

Title: Artists' 'embedded reinterpretation' in museums and sites of heritage.

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## **Artists' 'embedded reinterpretation' in museums and sites of heritage.**

### Abstract

Artists' embedded reinterpretation results in responsive artwork, made and sited in proximity to existing artefacts, the latter acting as a source. Typically applied through the practice of contemporary art interventions in museums and other sites of cultural heritage, the methodology provides a practice-based means of broad thematic, conceptual or contextual critique which goes beyond approaches which emphasise purely formal resonances. How embedded reinterpretation produces dramatic juxtaposition as a form of historicisation is important as its associated methods enable both a retrospective and prospective foci. This holds implications and anticipations for a body of cultural history while contesting periodisation, enabling imaginative disruption of otherwise orderly environments.

### Keywords

museum; cultural history; reinterpretation; contemporary; artist.

## **Introduction**

This article is concerned with the process of artists' reinterpretation of museum collections and sites of cultural heritage through intervention. Now part of a contemporary armory of tactics in the institutional rejuvenation of museum collections, artists' interventions in the museum typically involve a process which has been normalised. As negotiated access to highly regulated sites, new artworks sustain, extend or critique the meanings of history through agreement and collaboration. 'Embedded reinterpretation' is intended as a replacement for the overused term intervention. Intervention as a term underlies much of the critical reading or staging of work in this context, but it also implies crisis, with connotations of counselling others. But most museum interventions are undertaken within a process which includes objectively-formed planning, with artists working closely with museum curators or directors.

'Embedded reinterpretation' acknowledges the museum directors and curators as commissioning collaborators, with artists approaching the environment as auto-ethnographers, potentially utilising the narratives in the museum in their engagement with resident artefacts. Interaction is the more meaningful social term in the collaborative transaction, in which artists add to a given environment, sometimes benefitting from scholarly research, to provide an affective response to history which is unlikely to be disinterested. Their production may result from archival research but a phenomenological response to light and architecture, or towards learning, or their view of power and so on. This newly commissioned work is intended to lead to a compressed sense of historical successivity, which is often the prime curatorial intention. Artists are not critical outsiders in such a framework and the framework means they are not simply *in* a museum but also *in* history, into which they bring newly found unknowns. The intention of such commissions

is also expansionary, towards extending or even unsettling the Museum's seemingly static conditions.

As Ansbacher 1998, 39 says of John Dewey's *Museums and Experience* 1938, the experience and learning in the museum results from "the *combination* of whatever takes place at the exhibit and what the individual makes of it". Whatever artists consider as a viable interruption of the conventional ways of seeing in the dominion of the museum, above all, their renewal of the viewing conditions should not *deter* viewers and "whether [...] outcomes are considered positive or educational is a separate judgement." (Ansbacher 1998, 39). Hence, embedded reinterpretation can be likened to the embedded reportage famously deemed a problematic aspect of the media coverage of the US-UK coalition's invasion of Iraq in 2003.

I draw upon two recent sources to examine this activity further, then expand the notion via a suggested typology of the artist / art historical companionableness as methods which underpin embedded reinterpretation. I conclude with my case studies.

### *Lessons and projects*

Claire Robins' *Curious lessons in the museum: the pedagogical potential of artists' interventions* (2013) recognises that 'museums often invite artists to intervene in full recognition that their work sits within a continuum of critical and even disruptive practices targeted at the museum's own values.' (Robins 2013, 1) One of an emergent body of literature, Robins rightly aligns museum interventions to aspects of (neo) avant-garde practice; 'critical, disruptive, immersive, and parodic' (Robins 2013, 6) and notes that 'artists are ideally placed to orchestrate legitimated

transgressions' (Robins 2013, 1), for instance describing Joseph Kosuth, 1990, *The Play of the Unmentionable*, The Brooklyn Museum Collection, as a 'critical appraisal of historical examples as a warning for the present day' (Robins 2013, 5), specifically on censorship. Robins also differentiates agendas: 'it would be inaccurate to situate the act of intervention in the museum as necessarily oppositional.' (Robins 2013, 6).

**Figs. 1 and 2: Installation shot and /or Visitors to Joseph Kosuth, *The Play of The Unmentionable*, 1990, The Brooklyn Museum Collection.**

The point reiterated by Robins is that museum interventions are typically collaborative and often aimed at new demographic engagement with the museum. In the final chapter, 'The affable intervenionists', Robins notes a shift towards the expansive museum practice of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, a consequence of a collaborative intent which is underpinned by a professionalisation of curatorial training in new programmes and artist's conscious movement away from oppositional critique, culminating in a contemporary artistic / curatorial reciprocity. Robins concludes, 'in a museum, a transgression isn't allowed by a slip of concentration or accident; this is where positioning the artists' intervention *against* the institution falls apart. Interventions occur in institutions where there is already a desire for change and this may well necessitate transgression' (Robins 2013, 213).

Predating Robins 2013's pedagogical foci, in relation to 21<sup>st</sup> century practices Khadija Carroll La's 'Object to project: artists' interventions in Museum collections' (2011) is concerned with artistic environmental disruption of the contemporary museum. The works discussed are

typically site-specific, intervening in museums which hold an 'authoritative representation of a given culture'. (Carroll La 2011, 217) The interventions considered are concerned with resident ethnographies; with origin, acquisition and ethics. More generally, Carroll La describes a shift which takes place during such interventions; a transformation of the museum's artefacts *in situ* from objects to projects. What the essay does not quite state is, while artists' interventions can result in the potential un-anchoring or re-reading of the historicisation of any pre-existing museum artefact, the repositioning of any artefact in an unusual juxtaposition with any other artefact to provide a recontextualisation does not necessitate an artist. However, Carroll La's primary focus is the reflective / reflexive nature of museum *environments* and its further production thereof by contemporary artists, thereby engaged and enabled to such an extent that the concurrence of periods – including the contemporary - will draw visitors to unexpected displays in which 'museum conventions themselves become an artistic project.' (Carroll La 2011, 217)

'Object to project' specifically explores how such unexpected displays 'bring into the dialogue the sculptural body and the viewing body', (La 2011, 217) to evaluate different artist's approaches to museum interventions. Carroll La highlights the effectiveness of sensorial and phenomenological approaches and how the best of such projects 'intervene in time, and create the sense among viewers that what is past is still alive.' (La 2011, 219) The latter point reads as an ideal curatorial ethos for anyone who is charged with the contemporary redevelopment of a critical framework for a collection of national paintings, a jumble of ethnographic paraphernalia or unique sites of cultural heritage, i.e this matters to you, *now*. In fact, if one agrees with Carroll La's position, that a typical everyday visit museum tends to a passive engagement,

contemporary artists ought to be all over the museum, setting about ‘altering the infrastructure that once enabled visitors to simply gaze at objects on display’. (Carroll La 2011, 223) (my underlining). The further point Carroll La makes is qualitative, ‘juxtaposition based on form alone does [not] constitute an effective intervention’, (Carroll La 2011, 219) which means the best interventions bring to the fore the critical question of ‘what is gained by bringing contemporary and historical work together’ and the museum visit becoming a reflexive process. (Carroll La 2011, 219)

Carroll La 2011 and Robins 2013 both structure their excellent work on the inevitability (in this environmental context) of artistic disruption to chronological sequencing. Museums typically initiate a reading through similarly classified objects in well-versed methods of viewing, including side-by-side comparison or in glass vitrines. Irrespective of their apparatus, such viewing technologies are intended to help us look across time in comparative manner. By contrast, the most accomplished artist’s intervention reminds its viewers to treat the viewable environment holistically and bodily, as *being* in the museum. The intervention does not then so much aid comparison as stage a compression or even a collision. As Carroll La points out, the ‘space-time of the museum is loaded with distances – the interventionist artist assists us to travel across the distances’. (La 2011, 235) Artists assist the leap across typologies in the museum and ignore the sequencing of periods to the point at which the historical may also provide a critique of the contemporary, and vice versa.

*Artist / art historical companions*

Before I introduce my case studies it is important to describe what embedded reinterpretation is not. For instance, it is not intended to describe an act in which an artist embeds scholarly research as an historical consideration in their own practice without any commensurate environmental engagement. Artists' embedded reinterpretation includes historical reinterpretation, but the methodology also intends other methods and processes, which I express here as *conversational*, *sequential* and *concurrent*. Artists' embedded reinterpretation effectively entails all three and its 'embeddedness' is key.

Most artists are familiar with art historical methods which appear as textual commentaries on the works of contemporary artists. Published in gallery catalogues, often including a review of the artist's previous output, sometimes an interview is included, often founded on the art historian's long-standing knowledge of an artist's practice which is *conversationally* revealed. This semi-informal approach is in keeping with the conversational community of any artworld. Generally, the catalogue essay is not dependent upon the articulacy of the artist, but interviews form a constituent element and the resulting verbatim comments may later feed into the scholarly domain. For the artist, the catalogue essay also provides valuable esteem.

*Sequentially*, artists' oeuvre may also embed art historical readings, by applying their own and other's knowledge *within* their practice. This is of a different order than artists merely being inspired by other artists' work. Historical paradigms and visual structures can also be developed or challenged chronologically through their contemporary reimagining. This conforms to some of the expectations in art historiography, Velázquez leads to Picasso, Picasso 'knew' this, hence his 1957 series of analyses of Velázquez 1656, *Las Meninas*, Museo del Prado, Madrid, under

the same title. Whereas Bacon borrows from Velázquez in order to invest his subjects with an existential horror, he does not treat Velázquez's characters as a pedagogic source. Picasso, for whom Velázquez's artworks provide a set of historical linkages to his own work, applies his interpretation of *Las Meninas* to embrace but also escape art historical sequentiality. By which I mean, Picasso's act of affiliation, while reverent, is also an act of revision. As if Picasso cannot comprehend Velázquez until he *does* Velázquez, to remake *Las Meninas*, to bodily encompass Velázquez through the process of remaking.

The *irreverent* revisionist, is Duchamp. His moustached (or rectified) readymade *L.H.O.O.Q.* 1919, Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris, appending a postcard reproduction of Leonardo's 1503 – 6, *La Gioconda*, or 'Mona Lisa', Musée de Louvre, Paris, revels in the French museum-going public's possession of a painting notoriously made more famous by the 1911 worldwide reportage of its theft. The public were perhaps less aware that Duchamp's friend, the poet Guillaume Apollinaire, notably the later subject of Duchamp's earlier rectified readymade, *Apolinère Enameled* 1916, Philadelphia Museum of Art was earlier arrested and temporarily incarcerated for the suspected but unproven 1911 theft. Robert Motherwell would later characterise Duchamp as having 'smiled at "art history"' (Cabanne, 1971, 12) but it is as if Duchamp planned to visit the Louvre in 1919 with a set of expletives in his mind, yet found all he needed from the postcard hawkers ranked along the Seine. Perhaps not coincidentally, the first version of Duchamp's rectified readymades in the *L.H.O.O.Q.* series was authored in the year following Apollinaire's untimely death, also the 400<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Da Vinci's passing. Apollinaire himself had made the same migratory journey as Da Vinci, from Italy to France, hence the institutional home for this minor Italian portrait. Duchamp's pseudonymous gender

switch Rose Sélavy, made 'her' first appearance, just after the Mona Lisa reproduction was facially rectified.

Pierre Cabanne's *Dialogues with Marcel Duchamp* (Cabanne 1971, 62) allowed Duchamp's insouciant dismissal of the 1919 work to stand, revealing the economy of means and subterfuge:

*'Cabanne: And then, your "Mona Lisa" scandal had very clearly set a tone of revolt. Duchamp: October 1919. But what did I do with that "Mona Lisa?" Nothing. I drew a moustache and a beard, that's all. I didn't show it anywhere.'*

Now, *L.H.O.O.Q.* 1919, resides at the Pompidou, streets away from the original's shrine-like residence at The Louvre. It is possible to walk this sequence but not visually, not concurrently. Duchamp's compression of time represents a problem of 'The contemporary' which the French philosopher Lionel Ruffell suggested 'designates co-temporality rather than successivity, and it differs in that from the modern conception of time. And this has an impact on societies and cultures' (Ruffell 2015, 6). Such an impact would be fully emphasised were a concurrency of *L.H.O.O.Q.* and Leonardo's *La Gioconda* achieved. Positively, if it were allowed, to provide new insights and attract new audiences and a new demography to the museum. Negatively, if it were a deterrence. And here is the the original avant-garde in action: the concurrence of Duchamp's *L.H.O.O.Q.* exhibited beside the Leonardo's *La Gioconda*. Might this be deemed an attack on (the ossification) the meaning of the Louvre, perhaps on the sanctity of the 'Mona Lisa'?

**Fig. 3: *Private View*, 1996, The Bowes Museum, County Durham.**

In some ways, concurrency thinking structured the exhibition on contemporary British and German art, *Private View* 1996, curated by Penelope Curtis and Veit Gorner for the Bowes Museum, County Durham, England. The curators merged separate private collections as a curatorial intervention - the exhibition did not include commissioned work – including the careful environmental placement of artworks pre-judged to be efficacious to the curatorial structure. While *Private View* remains an exemplar, but lacks the iconoclasm of an unlikely concurrence of Duchamp with Leonardo, such re-enchantments of the Museum environment, now feature as the increasing normalisation of artists' interventions. Barbara Bloom and Fred Wilson's (neo) avant-gardism seems so different in intent from the spectacle of Wim Delvoeye, 2012, '*au Louvre*', Napoleon III Apartments, Musée du Louvre, Paris, curated by Marie Laure Bernadac. Delvoeye's textile-covered pig sculptures and other material mimicry were weasily at home in the lavish apartments of the second Republic's President and, later, Emperor. More recently, Lawrence Weiner's *Within a realm of Distance* (2015) embellished the portico and Long Library of England's Blenheim Palace as the mildest critique of privilege and wealth economies at the highest levels of establishment approval.

**Fig. 4: Lawrence Weiner, *Within a realm of Distance*, 2015, Blenheim Palace, Oxfordshire.**

### ***Case Studies***

In relation to a contemporary critique of the spaces of cultural history, I discuss three projects which I have co-curated, contingent on the methodology of artists' embedded reinterpretation.

The first is from 2004 and is a phenomenological reinterpretation of an ethnographic museum. The second is a cacophonous 2007 intervention centred on a relatively sedate Victorian painting collection. The third, currently planned, folds into its conception the insights gained from the first two environmental reinterpretations, to embed new meaning at a 'scheduled ancient monument' currently preserved as industrial heritage in Scotland. In the first two cases studies visitor numbers were selectively measured, with a brochure style essay made freely available for visitors to read and keep as a memento. Specifically, embedded reinterpretation was initially developed within the commissioning of Wong Hoy Cheong for Oxford's Pitt Rivers Museum. The environmental exhibition, 2004, *Slight Shifts*, (co-curated with Mohini Chandra and Elizabeth Edwards) entailed a method later developed within my collaboration with the artist Ross Sinclair as part of my AHRC-funded, 2007, *Ross Sinclair versus Sir Edwin Landseer*, at Aberdeen Art Gallery and Museum. These two curations shared a re-calibration of facets of Victorian culture for its museum visitors, including attracting new visitors, in familiar acts of contemporary museology in an expanded field.

At Pitt Rivers Museum, through Elizabeth Edwards, and in Aberdeen Art Gallery and Museum with the support of Jennifer Melville, Lead Curator of Art and now Head of Collections, Archives and Library Services at The National Trust for Scotland, directorial apprehensiveness for any potential contestation from the general public, as caused by new additions, was not evident. Both institutions agreed to the open-ended nature of an artistic engagement. Likewise, in both projects there was an explicit artist, and then an implicit artist, and a residential museum custodian. There was the possibility of confusion regarding curatorial roles, and for entangled relations to form between an artist who was functioning productively with the museum resources

in a lively manner, more so than the conventions of curatorship as custodianship might allow. At the same time, the explicit artists (Wong Hoy Cheong, Ross Sinclair) were research collaborators, working within a set of precise research enquiries or propositions. Defined by the implicit artist, myself, these questions could have been perceived as restrictive, so the dynamism of the subsequent embedded reinterpretations and its findings were contingent on the selection of the contemporary artist.

### *Slight Shifts (2004) at Pitt Rivers Museum*

Pitt Rivers Museum has periodically attracted the attention of artists, including Lothar Baumgarten's slide projection from 1968-9, *Unsettled Objects*. The endless parade of colonial representation at Pitt Rivers Museum was made even more apparent in the imperative of Hoy Cheong's *Slight Shifts* (2004), an artwork which re-rendered Pitt Rivers Museum in ambient light. The initial intention of Hoy Cheong's residency was residential and scholarly; to investigate colonial 'history' through the museum's restricted photographic archive. Following his preliminary examination of this and the museum's anthropological collection and its spatial architectural features, he found the collection to be unavoidably imbued and inflected with debates surrounding trans-nationality, post-colonialism and cultural memory. He wished to represent the environment as a space of artifice, notably during the time of the UK and US invasion of Iraq. Hoy Cheong became increasingly familiar with the evidently bewildering volume of information housed within the Museum and began to plan a responsive artwork made in direct interrogative address to selected artefacts but, above all, to play with the environment's patina.

Pitt Rivers Museum displays archaeological and ethnographic objects from all parts of the world, uniquely grouped by form or purpose rather than by geographical or cultural origin. The vitrines are filled to capacity with objects and so encourage qualitative comparison at a level of extreme detail. The collection overwhelms by presenting a seeming infinite variety of type. This invites the construction of 'narratives' as a means of interpretation, made easier by side-by-side comparison in their unusual typography. This includes 'materials and objects used as currency', 'Treatment of the Dead', 'Feather cloaks', 'snowshoes', 'Land and Air Transport Models'. And as the Museum is relatively free from the educational text-panels which the contemporary Museum offers, original small handwritten labels appear attached to items throughout. This hand-written appendage to the displays are reminiscent of the vitrines of Joseph Beuys, or contemporaneously of the work of artist-anthropologist Mark Dion. In such a context, for the contemporary art-aware visitor, the Collection almost presents itself as a complete work of art in which little left is required, except to see and be in this space.

As many of Pitt Rivers collection's half million objects were donated by early Victorian anthropologists and explorers the Museum is imbued with an almost rabid sense of discovery and acquisition. Engaging an artist such as Hoy Cheong inevitably entails fore-fronting the purpose of his engagement with a reminder that, at the very least, he provides a rejoinder to past misdeeds which the Collection comprises, even if the Museum remains faithful to its special Victorian origins. It is a fascinating place for the study and measure of our changing responses to post-colonial legacies. The patina of the environment is underlined by the gloomy darkness of the space, it creaks with a deep sense of integrity, only enlivened by the pools of cast pale amber light. This northern light is pale and romantic. At their best, Victorian museums utilise the pale

daylight as it lends a calming coverage of the resident collections. But in winter months the north sun casts a sad, long shadow; then the museums resemble morgues.

While Hoy Cheong wrestled with the necessity to reference contemporary political events in Iraq, by early spring he had also decided against adding artefacts to the items in the already extensive and sometimes palpably horrifying collection. The design of his embedded artwork, *Slight Shifts* would have as its points of focus cultures of transience, perhaps a resonating self-referentially to contemporary art's international nomadism, including his own.

**Figs. 5 and 6: Wong Hoy Cheong, 2004, Slight Shifts, Pitt Rivers Museum, Oxford.**

The resulting installation worked with colour and light in ways which energised the Museum space. Having dispensed with a need to further research the provenance of some of the Collection's more outlandish *objets trouve* Hoy Cheong distanced and aestheticised the Collection in ways which escaped recognition by the first-time visitor (although its visual appeal would be highly evident to them). The collection's better-known objects, such as the centrally placed canoe 'Salama' from the East African coast, were 'defamiliarised'. Indeed, Shklovsky's term obliges us to think through the original purpose of the collection; a thinking process which raises our political consciousness. Perhaps a better term, more appropriate to the transformation of this venue, might be Brecht's 'dialektisches Theater' ('dialectic Theatre') in which the audience is a critical participant in the action on stage. It is essential for the impact of this dramaturgy that the audience is aware of the fact that 'a play is a play', not a slice of life; it is an experience intended to stimulate thought processes which, after the curtain falls, should then be

applied to socio-political practice. Hoy Cheong ‘recognised’ the colonial aspects of the Pitt Rivers Collection and its ‘hang-ups’, while dispersing its authorial patina, through the placement of his specially constructed light projection boxes.

Visitors walked through channels of light and colour; filtered up through the museum floor’s beautifully crafted cast-iron grating, projected from normally darkened corners or atop the vitrines. Sometimes, Hoy Cheong illuminated the Collection’s hidden aspects and the poorly lit architecture of the museum, which now provided colourful reflections of its visitors upon its glass cases. Of the artefacts selected for highlight, apparatus for travel such as aforementioned boats and oars were bathed in a blue light and their silhouettes given a new dynamism. Within this amber-steeped museology it was shown how quickly and significantly its meaning could be refracted and re-communicated by subtle shifts in light chromatics. Unsurprisingly, the intensity of the colours (the actual light intensity was not a conservation issue) lent the Collected objects an immediacy, a sensory experience not normally found in the much cherished gloom of England’s museums, renewed as an “anti-authoritative history” (Cruz and Cheong 2006, 4).

*Ross Sinclair versus Sir Edwin Landseer (2007) at Aberdeen Art Gallery*

The pairing of the Victorian painter Sir Edwin Landseer (1802–1873) amidst the commissioned work of the contemporary Scottish artist Ross Sinclair (b.1966) included a conflation of their separate acts of representing Scotland. The Macdonald Rooms at Aberdeen Art Gallery and Museum was the context of this embedded reinterpretation of contemporary Scottish cultural identity, during the launch of The Year of The Highlands in January 2007.

Sir Edwin Landseer was fundamental to the Victorian vision and fascination with Scottish history and landscape of the Highlands. Landseer's early diptych, 1829, *High Life / Low Life*, Tate, typifies the contrast between Scotland and England as 'one of character. The deerhound in *High Life* reflects the chivalric and aristocratic world of the past. In *Low Life* the battle scarred terrier, representing the tough, plebeian, urban values of 'John Bull.' (Ormond 1981, 99)

However, Landseer's paintings are more complex than some of their subjects might suggest. Aberdeen's monumental Landseer, 1860, *Flood in the Highlands*, Aberdeen Art Gallery, shows a psychologically despondent scene:

*figures appear to be sitting on the turf roof of an outhouse... seated on a chair in the centre of the composition is a terrified and desperate-looking mother clutching her beautiful son. The presence of a Highland shield, two dirks, and a handle of a broadsword wrapped in a scarf seems to be reminiscent of the 1745 rebellion, when Highlanders hid their arms after the defeat of Bonnie Prince Charlie. The animals, in their terror, gather near the people (Ormond 1981, 202)*

The decision to approach Sinclair to respond to Landseer was straightforward, he presents Scotland's heritage tradition as self-consciously false yet powerful when reflected back by its subjects. Sinclair's works often include landscape features and he frequently signals the problems of absorbing historical mythologies in which a people, for economic reasons or otherwise, begin to manage their past as if it were a museum. His practice sometimes entails fore-fronts national icons, and yet avoids the warning made by Donald Kuspit, that '*it is hard to isolate a national trait without reducing one's sense of the nation.*' (Kuspit 1993, 49) The

impetus for this project arose from my own personal response to Ross Sinclair's and Edwin Landseer's work. Both can be said to have advocated characteristics of Scottishness in Scottish art, which is in itself a contentious idea. Sinclair is unusual in his generation of Scottish artists in frequently deploying or addressing abiding historical clichés and character in his art. The premise of the embedded reinterpretation in the art gallery was to ask what could be gained in depicting cultural inheritance and identity in mostly historical paintings, towards a better understanding of how these had become enmeshed in the national psyche.

My preparatory research included visits to some of sites holding Landseer's works, during which the publication of Richard Ormond's *Monarch of The Glen: Landseer in the Highlands* (2005) accompanied an exhibition in Edinburgh. Undoubtedly, Edwin Landseer's works have become irretrievably linked to a mawkish sentimental vision of Scotland, they inspire others towards an excitable immersion in colonial myths and are critically lambasted for supposedly how effective they are at this task. However, the nuances in Landseer's representation of peopled landscapes are worth reconsidering for a moment. T.C. Smout noted that Victorians praised Landseer for his realism in portraying people, beast and place, yet his mountains are bathed in a wonderful unreality, scenes that we might aspire to see but never will', continuing 'Moderns blame him for ignoring the bitter truths of Highland life, and glamorising the wild and empty, yet his paintings of people are not so unrelated to historical context as generally supposed.' (Ormond, Smout 2005, 13).

The curatorial framework was then to seek a contemporary relevance for the meaning of Landseer's specifically 'Scottish' work, and extend this exploration at sites in which Landseer

defines nationhood. Perhaps redolent of Smout's comments, the reinterpreted environment should then include any number of performance, video, photography, neon, sculptures – effectively new media – as well as music made by Ross Sinclair or others. Furthermore, the new work should involve a direct 'address' to a specific Landseer work. Sinclair responded by incorporating utilitarian objects including a Land-Rover vehicle in the museum. Sinclair found the highly defined nature of this curatorial construction be usefully assertive within his own very active and fluid working processes, which involves an intensity of purpose – at times he works by a kind of extrication from self-created chaos, studio shots of the related working processes (leading up to a decision over what forms and direct references he might use in the planned site interventions) demonstrated this to some degree.

**Fig. 7: Ross Sinclair, studio work-in-progress (2006), Kilcreggan, Scotland.**

For the exhibition, Aberdeen Museum rehung a number of its portraiture works to immediately surround the now centralised *Flood in the Highlands*. This initially presented a vista in which the Landseer should have been seen positioned on the end wall of last room, from a long distance, enlivened with an audience of portraits. The installation was comprised of a Landrover covered in paraphernalia locating this new work within Scottish contemporary culture and music. This work was placed right in the heart of this rehung Victorian collection, neither parallel nor perpendicular, but preventing the distant view of Landseer's while attracting the visitors towards it, given the visually aberrant nature of the addition. Interrupting the silence, the addition incorporated new video works, including a song composed and performed by Sinclair, represented differently via the nostalgia of super 8, or by emulating commercial video, heavy

with expensive chiaroscuro effects. As *Flood in the Highlands* has a peculiar lack of a fixed perspective, and the eye leaps around the picture surface, Sinclair's addition to the gallery incorporated its multi-perspectives, through the window of the vehicles, within the video performances, adding to swirling effect depicted in Landseer's painting and a challenge the stilled atmospherics of Aberdeen's Painting Gallery. The most disruptive aspect of Sinclair's reinterpretation was not so much the full-sized Land Rover but how it was covered in neon symbols and stag's heads. Not only did the neon vibrantly cast light on the surrounding paintings, it reflected off some of their glass while adding to the sonic cacophony. Having earlier performed in front of the painting in preparation for the work's video element while performing for video on an elevated platform in front of the canvas, he found it to 'have been in different stretchers, with sewn on sections, showing its 'history' in the physicality of the object which belied its uncertainty in its meaning and fixedness, in what it was trying to say, so different from the certainty of Landseer's 'Monarch of the Glen', so more able to allow for dialogue and conversation and to insert something into this.' (Richardson 2012, 158).

**Figs. 8 and 9: *Ross Sinclair Versus Sir Edwin Landseer, Aberdeen Art Gallery and Museum.***

What particular traits in the lived Scottish experience were referenced in Sinclair's interruption of the silent flow of Aberdeen Art Gallery and Museum with his composition of folk music? It enlivened a space of heritage, it expressed a desire for an authenticity (although imbued with a metropolitan sensibility). The bigger question then is creative practitioner's analysis of the cultural products of their place of affiliation, be it the place of their upbringing, their homeland, or place of settlement. I would argue that Sinclair temporarily redeemed of its contemporary

redundancy. His reinterpretation was reversal of the painting's, and the Macdonald Rooms', mood of decline, with national songs or symbols reimagined within an expanding panorama of new possibilities.

*The practical context of shale 'bings' as monuments (John Latham, 1976) in the twenty-first century.*

This prospective project builds on the findings outlined in the two case studies above. The practical context is a reinterpretation of a site which is both a safeguarded heritage site and an iconic late-modern artwork. A newly intended work will attempt to stabilise and develop these very differing concepts. Working collaboratively with the ecology artist Alec Finlay, we are intending new artworks towards local public engagement with the constellation of mining-spoil landforms in West Lothian, dating from the 19<sup>th</sup> century up to the early 1960s. These shale spoil heaps, one as high as 85m and are known locally as 'Greendykes', 'Faucheldean', 'Niddry' and 'Albyn' *bings* (old Norse: *heaps*). Much of our research to date relates to John Latham's 1975–6 scheme for these sites (as well as the proclivities of our own practice), with wider public interest in the local exploitation an 'intangible' heritage in an economically depressed conurbation. Our project has developed from our conversational exploration, and our affiliation with Latham's aims for the site, as well as an appreciation of post-industrial landscape's re-wilding and of the appropriateness of monumentalising localised ecologies.

The historical context is how, in 1975–6, the British artist John Latham (1921–2006) undertook an Artist Placement Group (APG) residency at the Scottish Office's Scottish Development Agency in Edinburgh, one of the first 'artist residencies' in the world. During this, Latham re-

conceptualised the shale bings as ‘monumental process sculptures’ in an innovative paradigm for engaging with our cultural heritage in a changing world. By conceptually re-envisaging these bings Latham created a seminal sited conceptual artwork, potentially the largest monumental work in the UK. Crucial to this process was his re-naming ‘Greendykes’ and other bings as an industrial geomorphic complex to be known as ‘Niddrie Woman’, alongside its detached ‘Heart’. The latter is disappearing as its material continues to be used for road infill.

While Latham’s reconceptualisation continues to present provocative challenges to contemporary sculpture, overall the status of the site remains one of contemporary dereliction. Yet, life abounds. Emptied of energy yield, these spent shale bings have been assessed as significant sites of rare biodiversity (Harvie 2005). Our new collaboration is intended to consider this alongside other renewable energy sites, such as Costa Head, Orkney. In this era of contested energy-sourcing, we will include this contestation towards a more ambitious narrative than conventional heritage management achieves, and will draw on speculative thinking regarding the generative potentialities of ruins. To reframe this unconventional landscape our approach will refer to antiquarian landforms, and parallel methodologies such as the eco-museum movement (Staffin, Skye), and an emergent artistic engagement with the catastrophic environments such as the evacuated town on Pripyat, near Chernobyl.

Given the role of iconic landmark sculpture in regional development, a practical re-evaluation of the site is overdue and would contribute cultural tourism in a relatively under-prosperous region. We intend that our artworks will incorporate the utilitarian vernacular, in part defined by conservation governance and to incorporate text-based artworks. Other interventions may

include summit indicators or conspectus formed of mesostic name poems. By venturing substantially beyond conventional curatorial arrangements of transporting pre-existing artefacts to semi-neutral spaces our approach will comprise the poetic and the visual, with ecological and empirical approaches, with others perspectives including the geological, botanical, sociological and the antiquarian.

Historic Environment Scotland (HES), as the authority responsible for the sites' maintenance. They have recently offered guidance, with meetings leading up to our planned embedded reinterpretation of this important site in Scottish history. HES has recognised that conventional heritage markers cannot function in such a landscape context, and yet the lack of sited qualification or audience inhibits broader public appreciation of the bings. HES consider that reinterpretations including those that we plan to undertake should occupy a place of public imagination, especially heritage sites which are over-familiar landforms for the local residents. In many ways this is an extension of the idea of an integrated public art, integrated not so much with architecture and the urban or other environment, but with the people who may bring the site to life. We will need to fully engage with HES policies, as well as reinterpret some of Latham's methodology. Finding equivalences between both will also yield dynamic readings towards new works. The sites themselves are locally understood within a matrix of leisure site, heritage monument, conceptual art and biological diversity. Conventional regulatory approaches to the site's preservation has obscured the aesthetic and cultural significance of Latham's *Niddrie Woman*, and without enhancing their ecological uniqueness. This project will contest the the loss of the sublime aspect of ruins, and contribute significantly to the sites' (re)presentation as an iconic form and reference it as botanical refugia, reconnecting its ecological recovery and yet we

may need to memorialise the ongoing loss of *Niddrie Woman's Heart*. Recently, Finlay wrote of this as an ecological lamentation, 'a heart - and the spoil, which is spoilt again, by being crushed; all the air removed, for the sake of the motor car. EARTH BLED OF AIR: SPOIL'.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Alec Finlay, email to author, 17<sup>th</sup> December 2016.

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Note: an earlier version of my discussion of Hoy Cheong's *Slight Shifts* appeared in *Shifts: Wong Hoy Cheong 2002 – 2007*. 2008. Malaysia: National University of Singapore Museum /Galeri Petronas.