

Applied Visual Arts in Public Places

One of eighteen Shetland Lace projections in the exhibition, Mirrie Lace, at Bonhoga Gallery, Shetland. Photo: Roxanne Permar

Mirrie Dancers :

Light and Lace in Shetland

mirrie Dancers was a cross-generational project that used light as a dynamic and transformative medium for community engagement and public art located in eight communities throughout the Shetland Islands. The project fused new technologies with traditional craft within Shetland's architectural and landscape contexts. It comprised a series of workshops, events, activities and temporary artworks which invited participation and facilitated creative engagement among Shetland's diverse audiences, culminating in a permanent landmark in 2012 at Mareel, Shetland's new music, cinema and education venue in Lerwick.

I conceived the project with Nayan Kulkarni in response to a Shetland Arts commission for a permanent public art work for Mareel. They specifically defined light as the medium for this commission because in Shetland Dialect the word 'mareel' means "phosphorescence seen on the sea" (Graham, 2009). The project attracted significant funding, firstly from Creative Scotlands' Inspire Fund as well as the Esmée Fairbairn Trust and the Leader Programme (European Union and the Scottish Executive) with in-kind support from Shetland College, University of the Highlands and Islands.

Significantly, the project marked the first time that light was used for public art in Shetland. The title of the project,

Mirrie Dancers, refers to northern light, meaning the auro-*borealis* in Shetland Dialect, derived from "mirr, a blur" (Graham 2009).

We developed the original commission for a permanent artwork into a socially engaged project comprising three distinct parts, Mirrie Light, Mirrie Lace and Mareel. We were thus able to investigate the potential for light to play an active role in generating creative community engagement, innovation in traditional craft practices and collective memory through shared meaning of place.

LIGHT AS A TRANSFORMATIVE MEDIUM FOR COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT AND PUBLIC ART

The first, participatory stage of the project, Mirrie Light, revealed the extent to which light can act as a dynamic medium for community engagement through shared experience. We worked with over 300 people, aged 3 to 90 years, across the majority of Shetland's geographical regions, some of which are very remote. They actively participated in the selection of sites for ten temporary illuminations, which took place during winter 2009-10. We invited them to take part in Light Labs where they made films. The films became "light scores" for a temporary illumination in their locale, which would become part of the permanent exterior light installations at Mareel. The project website provided up-to-date informa-

tion as well information about how to get involved. (www.mirriedancers.com)

Openness and inclusion were fundamental to the project as well as wide geographical spread. We actively involved people from all generations to work together, inviting everyone in Shetland to get involved. The groups were based on communities' geographical locations rather than special interests or age; they were cross-generational and inclusive. Participants of all ages, all levels of skill and experience, from absolute beginners to professionals were successfully involved.

Throughout the period of our temporary illuminations, audiences enjoyed a unique experience of light over two to six weeks. The most popular illuminations were located within the heart of a community and were visible from residents' homes. Emails and Facebook comments revealed how local communities took ownership of these sights, were thrilled to see the illumination from their home and felt disappointment when "their" illumination was taken down. Freya Inkster, a junior high school pupil at the time, commented that the temporary nature of the illuminations made them more special, even though it was sad to see them taken down (Inkster 2010).

The light we brought to the different sites effected perceptions of what audiences were seeing, whether it was sand dunes, ancient stones, houses, churches, tin sheds or Cold War buildings. The illuminations highlighted these sites, reaffirming their meaning as places; and brought familiar, un-noticed sites into focus while generating reminiscences alongside new knowledge and awareness of the histories and usage of these places.

The temporary illuminations brought new attention to familiar landmarks and prompted people to think about familiar objects or landmarks in a new way. Jane Ridland, who had known the Auld Methodist Chapel since childhood, came to see it quite differently through the temporary illumination (Ridland 2010).

The illuminations generated a sense of community ownership and even some competitiveness among communities. Local residents looked forward to the illuminations coming



Aald Haa, Hous, East Burra. Photo by Austin Taylor

to their locale. The differences between the communities inspired different approaches and affected ways participants engaged with their illumination, looked at their environment or held a different view of their place. The temporary illuminations sparked different responses, and several communities even asked if they could keep the temporary illumination on a permanent basis.

INTEGRATING SHETLAND LACE WITH ARCHITECTURE AND LIGHT

The second part of the project, 'Mirrie Lace' tested the fusion of the technologies for light and lace knitting as well as the relationship between intimate and monumental contexts for knitting alongside the pursuit of innovation within the island context of traditional craft.

We were privileged to work with some of Shetland's finest lace knitters to create permanent light works for both the interior and exterior of Mareel. Our collaboration encouraged risk, pushed boundaries and brought a fresh eye to our view of Shetland's cultural heritage in lace knitting. Shetland knitters have always embraced innovation in their response to meet market forces and changing fashion trends, and with this project they exceeded our aspirations.

Working initially for one year, then extending into two years due to construction delays, we experimented with light and lace in different architectural contexts. 23 knitters initially joined the project following a series of open meetings, one-to-one discussions and presentations of work.

Our work was focused in Lace Labs, a contemporary take on Shetland's traditional makkin and yakkin, or knitting and chatting, evenings. The knitters worked individually to produce small lace pieces, and then came together ten times between 2009 and 2012 to meet in developmental sessions. The samples were tested using a prototype projector designed by Nayan Kulkarni and the electrical engineer, Duncan Turner of Carbon Lighting.

After one year of working with the knitters, we organised an exhibition at Bonhoga Gallery in July 2010 with 18 large-scale projects within the gallery's architectural setting. The event made our work public, showcasing the knitters, and most significantly, enabling us to confirm that the large-scale light projections fulfilled one of our aims to influence the wider public to see and think about Shetland lace with new insight.

A number of factors contributed to innovation in the project. We used a process of "trial and error" which encouraged



Auld Chapel, Longfield, Dunrossness. Photo: Mark Sinclair

continued experimentation. The project released knitters from commercial constraints and thus provided opportunity to experiment freely, investigating different patterns in relation to scale and diverse materials. We provided a wide range of yarns, including monofilament, wire, linen, cotton, silk, retro-reflective and glow-in-the-dark in addition to wool. The small scale required for the light projectors enabled each knitter to finish pieces more quickly.

Communication and mutual support was also important. We engaged in extensive discussion at the Lace Labs as a large group and one-to-one. I communicated regularly with the knitters, initially by telephone and, as Light Labs progressed, through a regular Newsletter. These were circulated after each

Lace Lab to summarise our findings and latterly to sustain the project during the lengthy delays in building construction. The knitters identified well as a group, enjoying the opportunity to come together. Many knew each other before joining the project, lived in the same communities or were related to each other, e.g. sisters or mother/daughter. These “micro” groups offered another level of discussion with each other in-between Lace Labs.

The cross-generational composition of the knitters was very significant in facilitating experimentation. Knitters comprised a wide cross-section of ages, from late twenties into eighties. The less experienced knitters were able to learn and improve their technical skills by working alongside older knitters, and while experimentation with materials was absolutely not confined to the younger generations, some innovative use of materials was initiated by them. Five of the knitters were former or current students on the BA (Hons) Contemporary Textiles course at Shetland College, University of the Highlands and Islands.

While it is too early to assess the full impact of the knitters’ experience of the project, some knitters have already created new works in different contexts. Helen Robertson placed wire knitting inside an abandoned croft, and Anne Eunson has experimented with Shetland wool to make lace baskets as well as a unique, large scale knitted lace fence using black nylon twine. And perhaps most significantly, almost all the knitters overwhelmingly wish to take part in similar projects in future.

INSPIRING CREATIVE COMMUNITIES THROUGH LIGHT

This project confirmed my belief that cultural engagement extends and in-

spires shared vision and nurtures imagination. Shetlanders not only worked creatively with us during the project but also made impromptu responses to the illuminations. At our third illumination in Lochend, someone anonymously created a temporary “companion” light work on the launch night.

The process of initiating creative engagement and sustaining participation within diverse communities is complex. We successfully carried out this process by carefully developing a model for audience involvement drawing on Suzanne Lacy’s ideas where engagement grows in concentric circles from a core group (Lacy 1994, 175) through to experience the work as an audience member.

Engagement through sharing and exchange of skills, ideas and experience took place in all parts of the project, growing as it progressed. A significant number of participants took part in more than one stage, which provided crossover and continuity of experience. Those who took part in one element shared their

Mirrie Lace, Bonhoga Gallery. Photo: Mark Sinclair

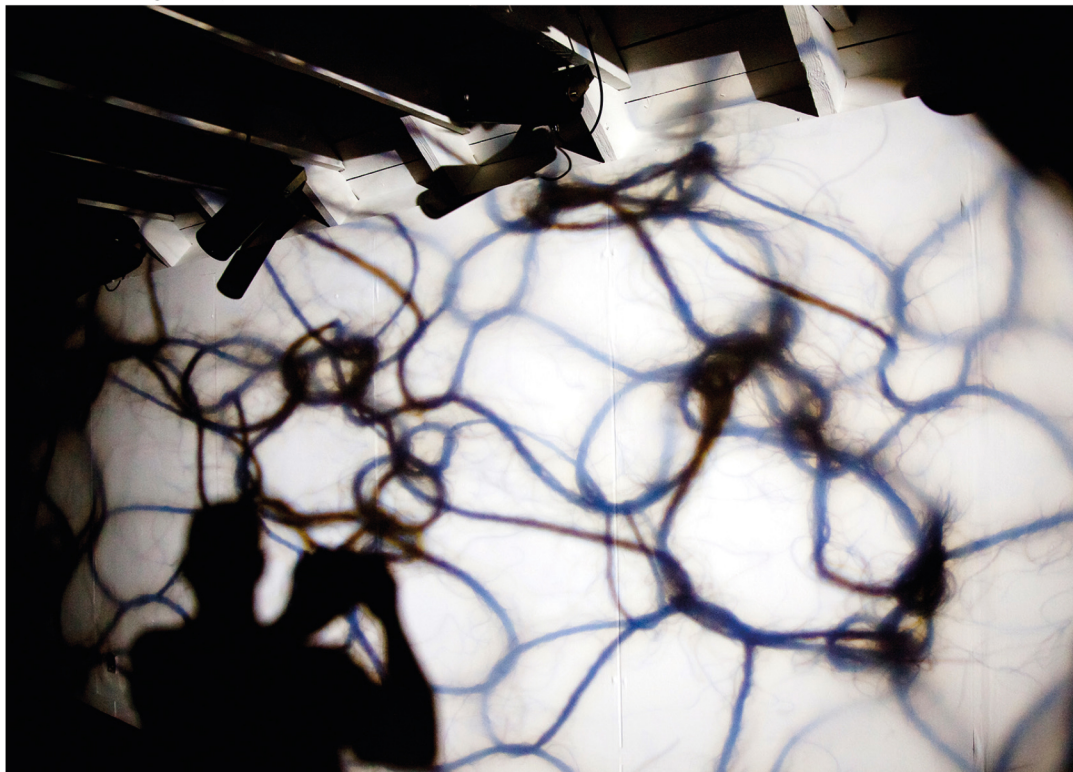




Photo: Malcolm Younger

experience with “newcomers” to the project.

Collaboration introduces further complication to processes of engagement and can unwittingly lead to misunderstanding and uneven levels of commitment. The research conducted by Karen Scopa in relation to interdisciplinary collaboration provided a useful framework for this project particularly in working with the knitters (Scopa, 2003). Our process was underlined by mutual respect, understanding and personal commitment.

Within each community this project created meaning across generations. The understanding and value of the individuals’ and whole communities’ experience was enhanced significantly with their participation in different stages of the project.

Communities felt a sense of pride in their illuminations, talked about them and shared their knowledge of the site and opinions. Schoolchildren were keen to share with family and friends what they learned during their schools Light Labs, and they were thrilled to see their work in the illuminations. The Burra History Group exhibited photographs of their illumina-

tions.

As the illuminations progressed, Shetlanders continued to be inspired and created poetry, drawing, photography and film. Students at Shetland College also worked with me throughout the project not only as participants but also by bringing their experience of their creative engagement into their personal studies in art and design, notably by working with light and lace.

The differences between the communities were significant, although there were also similarities. The project enabled people to engage with their place in new ways, e.g. looking at their environment differently. Many participants held a different view of their locale following their experience of the project.

MAREEL

In the last part of the project we installed the lace pieces into the nooks and crannies of Mareel, creating intimate and monumental experiences of light in its foyer, cafe, windows and exterior pathways. We relocated the light scores created from the temporary illuminations to create a permanent landmark on the exterior panels of the building and in its multi-storey windows. The flickering lights, from deep, rich colour to delicate, pastel shades, create a sense of purpose for the building, reflecting the popularity it enjoys among all ages of Shetlanders.

Shetland Arts hosted a marvelous Light-Up to celebrate our ambitious project in its new home. The large crowd who attended not only created a reunion for participants and project teams but demonstrated the value of their experience in the project. My favourite moment of the night reminds me how the success of public projects relies on the personal stories. In my case, it was the news that one of our knitters’, Janette Henry’s, granddaughters wants to learn how to knit Shetland lace.



Tin Shed, Haroldswick, Unst. Photo: Austin Taylor

ROXANE PERMAR

works in response to issues of location, history and community, using a variety of media including film, textiles and social exchange to realise public art projects, live events and sculptural installations. Processes of creative engagement and inter-disciplinary collaboration underpin her practice. The distinct character of every project arises from the different people and situations she meets in each location. Her involvement with Shetland began in 1985; she works locally, nationally and internationally. She teaches at Shetland College, University of the Highlands and Islands. www.roxanepermar.com

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