

Rarely less than controversial, public art can nevertheless create a sense of ‘place’, as the Northwest’s regional parks have found.

Words Louise Tickle



# IN HIGH PLACES

Walk up to the tree on the top of Crown Point, overlooking Burnley, and with the benefit of a good southwesterly, you’ll hear it humming. Actually, that’s not quite right – it’s honking. Or maybe whistling? No, still not right – as I push hard into a blustery wind, I feel myself enveloped by a mysterious gurgle of melodic sound as a series of low notes emanate from the stack of splayed metal pipes that make up the *Ringling Singing Tree*. This is one of east Lancashire’s four newest public artworks, known collectively as Panopticons, and from here you can see a very long way north. Just below Crown Point, a narrow snatch of sunlight has struggled through blankets of low, white cloud to illuminate Burnley in a faint golden haze.

Drive towards the *Ringling Singing Tree* from the south, and the sculpture appears as a tiny, yet highly defined iron-grey shape on the horizon. It’s immediately obvious that it couldn’t be a real tree, though its bent outline echoes the way isolated trees typically grow into

bowed forms at the top of windy hills. And yet it’s clearly not a building in any conventional sense. So immediately, it provokes a small, sharp bite of curiosity, and the question, ‘what’s that?’.

For Nick Hunt, director of Mid Pennine Arts, which commissioned the four panopticons, now installed across east Lancashire, eliciting that enquiring response was a big part of positioning the artworks in such unusual, faraway, yet prominent places.

The definition of a panopticon is “a structure, space or device providing a comprehensive or panoramic view”. And by siting something unusual on a high point, you not only offer the chance to observe the surrounding environment, but you also draw people to a place that normally they might not have considered visiting: a highly

visible destination has instantly been created.

Nick and I meet in the Crown Point car park and the wind is blowing a gale, so we huddle up in my car in order to speak in relative comfort. A spatter of rain suddenly hits, and two muddy mountain bikers whiz past on the gravel path leading to the *Ringling Singing Tree*. Then a stampede of sheep thunder by, followed by a frisky sheepdog and a shepherd on a quad bike. A few other cars are parked up with people eating their lunchtime sandwiches, but the weather’s too inclement to induce them to venture out.

This, Hunt assures me, is far from typical – usually there are



Ringing Singing Tree (left) and Colourfields, photographed by Ian Lawson.



plenty of school groups, walkers and visitors wending their way along the path to the sculpture. How, then, did it all begin?

“Six or so years ago, a regeneration programme with government money was conceived to promote this little sub-region as a regional park, and we knew this was a big opportunity to access serious money for some creative work,” he explains.

“At the time east Lancashire was getting a particularly bad press – the Burnley race riots had just happened and the housing market renewal programmes were in the offing because of problems with excess terraced housing, so lots of boarded up housing and general dereliction was how people thought of east Lancashire. And it is not widely appreciated that it has such environmental splendours. We wanted to encourage people to see this area in a different, more positive way.”

An international competition was launched to design the panopticons. £50,000 was budgeted for each. Four have since

concept of paying even such relative peanuts in order to, in simplistic terms, plonk pricey sculptures in the middle of the countryside, can become very controversial.

The reaction of local people was initially mixed, says Hunt. In the Ribble Valley, proposals to commission a panopticon for the area were so fiercely opposed that the project was entirely abandoned. In Accrington, the leader of the council was so hostile that again, plans for a local panopticon bit the dust.

“There has been only a gradual acceptance. People are very wary of change, and of anything as new and radical as this programme, and of art generally,” observes Hunt. “And the way the local press tends to deal with these things reinforces that resistance. They tend to latch onto easy hooks such as ‘waste of public money’.”

**“A narrow snatch of sunlight struggled through blankets of low, white cloud to illuminate Burnley in a faint golden haze.”**

been created – the other three are *Atom*, overlooking Wycoller village, *Colourfields* in Blackburn, and *Halo*, above Haslingden in Rossendale. This, says Hunt, was “shoestring” money in comparison with other high profile public artworks, which can cost a million or more. But in such an economically deprived area, the

How far does he think the panopticons, and the extensive public consultation throughout the programme to create them, has turned around the sceptics?

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“She’d never felt anything good about where she lived, and suddenly all those people were talking about it.”

“I think to a very large extent. There will always be some diehards who think these things are crazy ideas. But I think the majority of people involved in public life here have been won over by the attention the programme has attracted and the awards it’s won.

“More locally, what is more relevant is that images [of the artworks] are being used in promoting this area and the work of the local authorities. They have been adopted as visual shorthand for the area. For instance, if you’re not familiar with this little bit of country, you come up here to visit the Tree, and what you discover is what’s around you. It’s a gateway into east Lancashire.”

At Landlab, John Kennedy, creator of the fourth and final panopticon, *Halo* – a silvery structure reminiscent of a flying saucer which shines soft, blue light out over Haslingden at night – takes a phlegmatic view of the changeability of local opinion.

“Beforehand, people were concerned that it would be too prominent and too bright. So we re-sited it slightly, and turned down the light levels. Now people say they can’t see it and it’s not bright enough,” he says wryly. “What am I most pleased about? Well, I suppose, that it’s not been smashed up. It shows that people don’t mind it, and maybe even quite like it. They complain it’s not good enough, not that it’s there.”

In fact, Panopticons has won awards and plaudits internationally as well as at home, and Mid Pennine Arts has found itself invited to speak on the same platform as directors of renowned art venues such as Bilbao’s Guggenheim Museum. More crucially for local acceptance, however, says Nick Hunt, Panopticons was conceived in tandem with a community outreach art programme entitled Land. This, says Helen Callaghan, the artist who co-ordinated the programme, involved communities in a wide range of creative processes arising out of the proposals for the panopticons in their area.

Working with schools, community groups and local businesses, a variety of creative projects were undertaken as integral parts of the consultation. Some of those resulted in an actual piece of art being created. In other cases, results came from the discussions around local peoples’ understanding of their area’s history and identity, with an artist on hand to lead the project. “The usefulness was in the process, not just in the artwork at the end of it,” Callaghan observes.

All of this, of course, begs the question, why “do” public art at all? At the art-commissioning organisation Liverpool Biennial, director Lewis Biggs chuckles gently.

“A lot comes down to doing something different, and art is all about doing something different because good

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art is unique. And difference leads to identity,” he says.

But how does identity emerge from a giant concrete bull plonked at the end of a promenade, or a few statues gazing out to sea, or indeed a giant spider creeping around Liverpool town centre?

“Well, Liverpool Biennial is a commissioner and our job is to bring the artist and place and people together,” Biggs explains. “We’re specialists not only in art but also in place, and in working with the people who will give that artwork meaning. It’s like landscape gardening. If you think you’re starting with a blank sheet, you’ve got it wrong. You start with what’s there; the job of the artwork is to reveal the history of that place.”

With *Another Place* by Antony Gormley, for instance, the initial task was to get more people to visit Crosby Beach in Sefton, thus prompting the regeneration of local businesses. So Biggs, who had walked that beach many times and knew that it was the last place in England that thousands of emigrants to America would have seen as they sailed westwards, used this as his starting point in identifying an artwork that would chime with the area’s historical identity.

“I knew of *Another Place*, and it’s about people’s aspirations for, well, another place! Which seemed appropriate for this site, so we borrowed it for 18 months.”

“Art is always a risky business, and even good artists can make mistakes.”



Halo [left] and Atom [right], photographed by Nigel Hillier and Ian Lawson respectively.

Sitting Bull [top], and Another Place [below].





So successful was the installation that the Northwest Regional Development Agency finally stumped up the money to pay for it to stay. But Biggs says that he's always keen that public art is tried out first before becoming a permanent fixture. And even with footfall to Crosby beach trebling, an economic upturn for local businesses and a massively increased profile for the Sefton area, there have still been people dead set against *Another Place* staying put. One of the drawbacks of public art, then, is that it is always going to provoke opposition from some quarter. Another drawback, of course, is bad public art.

"Art is always a risky business, and even good artists can make mistakes," says Biggs. "I am always in favour of a temporary approach, so if it works out, then great, and if not, you can bulldoze it. So everyone has to be prepared to take a risk. If you're not prepared to take a risk,

then you're going to end up with bad art anyway."

Jo Hayes, co-ordinator for Mersey Waterfront regional park's Pride in our Promenades project, says that public art can create vibrancy and new appeal for an area. She brought the massive concrete sculpture *Sitting Bull* out of storage and installed it at the unloved, unvisited end of Otterspool prom in autumn 2006.

"This piece was originally conceived for the waterfront a couple of miles away as part of the Garden Festival [in 1984], and so we thought it was appropriate to try to bring it back, as part of a bigger regeneration project at Otterspool," she explains. "You can walk or cycle from the city centre right up to it. Combined with the children's play area, *Sitting Bull* has definitely brought life and a sense of fun down to that end of the promenade."

Quite apart from the economic benefits of having more people visit an area because of a piece of art, Biggs points out, is the energy and excitement that can be generated by encouraging people to commission their own artwork for the place where they live. Liverpool Biennial has recently worked

with local communities on three such projects for a programme called Pavilions: one outside Rotunda College in Liverpool city centre, one by Edge Hill station and one in Garston in south Liverpool. Biggs says that this kind of commissioning is an adventure for everyone involved.

"You get a feeling very early on as to whether they're going to trust you, but the thing that is magic is when you see people's confusion and uncertainty turn into pride and confidence. A wonderful example of this is the Rotunda community college project, which is a vertical garden – a sheet-iron structure covered in vegetation. Finding our way in this project was not an easy process and we nearly lost the trust and collaboration of people in the community on more than one occasion.

"But two weeks after it opened, one of the people who'd been most vocal told me she'd been on the top deck of a bus and could see down to where the Pavilion is, and she suddenly said out loud, 'there's the Pavilion!'. And then, other people on top of the bus were saying how fab it was. She'd never felt anything good about where she lived, and suddenly all those people were talking about it."

Louise Tickle is a Cheshire-based journalist who writes for the *Guardian*, *Telegraph* and *Times*.