

## ***RE-ENCHANTMENT AND RECLAMATION: NEW PERCEPTIONS OF MORECAMBE BAY THROUGH DANCE, FILM AND SOUND***

**Emma Rose**

*Re-enchantment and Reclamation* is a two-year research project, begun in 2006, involving four artists based at Lancaster University UK, who are collaborating with four artists from the UK and abroad. Through a programme of workshops and lectures the project aims to discover and develop methods in dance, film, and the sonic arts for re-enchanting and reclaiming the landscape of Morecambe Bay in the northwest of England. The project is funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council of Great Britain; a government funded body supporting research that enhances the cultural, creative and economic life of the nation.

Before describing the workshops in more detail it is perhaps useful to explain their intellectual and creative terrain, particularly since they are not designed to execute a clearly identified agenda. Rather, their scope is exploratory, relying on creative, critical and reflexive experimentation. The project begins from an intention to provide a platform from which artists can explore how cultural and artistic forms and processes are shaped by the experience of an environment, and, reciprocally, how those forms and processes shape our understanding of the area and region. The project's premise is that that art works can enhance or challenge the perception that a community has of an environment, with implications for different interest groups, for example, those who live and work in the area as well as those who visit it.

Situated in the northwest of England, Morecambe Bay is the largest area of inter-tidal sand and mudflats in the UK. It is environmentally significant for its flora and fauna, particularly as a habitation for invertebrates, crustaceans and birds, as well as a place of dramatic views and seascapes, but it is also recognised as one of the more economically, socially and culturally disadvantaged areas in the UK. This mix of sometimes conflicting characteristics, specific to the Morecambe Bay area, informs the artists, their creative endeavour, and related workshops. If the project is to engage with the public, including school children, professionals and interested academics, tensions between what the environment *is* and what various human projects would wish to *make* it will need to be confronted.

The 'landscape' –as a primarily visual and spatial spectacle, something 'we' enjoy looking at and moving through– is part of the issue, but not the whole of it. We might also want to see various social, cultural and economic activities of the area, say agriculture, fishing, ship building and tourism, as themselves aspects of the environment. But how do we understand and evaluate these activities, their impact and implications? This raises the thorny question of what we mean by 'the environment', and in particular of how we might approach the environment is *in itself*, in its own terms, according to its own demands, if only as a regulative ideal. It seems important to preserve an active sense of the integrity of the environment, and not merely as a kind of residual sentiment. This draws attention towards the longer, non-human life of the environment, for example geological time and infinitely complex ecological process, as well as to the unintended consequences of purposive human activity which build the unknowable and uncontrollable back into the modern world.

Embracing development, while avoiding or mitigating the worst effects of instrumentality, has become something to which everyone gives lip service. What happens, however, when this ideal faces the often conflicting interests and requirements of different interest groups: for jobs, a sublime landscape, a holiday destination, new transport links and housing?

The project then addresses widespread concern about our current relationship with the natural environment. The problems go beyond those posed by specific development initiatives to the pervasive and routine ways in which environmental features are perceived, that is, as a problem to be dealt with or as an exploitable resource. All too often this has led to insensitive, even damaging initiatives, which ironically neglect the very features that may be vital to other sources of cultural and economic regeneration. Intimate perception, reverie, memory, and love of place, through which an area might be imaginatively and sympathetically re-enchanted and reclaimed, belong to the everyday experiences of residents and visitors alike. They are also of particular concern to the arts. That is, they can be reaffirmed and enhanced by artistic artefacts and events that question, or perhaps more accurately, seek to live through, the inevitability of disenchantment and instrumentality. Art can stimulate critical thinking, but it can also help to reinstate the possibility of enchantment as an experience with a powerful ecological and political dynamic.

## **EXPERIENCING THE MORECAMBE BAY REGION**

Morecambe Bay exists in the shadow of the English Lake District. Typically it is seen as a place one drives past to get to the Lake District. Situated just to the north of Morecambe Bay, the Lake District is a designated area of outstanding natural beauty, and one of the most important National Parks in Great Britain. Its landscape can be both awe inspiring and picturesque. Celebrated by the Lakeland poets William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge, and artists such as John Ruskin and J.W Turner it is actively preserved, prospering as a key tourist destination for Japanese, American and European visitors, as well as attracting mobile UK residents. By contrast, Morecambe Bay does not have the historical legacy and lure of English Romanticism (although Turner was active here as well) nor has it the institutional clout of being a National Park.

Morecambe Bay is well-known for its quicksands and fast-moving incoming tides. It is a place of exquisite beauty for those who encounter it, but it is also highly dangerous. There have been tragedies on the sands since time immemorial, and its 'treacherous' reputation is both real and imaginary. A recent tragedy was the death of 21 Chinese cockle-pickers drowned by incoming tides in February 2004. The illegal immigrants, run by exploitative gang-masters without local knowledge and understanding of the tides, stood little chance of survival once the tide came in 'faster than a horse can run', surging up gullies cutting sand banks off from the land. A father and son died in 2002 when they became disoriented in the fog and cut off by seawater, the rescue services unable to rescue them, even whilst the father held his son on his shoulders a few metres from the rescuers whilst speaking to them on a mobile phone. In the eighteenth century there was a recognised route across the sands, albeit a dangerous one, and stage-coach and horses are reputedly still buried in the sand. Areas that appear firm one day can be quicksand the next. The danger of the sands has long been recognised, for hundreds of years a royal guide has been appointed by the queen, designated as having knowledge of the sands sufficient to guide people across.

It is perhaps at odds with the drama and beauty of the area that it suffers high levels of unemployment and low levels of business development and cultural activity. The loss of a once thriving shipbuilding industry in Barrow and dwindling viability of fishing is matched with physical inaccessibility, especially from the main northwest conurbations of Manchester and Liverpool. The region is unable to attract economic or cultural investment either from private

business or central government, which in the UK generally supports areas able to boast greater ethnic diversity and attendant social disadvantage.

The physical geography of the Bay is perceived as a contributing factor in the region's lack of economic prosperity and there have been several attempts to address the problem: attempts at land reclamation in draining the marshes in the Victorian period; more recently the Morecambe Bay barrage, which aimed to transform the Bay into a fresh water lagoon; and recent proposals to build a bridge connecting one side with the other in order to stimulate economic growth and open up tourism on the north side of the Bay. Today Heysham nuclear power station provides an important form of industry and employment, but casts a dark and looming presence over the south of the Bay. The Sellafield nuclear site, the world's first commercial nuclear power station, is situated on the north of the Bay. Since decommissioning of its nuclear reactor it is primarily a reprocessing plant, converting spent fuel from nuclear reactors worldwide into re-usable uranium, plutonium and highly radioactive fission products that need safe storage for thousands of years. Discharges of radioactive effluents to the environment have taken place since commencement of operations in 1951<sup>1</sup>. There have been many studies undertaken to assess and account for Sellafield's relationship to the excess of childhood leukaemia in the local village of Seascale. The presence of Heysham and Sellafield nuclear power stations raise questions about the place of industry, technology and infrastructure in the development of the Morecambe Bay area, but also the roles of agriculture and tourism, their status and viability.

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<sup>1</sup> . J Gray, S R Jones, A D Smith 'Discharges to the environment from the Sellafield Site, 1951-1992' in Journal for Radiol. Protection. 1995 Vol.15 No 2, pp. 99-131. UK



Sellafield Works. Aerial photograph by Simon Ledingham

Morecambe Bay's visual impact is primarily aquatic and terrestrial, although aerial forms such as storms, clouds, mist, and atmosphere, make a strong impression. An interesting and unusual characteristic of the area, at least in terms of the west coast of Britain, is the ambiguity or undecidability between the aquatic and terrestrial. At low tide the Bay is almost entirely 'land', but within an hour or so can become predominantly 'sea'. Where do land and sea start and finish? What difference does this dramatic oscillation, the presence of this 'not quite land, yet not quite sea', make to the way people live there? How does it act on the imagination? What are the cultural and physical implications? These are some of the questions the artists engaged in the project seek to address.

## **THE WORKSHOPS**

### ***Water Log: Dancing in-between the Wet and Dry***

*Water Log* took place in May 2007. It was led by environmental movement artist Jennifer Monson, USA, in close consultation with dance artist Nigel Stewart of Lancaster University, and cross-bay guide Alan Sledmore. It involved workshops with primary school children, a performance with professional regional dance artists, in collaboration with Dance NorthWest, and a symposium on Monson's work in general. The workshops explored an industrial estate and marsh land along the Lancaster Coastal Path and public rights of way across Morecambe Bay sands. *Water Log* investigated how dynamic eco-systems of zones in-between land and sea suggest specific strategies for dance improvisation, and how improvisations enable participants to experience even the most ephemeral eco-phenomena (e.g., patterns of washed-up debris, evaporating footprints). It explored how that experience can re-enchant our relationship with nature and contest the notion of landscape as merely a unit of human occupation.



*Water Log* with dancers Jennifer Monson and Nigel Stewart. Photographed by Kirk Woolford

The following workshops are planned for 2007-2008

### ***Natural Interventions: Technology and Representation***

*Natural Interventions* is a week-long workshop by film-maker Chris Welsby, Professor of Film, Simon Fraser University, Canada, in collaboration with video artist and painter Emma Rose, Lancaster University, and Folly Media, a leading digital arts organisation working in Cumbria, Lancashire and online, committed to enabling new audiences to explore art through technology. The workshop will explore how innovative uses of visual technology can change the exploitative, dominating and distancing relationship with nature characteristic of conventional representational practices. When viewed through a camera the landscape is distanced, contrary to the direct experience of nature sought traditionally by painters. Chris Welsby will demonstrate how visual technology can reclaim an embedded experience of nature. Filming in Morecambe Bay will enable the group to explore techniques for surrendering some degree of control by allowing wind and cloud and water movement to play an active part in film making.

### ***Ecologies of Narrative: Memories of Water***

*Ecologies of Narrative* is a one-week workshop led by performance maker and sound artist Graeme Miller, founding member of the seminal Impact Theatre Co-operative, in close consultation with landscape writer Carl Lavery, Lancaster University. They intend investigating ways in which the artist can work with landscape to disclose an ecology of memory and a site of mourning. They will explore the concept of landscape as memory by developing Graeme Miller's techniques of gathering material from people and the places they inhabit. The focus will be the drowning of twenty-one Chinese cockle-pickers. They will research the history of cockle-picking in the area and then run a writing and recording workshops with the university, artists, social scientists, environmentalists, historians and cultural groups from Morecambe.

### ***Sounding Environment: Listening to Land***

*Sounding Environment* is a week-long workshop led by the electro-acoustic composer and sound designer Ambrose Field, Senior Lecturer in Music, York University, with video artist and sound composer Neil Boynton and Folly Media. They will explore how technological advances in capturing and representing sound develop possibilities for a new relationship between composer and landscape. Ambrose Field will show how developments in technology have radically changed the way composers work. He will demonstrate new techniques of capturing, encoding and transforming elemental sounds through multi-channel audio. The group will record in the

Morecambe Bay area, returning to the university to work on the sound with digital equipment. They will reflect on how these immersive and interactive experiences evoke our embodied experience of nature.

Each workshop is documented through a written report and DVD, downloadable with audiovisual excerpts from the website: [cle.lancs.ac.uk](http://cle.lancs.ac.uk). Participants in the project can be contacted via their email addresses: [e.rose@lancs.ac.uk](mailto:e.rose@lancs.ac.uk), [n.boynton@lancs.ac.uk](mailto:n.boynton@lancs.ac.uk), [n.stewart@lancs.ac.uk](mailto:n.stewart@lancs.ac.uk), [c.lavery@lancs.ac.uk](mailto:c.lavery@lancs.ac.uk)

**THE VIDEO *RUSH* EXPLORES THE NOTION OF REVERIE AND LANDSCAPE. AS A RESULT OF THE SOLO EXHIBITION IN ZAGREB, CROATIA, ROSE WAS ASKED TO WRITE AN ARTICLE FOR *ZIVOT UMJETNOSTI*—MAGAZINE FOR CONTEMPORARY ARTS, CROATIA, TO BE TRANSLATED FROM ENGLISH INTO CROATIAN, TO BE PUBLISHED IN DECEMBER 2007.**

**THIS IS A COPY OF THE ARTICLE. AN EXAMPLE COPY OF THE MAGAZINE IS INCLUDED**

**ROSE WAS INVITED TO PRESENT THE PAPER AT THE INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE ON REGIONS AND REGIONALISM IN THE INSTITUTE FOR ADVANCED STUDIES, LANCASTER UNIVERSITY**