

Coast Seminars Report 2004

Commissions East has been working in partnership with Essex County Council, firstsite in Colchester and Future Physical/Shinkansen to deliver Coast, one of the most ambitious visual arts projects ever undertaken in Essex.

During the summer of 2004, Commissions East presented two professional development seminars for visual artists working or living within the East of England.

The seminars aimed to:

- Promote discussion and debate between artists and commissioners
- Explore the role of visual arts projects within cultural tourism
- Enable artists to experience innovative projects

The seminars included presentations from the Commissioners and the commissioned artists, informed discussion, a site visit and a guided exhibition tour.

Coast Artist Seminar 1 6 August 2004

Steve Downey, Arts Development Manager - Essex County Council Commissioner's introduction

The Essex coast line is often associated with muddy estuaries and overlooked by many visitors, this was an image that Essex County Council was keen to dispel through the initiation of a major visual arts project, Coast. The objectives of Coast were to raise the profile of the Essex coastline through developing a better understanding and appreciation for it. The project also aimed to promote excellence within the arts, encourage inward investment and attract tourism.

The four main aspects of Coast included:

- Coast Digital
- Coast Commissions
- Coast Schools
- Coast Promotion

Arts Council Lottery funding was the main springboard for Coast as it enabled Essex County Council to attract further funding from other sources. The total budget for Coast reached around half a million pounds. What had initially started as a simple idea had grown in to a three year programme of installations, performances, sculptures and events.

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Zoë Walker and Neil Bromwich
Commissioned artists for Maldon District

Collaborating artists Zoë Walker and Neil Bromwich have worked together on numerous visual arts projects, residencies and commissions. The theme of their work often explores 'fantasy verses reality' and the idea of 'artificial realism' often expressed in the creation of faked environments. Previous residencies and projects such as 'My Island Home' and 'Limbo Land' took the artists' work outside the gallery and into a rural environment. Limbo Land is a video work that was presented on two screens at the Berwick Gymnasium. Footage of Walker bouncing an asteroid planet constructed using air filled parachute silk, was filmed on a beach at dusk. The feather light asteroid appeared to be floating through a weightless atmosphere. For My Island Home, Walker was filmed drifting along the Thames on a large lifecraft that the artist had transformed in to an inflatable fake island. The island was later exhibited at the V&A Museum.

Walker and Bromwich were selected to make work for the Maldon District, a remote stretch of land along the Essex Coast. Their initial interest in this district was the Bradwell Power Station and the religious Othona community based just a few miles along the coast. They were also keen to incorporate the sea and capture the quality of light.

With these in mind, the idea developed for a glittering mirror tiled boat, the 'Celeste', moored in the River Blackwater Estuary in August 2004 between two main locations - the Celtic Christian Chapel of St Peters and the Bradwell Nuclear Power Station. To strengthen these ties and connect the sea with the land, Celestial Radio (87.7fm) was broadcast from the boat. This played philosophical interviews with locals, questioning the Big Bang, the existence of God, the universe, heaven, atoms and nuclear power loosely mixed with 70s glam rock, in homage to the infamous pirate station Radio Caroline that sailed off the Essex coast in the 1960s and 1970s.

A map and interpretation leaflet was produced so the public could walk the route whilst listening to Celestial Radio on headphones. The walk 'Making the pilgrimage between physics and faith' links together the elements of religious community at one end and the innovation of modern science at the other end. The highlight of the journey is the Celeste, whose glittering mirror tiles represent light, produced by the power station and the enlightenment of religion.

The commission was titled 'How The Universe Sang Itself into Being', taken from a quote made by an astrophysicist interviewed as part of the broadcast. It is a term used to describe how the universe communicated through sound following the Big Bang.

Michael Pinsky
Commissioned artist for Clacton County High School

Michael Pinsky's work explores the relationships between architectural spaces and perceptions of time. Since graduating from the RCA Pinsky has developed many projects and gained a PgDip in Education. He also lectures at the Birmingham Institute of Art and Design and the RCA.

Pinsky confronts urban issues, often using live performances, video installations or projections. As part of a commission for the Hythe in Colchester called 'Turning Point', Pinsky highlighted the turn in fortune the Hythe had experienced and the rapidly declining community. Pinsky focused on a group of swans who had taken up residence in a local dock and looked at their relationship with the starkly contrasting Breakers Yard. This resulted in a surreal choreographed performance of two cranes demolishing cars in time to Tchaikovsky's Swan Lake. The opposing themes united together and transformed the Breakers Yard into an unexpectedly elegant performance space.

Michael Pinsky was commissioned to produce a permanent video installation at Clacton County High School as part of Coast Schools. The commission is to feature in a new atrium space with state of the art facilities that will be used by the community, as well as the school.

The work is titled 'Weather Cluster'. Pinsky worked with the students to collect video clips of various weather conditions, locally and from around the world. These will continue to be recorded by individuals whilst on holiday, field trips, visiting pen pals and so on. The clips will be placed under common headings to represent various weather conditions and added to a database. The software used allows the weather library to be constantly updated. In addition a specially developed program will monitor the local weather station through the internet and these clips will play on a loop referencing current climatic conditions until the weather changes.

Discussion between participants and speakers

- What is the legacy of the project?

The project has had long lasting effects in terms of the publicity it has attracted and promotional material that documents the various temporary installations.

- Did you regularly exhibit before making the transition into working in the public realm?

What you create as an artist can feed into both forums. For some artists, working on public commissions can be a natural progression as the work develops in a new context and larger budgets allow you to produce bigger or more complex work. However, some artists feel it is important to maintain a regular gallery presence.

- Due to the nature of your work, do you find it hard to sell in the commercial market?

There is photographic documentation and multiples produced as a result of some projects that are saleable. Occasionally you may sell an entire installation, which is very exciting.

- Do you ever initiate projects yourself?

Yes, we like to when there is time. Residencies offer this opportunity. Also, if you think about it, applying for commissions is all self-initiated in a way.

- Do you ever feel uncomfortable with pressure to please others with public art commissioning?

You must try not to lose sight of your idea. I prefer to respond to environmental challenges as I find the studio a hostile place to work. The works often do relate to the environment and can encounter problems where regulations interfere with the artwork. Stand your ground if this happens.

I find there can be a pressure to please and it can sometimes present a bit of a constraint.

- Do you think there is a current trend towards community engaged public art projects?

There is more of a trend to work with artists in an engaged way and there is a growing understanding of how public art work can be important in increasing public awareness of certain issues or places. There does seem to be a move away from traditional practices and the Arts Council has stated it is far more interested in funding innovative projects.

Coast Seminar 2 19 August 2004

Lyndall Phelps, Project Manager - Commissions East

Coast intended to profile the Essex coastline and provide a much needed boost to tourism. Essex County Council had a budget of half a million pounds to go towards nine projects as part of Coast.

Locations for the commissions varied from rural to urban areas and beaches to marshy estuaries. They were specifically chosen to represent the diverse and interesting coastal landscape of Essex.

Artists were selected by open invitation and 182 applications were received. Selectors were looking for artists with diverse practices, experience at delivering quality commissions and the potential to produce unique proposals that would engage audiences in exciting ways.

Neville Gabie Commissioned artist for Rochford District

Neville Gabie works with many different media, from temporary installations to photography and publications. His work evolves through exploration of a location and the dynamic relationships formed with people, effectively capturing a sense of place. In a recent project delivered in collaboration with artist Leo Fitzmaurice, 'Up in the Air' and 'Further up in the Air,' Gabie was part of a team of artists invited to live and work in a tower block in Liverpool due for demolition. Gabie stripped one of the deserted flats of all its fixtures and fittings, leaving behind a ghostly impression of what once existed. The main centre piece was a neatly stacked block of all the parts he had removed, cut into squares and assembled into a perfect cube structure.

Gabie faced a challenge with his Coast commission as the Rochford coast was one of the most inaccessible areas of the Essex coastline. Much of the coast is owned by the Ministry of Defence (MOD), including numerous islands of mud flats and estuaries. Although Gabie was anxious about producing work here he admits it was the 'best decision he didn't make.' as the challenges faced inspired new ways of working.

Gabie's approach created inventive methods of accessing the restricted areas such as using a periscope and flying kites with cameras attached to get an aerial perspective of the land. These techniques reference military history as they were used during the First World War. Many of the images produced were presented as photographs and a video was also produced.

Part of Gabie's research into the area involved visiting car boot sales where he gathered a collection of sea memorabilia and had the opportunity to engage with the community.

Inspired by the novel 'Heart of Darkness,' by Joseph Conrad, written as he was moored in the Thames estuary and Charles Darwin's 'Beagle Diary', recorded during a five year journey, Gabie decided to embark on a trip to Estonia on the 'Baltic Wharf' a Russian cargo ship which docks in the area. He made a visual diary of his journey to an Estonian Wood Yard to collect a large wooden plank and bring it back to the Rochford District.

The various directions that Gabie's work took reflected the disconnected and unattainable character of the Rochford coastal landscape. He has captured the essence of the area through exploring a variety of strands that shoot off in different directions like the numerous islands that make up the area. His ability to respond and adapt to the unexpected has enabled him to overcome the obstacles faced and to produce a body of work that is as unique as Rochford itself.

John Kippin

Commissioned artist for Essex Coast as a whole

John Kippin is interested in the idea of place, often exploring landscapes and pertinent issues such as who owns and controls the land. In an earlier commission titled 'Cold War – Pastoral', Kippin was involved in documenting the changing landscape of Greenham Common as it opened its military barriers to the community. A publication of Kippin's photographs taken during this project commemorate Greenham's transition from military base to common land and marks the growth of the Womens' Peace Movement against nuclear war during the 1980s and 1990s.

Kippin was charged with documenting the Essex Coast in its entirety as his commission. The artist was intrigued by the military history along the coast, which inspired him to question 'what was being defended?' This provoked the overall theme of Kippin's commission – what is the identity of the Essex coast?

Kippin captured the Essex coast through a series of photographic images that evoke the unique and varying character of the whole coastline. It was important for him to portray a real representation of the less conventionally attractive parts and to explore the charm in their rawness.

Kippin's approach is evident in his proposal for the Martello Tower in Jaywick, an area of high social and economic deprivation. The tower reminded the artist of more elaborate Italian buildings which provoked his idea to use the unusual space to install his photographs, which he described would be 'a war memorial in which to contemplate the land, boundaries, what people fight and die for', thus referencing the issues Kippin has been exploring during his commission. This exhibition will also have international ties as it will be linked to the trans-national heritage project 'Crossing the Lines', which aids the renovation and use of 19th Century military establishments adjacent to the North Sea.

In addition to the exhibition of Kippin's images at first site in Colchester and his plans for the Martello Tower, a limited edition postcard pack has been produced as a tribute to Coast, prolonging its impact on the Essex coastline.

Discussion between participants and speakers

- Has the Coast process and outlook been unusual?

The project has been a unique opportunity for Essex County Council. The approach to Coast was fresh and interesting, it has also been a vital project for Commissions East to be involved with as it encouraged innovation in the arts and has had a very positive response from artists.

- How long will the commissions last for?

Coast has not resulted in any landmark works or major physical presences to date. Most of the work is temporary, however, each artist has produced additional material relating to their commission that will have a longer presence. There will also be a Coast publication, which will include documentation of all the commissions.

- (Directed towards Kippin) In relation to your plans for an installation in Jaywick, what is the space in the Martello Tower like?

It is a large and awkward shape, especially for hanging photographs in. I was considering adapting to the unusual shape by making the prints all different shapes and sizes.

- Will the installation in the Martello Tower be permanent?

Originally, we were planning to have the exhibition running for a year. Steve Downey has since suggested that it could run for 10 years. This would effect the budget though as we would need to use better quality fittings to last for the duration. So far we have not yet decided how long to run the exhibition for, as there are so many considerations to take into account.

Feedback from participants:

Our survey results showed that the expectations of the participants were met and a better understanding of public art commissions was achieved. They would all recommend the seminar to other artists.

Which sessions did you find most useful?

- Talking to the artists and seeing how they went about their project was very inspiring.
- Hearing the artists outline their career paths helped me to understand their route into public art.
- Networking with other artists and hearing about the commissioning and selection process.

Do you feel you have a better understanding of the role of the artist in a public art project?

- Yes, it gave me a better understanding of what the commissioner was looking for and the experience the artists had.
- Yes, it is more multi-faceted than you think.
- Yes, particularly the breadth of work and how well work can develop through public consultation.