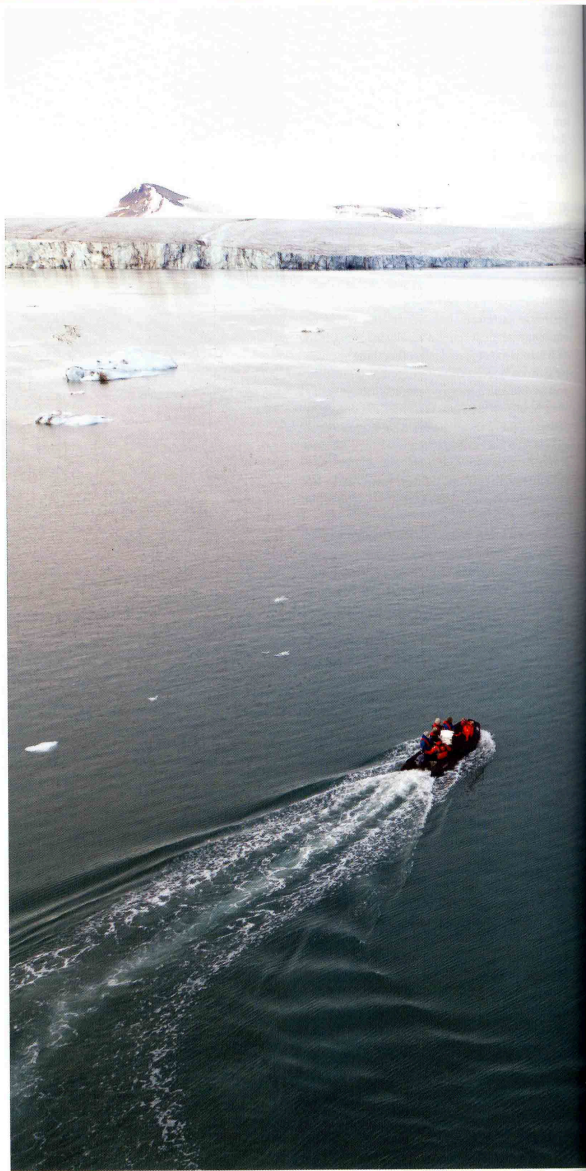


Art Review:

NOWHERE ISLAND A PROJECT BY ALEX HARTLEY

words TIM CRESSWELL





You carried a local delicacy each time in your bag, some small chosen gift, a stone, an apple, flowers, a photograph, transported hundreds of miles, as if you could bring a bit of your earth to me with each meeting; as if, over the months, you would bring your place to mine, one handful at a time.

Ann Michaels and John Berger, *Railtracks* (2011)

In July an island nation will arrive in Weymouth Harbour. It will be a moment of magic when a bit of faraway otherness arrives on Britain's coast – bringing something of another place with it.

In magic there are two now-neglected principles of space. One is the principle of contiguity. This is the idea that things that are close to each other can affect each other. Intangible properties of things flow between them due to their spatial proximity. When one part is removed and carried away, these properties may remain with it. These travelling parts can carry their origins with them as they journey, and the part can come to stand for the whole. By being somewhere in particular, or next to something, an object attains powers that stay with it as it moves. Something of the place of origin moves, is dislocated, but links an arrival to a departure. Something like this belief is apparent in the mundane way we use souvenirs. We bring that place with us and it appears to us in our living room or kitchen as part of everyday life. Postcards on the fridge, the tea towel with the map of Crete, a plastic model of the Eiffel Tower. All of these are little bits of elsewhere.

The second spatial principle is the principle of mimetic sympathy. This is the idea that a similar arrangement of space or appearance can act over a distance to affect the space it mimics. Like influences like. This similarity is not the notion of a perfectly accurate copy. Influence is based on being 'like', not 'the same as'. Both of these principles are present in a voodoo doll. The doll looks like the person it can affect from a distance. It also often includes bits of that person – a hair, perhaps. Contiguity and mimesis are combined.

Both of these principles are present in Alex Hartley's project *Nowhereisland*. The work involves returning to the small island of Nyskjaeret (which is part of the Svalbard archipelago in the High Arctic). In 2004, as part the Cape Farewell project in which artists engaged with issues of climate change, Hartley searched for and discovered the island. It had been recently revealed by the melting ice of a retreating glacier. He was the first human ever to stand on it. The Norwegian Polar Institute recognised Nyskjaeret and included the island on all maps subsequent to its discovery. This process was at the centre of Hartley's artwork *Nymark (Undiscovered Island)*



(2006), which formed part of Cape Farewell's 2007 *Art & Climate Change* exhibition.

Last autumn, an expedition team from different walks of life (and including myself) arrived at Nyskjaeret on the sailing ship *Noorderlicht* and collected as much of the island material as the ship could hold. The original island is roughly the size of a football pitch and is mainly formed of loose moraine material anchored to the seabed by a few pieces of bedrock. Natural erosion over the seven years since its discovery has already reduced its volume by a third, and in 20 or so more years the island will all but have ceased to exist. The island material was sailed into international waters, where on 20 September 2011 it was declared a new nation. It is currently being transported to Britain, where the magical transformation from material back into island will take place to produce a smaller version of Nyskjaeret called *Nowhereisland*: a large-scale floating sculpture measuring 40m by 8m. The island material is currently being held in customs somewhere in the nonplace world between 'there' and 'here', where officials are assessing its 'value'. Is it just 'stuff' or is it 'art' and at what point on a voyage does 'stuff' become 'art'? At what point is value added, and what is this value?

The *Nowhereisland* project is not the first story of moving land in Svalbard. The story of Svalbard is already a story of moving rock. The islands that make up Svalbard, which are now a little over 1000km south of the North Pole, were



this page, from top: detritus from S.A. Andrée's fatal 1897 balloon attempt on the North Pole, Virgohamna; Camp Mansfield, Blomstrand; cairn with claim note left by Alex Hartley in 2004, Nyskjaeret

facing page, from top: Nyskjaeret; Alex Hartley rebuilding cairn on Nyskjaeret

preceding pages: The *Nowhereisland* expedition approaches Nyskjaeret, discovered by Alex Hartley in the Svalbard archipelago in 2004







once (about 800 million years ago) very close to the South Pole. On their journeys they crossed the equator (about 400 million years ago). If you visit Svalbard and are inclined to look, you can see red rocks that appear as though they belong in Arizona or Alice Springs. This is red Devonian sandstone and was formed when Svalbard was where Morocco is now. Svalbard has long been on a journey.

Thanks to the more recent travels of us humans, rocks have come and gone from this place on the edge of the world over the last 400 or so years. They have been used in the ballast of ships since the sixteenth century, when English whalers began to operate in the area. They were taken aboard to trim and balance a vessel, and jettisoned to be replaced by more valuable cargo. The major industry of Svalbard through the twentieth century was coal mining. Approaching Longyearbyen (the archipelago's administrative centre) by ship, you can see the black surface of mined slopes topped by mysterious cable-car towers used to move coal from the land to the sea. From there it was shipped to fire the industries of Norway and the Soviet Union.

In the first decade of the twentieth century, Ernest Mansfield, an eccentric English capitalist and head of the Northern Exploration Company, quarried marble at Ny-London (New London), believing that it would become the biggest and richest source in the world. He wanted to use the magic of capitalism to add value to these bits of the island by moving them south and selling them to people for mantelpieces and monuments. The marble had other ideas. Cracked and shattered by freeze and thaw, it fell apart on its voyage to England and had to be jettisoned into the sea.

The traffic in rocks has not all been one way. Dotted around present-day Svalbard are bits and pieces of yellow and red bricks left by explorers and adventurers from the Netherlands, England and Sweden. At Virgohamna, the site of S.A. Andrée's 1896-7 attempts to reach the North Pole by hydrogen balloon, the landscape is littered with bits of broken Royal Doulton pots (left by the later American balloonist Walter Wellman) and the yellow bricks imported to build cabins and kilns. Over a century later, they appear to be folding back into the land.

RATHER THAN PEOPLE MOVING IN SEARCH OF A PLACE TO CALL HOME, NOWHEREISLAND IS A NATION JOURNEYING IN SEARCH OF ITS PEOPLE

In the natural world, a rock out of place is referred to as an 'erratic' – it is usually possible to trace its origins and account for its travels in the ice of a glacier. The word 'erratic' comes from the Latin *errare*. It is an error. It also means 'wanderer' – a nomad with no fixed course. In everyday English, 'erratic' refers to the chaotic and disorganised. The Svalbard rocks (the marble, the coal, the bricks, the Royal Doulton pots, the rocks that will make up *Nowhereisland*) are also erratics, but moved by us – by humans busy journeying and connecting the world. Wandering rocks.

Rather than people moving in search of a place to call home, *Nowhereisland* is an island nation journeying south in search of its people. Since the declaration of the new island nation in September, more than 4,000 people from 58 countries have become citizens, and this summer, towns around the coast of southwest England will decide how to meet and greet this roving nation. How will these rocks be welcomed? What magic will be enacted as they conduct their travels? *Nowhereisland* will look like Nyskjaeret and will consist of material from Nyskjaeret. It will be an act of artistic voodoo. The 'value' that has been added to these rocks will be revealed as they become a work of art encountered by residents and visitors in Weymouth or Mevagissey, or by people out walking their dogs on the coastal path. *Nowhereisland* will carry Nyskjaeret and its tales of changing earth along with it.:

Nowhereisland is an art project by Alex Hartley, one of 12 artists taking the lead projects funded by Arts Council England as part of the London 2012 Cultural Olympiad. The project is produced by Situations (www.situations.org.uk) at the University of the West of England, Bristol. Nowhereisland will begin its six-week journey around England's southwest coast on 25 July. To become a citizen and follow the weekly 'resident thinkers', visit www.nowhereisland.org.



this page, from top: rough seas; *Noorderlicht* returns from international waters – the new nation of *Nowhereisland* is declared on 20 September 2011

facing page, from top: *Noorderlicht* sets sail into international waters; Alex Hartley takes a final look after collecting material from Nyskjaeret

all photos: Max McClure (www.maxmcclure.com)