Preparing the Ground

by Chloe Barker

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Preparing the Ground *(2017) is a remarkable new moving image work developed by New Zealand artist Cat Auburn while undertaking the Graduate Artist residency at Tyneside Cinema in 2016, culminating in the artist's first solo exhibition in the UK (January to March 2017 in Newcastle upon Tyne). Auburn spent three months collaborating with coordinators of several heritage sites in Europe and working closely with Tyneside Cinema, who commissioned the work in partnership with Northumbria University, to produce a highly cinematic artwork that takes on the tropes and truisms of cinema by implementing jump cuts, drone footage, soundtrack and landscape.*

The independent Tyneside Cinema, heritage attraction and art gallery in the heart of Newcastle upon Tyne, is home to a range of programmes that support the creative crossover between art and moving image, including the exceptional commissioning of new artist films, in partnership with other institutions. HUM invited Chloe Barker, Arts Programme Coordinator at Tyneside Cinema, to write about Preparing the Ground *(2017) of which you can watch a short introductory video here.*

Directed by Auburn and made with the support of Creative Producer Dan Slaughter, the film is structured in chapters and set in four signature locations. The sites were selected for their cultural importance, and are central to the film: Laing Art Gallery in Newcastle upon Tyne, Dunstanburgh Castle in Northumberland, St Mungo Museum of Religious Life and Art in Glasgow and the

Spanish Riding School in Vienna. Auburn uses these culturally significant locations to communicate and interrogate the way cultural heritage is used to define our sense of history, culture and identity. In the UK, sites such as castles or ruins of castles, through the guardianship of organisations such as English Heritage and the National Trust, play to the histories of kings and queens to present a particular historical narrative to a particular tourist audience. They rely on membership and regular visitation by both tourists and UK residents, whose experience is directed towards enjoyment of the architecture, history and location, in order for these sites to be economically viable and continue to be preserved for future generations. Auburn locates the tension that exists between heritage, tourism and conservation, and their representation of historic hegemonic power.

The unspoken signifiers that these sites represent are revealed by Auburn through static long lens shots along with strategically placed soundtrack in lieu of traditional narration. Through *Prepari ng the Ground* (2017) we find ourselves on a journey to historical centres: St Mungo Museum of Religious Life and Art in Glasgow was opened in 1989; Dunstanburgh Castle, Northumberland was built in the 14th century as a fortification and is now a partial ruin; and the Spanish Riding School was built in 1572 for dressage horses to train all year round. Auburn opens *Preparing the Ground* with a scene of Dunstanburgh Castle that makes a direct visual reference to JMW Turner's watercolour *Dunstanburgh Castle* (c 1798-1800), held in the Laing Art Gallery collection in Newcastle upon Tyne. Notably, the same view-point of the castle is also used by English Heritage in their marketing materials produced for tourism. By reenacting Turner's watercolour, Auburn highlights the constructed realities of the heritage industry and the idealisation of the site as an embodiment of nationhood, thus setting up a traditional view of tourism, before unravelling it through the course of the film.



Cat Auburn, *Preparing the Ground* (2017). Film Still.



Cat Auburn, Dunstanburgh Castle, UK. (making-of) *Preparing the Ground* (2017)

The film opens in the Laing Art Gallery collection stores where the watercolour is filmed being placed on an easel. A cut follows to a long and fixed shot of the real Dunstanburgh castle, where the sound of waves crashing onto rocks can be heard, evoking the memory of Turner's watercolour. After this point, the film shifts to a contrasting use of visual and auditory language. The use of a drone to capture the next section of the film enables a new bird-eye-view of the castle that JMW Turner could never have painted, and shows areas of the site where the ground is being prepared for visitors. The drone camera captures the geometric-patterned cutting of grass by a groundsman on a ride-on lawn mower, complete with sweeping vistas of the horizon and the North Sea, while the *The Blue Danube* by Johann Strauss II is introduced. The music and scenery, with close ups of the land around the castle, recalls a scene of space-stations docking in Stanley Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968), demonstrating Auburn's developed awareness of film practice.

Through these small vignettes, we see the people who maintain our cultural landscape and by focusing on the repetition of labour, Auburn creates a visual language that she then uses similarly to deconstruct other locations in the film.

St Mungo Museum of Religious Life and Art, located in the West End of Glasgow is one of only three museums in Scotland dedicated to 'promoting understanding and respect between people of different faiths and of none'. St Mungo presents objects related to major religions from around the world, including what it claims to be 'the first Zen Garden in the UK' and which Auburn chose to focus on. As the scene opens, the action can only be heard, then slowly a tight close up of work boots and a wooden tool raking the stones appear, revealing the action conducted each morning before

the museum opens to the public. Auburn keeps the frame close to the ground whilst the Zen garden is being prepared, and only when *The Blue Danube* soundtrack returns does she insert sharp visual cuts that create a discordant sense of pace to the otherwise meditative process.

What is perhaps most compelling with the Glasgow site, and not captured in the film, is the museum's mission to represent religious ideology on a global scale. This approach differs significantly from hegemonic notions of cultural capital as presented in locations such as Dunstanburgh Castle and, later, the Spanish Riding School. The Glasgow location was chosen for the unlikely cultural context of a Zen garden, dedicated to meditation and enlightenment, and the humorous title as UK's 'oldest,' despite having been created in the 1990's. This outward-looking cultural venue is dealt with through a lens focused on meditation.



Cat Auburn, *Preparing the Ground* (2017). Film Still.



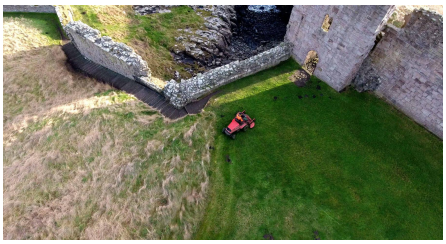
Cat Auburn, *Preparing the Ground* (2017). Film Still.

The influence of Timothy Morton's book *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology after the End of the World* (2013) upon Auburn's practice is visible in Preparing the Ground. Morton argues that *hyperobjects*[01] demonstrate that the end of the world has already occurred in the sense that concepts such as *world*, *nature*, and even *environment* are no longer a meaningful horizon against which human events take place. Instead of inhabiting a world, we find ourselves inside a number of *hyperobjects*; Morton uses as examples climate change, nuclear weapons, evolution, or relativity. Such objects put unbearable strains on our normal ways of reasoning because the objects are so massively distributed in time and space as to transcend spatiotemporal specificity. In Auburn's work, meticulous and sensitive understanding of the visual cues specific to cinema

are used to communicate an equal (and spatial) sense of importance of these locations, and their preparation.

This geographical span enables a wider consideration of heritage management and specifically the current exploitation of ex-military locations as tourist attractions. The etymology of horse-training at The Spanish Riding School derives from military horsemanship training: learning to manoeuvre quickly and with great complexity on a firearms-dominated, post-medieval battlefield. The opening shot of the final chapter of the film, set in Vienna, repeats the large wide angle technique used on the Dunstanburgh Castle, and documents the daily ritual of the riding school's groundsman, who drives a tractor and meticulously rakes the sand of the arena—in the same way he has done each morning for the past 20 years. This scene mirrors elements from both scenes of Dunstanburgh Castle, with the use of a tractor, and the Zen garden in Glasgow, with the raking of the ground to form a pattern of straight lines, reminiscent of minimalist paintings by Agnes Martin. The final scene ends with the triumphant *Waltz of the Flowers* by Peter Ilyich Tchaikovsky, and the groundsman leaving his tractor at the entrance of the perfectly patterned arena.

Auburn chooses to focus on the actions of the various groundskeepers as they go about maintenance at each site, using labour as a critical framework for the film. Through filmic investigation, Auburn articulates and reveals otherwise unseen ground preparations of cultural sites and closely scrutinises how culture is used to present a version of history best suited to contemporary preferences.



Cat Auburn, *Preparing the Ground* (2017). Film Still.



Cat Auburn, *Preparing the Ground* (2017). Install shot at the Tyneside Cinema, UK, 2017.

Preparing the Ground is constructed to allow new locations or chapters to be added subsequently, resembling Hollywood film sequels and prequels. The (digital) film medium also allows for the work to travel both theoretically and literally as Auburn has selected additional sites in Japan and New Zealand, creating a circular formation of exchange between the northern hemisphere and the pacific rim. These forms of exchange resemble colonial and imperialist paths from the UK to New Zealand and take inspiration from filmmakers Yasujiro Ozu and Jane Campion.

The opportunity to create a work within a cinema context is a unique experience, which Auburn has used to develop her artistic practice and acquire a complex screen vocabulary. Bringing together frameworks that operate sociologically and using them in filmmaking serves to reveal the materiality of cultural representation. It enables us to begin seeing these locations not as finished or complete spaces, but as locations that are constantly evolving over time. There is a visible evolution in Auburn's image treatment of these locations, with the use of technology such as drones to show new views, moving away from landscape depictions to aerial shots, leading to a flattening effect, located in the digital realm. This view of groundlessness, or looking down onto a subject, is described by Hito Steyerl in her essay *In Free Fall: A Thought Experiment on Vertical Perspective* (2011)[02]. Steyerl writes 'many contemporary philosophers have pointed out that the present moment is distinguished by a prevailing condition of groundlessness,' evoking Morton's disquieting *hyperobjects*. Steyerl refers to groundlessness as a sense of spatial and temporal orientation that has changed dramatically in recent years, prompted by new technologies of surveillance, tracking, and targeting through the development of the internet, drone technology, virtual reality (VR) and computer games.

The growing importance of aerial views—overviews, Google Map views, satellite views—is supplanting a biological visuality that has long dominated our vision. The stable and single point of view is being supplemented (and often replaced) by multiple perspectives, overlapping windows, distorted flight lines, and divergent vanishing points. These views are implemented in *Prepar ing the Ground*, complicating and expanding our relationship with these locations by using film to show what we otherwise could not

experience. Cat Auburn's short film attempts to tackle the *hyperobj ect* by changing the conventional view and enabling a different understanding of the chosen locations. With the inclusion of additional locations in Japan and New Zealand in the future, the final version of *Preparing the Ground* will again reveal a different view of these sites, offering both UK and international viewers an alternative to our usual frame of reference.

Footnotes

01. World War One, colonialism and global warming are all examples of hyperobjects as explained by Timothy Morton in *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology After the End of the World*, (2013). Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

02. www.e-flux.com/journal/24/67860/in-free-fall-a-thought-experiment-on-vertical-perspective/

Biographies



Cat Auburn is based in Glasgow (UK). Her art practice investigates how culture is constructed, reinforced, and strategically employed. She is currently an AHRC Northern Bridge Consortium PhD candidate at Northumbria University (UK). Her doctoral research is a practice-based exploration of the inheritances of Anzac mythology from the First World War and its influence on contemporary identity. Cat's exhibition, *The Horses Stayed Behind* received the 2016 Award for Best Regional Art Exhibition at the New Zealand Museum Awards. This exhibition had a three-year national tour and was created during the 2014/2015 Tylee Cottage Artist Residency with the Sarjeant Gallery in Whanganui, (NZ). Other residencies include D6 Culture in Transit (UK, 2019); Tyneside Cinema (UK, 2016); Olivia Spencer Bower Fellowship (NZ, 2010). Exhibitions include the TRIO Biennial in Brazil, Tyneside Cinema (UK), Baltic 39 (UK), Sarjeant Gallery (NZ), Dowse Art Museum (NZ), Te Manawa Museum (NZ), Waikato Museum (NZ), Tauranga Art Gallery (NZ). Cat's 2018 short film, *Shaken* (commission by Northern Film and Media in collaboration with Channel 4) was broadcast on national UK television in August 2018 and was officially selected for the 2018 Aesthetica Short Film Festival (UK).



Chloe Barker is the Arts Programme Coordinator at Tyneside Cinema in Newcastle upon Tyne, UK, delivering a moving image-based public programme of events, artist residencies and artist film commissions. In addition to co-ordinating Cat Auburn's Graduate Artist Residency and film commission, *Preparing the Ground*, she has produced Lucy Wood's recent exhibition, *Distant Neighbours* for Tyneside Cinema's *Gimme Shelter: Climate Change, Migration and the Refugee Crisis* programme. Barker's latest project revisits filmmaker John Adams' 1985 work, *Intellectual Properties* for the 80th Anniversary of Tyneside Cinema. Barker has recently completed a Master of Research in Exhibition Studies at Central St Martins UAL and has formerly held the position of Media Relations Executive at both BALTIC Centre of Contemporary Art and Turner Contemporary.

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