

DOORS INTO THE NEOLITHIC MIND

Experiential Interpretations of the Prehistoric Landscape

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CHALK, 2011. Atsushi Takenouchi performing in Harting Down end action.
Image Credit: Paul Winter.

Can art unlock a sense of place that is just as important as the facts? We've been driven up the sides of the valley between flaming braziers to the sound of gongs and I wonder whether this is an insight into the avenue at Stonehenge or the great sacred enclosures that we have fragmentary traces of. The idea of moving in a ritual way through fire and wind and light and theatre – if this doesn't help us to re-engage with ancient ideas then to be perfectly honest I can't think what will.

—Martin Ellis, Curator, Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery, 2011

Red Earth arts group has for over twenty years created outdoor site-specific installations and performances in, and in response to, landscapes across Britain, mainland Europe, Java, Japan and Mongolia. These intensely experiential events are often the result of interdisciplinary collaborations between artists and non-arts professionals such as ecologists, archaeologists, geologists, historians, land managers, farmers, and communities. We attempt to engage the public in the creative process, bringing people together in participatory events to explore their natural and cultural heritages, and transforming our understanding of the places where we live.¹

We are artists who have worked together as Red Earth since its inception over 20 years ago. We work with performance as a method of initiating culturally significant relationships between human and landscape. The group experiences are often intense and cathartic, immersing the public in performance and revealing the hidden terrain through communal acts of identification with place. Our interest in archaeology first bore fruit in the site-specific performance *Enclosure* (2007).

In this paper we look at three of our performance projects: *Enclosure*, a site-specific event on Hambledon Hill in Dorset, the largest Neolithic causewayed enclosure in Europe; *Lithograph* (in-development), a journey across the British Neolithic landscape; and *CHALK* (2011), a series of installations and performances across two chalk downland sites in Southeast England.

Our projects respond directly to prehistorically resonant sites. Performance and audience experience in *Enclosure*, *Lithograph*, and *CHALK* allow participants to draw analogies between contemporary and prehistoric experiences of the landscape. The events are cultural interfaces between modern society and an imagined past, via contemporary ritual in mythographic landscapes previously manipulated by our Neolithic predecessors. In the Neolithic Period, communities marked the land in ways that are still observable today: forest clearance and then-new constructions that utilized earth, stone, and timber – creative manipulations of spaces used for more than just everyday survival. As Mike Pearson indicates, Neolithic sites “are places of – and for – choreography: they are about the movement of people, as much as of the stars. They are locations of events, processions, gatherings, feasts, ceremonies.... places of – and for – performance.”²

Red Earth projects do not aim for authentic historical reconstruction. They challenge reductionist thinking about ancient peoples and foreground the imaginative processes inherent in all archaeological and historical constructions. We argue that such work is valuable to both the public and academia with regards to our understanding of the prehistoric landscape. *Enclosure*, *Lithograph* and *CHALK* allow us, through our contemporary responses, to conceptualize parallels between ourselves and our prehistoric predecessors. As such, we invoke Pearson’s definitions of performance as being “aware of its nature as a contemporary act, the latest occupation of a place where previous occupations are still apparent,” and which “can overlay different varieties of narrative – factual and fictive, historical and contemporary, creative and analytical, documentary and dramatic – within a given location, without laying any claim to authority or verisimilitude, whilst constantly serving to reveal it.”³

Contemporary site-specific performance, created in response to the palimpsest of history and the multitude of practices that form the identity of place, is an unconventional yet valuable vehicle for suggesting and interpreting possible cultural responses to landscape during Neolithic times. We suggest that site-specific group experiences can stimulate new interpretations of archaeological research materials, especially in the area of phenomenology, as the following sections reveal in further depth.

¹ For more on Red Earth, see *Fourth Door Review* Number 4, “Land, sea and sky: Red Earth’s Seven Sisters ritual performance.” Accessible online at: http://www.fourthdoor.co.uk/unstructured/unstructured_04/article4_5.php

² Michael Pearson, “Performing the Past.” *Half Life*, edited by Angus Farquhar (Glasgow: Luath Press Ltd, 2007): 49.

³ Michael Pearson. “Performing the Past.” *Half Life*, edited by Angus Farquhar (Glasgow: Luath Press Ltd, 2007): 51.

Exploring the Archeological Landscape Through Performance

ENCLOSURE

In 2007 we were invited to respond to the prehistoric landscape of Hambledon Hill in Dorset. There a chalk massif stands out above the Dorset landscape, marked by a well-preserved Iron Age hill fort. Covering the entire crown of Hambledon Hill are the almost invisible remains of the largest Neolithic enclosure in Europe.⁴



Hambledon Hill, 2007, Dorset. Note the Neolithic barrow at the center of the photograph.
Image Credit: Red Earth.

The Iron Age fort itself surrounds a formidable Neolithic barrow (burial mound), which, in the minds of our Iron Age predecessors, we can assume was a respected feature of Hambledon Hill's more ancient, unknown, and mythical inhabitants. Today the visible archaeological remains include substantial Iron Age ramparts and gateways, whilst, apart from the long barrow, the Neolithic enclosure has been reduced to faint undulations in the landscape, eroded by hundreds of years of farming. The Neolithic site was never permanently occupied; however there is strong evidence of ceremonial feasting, human and animal burials with substantial mortuary remains, and warfare.⁵ Key to the performance was this still-powerful presence of ancient cultures.

⁴ Roger J. Mercer, *Causewayed Enclosures* (Oxford: Shire Publications, 1990). Mercer's detailed a record of his dig on Hambledon Hill is the only in-depth analysis of this landscape's prehistoric legacy.

⁵ See Roger J. Mercer, *Causewayed Enclosures* (Oxford: Shire Publications, 1990).

Enclosure, a one-off, site-specific event, took place in September 2007 across the crest of Hambledon Hill. It was a poetic response to the invisible Neolithic landscape, a eulogy to our unknown ancestors, and a contemporary performative event that responded to the echoes of our prehistoric past. The land became the protagonist, the performance a ritual across a mythographic terrain molded both physically and conceptually by our Neolithic predecessors. The performance evolved into a metaphysical journey that charted a voyage through both landscape and cultural memory.⁶

Evident in *Enclosure* were the dynamics of ritual and ceremony. It was a journey/pilgrimage and communal interaction – the creation of a temporary community engaged in a symbolic journey in a liminal place – connected by a shared vicarious experience, amplified by sound and fire, and focused on a single figure as avatar, protagonist and initiate.



Enclosure, 2007. Atsushi Takenouchi beyond the gateway.
Image Credit: Tony Gill.

⁶ One of our main source texts for *Enclosure* was the influential work by David Lewis-Williams and David Pearce, *Inside the Neolithic Mind: Consciousness, Cosmos and the Realm of the Gods* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2005).



Enclosure, 2007. Atsushi Takenouchi begins the final journey.
Image Credit: Duncan Cooper.



Enclosure, 2007. Atsushi Takenouchi on barrow.
Image Credit: Tony Gill

We staged the voyage at dusk on the autumn equinox so it would blur the lines between day and night, summer and winter, as well as life and death. The event was saturated with an intensity and viscosity that outweighed the sum of its parts. It stimulated a sense of atmosphere and awe theoretically compatible with ritual events that may have taken place on Hambledon Hill five thousand years ago.

The event began with a mile-long ascent along a chalk path that wound up to the Iron Age ramparts visible at the top of the hill. Two white flags marked part of the Neolithic enclosure's perimeter. From this point several flag bearers, making their way over the sloping horizon, gradually joined an audience of over seven hundred people. Met by horn players within the Iron Age precinct, the audience eventually encountered Japanese performer Atsushi Takenouchi. The event then developed into a series of increasingly dramatic and transitional interventions, with Atsushi as catalyst.

Atsushi led us northward along the spine of Hambledon Hill. During the procession we became immersed in a unique atmosphere of sounds and images generated by conches, trance-like percussion, and increasing levels of flame and fire. Upon reaching and crossing the Neolithic barrow, Atsushi crossed the line between life and death in his ritual pouring of liquid chalk over his own body, symbolically transforming him from human to specter, ghost, spirit. At that moment the atmosphere felt more potent, reaching a climax that activated the entire landscape as Atsushi moved through a field of fire bowls to disappear over the horizon, obscured by a blazing corona of pyrotechnic fire. In the falling darkness and virtual silence, the audience made its way back down the chalk path, now delineated by fire bowls, to the "real" world below.⁷



Enclosure, 2007. Audience follows Atsushi Takenouchi towards the "field of stars."
Image Credit: Roy Riley.

⁷ For a more detailed response to the *Enclosure* performance, see Yvette Staelens, *Enclosure* performance review, *Time & Mind* Volume 2, Issue 1, March 2009



Enclosure, 2007. Fire corona.
Image Credit: Ray Gibson.



Lithograph, in-progress (photo taken in 2009). Preseli Hills from the south.
Image Credit: Red Earth.

LITHOGRAPH

A continuation of *Enclosure*, *Lithograph* is being developed by Red Earth in collaboration with archaeologists Tim Darvill from Bournemouth University, and Penny Bickle and Ffion Reynolds from Cardiff University. Currently envisaged as a journey across the British Neolithic landscape, *Lithograph* will begin with a two-part project that engages with Stonehenge and the Preseli Hills in Pembrokeshire, Wales (the latter is a source of the inner blue stone circle of early Stonehenge). This journey will contrast the created landscape of Stonehenge against the raw, natural architectural landscape of the Preseli Hills. We will explore the social connection between the sites, implied by the blue stone that they share.

We intend to extend the *Lithograph* project in ways that might enable a conceptual journey across prehistoric Britain. It will involve site-responsive performance events at several locations throughout the British Isles, including Avebury, Maiden Castle in Dorset, and the Orkney Islands off the Scottish coast – the latter a topic of great interest in the news due to the recent discovery of a Neolithic site that is older than Stonehenge.⁸ *Lithograph* will be an immersive experience that highlights theoretical interactions between Neolithic social groups and the landscapes they inhabited through performances in which a contemporary public shares the occupation of an imaginary landscape.

We are truly excited about the potential of how our events may bring voice and corporeality to the disembodied spirit of these places, bringing them to life through interaction. Whatever their original purpose, these constructed sites were meant to be *used*. Our performances can potentially break through the cultural barriers modern society has created around architectural puzzles by way of preservation without activation. *Lithograph* might also inspire new questions about, and appreciations for, the construction of Neolithic sites.



Lithograph, in-progress (photo taken in 2009). Stonehenge.
Image Credit: Red Earth.

⁸ See, for example, “Orkney’s new Skara Brae.” Featured item in *Current Archaeology*, October 11, 2007. Accessible online at: www.archaeology.co.uk/articles/features/orkneys-new-skara-brae.htm



CHALK, 2011. Atsushi Takenouchi, shepherd. Wolstonbury Hill is in the background.
Image Credit: Paul Winter.

CHALK

CHALK took place between March and October 2011. The project was a multi-layered response to the hidden landscape and history of the South Downs, a long and broad chalk grassland that rises above the English Channel, where the Downs end and their famous white cliffs meet the sea. There is strong physical evidence of prehistoric occupation in the form of earthworks and archaeological remains across the chalk landscapes of Southern England. *CHALK* was an allegorical journey through prehistory, beginning with the mythic era of the Mesolithic hunter-gatherer, and ending in the world of the shepherd and the Neolithic domestication and alteration of the land.



CHALK, 2011. RIVER - hazel, willow and ash. Harting Down, West Sussex.
Image Credit: Red Earth.



CHALK, 2011. FOLD - hazel, sycamore and ash. Wolstonbury Hill, East Sussex.
Artist Caitlin Easterby stands to the right.
Image Credit: Red Earth.

In *CHALK* our engagement with the landscape reached a new level of intimacy and interaction. Unlike *Enclosure*'s brief intervention, *CHALK* sustained a long-term presence in the landscape that lasted several months. It involved two site-specific greenwood installations called RIVER and FOLD (see photos above), collaborative dialogues, and public walks with archaeologists, geologists, natural navigators and wild plant specialists.

CHALK encompassed a sizeable area of land. The final performances took the audience-participants on two sequential journeys that lasted around three hours and traversed several square miles of chalk downland – which included drovers' paths, ancient river valleys, downland scarps and water basins – all marked by human intervention in the form of Neolithic, Bronze Age and Iron Age earthworks. The performances had no text-based narrative but were animated acoustically by animal horns, great bells, gongs and voices. The sculptures became centerpieces for action: RIVER (at Harting Down) was used to channel “the hunted” Atsushi Takenouchi, while FOLD (below Wolstonbury Hill), became a ritualized precinct, the center of a spiral that travelled across the hillside. Audience members became the herders and the herded, the hunters and the hunted, as they were led into the valleys by artists, musicians and members of the public. The divide between audience member and participant became increasingly blurred as we all became part of the living landscape we were creating.



CHALK, 2011. The climax of the hunt, inside the River installation.
Image Credit: Paul Winter.



CHALK, 2011. Harting Down, endpiece. Badamkhorol Samdandamba on horseback.
Image Credit: Paul Winter.



CHALK, 2011. Harting Down choir.
Image Credit: Paul Winter.



CHALK, 2011. Badamkhorol Samdandamba blesses FOLD with milk.
Image Credit: Paul Winter.

Local choirs brought together songs from the South Downs and the Russian Steppe with the extraordinary sound of Mongolian “Long songs” (Urtyn duu) from the shaman Badamkhorol Samdandamba, juxtaposing vocal traditions of culturally different but topographically similar grassland landscapes. The audience was directed to walk in “mindful silence” so the acoustics of natural and unamplified sound could be appreciated; however, they were also actively encouraged to participate in the creation of soundscapes.

The events, performances and sculpture installations of *CHALK* were inspired by past ritual landscapes – but as University College London archaeologist Dr. Matthew Pope points out on BBC Radio 4’s “Making History,”

Make no mistake. *CHALK* isn’t an exercise in reconstructing the past, part of that thing which makes me shudder: living history. This is an attempt to do something actually in the present. For me as an archaeologist, it’s all been about possibilities. Possibilities of how sound operates in landscape, how people move in landscapes. To see this work of modern performance utilising landscapes in ways that are evocative of, reminiscent of, engaged with the ancient ritual landscapes has been really instructive. It stands as a fantastic exercise in using landscape in new ways.⁹

⁹ Matthew Pope, Senior Research Fellow in Archaeology University of London BBC Radio 4, “Making History.” October 4, 2011



CHALK: Harting Down. Badamkhorol Samdandamba at the end of the performance.
Image Credit: Paul Winter.

FOUR KEY ASPECTS TO OUR METHODOLOGY

1. These events take place outside and in the “natural” landscape. Neither indoor experience nor demonstration can replace the experience of an event dominated by natural forces and the elements. Sun, wind, rain and cold intensify our experiences in ways that cannot be relayed by words and imagery alone.
2. The journey (procession) serves as an entry point into the performance space. The performance space thus becomes a sacred precinct, resulting in the separation of the participants from the mundane. The journey acts as both a meditative prologue and epilogue to the main events. It enables the naturalization of the audience into the environment and atmosphere of the experience.
3. Participation. Audience members, brought together on the journeys, take part in the actions. Our experiences become shared, forming temporary communities of travellers and initiates – or artists. Audience-participants are already immersed in the atmosphere of the event induced by a journey that is enhanced by visuals and acoustics, and thus they become inextricably engaged. They are part of the story.
4. The liminalization of space through ritual engagement produces an intensified experience. We become engaged in a sensory immersion, conjoining with landscapes in our own creative *umwelts*. The stories become real. By definition, performance creates liminal space, a boundary zone, a crack in our normal perception of reality. In one form or another it imposes on, or responds to, a space. We enter into meta-realities within meta-landscapes, temporary mythological precincts, doors between the mundane and the epic.

PERFORMANCE RITUALIZED: THE LIMINALIZATION OF SPACE

What became apparent to us in both *Enclosure* and *CHALK*, and what we are consciously continuing in *Lithograph*, is the potential of a contemporary art event to contribute to, and intervene in, our understanding of the Neolithic through enhanced experiences of landscape. We do not attempt to reproduce Neolithic rituals but rather imagine the possibilities of what such experiences might have been. We combine the vocabulary of contemporary art with that of established ritual and ceremonial practice. We incorporate performance, installation, and especially sound to create visceral experiences that engage physically with landscapes once inhabited by Neolithic peoples, and metaphysically with imagined Neolithic minds and cultures.



CHALK, 2011. Harting Down. Capturing the Stag.
Image Credit: Paul Winter.



Enclosure, 2007. Atsushi Takenouchi departs through the field of stars.
Image Credit: Roy Riley.

These projects gave us an unidentifiable but implicit taste of the deep resonance of feeling and interaction that we can only suppose existed between prehistoric people and the created environments in which they lived. Contemporary people can only speculate such relationships. And yet we can arguably expand on that rationale through *the experiential*: mobilizing a contemporary art form can create an interface between the modern mind, the ancient landscape, and the people who shaped it.

Fixed as we are in our twenty-first century mindset, it seems that ritual performance can introduce us to other possible worlds, lead us to unfamiliar boundaries, and so allow us to access imagined landscapes.¹⁰ Ritual is a vehicle for disengagement with the mundane and engagement with the “Other.” It creates liminality. It allows entry into metaphysical space between visible and invisible realities, conscious and subconscious. It catalyzes the imagination, removes us from our preconditioned mindset, and frees us to engage experientially with a meta-reality. Sound, voice, gesture, and fire all affect our subconscious perception of space and environment. The heightened experience that results from immersion through ritual becomes a bridge between the physical and the imagined landscape. Without noticing, we find ourselves “being” in a liminal zone, a meta-landscape confusing our perception of “physical” reality.

PERFORMANCE AS ARCHEOLOGY?

Our work is arguably radicalized phenomenology, possibly too extreme for mainstream archaeology.¹¹ Ritual performances take us not only *to* the landscape, but *into* it. Aural and visual stimuli, staged within a raw elemental environment, enhance our sensory perception and induce a sense of heightened presence during the rituals in which all actions have meaning and are interconnected with the shared landscape.

We suggest that there is value in the non-rational, yet highly provocative, site-responsive experience as a counterpoint to the classical, intellectualized reconstruction of the Neolithic world. Such an approach enables us to avoid monolithic interpretations of sites and societies, and helps us to better contemplate, if not actually understand, partial aspects of Neolithic consciousness and its relationship with landscape. In all, these projects enable an alternative perception of place on a visceral level, and engagement on a liminal level. We try to facilitate contemporary responses that enable us to draw *experiential parallels* with prehistoric peoples.

We assume that ritual performance was an inherent part of Neolithic culture. There are also strong arguments that frame social relationships with landscape as intrinsic to the cultural makeup of Neolithic peoples. And yet contemporary people can only theorize towards understanding that relationship. It is dangerous to argue that contemporary ritual performance, even when responding so intimately with site and context, can bring us closer to a specific Neolithic consciousness. Our interpretation is severely qualified by our own worldview.¹² We believe we are guessing about the past, but actually we are projecting a light onto a cracked mirror. Our contemporary response is analogous with how people of the Iron Age understood the Neolithic landscape they inherited. Similarly bounded as we are by our own cultural and chronological context, imagination and creativity are essential tools in any reconstruction of the ancient past, and are shared by both artists and archaeologists.

¹⁰ Lynette Russell discusses the imagined landscape in “Imagined Landscapes: Edges of the (Un)Known.” In *Handbook of Landscape Archaeology*, edited by Bruno David and Julian Thomas (Walnut, CA: Left Coast Press, 2008).

¹¹ Through dialogue with archaeologists we now appreciate that in an archaeological context Red Earth’s performances can be interpreted as phenomenological exercises.

¹² In *Stonehenge: the Biography of a Landscape* (Stroud: Tempus Publishing, 2006), Tim Darvill explores two millennia of cultural divergence with regards to observations of Stonehenge.



CHALK, 2011. Wolstonbury Hill. Approaching the enclosure.
Image Credit: Paul Winter.



CHALK, 2011. Wolstonbury Hill. Transformation at the center of *Fold*.
Image Credit: Paul Winter.

Occurring in mist, rain and wind, on a high hill, stimulated by fire, action and sound, events such as those we have described propel us to look outside of reason, inviting us to conjecture (via our own direct experience) on prehistoric cultural responses to both the physical and the imagined landscape. As long as we acknowledge that all performance is categorically a contemporary experience and confined by its cultural context, then site-specific performance can act as a leftfield methodological vehicle for interpretation. Our approach brings us, a temporary community of modern humans, closer to experiencing a collective vision of a transmorphic landscape, and our journey through that landscape becomes yet another layer in the spatial and narrative palimpsest.

Ours is a flawed argument. It is a conjecture. An intervention. As artists we are foreign guests in the world of the archaeologist, speaking at times a similar language, yet unrestricted by the rigors of academia. We are free to explore alternative and even radical ideas that may by chance or insight lead to new interpretations of existing materials and locations.

Ultimately artists and archaeologists share a dependency on the imagination to create images of the world, to construct stories of who we are and how we arrived at where we are, in our explorations of what it means to be human.



Enclosure, 2007. Atsushi Takenouchi met on the Iron Age boundary by conches.
Image Credit: Roy Riley.



CHALK, 2011. Wolstonbury Hill. Badamkhorol Samdandamba sings longsong at the end of the last performance.
Image Credit: Paul Winter

Caitlin Easterby and Simon Pascoe are the lead artists and co-directors of **Red Earth**, an environmental arts group creating site-specific installations and performances in the landscape, informed by geology, archaeology and ecology. For over twenty years they have been producing original interdisciplinary work across European, Javanese, Japanese and Mongolian landscapes, exploring our complex relationship with the land. Their installations are built in and from the surrounding landscape, with performances that immerse audiences in a hidden terrain, transforming our understanding of the places where we live. Caitlin and Simon weave life and work together, running Red Earth while simultaneously bringing up their three boys.