

Mapping The Black Country

Introduction

The title aim of *Mapping the Black Country* has become something of a stalking-horse for a wider investigation into public art. The time has given me the opportunity to research and discuss some key elements of working (creatively) in the public realm and has allowed me to contextualise my own practice.

What follows are some notes about The Black Country, with brief detours into some keywords relevant to public art – the text is not exhaustive and I put it here to be agreed with, expanded upon and challenged but above all to be used as starting points for debate.

'Black by day and red by night'

The Black Country owes its existence to a geological co-incidence of the ready availability of coal, iron and limestone and the ensuing industrial exploitation of these resources. Coal in particular dictated the geographical framework for the region; The Black Country being roughly analogous with the 'Thick Coal' seam of the South Staffordshire coalfield. It was Elihu Burritt that gave the term 'Black Country' common currency in his 1868 work entitled *Walks in The Black Country and its Green Borderland*, and the image of grim industry and even more grim social conditions, was enhanced by the pens of Dickens and Disraeli.



So Where is The Black Country?

Through my research of written evidence, questionnaires and discussion I have established two facts about The Black Country: Birmingham is not part of the Black Country; The Black Country is where a Black Country man says it is. So the region consists of topographical fact and human occupation. This fact isn't unique in itself as with most regions it is the language, habits and traditions that combine to define the place, but in The Black Country it's a bit different.

The region is made up of small, proud independent communities once each renowned for a particular living and over the years the workforce being augmented by an immigrant population. The Black Country has always been able to accept these incomers and this underlines one of the region's characteristics – its hospitality, the welcome may not always be immediate, but once you are seen to be genuine you will be accepted. This hospitality leads to adaptability and is another of the region's strengths; allowing the region to evolve as the economic climate dictates.



Community

Community involvement in art is all too frequently a box-ticking add-on masquerading as consultation - 'a kind of inadequate and ineffectual social work'ⁱⁱ. Exposed to a morning workshop of culture the community is left wondering what happened, while the commissioners imagine that the community has enjoyed the opportunity to express its identity through the sympathetic facilitation of an artist.

With this in mind maybe the approach to community art needs to be less fleeting and more ingrained with less emphasis actually placed on the community. Genuine communities are organic; they form over time, and evolve their common bond. Communities don't simply butt up to each other - they change shape and content; they overlap and nest.



Place

Urban planners have an urge to create a *place*, defining it with bold architectural statements and gateway art features. But, as with *community*, a place can't really be made on a whim, it has to evolve and find its own balance. This is an organic process that relies on a whole host of factors, not least time. Sometimes the places that planners wish to impose destroy an existing place that has developed over many years, but maybe now doesn't meet the glossy brochure expectations of today.

In my artistic practice I aim to reflect this subtle process by delving into the layers of the past, talking to the people of the present and having a respect for the future. As the Black Country proves, places are nebulous things; they are about human definition and impulse.

Heritage

Once upon a time towns at the edge of the Black Country were quick to distance themselves from the squalor of the region; today neighbouring towns want to buy into its tradition and heritage.

One of the Black Country's most popular destinations (after Merry Hill shopping centre) is the Black Country Living Museum. Even the hardships of the region's industrial past seem to take on an appeal that draws into the Black Country the previously uncertain towns such as Wolverhampton, Stourbridge and Halesowen. This is perhaps symptomatic of a national interest in, or yearning for past times - as we get further away from the hardships they become more fascinating; more romantic even.

But perhaps it is the security that the past brings that reassures us. With growing economic, political and social uncertainties our futures can appear daunting whereas the past that we know and love brings us comfort. This was brought home to me by the collective murmur of recognition and



familiarity heard from the audience at a recent screening in Wolverhampton of black and white archive films about the West Midlands.

Black Country Pinball

In a project running parallel with this one I am exploring the issues concerning *heritage* and *place* outlined above. The area of *community* I will start to address through my continued mapping of The Black Country. I intend to develop an approach that represents the place through community-controlled discussion, research and representation - letting the community speak for itself.

I have in mind a sort of pinball tour of the region with each person I meet referring me to the next so I will be guided by the people's understanding of what constitutes The Black Country - the specific approach will be developed over the coming months. This approach will rely on the caprice of participants, guiding me to all corners (geographic and demographic) of The Black Country as it is

today. Without a time limit, I can mirror the slow evolution of the community into the future. The process will reflect the intangibility, the just-over-there-ness, of community and place.



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ⁱ Burritt, E., 1976. *Walks in The Black Country*. Kington: Roundwood Press.

ⁱⁱ Kwon, M., 2004. *One Place After Another: site-specific art and locational identity*. Cambridge, US: The MIT Press.