

## Forest flashpoints: The Nature of Grizedale Arts

Andy Goldsworthy's balls of snow have been insured by Hiscox, the London-based specialist art insurers, against events that could happen but are not desired, such as 'being vandalised or run down by a car - anything other than it just disappearing in front of your eyes, which is the point of the art'<sup>1</sup>. What value, however, could we place on a later, different kind of transient art in the landscape, which positively welcomes unexpected, if potentially violent, outcomes? Such flashpoints have frequently been precipitated by artworks, projects and encounters over the last six years at Grizedale Arts, and have become an integral factor in shaping the ways in which this renegade arts organisation operates.

*The snowballs that are in the most public places will probably not last very long – their lives cut short by drunken snowball fights or whatever. Our urge to make snowballs is matched by our urge to destroy them.*  
- **Andy Goldsworthy**<sup>2</sup>

'Taking a Wall for a Walk' (1984), Andy Goldsworthy's subverted archetypal Lakeland dry stone wall in Grizedale Forest, followed the natural contours of the land. Eventually, a fallen tree brought about the sculpture's downfall; the very thing the wall had self-consciously skirted around had ironically led to the entropic outcome that Goldsworthy had intended for the work. That was at a time when nature, the weather and time itself were the only aggressors against the art interventions on the trails of Grizedale Forest. However at the dawn of a new era of art in the forest, a 1999 radio interview with the new director demonstrated that no prisoners would be taken. When Adam Sutherland said that he actually '(didn't) like wood'<sup>3</sup>, his statement was a snowball in the face for many who held Grizedale Forest dear; the new caretaker and his artist cohorts were obviously not exponents of the old order. The very suggestion of irreverence as an artistic approach was nothing short of incendiary.

*A snowball is simple, direct and familiar to most of us. I use this simplicity as a container for feelings and ideas that function on many levels.* - **Andy Goldsworthy**<sup>4</sup>

One of the criticisms aimed at many of the first new works in Grizedale was their low-key, temporal nature. How was the work to have any impact on the forest walkers that came day after day when it was a video, a performance, and anything but magnificent in terms of scale? One of the new regime's first large-scale objects to be sited in the forest that garnered a real, emotional response from the visitors – mostly of abject wrath – was the billboard. There is of course an obvious contradiction here, in that the cause of anger was the very permanence of the structure, rooted in concrete in a forest clearing. As an object, the billboard functions similarly to the way Goldsworthy describes one of his snowballs, being 'simple, direct and familiar to most of us'. Whilst Goldsworthy was to transport his symbol of timeless nature, the snowball, to the streets of London in 2000<sup>5</sup>, Grizedale Arts simultaneously brought the contemporary city to the forest. The melting snowball, seen on midsummer's day in London, revealed buried oak branches and ears of barley as it melted, magically touching the hearts of the hardened urbanites, returning them to their natural selves. The billboard snatched away this veil of romanticism for those hoping to escape into nature; neither an object of beauty nor an entity to channel quiet contemplation, it was instead a vessel ripe for confrontation.

*As with all my work, whether it's a leaf on a rock or ice on a rock, I'm trying to get beneath the surface appearance of things* – **Andy Goldsworthy**<sup>6</sup>

As with Goldsworthy's 'Taking a Wall for a Walk', the billboard's ultimate demise was at the hand of its surroundings, when in 2002 it was burnt to the ground by locals in response to an offer from Grizedale for

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<sup>1</sup> Robert Hiscox, 'It's bold, it's cutting edge - and it's falling to bits. Leo Benedictus on the appeal of perishable art', *The Guardian*, Saturday October 9, 2004

<sup>2</sup> Andy Goldsworthy interview with Conrad Bodman, 2000, Barbican.

<sup>3</sup> Radio 4 Today Programme. See pg 30

<sup>4</sup> Andy Goldsworthy interview with Conrad Bodman, 2000, Barbican.

<sup>5</sup> Andy Goldsworthy, 'Midsummer Snowballs', 2001, Thames and Hudson.

<sup>6</sup> Andy Goldsworthy interview with Conrad Bodman, 2000, Barbican.

the village to make its own piece of art for it. Although both old and new versions of Grizedale engage with context, the shift between the two occurs in their approaches to ‘surroundings’, from an evangelical belief in ‘the natural’ to an examination of the reality of nature as evidenced in place and people. The billboard was the first real, physical manifestation of Grizedale Arts’ intent, with its beginning and end mirroring the organisation’s evolving strategies over this period. Its initial instigation had been an attempt to get ‘beneath the surface appearance of things’, questioning the predominantly accepted Romantic view of Nature by drawing attention to the forest’s real nature as carefully managed Forestry Commission land. Its demise three years later was as important as its origins; the burning ceremony at the hand of the villagers, although an unexpected outcome, was very much viewed by Grizedale Arts as an important part of the project. The life and death of the billboard is the manifestation of the antagonistic and awkward dichotomy that exists in Grizedale Arts’ failures and successes: never as popular as a Goldsworthy, but populist in its concerns.

*Breaking stone with a hammer is a familiar and acceptable way of working the material, but is in fact a more violent response than firing. -Andy Goldsworthy<sup>7</sup>*

The disintegration of the object was still a preoccupation many of the new artists shared with Goldsworthy and his contemporaries. Goldsworthy revelled in how he attacked the materials he used in his sculptures, talking of his action as releasing a ‘violent’ energy in himself and in revealing the nature at the very core of the material. From 2000 onwards Juneau Projects (Ben Sadler and Phillip Duckworth) were also to examine the process of breaking objects through the early period of their acquaintance with Grizedale, taking self-reflexivity to its limits through technology’s own examination of itself as revealed through its destruction. Sadler and Duckworth evolved a series of ‘car crash’ actions in the landscape where the technology they utilised could not help but record and broadcast its own demise, disappearing literally in front of its own eyes or ears.

*He equates the unexpected arrival of people while he is working with the unexpected arrival of rain or snow, events over which he acknowledges he has no control.<sup>8</sup>*

Unlike Goldsworthy, however, who poetically but misanthropically saw people as a singular amorphous element akin to the weather, Grizedale’s resident artists saw the community as a fractured medley of interests, concerns and viewpoints. Around the year 2000 their zone of interest began to expand from nature, the forest and its workers to a fascination with the wider splinter groups, hobbyists, craftspeople and eccentrics in the area. Some, such as Jordan Baseman, abandoned the subject matter of the Lakes entirely, preferring to make work focusing on communities or individuals in grittier outer Cumbria. In a sense, the artists-in-residence had themselves become another marginal group of fanatics interested in the other fanatics. Adam Chodzko’s addition of a sign outside Summer Hill, the artists’ residence, advertising ‘Residencies for gun jumpers, loose cannons, strategists, wit workers, deadpanners, soothsayers, sleighters, chaos mongers, pattern spotters, aligners’ was bang on the button.

This progression coincided with Grizedale’s preferred format for presenting the work of resident artists to the public. Through the familiar guise of the country show, complete with tented activities, show ground and public announcer, Grizedale sought to make room for an alternative culture to sit alongside the traditional. In 2000’s ‘A Different Weekend’ for example, Jordan Baseman’s self-taught taxidermy efforts (including a guinea-pig coin purse) sat on the same stand as award-winning taxidermist Jonathan Standing’s predator fox, captured mid-leap before seizing its prey. The hierarchy of skills was inverted, aptly illustrated with a bemused Brit Art goliath Mark Wallinger in charge of kids’ face-painting for the day.

*Abandoning the project was incredibly stressful after having gone through the process of building the room, installing the kiln, collecting the stones, sitting with the kiln day and night as it came to temperature, experiencing the failures. – Andy Goldsworthy<sup>9</sup>*

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<sup>7</sup> IBID

<sup>8</sup> P.12, ‘Midsummer Snowballs’, Andy Goldsworthy, from Introduction by Judith Collins, Thames + Hudson, 2001.

<sup>9</sup> IBID

In 2003 Grizedale decided to take the festival format out of the forest and onto the road. The premise of 'Roadshow', taking the art and the artists to places they would never normally reach, was a logical conclusion for an organisation whose activities had increasingly sought to 'locat[e] contemporary practice within the culture at large'<sup>10</sup>. There were many unknown variables in adopting this format, creating room for a desired element of risk. However there had always been a sense of unease in regards to the last venue of Blaenau Ffestiniog, a small mining village in North Wales, suggested as a venue by Grizedale regular Bedwyr Williams. Roadshow tented up in the local rugby field, taking the security precaution of employing the home rugby team as bouncers for the event. The first day's activities ran smoothly, with artists engaging the not unusually dubious crowd who had gathered out of curiosity on the edge of their town. By the evening however, a troubling omen of malcontent came in the form of tanked-up local youths roaming through the crowd, each armed with their own personal box of Country Manor white wine (an incongruous choice of poison). Their end-game played out in the small hours of the morning through to daybreak— a Roadshow caravan was ram-raided, the education tent set ablaze and in the ultimate marking of territory, the hermit's straw-thatched hut was pissed upon then set alight. It had again come to pass that the locals remained resolutely unconverted by the message. The nomadic 'Roadshow' shut up its charred shop a day early and headed for the hills.

*Confrontation is something that I accept as part of the project though not its purpose. - Andy Goldsworthy*  
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Grizedale Arts had provoked yet again a different kind of emotion to the obvious Romantic response to the landscape. On the face of it, the socially engaged activities of the organisation have much in common with the characterization of 1990s' art outlined by Nicolas Bourriaud in his 1998 collection of essays entitled 'Relational Aesthetics'<sup>12</sup>. The art described by Bourriaud rejects the idea of the artist as autonomous maker and of the object as transcendental vessel, seeing itself instead as 'a set of artistic practices which take as their theoretical and practical point of departure the whole of human relations and their social context'<sup>13</sup>. The importance was that the audience was now acknowledged as co-collaborator in making the work, a participant through their encounter with the artist or situation and a necessary presence in shaping the outcome. The role of the artist was to create the situation or social space for the encounter, an egalitarian levelling of roles between artist and audience in order to promote dialogue and exchange.

However, in reality, Grizedale Arts is closer to Claire Bishop's vision of a fractured rather than democratic relationship between artists, community and environment. In her extended essay 'Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics'<sup>14</sup>, Bishop states that the ideology of Bourriaud's Relational Aesthetics pointed towards social harmony as a prerequisite: 'This may be a microtopia, but like utopia it is still predicated on the exclusion of those who hinder or prevent its realisation'<sup>15</sup>. Citing the work of Rirkrit Tiravanija, one of Bourriaud's championed artists, Bishop goes on to suggest that the social situations he created had 'no inherent friction... it produced a community whose members identify with each other, because they have something in common'<sup>16</sup>. Grizedale Arts had from the beginning steered the difficult course of dissonance over harmony, whether through early skirmishes with the retired Director of The Grizedale Society Bill Grant or its uneasy relationship with its immediate community and landlords, The Forestry Commission. Furthermore, in the microtopia of the Lake District, the organisation's early interests lay in that which was excluded from this idyll to keep it a unique, beautiful area, namely the modern, the urban, and the trashy. It was therefore natural that Grizedale Arts should gravitate towards setting up situations where the outcome was not clear, where confrontation could occur, and where it was the excluded element that effected the situation.

<sup>10</sup> Claire Bishop, 'Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics', P54, OCTOBER 110, fall 2004, October Magazine Ltd and Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

<sup>11</sup> Andy Goldsworthy interview with Conrad Bodman, 2000, Barbican.

<sup>12</sup> 'Relational Aesthetics', Nicolas Bourriaud, Presses du Réel (1998).

<sup>13</sup> Ibid, from 'Glossary' section.

<sup>14</sup> 'Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics', 2004, Claire Bishop. OCTOBER 110, fall 2004, October Magazine Ltd and Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

<sup>15</sup> IBID, p.68.

<sup>16</sup> IBID, p.67.

*He enjoys taking his work into a different environment, to see how it looks in a new place.*<sup>17</sup>

Throughout this essay I have employed quotes by or about Andy Goldsworthy, maestro of the monosyllabic monologue, in order to set up a virtual dialogue with Grizedale Arts. Both sides I am sure would think any conversation or comparison is long since a redundant enterprise. But it has been necessary, in the spirit of 'Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics', to use him as a spectre of what Grizedale Arts itself has excluded, and to find some surprising commonalities lurking in the antithesis between the two. Finally, it is maybe fitting that Goldsworthy himself has adopted Grizedale Arts' antagonistic approach; his 1986 slate 'Cone' sculpture sat intractable in the midst of the grey office carpeting of the 'Gallery in the Forest' for years. Non-negotiable, the artist refused to have it moved to a new place or sold when Grizedale Arts approached him in 1999. So there it sat, two fingers stuck up to the new work terminally relegated to being placed around its rotund form, until last year the Forestry Commission transformed the gallery into a mountain bike shop and demanded that it be dismantled.

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<sup>17</sup> P.12, 'Midsummer Snowballs', Andy Goldsworthy, from Introduction by Judith Collins, Thames + Hudson, 2001.