity from the nineteenth century, see Paul Usherwood, 'Myths of Northumberland: Art, Identity and Tourism' in Robert Colls, ed, *Northumbria: History and Identity 547-2000*, Chichester: Phillimore and Co., 2007

⁹ The phrase appears on a flickr site of photographs on the castle <http://www.flickr.com/photos/99619150@N00/3051956423/>

¹⁰ For relevant discussion of the extent to which particular representation of rural spaces in film and television underpin post-1945 anxieties about modernity and technology, see Peter Hutchings, 'Uncanny Landscapes in British Film and Television', *Visual Culture in Britain*, Vol.5, no.2, 2004. Hutchings expanded his discussion in relation to *Cul de Sac* at a Northern Peripheries network seminar at Cove Park in Argyll in February 2011

¹¹ Lowenthal, 2007, p. 202. William Golding's *Lord of the Flies* (1954) and *Pincher Martin* (1957) are obvious literary examples of islands perceived in these terms. A Lindisfarne example here might be Gordon Honeycombe's supernatural tale of 1972, *The Dragon under the Hill*. For a current example of film in this regard see 'Rising Tide', 2012, directed by Philip Shotton and Dawn Furness. As the film notes describe, a group of college friends go to camp on 'the remote tidal island of Lindisfarne off the North East English Coast, steeped in myth and mystery, where [Izzy, the central character's]... skeletons come well and truly out of the closet to take revenge on the trapped, terror-stricken teens'.

¹² Lime-burning and lime kilns – the latter still in evidence today- was a particular part of the island's economy in the second half of the nineteenth century.

¹³ The 'cradle island' phrase was popularised at the time of a 1984 book and television series produced by Magnus Magnusson.

¹⁴ For an excellent short account of developing distinctions between forms of representational and non-representational performative environmental art, see John E. Thornes, 'A Rough Guide to Environmental Art',

2008, *The Annual Review of Environment and Resources*, published online at http://environment.arizona.edu/files/env/Thornes%20on%20Environmental%20Art%20in%20ARER_0.pdf

¹⁵ All of the excerpts in these paragraphs come from visitor book comments in the artist's own archive.

¹⁶ http://www.hjbanks.com.northumberlandia/2_3

¹⁷ On this tendency in Newcastle-Gateshead see Paul Usherwood's essay, 'Tyneside's 'Artistic Renaissance' and Art' in Hilary Fawcett, ed., *Made in Newcastle: Visual Culture*, Northumbria University Press, 2007

References

Lawrence Alloway, *Introductions 1: Options*, Milwaukee Center, 1979

Arnold Berleant, *Aesthetics and Environment: Themes and Variations*, Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005

Sarah Brown, Stacey Fox and Alison Jaquet, introduction to 'On the Beach: Liminal spaces in historical and cultural contexts', Special Issue of *Limina: A Journal of Historical and Cultural Studies*, 2007, <http://liminaarts@uwa.edu.au>

Allen Carlson, *Nature and Landscape: An Introduction to Environmental Aesthetics*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2010

Robert Colls, ed, *Northumbria: History and Identity 547-2000*, Chichester: Phillimore and Co., 2007

Tim Cresswell, *In Place/Out of Place: Geography, Ideology and Transgression*, University of Minnesota Press, 1996

David Crouch, 'Creativity, Space and Performance: Community Gardening', in Tim Edensor, Deborah Leslie, Steve Millington and Norma.M Rantisi (eds), *Spaces of Vernacular Creativity: Rethinking the Cultural Economy*, Routledge, 2009

Peter Davidson, *The Idea of North*, Reaktion Books, 2005

Mark Dion, *Tate Thames Dig, 1999-2000*, exhibition catalogue, London, Tate, 1999

Michael Hampton, 'Human Nature', *Art Monthly*, Dec. 2012 / Jan 2013

David Hill, *Turner in the North*, Yale University Press, 1996

Peter Hutchings, 'Uncanny Landscapes in British Film and Television', *Visual Culture in Britain*, Vol.5, no.2, 2004

Tim Ingold, *The Perception of the Environment*, Routledge, 2001

Tom Jennings, 'Art in Ruins', *Freedom* magazine, London, Vol.72, No.3, February 2011, (<http://libcom.org/blog/lindisfarne-shelter-sally-madge-23022011>)

David Lowenthal, 'Islands, Lovers and Others', *The Geographical Review*, 97, (2): 202-229, April 2007

Christine McCulloch, 'Kielder Water and Forest Park: city in the country', AHRC Landscape and Environment, Environmental Histories Network, 2011, <http://www.environmentalhistories.net/>, accessed, 25/04/13

Simon Morely, 'Staring into the Contemporary Abyss: The Contemporary Sublime', *Tate Etc*, issue 20, Autumn, 2010

Peter Mortimer, *100 Days on Holy Island: A Writer's Exile*, Edinburgh: Mainstream Publishing Company, 2002

Bronislaw Szerszynski, Wallace Heim and Claire Waterton, eds. *Nature Performed: Environment, Culture and Performance*, Oxford: Blackwell, 2003

Kate Tristram, *The Story of Holy Island, An Illustrated History*, Norwich: Canterbury Press, 2009

Paul Usherwood, 'Tyneside's 'Artistic Renaissance' and Art' in Hilary Fawcett, ed., *Made in Newcastle: Visual Culture*, Northumbria University Press, 2007