



Case Study: Playing Puck—a study of performative action in the shaping of a “Legend Landscape”

A practice-based PhD thesis by artist Rob Irving. Focussing on the complex of prehistoric monuments of Avebury’s ritual landscape this social study, through visual practice and written analysis, explores the connections between myths and everyday circumstantial reality.

This project demonstrates how academic research combined with visual arts, in this case an emphasis on photography, inspires artists to reflect upon and interpret our landscapes and environments.

Arts and landscape case study series



United Nations
Educational, Scientific and
Cultural Organization



Stonehenge, Avebury
and Associated Sites
inscribed on the World
Heritage List in 1986

Wiltshire Council
Where everybody matters

Exploring art and rituals

Artist Rob Irving explored Avebury and its environs whilst undertaking a practice-based PhD Thesis in 2014 at the University of West of England – Playing Puck: A Study of Performative Action in the Shaping of a 'Legend Landscape'. The thesis investigated myths / the fanciful and reality with the connection between them seeming to be hard-wired into the human condition.

<http://www.robirving.co.uk/PlayingPuck/puckthesis.pdf>

<http://www.robirving.co.uk/PlayingPuck/Fieldnotes.pdf>

Through new approaches to art practice, and case studies, the project explored the ways we link this connection in relation to place / landscape. It also drew on an interdisciplinary frame of reference consisting of art history, anthropology, performance theory, and folklore studies of how perceptions and experiences of 'paranormal' phenomena are influenced by place, and vice-versa. The project focused on Avebury's ancient landscape, which has become a crucible of cultural significance and a site of mystical tourism concerned with allegedly paranormal phenomena, fuelled by stories around the extra-terrestrial, crop circles, and 'ley' or earth energies.



Rob argues that these circumstances produce a range of responses, often broadly religious or aesthetic, which involve ritualistic, artistic, and, above all, performed activity, where legends are re-enacted and presented as fact. His contention is that this activity not only revitalises and extends the legend as a form of cultural mediation but also stimulates a shared 'sense of place' that helps to enrich an existing narrative world.

The consequence of the growth of interest in this activity in Avebury has transformed what was once a sedate passing trade in antiquarian interest into a



tourism industry that significantly contributes to the local economy.

The project included original research into the mystical association with this landscape going back more than 300 years - since at least Aubrey's 'discovery' of Avebury in 1649 - from Stukeley and his friend Isaac Newton's belief that the monuments were remnants of an ancient, lost, but recoverable wisdom, through Blake's illustrated poetry, to the influential New Age writings of John Michell.

Connecting this to the present enabled Rob to examine the processes by which myth survives by an accretive and continuous system of adaptation and mutation in response to shifting cultural tastes. This is a history which is often trivialised or ignored due to its outsider or 'occult' status – which Rob argues is a mistake as there is no better indicator of cultural values than folklore.

Achievements, outcomes and reflections

- Practice-based PhD Thesis. Doctorate obtained
- A social study involving thousands of people
- During research, links made with other complementary projects including "Measuring the Land" which introduced young adults to ancient and recent heritage of the landscape and initiated a wider maths education project
- Artist walks and talks engaging with communities and contemporary arts practitioners e.g. [The Alchemical Landscape Symposium](#) at Corpus Christi College, Cambridge
- A book chapter in [Sacred Mobilities: Journeys of Belief and belonging](#) (Ashgate, 2015)
- 2 exhibitions of photographs and other material

Commissioners, key project partners and stakeholders:

Arts and Humanities Research Council · University of the West of England · National Heritage Lottery Fund

<http://eprints.uwe.ac.uk/23144/>

Published in April 2017