

FIELD STUDIES

2010

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CREATIVITY MAKES US TRAVEL FURTHER...

What do you seek at this door, Jo Roberts?

What do you seek at this door, traveller?

The word is you have good leaves for toothache.

Foresterhill: Comings and Goings

George Mackay Brown (1)

If we think of the artist-in-residence as the traveller, Jo Roberts travelled from her home in Kenilworth to the door of contemporary art and heritage centre Timespan in Helmsdale, Sutherland. Her 'comings and goings' took place over a series of visits between 2009 and 2010. In pragmatic terms (2) the distance, in one direction, travelled between these two points is 531.9 miles. In geological terms the journey over land shifts up through the Carboniferous rocks of Warwickshire, through the backbone of England, the Silurian rocks of the Southern Uplands of Scotland, finally reaching the Metamorphic rocks of Sutherland.

Metamorphic is a good description for a certain kind of alchemy that runs seamlessly through Jo and her practice as an artist, particularly captured in the specific form of momentum she brings with her. This traveller's leaves are action, discussion, responsiveness, reflection, shared understanding and subsequent articulation. These elements form the igneous material, containing the potential to collaborate with and alter the *existing rocks* in some way. In her practice, Jo is passionate about creativity and working with others to explore theirs. Does creativity suffer from 'toothache'? Yes, of course. All creative practice seeks out, indeed requires the *toothache* that niggles us and carries us ever onwards to our next ideas and resolutions.

An organization established in 1986, Timespan has been on a new stage of its journey, from 2005 bringing contemporary art alongside its heritage remit following a strategic review. Timespan invited Jo to their door to explore with board members, staff and volunteers new ways in which to advocate contemporary art within their organization, the immediate community of Helmsdale and the wider community of Sutherland.

Sutherland has the oldest rocks in Europe, and was the place where Scottish geologists Peach and Horne (3), found a new way to untangle their understanding of geological structures through looking and reconsidering what they were seeing. They discovered the Moine Thrust at Knochán Crag, a unique geological situation where the old rocks pushed up and over the newer rocks, due to forces along a fault.

From initial research, Jo used the metaphor of geology and a quest for a new understanding as the premise for *Field Studies*. The unique combination of contemporary art and heritage within Timespan could be viewed as such a thrust.

In Malcolm Gladwell's book *The Tipping Point*, 'If anyone wants to start an epidemic...he or she has to somehow find some person or some means to translate the message of the Innovators into something the rest of us can understand'. (4) In consideration of these terms, Jo could be viewed as an intuitive Translator in her advocacy of contemporary art. She describes her role as *Commentariographer*, a term last used in 1576. This means, 'someone who writes, mediates, ponders, portrays or records. One who comments on current events and produces an expository treatise.'

Gladwell states that the margin for changing people's perceptions is narrow, and that the *tipping point* in the message is often created not by altering the fundamental nature of the idea but by 'tinkering on the margin with the presentation of the idea'.(5) How could Timespan and its audience find alternative ways to consider the value and meanings of contemporary art? In *Field Studies*, a humble flat pack box measuring 30 x 15 x 3cms, became the tipping point. Jo's treatise in Sutherland was to find a way to take a sample of people and the place of Sutherland, by asking people to consider whom they are and put their thoughts in a box. Boxes were handed out during workshops, on school visits, through Timespan networks and as the occasion arose. The box aroused great curiosity, with a high number of people calling in to Timespan on hearing of the project by word of mouth. The epidemic of the boxes grew apace. The box called upon its owner to consider how they would work with it and what they would put in it. As Meg Telfer, a member of the Timespan Arts Committee said, 'Why did Jo hit on exactly the right thing with the box? I think it was because it could be a private activity for people as they could take it away. Possibly we reveal more than we mean to with the box. It starts off empty, but it becomes your box, you open it and shut it and another thing has gone in it.'

The box became a container for ideas. 100 were returned for the subsequent exhibition with the youngest participant 14 months and the oldest 99. No box was alike – each had its own story and was unmediated. Some were collections of objects, like a piece of glass that changes colour to black over time, or washed up rope from the fish farm in Loch Eriboll, picked up, cut to uniform size and arranged in bands of colour. Other boxes referenced memories and people, such as the box containing reminders of an older generation passed or the tiny little book, containing three scans of babies and bearing a drawing of a tree with the inscription of 'Roots that go deep'. One box contained a 'Map of the Minch', hand drawn by Sandy Cowie, a retired fisherman. The drawn line followed the contours of the coastline of Sutherland, the dots denoting the places he fished as a young man. This box echoed Jo's own recurrent obsession with the map, as you see here in this publication, as a way to follow a process or record a personal journey. Her maps echo Benjamin Peach's own hands-on approach to layering his geological maps with anecdotes written across them in pencil; immediate, excited recordings of aspects he had

noticed and intuitively understood about rocks whilst he out in the field.

What did you find at this door, Jo Roberts? A unique set of people committed to investing their time in all aspects of their organisation; an active and lively community spirit in Helmsdale; and in the great areas of Sutherland and Caithness people proud of where they live and invested in what happens there. In this exploration of contemporary art, Jo set off to further explore her creativity and to be inspired by that of others. Jo's final report summed up her shared discoveries perfectly. 'When we set off on this journey, it was ABC, when we finished it was XYZ.' This mirrors the fact that culture is always changing in response to changing conditions.

Is it unsettling that there is no one answer? Like George Mackay Brown's traveller, we all carry 'leaves' on our travels, those things that give us a set of known tools we can call upon. Yet, out of curiosity, we also seek the unexpected discoveries that can only be found as we go out into the fray. Traveller Martin Martin describes it well as: '...a Natural Impulse of Curiosity, [which] formed such an idea of it in my Mind, that I determined to satisfy my self with the first Occasion I had of going Further'. Creativity makes us travel further.

- (1) p164 *Selected Poems 1954-1992* George Mackay Brown, John Murray (Publishers), Albermarle, London 1991.
- (2) AA Route Finder.
- (3) Benjamin Neeve Peach (1842-1926), John Horne (1848-1928). Further reading *Ben Peach's Scotland*, Institute of Geological Sciences, Edinburgh, 1980.
- (4) p203 *The Tipping Point* Malcolm Gladwell, Little Brown, 2000.
- (5) p131 Ibid.