

PROJECT AND ARTWORKS DEVELOPMENT

A detailed account of the project and creation of the artworks

by Director of StoreyG2, John Angus

At the time of this project, StoreyG2 was a tiny art organisation. It had been developed from Storey Gallery.

I was one of a group of Lancaster artists which started Storey Gallery in 1991, a contemporary gallery based in a grand but unused Victorian gallery in Lancaster. We ran a programme of over 100 exhibitions featuring many artists with international reputations including Andy Goldsworthy, Albert Irvin, Richard Wilson, and Linder Sterling. Over a 20 year period the structure of the organisation gradually developed from being an informal group of artists to a company limited by guarantee and registered charity. I became director.

In 2012 our funding was hit in an Arts Council England cull, and this was exacerbated by the financial collapse and insolvency of our landlord and partner, the Storey Creative Industries Centre.

At that point we could have folded, as many other small arts organisations in the same situation up and down the country have done. However, in addition to running gallery exhibitions, we had been delivering a variety of projects in public places. I decided to try a shift of our focus to concentrate on that aspect. Two of our funders indicated potential support.

I had been aware of Freeman's Wood for many years, and knew that it was thought of and used by local people as common land. In the late 70s and early 80s, I had lived on that side of the city. More recently I had moved a few miles out of town, and often commuted by bike, along a cycle track which went by this site. One day I found a group of men installing a high spiked metal fence along its edge by the cycle path. Their responses to my questions were not helpful. The public outcry soon followed, with reports in the local press.

I was thinking about potential art projects for our revised organisation, and realised this could be it. I had been interested in landownership, and had read

Kevin Cahill's book, "Who Owns Britain" a decade before. I began to formulate a plan and proposed it to our trustees, who rapidly gave their approval and support.

I considered artists who might be interested, and who had a suitable track record.

I approached Layla Curtis, Goldin+Senneby, and Sans Facon, all artists with international reputations who we had some contact with previously. All responded and were keen to be involved.

I made funding applications to Arts Council England, Lancaster City Council, and Lancashire County Council, and succeeded in obtaining their financial support.

We then changed the operating name of the organisation to **StoreyG2**, to reflect this change in activity.

Landed (Freeman's Wood)

This funding application process had taken about 9 months. The artists were all still keen, but as successful practitioners they were in demand, and were all working on other projects. They would not be able to start for a while.

During the application period I had been conducting research about landownership, and I continued to gather information. I learnt about Henry George and the Land Value Tax campaign. I discovered that Scotland was considering a land reform programme. I found numerous newspaper reports about the subject. During development of the project, further books on the topic were published including: Hedge Britannia: A Curious History of a British Obsession by Hugh Barker; The Land Grabbers: The New Fight Over Who owns The Earth by Fred Pearce; and Owing the Earth: The Transforming History of Land Ownership by Andro Linklater. It was clear that although landownership had become a hidden topic, there was widespread interest in it.

I also searched out information about the history of this particular plot of land, and was given support and guidance by a recently retired member of the history department at Lancaster University, Michael Winstanley.

I appointed two Lancaster-based artists, Helen Hicks and Rachel-Ann Powers, as 'engagement artists' to assist with the project, particularly in contacting and interviewing local people about their memories of this plot of land known as Freeman's Wood. We contacted the people who had made and supported the applications for designated footpaths and town green, and followed up a variety of other contacts, including three academics at the Law School at Lancaster University. We talked to local people who have used this land – the dog walkers, footballers, cyclists, den-builders, nature watchers, etc. - and collected their memories of Freeman's Wood, and their wishes for its future. We recorded interviews with over 30 individuals.

The fence obviously deterred access to Freeman's Wood, so the use of this land by members of the public diminished initially. But the fence is not continuous, including a section beside the cycle path of a few hundred metres where there is no fencing. Also, gaps were created at various points, so the fence was permeable and it was still fairly easy for people to access the land. During the development of this project, it became well used by local people once more, and there were well-trodden footpaths, and clear cycle paths. Lancashire County Council gave approval in principle to the designation of the three requested footpaths across it.

Commissioned artists and the resulting artworks

StoreyG2 commissioned three sets of artists to lead an investigation of the Freeman's Wood site, to research and explore land-ownership and its social effects, and to produce new art works, which would aim to raise awareness of, and stimulate thought about, these issues.

The artists Layla Curtis, Goldin+Senneby, and Sans Facon, who each have an international profile, were selected because they produce high quality work, and their practice and approaches are appropriate for the topic.

I wanted the project to reach a large audience, so I asked the artists to produce artworks in forms suitable for distribution on the internet, rather than objects for display in a gallery.

As each artist became available, I sent them all the research information I had collected, as background to the project, and a curatorial context for the kind of artwork I hoped they would produce.

Layla Curtis was the first to begin. She is a British artist who makes artworks about maps and mapping. Extensive travel has informed her work,

which explores boundaries, both physical and metaphorical. She has undertaken projects in the Antarctic and the Borneo jungle. Her early cartographic work, developed during a residency in Japan, is in the Tate collection. Layla's investigations into our sense of place utilise digital technologies and extreme sports.

Layla Curtis is based in London, but visited Freeman's Wood several times. She found herself being drawn back to it, saying it would have been a wonderful place to play as a child. We talked a lot about the fence and its symbolic significance, and its effect on the experience of being in this place. It's obvious, but a fence asserts ownership, it creates an inside and an outside, although otherwise the land on both sides looks the same. The fence is an apparently randomly located linear barrier amongst the trees.

Layla Curtis decided to produce an app for i-Phone, which would highlight the role of the fence. She engaged another artist, Ron Herrema, to assist her with its technical development. First, they GPS mapped the fence.

Following our preparatory work, the artist then recorded conversations with local people about their personal memories of this site and their speculations on its future. She also included two academics from the Law School at Lancaster University. In these interviews, the members of the local community gave their responses to the landowner's recent erection of the metal fence, along with accounts of how this, and the accompanying 'Keep Out, No Trespassing' signs, have affected the way the space is now used and accessed.

The resulting audio tracks are compilations of these conversations. Memories and accounts of how this land been used as a recreational space over recent decades are intertwined with discussions of wider issues of land ownership, trespass, territory, common land, and activism.

The conversations were conducted on site, and the recorded sound tracks are GPS mapped, so users of the app can listen to the recordings while walking in the place where they were recorded and to which they refer, and can follow their own movements on a map.

Conversations were recorded both outside and inside the area enclosed by the fence. The conversations on three of the thirteen audio tracks were recorded outside the boundary and are available to listeners anywhere in the world. However, to access those tracks which were recorded inside the boundary fence, the listener must cross into Freeman's Wood itself.

The app is entitled 'TRESPASS'. It tells the story of Freeman's Wood from the perspective of people who have used it. This app forms a lasting document of the local community's long relationship with this piece of land. Even if the land is developed in the future, and is changed beyond all current recognition, this app will continue to map these stories onto it indefinitely.

Apple were initially reluctant to approve the app. They suggested that we were encouraging criminal activity, but we pointed out that trespass is not criminal in the UK. They then said that we were inciting reckless behavior in encouraging people to go onto private land, but we told them that the County Council had given approval in principle for three designated public footpaths across the site. After further negotiation and explanation, we were pleased that Apple approved the app for distribution via their store.

Although the Trespass app is currently only for i-Phone, we hope to also produce an Android version.

Goldin+Senneby are a pair of artists based in Stockholm. Their work addresses bureaucratic and financial systems. Their projects create a complex structure in which multiple voices of actors and agents are presented, but the artists are absent, reflecting the public absence of the wielders, manipulators, and systems of social and economic power. I felt there was an appropriate similarity in their mode of operation to that of absentee landlords.

I first came across them through a small book documenting part of their ongoing project 'Headless'. They had commissioned a novelist to go to the Bahamas to investigate an offshore company called Headless, and to write about it. They commissioned the writer by email, without ever meeting. I'm not sure if this company exists. In their work it is not always clear what is real and what is not.

Initially I did not know their first names, emails were signed simply and mysteriously, G+S. I was surprised, but pleased, when they proposed a visit.

On their visit to the site we discussed the "For Sale" signs on a plot of adjoining land, between Freeman's Wood and the river Lune. I had enquired about these plots earlier, and discovered that the going rate for farmland in the area was about £8-10,000 per acre. So unfortunately they were well beyond our budget.

Undeterred, G+S decided that buying a plot of land was to be a core component of their project. They said “We need to become complicit in what we are investigating.”

G+S investigated websites such as “PerfectPlot” and “EnglishLandAgency”. My preference was for a plot of land near Lancaster, but the ones we found were too expensive, so we gradually spread the search more widely.

We soon found that there are numerous tiny plots of land for sale, where one large plot has been divided up into many small ones. It is not clear what these could be used for, as they are so small and fairly inaccessible. It appears to be a way of making more money for the seller. For example, I became interested in a set of small plots in West Yorkshire. It’s not close, but at least it is in our region, and it had plots within our budget. I found that it was a piece of fairly remote moorland, which was divided up into tiny rectangular plots for sale. A very strange site to sell off in such small plots.

Eventually, for pragmatic reasons of their own, they decided on a plot in Kent, whose previous owner was living (or at least registered) in Bahrain, and made a downpayment.

Goldin+Senneby have used this plot of land as a stage from which to present ideas about landownership. Their piece, entitled “A3 - A PLOT”, presents an estate agent’s ‘For Sale’ details for this small plot of land in Kent, in the south of England. These sale particulars feature a photograph of the plot, and directions to it from London, plus a conversation between two people on the site. This conversation is a prologue for a play script, to which there is an on-line link as a PDF document. G+S commissioned this script from playwright, Pamela Carter. The script, about the imagined history of the plot of land, explores various aspects of landownership and its history in England. This play script forms the apparent estate agent’s sale description of the plot of land.

Sans Façon is a collaborative art practice between French architect Charles Blanc and British artist Tristan Surtees. They are based in the UK, and undertake a wide variety of projects internationally, both short and long term, working on a large number simultaneously. Their work predominantly explores the complex relationship between people and place. They state that “We like to see the role of the artist and art as a catalyst in a process of raising questions and inviting one to look and think differently about a place,

hoping to create an opportunity rather than an inanimate object.” I had met them several years ago, and engaged them to give a talk about their work, as one in a series of talks which we organised about the variety of roles which artists currently take on.

Sans Facon have been working on a longterm project entitled WATERSHED+, a public art program in the city of Calgary, in Canada. It is hosted by the Utilities and Environment Protections department, similar perhaps to a utilities company in the UK. The guiding motive is to embed artists and their creative process within the department’s core activities, in order to build an emotional connection between local people and the Calgary watershed. A rather innovative and remarkable project.

Tristan first visited Freeman’s Wood alone, and later Charles and Tristan visited together. They were smartly dressed, and I noticed that they were both wearing city shoes, so were slithering around a bit on the muddy paths. A passing dog-walker asked if they were estate agents, much to their dismay, but also amusement.

A few weeks later they proposed to create a board game about landownership. Over the next few months their ideas gradually evolved and they sent a series of developmental stages.

“FREEMAN’S WOOD – THE GAME” involves verbal negotiation between the players. It is intended to encourage the players to consider the points of view of the various stakeholders with an interest in a plot of land. Individual players take on the role of a designated stakeholder, such as 'Developer', 'City Council', or 'Community Activist', and they have to inhabit the point of view and interests of this stakeholder, even if they do not personally share those views. ‘Event’ and ‘Action’ cards are presented which feature a wide variety of potential events and actions which might occur, from discovery of archaeological remains, to changes in the composition of the local council. Players are required to react to these events, and to discuss their potential effects. Each player role-plays their allocated stakeholder and tries to influence other players, and gain their support for their favored response. A player may seek influence through discussion, by bartering influence chips, and by buying votes. It is a game of strategy, influence, and compromise.

This game for 3-8 players is available for download from the StoreyG2 website. The board, all the cards, and full instructions can be printed out on A4 sheets with a standard domestic colour printer. The board is easily assembled and the cards cut out.

The game is still in a testing or Beta phase, and the artists are keen to receive feedback from players. We know it will take a few iterations before it works satisfactorily. I have played it several times, and found that all players have had difficulty in understanding some of the rules, and some of the action cards. However, it is always successful and effective in achieving its primary aim - to get people thinking and talking about landownership and related issues. Players are particularly amused by having to speak from political positions different to their own.

Supported Artist

I offered some financial support for any locally based artist who was interested in contributing to the project. Catriona Stamp responded, and produced a video - 'Speculation'.

Further Development

The Media Innovation Studio in the School of Journalism and Media at University of Central Lancashire were currently developing a civic drone centre. Academic staff there enabled us to obtain aerial photography of Freeman's Wood. Video clips are on line, and incorporated in a short film, to provide an understanding of the site, particularly for people in another part of the world who have not visited, and might never do so.

Conclusion

The aim of StoreyG2 was to stimulate thought. Our aim for this project, and the artworks produced, was to raise awareness and discussion of land-ownership and its effect on people's lives, both locally and around the world. We believe that a key role of art is to imagine how things could be different, and to communicate with a wide audience. The art works produced in this project provide an example of how artists can contribute to the understanding and dissemination of ideas around complex social and political issues, and that art may be able to shift perceptions and discourses.