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Making maps and exploring territory

Anne Douglas and Mark Hope

Since its formation in 1994, Woodend Arts has been grappling with what it might mean to be a community arts centre. “Providing the best of local, national and, where practicable, international arts . . .” used to be our by-line. Since 2014, we have adopted a mission “to work collaboratively through the arts, connecting our communities through creativity and friendship”. But in either case, questions remain: How best to do that? How best to engage with our many different communities? How to develop the best conditions for artists and their audiences? How and why do we value participation, including in the process and management of the organisation itself?

It is a challenge in which the quality of work as art is integral to the practices of community.

Art only becomes important when it moves you in a particular way. Art takes us to new experiences that go beyond a common understanding of what to expect. Johannes Birringer in his preface to *John Newling's Writings 1995-2004* introduces us to John as an inspired maverick artist. Perhaps what we are seeking through John's work at the Barn is this kind of questioning.

The Barn recently celebrated its 21st anniversary and you could regard its life as an on-going exploration. In the process, we have collaborated with *On The Edge* (OTE), a research programme at Grays School of Art. OTE is interested in re-imagining the artist in public life, testing assumptions and influencing artistic and organisational policy and practices.

For both the Barn and OTE, there are many resonances with John Newling's continuing enquiry into the human condition. Over twenty years the Barn has developed a trajectory seeking sustainable ways of living. In this endeavour, the arts open up a space in which to frame questions. How can we respond constructively to the challenges of environmental degradation and climate change? Over a similar period of time, OTE has worked in parallel with the question: What does it mean to be an artist at this time and in this place? We have drawn on a network of artists who similarly trouble the assumptions of the artist's role and meaning in society. These include artists such as Helen Mayer and Newton Harrison, who create a deep relationship between art and ecology; Suzanne Lacy who opens art up to social and political issues of race, gender and inequality; Reiko Goto and Timothy Collins, who rethink human relations to the natural environment; Chu Chu Yuan and Jay Koh, who work with the arts to open up the voice of the individual in the public sphere. All of these artists address pressing societal concerns.

Like them, John's work explores our social fabric. He does so by embracing our internal landscape and the minutiae of everyday life: What makes us happy? What makes a place a site? What is it that gives significance to places or events? Are there places where the substance of our reality is thinner than

elsewhere? John's enquiries are always beautifully crafted and presented, whether through writing, sited works or formal exhibitions in art galleries and museums.

But looking beyond the work itself, what might it look like if we employed John's artistic practice as both a strand and a *modus operandi* for the Barn's work over the next few years? What might it look like if we treated the Barn as an artwork in terms of its programme, its site, its organisation and management and even its audiences? What might result from imagining the Barn as a kind of laboratory in which we might suspend disbelief about what we think we know?

With John, we might seek to go beyond commissioning or exhibiting a work or series. Instead we might look for a unique and particular relationship between the artist and our site. We might seek to alter our perceptions of what to expect from the situation:

"I search for the frames of the place, the frames of the work and the frames of their relationship. The skeleton that lies within the situation. This involves me in asking and forming questions that begin to map a possible situation between a work and a place. It is this situation that changes the perception of place to site ("Essays by John Newling 1995 – 2004, *Certainty and Uncertainty*, p65)

What might be gained from such indeterminacy? Might we learn to forgo our desire for certainty in favour of simply exploring the mysteries that surround us?

"*The Lemon Tree and Me* is situated on this shared ground of possibility, where the artificial distinction between nature and culture will no longer make sense. Seeing Nature as both affect and effect, tied into the multiple ecologies of humanity, we can re-evaluate its transformative potential in the complex workings of everyday life. A social ecology, in a state of co-creation with the natural environment, could provide the practical grounds for addressing the question of how to properly constitute the well being of contemporary life." (p45).

Wellbeing is an important aspiration but what might it mean in our context? In the Barn's work with Buchanans and artists like Janet McEwan, OTE and Helen Smith the key constituents of a social ecology appear to be present: individual agency, social activity and the natural environment. The spoil heap of a midden inspires poetry in young children (Janet McEwan's *Waste Not, Want Not*, 2003); squares of turf engage artists in figuring out a riddle (OTE, *Calendar Variations*, 2012) and *Lavender* (Helen Smith, 2012-14) enabled a community to reflect upon its sustainability through the life cycle of a local commercial venture built upon the properties of *Lavandula angustifolia* 'Munstead' and a new cultivar, 'Torramhor'.

However John adds other dimensions to well being including the importance of working between different registers of the poetic and utilitarian. In the *Lemon Tree and Me*, John spends 688 days cultivating a lemon tree that has been purchased by a friend from B&Q. The tree manifests all the problems of

contemporary gardening, the quick fix of a purchase that carries little care for its provenance or responsibility in its consumption. John reverses this system of value by painstakingly building a relationship by closely observing the tree's condition, developing knowledge and experience, acting on minute changes in the tree to the point that it begins to thrive, bearing fruit. John describes this as a poetics of responsibility.

“On the common ground of ecological sustainability, art can both enrich and nurture a new belief in the social value of civic authority, based on our shared responsibility as gardeners of the public domain (*The Lemon Tree and Me*, p40).

This proposition is demanding. It requires close attention, a kind of mobility between oneself and the object of our attention as this relationship changes through time and experience. Michel De Certeau in his essay about the *Harrisons' Lagoon Cycle* says “Art is what attention makes with nature” (1985). He might equally well have said this about *The Lemon Tree and Me*.

In one of his essays (“Essays by John Newling 1995 – 2004, *Certainty and Uncertainty*), John describes art galleries and museums as challenging our views of the world by giving us many different ways of seeing, not a single theism as represented by the Church but a multiplicity of conflicting beliefs and values that open us up to mystery. In a complementary way, research as a process of inquiry in the world, is a suspending of *disbelief*. So perhaps what is important about the Barn, OTE and John is evoked in *The Lemon Tree and Me*.

John describes his art “as an attempt to restore a set of values to materiality” (*The Lemon Tree and Me*, p106). It is becoming ever more apparent that market capitalism has caused a disconnection between humans and nature leading to progressive environmental degradation as well as social and political discord. In John's words:

“The everyday currency of contemporary art can illuminate a common creativity of sustainability if we can extend our vision beyond our back gardens into the wider social field” (*The Lemon Tree and Me*, p106).

John's relationship with the lemon tree, seeking to better understand the workings of nature and its inter-relationship with humankind, in some ways parallels the Barn's history. At the Barn, this desire underpins the development of the allotments and wild garden, the food practices of Buchanans as well as the exhibitions and performances that we have shared experimentally between Gray's and Woodend Arts. Activity in all these places helps us to grasp the human condition as a fragile, temporary state of being which is wholly dependent upon the natural systems that surround us. It also helps us appreciate the extraordinary beauty, complexity and resilience of the natural world.

As John observes,

“ The meaning of life might turn out to be the wonder of life itself. Our purpose, beyond survival, is to find a better balance in our co-evolution

with the environment and in turn to safeguard and nurture life, to become expert gardeners of a rich natural inheritance" (*Lemon Tree and Me*, p82).

If we are to rise to this challenge, we need places where we can share these ideas and learn new ways of living. Or we might say - remember some of the ancient ways of living which have been discarded in our enthusiasm for the 'new'. For many thousands of years, indigenous peoples on all continents revered nature and husbanded the soil. It is only relatively recently that developments in science and technology have yielded knowledge that has led us to believe that we can control nature. This is a dangerous illusion that we need to awake from very soon.

The Map Room of the Last Islands invites us to join in John's exploration of the relationships between the natural world and systems of value in society. As in any map room, there are various maps, each showing a different part or aspect of the territory. The maps are beautiful objects in themselves but they also contain many layers of meaning, reflecting the work, research and experience which have been invested by the map-maker.

John's maps contain many natural materials as well as paint and paper – including plants and seeds some of which are simply impressions, memories of something now absent; some are gold leafed, some representational – landmass and sea, terrain; some are abstractions. The territory is there for us to explore, both in these beautiful art works and in the living of our lives. And it is only we ourselves as individuals and communities that can explore it. In doing so, perhaps we can discover *a common creativity of sustainability*, valuing our planet, remembering that it is our home, and treasuring the beauty, uncertainty and mystery that surround us.

We look forward to a continuing exploration between the Barn and OTE, travelling with John as a co-conspirator, guide and provocateur.

Note:

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