

GUDRUN FILIPSKA from the ARTS TERRITORY EXCHANGE *in* conversation with  
VERONICA SEKULES of GROUNDWORK, the first gallery in the UK to be dedicated to ART  
and the ENVIROMENT.

Groundwork is located near to the banks of the river Ouse in the slowly regenerating post-industrial docklands area of Kings Lynn, UK. When the gallery opened in 2016 the curator and owner Veronica Sekules asked artist Richard Long if he would make a piece for the gallery – he agreed and requested a sample of Ouse mud, he subsequently made *The Great Ouse River Drawing* which is on permanent display at the gallery.

The river Ouse, with a winding course of 143 miles, ambles its way from central England through the Fens, past Ely and onwards to Kings Lynn where it flows into the mouth of the Wash. The name itself suggests the slow moving laugour of a river laden heavy with mud and silt. In the Fens it is an essential and highly modified channel which takes the burden of overflow water from the periodically flooded and highly prized agricultural land. The Fens are a place of silt, a land deforested, dessicated and compartmentalised and much Fen silt ends up deposited at the mouth of the Wash in Kings Lynn.

*GF* What does it mean to you to be close to the Ouse? It is such a powerful emblem to me of the drainage of the Fens and the subsequent ecological consequences, I can't imagine a more perfect location for Groundwork and the work by Richard Long using the Ouse mud further embeds the gallery in its location... The emblem of the river seems to be a very important one in 'environmental art' I am thinking of Jem Southam's River photographs and Olafur Eliasson's *'Riverbed'* among others...

*VS* *The river location is absolutely critical to the gallery's identity and ethos. It is exactly because of it, and the fact that it is in a flood plain, that a focus on the environment made complete sense, both in the context of the town and the need for it to be explicit about its perilous position in the light of climate change, and in terms of the art world at large. There are no other galleries with quite the same concentrate and consistent focus. Its location gives it its legitimacy and the reason for its urgency. Apart from this important foundation idea for the gallery, I have not yet pursued it specifically as a theme (except with Richard Long), although I have been talking for some time to Simon Faithfull about exhibiting a series of images he has made while sailing the Great Ouse. I hope that will form the core of a theme to be pursued from 2019.*

*The specific details of the history of the local river, or rivers, as you say are pertinent - not so much literally, but as a symbol of how environmental change is a part of bigger societal change and often controlled by factors which are not beneficial for it. The Great Ouse has had a chequered history and now is hardly used by boats. It flows out to the Wash and the opening out of the fenland landscape can be seen just beyond the town boundary. The conflicting pull of the tides has always made it difficult to navigate, which the engineers who drained the fens in the 17th century tried to avoid, or remedy, by opening up alternate river channels. It has also always had a tendency to silt up badly, a fact noticed by Daniel Defoe in the early 18th century. Its tributary, the Purfleet upon which the gallery building sits directly, was worse, as it was slower to drain and flow and was known as a stinking drain in the 19th century. Now it is culverted and maintained (sort of) by the Council as a reed-bed, seldom cut, in order to preserve its biodiversity. In summer, ducks live there, as well as moorhens, reed warblers and plenty of dragonflies.*

*Richard Long made his 2016 drawing with Great Ouse mud, as it needed to be tidal. For me it is a*

*symbol of the endurance of nature, its structures surviving and adapting to change and it holds out hope, not least that an artist can be the one to remind us of its modest powers.*



***The Great Ouse River Drawing*** - By **Richard Long**, July 2016. Created specially for Groundwork. Image Veronica Sekules.

**GF** Your recent exhibition '*Fire and Ice*' by Gina Glover and Jessica Rayner touched on so many issues, from energy use and climate change to post industrial futures and economies of human conflict. I was particularly struck by the theme of ruin and degradation. Ideas of ruin, which have long been explored in environmental art are touched on here in a literal sense by the melting of ice and the destructiveness of fire but also in a more complicated way in '*Poisoned waters run deep*' Glover's black and white series of photographs documenting fracking sites in the US – on first look the images echo Bernd and Hilla Becher's industrial photographs (1966-1999) they have a similar formalist style and it almost takes a second look to realise the series is contemporary. The aesthetic of the photographs speak through a similar nostalgia to that evoked by the Becher's images of post industrial monuments but their positioning as new emblems of industrial intervention mean they act both as markers for future ruin and degeneration as well as cleverly harking back to 'ruin' as nostalgic site of mourning...do you have any thoughts on these ideas?

**VS** Yes, this is very interesting indeed and the more one thinks about it and views the images, the more complex the issues become. I have had the privilege of talking quite a lot to the artists, and

then seeing the images every day for several months, and engaging in numerous conversations, some of them with people who have been very thoughtful and knowledgeable about the issues they tackle. Gina Glover's *Poisoned Water Runs Deep* images were generally reckoned to be powerful, hard hitting. In fact they were printed in black and white, with heightened negative in the background, but there is one of the original colour prints reproduced in her book 'The Metabolic Landscape' which shows how extensively she manipulated the image subsequently to give it a doom-laden edge. So, in monochrome, it has become superficially more like a Bernt and Hilla Becher than before, though, while I agree theirs suggest ideas of post industrial ruin and a nostalgia for a lost economy, I think that Gina's images aim to portray the machinery as an active agent of destruction rather than ruin. There is something of the science fiction about her tanks and ladders and rocket-like projections, and I find them a little frightening. On the other hand, equally manipulated digitally to enhance their soft colours and mists, her melting ice pictures are simply beautiful, one of them, someone said they could just stand in front of endlessly, as it took their breath away. That was their strange power - we ought to be disturbed because of the loss they represent, yet their beauty induces a sense of guilt.



Image from Gina Glover's *Poisoned Water Runs Deep* photographic series. Groundwork 2017.

Jessica Rayner's work has quite a different emphasis I think, on renewal, innovation, resourcefulness. The fire integral to her work 'Conversion', never appears as destructive. The bale of biofuel at its centre, lives on through the work as the fire roars around it and is then absorbed back into it in an endless loop. So the fire is in effect the force which enables transformation from one medium into another, but we never see that happening, as the bale of straw-fuel never disappears. So, it is an illusion. The work doesn't answer the question as to whether or not this is a good idea but it raises many questions, and it is an image, once again, that stuck in people's minds very powerfully. Others of Jessica's works tackled similar issues of apparent renewal. The ice block which I showed opposite 'Conversion' is called 'Nothing is Destroyed' and is chipped away to shards and then reappears as a block, endlessly repeating its life-death cycle. So it is not for me a cycle which is about mourning, but it expresses hope that we are not actually witnessing complete loss, but change, and that in order to understand the forces of change, we need to rethink our prejudices. That for me is a very strong message about climate change.

GF...I was also very interested in the varied locations of the works in the Fire and Ice show (Iceland, the US, Greenland...) and how important ideas of travel and journeying have been historically in work which considers the environment, whether as a narrative device as in Patrick Keiller's 'Robinson in Space' or as a performative and explorative tool as in the work of many 'land artists' and contemporary 'walking artists' such as Francis Alys, Hamish Fulton and members of WAN (the Walking Arts Network). As an aside, I'm also wondering how the economies of travel which are necessary to further research work in the humanities and sciences are both aided by narratives of globalisation and its ease of travel and at the same time troubled by air travels impact on climate change for example and how these tensions and contradictions can be managed...perhaps opening up new opportunities for engagement that can be both local and far reaching such as Chris Kraus's propositions for radical localism<sup>1</sup>... I was wondering if you had any thoughts on the political implications of artists 'travel' and how these ideas may have changed post 'Land art'?

*VS The whole question of travel in the art world is fraught with contradictions. It was a problem for Cape Farewell, who were criticised for sending artists on expeditions to the Arctic, and that being in contrast with the idea of a low carbon economy necessary for mitigating some of the impacts of climate change. Yet, the role of the artist as 'witness' is a crucial and long-standing one. We need the authenticity and independence of vision that an artist can contribute, and not least, the willingness to be critical and both to take risks and portray them. For artists too of course, travel is an important professional development thing and means for inspiration. Gina and Jessica cemented their relationship as artists through their travels to Iceland. For Hilary Mayo, it enabled a complete change of direction, giving her work new force and imagery.*

*Land Art is also complex - depending on whether we are talking about the American or the British versions, which are deeply contradictory, the former being very much about dramatic reshaping of landscape and the latter about minimal and very personal intervention. Ditto, the whole notion of walking art, which can be equally about risk, about modernism, history, location - depending on who you are talking about. I think that your **Arts Territory Exchange**, enabling virtual and locally based collaborations and initiatives, is one of the ways forward. There is a big localism movement developing, which I also have written about - and at best this can be about regeneration and understanding indigenous knowledge as well as valuing the minutiae of place.<sup>2</sup>*

GF I was struck by a quote I read recently by Nancy Holt about her 'Sun Tunnels' (1977) in rural Utah, that the landscape '...could speak of walking on earth that has surely never been walked upon before, (evoking) a sense of being on this planet, rotating in space, in universal time'<sup>3</sup>. I was considering how our concept of time in 'environmental art' may have changed over the past 50 years, the idea of a universal time or being suspended in space in this way seems an impossibility now - due largely to the fact that environmental issues are far more pressing and urgent - the feeling that we are existing on a kind of borrowed time now the climate change tipping point<sup>4</sup> has been passed and even if CO<sub>2</sub> emissions were reduced completely, the damage already done is no longer reversible...I suppose I am wondering what these knowledges mean for contemporary arts practice and activism in general, especially in an age when the president of the United States denies climate change in favour of industry and economic development. So the idea of 'universal' time that Holt talks about has been perhaps replaced by some kind of anxious and increasingly frenetic temporal landscape, and I'm interested in what this may mean for the making work and the need as talked about by artists such as Marina Abramovic to be inside of time and to suspend time somehow in order to carve out a space in which to make art...?

*VS Regarding the notion about time, it depends very much on who you are looking at. For many artists now, the idea of deep time is more relevant than ever - look for example at the great interest*

*being shown in geology and eg. Doggerland - the prehistoric environment beneath the North Sea, or at the impact of development of the Anthropocene. Mind you, both these ideas speak of landscape that has very much been trodden - and that is the really big difference from Nancy Holt's era. And I think that the Climate change and the feelings of human responsibility for it have very much led to and accelerated interest in these ideas about traces from former civilisations and the impact on the present - and how we read the past. I think that Marina Abramovic's concerns come from a different place - being very sensitive to the autonomy of art, and the idea of the artist as author deeply within a protected practice, with a right to dip in and out of time at will. She may or may not share concerns about climate change, but I don't see that as being primary for her, as much as the idea of Vanitas - focussing on life and death and on the limits of human life and experience.*

GF ...also in terms of audience engagement and ideas around 'looking', slowness is equally as important as an urgency in consumption, how as a curator do you balance the delivery of a message or the raising of awareness around environmental issues with the importance of the suspended time necessary for spectator engaging with the work? And how important is the delivery of a message to your remit as a gallery?

*VS I love the whole idea of 'slow' - as in slow food, slow art - and I think it can also be applied to slow looking. But there is also an urgency in terms of the environment. They are not necessarily contradictory ideas though. In order to understand the environment and the issues we face in our relationships with it, we need to focus on its minutiae. In both cases, being slow often involves careful looking and engaging in conversation. I very much regard the gallery as a place for both and try to engage people in conversation, though of course silent contemplation is important too. Roger Ackling used to tell a wonderful story about the best tutorial he ever held at Chelsea with two artists, was a completely silent communion in front of their work. He had told them only to talk when they were ready and they saw no need. Silence can be a bit of an elite thing though - like minimal art - very much for those who already understand things deeply.*

*As for the environment and how I relate to it via the gallery, it is a question of watching listening and being attentive to what artists are doing and using the work of theirs that I show as a springboard for campaigning about issues it raises. That happens through conversations, discussions, colloquia, conferences, workshops. These have to work across disciplines and I am a great advocate for that, as a means to engage people beyond the confines of the contemporary art world. I see the gallery as a place that bridges between specialists and non-specialists, and people of different specialisms. It is, and ought to be a social space, welcoming of different points of view. My space is intentionally hybrid - using the methods of a public gallery with the practices of a commercial one, i.e. being a shop, as it matters to me ethically to engage in the economy. Being on the high street is as important as being on the river. I am bringing international and global artistic and environmental concerns there, and I hope, a greater interest in how art can engage with environmental politics as well as with people's daily lives.*

Groundwork's next exhibition *Trash Art* opens on the 9th of March and Veronika Sekules new book '*Cultures of the Countryside, Art | Museum | Heritage | Environment*' is available now published by Routledge.

1Chris Krauss, 2012, *Kelly Lake Store & Other Stories*, Portland, Companion Editions.

2Veronica Sekules, 2018, *Cultures of the Countryside, Art | Museum | Heritage | Environment*, London and New York, Routledge.

3 Lucy Lippard, 1983, '*Overlay – Contemporary Art and the Art of Pre-history*'. New York, pantheon. page 106.

4 A few years ago, 400 parts per million for carbon dioxide was widely cited as the tipping point for climate change. Whether it's a tipping point or a milestone, we have decisively passed it and CO2 levels appear certain to continue rising. Forbes [www.forbes.com/sites/uhenergy/2017/03/16/](http://www.forbes.com/sites/uhenergy/2017/03/16/). Article written by Earl J. Ritchie.