ENHANCING NATURAL BEAUTY OR POEMS THRUST IN MY FACE? PERCEPTIONS OF ARTWORKS IN ‘WILD’ LANDSCAPE SETTINGS

DR NICOLE PORTER

What role can (or should) artworks play in landscapes that are perceived as ‘wild’? Conceptions of natural landscapes are a part of cultural discourse, and consequently artworks can both reflect and affect concepts of wilderness. Site-specific physical artworks situated in remote settings offer unique opportunities for interpreting relationships between culture and nature, time and place, and are used to communicate a range of environmental and heritage values. However, the appropriateness of placing cultural artefacts in protected and sensitive landscapes is subject to debate. How do contemporary art objects impact the experience and understanding of ‘wild’ landscapes, especially if the people drawn to such landscapes value those very same ‘wild’ landscapes, especially if the people drawn to such landscapes value those very same ‘wild’ landscapes, especially if the people drawn to such landscapes value those very same ‘wild’ landscapes, especially if the people drawn to such landscapes value those very same ‘wild’ landscapes, especially if the people drawn to such landscapes value those very same ‘wild’ landscapes, especially if the people drawn to such landscapes value those very same ‘wild’ landscapes, especially if the people drawn to such landscapes value those very same ‘wild’ landscapes, especially if the people drawn to such landscapes value those very same ‘wild’ landscapes, especially if the people drawn to such landscapes value those very same ‘wild’ landscapes, especially if the people drawn to such landscapes value those very same ‘wild’ landscapes, especially if the people drawn to such landscapes value those very same ‘wild’ landscapes, especially if the people drawn to such landscapes value those very same ‘wild’ landscapes, especially if the people drawn to such landscapes value those very same ‘wild’ landscapes, especially if the people drawn to such landscapes value those very same ‘wild’ landscapes, especially if the people drawn to such landscapes value those very same ‘wild’ landscapes.

To explore these tensions, this study investigates the role of art in UK national parks, as evidenced through one recent project, Companion Stones, situated in the Peak District National Park. Following a brief review of the role of public art in relation to national parks policies, a case study of Companion Stones assesses how the works physical presence is perceived by stakeholders and the wider public.

National Parks and public art policy context

Whether urban or non-urban, public art can incorporate tangible on-site artefacts, for example temporary or permanent sculptures, as well as a diverse range of off-site or non-object oriented practices, for example community engagement workshops, performances, oral histories, artist residencies and gallery exhibitions in various media. A body of precedent and research evidence demonstrates how public art programs in urban landscapes are part of contemporary regeneration projects, where they perform numerous roles including place making, heritage interpretation, enhancing community identity and city branding. Beyond the urban context, award-winning initiatives such as the Watershed Landscape Project (South Pennines, 2010–2013) and Yorkshire Sculpture Park (Wakefield, established 1977) demonstrate the ‘multiple benefits of cultural programmes which bring local communities, art and landscapes together.

While issues of identity, place and change are common to all landscapes, the way that these are expressed and managed in national park landscapes is governed by statutory controls which seek to offer increased levels of planning protection. National Parks in the UK encompass a spectrum of landscape settings and experiences, ranging from human settlements and infrastructure (towns, houses, roads, reservoirs, forests), through to agricultural landscapes, countryside, public rights of way and more remote and wild environments of ecological importance. The purpose of designating landscapes as National Parks, as articulated in the 1990 Environmen Act, is to clearly set out the combination of natural and cultural landscape values associated with such settings and the dual arms of conservation and promotion of use by the public that direct their ongoing management. These are:

- conserve and enhance the natural beauty, wildlife and cultural heritage;
- promote opportunities for the understanding and enjoyment of the special qualities of National Parks by the public (where this purpose is in conflict with conservation, conservation takes priority).

This statutory context is important when considering the role of public art within national parks, which present specific opportunities and challenges for arts practice when compared to other public landscapes. Policies addressing the need to promote opportunities for the understanding and enjoyment of national parks invariably include natural and heritage landscape interpretation strategies, which in turn relate to the communicative and interpretive potential of arts practices and artworks. Although no UK-wide arts policy exists for national parks, most individual parks’ interpretation and cultural heritage policies touch on the arts as a means of promoting certain landscape values and themes; for example, Brecon Beacons encourages ‘creative on-site interpretation’, defined as ‘2 and 3D installations such as seating, sculpture and specially designed waymarking, incorporating creative use of the arts as part of its interpretation strategy. As of 2012, Dartmoor was the only national park to have an arts specific policy and multiple-nation strategy, which explicitly sought to encourage, support, promote and enhance creative endeavor, whilst noting that the Parks Authority is not primarily an arts organisation and as such was not in a position to fund or commission works to a large extent.

Reflecting this policy context, each national park features a variety of approaches towards arts-based landscape interpretation, and to date the amount of physical artwork occurring ‘on the ground’ differs from park to park. Of several projects identified during a desktop review of national parks web sites in 2012, common features include an emphasis on communication/interpretation of landscape ‘special qualities’, expressing connections to the environment (both ecological and cultural), the use of natural and local materials, and applying community involvement and artist / stakeholder collaborative processes. Parks featured some permanent physical structures / objects (sculpture) but more often employed temporary installations, performances and exhibitions which left no physical impact on the landscape per se. Projects were almost invariably funded via a combination of charitable sources, and were very rarely funded by National Park Authorities themselves.

Irrespective of its purpose, location, medium or content, public art is – by its very public nature – often ‘deeply contested’. In the case of national park landscapes, its presence is further contested due to the fact that countryside is often perceived as ‘natural’, as such the presence of any signs of contemporary life be it wind farms, tourism developments, infrastructure, or sculpture, is contentious. Given that the introduction of art in the landscape can be at odds with the experience of nature-based remote settings, the potential for contested views and values is increased.

Companion Stones case study

Companion Stones was produced by Arts in the Peak, led by local artist / curator Charles Monkhouse and designed collaboratively by Peak District artists, poets and stonemasons in 2012. The work consists of 14 poems inscribed on sandstone sculptures located in more and less remote parts of the park, on private and publically owned land, ranging from agricultural fields to moorland, valleys and ridges. One stone is situated as a companion to a guide stoop, 18th century griststone artefacts found on historic routes of way which are carved with the names and distances of the nearest market towns. Historically, guide stoops provided direction for travelers across the wilderness of the moors. As explained in detail on the project web site, Companion Stones bare inscriptions that guide audiences not to a physical destination, but toward the future […] to draw attention to the moors and the tricky environmental terrain we have yet to navigate […] a meditation between past, present and future possibilities.

The £43,000 project was funded by a number of stakeholders, and was supported from the Peak District National Park Authority (PDNPA). Planning permission was granted on the basis that the works would remain in situ for 5 years, though no plans or arrangements for their removal or relocation have been formalized.

Methodology

The study consisted of interviews with key stakeholders, a review of secondary material about the project, and a short survey capturing park user expectations, interpretations and value judgments about Companion Stones, along with demographic data. Surveys were conducted over six non-consecutive weekdays and weekends during the summer of 2012 and 2013. Each survey occurred on-site, sampling of 7 of the 14 artworks (fig 3 - 1), W3, W2, W1, L9, E7, E9, L8. These ranged in landscape context from the more remote to those sited close to existing roads and visitor facilities. Survey data was limited due to difficulties obtaining results across all sites. No results were obtained at the most remote or ‘wild’ moorland location (L8) as no potential participants passed by during survey collection times, whereas the majority of responses were obtained at sites adjacent to trail head car parks and facilities with greater traffic.
Eastern Moors offers an accessible landscape given that 'a lot of people see what is in effect a heavily managed, a heavily manicured landscape, they see it as a wilderness'. Smith had observed that 'everyone brings their own perspectives and their own perceptions to it, a dozen people will see the same piece of art in a dozen different ways,' including his colleagues in PDNP who variously supported and opposed the project. One particular feature of the stones – the www address inscribed in small lettering on several meters from its designed location. In her own assessment, Clarke viewed each companion stone according to its landscape context, stating that each has a different feel about it depending on how remote the terrain is and likely to the particular distinction between works at Curbar head near a car park (L/) or Longshaw estate (L1); that 'feels more comfortable' and 'don't stand out' compared to others where 'you come across it in the middle of the road' (for example L3 and L6). Lead artist Charles Monkhouse received a small amount of email correspondence from members of the public between 2010 and 2012, both praising and criticizing the stones. Two correspondents praised the work for its beauty and unexpectation: 'My friend and I found the stone on Ramsley Moor quite by accident [part of Eastern Moors]. Think they are beautiful! We came across a couple of the Companion Stones on the Longshaw Estate whilst we were out walking with some friends today; they were both really beautiful and they are a wonderful idea.' These comments suggest that the presence of aesthetically pleasing crafted objects in a contrasting remote landscape context contributes to their appeal and effect.

Three wrote to oppose the presence of the stones, raising numerous detailed objections and questions. Notably, two of the three correspondents related their comments to the stone at the wildest moor site (L3). Common themes arising were the lack of meaningful relevance / relationship between the stones and the guide stoops, inappropriate design and the inappropriate siting of the work at a micro scale. General statements such as 'an unfortunate distraction and quite out of sympathy with the environment / seemed quite incongruous/ detracted from rather than enhanced the natural and ancient features of the area / Ancient features in their natural settings do not need modern abstractions for companionship' articulated the strongly held view that contemporary artwork does not belong in this setting. Particular design concerns included the choice of sandstone and its method of presentation, for example 'the smoothly dressed, light coloured sandstone is quite alien to the area of rough dark gritstone and the precisely chiseled inscriptions bear no resemblance to the crudely marked guide stoops.' The quality and content of the poems were questioned, 'Making any sense of the inscriptions is virtually impossible / Do these poems have any relevance with the [guide stoops]?' The siting of stones either because they were at a distance from walking paths, or from the guide stoops, or because they did not physically gesture toward them in some form was critiqued: 'One or two of the stones seem to have been haphazardly dumped and any connection with a guide stoop or walking path is clearly not intended.' Finally, although one correspondent welcomed such interpretive projects in principle, others suggested money would 'be better spent' on other landscape priorities.

The criticisms outlined above reflect a feeling that the artwork is an unwelcome imposition on the wildness of the landscape experience which is enjoyed by regular visitors, a view summed up by the email comment: 'For years I have enjoyed going out walking in the Peak. It is likely that I speak for others when I say that I would prefer not to have other people's poems, carved in rock, thrust in my face while I am out walking.'

The following section presents the results of on-site surveys which seek to determine the extent to which the views expressed above reflect wider public attitudes.

**Survey results**

**Demographics**

| Decriptive data identified | 2014 variables: | Age (under 16, 18, 30, 50, 50+), and familiarity with the landscape based on frequency of visitation (living / working in the park, frequent visitor, occasional visitor, been a few times, first (‘me’ visitor), 1st of these surveys 2014) | Pattern matching did not identify any noticeable correlation between age and the response to the artwork. Almost two thirds of respondents were very familiar with the landscape (living, working, or being ‘frequent’ visitors) and just over a quarter were ‘regular’ visitors, with the remaining minority having encountered the landscape rarely or for the first time. Similarly no statistically significant correlation was evident between familiarity and type of response to the artwork, although the more detailed interpretive responses and highly disapproving responses were from local / regular visitors not first time visitors. Given the small quantity of responses from under 30 and / or from infrequent / first time visitors, more detailed correlational analysis was not viable. These demographics are consistent with visitor data collected by the Peak District. |
Companion Stones remain latent in the works to a significant extent. Although the underlying themes of the guide stone heritage, time, place and navigating an 'environmental terrain' may not be directly related by the majority of respondents, where subsequent explanations of the intention of Companion Stones were offered by researchers the respondents generally welcomed such explanation. Several suggested this information should be available with the artwork on site, i.e. 'needs more explanation about what they are'.

Do you like / dislike Companion Stones? What do you like / dislike about it?

Value judgments about the project were varied amongst the respondents, revealing several opposing views.

The most frequent response to the artwork was neutral: neither supporting or objecting to it - with nearly half of all respondents choosing not to comment or making statements such as 'I think / approve / like it'. Those who did not like the work, a similarly small number strongly liked the work, and the remainder simply 'liked the work'. Notably, several positive comments were expressed as a double negative, for example 'nothing wrong with it / not disturbing or distracting or garish', implying a lack of being offended rather than an actual endorsement (a point raised in later responses).

The form and materiality of the stones were noted by numerous respondents. Several stated they liked 'the shape / works / I have seen blend well into the landscape and augment what's there' and that 'stone is a nice colour / stone natural materials'. An equal number disliked the shape(s), especially at work b3 (one of the 'more angular, taller stones') which was described as 'regular lines, too smooth, the opposite [of the stoop] / stripes are too straight'. Two survey groups noted the material 'doesn't relate to older stone - sandstone vs. granite', though others suggested that 'erosion and weathering will improve them'. The extent to which the works contrasted with their landscape setting was itself seen as a positive as well as a negative, with responses such as 'contrived / doesn’t really fit', being expressed in the negative by some and 'novelty / contrast is good / juxtaposition [between guide stoop and new work] is good / surprising' being expressed by others.

Underlying the comments about formal qualities of the work were feelings about the general effect and intent of Companion Stones. Several respondents expressed appreciation for the contemporary ideas and practices the work introduces to the landscape, for example 'thought provoking, interesting / brings something about the future, creativity / it’s for the future / nice to see local artists and poets working in this area'. Two comments made reference to the accessibility that such items add to the landscape for families and urban visitors, stating 'you can plan a walk to take interest for the kids / coming from the city, it’s an alien environment - these welcome you in'. By comparison, others were strongly opposed to art in the park, stating 'I am against all modern interventions / don’t agree with them, the countryside should be left so not something you can take a photo of, they don’t have a place here / nature gives so much, there’s no need for anything [to be added]'.

What are your thoughts about cultural projects like these in National Parks in general?

I have a final survey question prompted respondents to make general comments about the value or appropriateness of situating artworks in National Parks landscapes. This prompted a similar mix of positive and negative responses in keeping with the project specific views outlined above, however what captured an important unifying trend emerged. Of those who approved of art in national parks, almost all were very cautious and qualified their approval with a number of important conditions. Key words such as subtle, natural, fit in were repeatedly used to describe the kind of works that they endorse. A consistently recurring theme was one of relating sympathetically to natural landscape qualities, 'depends how subtle / shouldn’t be too big / as long as they complement their surroundings / I don’t object, good if in keeping with surroundings / yes, if they do it in a natural way, not too outlandish / not too garish / as long as they aren’t spoiling'. Location was raised on several occasions, referring to the need for 'appropriate places, chosen carefully / some better than others'. Limiting the number of projects or to local landscape and change, values, and experience will be subjective and varied, in short, you cannot please everyone. This study reflects how opinions about the appropriateness / inappropriateness of artworks in landscapes are illustrative of wider concerns about landscape management and change in areas which are valued as wild when they are wild or not. The different responses to Companion Stones illustrate how an artefact that is perceived as a place-specific enhancement to one park user can be an out-of-place nuisance to another. In a society where art is not an integral part of daily life, an unresolved tension exists between two equally valid aesthetic experiences – experiencing the beauty of remote landscapes and experiencing the beauty of art – and there is no easy means of reconciling them.

Studying perceptions of existing art works can inform policymakers (and artists) as they seek to achieve the national parks aim of Promoting public understanding and enjoyment of their special qualities. Translating this understanding into general advice or policy, however, is problematic: The mix of responses and interpretations evidenced by Companion Stones suggests that each project and each landscape is different and a very nuanced and context-specific response is essential. The need for well crafted quality work which demonstrates attention to site-specific detail and a strong conceptual, formal, material and spatial relationship to the landscape is a must – though ultimately individual park users will interpret such relationships differently according to their own point of view.
Endnotes

(Ennotes)


5. Dartmoor National Park Authority [dartmoor.gov.uk] [accessed June 2012].


7. In the UK, ‘Rural scenes are popularly labeled natural when a small amount of reflection on the matter would quickly reveal that they are to a large extent the result of man’s act. v. est. Bourassa, S. (1999), The Aesthetics of Landscape. London: Be heaven Press, p 0.


13. In some instances this was due to environmental planning permission being refused for sites immediately adjacent to some remote guide stoops. However, this was at times perceived as an advantageous design outcome: Diana Snyder, poet for the E6 stone, comment ’ ‘I’ve got this idea that the companion stone is placed on a path at some distance from the guide stoop, showing the traveler he is close, but not intruding on his eventual experience of being alone with the original stone in its atmospheric setting.’ See Artists talking – exposing contemporary visual artists’ practice (2017), av a bib e at http://www4.npaa.com/artists_talking/article/707000 [accessed July 2012].

Figures

Figure 1 – Image of Companion Stone ‘E1’ (Longshaw gate location), poet Jo Bell and designer Kate Genever. Photo by author.

Figure 2 – Companion Stones web page, including inset image of an historic guide stoop http://www.companionstones.org.uk/home/home1.htm [accessed December 2014].

Figure 3 - Companion Stones location map, http://www.companionstones.org.uk/home/CompanionStonesMap1.pdf [accessed December 2014].

*Note author will obtain permission from artists if reproducing this for publication.