ENVIRONMENTAL ART AT GLASGOW SCHOOL OF ART

ENVIRONMENTAL ART AT GLASGOW SCHOOL OF ART 1985 -2001 – a short memoir mainly written around 2002 with some edits ongoing since then.

I was teaching on the Art and Social Contexts course at Dartington College of Arts in Devon when, at the start of 1985, I saw an advertisement for the head of a new department to be set up in the School of Fine Art at Glasgow School of Art. When I read the job description I thought to myself, 'Somebody's written me a job.' It was almost as if I had written it myself. Somehow I knew that this was my job and that I would get it. I am sure many people have had the same response to a job advert and then reality has quickly taken over. I applied in the full knowledge that it was, as ever, a long shot but worth going for. I was interviewed and was fortunate enough to be offered the job. But what was the job?

The title of the new department was to be Environmental Art. It would be one of the specialist areas of the School of Fine Art, the others being Painting, Photography, Printmaking and Sculpture. A department already existed called Murals and Stained Glass and with the retiral of its head, George Garson, the School had decided that now was the time for a new beginning. It needed a change of name and a course syllabus with a strong philosophical direction. And what of the name of the new department, Environmental Art? It has been a source of much confusion over the years. I was forever being asked to define it as well as continually getting enquiries from environmental/ecological bodies, groups and individuals. Naming the department Environmental Art certainly indicated that the course would deal with making art in the broader public domain and therefore that the range of media would be broad. At my interview the then director of the school, Tony Jones, asked me whether I thought that the department should not be a separate course in its own right but rather that it should offer a service to those students in the other areas of Fine Art who wanted to make art works outwith the art school in the broader public domain. This was a related question to the one that had been posed to me many

times while at Dartington. It was this – shouldn't the Art and Social Contexts course be a postgraduate course rather than an undergraduate? My response was always that it was better to build a concern and understanding of the role differing contexts could play in the practice of students from day one in order to produce a mature contextual practice and that this was not something that could be achieved on a one-year post-graduate experience. I said 'no' to this and was assured by the interview panel that it was to be a new, independent department, but that it would be inheriting an existing body of students. It would have to deal with that problem, define its own terms and find its own way. It was not a bad position to be in though it also contained some seeds of future problems in terms of access to workshop facilities. The old department had a wood workshop and stained glass facilities so our students would need to be able to access workshop facilities in the other specialist areas. The school however never faced up to this structural problem. It was never resolved and caused constant problems for students wasting time and energy for those who needed to use other specialist facilities, machinery and equipment. There was a plus side to this however, though it was not apparent to the staff and the students at the time. It shaped the way some students made work as they learned how to hustle, to persuade and inveigle themselves into other specialist areas and workshops in the School and also to make work out of what was at hand, or found. These became characteristics of the department.

I was expected to take up my new position during the summer of 1985 and begin planning a programme for the new academic year. However there was a problem. The Dartington course was on the point of being validated for an honours degree by the then Council for National Academic Awards (CNAA). We had worked hard on the vision and content and the documentation was in the process of being completed for the visit of the CNAA examiners in the autumn. I felt bound to remain and assist with trying to achieve the validation. Glasgow generously agreed to this and that I would formally take up the post in January '86.

The transition from the existing department was relatively smooth due to the retention of staff. Sam Ainsley was a full-time member of staff and Brian Kelly and Shona McInnes part-time – Shona ran the stained glass workshop. I brought in Stan Bonnar who had been my first post-graduate assistant in Glenrothes as another part-time staff member. I made a couple of visits to the School during the summer term of 1985 one of which was specifically to see the end of year Degree shows. In particular I wanted to see the work of the First Year students who had been accepted for the new department. Sam took me round the First Year Exhibition and I was very impressed by what I saw. This was reinforced when staff from other departments commented that we had a group of very strong students. The creation of the new department attached to no particular medium seemed have galvanised a group of students into wanting to join it. Further, Sam's contact with them in their First Year tutorials and crits had also had a powerful impact in attracting good students. (It is important

to note here that Scottish art schools have a general First Year course followed by three years of specialisation.)

During the summer of 1985 Sam, Stan and I met to discuss the new department and to plan the schedules for the upcoming year starting in that September. We agreed projects on gender and collaboration, complemented by the lengthy interrogation of students' work through group crits. We committed ourselves to a policy whereby visiting teachers to the course would not necessarily be artists but could be sociologists, philosophers, poets, novelists, architects and others to broaden our students' understanding of the world in which we lived. Not only were we educating artists but also people to take their place in society. Ecology, politics, human geography, ethnicity, collaborative practices, among others, were, we believed, suitable topics for the education of artists. Criticism and questioning self-criticism are essential elements in the formation of all artists in all fields. Art students have to experience it and learn how to react to it. It is tough sometimes but essential. However where there is a mutual and supportive respect for the efforts of the individual, a confidence is bred in which people do perform to the best of their ability. When the first university in Europe was set up in Bologna it described itself as "a company of scholars." On the other hand, there was a form of teaching in art schools, certainly in the UK, where it was believed to be necessary to first of all destroy the student before then building her/him up. This ethos had no part in the teaching in the department where our attitude was more towards the notion that 'good teachers learn from their students'.

Formal course development meetings began straightaway in January 1986. These included Bill Buchanan, Head of Fine Art and staff from the Schools of Architecture, Planning and Design. Good intentions expressed about future collaborations but, as I learned later, actually making them happen was an entirely different matter. Unless there are clearly specified arrangements, written into the courses for access and collaboration with other areas, it will not happen. What shared projects that did take place over the years were ad hoc and, though two or three of these were excellent, especially those working with Fred Smith of the School of Architecture, they were never able to be written in as a part of the other courses. There is much talk today in the schools of art of developing synergies between different disciplines but if it is not planned for, if it is not built-in, if time is not allowed for it to happen then they won't happen. The course made up for this by ensuring that the students were exposed to ideas and thought processes outwith Fine Art. Coupled with this was the commitment to break out of the studio and the art school bubble in order to provide 'real life' experiences for the students.

Many art schools in England had already adopted 'general' Fine Art courses in which students could begin with painting, then move into sculpture work and end up doing printmaking, performance or installation. The four Scottish Arts Schools had continued to teach through specialist media areas or departments. Thus, as mentioned be-

fore, the School of Fine Art consisted of departments of Painting, Photography, Printmaking and Sculpture. Students would develop their practice through three years of specialisation. On reflection the Environmental Art course became in effect a 'general' Fine Art course with, however, a major defining element which made it different to all others and this was the emphasis placed on the context of a work. It was non-media-specific department with an underlying philosophy that was specific and specialist. While it took a few months to write a formal course document the first intake of students were nevertheless exposed to the thinking, teaching and critical positions that were to permeate the course thereafter.

In June 1986 the London gallery owner, Nicholas Treadwell, came to the school to select work for an exhibition entitled 'Fresh Art' due to take place at the Barbican in London in August. It was a to be a UK wide selection from art schools across the country. He was very impressed by what our students were doing and as a result selected four Environmental Art students and two from the Painting department. It was our first step out into the 'world of art' and set the tone for our students' ambitions thereafter.

Another important factor that had a major impact on the way that student work evolved was the location of the department in what had been the Glasgow High School for Girls. It was a forbidding four storey, Victorian, stone pile littered with decorative elements the main features of which were a double Escher-like staircase , the confusions of which always remained a mystery to me, and a large varnished, wooden honour board on which were inscribed the names of former prize-winning girls. It had a myriad of rooms of all sizes from the basements to the attics all in various stages of decay. Bachelard's 'The Poetics of Space' became an important teaching text. The old school had comprised of two linked Victorian buildings and legally we only had the use of one and, although the access to the other one was boarded up, the students made light work of getting in there when they needed to do so. Many rooms, including laboratories, contained the residue of the school's activities blackboards, desks, chairs, easels, piles of identical textbooks on science, history or geography, numbered hooks in cloakrooms among many other bits and pieces and all these would at some time or another find their way into student work. Almost all the rooms had special characteristics and a charged ambience thus enabling students, on their very doorstep, to begin to engage with the notion of context. Each room, each space presented a different ready-made setting for making videos, performance and installations. The decay and dereliction of unloved spaces provided unlimited scope for working through ideas of 'the other.' The high ceiling of the gym hall and the huge spaces of the stairwells and hallways afforded the opportunity to play with scale and notions of ascent and descent. It would be difficult to emphasise enough the effect that all of this had on the students' work and their evolving practice. It is not surprising that, when I came to organise an exhibition of work by graduates of

the course to mark its tenth year, the title chosen for the exhibition by the ex-students was, 'Girls High.'

I introduced the APG maxim, 'the context is half the work', as the philosophical basis of the course. This was profoundly important to the development of the course and in formulating student practice. I had used it effectively at Dartington but had grown to believe that APG's Placement model was too demanding for students. When one considers the difficulties that experienced professional artists face in making successful work out of placements then one can understand the problems that students would face. I had felt that some students at Dartington had been 'damaged' by their placement choices through their immaturity, misplaced idealism and belief in their power as artists and the power of art to change things. Nevertheless I do not necessarily believe in an educational model in which every element moves from the simple to the complex. At Glasgow, instead of the Placement, I introduced the Public Art Project which became the key element in exploring context and one of the main characteristics of the course. It moved from the longer-term engagement of a Placement to one lasting several weeks of intensive work.

It is important to go into some detail in describing the Public Art Project though in doing so it has to be emphasised that over the years different parts of it were changed and or refined. The term 'public art' like the term 'environmental art' was very loosely defined as being a work made for a non-gallery setting outside of the art school. Every student carried out one project in each year of the course. They had to find their own site, negotiate permission to use it, propose a work and set it up. Thorough research of the site and its setting was important. Using a variety of strategies students were encouraged to get to a point of immersion, seeking out the critical elements of the context of their chosen setting whether it be social, historical, architectural, political, psychological. Students were advised to adopt one of two fundamental approaches; to seek out a site, place or setting, which had resonances to their own interests and practice or to select one that had none. In the latter mode some students chose to carry out what one might call 'guerilla' works – no permissions were sought and often subversive works resulted. Work would remain in-situ for one or two weeks while staff/student crits took place on each of the sites. The work was thoroughly documented before it was removed. To maximise the opportunity for critical feedback we later introduced student presentations of their project to their year group and staff using slides, video, overheads or whatever means the student decided best communicated the work. These sessions were open to students from other year groups. This presentation element, which took place over two days for each year group, was one of the key parts of the whole project and fulfilled a number of important functions. It demanded that each student prepare and deliver a professional presentation of their work. It involved each student in being able to discuss their work and answer questions from students of different years. Final year students for instance would bring to the discussion the experience of having com-

pleted three of these projects. The presentations also allowed for several contingencies. Inevitably some projects didn't always work out as planned; bad weather could prevent a work from being set up on an exterior site or limited the site crit; the host/owner of a site could withdraw permission at the last minute. It was allowed that the work could then be presented as a fully worked out proposal. Finally the students compiled a Public Art Project Book which contained sketches, ideas development, correspondence with the hosts of the setting, images and a personal critical analysis of the work. This was submitted some time after the project had been completed which allowed for a period of reflection. A high professional standard was demanded since these project books could be useful in 'life after art school' as evidence of the ability to carry out a commissioned art work. It is evident that this was a major work of the course and was one of the things which distinguished it from the other Fine Art departments. Some students, on their own initiative, would do more than three of these projects but the course only expected one per year. It was through the Public Art Project that the key elements of contextual practice were learned; negotiation with the secular and the everyday; researching and understanding non-gallery settings as a location for art; learning to unlock the special sense and meaning of a space, place or social group; engaging broad, unspecified audiences; learning that there is no single universal public.

Projects like these have to be able to develop in students of Fine Art a willing engagement with, and a sensitivity to, non-art/secular/everyday contexts; to negotiation and /or collaboration with non-artists; to a delicate balance between the personal and the public; to the issues around the local and the universal; to sites, places, audiences. How different an attitude to making art this is can be gauged by the comment of a leading British sculptor who stated in 1972 that, 'the idea of designing a sculpture for a particular site, even if chosen by oneself, seems to me to be a gross limitation on the sculptor's freedom.' On the other hand the US artist Robert Irwin provocatively stated that 'self-expression is the lowest form of artistic endeavour.' Contextual practice does not exclude the need for self-expression, one still needs to find one's centre and draw on one's own inner necessity in making art, but it alerts us to the need for another and enlarged set of precepts for making art; other layers of creativity and problem-solving.

The evidence seems to be that the course produced students who didn't wait around to be asked to do things but were equipped to go out, initiate projects, create their own opportunities and set things up for themselves. The sense of being a new department and its isolation in the Girls High bred a feeling of being different, being special; the absence of a dominating medium did likewise. These contributed to a strong sense of camaraderie and community. We, staff and students, partied together using any excuse to socialise. There was the need to hustle for access to workshops and materials, or to improvise and use what could be found. There was the

demand of the course that students engage with individuals, groups and agencies in the 'real world' to make work.

In 1987 Nikki Millican, founder and director of the National Review of Live Art, selected three students to perform a work at the annual event that took place that year at the Riverside Studios in London. Douglas Gordon, Craig Richardson and Euan Sutherland, under the name of 'tradition – debilitation' presented a marathon performance entitled 'Seven Hours'. It was a disciplined and demanding work that impressed Millican so much that they were commissioned to perform at the following year's staging of the event which, by chance, was at the Third Eye Centre (now the CCA) in Glasgow. I drove the whole year group to London in the school's mini-bus and, as well as see many of the other works being presented at the NRLA, we were able to visit a number of the exhibitions going on at that time.

As I have said social activities were seen as an important element within the department and one form of this was organising 'dance' nights to raise money for our foreign trips. For a few years in the late 80's and early 90's the Environmental Art dances were the ones that everyone wanted to go to. It took a lot of effort but it was well worth it – we could make a £1000-00 a night. In 1987 we planned to visit Berlin. I brought in the artist George Wyllie to work with Third Year students to prepare a dance night. It began with George asking the circle of students for any paperback book which was then passed around. It stopped at one student who opened it randomly. It was passed to another student who was asked to choose the right or left hand page. Then passed on again for the next person to select a line halfway down the page. Finally George asked the next student to chose the two words in the middle of that line. The words were 'and I'. The title of the event became the 'And I' dance. We spent an intensive week working with the students and a number of art installations and performances were prepared for the event. A song was written and performed. A Berlin Wall made of large cardboard boxes was constructed in the dance hall and then, in a prescient act, demolished. It was an astonishing and resounding success.

'Creacite' – Students exhibit and make public art works in Tours, France

We were always looking for opportunities for our students to make and exhibit work outside the school and in 1989 a notice came across my desk about an international exhibition to be held in Tours, France in 1990. The theme was 'Water and Europe' and artists from numerous European capitals were to be exhibiting. Glasgow had been selected by virtue of being the European City of Culture in 1990. It seemed that there was a possibility that student work could be exhibited. I took it up and ran with it. The whole project turned out to be one of the most stimulating and successful events in the 'professional' world with which the department was involved. I managed to raise funding from the school and from Glasgow City Council while the

organisation in Tours covered shipping, setting up and insurance costs. Each of us would have to pay for our own food for the duration of the trip. I decided that Third Year students should take up the challenge as I felt it would be a good starting point for their final year. There were two strands to our contribution. Each student would make a work for exhibition on the theme of water and also develop ideas and make preparations for a work in relation to the River Loire to be installed on the banks of the river near the city centre. It was a massive undertaking and involved all of us working throughout the summer vacation to meet the end of September deadline. We planned to drive to Tours in the school mini-bus, which fortunately had a large roof rack running the whole length of the vehicle. Stan Bonnar and I did the driving. I had planned an overnight in London but when I announced that we would have to save time by travelling straight to Newhaven for the overnight ferry it was greeted with boos. However I immediately, and maybe rashly, responded by saying that in place of London I would offer them 'dawn in Chartres Cathedral.' I seem to recall that this offer in no way seemed a suitable bargain and I wonder if any of the students quite realised the significance of Chartres. After four wretched hours on the ferry lying stretched out on the floor trying to grab a little sleep, at 2-00 am I drove off the ferry through Dieppe and out into the flat, dark, mist-covered plain of Normandy. We had already been travelling for 15 hours but it is amazing how the adrenalin kicks in so I was feeling wide awake as I snaked along the country roads in the dark while everyone else dosed off. The first glimmer of light began to appear and in the far distance were the spires of Chartres. Fortune was with us and around 6-00 am as we parked outside the railway station across the street a bakery and café was just opening. I announced, 'coffee and croissants on the budget!' There are many sweet moments in life but I must say that that café offered one of the sweetest. Suitably refreshed we drove up the hill to the cathedral. The doors were closed and though the overcast sky made for very little light, I settled for an instructive tour around the exterior pointing out significant features when one of the students opened a small door. We went in. The place was empty and lit only by single candles around the walls. As we wandered around in the gloom, walking the maze and taking in the wonders of the place the sun broke through the windows and the great, medieval stained glass of Chartres bathed us in a colourful dapple of light, just as it had for other fortunates for 800 years. What can one say about a moment like that? I am susceptible to epiphanous spiritual experiences and so for me it was one of the very special moments of my life. We travelled the rest of the way to Tours on some kind of high. The quotidian realities soon brought us back down.

In order to make the trip financially possible I had had to prevail upon a friend Herve Bechy who owned a small section of the Chatenay farm buildings on the outskirts of Tours above the village of St. Radegond. It was rough living but we made the most of it. Herve's 'camp fire', encircled by log benches, meant that most evening meals took on the atmosphere of being on a camping holiday; stories were told and songs were sung.

We had been assigned a large exhibition space in a 'still being finished' new school building. Though not ideal it offered sufficient opportunity for the works to be well displayed. We all worked very hard over long days. The exhibition had to be set up as quickly as possible so that we could use the rest of the time to work on the sited works by the river. It was a hassle with little of the promised assistance from the organisers and not knowing the best places to get things. But as is usual in these kinds of situations it all seems to work out in the end. The exhibition looked good. Then it was off to the Loire. The Director of the local Ecole de Beaux Arts provided a workshop base. Even now I am astonished at what the students achieved on such a tight budget and schedule. The works, in terms of scale, breadth and visual impact, stood up well to the grandeur of the river. I still use several of the works in my lectures when I'm describing the Environmental Art course. Stan and I collaborated on a work high up on the huge, stone floodwall which protects the city..

At both the formal 'Creacite' opening and our own opening, the works in the exhibition and those by the Loire were singled out for high praise. We were the only student group exhibiting work. Did I hear organiser Charvet Pello say that the Glasgow work was the most challenging of all the exhibitions – that the works asked questions? I did indeed. She took us out for a wonderful dinner. We only had one free day which we used to visit Chinon one of the great chateaux of the Loire. Quantities of the great red wine of the area were bought.

I decided that if we left early on the day of our return journey, with a midnight sailing from Dieppe, we could manage a few hours in Paris. This decision almost caused a disaster as it meant driving from Paris to Dieppe in the dark at high speed through towns, through red lights and on country roads. We boarded with five minutes to spare. On arrival at Newhaven the customs were waiting for us. Everything was emptied from the bus and the well-secured roof rack. Every bag, case, box, tent opened. Every one of us searched. Dogs and detectors went over, inside and under the bus. Fortunately the only thing that the customs people found that was in any way suspicious was a batch of different colour paint syringes! One could tell that they were bitterly disappointed at what they had no doubt deemed to be a certain drugs arrest.

Social Engagement – A community mural in Glasgow.

I turned down most invitations that came to the department to carry out commissions. Sometimes the enquirer wanted something on the cheap and the request was finessed by 'it will be good experience for your students.' I had to assess how worthwhile it was for the students and in most cases it wasn't. We did do one or two commissions in the summer holiday where the students could earn some money.

The Blackhill Mural

Augusta Boal, the Brazilian theatre director and founder of the Theatre of the Oppressed, gave this contentious advice to artists, 'Never go into a community until it has articulated its need for you.' If this seems extreme and idealistic then so be it. It's good advice if only to say to artists be cautious and be respectful. In the late eighties just such an articulation was made to me at the school. A tenants' association approached me through their local housing officer asking if my students could paint a gable end mural for them. They had a site and they had the money. Blackhill was a small housing estate and, as its name could be taken to infer, had a bad name for poverty, unemployment and crime. In fact it was often described as one of the worst areas of deprivation in Glasgow. (how often we have heard that description applied all over the country?) And special too in that at that time100 yards from the gable end was the house of the Thomsons the most notorious gang family in Glasgow at the time. An ostentatious fake of a place known variously as 'The Ponderosa' or 'South Fork' of Dallas fame. But for all that, I found Blackhill to be a good community of good people well served by the activities and concerns of, among others, the local Church of Scotland minister and Catholic priest as well as a strong Tenants' Association led by Marie Stewart.

I've always regarded what we did in Blackhill as one of the most rigorous and productive examples of socially engaged art practice. Working closely with the tenants public meetings were held, ideas discussed and art workshops were held for young people. The students, Nathan Coley, Alan Dunn and Meg McLucas, drew on these, prepared proposals and presented them for discussion. Slowly the concepts and the design were refined and then approved at a public meeting. The wall was a gable end of a three-storey building about 35 to 40 feet high looking out over a large stretch of waste ground. Though the winter was on us and despite the wind and rain quite a few local people and even the local Housing Officer took time to assist in the painting. Young people joined in at weekends. There were however two brothers aged 13 and 14, Hugh and James McNulty, who worked with us more or less continuously throughout the four weeks it took to complete the mural. Asked why they were not at school the boys simply replied that they preferred to work on the mural. They were serious about it and worked hard. One day James brought a comic strip he had created and drawn with a ballpoint pen in a school exercise book. He made several copies on the school photocopier and distributed them around the area. Two or three other issues of the comic were done. We were impressed and we visited the brothers at their home nearby. It would be difficult to exaggerate the poverty in which they lived. In the experience of working on the mural the two of them seemed to have found something that they felt good about; something with which they strongly identified. When the mural was complete they featured in the television and newspapers reports of the project. Locally they were recognised as major contributors to the mural. It gave them status and pride. This seemed to me to be as important as the actual mural itself. The 'dedication' (always a crucial element in helping to embed a work into the local community) took place as part of the annual

Christmas procession around the streets of the area. Later, unknown to me, the city council fixed top lighting to the mural wired to the street lighting. Thus at dusk the mural burst into light. It remained virtually free of vandalism and in excellent condition until the general demolition of the area sixteen years later. (Recently a police inspector, who had worked in the area, told me that the 'godfather' of the gang family had sent out the word that the mural was to be protected!)

The 'Girls High' – exhibition to mark 10 years of the department.

1995-96 marked ten years of the founding of the Environmental Art Department. I co-curated an exhibition with Rebecca Gordon Nesbitt to celebrate this. Unfortunately I was very ill at the time and wasn't able to contribute, and support Rebecca, as much as I would have liked. She did an excellent job with not very much in the way of funding. Several ex-students were on the working party and one of them, Roddy Buchanan, came up with the title of "Girls High." It was an ambitious project for not only had we to engage with the huge space of the Old Fruitmarket in Glasgow but also the Mackintosh Museum in the School of Art. Out of around 120 graduates, 45 exhibited with each one making a new work for the Old Fruitmarket venue. The place still contained much evidence of its former use with individual stalls and shops their signboards still intact. The Mackintosh Museum was used for documentation of public and site-specific works which many of the artists had carried out since leaving art school. And finally some of the artists carried out billboard works in different locations across the city. Part of the reason for the exhibition was to bring together all of these artists from different generations of students to endorse that notion of a family of artists. When Douglas Gordon thanked the 'Scotia Nostra' in his remarks in accepting the Turner Prize he was simply describing a fact. We still meet, socialise and support each other. In 'The Corrosion of Character' Richard Sennet writes that a society/regime, "which provides human beings with no deep reasons to care about one another cannot long preserve its legitimacy." These Glasgow artists genuinely care about each other. In the art world this must seem to be a contradiction in terms.

David Harding 2002 + later edits