

SITUATIONS

NOWHEREISLAND

An Introduction

When artist Alex Hartley wrote of his discovery of an uncharted island in his diary entry '[New Land Discovered](#)' for Cape Farewell on 19th September 2004, the formal tone and language of his words recalled those of an Arctic explorer's endeavour decades before. With his search for 'a land on which no human had ever stood', he summoned a vast body of art and literary references for which the urge to seek out and possess the remote and unfamiliar landscapes at the 'edges' of the world have been an enduring creative impulse.

But what happened next is surprising. From this artist's sole Arctic endeavor, and his act of attempted colonization to secede the island from the Kingdom of Norway in 2004-6, emerged a multi-faceted artwork – *Nowhereisland* – conceived specifically for the London 2012 Cultural Olympiad. *Nowhereisland* began with a provocative proposition: what if an Arctic island travelled south as a new island nation to visit South West England during the Olympic Games and, in doing so, became a territory symbolizing a nation of global citizens, with citizenship open to all?

The journey began in September 2011. After leaving the High Arctic region of Svalbard and the jurisdiction of the Kingdom of Norway, the island entered international waters, at which point it was declared a new island nation – *Nowhereisland*. The island arrives in Weymouth for the sailing events of the London 2012 Olympic Games on 25 July 2012 and continues its coastal journey around South West England. Towed by a tugboat *Nowhereisland* will be hosted by eight ports and harbours and accompanied by its mobile Embassy, arriving at its final destination of Bristol on 7 September. There it will form the basis of a weekend of performances and calls to action to mark 'The Last Days of *Nowhereisland*'.

The island will exist as a nation for just one year. From the moment of declaration on 20th September 2011, *Nowhereisland* has gathered around it a growing constituency of citizens (more than 6,000 from almost 100 countries in May). The project foregrounds the participation of its citizens as fundamental to the way in which the work is unfolding even before the island's arrival off the coast of England, proposing "If we were to found a new nation, where would you begin?"

Richard Noble suggests in his consideration of contemporary art and utopia that, "for artworks to be utopian, they need to offer two things which seem to pull in rather different directions: on the one hand a vision or intimation of a better place than the here and now we inhabit; and on the other some insight into what [Ernst] Bloch terms the 'darkness, so near' the contradictions and limitations that drive our will to escape the here and now in the first place."¹

The [Nowhereisland online constitution](#), unlike the format of the art manifesto, is not authored by the artist; rather, its structure is defined by the artist to allow for a diverse and often conflicting set of aspirations proposed by citizens of *Nowhereisland* in an ongoing, cumulative form. Ranging from internationally renowned academics, to politicians, activists, musicians, poets and broadcasters, 52 [Resident Thinkers](#) are also contributing letters to *Nowhereisland*

over the year published on a weekly basis, each of which articulate a different facet of the work. The final seven thinkers during the South West journey will be artists, musicians, performers and poets.

By proposing that citizenship lies at the heart of *Nowhereisland*, the artist understands that the artwork could offer itself up as a proposition with profound social, political and economic implications within the context of London 2012. *Nowhereisland* will arrive in Weymouth as the celebrations begin for the sailing events of the Olympic Games.

The island territory of *Nowhereisland* is unrelenting in its barren nature – distinct from the green and fertile coastal surroundings for much of its journey. This alien characteristic is symbolic of a refugee nation. No one can go on the island, no fireworks will be shot off it, no music gig played on it. *Nowhereisland* does not prioritise the moment of display or the event of the presentation of the island. Instead, it allows for open-ended, accumulative processes of engagement through the multiple facets of the work: from the promise of utopia through the online constitution to the lone encounter with the island as it passes off-shore, to the calls to action of the citizen welcome marches to the collective celebrations in small ports and harbours.

The island and its mobile Embassy will carry with it the story of its Arctic origins – a contested zone over which territorial and environmental battles continue to be waged – and the possibilities for shaping a new nation through direct action.

Nowhereisland is a work of land art for our time. Its simple narrative premise – the journey of a small island from an Arctic archipelago as a migrant nation during the London 2012 Games – acts as the new nation's emblematic back-story. Yet *Nowhereisland* is not simply a story. It is above all sculptural - a provocative act of material displacement by an artist. Alex Hartley challenges our assumptions about the fixity of landscape. If national boundaries shift, if peoples are displaced, if territorial rights are contested, he asks, why should landscape itself not move, and what are the implications socially, economically and politically of such a sculptural act?

¹ Richard Noble ed., *Utopia* (London: Whitechapel and Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2009)