

What's the point of short-term? What is the legacy of non-permanence?

Roxane Permar 11 Oct 2010

Editor's introduction

Roxane Permar is an artist based in Shetland, who describes her practice as framing “*art as a vehicle for change, where people and communities come together to engage in processes of social interaction and creative exchange.*”

While her involvement with Shetland began in 1985, Roxane works locally, nationally and internationally. In 2010 she has taken part in the first International Festival of Arts in Baku, Azerbaijan and is exhibiting in *I Vesterveg*, currently touring five museums throughout Scandinavia.

Since 2008, in response to a Shetland Arts Development Agency commission for a permanent public art work using the medium of light for Mareel, Roxane has been developing the project *Mirrie Dancers* with Nayan Kulkarni. Mareel is SADA's new music, cinema and education venue, which is scheduled for completion in 2011). The project is participatory in nature, and Nayan and Roxane have worked with local residents to help them create video works which they used in a series of temporary illuminations located throughout Shetland this past autumn and winter. These video works will in turn become part of permanent light installations at Mareel.

<http://www.veernorth.org.uk/members/detail.asp?newsid=110>

<http://www.nkprojects.co.uk/>

<http://mirriedancers.blogspot.com/>

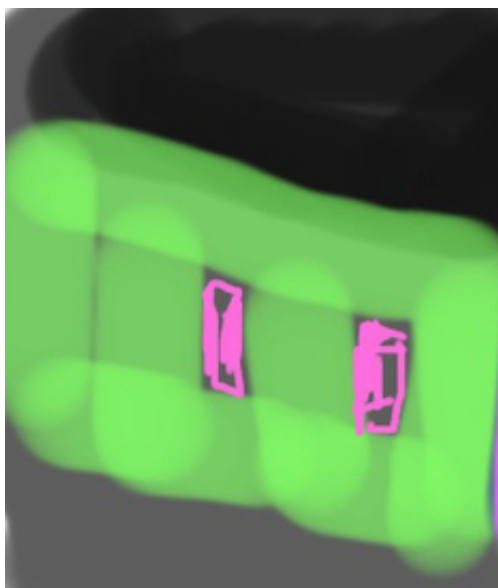
Mirrie Dancers Acknowledgements

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Some Questions



Easthouse Croft
Illumination,
Brush Strokes
Digital

The Complexity of Light

The relationship between the temporary and permanent in *Mirrie Dancers* is complex. Not only is light itself a complex medium, but the permanent and temporary elements in the project are wholly interdependent. The permanent installation will ultimately become the legacy of a collection of temporary experiences, both individual and collective, created through a combination of participatory and temporary events over this last autumn and winter.

By using temporary art and processes of participation and creative engagement, we turned the remit for a singular, public art work into a dynamic, multi-layered project involving people of all ages across Shetland. We deliberately chose to locate temporary and participatory elements throughout Shetland in the hope of engendering a sense of ownership for the permanent work that risked being seen as town-centred. Perhaps this approach also served to mediate some of the acrimonious public controversy surrounding the new building that will become the site of the permanent installations.

Drawing, Paul
Bloomer.

Each temporary illumination, and the events linked to them, were very different from each other. The sites reflected the vibrancy of Shetland's widespread local communities as well as aspects of its culture generally, from the natural environment to the maritime industries through to its role in the global context of the world wars and the Cold War.

The temporary illuminations got people talking, some were inspired, others felt let down, having expected something big, bright and flash. The illuminations attracted very local support, particularly among those who had directly participated in workshops, and in many cases we were asked if the temporary illuminations could be made permanent.

It is important to point out that the work we made was never intended to be a spectacular *son et luminaire* event. Although some sites were clearly more successful than others, when we struck the balance between the illumination and landscape context, the illumination worked very well.



Glasshouses,
Tingwall,
photographed
by Austin
Taylor

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Former
Listening
Station,
Garthsness,
South
Mainland,
photographed
by Austin
Taylor



Short-listing sites for Central Mainland, Trondra and Burra Isles, photographed by Malcolm Younger

Permanence is Relative

Mirrie Dancers marks the first time that light is being used as a medium for public art in Shetland. The temporary and participatory elements in the project have helped develop wider awareness and critical understanding of this medium, paved the way towards deeper understanding of the permanent work and created a resonant foundation for collective memory. Continuing dialogue over the next year will help promote further interest and facilitate a growing cumulative response throughout Shetland until the final work is permanently installed in Mareel.

While the magical qualities of light help attract positive response, it is nonetheless a complicated material in consideration of questions around temporary and permanent. Its ephemeral and highly experiential qualities challenge ideas of permanence. The question of permanence becomes relative, for in relation to other materials such as bronze or stone, light may not be everlasting and indestructible. The fixtures and fittings that hold the light source and feed power to it have a limited lifespan and could be regarded as temporary in relation to more durable materials.

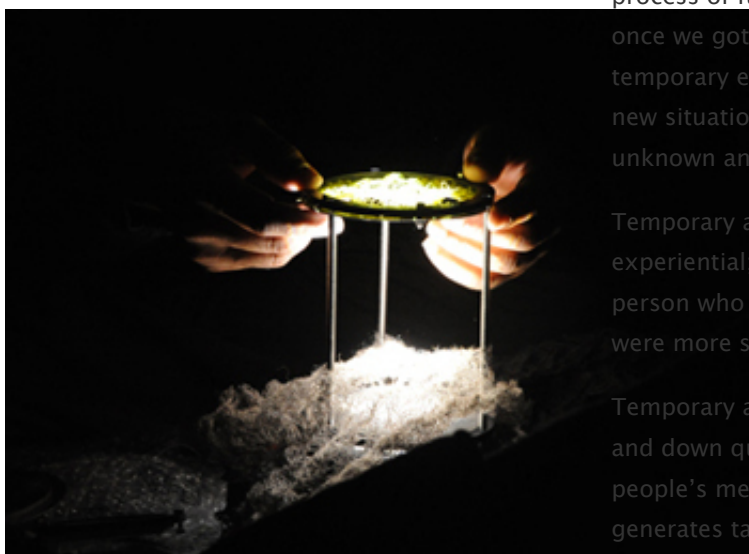
It is this tension between the temporary and permanent in *Mirrie Dancers* that has sustained my commitment and enthusiasm through the long process of fundraising and the subsequent intensity of the long hours once we got started. I enjoy the spontaneity and unpredictability of the temporary elements and the need to remain open and responsive to each new situation created with the new mix of people involved, pitching the unknown and potentially uncontrollable into our well defined frameworks.

Temporary art is of the moment. It is performative; like theatre it is experiential, at once collective and personal. Freya Inkster, a young person who took part in all stages of the project, told me the illuminations were more special because they were temporary.

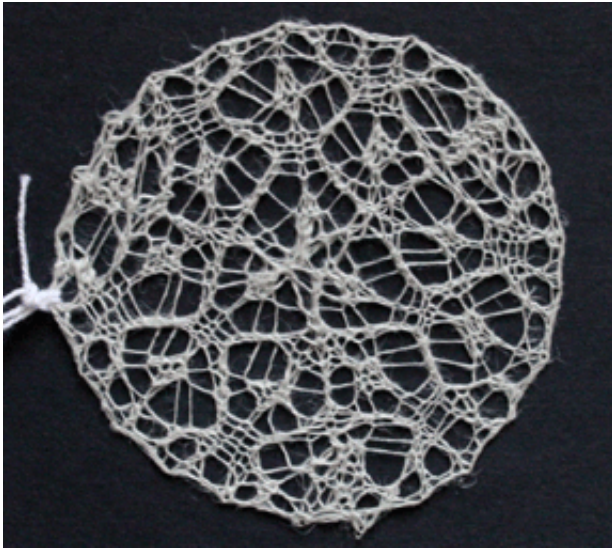
Temporary art forces audiences to respond, hothouse like as it goes up and down quickly and then takes on a life of its own afterwards in people's memories and conversations. I like the way that the temporary generates talk. People are surprised if they didn't know about it in advance; those who do know, think about it, anticipate it and then relieved and happy, they celebrate it when it finally comes. Discussion is underpinned by these different perspectives.

The legacy of temporary work usually lies in people's memories and imaginations. In the case of *Mirrie Dancers*, the building is going to form a permanent legacy to the participatory contribution. The legacy of temporary work lies in the hands of those who experience the work.

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Placing Lace in Prototype Projector, Lace Lab, Voxter, photographed by Malcolm Younger



Shetland Lace,
knitted by
Kathleen
Anderson,
photographed
by Roxane
Permar



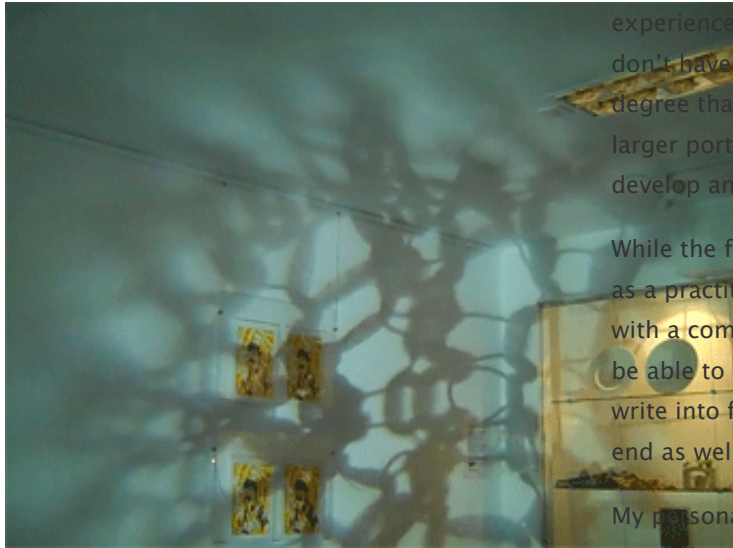
Testing lights
attracts local
audience,
Easthouse,
West Burra
Illumination.
Photographed
by Roxane
Permar.

Something to Share

I have highly valued the responses that we have collected and are still collecting to Mirrie Dancers. It's hard work, but temporary art requires you to collect responses in order to have a concrete record which of course in itself forms part of the legacy of the work. Photographs and reviews help trigger memory. Written and published texts encourage deeper thinking, contemplation and reflection. Together these form a record of the work that will keep it from being forgotten. These are very important if you don't want it to get lost once those who directly experienced it are gone.

I have loved the experience of working on this big project where I live, for that doesn't often happen these days. For a while it seemed that whenever I went into town, I bumped into at least one person who had something to share with me about the project. It is very meaningful when someone makes an effort to speak to you about the illumination that was in their locale. One of my favourite moments was when a woman working in a cafe came over to specially tell me how much she had enjoyed the illumination that she could see from her house. Another younger woman told me how she had travelled to go see one of the illuminations after I had worked with her nephew in his school. He was able to tell her much about the project, which reinforced my commitment to visiting many of the schools near each illumination.

Over time I have learned that the temporary is more flexible and responsive than the permanent. It is possible to respond quickly to new situations that might occur during the process of setting up or realising the work and to be able to change it. You can take greater risks because you are not going to visually intrude on someone's life forever. In my



Experimental
Projection, Lace
Lab, Lace
knitted by
Christine
Smith.
Photographed
by Roxane
Permar.

experience smaller budgets and less bureaucracy are usually involved. You don't have to compromise artistically in the same way nor to the same degree that the realm of permanent artworks demand. It seems to contain larger portions of the fun bits, researching, working with people to develop and test ideas.

While the flexibility and openness of temporary work are attractive to me as a practitioner, on a more practical level, how do you measure success with a complex project such as ours? It is important to evaluate in order to be able to improve working practices. I find the aims and objectives that I write into funding applications a very useful check list for reviewing at the end as well as at critical points throughout a project.

My personal criteria for the success of this project includes a sense that people's participation fostered new knowledge, awareness and understanding of the issues related to temporary work, particularly light. I feel these processes have taken place, based on responses to the work through conversations and anecdotal word of mouth. I wanted people to think, and we certainly have some evidence of thinking from all kinds of people who have been touched by this project. We also have to date a small collection of creative responses, including two poems, a film, electronic drawings, reviews published in our local paper, two recorded conversations in response to particular illuminations where the interviewee could see them from their home.



Nayan Kulkarni
and Light Lab
Participants,
Burra Isle.
Photographed
by Roxane
Permar.

The project is working because we have been able to build on networks that have long histories of trust and open-mindedness. People in Shetland have been fantastic, generously giving of their time and energy, and without them this project would not be possible.

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Glasshouses,
Tingwall,
photographed
by Austin
Taylor.



Da Giant???
Grave,
Lochend,
Northmavine.
Photographed
by Mark Sinclair

Some Questions

Ruth Barker: So Roxane, you've written so eloquently on the nature of the temporary, but were there any downsides to Mirrie Dancers' temporary nature? Did you encounter any negative or problematic issues?

Roxane Barker: One downside of working towards such temporary outcomes is that the work is very intensive and can be exhausting. We worked very long days, and there were no days off. Looking back, we also didn't allow sufficient downtime between installations in order to allow us to recuperate, and we often were working intensively in between installs. Nayan was working off-site on preparation for each install, with the first one being particularly demanding. I was doing the usual work that temporary work requires - documentation, trying to engage with audiences in order to gauge response, and (for two of the sites) also

tending to the generators due to lack of wind. Most members of the team had at least one install off, but our Project Assistant Emma Blain and I worked on all of them.

There are of course many risks associated with temporary work. The weather was a risk for our temporary illuminations. We lost locations and hence audience numbers as a result of extraordinarily unusual winter weather. I remember laughing when Nayan told me that he and Duncan had included lack of wind in the risk assessment, and of course that is precisely what happened to us! The weather conditions were completely opposite to what we usually experience in Shetland, with lots of snow, sub-zero temperatures, and little wind. These adverse conditions tested our flexibility and ability to respond to changing situations, which I feel we handled well.

RB: That flexibility and your ability to respond to situations is important.

RP: Yes. We had ten different illuminations, which meant that we were able to learn from each one and make improvements. Working in series was interesting *because*, not despite, the fact that it subjected us to new pressures. It became a positive way for us as the artists, as well as the team, to learn and improve each illumination. But this flexibility is also risky, as, by changing the way of work, of course some solutions are going to be more successful than others.

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Sand Dunes,
West Sandwick,
Yell.
Photographed
by Mark Sinclair

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