

St Ives – is it worth saving?

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St Ives, of course, has a very particular history. In developing the present exhibition, artist and historian Chris Short has chosen to propose a fresh way to shed light on this history, and to celebrate the work of some of the younger artists connected with St Ives. In considering them, Short seeks to provoke fresh perspectives on what the town of St Ives is like today, and what the term ‘St Ives’ has come to mean.

When the Tate St Ives opened in 1993, some key issues were evident. The agenda for Tate St Ives was initially historicist, and regenerative of the tourism industry; what struck the team setting it up, however, were a number of paradoxes.

First, the artistic community defined as ‘St Ives’ had also already been described as ‘over’. Dates such as the community beginning in 1886, or 1928, or 1939, and ending 1964 or 1975 had been cited. This had been particularly true of the reaction to a show at the Tate in London in 1985. Tate St Ives, with the quintessential artist museum, the Barbara Hepworth Museum as a component, was to be the apotheosis of this historicisation.

For the new team, this only served to emphasise that artists were indeed still living and working in the town and the area around. They were alive and well, albeit as a continuation of a long a complex history. At the time of the Tate’s opening in 1993, Barns Graham, Feiler, Frost, Heron, Mitchell, Weschke and Wells were all working in the vicinity, as was Janet Leach. They were joined almost immediately by Trevor Bell and Sandra Blow who, more or less coincidentally, moved back to Cornwall. Other artists associated with St Ives, like Tony O’Malley or Brian Wall, were working away elsewhere. Studios and organisations connected with St Ives’ history - the Porthmeor Studios, the Penwith Society, the St Ives Society of Artists, the Leach Pottery - were all functioning as hosts of artists’ practice, and some commercial galleries in the area, like the Salthouse and Wills Lane Gallery, managed to sell work from these artists.

So in what sense was St Ives over? We realised that what was actually at issue was the nature of art created in the town, the way it related to contemporary practice and how it related to the paradigm generated in past generations.

In becoming a place celebrated as a place to make art, its name had evolved into a shorthand term for a kind of art. The key components were certain signifiers of place – harbour, coast, landscape, special quality of light. These topographic descriptors had elided with the language of some of the central artists, notably a certain painting style that used brilliant colour with gestural abstract devices. Whilst the major artists could play out their careers making still substantial work, much of the other art being made in and around St Ives by the early 1990s was starting to become at best, lacking in freshness, at worse, mere pastiche.

In terms of a wide language of contemporary art, this type of art had become marginal to newer forms that had succeeded it. It also struck us that much local art practice had not embraced some important elements which had brought vitality to other artistic communities from the mid 1970s onwards. This was not simply defined by media, even though this was also a factor. More fundamentally, one might describe missing components as: pluralism, bringing different practices together in collaborative projects (which weren't defined by terms like 'society of artists'); attempts to reach new audiences; and work in diverse settings beyond the traditional concepts of "studio" and "gallery" being within artists' core practice.

To illustrate: when I gave a talk for artists in St Ives in 1992, I was asked 'what would I do to make the Tate reach out to the community'. There was some confusion over my answer. I had taken 'community' to be shorthand for those beyond the visual arts and immediate stakeholders, and described the potential for initiatives in different contexts, noting west Cornwall's problems with housing and transport infrastructure and so on. I later realised that my questioner had actually meant those very people in the visual arts and other closely connected stakeholders whom I had regarded as those who would work alongside the Gallery in this outreach.

Alongside the question of 'style' and the definitions of contemporary practice, there was a second paradox. Where is St Ives anyway? Is the art-historical term congruent with the town or parish? Of the artists in our opening displays only Barns Graham and Leach actually lived in St Ives. Heron worked in one of the Porthmeor studios though living at Zennor, and Weschke gave his Porthmeor studio up in 1993-4. Feiler, Frost, Wells and Mitchell all were more closely associated with Newlyn.

The curator of Newlyn Art Gallery, in the 1980s and early 1990s, John Halkes, was one of those in the locality who had actively opposed the Tate development. He defined it as a threat that would soak up what resources there were for the more open and diverse programming for which Newlyn was known. This distinction was rooted in the comparative history of St Ives' and Newlyn's artists' activities, most notably in Peter Lanyon's espousal of the Newlyn Society when, as Lanyon saw it, the Penwith Society in St Ives sought to create an exclusive modernist agenda.

In the early 1990s, under Gerald Deslandes, then Emily Ash, Newlyn had begun re-defining west Cornwall's relationship to contemporary practice. Programmes combined artists already connected to the area, work by locally based young artists, and new work from artists from elsewhere, searching for a connection with the locality. Many other artists worked in the wider west Penwith area, and with Falmouth College of Art, and various other colleges (within and beyond Peter Lanyon's personal definition of the boundary of west Cornwall), wider support structures and communities of practice continued.

Therefore in reviewing and examining the approaches open to Tate St Ives, the Tate team determined that if the gallery were to stick with a reductive historicist agenda, based on a narrow view of St Ives and not addressing wider audiences, it would not achieve its

regenerative goals: that fresh, open curatorial practice would be vital for the future life of the institution.

Chris Short's selection for the current exhibition traces a connection between six artists whose paths have crossed over the last decade in St Ives. All represent different forms of reaction to St Ives the place and 'St Ives' the term. All have lived in St Ives itself (as opposed to Newlyn, Penzance, St Just and elsewhere in west Cornwall) over the last ten years, apart from occasional periods away. Two might loosely be defined as painters, two, equally loosely, as photographers, one potter and one who works in film, video and performance.

Short has chosen six men. To this extent they echo the brave men of the 1950s generation. Like that generation, singular women artists have been of critical importance in the dynamics of their careers. For Short's list of six, the work and practice of the late Pat Finn, one of the most fascinating artists to have worked in St Ives in the 1990s, is a thread that connects to all of them and to Short himself. A way of unravelling this thread might be to begin at the door of 'Art Surgery'.

In 1999, Short took part in a season curated and commissioned by Art Surgery. Art Surgery had been set up by Andy Whall and Pat Finn in St Ives in 1998, its aim to generate new work in new media within St Ives and its vicinity. Art Surgery was one of a number of new initiatives that artists had created around St Ives and Newlyn in the wake of the Tate opening. It took its name from the house that Finn lived in at the time, a former doctors' premises.

Short's work for Art Surgery took the form of performance at Tate St Ives, in which he tried to write a text on Tate St Ives, from a desk visible from within the gallery into the 'education studio'. A live remote computer monitor allowed visitors to read the text as it was being drafted. When he went for a break, walked around or stared into space thinking, they had to be content with the text as it stood at the moment. Referencing conceptual art of the 1970s and 80s, this was Short's considered response to a variety of ideas and issues: the positioning, in the gallery and its critical framework, of education; the reflexivity of texts about a hermetic community; and the perceptions of residencies, live art and other ciphers for fresh creativity.

Chris Short was one of those who engaged with the process of debate around Tate St Ives' curatorial practice after the opening. He became involved with the new M.A in the History of Modern Art and Design at Falmouth created by David Cottington in collaboration with Tate St Ives in 1993. The MA took Tate St Ives and its relationship to the town as one of its principal areas of study.

One of the earliest projects at Tate St Ives had been a residency which had been run with photographer Andy Hughes. Hughes had left the Royal College M A in photography with

a passion for surfing – then just taking on fashion connotations – that had led him to seek work in Cornwall.

One of those groups in the community that my questioners in 1992 had considered were the surfers on Porthmeor Beach. I felt that they had a lot in common with us in the gallery. They were there the whole year. They were concerned with dialogue between human culture and the natural world. As a group of people they cut through groupings like ‘local’ and ‘tourist’. They also connected with people that the established modern art community didn’t always – especially young people in the immediate locality.

Hughes’ work documented them and their surroundings, and was shown in different contexts in the gallery. It was eventually a key element of the 1995 exhibition ‘Porthmeor Beach : A Century of Images’. This featured a wide range of imagery, historic, modern and contemporary, underscored by a new body of concrete poems by Alaric Sumner.

Hughes also worked with gallery staff, notably the former pro-skateboarder Dave Davies, on a variety of events around the gallery, many of which broke down traditional barriers between local people and ‘the art community’. On one memorable occasion, a fashion show on the roof of the gallery, the then head of St Ives Comprehensive was an invited member of the audience. When he asked Davies why so many St Ives students were in the project, Davies replied “Because you banned them from taking part.”

In 1997, the collaborative project ‘A Quality of Light’ had led Whall and Ken Turner to organise a parallel and alternative live art programme, ‘The Questioning Office of Art’. Hughes was one of the participating artists in a diverse programme that bridged studios and galleries with temporary locations, a local club, and even interventions in the Tate itself.

In the same year Whall, Finn, and Sam Hall also presented a show called ‘Lost Space’ in a disused garage in Back Road West, just along from the Porthmeor studios. Three installations which referenced the fishing industry were widely reported in the local press as a “demonstration” about the way artists were beginning to be squeezed out of the town by the first signs of a changing economic profile.

Pat Finn is quoted in these reports: “Needless to say, the future of the building takes no account for [sic] arts use. Our aim is to draw attention to what we consider is a dangerous assumption – namely that because St Ives is and the Tate attract thousands of visitors, that the community is alive and stimulating. We feel that it is only when St Ives has more space to show contemporary and experimental work that the town will avoid the process of fossilisation that could be its continuing fate.”

Another event which involved Pat Finn was the creation of Gaolyard Studios in 1999 by John Bedding. This was to become a new facility for making and firing ceramic work, a symbolic ‘other’ to the Leach pottery. Bedding chose to mark the opening of the building

with an exhibition of new work by a number of artists from the locality, including Pat Finn, Sam Hall and Sax Impey.

By re-assessing this and other such contemporary art interventions in his 1999 project, Short was circuiting the theoretical and the actual in terms of contemporary practice. His method referenced classic conceptual art, apparently invisible to 'St Ives' the term, so re-opening the modernist history which the gallery had seemed to close. The 'reality' of his working away in public also made play on the drama of live art, which was being played out elsewhere in the usual 'mad artist uses tax payers money to make fools of us all' local media manner.

Impey had grown up in Penzance, and had studied at Newport College of Art and then worked as a despatch rider in Cardiff. He hadn't known Whall and Hughes, who had been at art college in Cardiff at the same time, until moving to Penwith in 1994. Having worked in St Ives, in 1998 Impey, Hall and Richard Nott had located a barnyard studio just outside St Ives as a place to work whilst remaining based in the town itself.

Nott had arrived in west Cornwall in 1993 intending to stay a few months. His work has often seemed close to Impey's, and continues to be compared in exhibitions and discussion. Both make images that make play with dense surface mark-making, to play on the possibilities of shallow pictorial space. Both use limited ranges of colour to assert a tough physical presence, Nott using the industrial materials which had characterised some of the so-called new painting of the 1980s, Impey, underscoring imagery with grids in greys and layering with muted tones and earth colours.

Graham Gaunt had also studied in Cardiff in the mid 1980s, and had also kept up professional connections with his native city of Sheffield. His urban documentary photography had featured in a show about regeneration in Sheffield, and thereafter travel and professional commissions in architectural photography had taken him around Europe and North Africa.

Having settled in St Ives in 2001, his photographic language contrasts with Hughes', but puts him alongside Nott and Impey. Like Gaunt, Impey seems to be searching for an underlying geometry through which to re-discover both natural phenomena and urban order. Like Nott, Gaunt seeks out the texture of the built environment, often framing simple forms in voids or gap-sites to open up enigmatic space.

Many of the faces at the opening of Tate St Ives are not with us any more, as are younger personalities who arrived since like Finn and Sumner. Inevitably there has been change in the relationship between historical tradition and current practice.

Across Penwith and west Cornwall practice has shifted between different centres, artists generating new work across the region. Newlyn Gallery, under the wise creative lead of

Liz Knowles, is in its second refurbishment since the mid 1990s and seeking to open a second space; Penlee House has been refurbished, as has Falmouth Art Gallery. Falmouth College of Arts has become the leading component of the developing Combined University of Cornwall, of which the design historian Alan Livingston is the head.

In St Ives itself there is a new generation of galleries, serious ones cheek-by-jowl with a plethora of less interesting ones trading on pastiche of the 1950s modernist language. Opportunities to promote and sell work still seem more prevalent than many other places in the UK, but there are less regular opportunities for artists who do not wish to pursue work that easily fits into the established rhetoric.

Art Surgery continues as an extension of Andy Whall's practice. Projects have ranged from seasons of performance and video to an exchange between St Ives and Dublin. The last led to a show by the Irish artist Katie Holten at the New Millennium Gallery supported by a foundation created by Pat Finn's family. This foundation has also supported solo shows by Nott and Impey at the same venue. All the artists have collaborated with other artists, curators and venues beyond St Ives, but continue to return to the paradoxical situation of the town itself.

One effect of the promotion of St Ives and west Cornwall has been to grossly inflate the property market through the distortions of second-home and holiday let owning. John Wells' studios have been added to those at Porthmeor in St Ives to be in public ownership, but the pressure of property prices has forced many artists to other locations outside St Ives and Newlyn.

When visiting in the summer of 2006, one of the artists in the show described what it felt like to try and make serious art in the contemporary St Ives as 'a battle'. They feel squeezed out by the very market forces which trade on the concept of St Ives as an artists' colony. Nott and Impey now occupy two of the Porthmeor Studios. Studios' Trustees are trying to fundraise for its desperately needed refurbishment, whilst, on the opposite side of the road, the Norway Square site is, as I write, on the market for £1.5m. If developed this would displace one of the oldest of the independent galleries in St Ives, the Salthouse.

Looking back over the documentation of the various projects that all six have been involved in, one can see how they were indeed addressing the very issues that the founding Tate St Ives team had defined in 1993. Their practice has been collaborative, rooted in diversity and seeking new contexts, new audiences and new locations. It has looked outwards, connecting St Ives across west Cornwall with other like-minded artists; and to collaborators, venues and contemporary practice around the UK and beyond.

At the same time, the task for these artists has been not only to reiterate contemporary art practice, it was to do so in particular terms which had been squeezed out of the term 'St Ives': collaborative, pluralist in media terms, with a thread of community based references. Equally, it was important for them not to obfuscate 'St Ives' by escaping from

St Ives the town to alternative local centres, sometimes treated as they were as means of escape from the creative claustrophobia of the 'St Ives' idiom.

The last fifteen years have seen the refracting of 'St Ives' as a term for an artistic canon. In other words, St Ives the place retains its status as a site in which the extent to which the 'St Ives' term is measured against what work is being made there. St Ives the place is certainly worth saving by carefully guarding and nurturing the relevance and value of its artistic product, to make sure that it is as special as the place itself. How 'St Ives' the term is to be renewed depends on the opportunities open to younger artists to make new and meaningful work that, like that of previous generations, possesses credibility and is innovative, rooted in its location and cosmopolitan in outlook.