

The Lindisfarne Shelter:

The eventful life and death of an outstanding work of anonymous, autonomous public art.

Shelter's initial manifestation was at Sandham on the remote northern shore of Lindisfarne, a Northumberland tidal island, in the foot-and-mouth summer of 2001 with coastal clean-up operations suspended by the authorities. Enter artist Sally Madge* who, in her weekend leisure persona merely messing around on the beach, fashioned an excess of driftwood, plastic, rope and rubbish into an impressive little shack delighting passersby and reinstating the relatively pristine aspect of the vista. Sadly, the National Nature Reserve manager ordered its demolition, citing complaints of an 'eyesore' – ironic, since wardens admitted that the public's responses were infinitely more complimentary than those in the official wildlife hide round the corner. Doubtless concerned about tacitly legitimising a precedent, that such transparent dishonesty was deemed expedient speaks volumes about official morality, discourses of conservation, and bureaucratic anxieties about control and participation.

1. Thereafter begun in autumn 2002 – similarly whimsically, with no planning or permission – *Shelter* proper was a small drystone hut on the rocks even further from the village and tourist zones. Without legal impediment (despite murmurings about health and safety), it withstood eight years of batterings from winter storms, spring tides, malevolent godbotherers, and exuberant celebrants of all ages before being systematically destroyed by person or persons unknown last October. Having become increasingly elaborate and substantial, with roof, window and wooden benches plus all manner of weird and wonderful internal décor, it remained discreetly merged into the surroundings. Great renown, respect, love and affection accrued from near, far and worldwide, by word-of-mouth but also on the internet – demonstrated concretely by *“the care, attention and appreciation lavished upon it by locals and visitors, with various additions, modifications and ornamentations ... [and] several comments books filled with notes, poems and sketches. A sense of community, creativity and mutuality seems to have developed completely outside of the usual artificial frameworks of ownership, egos and institutions”* (in 2007 reply from hutstory.co.uk to those emailing their own photographs).

2. Built purely for personal pleasure, without pretensions to status or seriousness, the artist retrospectively designated the shelter a “public artwork, site specific installation, museum”, a:

“space for reverie, play, pilgrimage, parties, sleeping and birdwatching. Over time the interior filled with a bricolage of flotsam, found objects, handmade artefacts and personal mementos ... Originally an anonymous, playful, unofficial artwork, the hut gradually became a collaborative venture with all those taking part assuming an integral role in its development. The boundaries between artist/maker and visitor/spectator became not only blurred but interchangeable. I

regularly tidied, edited and rearranged the contents – and so did others, often not to my liking. The shelter became a locus for ongoing symbolic engagement between strangers (sometimes humorous, frequently poignant, occasionally unpleasant), and I found myself disoriented as well as intrigued by the fact that ownership and provenance had become such a moveable feast ... [marked by] informal, spontaneous and unmediated exchanges of ideas and practices” (Sally Madge, ‘Serious Play’, *Garageland* magazine, No. 11, 2011, p.67).

Clearly, while some might balk at recuperation into Fine Art language of their contributions, rather more was involved here than idle, inconsequential, seaside playtime.

Art In Ruins

Plausible references for *Shelter*'s high cultural credentials include landscape art, characteristically flattering grandiose ownership and mastery of geography, or reinforcing pastoral nostalgia or regional or national identity; and modern environmental art's ecological sensibilities privileging formal purity while acknowledging human agency. The sublime and picturesque, likewise, readily assimilate into heritage and tourist consumerism; in this case evoking hermit dwellings and caves as well as the 'Holy Island' Christian history portfolio – whereas, despite episodic evangelical colonisations, the hut remained resolutely secular. Comparable aesthetic domination appears in state-sanctioned Public Art, suffered resignedly by citizens after imperial imposition by national or local government (see 'our' *Angel of the North*, rejected by half of Europe before being dumped in Gateshead). But again, hierarchical organisation is refused here – as are the patronising pitfalls of 'community art' and contemporary PC incarnations like 'socially-engaged practice' or 'relational' art, where professional moralisers purge creative deficits from ignorant masses.

Conversely, avant garde aspirations merge artistic activity with everyday life – as opposed to artificial segregation when supplicants consume spectacles of marketised genius, recapitulating capitalism's constitutive alienations. Whereas from Dada, surrealism, situationism and Fluxus onwards, radical artists honour sensuality's subversive potential, emphasising mundane human origins in children's play, unconscious and bodily experience, and collective resistance to oppression. Sally Madge's practice certainly qualifies as normal routine, evidenced in many small works following engagement with Lindisfarne. Some have been exhibited – multiples *Holy Shit* (necklaces of baked rabbit shit) and *Holy Smoke* (finger pots made of clay from the cliffs, fired on the beach); short animation *Flotsam Fandango* (featuring wood and bone puppets) – and countless others furnished the hut: drawings and paintings on pebbles and driftwood, sculptures of organic detritus like feathers and burrs, coloured plastic melted and welded together, fishing line and broken lobsterpots, abandoned toys and sundry interestingly deployable jetsam. A lowbrow archaeology of the island, natural and effluent, sacred and

profane, thus coalesced in magical juxtaposition – which, crucially, was unconditionally available for anyone to shape.

And authorial integrity did comprehensively erode, since so many partook of equal opportunities to reconfigure the topography. Furthermore, twentieth century conceits posit the artist imagining a ‘concept’ and pronouncing it ‘art’ – but here there was no originary revelation, just habitual creation. Only subsequent intrusion into public discourse prompts questions of artistic privilege; otherwise, perhaps, we have a glorified sandcastle. Even then, the history of ordinary folk’s workaday passage and holiday enjoyment associated with beaches cross-fertilises with traditions of workers’ self-build housing, rural craftiness, and the flouting of restrictions on the use of space. So action against enclosures of the commons throughout the centuries, not to mention rambblers’ campaigns for access and contemporary guerilla and graffiti art, also come to mind. The performative elements of *Shelter* therefore seem key, along with its communal ethos and the kinds and sources of value felt and ascribed. Indeed, Sally Madge’s intention now is to present visual archives of the project, so that a fullest possible account of this constellation of passionate effort properly enters posterity – and in a final humble gesture, overcoming sadness at its gratuitous destruction, she rescued what remained of the contents, rendered the site safe, and left the foundations standing for further open-ended intervention.

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