

NO LITTLE GREEN MEN

Martin Spray

THERE IS already quite a lot of it about. I mean art in the landscape: artworks made to fit, to change, to grace, particular places. One might say there always was a lot of it – but I think most of *that* was something different. This insertion of art *qua* art is a fairly new habit. Of course, the art of buildings, and memorials, and garden ornamentation, has a civilisation-long history; but land-art / earth-art / eco-art / environmental art is [or are] something different.

I sometimes wonder if all of it is necessary. I wonder, for instance, if it draws attention away from other things just as worthy. It also further humanises the land – not always what its makers wanted. Sometimes, it isn't clear where it's heading. And like many rambles, this one will probably bring us back to the starting point, but it may not be easy to say where we've been.

It is through our predominant sense that most environmental art is experienced. Speaking at a conference on landscape and sculpture, garden designer Preben Jakobsen took a particularly wide, accommodating, some might say indiscriminate, view of what art is about. "I have this belief", he said, "that when we do an object of whatever kind – it may be a fence or a wall or a gate into a garden - ... essentially that should be a piece of sculpture as well as a utilitarian object." He saw the *details* of a landscape; and saw them within an art-aesthetic. He spoke about seeing timber stacked on a quayside: "Now, for me that is pure sculpture." A different eye might like it just as much, but insist "This is not art; it is happenstance, serendipity-in-waiting." It is the unpretentious work of ordinary people.

When someone with this perspective takes a wider view, and looks not at details but at the landscape as an entity, it is seen within the same art-aesthetic frame. The landscape, at least many of the intentionally *designed* bits – whether Stourhead or a neighbour's front-garden, the grounds of Chatsworth or the grounds of the local hospital – is seen through these eyes as a work-of-art. Most of us, I guess, have such eyes. And I think it is with the same aesthetic that most of us look over [say] a landscape of rolling English down clothed in ripening wheat, or the startling yellow of fields of oilseed rape, or the sinuous drystone walls of a Yorkshire or Lakeland dale, or [as R. S. Thomas expressed it] sheep grazing a Welsh hillside, "arranged romantically in the usual manner". The same point-of-view motivates concerns to keep the long, open, challenging panoramas that so many of us enjoy in the Highlands – enjoy as *views*, for their aesthetic pleasure foremost. Even those who consider these soggy moors human-made, impoverished, and degraded, find it hard not to enjoy their 'natural' beauty, and do not entirely relish their transformation into forest.

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If I understand Robert Dixon's stimulating book *The Baumgarten corruption* [Pluto, London, 1995] correctly, I largely agree with him that what he calls the 'aesthetic orthodoxy' "contains a double premise, both parts of which are wrong: [i] that art is the paradigm aesthetic, and [ii] that Art is the paradigm art". Preben's stacks of timber, R. S's sheep, and centuries-old field walls, are where they are, and are as they are, for utilitarian reasons – our liking of them [or not...] as things of beauty is a secondary matter. Happenstances and serendipity, but also affluence and leisure, give us opportunities to add 'as art' to our ways of appreciating them [or not...], but this is secondary to their first purposes. Sometimes we need do no more than relabel what we find [e.g. timber > sculpture]; they may fire the imagination [stockproof field boundary > 'Taking a Wall for a Walk']. Sometimes the inspiration is quite subtle / complicated. I think [trampling + path > *Walking the line*] is an example.

Of course, such examples are all deliberate 'interventions' or 'installations' *in* a landscape; and the foremost reason in all such cases is known to be the making of works of art, not utility. In various parts of the world, people have spent enormous efforts drawing on the ground, scratching and scraping it, and erecting things on it... for reasons we haven't yet fathomed, but which often seem unlikely to be 'art'. If, however, utility was involved in these, just what that utility was is now commonly hidden. As things seen, they can be attractive, and we puzzle over who made them, and why, and how. We may wonder if the same things were pleasing then as now. For example, the grotesque tors of Bodmin Moor—or Dartmoor, or the Peak District – give us aesthetic pleasure, "heightened by our particular romantic appreciation of things ruined and patinated by time". No doubt for the prehistoric people who lived there, "there was also an aesthetic, [but] not just about surface form or juxtaposition but more about the quality and power of the stones". And unlike most of us, they found the stones "profoundly animate".

[1]

Whoever did make such things as the giant birds, spiders, and geometric shapes in the Nasca Desert, or the Uffington White Horse [or Dragon] in southern England – and some people claim that if not made by superhumans or magicians they *must* be the work of Little Green Men – had evident skill, lively imagination, and not a little insight into geometrics. Many people hold them in awe; and today, 'lost skills', 'lost knowledge', magic, *and* L.G.M., are still invoked to explain such 'mysterious' contemporary, but surely more understandably artwork, creations as so-called crop-circles.



II

There are several peculiar things in all this. I am not examining this systematically, but will try to highlight some aspects that seem particularly interesting.

* Our dominant sense is vision. We moderns are probably all inclined to try to perceive / imagine and describe / explain our environment and things in it as things *seen*, and seen within an aesthetic attuned to artefacts rather than the so-called natural. And very often we pigeonhole things alongside definite works of art without considering the appropriateness of other pigeonholes. I regret the devaluing of what we call the natural – but I'll not pursue that now. I do not wish to imply that human-works are unnatural, or intrinsically bad.

* Touchyfeeling in English culture remains rather inhibited; and we are scientifically rather ignorant, still, of our bodies' perception of things vaguely called electromagnetism, forces, fields, and what Rupert Sheldrake calls 'morphogenetic fields'. Such things have fuelled the inspirations of students of 'lost knowledge', 'mysteries', and L.G.M.. As usual, of course, there are gems amongst the sediment.

* There is a tendency to under-rate what humans can do. Oddly, there is also a tendency to claim too much for what humans can do. Or, rather, what humans used to be able to do.... I can think of no sensible reason for not believing that human beings who were in no significant way biologically different from us made Stonehenge. Likewise, it seems unnecessary to believe that blocks of stone were moved from Dyfed to Wiltshire by levitation. Sweat, ropes, poles, broken bones, time, and luck, are sufficient. We may have lost / abandoned much particular knowledge / understanding down the millennia, and may have become in some ways unskilled, but I find it no help at all, to think that there were quanta differences between megalithic 'Druids'' ability to move boulders by magnetism and ours.

* This world is our home. It is normal. We are suited to it – whether by design or evolution. Just as there seems no merit in trashing it, there seems no need to stick the word 'mysterious' to any- and everything in it we haven't got an explanation [or multiple explanations...] for. Were those mysterious blue-stones levitated along mysterious energy lines by subtly mysterious forces? Science is commonly over-rated: it has made only a tentative start to 'explaining' the world – and anyway is only one way of 'explaining' it. But mysteriousification explains nothing. It takes Guy de Maupassant's instruction of 1888 – "The least thing contains something mysterious. Find it." – too seriously... moreover, only a year before, Arthur Conan Doyle had pointed out that "it is a mistake to confound strangeness with mystery". I don't wish to deny that the world – both the human-made bits of it and the rest – is bewilderingly fascinating, and still preponderantly beautiful. It is, after all, still our only home – "like it or lump it", as we used to say. Mostly we like it, and – I think – *therefore* tend to find it beautiful.

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* A small but swelling band is making efforts to celebrate the fascination, and beauty, and indeed mystery, and to condemn and try to counter the trashing, by their skills as artists. Their / your efforts manifest as objects and happenings in the landscape, and indeed as whole landscapes-as-art. There is now quite a lot of it about. Meanwhile, on [for example] various quaysides, stacks of timber [for example] are being made without any thought of sculpture, and unmade without any pretence of performance [though both the stacking and unstacking can be fascinating to watch...].

* I'm reminded of William Morris's plea that we should have in our home – Earth – only things we believe to be beautiful or know to be useful. [I hesitate to correct him to "*and* know", after remembering that Ruskin advised us that "the most beautiful things in the world are the most useless" – though the peacock might well agree with the peahen that a magnificent tail has a quite important use!] What might Morris's take on those quayside timber stacks have been? For me, they are reminders that the everyday, ordinary, utilitarian, and transient, can – sometimes, perhaps commonly – strike and affect a person as much as something that is [as it were] deliberately aimed at them. I'm with Preben, except that I think I arrive by a different aesthetics route.

* Set somewhat tangentially to Morris's point of view, and Jakobsen's, is the belief that our science-centred culture makes a mistake in thinking of 'aesthetic' qualities as "qualities of things. [...] I insist", said designer R. S. Latham, "that they are qualities of experience". Whichever it is, aesthetics tends to overshadow considerations of both function / utility and ecology / sustainability. Sometimes the aesthetic parameters we have are very narrow: for instance, my own enjoyment of the pattern of greens and blue offered by pasture, woodlots, and fields of flax in flower, compromises my disliking of that landscape's ecology and also my professed preference for 'the beauty of nature'. It takes no immediate account of what the flax is for, or of what else might grow there. On my pin-board is a magazine photo of Indonesian rice paddies: a panorama of top-to-bottom hillside terraces, and almost nothing else in view. Just paddies: it is a denial of wildness; it is engrossing. Preben might



call it art. An earth-artist might be proud to have made it. This single-minded landscape is so extensive, some might say it must be the work of L.G.M.! And those who made it, or live there now?... it is source of sustenance and back-ache.

III

These raw and naive thoughts are prompted by browsing some recent publications, and by watching Tony Robinson explaining British hillforts on t.v.. The books didn't seem of immediate interest to the Network – but, they are of background interest, and each in its way helps point up the value of looking at the wider context.

Words in place. Reconnecting with nature through creative writing is the write-up of the creative writing course Paul Matthews runs at Emerson College in Sussex. [2] A Steiner devotee, he makes passing reference to flow-forms and energies, gnomes and nature spirits. However, my guess is that if such things are left to amuse themselves, the writing course still works; and if it is 'customised' ought still to be successful and stimulating. Its intention is to "encourage a faculty of imagination capable of apprehending the inside of the world and the outside of the mind". It looks interesting; and I wholeheartedly agree with the suggested first step: "being willing to play and be silly"... One of the early exercises should indicate the tone: "Go out [...] in groups of three and [select] one human-made object [he specifies 'not a work of art'], spend some time in its presence, observing it through your various senses [...]. Having done this, let one member of the group write about *It*; another address it as *You*; and the third lend it a voice and speak for it as *I*. "

Not easy.... The hope is that participants begin to know their environment, fellow species, *and* fellow humans in a more *participatory* way: the way that comes more readily in the absence of advanced civilisation, and that we think our prehistoric and early historic ancestors enjoyed.

Some of our customs are surprisingly persistent. Even more surprising is that occasional fragments of the landscape in which they developed still exist. Phil Cope's photographic journey *Holy wells: Wales* takes in 44 fragments. [3] Fifty years ago, more than a thousand were listed; Cope has found something over 200. A loss of 80% might be read as a severe degradation of landscape; but, that so many survived into the fifties might be taken to indicate rather a lot of holiness in Welsh ground!

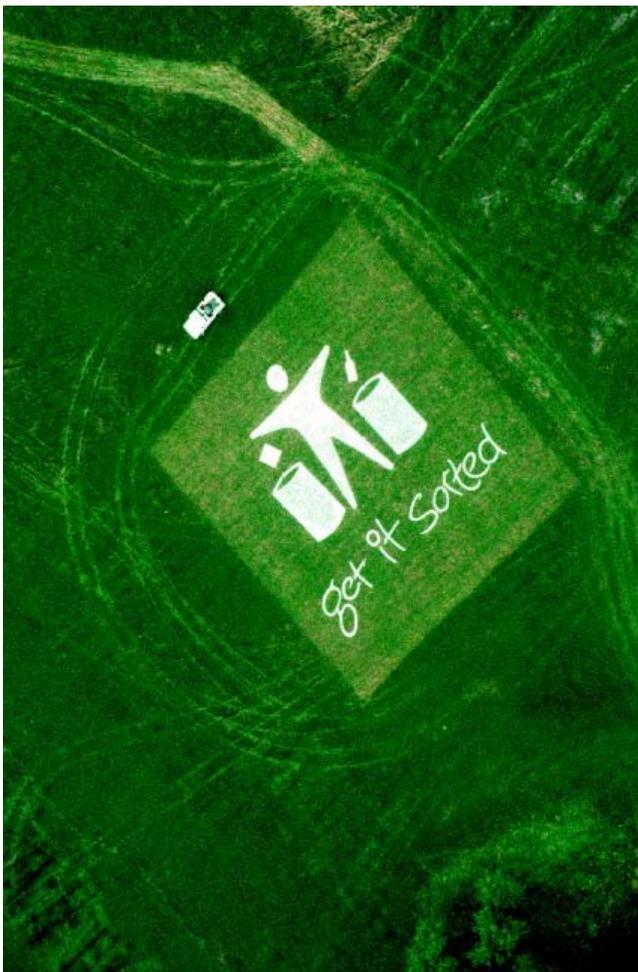
Which wells count as holy depends, says Jan Morris in her introduction, on what one thinks is holy – but of the ones so called she says "it is certainly true that many [have long been regarded] as transmitters of energies beyond human explanation [...]". Cope, who appears to equate holiness with wells that bear the names of [Celtic] saints, comments that they are commonly believed "to predict the future [...] to erupt with milk or blood [...] to be home to fairies", and so on, as well as to cure various sicknesses.

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Holy Welsh wells, then, are particular spots imbued with mysteriousness. In some parts of Britain, whole landscapes are. And amongst the best known are those parts of Wiltshire including Avebury & Silbury and Stonehenge & Woodhenge. These two 'ritual landscapes' are detailed in *Prehistoric sacred sites in Wessex*.

This is one of a family of attractive, well-illustrated booklets published in the mysteriousness tradition. [4] It presents summaries of over 50 ancient insertions into the region's landscapes, including folklore references and a variety of guesswork, as well as measurements and dates. Sober archaeologists would, I guess, not dislike much of it; their tipsy colleagues might wish to discuss [say] theories of Silbury Hill as a huge fertility figure or Earth Mother womb.

Other Wessex booklets are devoted to particular places / structures / phenomena.. *Stonehenge. Earth & sky*, and *Avebury. Sun, Moon & Earth*, tell of two of the world's most interesting prehistoric structures. *Stonehenge* is a fair review, with the expected comments on calendars. *Avebury* makes useful reference to other British sites for context and comparison, including enthusiastic comments on 'earth mysteries'.



A new use for hill figures? The 'Get it sorted!' recycling campaign logo painted - temporarily - on a closed landfill site in Gloucestershire. Image courtesy of Get it Sorted Ltd.

Ley lines of Wessex "hopes to give you a clear introduction to the ideas involved", bearing in mind that "whether or not [they] exist is still hotly debated". It is written as though the debate ended some time ago, unfortunately, making the interpretation of some intriguing patterns difficult.

An introduction to crop circles, which I have not seen, and *Crop circles. The hidden form*, look at these contemporary, ephemeral, impressive, often beautiful, 'works of art' that many people think cannot be the work of humans – even [they say] if not the creations of L.G.M., or at least of magicians, they are *very mysterious*.

IV

Silbury Hill, Stonehenge, Avebury Circle, chalk figures [the subject of an earlier Wessex booklet], and the overnight manifestations in the wheat-fields, have several things in common. We are impressed by them. They tend to make us think "We couldn't do that! At least, not without bulldozers [or whatever]". We are skeptical that 'science' can get to

grips with explaining some of them [it has groped a little way...]; we say there are mysteries and energies that can be understood only in ways known to the long-dead and *perhaps* just a very few moderns. They prompt the invention of 'mysterious' concepts – topographic, energy and astronomical leys, dragon lines and currents, earth energy, geospirals, subtle electricity – and such phenomena as levitation of boulders.

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Although I remain a skeptic, I am *not* saying this is all bunkum. We do not *know*, though we have tantalising glimpses. The writers of *Avebury* claim that “magnetic energies emitted by certain standing stones [...] can affect the physical body and promote spiritual visions”, and they show magnetic energy bands on one of them. Maybe... I see that an article in the current issue [October 18] of *New Scientist* is ‘Man “roused from coma” by a magnetic field’; and a B.B.C. Science item [October 23] reports an experiment showing that “peeling sticky tape emits X-rays strong enough to scan a human finger”. One should always be aware of being surrounded by unknown unknowns.

Even so, I would suggest that a cut or two with Oakham’s Razor [‘Keep it simple!’] might let some light in and some of the mystery out. All these things in the landscape are *interesting*, some highly stimulating. They are worthy of protection / recording / study. Many show great artistry. We enjoy them *as if* they were made as art – including environmental / earth- / land- / eco-art.

The habit of drawing, scratching, and erecting things on the land will doubtless continue. Some of this is quite enterprising. The installation / insertion of monuments in the landscape is still important. They may no longer have calendar or astronomical functions, and one doesn’t hear of many of the new ones being holy, predicting the future, or curing the sick, but there are echoes of mysteriousness. After a three-day public inquiry, the White Horse of Folkestone Millennium monument was constructed in 2003-04, being “completed with the placing of the eye of the Horse directly over a powerful positive earth energy point”. [5] Such works do have some of the old purposes: they are assembly points; they are foci for ritual; they memorialise events / ideas / people; they celebrate their makers’ relationships with Life, the Universe & Everything. And some will provoke argument over *which* ritual, event, V.I.P. or relationship. [Conservationists argued against the Folkestone horse; the European Commission declared it illegal...] Perhaps some will be so grand we forget that we did it, and the L.G.M. will get the credit – again. As Lady Raven Ariana [*sic*] might say, “alien life forms [are] the Deus ex Machina of the modern dilemma of [...] lost knowledge”. [6]

Many of their makers are doubtless “under the spell of their ancestors –Egyptian, pre-Columbian, and megalithic structures are particular favourites, along with spirals and labyrinths from Jung’s treasure-trove of archetypes”, as a reviewer of Gilles Tiberghien’s *Land art* put it; but such works “can seem empty of content in comparison”. And amongst their makers will be artists, working to serve the variety of purposes of art. [I suppose for completeness, we’d

better say some will be Art.] I think Preben Jakobsen, with whom I set out on this ramble, had a good point – and Ruskin: that when we do something, the result should be more than just utilitarian. The name Robert Pirsig comes to mind, too, and his now neglected plea for ‘quality’, *Zen and the art of motor-cycle maintenance*. Drawing, scratching and erecting structures [no aspersions implied] on the land may have a fashion component, but seem to be pursued for essentially genuine reasons – including both beautification and the ‘interrupting of habit’ function of art. Most is small-scale and short-lived. A little is monumental. A very little [an unsuitable word for, say, the moving of a quarter of a million tons of desert...] is megalomaniacal.

Are there any recent ‘insertions’ that will awe our descendents – or visiting L.G.M. – in the next but one or two millennia? And which modern works of land-art are likely to prompt future visitors to say that, though responding to natural beauty, they welcome ‘interventions’ because they can bring particular life to places? “People do this to the landscape” [7]: they mark it, change and grace it – they *humanise* it.

Should we, however, be making such insertions? I am slightly uneasy about some of this. There are – certainly in Britain – various competing desires for how the land should be used, and how landscapes should be changed [or not]. Surely, the strongest arguments for making changes are not aesthetic ones!

One can, they say, have too much of a good thing. Before reaching the ‘too much’ stage, there is sometimes a diluting of that nebulous thing ‘quality’. Isn’t the landscape in places showing slight early signs of an over-liberal insertion of artworks – including those with eco-messages – and of too much insistence on art-aesthetics? This is, I think, where such things as ephemeral crop-art are especially interesting, but more important is, along with de Vries, Goldsworthy, etc., to remember other ‘aesthetics’. Two in particular: The aesthetics of nonhumanised Nature, of things not made or done by *us*; and the aesthetics of happenstance, such as timber stacked by busy, anonymous, grumbling, workers. [8]

1. Christopher Tilley and others [2000] Art and the representation of the past *Journal of the Royal anthropological Institute* 6: 35-62. See also C. Tilley [2002] Wrapping up the past *L&A* nr. 26: 8-9.

2. Paul Matthews [2008] *Words in place*, Hawthorn Press, Stroud; pbk., 256 pages, £14.99, ISBN 1-903458-69-2; www.hawthornpress.com.

3. Phil Cope [2008] *Holy wells: Wales*, Seren, Bridgend; hbk., 222 pages, £20, ISBN 978-1-85411-485-3; www.seren-books.com. Numerous photos, commentaries, and poems by various Welsh poets.

4. Wessex Books, Salisbury, www.wessexbooks.co.uk.
 - * George Wingfield & Jürgen Krönig [2007], *Prehistoric sacred sites in Wessex*, pbk., 48 pages, £4.99, ISBN 978-1-903035-27-6,
 - * Gerald S. Hawkins & Herbert A. Allen [2004] *Stonehenge. Earth & Sky*, pbk., 48 pages, £5.99, ISBN 978-1-903035-24-4,
 - * Maria wheatley & Busty Taylor [2008], *Avebury. Sun, Moon & Earth*, pbk., 48 pages, £4.99, ISBN 978-1-903035-30-6,
 - * Roger Crisp [1998, rev. ed. 2008], *Ley lines of Wessex*, pbk., 32 pages, £4.99, ISBN 978-0-9529619-3-2,
 - * Nick Kollerstrom [2003], *Crop circles. The hidden form*, pbk., 64 pages, £4.99, ISBN 978-1-903035-11-2.

 5. <http://whitehorsefolkestone.co.uk>; Debbie Bartlett [2002] The White Horse of Folkestone – desecration or overreaction? *Ecos* 23[1]: 85-88.

 6. From the *International journal of the Society of Celtic Shamans*. In early Greek theatre, actors playing gods descending to sort out the Mortals' problems were *theos apo mēkhanēs* – they arrived on stage attached to a crane.

 7. Janet Swailes [2008] Experiencing desert islands *Landscape & Arts online* nr. 45: 2-21.

 8. I am of course framed by Western traditions... and largely ignorant of others. There are very useful insights in Crispin Sartwell [2004] *Six names of beauty*, Routledge. He includes Japanese attitudes to imperfection, commonplaceness, and age – *wabi, sabi* – which are excellently dealt with in Howard Rheingold [2000 ed.] *They have a word for it*, Sarabande [Kentucky]. Some of the limitations of 'frames of tradition' are gently illuminated in Junichiro Tanizaki [1933 tr. 1991 / 2001] *In praise of shadows*, Jonathan Cape / Random House.
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