

## WONDERS OF WESTON

Avoiding the kiss-me-quick cliché of the British seaside, artists Ruth Claxton, Tim Etchells, Lara Favaretto, Tania Kovats in association with landscape architects Grant Associates, raumlaborberlin and Wrights & Sites were recently commissioned to produce a series of permanent new works for the North Somerset town of Weston-super-Mare. Director of Situations Claire Doherty and artist Stephen Hodge (of Wrights & Sites) give their account of how they developed one of seven commissions as part of the broader regeneration programme.



1

The seaside town of Weston-super-Mare has been undergoing a process of redevelopment for over 150 years, and so the opportunity to contribute a permanent public art programme as part of the Sea Change regeneration scheme was not to be taken lightly. When setting up Situations back in 2003, I set out to combine an art commissioning agency model with a research programme, whereby our work as producers and curators of artworks would feed, and in turn be fed by, an ongoing process of enquiry and critical reflection. The University of the West of England gives us an unusually fruitful context in which to work, whilst every project we embark on requires a complex set of external partnerships, at the heart of which lie our relationships with artists.

It was not surprising then that our first encounter with Wrights & Sites was through an arts and research programme. Back in 2007, their performance *Simultaneous Drift* formed a significant part of 'Material City', a programme of interdisciplinary conversations developed in collaboration with Arnolfini and the Department of Archaeology and Anthropology at the University of Bristol, which explored creative imagination within the context of urban regeneration. In many ways, this was the kernel of our future collaboration, which bubbled away for a few years, until the opportunity in Weston-super-Mare arrived.

Along with my co-curator, Theresa Bergne, and my production team including Katie Daley-Yates and Danae Mossman who worked directly with Wrights & Sites, our brief from North Somerset Council was to "connect and promote many of Weston-super-Mare's existing cultural assets and activities", to encourage visitors to "explore further and stay longer", contributing to inward investment. To us, commissioning is far more than project management. It is a creative, critical and often passionate undertaking where we seek to understand the best possible means through which to support an artist to make an outstanding work of art in response to a specific situation. In the context of Weston-super-Mare, this commitment to the development of artists and artform was necessarily matched by our responsibility to the Council as our client and to the funder, CABE.

Our initial proposal for Weston (to combine a cumulative series of temporary events with the gradual launch of longer-term artworks) had to be adapted early on, given the specific capital parameters of CABE's Sea Change funding. Nevertheless, we sought to create a programme which would challenge expectations about permanently sited sculptural installation through work which might encompass a performative charge – either observing or inducing action, gathering temporary communities around certain works.

The selection of artists for a public project is an alchemical process of sorts. Along with the customary curatorial considerations which invariably spin on the issue of timing, a public art commission requires consideration of the artist's ability to negotiate the complex challenges of the public realm. Here, those ranged from the implications of extreme marine conditions for the longevity of materials, complex health and safety precautions given the treacherous tidal range, to there being a relatively short period of time in which to understand the multiple identities of a town undergoing substantial redevelopment.

### Commissioning is far more than project management. It's a creative, critical and often passionate undertaking.

What appealed to us about Wrights & Sites was precisely that ability to consider place as a series of layers continuously shape-shifting through social encounters. Their proposal for a work of monumental proportions dispersed through forty-one signs across the town appealed precisely because it might operate as a call to action. We could see that this would be a development of their performative practice and might have a wider reach for a new audience who would come across the work unexpectedly in addition to other works which would act in contrast as destination points.

Within an economic context in which arts budgets are severely curtailed, we may be about to see a retrenchment back to a narrow definition of public art, away from these experimental and performative approaches. One way of protecting the sophistication of our current public art sector is to follow Wrights & Sites lead to undertake a fundamental shift in the thinking about the 'time', rather than simply the 'space', of public art. We need to persuade funders, stakeholders and clients to appreciate how artists need time to get beneath the skin of a place. We need to recognise that places are not static sites onto which public art is grafted; rather, regeneration is a continuous process to which artists can make a startling and long-lasting contribution.

#### Claire Doherty

Issues around public art have often cropped up in Wrights & Sites' discussions, but we hadn't imagined that, with our seeming lack of appropriate training, experience and skill set, we'd be at the heart of a major programme of public art in 2010.

Aside from the associated funding application (which levered a £100,000 grant from Arts Council England), our first large-scale project – *The Quay Thing* (Exeter, 1998) – employed thirty-seven people and resulted in fifty-four site-specific public performances across a range of locations on and alongside Exeter's quay, river and canal. Too big. Too administration-heavy and too dependent on rules and regulations. It nearly killed us and our work. In response, we quickly shifted away from theatre towards other spatial practices; away from site, towards journeying (almost always on foot); and away from big projects and chasing grants, towards a position where we try to take on only the projects that really interest us – that complement our trajectory – whatever the scale, whatever the budget.

When the phone call from Claire came through, the answer to her question was an immediate 'yes'. Recent projects – Possible Forests (Haldon Forest Park, UK, 2007), mis-guided (curated for BBI Festival, Switzerland, 2008) and *Leaving the Building: Manifestoes and Manifestations* (approved book proposal, 2010) – had all demonstrated an increasing interest in the relationship between walking and architecture, and *Wonders of Weston* was CABE funded. Perhaps more importantly, though, we knew the work of Situations, through attending symposia at Arnolfini, reading Claire's books and presenting a somewhat awkward performance-lecture (one strand of which focused on urban signage) as part of Situations' 'Material City' programme. Situations has a reputation for careful work and a respect for interdisciplinarity.



2

We were both intrigued and out of our depth. What better way to start? As discussions began, two central questions emerged for us (and, I think, Situations) as we dug down into the somewhat alien brief:

1. How could we draw some focus back from the seafront, where most of the other commissioned works would be sited?
2. How could we approach the funder's desire for 'permanence' in the work, given the transient nature of performance and peripatetic practices?

For us, walking has become both a research tool and a potential outcome. Everything you need to build a town is here (our work for *Wonders of Weston*) was not conceived in an artists' studio (we don't have one), but only really emerged after several months of reconnaissance walking – not only in the obvious places, like the seafront and the town centre – but also in the industrial, post-industrial, residential and edgelands of Weston. Chance encounters with places, residents, workers and visitors became central to both the process and the final work.

Time was tight, but the commission context suited us well. Through our walking-based methodology we were able to accumulate potential material in parallel with working up one over-ambitious proposal after another. As a multi-voiced collective our ideas can easily become complex and tangled webs (sometimes helpful, sometimes not). However, regular on-site meetings with the Situations team offered us an unusual opportunity to respond directly to informed, focused and objective critical feedback within the making process. As we stripped back one element after another, some of us wondered if there was much left, but the kernel of the work is undoubtedly more clear and coherent than it would otherwise have been.

Rather than making a single-sited monumental public artwork, in the end we all opted for a more viral engagement with the everyday Weston. The resultant forty-one cast and painted metal signs for the pedestrian, which are organised into eight architectural layers, engage with a widely scattered constellation of Weston 'wonders' – from the old town quarry and museum, to less prominent car parks and allotments. The work is large-scale, in that it encompasses the entire town, but small-scale in that each intervention measures only 370x275mm. The verbal content of each sign references a particular architectural aspect of its location, and then gently but playfully provokes the reader-walker to generate their own architectural action or thought experiment. Individual signs may not be noticed at first, but we hope that they will create pockets of intrigue, and will seep into personal and public consciousness over time.

We were relieved to read in the contract that Situations would be responsible for negotiating permissions to use sites – one of the reasons we'd shifted from site-based to journeying practices had been to bypass the sheer amount of energy this consumes. And the final, agreed proposal was to multiply that negotiation by forty-one – we'd have run a mile without the diplomatic skills of the Situations team and their understanding of the multiple agenda of the multiple project stakeholders. And then there are the shortcuts to designers Polimekanos and sign casters DM Foundries...

I'm not sure how easily we'll readjust to making work without the luxury of a creative producer.

**Stephen Hodge on behalf of Wrights & Sites**

## PROFILE

**Claire Doherty is Director of Situations, the public art commissioning and research programme at the University of the West of England, Bristol.** Doherty initiated Situations in 2003, commissioning a range of artists of international acclaim such as Phil Collins, Nathan Coley, Susan Hiller, Joao Penalva, Jeppe Hein, Roman Ondák, Hew Locke, Lara Favaretto, Tim Etchells, Ruth Claxton, raumlaborberlin and Ivan and Heather Morison. In 2009, she was awarded a prestigious Paul Hamlyn Breakthrough Award as an outstanding cultural entrepreneur which will fund new commissions over a three year period from 2010-13. Doherty was Curatorial Director of One Day Sculpture in New Zealand from 2006-9 and Co-Curatorial Director of Wonders of Weston: the Sea Change programme of public art commissions in Weston-super-Mare and is now Curatorial Director of the public art programme in Oslo Harbour and Project Director of Alex Hartley's *Nowhereisland* for the Cultural Olympiad in 2012. She is also editor of *Contemporary Art: From Studio to Situation* (Black Dog Publishing, 2004); *Documents of Contemporary Art: Situation* (Whitechapel/MIT Press, 2009) and is co-editor of *One Day Sculpture* (Kerber, 2009) and *Ivan and Heather Morison: Falling into Place* (Book Works, 2009). She is currently an external advisory member of the Olympic Park Public Realm Advisory Committee.

**Wrights & Sites are four artist-researchers (Stephen Hodge, Simon Persighetti, Phil Smith and Cathy Turner) whose work focuses on site, landscape and peripatetic practices.** The group straddles three south-west UK universities (Exeter, Plymouth and University College Falmouth). Their work began in theatre and live art, but now engages with a range of interdisciplinary spatial practices, including visual art, cultural geography, archaeology, architecture and planning. Key works to date include: *The Quay Thing* (Exeter, 1998), *A Mis-Guide to Anywhere* (launched at ICA, London, 2006), *Stadtverführungen in Wien* (Tanzquartier Wien and Wiener Festwochen, Vienna, 2007), *mis-guided* (Belluard Bollwerk International Festival, Fribourg, 2008), and *A Manifesto for a New Walking Culture: 'dealing with the city'* (published most recently in Nicolas Whybrow's *Performance and the Contemporary City: an Interdisciplinary Reader*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2010).

**Stephen Hodge is a member of the Centre for Intermedia at the University of Exeter, where his teaching and research focus on live art, spatial and interdisciplinary practices.** He is the Performance Curator at Exeter Phoenix, and is a member of the Arts Council England initiated think-tank, the New Theatre Architects. His avatar, Drifter Rhode, curates 2ND LIVE (2ndlive.org), which aims to explore space, event and the anachronistic practice of walking within virtual environments.

[www.wondersofweston.org](http://www.wondersofweston.org)  
[www.onedaysculpture.org.nz](http://www.onedaysculpture.org.nz)  
[www.mis-guide.com](http://www.mis-guide.com)  
[www.cabe.org.uk/sea-change](http://www.cabe.org.uk/sea-change)  
[www.situations.org.uk](http://www.situations.org.uk)

1,2 **Wrights & Sites, Signs from Everything you need to build a town is here, 2010.**