

Bodies of Water Symposium: Regenerative Art Practice – Introductions Transcript

0:10 Emma Underhill

Emma, welcome everybody to *the Bodies of Water Symposium* on regenerative art practice. For those that don't know me, I'm Emma Underhill. I'm the Founder and Artistic Director at UP Projects. I'm a white woman with blonde shoulder length hair. I'm wearing brown glasses and a navy dress. So just to give you a little bit of background about UP Projects, we are a national public art commissioning organisation with over 20 years' experience in curating ambitious projects in the public realm that have a deep social impact and are rooted in community collaboration and our work addresses pressing issues of our time, and obviously the climate emergency is certainly one of those. So we're kind of assuming that, because you're all here today, you're already highly aware that the earth is in crisis and urgent action is needed. So we're not going to spend much time talking about why we need to do this work and focus much more on the how. So we're going to take a deep dive into the particular role that public art and social practice can play within the climate crisis. The intention of this event is to challenge and support one another as we consider what regenerative practice means, recognising that environmental responsibility is an evolving journey, and that as individuals or organisations, we are all at different places along an evolving learning curve. So this symposium is part of our *Constellations* programme which offers learning and development opportunities to the public art sector in order to encourage progression thought leadership within the field of public art and also social practice. And we have curated this event together with the independent curator Justine Boussard. It's always a pleasure to work with Justine, and I'm incredibly grateful to her for introducing us to so many useful resources and ideas which have underpinned today's programme, as well as to many of the inspiring speakers who will be presenting their work and leading workshops today. I'm also really aware that there is so much expertise among all of you here in the room, and as with all of our *Constellations* events, we want to create as much space as possible for you to share your own experiences and critical thinking, and I hope you feel really welcome to participate actively through the Q&A sessions, the workshops, and also within the virtual space, which Justine will tell you more about shortly. So I'm a really big believer in learning through practice, as well as through discussion and collective thinking. And over the past four years, we've been working on a highly ambitious commission called *Bodies of Water*, working with the Berlin-based artist Anne Duk

Hee Jordan, who's over there. The project was conceived to explore and lead the conversation around how public art commissioners can approach environmental responsibility and consider the principles of regenerative practice. So the commission has unfolded across two locations in England, and you'll see lots of images from this project on the screen behind me as I speak. A la Ronde, which is a national trust property in Exmouth in Devon and Haigh Hall, a 19th century country house in Wigan that's currently being transformed into an arts, culture and heritage destination. The commission focuses in on the politics of water and the need for better water management, both locally and globally, and it has grown directly out of those place-based partnerships. And it's underpinned by community collaboration, working with a locally based artist, Anna FC Smith, who I hope is here somewhere, and a team of community ambassadors who have directly been involved in developing the development of the commission in Wigan. Anna has also worked with us on developing a beautiful learning resource and an extensive schools programme is underway that will encourage young people to consider their relationship with nature and how they can take better care of the planet. So Duk Hee will be speaking further about the project, along with our curator, Mala Yamey, and they'll be talking during the panel discussion, and I'd like to just take a moment to congratulate them both on achieving this really ambitious commission.

4:49

[Applause]

4:56 Emma Underhill

As with all public art projects, this one has not been without its challenges. And I'm sure any of you who work in the public art sector will know what I mean. We've learned so much along the route, and it has particularly highlighted to me, that the values that we share when working with communities that are centered on building relationships and trust, working in a way that's sensitive and responsive to place are also central to environmental responsibility and working regeneratively, and some of that thinking is feeding into the considerations that we've included in our programme. And Justine will refer to that a little bit more in a moment. So on to the day's proceedings. There's just a couple of adjustments I need to let you know about to today's programme. Unfortunately, Harun Morrison is not able to join us to host his table within the forum. He sends his apologies. And I hope that those of you who are going to be attending that session are happy with your new allocation. Also, and I hope you all received an email about this yesterday. Regrettably, we

haven't been able to provide British Sign Language interpretation as advertised. This was completely outside of our control, unfortunately, and we do take access very seriously at UP Projects. As far as we're aware, no one in the audience needs BSL, but if you do have any concerns, please find a member of the team, and we'll do our best to help. So *Bodies of Water*, and indeed, this symposium has been made possible by generous funding from the Arts Council. And the project's also been supported by the Art Fund, Wigan Council, Vallum Associates, and the Goethe-Institute, with engineering support from Civic Engineers and environmentally focused advice and guidance from Julie's Bicycle. And I'd really like to thank each of these organisations for their belief in our vision for the project. And I'd particularly like to thank the team at Haigh Hall who have worked so closely with us to realise this commission. And in fact, Dr Sylvia Travers, the Head of Horticulture at Haigh will be leading one of our round tables during the breakout this afternoon. I'd also like just to take a quick moment to thank the fantastic team at UP Projects who have worked really, really hard on delivering *Bodies of Water* and all the other things that we do. Moira Lacelles, Executive Director and Head of partnerships; Mala Yamey, Curator; Jack Newbury, Producer, who's worked tirelessly on putting this event together; Leila Baetiong, Producer, and Zoe Scholes, Comms Coordinator. And another really important thank you is to The Black-E - this amazing building for hosting us here. I really hope you enjoy this space and take good care of it and thank you to Andrea and her team for enabling us to be here today. So just on that end, I've got a few points of quick housekeeping to share with you. As far as we're aware, there are no planned fire alarms, so if you do hear one, please follow the signs and assemble outside the fire exits in a calm manner. We will be filming today. So if you don't want to be filmed, please let one of the team know, and we'll make sure that the videographer knows not to include you. And also, I know some of you probably didn't get the chance to have tea or coffee. There is going to be tea or coffee downstairs throughout the event, so please free feel free just to go and help yourselves whenever you need it. So finally, I'm absolutely delighted that we've been able to present this event during the final week of the Liverpool Biennial. We have worked in partnership with the Biennial many times over the years, most recently through our *Constellations ° Assemblies* programme. And I hope if you haven't had the chance to see it already, you'll catch some of the festival while you're here in Liverpool, but that's quite enough for me. Let's get on with the day. I hope you have a fantastic and inspiring, thought-provoking afternoon, and I'd now be delighted to invite Dr Sam Lackey, Director of Liverpool Biennial, to say a few words. Thank you.

[Applause]

9:07 Sam Lackey

Thank you, Emma, and good afternoon, everybody. For those of you who don't know me, my name is Sam Lackey, and I'm the Director of Liverpool Biennial. I'm a 51-year-old white woman, quite tired looking. It's the end of the Biennial. I've got brown hair tied back in a ponytail, and I'm wearing dark rimmed glasses and a light blue trouser suit. It is my absolute pleasure to welcome you to Liverpool and the final week of our Biennial, *Bedrock*, curated so sensitively by Marie-Anne McQuay, who in these last few days of the festival, I would like to thank once again for her considered and connected approach to creating a biennial in the city in which she lives and works. I would also like to extend my thanks to our long-standing partners, UP Projects, whose work around regenerative practice is both pushing and pulling us all towards change, and also to Justine too, who has so thoughtfully and effectively created and held the parameters for today's event. Thanks also to Anne Duk Hee Jordan's artwork, which is so pivotal to this symposium and to which I'm eagerly looking forward to encountering at Haigh Hall this autumn. And finally, I'd like to echo the thanks to our hosts and partners here at The Black-E who have worked with us so tirelessly throughout the festival. This biennial, *Bedrock*, explicitly draws on our city's environment with three connecting strands. Firstly, it takes as its starting point the yellow and red sandstone on which, and from which, much of Liverpool is built. Secondly, it acknowledges the civic and historic foundations of this city that's inextricably linked and built upon empire. And thirdly, it celebrates the underpinning of people and places, the social bedrock that grounds us. As such *Bedrock* reflects our intention to always acknowledge the city and its people in which and with which we work. Its history, and to hold in mind all our futures. As a festival we're committed to considering both the practicalities and the contradictions of a committed commissioning practice. And as such, are really honoured to be working to support today's symposium. It's always our intention to work with curators and artists to ensure that issues around environmental and climate crisis are addressed within works themselves in the Biennial. For example, Linda Lamignan's powerful film at Fact, showing the ways at which humans treat, engage and extract from this world, alongside the installation by DARCH also at Fact, about death and life cycles in relation to Earth and non-humans. I'd also like to draw your attention to Imayna Caceres' film and shrine at Jordan Street, which uses water and mud from the River Mersey and the river Danube, proposing resilience and natural survival. I hope you really do have time after this to go and see some Biennial tomorrow. At the same time, we also consider the practicality of creating

large sculptural installations, working with artists such as Cevdet Erik to think through material in relation to concept and the possibility of reuse, which we'll be talking a little bit about later at our round table. Finally, we seek to do this to find our bedrock and stability while many of our assumptions and certainties about our broader freedoms and rights are on shaky ground while we were all bearing witness to the conflicts and harm that are currently being enacted on people, on nations and this planet. While we are sitting here today as arts and cultural professionals, I would suggest that by our very attendance, we're also committed to international solidarities, to collaborative connection making, and generous and generative thinking. I know that today's thoughtful program brings together artists and colleagues who have thought deeply about our interrelations, our histories and our context right now, and the ethical conditions within which we aspire to work. I thank them and you for joining us here today, for reflection, for conversation and connection. Thank you.

14:04

[Applause]

14:16 Justine Boussard

Hello, everyone. I'm Justine Boussard. I'm a curator and a storyteller and a longtime collaborator of UP Projects, I am a white woman in my late 30s with brown hair in a bun and a brown cardigan with floral and shell patterns very appropriate to the theme. So through my practice, I create events that explore who we are as a species, how we got to our current predicaments, and where we might go next. I call this being an Amateur Ancestor, and it's a lifelong quest to understand how culture, art and heritage can help us do better by those who will come after us. I'm delighted to be finally here with you all after months of preparation and anticipation. I am a deep believer in the power of collective intelligence, in being brave enough to get to work while we're still figuring out how things might work, and humble enough also to know that we won't make it far without others. So it's really heartening to see so many people together in the room. So today, we do not come to you with a definitive definition for what regenerative public art practice could be. There will be as many definitions as there are organisations, people and ecosystems to work with. Still, we'd like to offer five considerations that have emerged out of the *Bodies of Water* project and the curation of this symposium, you'll find them in your digital conference programme and on our Padlet, which I'll introduce in a moment. So I'll just briefly mention them. The first consideration is

“Slow down and think ahead”. It's an invitation to shift from being delivery-driven, to being legacy-oriented; considering public art not as an outcome but as a process that supports the ecosystem it's a part of. The second is “Make mindful decisions”. Creating and producing art in the public realm is very complex and often constrained by parameters that are beyond our control, so we must become better at making decisions that are ambitious yet don't drive us, on the one hand to burn out, or on the other side of the spectrum to water down compromises. The third is “Amplify artist's unique voices”. Artists provoke discussions. They shift perspectives. They implement groundbreaking, groundbreaking processes, and they create longing for a better world, but they need to be properly resourced and supported to do this work. The fourth is “Challenge worldviews”. Our work should be concerned with addressing the deep narratives that underpin the different ways people see the world, starting with the view that humans are somehow separate from nature. So many of our current woes, from limitless resource extraction to the rise of fascism, white supremacy, to the lives lost to endless wars and genocide, down to the climate crisis itself. All these have deep, interconnected roots, which artists help us uncover through their careful analysis and their visceral creations. The final one is “Localise the work”. There is no one size fits all to the challenges we are facing. Though, there are principles that we can follow. Rooting our work within its local ecosystem, whether natural, social or economic, is essential, not just for the longevity of the work produced, but for it to be truly beneficial to the people, plants, soil and animals who coexist with it. So what we present to you today - it's just a half day - can only be a glimpse of a growing movement that is really ambitious in its vision, experimental and diverse in its nature, and really enchanting in its delivery. But above all, absolutely vital to the health and wellbeing of all life on earth now and into the future. So we know there is a wealth of knowledge in the room, and we are as excited as learning from you as we are from sharing insights. So we've created this Padlet. There's a QR code, which you can scan here, and there's also a link in your programme. On this Padlet, we have put the considerations in more details, as well as some of our top resources. And we invite you all to contribute throughout the day, add your own considerations, your comments, your own resources, to what we hope will evolve into a really rich resource supporting the public art sector on that journey. So let's get started shall we? I'll bring up the programme. There we go. So in a moment, our first panel will help us zoom out of our current acute state of crisis, looking at environmental responsibility through the lens of legacy, so trying to expand our sense of time. We will then break for tea at around three-ish, after which we will split into groups for the breakout sessions, which will start at 3.45. These will be dedicated to cultivating some of those skills and principles that are putting us on the path towards regeneration. There are many people we have been learning from, but I'd be amiss

not to mention at least one, and that is Daniel Christian Wahl who is the author of Designing Regenerative Cultures, and I know an inspiration to many. So the quote should appear shortly. There we go, but I'll be reading it out anyway. "Regeneration is less about saving the world and more about understanding our role in it again - our relatedness to life. Regeneration is a disposition of the heart, an attitude towards the community of life that asks: What serves life - in me, around me, through me? When we begin to create from this attitude - our work, our economic activity, our decisions - then change happens. Not because we control everything. But because we participate more consciously in life as a local, regional and planetary community. Serving the community of life is the most effective way to serve ourselves and others. Beautiful words. So it's now my pleasure to hand over the stage to Seyi Adelekun, who is going to lead us through a guided visualisation. Seyi, please join me.

20:50

[*Applause*]