

River life: a meandering intervention

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1. INTRODUCTION & CONEXT

“Water in one form or another circulates around us, all the time and everywhere.”_ [E. C. Pielou, Fresh Water (1998)]

Living things depend on water
but water does not depend on living things.
It has a life of its own

Two years ago I delivered a paper about art, ecology and global warming - “*O brave new world: a change in the weather*”_. Most people in 1999 considered climate change a rather strange topic for public art – an eccentric English preoccupation with the weather, perhaps? However, from the Deluge and Tempest of that paper, the PAO’s ‘Waterfronts of Art’ has brought me in touch with Barcelona’s Rio Besos whose flood rhythms and riparian community song carried me to the Rio Duoro where a disaster of global warming and global economy demonstrated the vulnerability of the people of Porto.

This paper is about a project in the English county town of Shrewsbury and Briton’s longest river, the Severn. . It develops my interpretation of ‘Waterfronts of Art’, responds to current global problems and focuses on future opportunities – “a dialogue for the beginning of time”.

2. SHREWSBURY IN THE LOOP: THE SITUATION

*Under the floorboards,
You could hear the fish singing.
A stream of meaning.*

In May 2001 Shrewsbury’s Museum and Gallery Director, Adrian Plant, invited me to contribute to an exhibition about the River Severn called “River Life II”. Five months after the River’s dramatic floods, my introduction to the project was the opening lecture of “River Life I” by a local historian to the town’s Traders Association. The gathering welcomed me as “the flood defence expert from Manchester”! I explained that I am just an ecological artist, but they



asked me to help anyway. I said I would see if my art was appropriate to their needs and they should have no expectations of what might be achieved. Driven by their fears and hopes, they sent me a report from the Environment Agency - “.... Flood Defence Strategy for the River Severn”.



The report compared three approaches to solving the problem. The chosen ‘hard defence’ scheme which should reduce the chance of flooding from 1 in 50 years to 1 in 100 years may have been driven by a £6,000,000 grant and an immediate political solution. Interestingly, much of the justification for Shrewsbury’s flood alleviation scheme came from the report’s aesthetic assertions “limiting negative visual impact” to maintain the “landscape value” and form “an attractive backdrop” for “important views”. The accepted scheme now has plans to add art to “minimise the visual and physical presence of the hard defences”.

The group I met have since lodged their protest against this scheme and I am now working with the Shrewsbury Museum Gallery on an artwork to network with other galleries and their communities along the course of the river. This gallery relationship is important in the process of questioning our cultural construct of a ‘nature’ aesthetic.

Starting in Shrewsbury, in July 2002, the initial work will include a poem to trace time from the first droplet of water that melted from the glacier that formed the river, to the droplet that brakes the surface tension of disbelief to cause the next flood. The installation will use ‘live’ webcam images to replace the views of river paintings in the museum’s collection and possibly witness a flood. A clepsydra (“water thief”) or ancient Greek water clock will measure the duration of our species and a river cruise will perform the buoyancy of re-insurance.

As the realities of Global Warming are comprehended, model-based solutions and the credibility of experts are being severely challenged - not least those of artistic and design practices. Here we consider the development of an ecological dialogue as a cultural construct for survival and the creative potential of Climate Change - “a new culture in which problems give way to capabilities”_ (Eduardo Paolozzi 1985).

The remainder of this paper is based on the elements common to all living organisms – Pattern, Structure and Process_ (Capra 1996). Providing it is understood that no one element takes precedence and that they are completely inter-related it presents a useful concept for understanding the dynamics of life.

STRUCTURE

PATTERN

PROCESS

They also correspond with the inter-related areas of concern published in February 2001 by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC): Impacts, Vulnerability and Adaptation.

STRUCTURE

PATTERN

PROCESS

IMPACTS

VULNERABILITY

ADAPTATION

They form the basis of the IPCC's assessment "concerning the sensitivity, adaptive capacity, and vulnerability of natural and human systems to climate change, and the potential consequences of climate change."_ For the purposes of this paper, I will focus on the PATTERN and PROCESS.

3. "THINKING IS FORM" PATTERNS, SYSTEMS, KNOWLEDGE & DRAWING

The proponents of 'Deep Ecology' say that we need to be able to ask "deeper questions" _ and that our survival is based on the questions we formulate and how we answer them. In the simplest of terms, survival is based on the ability to recognise and respond to particular patterns. And it can at times be a simple matter of recognising the difference between a complex and complicated situation.

Noah said to God, "*God, what's an Ark?*" And God said to Noah "*How long can you tread water?*"

Given that the recent flooding of the River Severn is an expression of climate change, I have tried to empathise with the people of Shrewsbury by posing some fundamental questions:



A Systematic Approach

IDENTIFY PROBLEM

The accelerating effects of climate change are uncertain and I don't know how to cope

PURPOSES (WHY)
To survive & maintain Q of L
Me, those I love, others

CUSTOMER (WHO)
Me, those I love, others

CLARIFY AIMS

How am I and those I love able to survive the accelerating effects of climate change?

END PRODUCT (OUTCOMES)
Survival / sustainability
well-being / quality of life

SUCCESS/CRITERIA/STANDARDS/KSFS (MEASURES)
My art is appropriate & capable of adapting to the needs of surviving the accelerating effects of climate change

INFORMATION

The effects of climate change are accelerating & we don't know how to cope

KNOWN

UNKNOWN (& NEEDED)
How to adapt (attitude),
The risks

WHAT HAS TO BE DONE

WHTBD BY ME

Learn Adaptable skills
Learn to read the signs

WHTBD SOMEONE ELSE

Invest in research
Reduce global warming
Promote biodiversity

WHTBD BY ME TO GET IT

Shift attitudes (culture)
Develop appropriate technologies

BY ME TO GET THEIR COOPERATION

Demonstrate economic viability

PLAN TO DO IT

ACTION

REVIEW

PLAN TO DO IT

ACTION

REVIEW

PLAN TO DO IT

ACTION

REVIEW

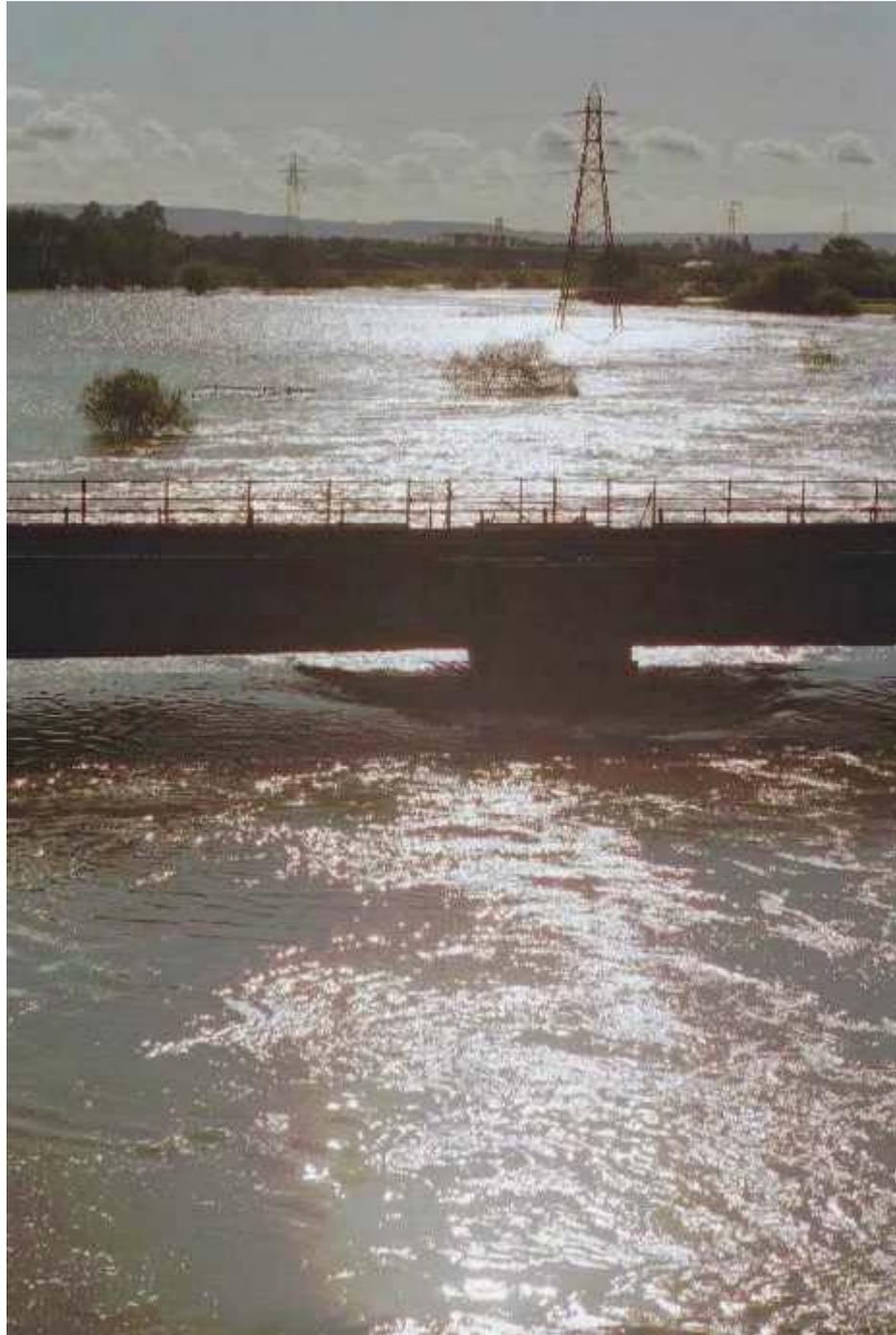
- How will I and those I love survive the accelerating effects of climate change?
- Is my art relevant for this purpose?
- What do I need to do to increase our chances of survival?
- What do I need to know to survive?
- Where do I get this information?
- How do we learn from this information?
- How do we apply this understanding to increase our ability to adapt to climate change?
- Will I and those I love survive the accelerating effects of climate change?

I realised that my enquiries were describing feedback loops and that I was constructing a systematic approach which could be applied to the situation.

I was, however, concerned that this process may become formulaic or constricting. But this was not a deterministic model, it was simply an approach that gave form to the process. By making the problems of others tangible, it let me take control of my situation and it demonstrated our dependence on each other. The activity of drawing the diagram helped too. It meant that I could 'capture' the complexity of the problem in an image - change it, erase it, rearrange it, visualize it, understand it, invent with it, and communicate this to others.

Science and research teach us the rationale of systematised methodologies and ecology as a science was invented to study "... organisms in relation to one another and to their surroundings..."_. Here, in the need to interact with others, art and science co-join in the creative process.

If "thinking is form", then drawing may be found in the dialogue between organisms - or the relationships between people. If ecology is the study of relationships between people, then the dialogue generated by these relationships may be a form of drawing and drawing may be a method of studying ecology. Could the creative activity of drawing/studying



ecology be an art?

So, we may 'draw' our own future - not predetermined mapping but improvised, inventive drawing - a flexible response to change. Drawing the relationships from which and with which we may creatively intervene.

I then realised that I had touched

on a 'deeper' understanding of my own research ("Creative interventions: drawing in the art of ecology") and that despite my geographic separation from the people of Shrewsbury, we are inextricably linked by the deepest concerns to face our species since its creation.

So, I had drawn a 'creative intervention' to understand the 'art of ecology'! A drawing with words, a drawing as a metaphor - an



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experiential_ shift in meaning - from drawings of water to drawing with water, and the clepsydra drawing in time.

For me, many things fell into place: 'pattern recognition' - survival on the savannahs - Zen 'seeing' - Leonardo's understanding of ecology - 'phenomenological drawing' - 'drawing in the art of ecology' - the concepts of 'ecopoiesis'_ and 'ecopraxis'_ - witnessing the evolution of our kind - species nova_.

Sometimes reaching an 'insight' is like watching an accident taking place in front of you - everything goes into slow motion but the impact is inevitable - the arrow hits home even if the philosophy takes a while to catch-up. An intuitive improvisation: its like realising a great joy or a terrible secret - Globalisation? Debt? The profit of fear - insurance? It's important to find expression for such understandings, unlike Charles Darwin (a son of Shrewsbury) who became subsumed by neurotic fear of releasing his blasphemous evolutionary secrets. Adrian Plant, the Museum's Director, is contributing this area of research to the project.

Meanwhile ... regardless of our monoculture, the sea continually re-draws the land and rivers re-draw their needs, adapting to each situation as it occurs - this is drawing as making / invention and improvisation.

These are the drawings of our time. This is a dialogue for the beginning of time.

O n the ground the river draws the story from the end of the last ice age to now. And that story contains the understanding of our future - if we are able to see it, speak with it, join it.



But to think of a river as a mere linear form is a gross misunderstanding of its pattern of being, for a river is just one form of expression in the water cycle. The pattern of water is a dynamic energy that conforms to no cultural dictates, "... the abominable and awful evils against which no human resource avails ..." (Leonardo da Vinci). Each river is a multi-dimensional self-organising ecological system with its own rhythms, relationships and responses, operating "far from equilibrium".

In cultural terms the River Severn is, therefore, a subversive form, knowing no political boundaries, no national loyalty. In drawing itself, its meander is a constant intervention maintained by its own structure. We use the river, abuse the river and think that we control the river, but in this instance the river generates it's own 'eco-morphology'. These understandings provide the basis for the River Severn's catchment community to discover their river - a dialogue for the beginning of time.

4. AN ECO- CULTURAL PROCESS

So, if we are to live with the river, we need to develop those skills of 'pattern recognition' and here the project will question our ability to observe. Preoccupied with information and driven by media fear our society removes itself from reality with CCTV. Paralysed by impending disaster, tele-visual surveillance actually restricts the scope of our vision to prescribed views and responses.

In Shrewsbury, however, the threat of potential crime is substituted by the threat of flooding, a situation that the local press turned into a hate campaign against the river. So, to parody the situation, webcam images will replace views from the Museum's collection of paintings, transforming mythical heritage 'backdrops' into views of potential disaster. The images will also appear on the Museum's web site, providing a 24 hours a day service for local audiences to participate in their own aesthetic surveillance system.

Returning to the media, it is worth noting the role of the local radio station that provided local residents with vital information and comfort. In contrast with the newspaper disaster headlines, the National scale of TV coverage and the anonymous telephone information services, Radio Shropshire involved people by helping them to experience and cope with their trauma. The interactive quality of radio let people participate in their own narrative, creating stories in a dialogue of their own making. It is precisely this quality that we wish to develop and sustain.

However, of the twenty-two Agency led Government research and development projects linked to last year's floods, virtually all the effort is being put into more models of prediction, warning systems, flood disaster reaction programmes and defences focused on river channels. Little new research has been commissioned regarding health or the effects of flooding on people's lives, despite a statement in the Environment Agency's recent Climate Change Supplement_ recognising "... the psychological consequences as people see familiar places, seasons, wildlife, and flora exposed to climate change and loss that would normally take much longer periods_" and from the Agency's Lessons Learned_, "Many communities have been traumatised by their experience fearing the return of flooding each time it rains".

When 'normal' is no more, what is culture – a dialogue for the beginning of time?



Living things depend on water but water does not depend on living things. It has a life of its own

So, rather than perpetuate a deterministic, solution driven culture, the project will encourage us to learn from the river itself – giving time to meander, learning to adapt, learning to evolve, learning to make new habitats – building flexible forms of dwelling and “... making the space for life to move on”

Let us, then, consider this artwork, not as commodity, nor mere interpretation, but as invention, or as creative intervention - a catalyst to initiate change in response to change - a collaborative process of arts practices and disciplines to develop resilience, not resistance - the artwork as a river meander, as the development of community participation, as a dialogue . David Bohm, the renowned physicist contributed this insight ...

“ ‘Dialogue’ comes from the Greek dialogos: logos means ‘the word, or ‘the meaning of the word’ and dia means through (not two - a dialogue can be among any number of people ...). The image this suggests is of a stream of meaning flowing among us and through us and between us - a flow of meaning in the whole group, out of which will emerge some new understanding, something creative. When everybody is sensitive to all the nuances going around , and not merely to what is happening in one’s own mind, there forms a meaning which is shared ... It is this shared meaning that is the ‘glue’ or ‘cement’ that holds people and societies together.”

Building on a ‘community of need’ in one location, the project will flow to others, up stream and down stream to work with the whole river and its people as a dynamic inter-related water shed community.

And so this proposed artwork for Shrewsbury represents the start of a process, a creative catalyst to promote an eco-centric culture for people to live with their river.

We are setting-up a series of gallery initiated, creative interventions to flow into the river’s narrative. Stories joining the dialogue, each representing a feedback loop to diversify the story of the whole ‘eco-culture system’.

The process of dialogue like the river will become its own structure, and its own pattern

- a dialogue for the beginning of time ...

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