

Bright Sparks Research and Development Award – Round 2.

Creative Proposal

Background

Sustainable Indulgence I & II

In 2003 I was approached by Christine Gist (Whitstable Biennale) and Victoria Pommery (Turner Centre, Margate) to work on a proposal for a new commission that would form part of the Whitstable Biennale, 2004. The brief involved considering a rural cliff-top site at Reculver on the East Kent coast. The rationale involved extending the bounds of the Whitstable biennale beyond that town, and beyond the traditional gallery based venues.

Following a site visit in December 2003 I began to draw up ideas for a solar powered ice cream stall which would travel the length of the East Kent coast, gifting ice cream to passers by. Under one small roof I would produce, store and distribute ice cream produced from local, organic ingredients. All of this would be powered by photovoltaic technology incorporated into the design of the stall.

To the public this strange alchemy (of sun to make ice) proved to be a fascinating and popular paradox. Yet beyond this gimmick there was another quite unexpected discovery: The more sun there was, the greater the demand for ice cream, and this could be matched by an increased production output. The use of photovoltaic technology poetically suggested that the economic forces of supply and demand could be physically connected to the land - the physical climate physically connected to the economic climate.

In the lead-up to the project outcome I worked with a small team of experts from Renewable Devices (RD), a small specialist technology firm based at the Scottish Agricultural College just outside Edinburgh. Their input, advice and skill enabled a risky and somewhat ‘wacky’ idea to become a reality. Later, in 2005 following an invitation to participate in an exhibition in Toyota City, Japan as part of Aichi Expo, I was able to work with RD again to modify the design to take account of a number of new factors.

This time the structure was made from lightweight materials that telescopically expanded from a shipping crate which itself became the body of the structure. This approach simultaneously reduced the carbon footprint and acknowledged the work's journey to the location by bearing its customs and shipping information to visitors like proud badges – (the work hadn't just appeared out of the ether like all of the other exhibits). The work acknowledged to itself and its audience that it existed at a price to the environment, even if that price had been reduced to a minimum.

This working relationship with RD, which has been developed and tested over many months, has been very productive and educational on both sides. However, at the same time it has always been limited by the demands of deadlines and expected outcomes. One of the underlying factors supporting this application is that of creating further opportunities for dialogue, experimentation, speculation, innovation and discovery.

Environmental issues, particularly those linked to climate change, are rapidly climbing the political agenda on a domestic and Global level. Although public awareness of the problems has never been greater, attractive and clear solutions are perhaps less tangible. Art has a key role to play in relation to sustainability and not just in terms of communicating and raising awareness.

Many of the problems we are faced with today have come about through an increasing sense of detachment from what is an increasingly complex World in terms of production methods and scale. Increasingly there is a sense of separation from the reality of life's key building blocks such as where our food or energy comes

from.

Contemporary artists, liberated from allegiances to specialist methods and materials are perfectly placed to bridge the gaps between experts and subject specialisms. Artistic response should no longer be seen as a 'worthy' obligation, but as an interesting creative opportunity.

Broad aims of this research would be to respond to the following research questions:

What new art/life 'solutions' can cross-disciplinary dialogue and teamwork create within the environmental sustainability agenda?

How can a multi disciplinary team utilise renewable technologies in urban and rural situations to create art-work which is sensitive and responsive to site and the social?

Are there specific art objects or scenarios reliant on renewable technology that might have large-scale production value? (multiples and mass production?)

Within the production of works of art that address the issues of environmental sustainability, can the means ever justify the ends on a practical and symbolic level?

Aims and Objectives

Through dialogue with Renewable Devices and other project partners, to develop imaginative and ambitious ideas for sculptural objects and situations which explore and expand the possibilities for sustainable living and art. These might range from responses that attempt to 'problem solve' to those which ask questions or illuminate the key problems.

To develop concepts in relation to landscape settings where sculptures are able to respond to the physical conditions of geography and climate: To exploit the potential feedback paradoxes of supply and demand ie, wind powered kettle, geo-thermal or water powered heating. To push back the boundaries of what is understood to be sustainable art, or 'eco art' by integrating new and developing technologies to create new hybrids of functional devices.

A specific intention is to focus on integrating domestic appliances or activities within rural public space, thereby confounding the expectations of the viewer. In this situation it is hoped that the social aspect and subject matter can be opened up through discussion around the functioning work. Eventually, by situating the work within the landscape context I would also be attempting to address some of the questions relating to energy use and the separation between cause and effect, use and waste, landscape and landfill. To close these loops within a working process, with the viewer located in the middle is a key aim of the project.

To develop all of the above aims specifically in relation to the social, and to speculate on the potential of such devices in different environments, particularly the Developing World. – To consider feasibility of outcomes on a larger production scale.

Research Outcomes

Online publication including description of working process and demonstration of models/drawings.

Artists Talk at Glasgow School of Art hosted by the Centre for Art and Social Context.

Exhibition and display of outcomes at Gunpowder Park. (+Archive input)

Seminar at Gunpowder Park.

Methodology

The methodology for this project is reflected in the schedule laid out below. The methodology applied in each of those phases will be described in greater detail here:

1. To begin the collaboration process each of the project partners will give a short presentation introducing their practice, focussing wherever possible on processes and outcomes involving concerns relevant to the project aims and objectives – namely collaboration, public space, renewable technologies and so on. Initial discussions and brainstorming would then follow with the focus being on ambitious and imaginative possibilities based on shared interests and ideals. These ideas would be collected in drawn and textual form.
2. These initial ideas would be edited through round table discussion, still using creative and qualitative judgements as guide, rather than practical or cost concerns. These would be further developed in drawn form and by using basic models. Towards the end of this phase a selection of the most promising concepts would be further developed taking into account the time and cost constraints inherent within the project. Adding detail and expert practical knowledge at this stage would be key. Meeting at Gunpowder Park Field Station would allow additional guidance and feedback.
3. The selected concepts would then undergo a process of creative and technical development towards plans for functional prototypes using CAD. At this stage it is envisioned that radical changes in design might occur, and that essentially separate ideas might combine to make new hybrids. At this stage the context for the work would be one of the main considerations and sites for testing on different time scales would be investigated dependent on the specific concept. These issues would be considered in consultation with Gunpowder Park.
4. Functional prototypes would be fabricated wherever possible, and/or load testing of systems. Each of these processes would allow the team to assess the potential performance of the final outcome in each case. This would help decide which of the outcomes at this stage might be developed further beyond this seedbed stage of the project, and to what extent.
5. The most successful ideas and scenarios from phase 4 would be developed and presented in various forms including exhibition at Gunpowder Park, and dissemination on the World Wide Web. This would encourage wider dissemination of ideas with a view to gauging feedback and creating further professional links enabling the realisation of some of these ideas in context.
6. Reflection. Feedback from phase 5 would be analysed in relation to the aims and objectives set out in the brief. This would happen initially within the team, and secondly in consultation with the public through talks and seminars at Gunpowder Park and Glasgow School of Art.

Feedback and reflection during Phase 6 would enable the team to assess the future direction of the project and to develop a strategy to take forward these ideas onto the next level of realisation.

Schedule

1/8/07 – 1/7/08

Phase 1 – Initial presentations and brainstorming.

Phase 2 – Development of plans

Phase 3 – Detailed development using CAD

Phase 4 – Load testing of systems and construction of models

Phase 5 – Publication and presentation of concepts

Phase 6 – Reflection & presentation of findings.

*Each Phase lasting approximately two months.