

## **Sense of place: place of sense**

**Beacon project September 2005, Lincolnshire**

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### **A new curatorial practice**

The writer John Carey tells us that John Paul Getty, as ‘one of the most lavish art lovers of all time and one of the greatest benefactors of the arts’<sup>1</sup> believed profoundly that it was a love of art that distinguished a complete human being from a barbarian. His solution to the urban masses who were dependent upon the State, was to banish them to remote rural areas. Carey also comments that Getty is an extreme case in which it is evident that exposure to the arts did *not* make a better human being.

The notion of art lover as connoisseur has challenged a number of artists and policy makers to rethink the relationship between art and specialised forms of knowledge or connoisseurship. In focusing on the question of access they have reinvented codes of representation. They have also expanded the kinds of spaces and ways in which contemporary art can be encountered. The development of new forms of public art, many of which take the form of temporary interventions, is directed towards profoundly questioning elitist tendencies in urban as well as rural places.

The Beacon project (2004–present) in Lincolnshire is a significant case of the quest for different ways of both authoring new work and presenting work to audiences. It also takes place significantly in a rural context. Within Beacon the rural presents a specific advantage, an opportunity to question the dominance of urban values and related mores of practice. ‘Audience’ cannot be assumed in rural places in the way that it can in an urban context. Audiences therefore need to be consciously developed. For John Plowman, who has created Beacon, the artist working in the rural is secure in knowing who and where they are. However, the audience is vulnerable,

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<sup>1</sup> Carey, J., 2005, *What good are the arts?*, Faber and Faber, London

disorientated, not able to grasp what is expected of them because they are not functioning within the known rituals of the gallery. The title of this year's Beacon project reflects this critical concern – *senseless and placeless* as does Plowman's catalogue essay.

How might we begin to understand these new forms of experimentation that Plowman shares with a number of contemporary artists? It seems clear that to use knowledge of *art* to judge the worth or otherwise of *people* (as Getty has done) is absurd. Producing and displaying art reflects values. This activity can be deployed to create freedom of individual thought as well as to control that freedom (as the effective use of visual art within Fascism testifies). Plowman's interest in the audience in some respects shift the focus on the intrinsic qualities of the art object to qualities of experience.

Encouraging *people* to judge for themselves the worth or otherwise of *art* seems to be profoundly liberating. The question then becomes – *How*, in any single project, are individuals encouraged to make judgements of value? What are the implications of doing so? I would like to explore this question as a critical framework for evaluating the Beacon project.

Six years ago John Plowman moved with his family from London to rural Lincolnshire. Beacon's mission is art>travel>site. Plowman commissions experienced artists of quality. He carefully matches artist to site. The artistic interventions within the historic spaces are completed pieces of work. Many take the form of sculpture or objects placed within the selected spaces. One is a performance work. This year less experienced artists work alongside more experienced professionals. In each case the audience is invited in to witness what the artist has authored. The works are not in any sense dependent upon the audiences' participation. Nor are the works dependent in any literal sense for their reading on specific place or specific history, though the imaginative connections that play between these two registers are rich in potential.

Plowman invites the audience to visit each site in sequence and to commit a period of three and half hours to making a journey that links the sites into one coherent, complex experience. The journey by coach is a pragmatic means of getting an audience around the six different sites. It is also an artistic device that acknowledges

and builds on a challenge inherent to the rural – geographically dispersed living. The dispersion of people is endemic to rural places of all kinds. Plowman has appropriated this challenge of everyday life to establish a journey in two senses, one functional and the other metaphorical, a journey of discovery.

At one level Plowman recognises that neither of his specific tactics, a coach journey and interventions in heritage sites, are necessarily original. Instead of audiences coming to the venue of the art – public gallery or site, Beacon takes the audience to the site. Instead of the art being presented within dedicated, ‘neutral’ spaces such as white cube gallery, it is presented within spaces of historical importance dispersed across the countryside of the Fens. However, in experiencing the journey a number of times, I started to sense that what I was encountering had greater depth than either of these tactics fully explain.

Normally journeys are mundane. To take three and a half hours to visit an exhibition is an extraordinary way of experiencing time. We break with the cyclical norms of going to work, to school or to shop. This journey to visit art creates an aesthetic in an around how we pace our lives, clearing a space for us to notice. As passengers on the coach, we peer through the pixellated images of Helsinki and other more anonymous urban landscapes. This work by the artist Simon Faithfull speaks to journeying as a way of marking the limits of our world through simple means – in this case drawings that are generated from a palm top and emailed to Lincolnshire from wherever the artist happens to be each week of September. Each of the artworks within their particular places give us as audience the opportunity to orientate ourselves. They open our senses and imaginations to new sets of experiences. The journey gives us time to savour these before moving on.

Nicola Streeten, John Plowman’s partner, acting as ‘courier’ to the journey, invited individuals to make sense of the Beacon experience for themselves -“We are keen not to tell you too much. We would like you to make up your own minds about the artworks. You may come up with ideas that we had not thought of”. Nicola provides background that is sufficient, entertaining, light but also sharply professional. Her role as courier sets a tone and establishes a set of possibilities. As audience we feel that we

are valuable to their (the artistic/curatorial) process. The relationship that is drawn here between artist, curator and audience is immediately one of interpretation, of creating one's own meaning while also speculating about the intentions of the artist. These intentions are implicit and are likely to remain enigmatic but in working with them, we are reaching out and stretching the limits of what is familiar.

Unlike many forms of dialogue in real life, our thoughts and impressions within Beacon remain an untapped and largely private experience. On the bus we are 'a mixed bag' of the very young, the elderly, some teenagers and the middle aged. Some of us are involved in the arts. Others are civil servants, housewives, students, clerks. Individuals come to Beacon with very different expectations and also for different reasons. Many have experienced Beacon the previous year. One elderly woman wrote about what she had seen so that her elderly, infirm friend could 'go out' through her descriptions. Her friend had died but she continued to come and make notes. I thought how few artists could have come up with such a simple but productive and generous method of creating work. The atmosphere is convivial and reflective. This quality - the invitation to 'come with', to take time, to explore is particular to this project. *Beacon chooses to focus art within an act of discovery, of 'not knowing' but 'uncovering', 'experiencing for oneself' and 'experiencing with others'.*

The artworks are challenging in different ways but possibly share in common a degree of openness to interpretation that makes sense of Nicola's invitation to make of it what we will. Phyllida Barlow's work in the Engine House, the Maltings at Sleaford has responded to particular qualities of the space by evoking what I read as 'theatre', even 'classical theatre'. The artist has improvised with materials, space, image and surface to evoke a round 'stage', 'seats' that were in the 'up' position and unoccupied, 'props' such as curtains and scenery, 'tiers'. It is as if we are viewing a space moments before the performance begins or moments after it has finished. As viewers we peer into the space from outside through three viewing points erected as scaffolding on the outside of the building - an unexpected development because of finding asbestos and the room being closed off to the public. If anything, this limitation and its subsequent improvised response enhance the experience of the work. It creates mystery by distancing the viewer in ways that feel voyeuristic,

‘peeking’ as one elderly viewer put it. (She and her companion clearly find the prospect deliciously subversive and playful).

In conversation, John Plowman describes his role in Beacon as ‘curator’. He is currently exploring ways of sustaining Beacon’s creative edge by, for example, inviting a new curator each year so that each iteration of Beacon can take on a different character. I find the possibilities of evolving the work by embracing other imaginations stimulating and feasible. It points to a way of sustaining Beacon as a project that constantly refreshes itself creatively without becoming institutionalised. It also reinforces a growing hunch that Beacon is concerned with acts of making meaning across different individuals.

Plowman is using the term ‘curator’ in an expanded sense. He has different strands to his practice as an artist that resonate in interesting ways. Within his own studio/gallery based work he is interested in drawing our attention to repetitive actions of rolling, drawing, scattering, tearing and folding attributing value to the quality with which we make actions within the everyday for their own sake. Beacon is clearly different to this area of work. In experiencing Beacon, I increasingly feel that we as the audience and the contributing artists are exposed for a short while to a profound idea that has emerged from Plowman’s own highly personal and individual response to moving from the city to the country. In making that move he has chosen to retain and build on his professional networks and relationships, actively encouraging exchange across these different contexts taking art closer to people’s everyday cultural experience.

In the catalogue text, John notes how contemporary culture, whether rural or urban, is a condition of nomadism. This may be a consequence of searching for employment and housing. In inviting us on board for three and a half hours, we relive ‘journey’ in an entirely new sense.

If journeying is purely instrumental to arriving, of getting somewhere else, then like life itself it is not experienced for its own sake. Like the commuter we move on without necessarily noticing. If the act of journeying itself is experience, then it has

intrinsic value. Beacon is a conduit to hold our attention long enough to see aspects of our world differently. This points to a different set of values in and around art. If this is the brief for the third, fourth or fifth years in Beacon's evolution, then it is challenging what we already know how to do.

*This year Beacon showed work in six sites including the Engine Room of the Victorian Maltings at Sleaford (artist Phyllida Barlow), the 12th Century Tower at South Kyme (artist Gerard Williams), a Recreation Room at Ashby De La Launde (artist Doug Fishbone) and an 18<sup>th</sup> century manor farm house at Hepringham (artist Roxy Walsh), The Reading Room and Chapel, in which Plowman and his family live, is the fifth site, itself housing five pieces of work, each of which draw predominantly on one of the five senses. These pieces were developed by less experienced artists than the other four sites, giving them an opportunity to work alongside more experienced artists. These 'younger' artists included Gareth Brookes (touch), Colin Greensmith (hearing), Emma Halliday (taste), Helen de Main (sight) and Tokuko Takeshita (smell). Visiting the sites was made possible through a coach tour in which the coach itself became the sixth site (artist Simon Faithful).*