Anthropology of Landscape

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In this chapter we provide a brief review of relationships between artists and landscapes, considering environmental art and the inspiration provided by walking in the landscape. We finally mention developing relationships between the practice of art and the work of anthropologists to provide a background to our own consideration of the arts in relation to the heathland landscape and in relation to a collaboration with one particular artist, Priscilla Trenchard.

Wittgenstein claimed, ‘what can be shown cannot be said’ (1981: 50). Yet in his lucid account of ‘circuits of subjectivity’, in which he critically examines, amongst other aspects, the sometimes ambiguous but essential relationship between words, gestures, memory and art objects within the context of oral history work, Cândida-Smith writes of how we appreciate visual and performing arts because they provide us with aspects of experience and feeling that elude words: ‘but then we must use words to share processes that communicate on other levels’ (Cândida-Smith 2003: 8). In interviewing the artists whose works involve the heathland we are concerned, therefore, with the essence of the work itself, how it is produced and from what embodied intentionality and inspiration it may have been assembled – the unfolding relations between the agency of the landscape, that which the artist brings to the landscape, and the agency of the artwork itself. And to frame the discussion we turn to the words of the poet T. S. Eliot, when he writes of Andrew Marvell’s verse ‘making the familiar strange, and the strange familiar’ (1950: 259).

Dufrenne considered the manner in which an inspired artist may conceive of the process of producing the artwork as a being that he must promote: ‘a being-for-the-artist, a being which is anterior to his
act’ (Dufrenne 1973: 33). In Gell’s Maussian reading art objects may be considered as persons (Gell 1998: 9) or ‘distributed persons’ (Gell 1998: 103). Küchler comments that from this perspective both an artwork and the inspiration ‘of intuitive associative thinking’ are a locus of agency in the unfolding of person–object relations (2006: 86). We now consider this process in relation to landscape art.

**Fragile environments: nature and culture**

As we have seen the Pebblebed heathland is a fragile environment that requires constant nurture. Author and environmental activist Berry writes, ‘a culture that does not measure itself by nature, by an understanding of its debts to nature, becomes destructive of nature and thus of itself … The only thing we have to preserve nature with is culture; the only thing we have to preserve wildness with is domesticity’ (Berry 1987: 143). Herein lies contradiction, contest and connection. The theoretical opposition between nature and culture is embodied in the works of those artists who have chosen to work with, and indeed in many examples for, nature. Together with the growing awareness and concern for the environment, since the 1960s certain conceptual artists have rejected the institution of the gallery in which to frame their works, instead choosing to make their mark directly within the landscape itself. Perhaps one of the most interesting examples of this within an urban landscape is the practice of graffiti – the anthropologist Schacter’s discussion of which affirms the power of ornament to not simply reflect but to create order … [disclosing] the distinctly ritual quality of the productive processes from which these artefacts emerge … [inhabiting] the space between the ordinary and the extraordinary, that exists on the borderline of art and life

(Schacter 2014: 10; 221–2)

Our relationship with landscape, and the effect we have upon it and leave behind us, is complicated: ‘we see stability in its mute performance and flux in its unending variances’ (Kastner 1998: 17). Berry writes of the human predicament being ‘animated by profound connections and insurmountable divisions. The best Land and Environmental Art highlights this contradiction, probing the limits of artistic activity with the limitless tools of the artistic imagination’ (Berry 1987, cited in Kastner, 1998: 17). Matilsky describes ecological artists as our contemporary shamans
with their visions to restore the once vital balance between humans and nature (Matilsky 1992: 115). Lowndes discusses the early attempt by some conceptual artists to restore the relationship between artistic creativity and social reality in Europe and the United States in the 1960s (Lowndes 2014: 11–12). She cites Marioni, an artist and curator living on the west coast of the United States: ‘it was an invisible decade; the work that was produced had low commercial value; relics, documents and photos of events, earthworks and installations – all works not made as ends in themselves. It was a vital era and the art world could hardly wait for it to pass’ (Marioni 1988: 36). Yet it has not disappeared and, as Matilsky writes of ecological art, ‘it is slowly beginning to make an impact as it provides solutions to environmental problems’ (Matilsky 1992: 115). In her introduction to Fragile Ecologies, which discusses and portrays the interpretations and solutions provided by ecological artists, Matilsky traces the ways in which during human time artists have defined their environment; how, from the early celebrations of nature’s cycle of growth, decay and renewal, ‘art and ritual reflected the symbiotic relationship between people and the land amongst hunters and gatherers, and agriculturists’ (Matilsky 1992: 35). This connection was lost, she argues, at the time of the industrial revolution and ‘the flourishing of landscape painting represents a direct response to this schism. Like their preindustrial forebears, landscape painters communicated the spiritual and physical energies of the earth’ (Matilsky 1992: 35).

This communication is still being practised by the landscape and contemporary artists of today, their works often being both ‘agentive and transformative’ (Pinney 2002: 135).

**Inspiration, emotion, time, memory and walking**

We have already referred to anthropological studies concerning walking and considered why people walk in Chapter 8. So it is interesting to note the manner in which walking or journeying has become a strong focus for many artists and curators, both for individuals – see for example, Anna Dillon (n.d.) and Alison Lloyd (n.d.) – and for those who choose to walk or journey with others as a means by which to explore ‘processes of dialogue and negotiation’ (Pope 2012: 57). An example of this is the Walking Artists network, which seeks to connect people who regard themselves as walking artists, those who regard walking as a mode of art practice as well as those in related fields such as cultural geography, history, and anthropology. Deveron Arts, based
in Huntley, northeast Scotland, possesses no gallery or arts centre. Instead, its Director, Zeiske, writes: ‘the town is the venue, working with the spaces the place has to offer’ (Zeiske 2014: 91). The group works collaboratively with artists from around the world and the local community, bringing together ‘artistic and social relationships in a global network that extends throughout and beyond the geographic boundaries of Huntley’ (Zeiske 2014: 91). Calendar Variations is a series of practices by individuals working from a score by the artist Allan Kaprow in order to ‘move from possibility to action, from score to performance (as) by understanding that Kaprow sought to develop social experience by artistic means, we become free to work with our centre and also (be) challenged to create common ground between participants’ (Coessens and Douglas, 2011: 13).

Pope’s work is regarded as central to the way in which walking as a method of art production has been rethought in recent years, Collier describes his group walks as ‘deliberately subverting the Romantic notion of the solitary walker’ (Collier 2013: 113). Pope’s The Memorial Walks were created as a homage to W. G. Sebald, ‘drawing on his use of walking and the stubborn insistence that the past would not fade from memory’ (Pope 2012: 57). Invited guest walkers, among them those who wrote about landscape, the environment and memory, were requested to spend time with a painting of a local landscape from the Norwich School, the first provincial art movement in Britain, in which a tree was the main focus, and then accompany Pope on a walk around the East Anglia fenlands and farmlands: ‘each writer would perform a recollection from memory of a tree. In doing so I had hoped that they might repopulate the countryside with images, summoned-up and made to live through the sheer force of a spoken-word description, as an act of defiance against forgetting’ (Pope 2012: 57). Dillon, one of the guests accompanying Pope, wrote later:

accompanying the artist into the countryside around Norwich, standing in the rain before a nondescript stretch of land, one realised that the chosen painting had become nothing more than pure atmosphere: it had been sublimed into the air and become the mere ghost of a painting, its afterglow … Art, we might venture, is just that realm where the atmosphere becomes visible … which infolds itself into the dark, which hints at affinities and correspondences across time, which evokes rather than narrates … may well be the art that most closely answers our sense of wonder or curiosity.

(Dillon 2007: 23–4)
When we look at the emotions felt and what may then inspire an artist we find a number of aspects that both contemporary realist and environmental artists hold in common, including their perception or feelings about time and place. One artist exploring the boundaries of representational painting and time is Californian artist Gregg Chadwick. In an interview with Jeffrey Carlson, editor of *Fine Art Today*, Chadwick states his desire to ‘break down the illusions of linear time passing and expose the co-existence of past, present and future’ (Carlson n.d.). Art critic Clothier describes Chadwick as a literate painter; his readings and experiences within the landscape walked ‘are processed through the work of the arm and the wrist, the hand and the heart’ (Clothier 2013: 4). As the work comes into being ‘each choice, each image, each gesture is informed with meanings, all of them so deeply interwoven as to be indistinguishable as single threads’ (Clothier 2013: 4). In a discussion with Chadwick the importance of walking, inspiration and emotion become clear. He states that they ‘are all deeply entwined in my artistic practice. Emotion is often an entry point into my art. And a balance of emotions is crucial both in my process and my paintings’ (personal communication October 2015). For example when walking in Verona his sense of awe at the layers of history within the city and its surrounding countryside is ‘tempered with a sadness of historical memory. As I painted these artworks of Verona I felt both the joy of human achievement evident in my subject matter and the anger and loss over the countless wars from the Romans through the Nazis and into our current era’ (personal communication October 2015). He does not walk to escape:

> and not really to get to a place but instead to be in each spot as I take my steps … Snippets of overheard conversations, the smell of lilacs, the crunch of my shoes on gravel, a blaze of light scattering across a shop window, passing traffic – all find their way into my storage banks of inspiration and reappear as colors of time in my paintings (personal communication October 2015)

Land artist Andy Goldsworthy writes:

> I cannot disconnect materials as I used to. My strongest work now is so rooted in place that it cannot be separated from where it is made – the work is the place. Atmosphere and feeling now direct me more than the picking up of a leaf, stick or stone … a long resting stone is not an object in the landscape but a deeply ingrained witness to time and a focus of energy for its surroundings.  
>  
> (Goldsworthy 1998: 6)
He then goes on to describe how he repeats his visits to some stones and places, as they change according to season. He is interested in the ‘binding of time in materials and places’ (Goldsworthy 1998: 6). Stone and time are important for the walking artist Long too: ‘I like simple, practical, emotional, quiet, vigorous art … I like to use the symmetry of patterns between time, places and time, between distance and time, between stones and distance, between time and stones’ (Long 1980). In an interview fourteen years later he says:

It’s literally the same stones and the same surfaces of the world that people have always walked over and used. All the place names are like layers of history and different cultures. My work is just another layer on the surface of a world that has been shared by all these different generations, so it’s really about continuity.

(Long 1994)

Long’s walking artist friend, Fulton, states that he walks on the land ‘to be woven into nature … walking into the distance beyond imagination’, his artworks acknowledging ‘the element of time, the time of my life … (where) walking is the constant, the art medium is the variable’ (Fulton 1995: 8–10). Describing walks as the kilometre stones of his life, Fulton writes ‘each walk marks the flow of time between birth and death’ (Fulton 2015). In one of the most important exhibitions held as yet of walking and artists, the 2013 Walk On exhibition brought together works from the late 1960s to newly emerging walking artists. Co-curator Morrison-Bell states the intention being ‘for their paths to cross, so to speak, and for the viewer to experience, look or feel how an artist’s walk could also possibly become the viewer’s own, leading him or her to hitherto unknown places’ (Morrison-Bell 2013: 2). In his discussion of some of the artworks, artist and co-curator Mike Collier writes that he feels many of the artists share an embodied or phenomenological approach to the making of their work:

either – the way that they ‘represent’ movement through space (by walking), activating senses we sometimes take for granted … the way that they engage with an embodied experience of space and depth (what Merleau-Ponty called the ‘flesh of the world’) … the way that their work engages with others … making art is a practical application of phenomenology.

(Collier 2013:73)
Artists and anthropologists sharing the same space/place

An exciting aspect of our anthropological study of the Pebblebed heathland is the way in which artists working in a variety of practices share this same place as us in what is frequently the sensual production of their work, and, as the reader will find, an often self-reflexive approach. This and other aspects lead us to note the now major discussion between artists and anthropologists as to the differences and possible similarities between the artist’s and the anthropologist’s gaze and means of representation. These concern fieldwork and the affective presence of the artist or anthropologist, and the importance of immersion, decontextualization, embodied engagement and the practice of repetition in order to ‘know’.

Three important books edited by Schneider and Wright contain essays providing us with perspectives from both artists and anthropologists. For example, a detailed exploration of appropriated methodologies and subjects between the disciplines of art and anthropology, and the possible development of new practices, may be found in their Contemporary Art and Anthropology (2006). In Between Art and Anthropology (2010) Ossman’s discussion of her fieldwork practice and the contribution of painting to developing anthropological knowledge (2010: 127–34) is but one of the presentations and discussions about work being produced within what Schneider and Wright describe as the inter-space between the fields of art and anthropology; they discuss the fragile nature of this ongoing dialogue. In Anthropology and Art Practice (2013) Schneider and Wright introduce the work of practitioners ‘subjectively chosen’ for their representation of ‘particularly challenging and productive engagements with the shifting area between contemporary art and anthropology’ (2013: 2). An excellent example of an artist whose methodology is akin to that of an anthropologist is that of Lang. Art critic Metken describes his exhibition, Nunga und Goonya, held in Munich in 1991, as being at first glance similar to a cabinet of curiosities:

There are implements lying next to weapons, minerals and articles of clothing. Rock and colour samples can be seen, limbs of exotic animals, bark containers, a coal wagon, grass and feather capes. Good, one says to oneself: a somewhat sporadic anthropological collection, extremely widely deployed and embedded in its natural and social environment … however this is no systematic collection. (Metken 1991: 34)
What is on display is a confrontation between cultures, between nature and culture. Helmut Friedel et al. (1991) write that in his various works Lang attempts to collate pictures of human encroachment on nature: the methods used in so doing always remain the same. Findings that evidence human activities and interference are collected, ordered, described and examined as to their meaning. Researching the historical and local contexts, the ‘biographies which come to light from the finds play just as an important a role as the actual remains and traces he has found in the completed picture (he) creates’ (Lang 1991: 6). In Nunga und Goonya Lang is mourning for the lost cultures of Australia’s indigenous population, the Aborigines, and it is the latter’s view of the white settlers who regarded the Australian continent as terra nullis that he presents (Lang 1991: 8). Yet as Metken remarks, Lang ‘remains the white artist who takes his findings back home with him and uses them for his purposes … which does not exclude any amount of commitment, not to mention dismay over the injustices continuing till the present day’ (Metken 1991: 36).

Among the heathland artists discussed below, Trenchard’s approach and works, both on-site and in her Master’s portfolio, are a good example of a non-textual, visual production that is often anthropological in its essence. This is important in view of the dominant textually documented and descriptive negotiation and representation of place, emotion and aesthetics. Schneider and Wright correctly emphasize the difference between ‘participation’ and ‘collaboration’, stating that ‘they are charged forms of rhetoric that have been subject to much critical scrutiny’ (2013: 11). Participation involves a ‘whole constellation of different degrees and conceptions of agency and control at work … and the specific complexities of particular contexts for collaboration require acknowledgement’ (Schneider and Wright 2013: 11). Perhaps it is also important to state that, although anthropology has been critiqued for its anti-aestheticism, Geismar and Empson (2004) argue that anthropologists such as Edwards (2002), Gell (1998) and Pinney and Thomas (2001) have acknowledged the power of the visual both ‘in its own terms, as well as through more academic discourse (in which) the importance of the visual (is) a crucially material category in vital interaction with socio-political, economic and cultural contexts’ (Geismar and Empson 2004: 44). There is a difference too between anti-aestheticism and ‘beyond aestheticism’. As Pinney states, ‘it is not the efflorescence of words around an object that gives it meaning but a bodily praxis, a poetry of the body, that helps give images what they want’ (Pinney 2001: 161).
Heathland arts

A painting of the heathland that few members of the general public have seen hangs in the Officers’ Mess at the RM Commando Training Centre, Lympstone. Painted by Margaret Dean in 1981, it was gifted to the Royal Marines by the Oxford Architects Partnership. It is a large oil painting, about two metres wide.

Margaret says she had a choice between the Exe Estuary or Woodbury Common and she chose to paint the latter: ‘I chose Woodbury because I liked the tangled intertwining of the brambles and gorse bushes in the foreground, which helped to push back the furthermost part of the Common to give a big spatial sense to the place’ (Margaret Dean, artist). Arguing artistic licence, Margaret moved some of the trees in the distance as she felt she needed them to be differently distributed for the picture’s sake. This has been picked up on by some observant commandos who know this area very well indeed as it is the landscape they train in. Amusingly she says: ‘The commandos also say that they can see figures moving around in the undergrowth – I can’t understand how they can see things that are not there – and I should know!’ The initial work, mostly drawings and notes, was done from inside her car very early in the mornings: ‘I was very nervous during

Figure 9.1 Margaret Dean’s painting of the heathlands hanging in the RM Officers’ Mess at Lympstone Commando Training Centre
this time because it is so isolated and I used the car as a safe place to be. There are quite a lot of people seemingly alone and I didn't want company at that time'. The painting was done in her studio and took her about six months to complete. Margaret says she loves the heathland area for its light, undulating terrain and the sense of being close to the sea and the beach pebbles.

Margaret Dean's painting is unusual in another sense. We noticed on visits to exhibitions by local artists a striking absence of landscape paintings of the heathland. Favoured scenes were of the area surrounding it: views along the River Otter or of the Exe estuary, or of the sea and the coast. This is no doubt because the heathland itself is not sufficiently picturesque, definitely not the kind of bucolic English scene we see depicted in the work of Gainsborough, Constable and others. This is not to say that those practising the creative arts are uninterested in the heathland. Indeed many visit it and derive inspiration for work and practices of another kind. During the course of our fieldwork we talked to a local poet, an actor and theatre director and performance artist, an acrylic artist influenced by Jackson Pollock and a dancer. Their approaches, methodologies and artworks are as individual as their relationships with the heathland. We summarize a few points here.

For Barbara Farley, the poet, the heathland is a place where she walks regularly and takes picnics. Each walk she describes as being different in terms of the plants and wildlife she encounters: butterflies, dragonflies, etc. The heath invokes pictures in her mind and to her the heathland has different personalities in relation to seasons and places within it. Although she knows the heathland is managed it feels wild and untamed to her and is a spiritual place. She describes herself as having a photographic imagination. After walking on the heath she carries away pictures in her mind and these in turn enter into her poems, in which she paints a picture using language:

**Watching For Nightjars**

*Barbara Farley*

we gathered in a clearing at the edge
of the heathland on the cusp
between day and night

a sudden thunderstorm in the afternoon
had made the air clammy
now wrapped us in a cobweb shawl of moisture
there was a sense of anticipation
a few people spoke in hushed voices
but mostly there was silence

our guides led us down the track
towards the heart of the plantation
where we split into two groups – I took the lower path

we left the pebbled track

made our way downwards towards a clump of scrubby pines
the way became sandy beneath our feet

we walked with concentration as if
carrying a bowl of some precious liquid which we were
afraid to spill

we stopped beside a tree which stood alone from all the rest
somebody coughed
a violation which tore a hole in the flimsy fabric

of the dusk the seconds stretched
until I was sure time would break as we floated in that dark
lake of our own isolation

then it came – a churring like a thumbnail
drawn down a metal comb – rising and falling
somewhere out of sight

and then an answer our island filled with noises
we turned it was impossible to tell
from where they came

about our heads three long-winged shadows
wrote their cryptic messages
against an ever-dark sky

at last the sounds ceased altogether ever
in silence we returned to where we’d started from
I saw a footprint in the sand

and knew that it was mine
all the way home and for a long time afterwards
I felt

as if I cradled close to me
some tiny fragile form whose warm heart
is beating still
Jon, the performance artist, who had come to the heathland for the first time when we talked to him, was interested in ‘mining the landscape for stories and information and feelings about the people in it’. He hopes that by linking the ecology and history of a landscape and presenting this in a performance people will value it more. He describes the process of entering into an unknown landscape and trying to understand it as being ‘heritage art’. By walking he attempts to understand the atmosphere of the place, ‘the things that people know about without even knowing that they know about them’ (Jon, performance artist). Place makes things happen in the mind and he wants to re-mythologize space. Observing a gap in the ridge to the east of the heathland he suggests a potential story, an audio walk: ‘I might decide that that ridge, that hole in the ridge line was caused by a giant who awoke from beneath the ground and took a lump of it for his tea’ (Jon, performance artist). He is fascinated by the Iron Age hill fort of Woodbury Castle, viewing it as an ideal performance stage, describing how a number of little promenade stations could be allocated so that people could come in and experience different types of performance: ‘you could do things in the trees; you could make little hollows in the bracken; you could walk people around the site and give them a sense of that fairy feeling because these places do have their own atmosphere’.

Caroline, the acrylic artist who walks regularly on the heathland with her dogs, feels that the ubiquitous pebbles have subtly influenced her work because she’s interested in their shape and colours. She goes on to describe the energy of colour:

I’m just such a colour person. I love the energy of colours and what they do. They’re next to each other and so two colours will talk to each other but they’ll talk differently. Even if you’re not working representationally at all, those things [the pebbles] are underneath somehow.

(Caroline, artist)

The experience of walking on the heathland influences her work indirectly in another way: ‘it’s an important part of the reflective process, a reflective time for me’. For her the heathland conjoins emotion, imagination, movement and memory. It embodies a different time and place in which, restored, she has been able to return to her life, to her artwork.

Michelle, the dancer, for several years has been exploring dance and yoga in relation to nature. She usually comes to the heathland at weekends or, in the summer, in the early evening and tends to use one
of three sites to conduct her personal movement exploration. These are
the Woodbury Castle area, an area out on the heathland in the woods not
too far from the castle, and the opposite side of the road that looks back
on the River Exe. She describes herself as having an instinctive feel about
where she wants to be on any particular occasion – either which side of
the castle or in the castle:

If I’m in the castle I’ll probably be drawn to work with a group of
trees, or a particular tree, or between the trees. The weather condi-
tions will affect this decision because this is going up every week
during the year and if it’s very, very cold, I probably wouldn’t do so
much static exploration; I would do something a bit more physical.
(Michelle, dancer)

So first she arrives in an area she is attracted to. She may move around
quickly but often she is still and allows her energy vibrations to con-
nect in with the actual place: ‘So I’m much more open to the sounds,
to the atmosphere and the conditions of the place rather than coming
in and saying “I want to dance on or in this place”. It’s allowing the
space and the place to invoke in me some kind of movement response’. Believing that thought, feelings and movement are all interconnected,
Michelle responds to the chosen place and describes this response as
a more open way of being in the environment than if she was walk-
ing, where she feels she is more of a spectator: ‘Movement will come
through. By spending periods of time in a smaller part of an environ-
ment, I tend to have perhaps a deeper relationship. It’s a slightly differ-
ent experience to just walking on by where you’re constantly stepping
from one place to another place’. In this way, the actual place itself,
rather than the landscape generally, is of most importance, as she feels
the latter describes a flat picture or terrain. In ‘place’, she allows her-
self to become part of it and the feeling of the ground beneath her, its
textures and smells.

Michelle has taken part in a piece performed during Heath Week
2010 by Landance, an organization that runs workshops in contempo-
rary dance, music, visual art and film that lead to performances in the
landscape of the south-west (http://www.landance.org.uk) and has
permission to conduct workshops in the castle area (this is just one of
the many sites that she uses locally). She states that the premise that
she works outside certainly has the same ethos at each site but that each
also brings its own qualities. Also, each person who comes to the work-
shop has their own personal response, their own personal relationship
to the space. Sometimes people have driven quite a way to come to the workshop and on such occasions Michelle conducts a warm-up that may entail feeding in suggestions about moving different parts of the body: ‘I sometimes do a little movement, a ritual, where we all just stand together and do similar kinds of movements but not having to do it exactly how I do it. This is a way all of us can be together as a group and also of just coming in to the body’. The participants are moving outside in a public place, moving and experiencing the space and different weather conditions in a way that is likely to be dissimilar from how other people, such as dog walkers, are experiencing it. Michelle says that people seem to like having this structure first and that it is a helpful transition to developing an individual response where people move off, not far from each other so they can be themselves but still have the sense that they are part of a whole group that is moving. Each workshop tends to be about three hours in length and coming together in this way at the start is supportive. During the course of the workshop, often at its end, there is a space for artistic or personal response: ‘People might write or draw or create a little bit of environmental artwork’. Some of these responses may be viewed on the ‘Moving Naturally’ website (http://www.moving-naturally.co.uk).

Thus we can see how moving the way she does in the heathland locations is part of what Michelle has described as her journey of human embodiment. It involves the physical movement of yoga, dance and other movements that are free from being stylized, the use of senses more than just the visual, together with an opening of the emotions and thoughts. These are not processes that are undergone separately or felt individually but a sensitizing embodiment in an empathetic relation to the environment moved in.

In the following section we consider in much more detail the work of two local artists whose work has been directly inspired by the pebbles and the heathland landscape itself. During an unguarded moment while talking to the assistant manager of Black Hill quarry, Chris remarked that the pebbles that were to be annihilated by crushing and turned into aggregate were rather beautiful and aesthetically pleasing. Had he kept any that were particularly interesting? The assistant manager’s jaw dropped with an expression of total disbelief. He eventually commented ‘Well, you can go back to the Stone Age and live in a mud hut but we need these materials to maintain our prosperity and way of life’. That, if you like, is a functionalist view of the qualities of pebbles. We now examine them as material media of both artistic agency and aesthetic appreciation.
The uniqueness of pebbles: the story of the beach artist

Having retired early due to ill health Barbara Hearn started to paint when she was recovering. One evening when walking at Ferrings, a beach on the English south coast, she looked down, saw the pebbles and thought ‘Gosh, that would make a better painting than the one I’d been trying to do’. She took a photograph but found she could not paint pebbles very easily from a photograph and so returned and collected some samples. Since then she has painted pebbles from a number of beaches and now, living in Budleigh Salterton, paints the pebbles from this location. Her works, then, are based on the border between land and sea. Barbara has sorted and arranged pebbles since her childhood: ‘A very early memory of mine is having shops on the beach and having rows of pebbles and shells and selling them to people. That was my shop. Everything arranged on that beach very beautifully’. She finds that each beach visited is different and that although they have more or less the same kinds of stones, the proportion of colours to be found varies greatly. Each pebble is regarded as being special: ‘I haven’t come across one that’s not special but there are no other pebbles like Budleigh Salterton ones, are there? That’s the only place where I’ve found this particular shape. They’re not round, they’re flattened. They are a very specific shape and form’. She explains how there are many different ways to look at a pebble, as there are several different angles to view it from and one side of the pebble may be different to the other. Also, when the pebble is turned round it can look very different and this can result in a particular pebble appearing in several paintings without ever looking the same. This handling of the pebble is pleasurable for her: ‘I like the feel of them, the tactile sense’. Some of these pebbles are very smooth; others are more textured: ‘The Budleigh Salterton pebbles are interesting because of their speckled nature and the patterns you get on them’. Barbara herself has favourite pebbles. She particularly likes pinky-coloured ones that have many speckles on them but has found, when conducting workshops and when serving as an artist in residence in a school, that the sort of pebble she thinks most pleasing will not interest someone else. For her, the combination of the pebbles’ elliptical and repetitive forms, together with the variety of colours and patterns, is fascinating.

Colour is of great importance to Barbara and this is why she describes the Budleigh Salterton pebbles as ‘a joy to paint’. Some of the first pebbles she painted were bright orange, but she then realized that
these were quite unusual ones. Now she focuses on getting an initial correct representative balance of colours of the beach’s pebbles in her paintings, although she says that she does tend to put in more white and black pebbles than you would find proportionally on the beach because it helps ‘make’ the picture. She believes there are more greys, pinks and purples than orange, black, brown or white pebbles on the beach at Budleigh Salterton and feels that the Pebblebed Project’s attempt to colour-code the pebbles in the archaeological excavations must be a difficult task:

Because you get that orange with the pink, don’t you, and you get a deep sort of brown with purple in it and then you might turn the pebble over and find there is a corner that’s grey with bits of orange in it. Even the red ones have got that brown in them. So they are very unusual.

(Barbara Hearn)

It is interesting to learn of how Barbara works colour when she is painting. For example, for the pinky-coloured pebbles she uses a permanent rose that is deep pink in colour and adds burnt sienna, which is warm mid-brown: ‘Now those are two colours you would never have on your palette together but when you are painting Budleigh Salterton pebbles this is necessary’. She remarks how the soil on the cliff face itself is red sandstone, a red-orangey colour, and this is maybe why she adds burnt sienna too in order to get the correct tone of pink.

Prior to painting Barbara does not have an arrangement in her mind but chooses a number of pebbles of varying size and colour. The pebbles are then wetted as this exaggerates their colour. Chosen pebbles are laid out on a tray: ‘This means the spaces between the pebbles are interesting … on the beach they would be overlapping so what I do is quite artificial; it’s almost like an abstract’. Next she chooses a pebble that she really likes and this becomes her focal point. She draws its shape but does not paint it at this stage. Then she takes another pebble whose shape she finds pleasing and draws that. Pebbles of the same colour are rarely placed together. In this way a small composition grows in the picture’s centre, with an intention that there are echoes through the whole painting, with pebbles placed strategically so the eye travels: ‘What is so very interesting, which I found from teaching children and adults to paint pebbles, is to find the composition pleasing is actually much more difficult than you would think and I normally now encourage people to find three pebbles that go together to start their painting’. Once this central composition is flowing she then starts to paint, having decided what
her palette is for the beach; she normally has no more than four basic colours that she mixes. She tries to create what she describes as a limited palette and states that even bright orange pebbles contain four basic colours. A note of the colours used is made: ‘I will write down the four colours because I may not finish the painting at that sitting, so I need to remember’. Textures are created when necessary and this may mean adding salt to create a clump effect or adding salt to a pearly mix when it is very, very wet. To get the subtle mottled or speckled effect, table salt is put in to the wet mix as it fixes the paint, and then a toothbrush used to splatter the speckles. Candle wax is used to create the white lines on black pebbles. In order to show the direction of the light each pebble has a light side and a dark side:

While it is still wet I’ll take a brush and put extra water on where I want the light bit using gravity to hold it, to let the paint drag down. And then if I’m not happy with it as it is drying I will add more colour. I fiddle around. It’s fun to do, great fun. When people first do it they squeal!

(Barbara Hearn)

Once she is satisfied with the centre, she slowly builds up other pebbles: ‘What I will try and do is to get the eye to flow round the painting and that’s where the Budleigh Salterton ones are useful because you can turn them on their side and they will be long and thin and they will make arrows for the eye’. Next the spaces are filled in with little pebbles whose colours will either grab attention – ‘look at me’ – or blend in. In this way she makes judgements regarding placement, colour and flow. The final piece of work is to add black spaces: ‘Sometimes I just scribble with a very soft pencil and then wash it in with water and the graphite will fix. Sometimes I use a charcoal pencil; sometimes I’ll use the colours already on the palette, all the oddments to fill in the spaces over the pencil to blend it nicely’ (Figs. 9.2 and 9.3).

All of Barbara’s pebble paintings are created in watercolour: ‘it has to be watercolour because as the watercolour is drying, I’m dropping colour in and fiddling with it’. She runs a pebble-painting course named ‘Painting texture’: ‘It teaches them the techniques of getting different textures and how you can achieve that with watercolour. You couldn’t do that with oils’. She also creates a dark background as this has the effect of throwing the pebbles forward: ‘If you keep it fairly gentle behind the pebbles the picture does not look so dramatic’.
When Barbara initially tried to paint pebbles it was from a photograph, but she found that this did not work very well. The essence of the pebble was not captured. She needs to hold the pebble while she is painting it: ‘Yes, if I don’t handle them, I don’t paint them anywhere near as well. It’s interesting. There is something about the feel of what I’ve got in my hand’. Barbara has painted Budleigh Salterton pebbles so often now that she finds she has a quick response to them: ‘I think it’s capturing some kind of emotion from them’. In turn, she describes herself as not being conscious and being lost to the world when she is painting: ‘I wouldn’t eat, I’d forget to drink; it’s like a bit of meditation with that bit of paper and the colours … very content with myself and not really worried about what was coming through, not thinking about what I was painting, being at one with what was inside me’. Importantly, Barbara only paints when she is happy: ‘I can’t paint when I’m sad, when I’m not feeling good about myself I cry when I try to paint’. Her paintings then, may be considered to be happy paintings and she believes that comes through: ‘Some people said that when they see my work; not everybody but with some people it resonates. I do know when I’m painting well there is a joy there’. However, she does not want people to make conceptual associations or read meanings in to her pebble paintings: ‘I want people to make them their own really’.

It may be seen that Barbara’s relationship with each pebble painted is personal. Each pebble is held, its essence captured in the painting, the colours used echoing the pigmentation found in the pebbles and their environs, and the colours in her mind’s eye becoming a corresponding repetition of what is seen and felt, a repetition of form but uniqueness of being. She becomes attached not only to the pebbles she paints but to some of her paintings too, and nearly cried when she sold her first as she could barely part with it. Her absorption and contentment when working are part of this process of the capture of colour, essence and a making of something that she hopes will bring happiness to others too.

The Pebblebed Project artist’s story

Our next artist, Priscilla Trenchard, is another who has had a long-term fascination with pebbles. She too is interested in sorting and arranging the pebbles and takes pleasure in the tactile experience they give her. The way she works is very different from Barbara’s methodology, however, as are her completed pieces of work. First we will look at Priscilla’s
Figure 9.2  Pebble painting 1. Painting by Barbara Hearn

Figure 9.3  Pebble painting 2. Painting by Barbara Hearn
experience and feelings about the Pebblebed heathlands. Then we will discuss the work she produced for the Pebblebeds Project.

As a child Priscilla lived in the coastal town of Seaton and brought pebbles home, and since then – ‘Always, wherever I go, even in the US, I’ve collected pebbles’. She has ‘gone past’ the heathland much of her life and visited Woodbury Common as a child but it is only recently that she became so involved with the Common, and this was through her university course work. She and her partner, a cultural ecologist, wanted to work on something together that was related to people’s reactions to things in the landscape. At first she was going to make a cairn on Budleigh Salterton beach and see whether people added to it but then a friend told her about the dig on the heathland: ‘I had no idea who Chris Tilley [the project director] was but I wrote to him and I met him and he said, “Join in things”, and it was great; my Master’s thesis was written up about the dig’. Priscilla illustrates this engagement in her contribution to the book *Between: Ineffable Intervals* (PLaCE 2012: 64–70), a collaborative work by thirteen landscape artists.

Like several of our interviewees Priscilla remarks that there is little in the British landscape that has not been ‘touched’ and so although she finds the Pebblebed heathland to be a natural place, it is not wild. In fact she describes it as being ‘uncomfortable’ and ‘painful’ when walking through the gorse: ‘I was like a little pin cushion. I think it’s slightly bleak, quite a moody landscape; I don’t think it’s altogether inviting; it’s slightly aloof and I found it quite intimidating initially’. This initial experience came after she attended the archaeological excavation and was invited to work in the landscape; her feelings of intimidation were perhaps not just to do with the heathland itself but also because she was joining a group of people whom she did not know: ‘I didn’t know Chris, I didn’t know anybody; who were the professionals and who were the volunteers. It was more than just landscape, it was personalities as well’. She remarks that this is her first experience of being on an archaeological excavation and has never been anywhere where pebbles have been scrutinized in so much detail.

Soon she started to appreciate the heathland, finding the actual process of getting to the excavation sites themselves as an enjoyable experience: ‘The process of going there, the process of going with the whole group, the same trails every time and setting up the site; I really got to love it’. Priscilla finds ‘repetition’ to be of importance, returning over and over again to the same place in order to get to know it: ‘That’s what I like about Colaton Raleigh Common. I look forward to seeing the next ridge and then you get to where Tor Barrow is (a Bronze Age pebble
cairn) and there is the whole sense of arriving that I like’. She finds that when she drives across Woodbury Common she now sees it differently; that it is not necessarily a love with the place but she is now intrigued with it: ‘It is the familiarity with it that makes me want to go back’. The heathland’s bleakness, gorse, heather and trails are now appreciated.

In her writing on the Pebblebed Project website Priscilla describes Tor Barrow as like being in Avalon: ‘I felt we were in a special place. It’s unfriendly terrain and yet it felt very powerful. Down below was all the greenery and I did feel we were up somewhere wonderful, and the connection with the group as well; it was very, very interesting’. Her feelings towards another excavation site at Aylesbeare are not as warm: ‘I was quite grumpy there. We all sat like we were on a beach, looking at the beautiful view but, I don’t know, it just didn’t have the serenity that the other places have’. She explains that this location was close to the road and she could see a few buildings, making it more connected to contemporary life than the Tor Barrow, which felt more special with a sense of belonging to the project team. When contrasting her experience of being on the Pebblebeds with Dartmoor, she describes them as not drawing themselves to her the way Dartmoor does. When asked if she found the heathland changed in character when it was sunny she describes how she herself changes in character when it is hot: ‘I’m not very nice, so, I was really happy with the weather up there. There’s always a breeze. I can’t bear still air. I need to feel movement and air so I was very glad that it was dull up there’. Priscilla likes to know there is what she calls an ‘edge’ to the landscape and describes how she felt claustrophobic when living in North Carolina with its mountains: ‘The one thing about being in Britain, the edge is never that far away. We were high up and down there was all this lusciousness and the lovely aspect of High Peak and that whole ridge that goes along the top’.

Besides her excavation work, the only recent occasion she has walked the Pebblebed heathland was with Chris, soon after a big wild fire had swept through. She found the blackened and charred landscape interesting and describes it as being like a drawing:

It was like a living drawing to me because of the black lines where the bracken was just starting to grow. The new ferns looked extraordinarily like black spirals but when I went to pick them, they were juicy inside. Despite being charcoal burnt on the outside, they were still alive inside. It was very odd to be somewhere that was completely black. After a while it was a bit depressing because you knew why it was black as well. The sad thing was we found cooked
eggs and all the things that would have been alive on the surface – if they couldn’t fly, they were cooked.

(Priscilla Trenchard)

Priscilla remarks on how the fire had changed the structure of parts of the landscape: trails had vanished and this made map reading difficult: ‘And, of course, it smelt still of fire and I actually love that smell, the smoky smell but again, you know the damage that has been caused’.

The pebbles themselves Priscilla finds interesting, and feels that they are reminiscent of her childhood where she collected them in Seaton:

They are tactile, very basic earthy connections with the land I think. The patterns in them, the grey ones with just white stripes. It’s fascinating to me. It’s got a graphic element so sometimes I just collect bundles of those; ones with holes in. It’s like they all have a little mystery to them.

(Priscilla Trenchard)

She remarks on how people look for pebbles when they are on the beach at Budleigh Salterton, and she does the same: ‘I’m not looking up at the view but down at the pebbles. Some of the ones that aren’t exciting can still be of interest to me’. The shape of the pebbles and their smoothness is, she believes, what makes them special, and although she likes their colours she describes the scope of those colours as being limited. Their magic lies in the holding of them. She says that although some people read things in to the pebbles, she prefers not to: ‘“I can see a witch’s face; I can see a tree”; I tend not to want to see images in this way. I tend to look at the pebble and enjoy it. This colour is next to that, and the pattern and the way when you turn the pebble it changes. It may be mirrored on the other side, it may not’. As a child Priscilla always had a matchbox of objects in her pocket: ‘It held either a stone or a bug or a piece of something, a connection. It was like some other land, some other place I could go but I think it takes me back on a journey through history, it is something which is solid and re-assuring’.

When we look now at the work Priscilla did for the Pebblebed Project dig and her Masters degree we will discover some of the ways in which her heathland experience and the feelings associated with it have helped influence what has been produced and how.

Having taken part in excavation work at Tor Cairn Priscilla felt she had to break away and commence her artwork, but she felt quite guilty at
leaving the group to do this. It made her question what ‘work’ is, whether it means producing something or if having an ‘idea’ is also ‘work’. She had never worked in a landscape before and knew she did not want to bring paper in to it. Another woman on the dig knew quite a lot about weaving and this interested Priscilla: ‘I thought, okay, I’m only here so many days; I can’t learn to weave properly in this time; I can’t actually do a proper weaving’. She decided, however, to weave a container for the pebbles (which would have been carried by the prehistoric people to the cairn in this manner), and initially tried working with willow. This she found to be a frustrating process, mainly due to her lack of knowledge about which season such materials should be gathered and her attempt to create a structure that was regular in shape. The next decision was to use the materials that were more to hand – the gorse and heather. She walked down in to the valley to harvest materials that were manageable and pliant and then considered that this too was not quite right: ‘I thought, no, I’m going to deal with what’s here and what I can do with what’s here’. And so, using the rigid gorse and heathers, she commenced by putting a few things together, tying them initially and then pushing in more materials. She describes the weaving as taking on a life of its own: ‘I wanted to make a basket and it just kept growing out’. Eventually she placed it on the cairn: ‘I put it in the landscape and I thought, “Oh, it’s done”. It looked like a woven flame so I called it “Woven Flame”’. To her delight the other people working that day came to look at it, each one of them leaving a stone inside of it. It was as if a form of ritual had been established. When asked whether she felt that this was akin to a giving back to the landscape, Priscilla said it was: ‘Because it was very much of the stuff that was there, of course it looked at home there’. The roots of gorse mimic the way the gorse grows above ground and this lent Priscilla the notion that the weaving was mimicking back at the landscape. To an observer, looking at this Woven Flame, one can feel that it not only mimics itself back to the landscape, it also looks back at the observer.

Priscilla says she felt this too and put her camera inside the basket to take a photograph looking out. She has gone back to the site to see how this weaving has changed with the seasons: ‘It’s not woven properly so it will eventually collapse I think. So I go like a pilgrimage to the site’.

Priscilla’s fascination with the fire at the dig (the excavation team had found traces of fire and burning on the old ground surface on which the cairn was built) also led to her own work with fire and smoke (having invited the fire brigade to check her home beforehand for possible dangers): ‘Fire, watching flames seems to be a very important thing ceremonially in lots of cultures, and in Christianity you have baptism by fire. It’s
Figure 9.4  Woven Flame 1

Figure 9.4a  Woven Flame 2
a very important element to live with so it’s very significant’. One of the things she does is to try and capture the smoke; she tries to draw it and has found that many of these images appear to contain human form. She has a sink full of water into which the carbon, from candle smoke on paper, is released onto the surface of the water. The carbon then reassembles and cracks and this ‘drawing’ is lifted on to another sheet of paper where it is held in a more stable state. ‘It was very interesting to capture material disappearing in to what seems like nothingness’ (Figure 9.5) (Priscilla Trenchard).

The tonal colours of both the pebbles and the soil from which they come are of immense interest to Priscilla and she has used the archaeological grid from the Aylesbeare site to make colour classifications:

The whole thing about the soil, to me, is just wonderful, the tones, and I collected all the different coloured earths that came up, even the burnt bits. Chris let me take samples and I ground them down and have them all out and I may make pigments out of them, at some point. I’d like to impregnate something with the pigments, you know, it’s been fascinating; I can’t tell what else will come from it.

(Priscilla Trenchard)

When asked if she thinks colour can evoke emotions, she agrees and states that formerly she used a lot of colour and although people may respond more easily to colour because of the emotions it may induce, her work is now more monochromatic and subdued.

Of her pebble paintings she describes much of it as being to do with a calligraphic mark:

Having done calligraphy and learnt to manipulate the drawing instrument, the way you hold it, there is something wonderful about the pebble shape, the way you make it. So I like that gestural
flow, that way of working; when you are drawing them as pebbles it’s to do with depth and overlay and counterplay.

(Priscilla Trenchard)

She says that most drawing is about light, not line, and when trying to make a mould of a pebble this created problems:

Because when we look at it in our heads we actually create an outline. A pebble doesn’t actually have an outline like that. If I was drawing it from an actual pebble, it would have to be about light hitting a surface so I have abstracted it to a movement about line. It is very rarely that I would draw a line that meets up the other way. I do multiple lines.

(Priscilla Trenchard)

Chris asked Priscilla to draw the pebbles in a section of the cairn using an iron grid. She did not enjoy this as, like the artist Barbara Hearn, she finds a pebble has no edge and there are several angles from which it may be looked at: ‘Every time you moved your head to one side of the grid, you saw something different. It was doing my head in. In a more patient life twenty years ago I would have loved doing that, now it’s a “no, I can’t”’. As has been stated, Priscilla does not read things in to the pebbles and her work is not about drawing things as they are but from what she can extract from the thing – pebble, smoke, earth: ‘It’s more about expression’. The iron grid used in the technical process of drawing an archaeological section was used, or subverted, by Priscilla for another on-site artwork. She collected pebbles of different colours and placed them in the grid. When wetted they came alive, creating a dazzling display (Figure 9.6).

The methods used in the excavation work were found to be similar to those Priscilla often uses when making an artwork – working in layers and then allowing things to reveal themselves or not. For her some of the layers are in the repetitive journeying to a significant place, the archaeological site; the marking and making of a pebble colour grid for example. In one piece of work the marks made by indentations and other things in the soil are worked on and layered, the different images making up the composition: ‘It’s why you can’t read it as being on Woodbury Common’. Other layers have been formed when she has left fabric with pebbles on it in the landscape from which a natural print forms from the debris and the mud (Figure 9.7). Another attempt at layering was when a fabric sheet with pebbles laying on it was successively splattered with
muddy water. Instead of a material layered effect, it became ghostly in appearance, which again can be seen as a kind of layering, on this occasion the presence of past time. When she writes about her work now, making artistic statements, she describes the way she works as being an
archaeological means of working with landscapes, materials and fragments: ‘Putting things together so other people can make the connections and frequently the way I put paint down, it’s surface on surface’. In her Master’s exam she displayed the materials from which she had worked, placing the ground-down muds, charcoal burnings and sieved ash sections in jars – this in effect became the journal of her work.

Whereas Barbara finds background to be of great importance in her paintings of pebbles, Priscilla does not: ‘For me it is a physical thing. It’s not just the look of the pebbles. It’s about it making a print and what will I do with that? I like working with the elements; it’s all about the experimental, allowing things to happen, which I can’t predict’.

Conclusions

We have seen in this chapter how the notions of repetition, colour, the tactile nature of pebbles, the pleasure in the visual aspects of a pebble and being in a landscape of pebbles, and the gestural movements used in painting are crucially important to our artists, an embodied and material relation that provides affordances for their greatly different works. Those working in the arts clearly have varying degrees of engagement with the heathland and its pebbles. A number of ideas have come forth – movement, time and memory, the embodiment of the human with the landscape, pleasure and discomfort, and a sense of belonging in the landscape. As well as feelings and emotions there is the question of consciousness and the unconscious processes that also may be at play here, together with their role in establishing such feelings and emotions. Essence, expression, holding and layering, memory, movement and walking have been seen to be held in varying degrees of importance, as are the artists’ attachment to or engagement with the landscape and place, which have either subtly or strongly influenced their creative activity.