

CITY ARCADIA

DOSSIER #2

Kathryn Hawkins
(river)

City Arcadia
An Open Call to Enter
Optimism with Coventry

First published in Coventry Great Britain 2014

Artspace

City Arcadia
32 City Arcade
Coventry
CV1 3HW

www.city-arcadia.co.uk

twitter: @covartspace @thisismayhew
www.facebook.com/MichaelLauraCityArcadia

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Edited by Laura Elliott

Text and cover design: Roshana Rubin-Mayhew

Printed in Coventry by Rope Press

/ CONTENTS

City Arcadia	1
Prologue	2
Past	3
Present	7
Future	8

/ CITY ARCADIA

An Open Call to Enter Optimism with Coventry.

A practice based discourse with a city - its history - its sites & its people,
by employing an open & holistic approach into methods of inquiry,
process & engagement with site based creative processes.

/ PROLOGUE

(river)

a conversation with Kathryn Hawkins

September 2014

The name of Coventry's River Sherbourne is said to derive from "Scir Burna", meaning 'clear stream'. This river is culverted just outside the city's concrete inner ring road, becoming visible for just a few fleeting moments around the centre before it flows back out beneath shops, pubs and offices through an elaborate underground tunnelling system. It is a source of fascination for Coventry artist Kathryn Hawkins, who [re]traces and [re]creates the line of the river's hidden course within her work.

As a starting point for 18-months of conversation and activity through the '*City Arcadia*' programme, Laura Elliott & Michael Mayhew commissioned and collaborated with Kathryn Hawkins to chisel into the concrete surface of the 1962 shop space that has become the creative play space for the programme and has also been named *City Arcadia*. Kathryn employed industrial power tools to cut a line across the surface of *City Arcadia* and so into the surface of the city itself. This line was then opened up and filled with water and light to create a visual metaphor, intended to illuminate the underground route of the city's buried river.

This was (river), a sculptural installation that exposed and revealed the hidden undercurrent beneath Coventry city's modern foundations. A work that encapsulated [PAST] thinking about the source of the city as an essential life force and beginning point; that revealed its [PRESENT] vulnerability as a hidden energy and that spoke about its imagined, perhaps visible, utilised and celebrated [FUTURE].

In this transcript of an interview with the artist that took place at *City Arcadia* in September 2014, we explore her rigorous process for researching, questioning and revealing the River Sherbourne and this water's elusive allure; repeatedly calling for Kathryn and Coventry's other inhabitants and artists to interrogate the ways in which the city is navigated and experienced. In essence, how its story is told.

Laura Elliott & Michael Mayhew

September 2014

/ PAST

LE: (Laura Elliott) Where did your fascination with Coventry's subterranean River Sherbourne begin?

KH: (Kathryn Hawkins) My starting point is human geography and social science and about how I as an artist and a person living in a city think about space. To quote SAGE, publishers of Professor Doreen Massey's 2005 book 'For Space':

"The way we think about space matters. It inflects our understandings of the world, our attitudes to others, our politics. It affects, for instance, the way we understand globalisation, the way we approach cities, the way we develop, and practice, a sense of place.

If time is the dimension of change, then space is the dimension of the social: the contemporaneous co-existence of others. That is its challenge, and one that has been persistently evaded."

Professor Doreen Massey is Emeritus Professor of Human Geography at the Open University, where I studied between 2002-2008.

'For Space', which pursues its argument through philosophical and theoretical engagement, has been a key text for me, pulling together my interests and ideas and how I approach engaging with the city. Through it I've found that other people share these questions, these interests, these engagements, because the place that you live is also part of the relationship with yourself, the other people that are there and the wider world.

We don't exist in a vacuum, we don't exist in isolation and cities are places of ingress and egress, things come in and they go out.

Part of the research I began in 2011-2012 was to ask those questions about where the river in Coventry had gone, why it wasn't there anymore and how that affected my experience of living in a city where although the roads go in and out, they tend to be represented by the ring road, which encircles the city. Looking at it you don't have this obvious connection with the outside, you don't see something coming in and going out, which is what a river does.

Of course it does happen with the River Sherbourne but it comes in, it goes underground and then it goes out again and you see very little of that process.

You don't have that opportunity of being able to sit on the banks of the river like you might do with the Avon, the Leam or the Thames or somewhere and to think "where do the ships go?" and I wanted to explore how I felt about that. I wanted to explore my relationship with the city, through the medium of the river and how that river had been buried.

<http://www.uk.sagepub.com/booksProdDesc.nav?prodId=Book227109>

http://www.open.ac.uk/socialsciences/main/staff/people-profile.php?name=Doreen_Massey

LE: How would you describe your compulsion to make work about the river?

KH: I want to make work. It's where I live. If I lived somewhere else I might make work about something different but it makes sense to me. Why do people do what they do? Because it makes sense.

LE: We've seen some of your historical research. A comprehensive collection of documents and images; maps, lost boats, bridges, coins and other treasures washed through the river's waters. It seems to be a significant starting point for your fascination with the River Sherbourne. We've also discussed more contemporary artistic practices and how they influence you such as:

Andy Goldsworthy - <http://www.goldsworthy.cc.gla.ac.uk/>

Richard Long - <http://www.richardlong.org/>

Bill Fontana - http://www.frieze.com/shows/review/bill_fontana/

Giuseppe Penone - http://www.frieze.com/issue/review/giuseppe_penone/

David Nash - <https://www.royalacademy.org.uk/artist/90>

Constant van Nieuwenhuis - http://www.classic.archined.nl/news/9812/Babylon_e.html

LE: Can you tell us about your approach to research and how important it is for exposing the river in your work?

KH: You want to get to know your medium. Research is crucial because you need to know your subject and also your medium. In this respect Andy Goldsworthy is an artist whose method of practise has had a significant influence on my philosophy of working. Once you know your medium you can act intuitively. You've internalised the thinking process and once you're confident with speaking about the background of your work, you end up with a wonderful...fluency.

To have opened up a surface physically in the way that I have with *City Arcadia* is the sort of opportunity that you might get in, say, a sculpture park, it doesn't happen very often.

Another significant contemporary influence is Tim Ingold, the anthropologist. [Ingold, Tim 2007. *Lines: A Brief History*. London: Routledge, features in the *City Arcadia* library]

Ingold explores the stories that we tell about ourselves. You can redraw a map to reflect spaces on the ground, but could you do the same with a space in your head? Perhaps you can but there's an infinite amount of possibilities and that's where the research comes in, it's seeking out and making those links and making other people's links and understanding that they are already there. I just illuminate it.

<https://www.dur.ac.uk/writingacrossboundaries/writingonwriting/timingold/>

http://geactblog.files.wordpress.com/2012/03/tim_ingold-being_alive__essays_on_movement_knowledge_and_description__-routledge2011.pdf

LE: I very much see the references to archaeology, to excavation. Where does that sit?

KH: For me it's a question of how easy it would be to take the top off the town and look at what's underneath. As an anthropologist Tim Ingold explores how we come to understand ourselves and the landscape through the telling of stories. How people move across and understand a landscape, without a compass or a cartographical map... how you gather bearings and how you develop an understanding of a place and of each other without those things. Having said that he also substantiates historically, looking back from our current position

and pin pointing the journey of people as they move in space and time. With Ingold it's also about networks, conversations and the things that people do when they are telling stories: knitting, weaving, the drawing of a line - how these things both facilitate understanding and become integral to the experience. How it becomes part of how memories are formed, as a lived experience...if you do something, if you experience it, you learn quicker.

LE: Are you then seeking a way for the Sherbourne to become more prevalent in people's consciousness? What might happen as a result?

KH: We don't forget things because we tell stories, about ourselves and places and they become who we are. It's how we develop a sense of place, sense of self. What do I think of when I think of Coventry? The ring road is a dominant image now, 45 years ago the river was still a dominant feature of the city centre. The ring road came into being and the river was culverted. One thing came to be, one thing ceased to be visible. In order for me to believe and to acknowledge that the river still exists I need to keep telling its stories.

Coventry wouldn't be here if the river wasn't here. People build where a water source is, where you can have a defensive structure if you need one, where you can drink water, wash with water, generate power from water.

It's not just the source of people but of our industrial heritage; wool dyeing, weaving, washing, rinsing...of mills, and factories and making. It is so much harder to make those links with your history when those visual presences disappear.

If you lived with the river before it disappeared, you'll have a story about the Sherbourne. If you're from Wyken, Walsgrave, you'll have one. If you're from the South side of city, Coundon, Earlsdon, Canley, you'll have another story. And now you can't see it.

LE: I've enjoyed those conversations. I met someone at the launch who when living in Spon End as a child used to walk up the section of Sherbourne with trousers rolled up. They called it the Jungle River Cruise.

/ PRESENT

LE: Chiselling into the concrete surface of *City Arcadia* was a highly industrial; filthy, deafening, exhausting process and it was a first, for you and us. Can you tell us about it?

KH: I think that using industrial kit is Gordon Matta-Clark [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_Bt9FZvk4zU], to me it's like lifting a house off its foundations, it feels like it's possible to do this in a city centre, and it's another way of drawing. Yes the process was noisy but so are lots of things, washing screens for screen printing, all sorts of sculptural work. We do dirty jobs in studios, as do people in their homes, in the building trade, in kitchens; making things and altering internal and external spaces.

(river) has been a learning curve. It was ace, visceral, physical, noisy. Cutting into the space changed it physically - there was a lot of spray, mud, water for cooling. If you're using an indelible medium you just have to crack on. Again I was thinking about David Nash, the process of cutting, burning; and Richard Long, whose work is made from the geography he inhabits. I live in Coventry and this environment is where the genesis of my work comes from.

LE: As the first collaborator with *City Arcadia*, what have you discovered?

KH: It was a gift to have the conversations with you both which enabled this to happen. Perhaps casting (river) will take place, the filling of (river) with concrete will definitely take place, there will be a line where (river) was and so the conversations will continue.

/ FUTURE

LE: A newspaper feature in March this year revisited proposals to revive and uncover the River Sherbourne, so that it might flow through the streets of Coventry city centre once more. what are your thoughts on this?

KH: We keep digging things up, it wouldn't be that much more difficult to dig that bit further, to acknowledge that the river is here, to keep going. The river is something that can be embraced. In Coventry we function as a city that is very easy to go round the edge of. Bikes, cars, our motor heritage, it means it's really easy to get from A to B and to

get round the edge.

Perhaps we could have a river instead of it being underground.

LE: What does your imagined future for the River Sherbourne look/sound/feel like?

KH: The pre-war city redevelopment plans which form the basis of the post WWII redevelopment lined Pool Meadow and the Swanswell into one generous city centre park. [<http://www.historiccoventry.co.uk/nowandthen/swanswell-pool.php>] We've got plenty of space to play with, to consider liveable cities, playable cities, spaces for leisure. The great things about rivers is that they are social spaces. They are slow, they can change the pace. Look at a river and people are feeding ducks, taking photos, boating, picnicking, maybe they are playing pooh sticks. A conversation about a river in the city is a conversation about flow, pace, about shifting behavioural patterns, activity patterns. We have the space to do it.

LE: What's next for you?

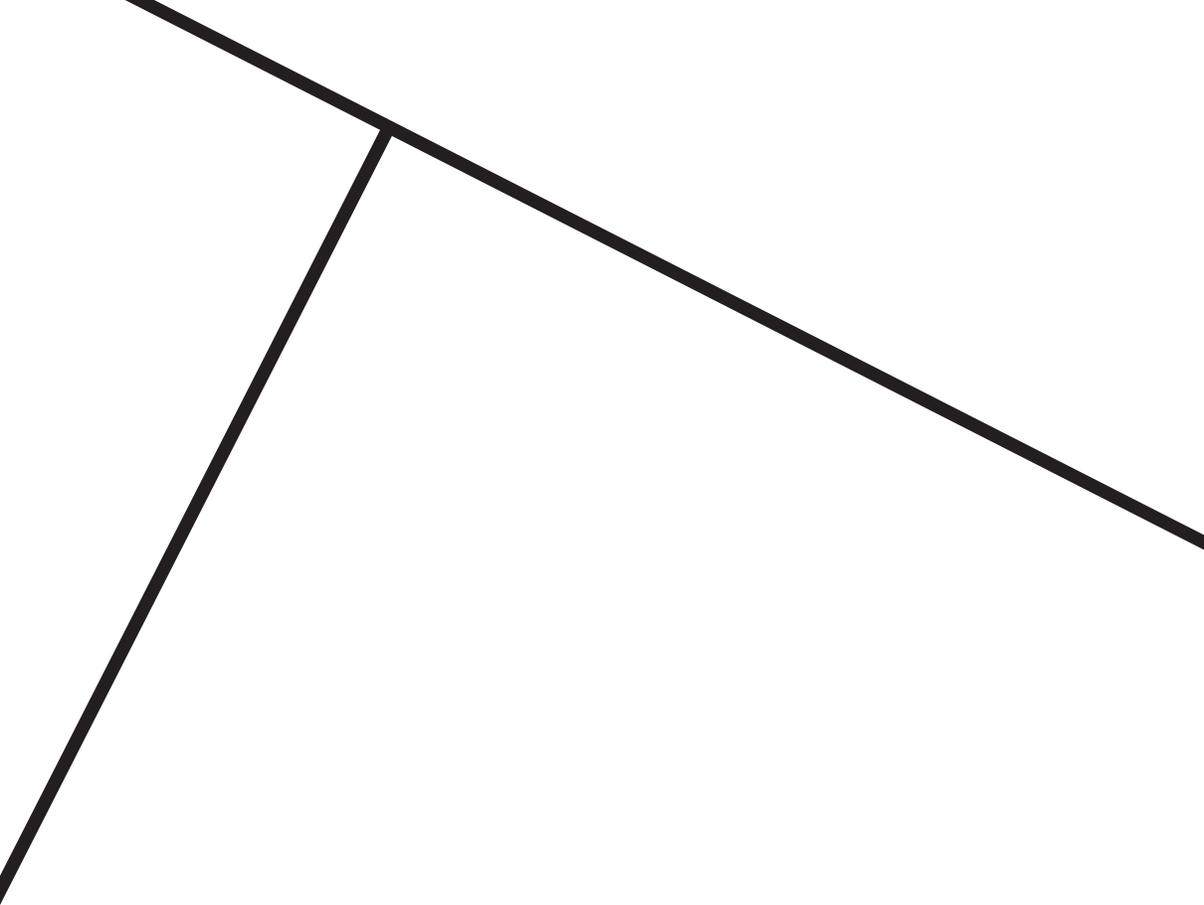
KH: I want to keep making work, I think that these conversations will continue. People have seen (river) and want to talk and I can build on that. I'm part of a group of artists working here because they enjoy it and love the city. Through *City Arcadia* there's a real sense of that post-war promise of modernism, we just have to make choices about what we do and how we do it.

It's been a pleasure, so ace to take part and presently I don't know what I'm going to do next, I didn't even know I was doing this until the end of July.

LE: Your energy and drive and willingness to say yes is why it happened. It's not just about artists making work about the city that they live in, but a complete attitude that was central to the development of Coventry's 'modern' city centre. An attitude that art and artists are integral to how that city is negotiated, navigated and experienced. You're part of a groundswell of artist inhabitants talking about the past, present and future of cities which I hope will continue through your practise, in Coventry and throughout and beyond *City Arcadia*.

Thank you Kathryn.

About Kathryn Hawkins <http://kshawkins.weebly.com/>



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