

# A Sense of Place

MAREK WOLYNSKI REPORTS ON THE 'ART IN THE LANDSCAPE' SEMINAR.



'Art in the Landscape' workshops, County Mayo and County Offaly, facilitated by artists Rachel Jones, Anna Horton and Studio Response; photograph by Miles Umney, courtesy of Studio Response.

'ART IN THE Landscape' took place online on 25 May. This international seminar was part of a larger, ongoing project with Offaly County Council (lead partner), Mayo County Council, and Visual Artists Ireland. Studio Response, a renowned public art and creative engagement organisation, was the cultural producer for this illuminating event.

The conference brought together artists, architects, academics, curators, and researchers who shared inspiring case studies and discussed a range of perspectives on the intersections of art, landscape, communities, environmental tourism, and economies. The event also shed light on the role of sculpture trails and parks in delivering environmental and social resilience. It stimulated ideas in relation to two major outdoor sculpture locations in Ireland – Tír Sáile Sculpture Trail in County Mayo and Lough Boora Sculpture Park in County Offaly – and presented original ideas for future development. Given the post-pandemic realisation of the value of natural surroundings, the seminar was a timely deep-dive into environmental art.

## Movements of Art

Legendary sculptor and land artist, David Nash, delivered the first keynote. He told a fascinating story of *Wooden Boulder*, an artwork which is often called the first 'free-range sculpture'. The titular boulder was, in fact, a huge piece of 200-year-old oak, which was brought down by a storm and cut down by the artist in 1978. When being transported to David's studio, it got stuck in the River Dwyryd in Wales, and for the next 35 years, it travelled downstream before eventually vanishing. Although the artist kept documenting the

transient boulder, he let it move freely, stating that land art is about collaborating with nature and revisiting it, rather than intervening. The story provided a valuable opportunity to address a common dilemma – that of decommissioning. David noted that decommissioning, when given considerable thought and attention, has the potential to generate exciting opportunities. Magdalena Jetelova's *Giant's Chair* (1986) was mentioned as an example; her public artwork crafted out of oak was converted into charcoal and creatively repurposed by schoolchildren.

## Identity of Place

How can manmade structures be incorporated into natural environments? Anders Tväråna from White Arkitekter, an interdisciplinary practice from Stockholm, approached this question in his presentation. While reflecting on designing and branding National Parks in Sweden, Anders highlighted the Swedish Environmental Protection Agency's guidance encapsulated in three meaningful words: PROTECT, CARE, SHOW. The architect brought up the contradiction of dealing with the "sometimes hard to combine aims of protecting and showing to the masses." He also focused on effective architectural solutions, including the use of natural materials, low construction, clear but minimalist signage, and wheelchair-accessible trails. While contemplating working in tandem with nature and engaging local businesses, he stressed that "interventions don't need to be large, but they need to be thoughtful and grounded in a deep understanding of the landscape."

Notions of social engagement reverberated through

the discussion with artists and researchers Rachel Jones and Anna Horton Cremin, who reflected on how art can be used as a research tool to understand communities and places. Both speakers highlighted the importance of cross-sector collaborations, which enable an exchange of different perspectives and contribute to long-term public engagement. Geraldine O'Riordan, a seminar attendee who previously participated in a workshop organised by Anna and Rachel, acknowledged that the event inspired her to set up a local discourse group to encourage neighbours to take ownership of local nature and biodiversity. The session finished with another valuable remark: what changes people's minds and behaviours is an experience, not statistics.

## Art as Infrastructure

The following keynote, delivered by philosopher, writer and curator John Thackara, continued to accentuate the experiential. "We need to shift away from telling people to behave or think differently, towards experiences, as a result of which we'll all behave differently," he stated. John offered multiple examples of immersive interconnectedness with the land, including birdwatching, listening to earthworms, eating soil, and undertaking rewilding activities. He stressed that partnering artists with local legacy institutions – such as bookshops, post offices, and farms – can create new forms of connections with long-lasting effects on local communities. While Thackara drew attention to prioritising social and ecological systems in policymaking, Professor John Thompson, an expert in social entrepreneurship, pointed out the critical role that fun and joy – aspects of projects that are often dismissed in art discourse – play in ensuring greater place-recognition and securing economic revenue.

## A Rising Tide Lifts All Boats

The seminar concluded with a panel discussion emphasising key takeaways. One of the conference mediators, Paola Catizone, highlighted phrases that kept recurring throughout the day, including 'a sense of place', and 'reinventing the notion of capital'. Terre Duffy drew attention to the presence of art in the landscape and its pivotal role in societal development. The chat section was also lively with numerous references and links to resources that now inform the seminar's website.

In her closing remarks, Emma M Prince, Co-director of Studio Response, elucidated that cross-sector collaboration is indeed the key to achieving common goals and influencing politics. After all, shared issues hold shared solutions, and art is a truly inspiring ingredient of this polyphonic search for the most beneficial outcome. Poet Alice Kinsella noted that the landscape allows for leaving a positive legacy that blurs the boundaries between the ordinary and the exceptional. What caught Alice's attention throughout the conference was the strong emphasis on togetherness and teamwork. As she sublimely expressed in *Hiraeth* – the poem accompanying the seminar: "Immerse in the fields like a hot bath. / Roam, take and give away. / Break down the barrier between / expert/everyday / a reframing, a changing, a saving".

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