Thinking Place – A Creative Exploration of Coastal Erosion

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A wave in the Sound – one of those seventh waves that comes in higher and colder and more rampant than the six ordered predictable waves on either side of it – crashed against the round ancient ruin on the shore, and carried away another loose stone that had stood for twelve centuries. That stone would trundle here and there with the tides, flung back and fore in the mill of ocean...

(George Mackay Brown, Beside the Ocean of Time)

Stories and reality, mythology and environment, past and future are interlinked in places like Orkney. Island life on the edges of the Atlantic and the North Sea, from the Mesolithic to the present day, has been and continues to be both creative and resourceful. The pull of strong elements in Orkney is a constant feature of life, wind and sea increasingly being harnessed as sources of renewable energy. This place, with its particular light, the unique geology of its cliffs and wide beaches, is home to a vibrant group of researchers, among them academics, independents and those working in research and development companies: effectively a diverse and fluid “community of practice”. The extraordinarily rich archaeological sites and material culture place archaeology at the centre of dialogues and events which flourish in this environment, such as the interdisciplinary Wilder Being project.

Led by an artist and an archaeologist, Wilder Being brought together anthropologists, environmental scientists, a folklorist, students and community members of all ages and from a variety of backgrounds. Situated at an exposed and rapidly eroding coastal section of the multi-period site of Pool on the island of Sanday, it involved various forms of archaeological and art practice undertaken as part of an experimental workshop. Essentially transdisciplinary from the outset, our aim was to create space for a new kind of dialogue, and to collectively explore our understanding of this local site of loss and the broader process of climate change. Our participatory event on Sanday aimed to highlight the connectivity between humanities and sciences, through the entanglement of lines between land and sea, culture and nature, present and past. Subtitled Creation and Destruction in the Littoral Zone, Wilder Being aimed explicitly at setting an

1. Wilder Being was undertaken as part of the UK-wide 2014 “Being Human” Festival of the Humanities: http://beinghumanfestival.org/
understanding of the coastal erosion of archaeological heritage within wider contexts of debate around climate change and societies’ role in its creation and mitigation.

In this contribution we reflect upon how a creative practice-led approach to coastal erosion could foster new forms of dialogue and engagement, new uses for archaeological techniques and new ways of exploring the relation of local stories to broader narratives about our relation to – and involvement in – the process of climate change. We consider how the practice-led and place-based *Wilder Being* project contributes to academically meaningful and socially relevant archaeology and heritage studies through thinking and doing at a place where climate change is manifest, in a place where heritage is really important to the community as sustainable development.

**Shifting Sands**

There were many footprints in the sand before we came to Pool. Coastal erosion and its impact on archaeology is widely recognised as a crucial, time-sensitive concern. In Orkney, climate change-induced sea-level rise and increased storminess is causing increasing damage to, and destruction of, thousands of archaeological sites across the archipelago, from simple Viking boat nousts to huge multi-period settlement mounds (Gibson 2014) – including Pool, the location of our workshop. These sites are dramatic and tangible expressions of climate change, and their impact on the viewer is visceral. On an almost daily basis, unsuspecting walkers encounter pottery and stone artefacts on the beach, human long bones emerging from sandy cliffs, heaps of shells and animal bones interlaced with fragments of walling, paving and hearths. The powerful and often contradictory responses prompted by these encounters are captured very effectively in the photo essay by Julie Gibson and Frank Bradford (Gibson 2008).

The eroding sites provide rich scope for investigating and envisioning living with environmental change in the past, through a “deep time” span (cf. Dockrill and Bond 2014; Irvine 2014). There have been a variety of archaeological responses to “the problem of coastal erosion”, and Orkney has witnessed the full range; Pool itself was the subject of a sustained programme of archaeological investigation prompted by erosion (Hunter 2007), which explored the character of Neolithic to Viking Age and later structures on land behind the exposed cliff section, which was also recorded in detail (Hunter and Dockrill 1982).

All of this work has been important. However, the protection of archaeological sites from coastal erosion is beyond the scope of available funding resources, and of the responses to threatened sites enshrined in UK planning guidance – preservation either “in situ” or “by record”. Preservation *in situ* is obviously not an option for more than a handful of sites. And it is patently impossible to “preserve by record” – that is, through excavation – the thousands of archaeological sites either undergoing destruction or actively being threatened by the sea. It has been acknowledged for some time that we need new approaches to the problem.

In Scotland, community volunteers are being encouraged by the SCAPE (Scottish Coastal Archaeology and the Problem of Erosion) Shorewatch project to “locate, record and monitor sites” (SCAPE 2016) on the coast that are being eroded, and the CITiZAN (Coastal and Intertidal Zone Archaeological Network) initiative by Museum of London Archaeology (MOLA 2014) is a comparable project in England. Coastal erosion archaeo-
Figure 1. Top: Pool, Sanday – eroded archaeological site located at end of beach (photograph by Rebecca Marr). Middle: 3D Laser scan (image by Dan Lee). Bottom: Laser scanner and workshop participants next to eroding section (photograph by Rebecca Marr).
ology is thus arguably the biggest arena for community engagement, and therefore participatory archaeology, in the UK. Combining creative and participatory practice in this domain has obvious and untapped potential; what is perceived as the problem of coastal erosion can be seen as a creative resource offering exciting opportunities for quite radical approaches to interpretation. Adaptation, resilience, the reflexivity of people and the environment, and the impact of climate change on humans and non-humans – all of these require us to think about creativity in both the past and the present.

Collaborations between artists and archaeologists are established in Orkney, and previous and ongoing initiatives (cf. Thomas 2014) provide a point of departure for our work. With an additional emphasis on “Art, Archaeology and Environment”, Wilder Being was conceived as a place-based event, a workshop involving specialists and open participation from the public. In this way it can be considered within the context of participatory art practice, or with its climate-change focus, as socially engaged art.

For Pablo Helguera (2011, 5):

Socially engaged art functions by attaching itself to subjects and problems that normally belong to other disciplines, moving them temporarily into a space of ambiguity. It is this temporary snatching away of subjects into the realm of art-making that brings new insights to a particular problem or condition and in turn makes it visible to other disciplines.

Similar concerns lie at the heart of what is sometimes called relational archaeology, with its interests in assemblages, entanglement and the involvement of practitioners in the processes they seek to study (cf. Shanks 2007; Bennett 2010; Hodder 2012; Fowler 2013). We would contend that participatory aspects of both art and archaeology add another layer as yet unconsidered in relational archaeology. That layer matters if the relational approach is to become more “socially engaged”.

Wilder Being

Our project is a response to the tangible remains of the eroding archaeology, and also a response to the less tangible rich tradition of place-based folklore in Orkney. Additionally, drawing inspiration from the photographer Charles Fréger’s images of the “Wilder Mann” (Fréger 2012), our work began with a story. In Medieval European culture the Wilder Man is a shape-shifter, an entity who moves between states and in doing so articulates relationships between plants, animals, people and the spirit world. Orkney has its own rich tradition of mythological creatures that move between states, not surprisingly relating to the sea and shore. This is the place of selkies and, particular to the north isles of Orkney such as Sanday, there is the fearsome mythical sea creature: Knuckalavee, a horrific half-man half-horse, who emerges from the sea dripping flesh and seeking vengeance, associated for some with a fury engendered by the poisonous smoke and fumes arising from the kelp-burning industry of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (Orkneyjar n.d.).

Resonating with present day concerns about relations between land and sea, we were inspired by the environmental undertones of this myth to invent a new sea creature, named The Lopness Monster. The story of this monster was developed and recorded by filmmaker Mark Jenkins, narrated as part of the workshop by the eminent Orcadian...
folklorist Tom Muir. For a project designed to play with shifting scales of place, time and relevance, the story was crucial, evoking a canon of folklore familiar to many participants. This was given added weight by Tom’s voice, known to many from recordings and storytelling performances. While the story was new, detailing the anger felt by the monster faced with sea-level change and the avalanche of debris we wantonly discard into the sea (called “bruck” in Orkney), the form and delivery gave the account a traditional weight. For participants in the *Wilder Being* event, the telling of the story was a key point of departure.

On the first morning of our field workshop in Sanday, the group gathered to hear Tom’s story. We then walked along the beach at Pool, collecting found materials from the shifting line between land and water. These were the raw materials from which our own monster would arise. With a focus sharpened by the story and by the walking conversation that flowed from it, people pounced upon seaweed, feathers and plastics; battered creels and car parts; flotsam and jetsam emanating from both land and sea. And as we gleaned what we could (there was no shortage), we became participants in the story (Figure 1).

Our walk, increasingly encumbered by the burden of bruck, brought us to the eroding cliff section, itself spilling occupation debris, burnt stones, bones and shells back into the sea. This provided the setting and the medium for subsequent activity. Archaeologists in the group took participants through the stratigraphy in front of them, a long and complex sequence running from the Neolithic through to the present. There was time to move back and forth along the section, to look closely at details and to step back to catch the broader patterns as they shifted in both vertical and horizontal planes. With trowels and sketchbooks, we explored the section and shore, cleaning, collecting, bagging, drawing and later examining our finds in close-up with microscopes in the pop-up lab created in the local community hall. Throughout, there was a flow of conversation; about the time span held in the cliff, about sea change and about how significance might be drawn from the deposits.

Where does it begin and end? Everything is in motion… No sharp line between land and sea, or between nature and ourselves… The tide is a pulse, a clock, coming and going and making things anew… How far back into the land does the section go… Do layers build up slowly or suddenly… Why the change of colour… Why is that stone smooth… Sand, silt, earth, stone, shell, sea… Powdery, grainy, muddy, slippery, crumbly, lumpy… Battenberg cake, filo pastry… Things falling slowly and suddenly, trickles of sand and whole generations in an instant… Is it precious because it is 5000 years old, does it matter… All this will crumble but the plastic goes on…

These movements went hand in hand with other activities designed to prompt new ways of looking and personal reflection. Sketching, writing, photography, sorting and arranging found materials – tentative and removed at first, the boundaries between these different activities began to blur as people acted upon the section itself, pinning words and phrases directly onto the stratigraphic layers – a new matrix of concrete poetry (Figure 2, below):

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2. The video, “Wilder Being – Studies into Creation and Destruction in the Littoral Zone”, can be viewed online: https://vimeo.com/112154339 (uploaded by Orkney College UHI Art & Design).
Meanwhile on the rocks below, Dan Lee set up a 3D laser scanner, a technology used increasingly to replace scale drawing (planning and sections) to record these complex sites that are rapidly eroding. Here, however, we recorded not only the site but also the people, capturing the event in time and motion in the form of experimental ghostlike images; figures, some sinister, conjured from our activity (Figure 1, above).
The movement captured by the 3D scanner was also tracked at broader scales. Situated as we were at the base of an eroding cliff, we were acutely aware of just how loose and potentially mobile the deposits were. We were no less aware of the sea behind us, one eye always on the watery line that moved closer and closer up the shore as the day progressed. Aspects of this shifting situation were captured by the scanner itself, and also by 360-degree drawings across folds of concertinaed paper—panoramas of horizon, sea, shore and land. We also used GPS survey to map our movements during the day, creating patterns that captured the shifting of paths as the sea rose and fell. Lines close to the cliff; others running along the low ebb of the kelp-tangled shore.

The tide set a timetable for activities on the beach, and high water saw us shift to the nearby community hall. There we pooled the material we’d collected, laying the bruck out on tables to be sorted and recorded. These raw materials for a monster took on new qualities in this setting. In a studio established in the hall, Rebecca Marr encouraged participants to select and photograph particular pieces of detritus. In the process, many otherwise unremarkable bits of plastic, rope and metal became objects of enchantment, transformed by their setting and by digital capture (Figure 2). Photography here was not just a recording of things, a process of inventory; it was a way of bringing new meanings from the material.

As the photography continued, work on the monster began, running on into the second day of the workshop. Materials usually passed on the beach without comment, or even actively avoided, were now handled with energy and intimacy. This was not dead matter, beyond use or value. In a matter of hours, the monster emerged, collaboratively, from the story and from shared experience; a creature realised from found materials, and from the ideas and arguments that had animated our work on the beach.

**The Afterlife of Monsters**

Our creature has had a life beyond our weekend on Sanday. The two-day workshop was followed by projects on Mainland, the main island of Orkney, involving students from Orkney College UHI, who made related costumes and sculptures. These were exhibited at Pier Arts Centre in Stromness, the show creating a new context (and new participants) for discussing the ideas thrown up by the film and by the site-specific work (Figure 2). Further afield, there have been screenings of the video along with online interaction, conference presentations and papers (Bevan and Downes 2017), which have also extended discussions in new directions. There is life in the Lopness Monster yet, as there is in the debate that brought it into being.

Whatever our initial aspirations, *Wilder Being* brought home the potential of situated collaborative practice. Inclusive in many senses, the workshop used the site and the practices of collecting and recording to explore our relationship with, and involvement in, processes of environmental change. In effect, we combined in an “art of inquiry”, wherein through our activities we were “think[ing] through making”, (Ingold 2013, 6; emphasis in original). Such work produces outputs that are experimental and unpredictable. As the weekend unfolded, work and conversation blurred many boundaries: between disciplines, between present and past and between nature and ourselves. The archaeological site was key to the project, and the setting for our work at the cliff section.
was critical. Littoral space is inherently unstable and unpredictable, creating an energy that can be tapped in many different ways. Throughout, the shifting back and forth of the water spoke of things being worked and reworked, of time and materials being pulled into different orders and new arrangements. And the dialogue that emerged through our practice brought scales of space, time and process into focus in new and sometimes unexpected ways. A new mesh, a new story, a different take on our involvement with the material we’d collected.

In our Wilder Being project, archaeological methods and understanding were closely interwoven with creative approaches, techniques and experimentation; we could indeed call this a “creative archaeology”, one which leads us to think differently about our relationship to place, space and time. What began as a practice-led workshop has led to an ongoing dialogue well beyond the shores of the island. The subsequent thinking and reflection from this experience has brought, and continues to feed, fresh understanding to new art and heritage projects, as well as to academic studies. So, as the tide turns again on the shore, in the littoral zone, perhaps we have also been involved here in a shift in thinking beyond our locale; perhaps, Wilder Being establishes a “creative turn” for coastal erosion archaeology?

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References


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