**Departures, Arrivals and Changes In Between.**

A diverse group of young artists from a variety of cultural and national backgrounds meet in London. They are to work in partnership on the making of an exhibition for a celebrated Japanese public garden, ‘Ritsurin Garden, Special Place of Scenic Beauty’. Ritsurin Garden itself is an island of greenery located in what one of the participants describes as a ‘sea of concrete’, the city of Takamatsu, on the island of Shikoku in the Seto Inland Sea of Japan. The garden is a place of recreation which has been continuously re-worked over the centuries. Originating as a private hunting ground and recreational estate for feudal lords, it is now a place of public recreation, and housed until recently a childrens playground, a zoo and a public swimming pool. Over the years, it has therefore been the site of many activities besides its currently celebrated identity as a ‘strolling garden’, designed as 60 scenic views of carefully crafted landscapes.

The project’s main theme of ‘Complex Topography’ is subtitled ‘movement and change.’ Movement and change expands the theme from one of mapping of physical features, to include dynamic processes of transformation involved in acts of exchange and making. This partnership program, spanning continents and differing temporalities, re-enacts an old story of adventure, imagination and trade between different cultures and places, informed by a patchwork of histories, philosophies, fantasies, conflicts and economies. ‘Complex Topography’ therefore continues the exchange of knowledge, skills, materials, and capital through publicly financed educational co-operation.

First encounters between the participants take place in the art school studios of London and Tokyo. Visiting cards in the form of brief presentations to one another are given. There is a subtle eyeing up, a listening in, the first tentative exchanges of where to go, what to see, how to do this? Hands on messages, jokes, invitations and assertions are made. Information is shared; the context of the garden is described by some of the participants from Japan for the benefit of those who have never visited. Maps are laid out, drawings made, speculations aired.

The London workshops invite play andgenerate conversations using gestures,

texts, sketches, snapshots, collages, making up, acting up. The emphasis is upon improvisation and play invites surprises that can be taken lightly. Questions lead to ideas, some to be discarded, others taking root. Sympathies or indifferences, curious attractions and confusions come and go in the welter of notes, sketches and performances. What is a garden? What is it to work together? ‘What do you mean’? All is an open question and the purpose of the project is a subject for discussion and interpretation, not to be taken for granted. From the conversations, partnerships for making are established which require commitment and trust.

Further workshopslead to the realization that any notion of ‘the global’ is made up of a diversity of localities. The process of researching, imagining and making for the anticipated Ritsurin Garden accrue from experiences gained on the beach in Margate, in a studio in Central Saint Martins, in a bar in Tokyo city, in a workshop on Toride campus, Japan, and the many journeys and conversations in between. As the projects develop from site to site, concentration is needed to maintain focus on the work whilst on the move. The students work alongside highly skilled artists who assist them with the evolution of their ideas into works, testing and responding to the resistance of materials (‘why this and not that?’), managing schedules and learning the protocols of how to work together in an unfamiliar culture and climate.

Arriving at Ritsurin Garden in Takamatsu, is necessarily a surprise. Here, the works so far made on the basis of projection and speculation have to find their completion in the order of things, not to ‘fit in’ but to expand the possible narratives that the place already generates. And while the garden as a designed place is a carefully managed artifact, it is also bursting with potentially disorderly elements. It is alive. New challenges arise. Improvisation and rethinking is required to respond to the restrictions imposed by the site. The place as a lived and worked environment is understood to be infinitely more complex than any single story, photograph or drawing can suggest.

The head gardener of Ritsurin Garden Mr Kawata, speaks of his constant watchful care for the garden and his striving to learn from it each and every day. His respect and care seems an important lesson for any artist to practice. The cultivation of Ritsurin Garden, while appearing to be one of tight control, is revealed to be an ongoing intimate conversation between the work of the gardeners and the garden, a process which is attentive to the pressures of technologies, climatic variations and the opportunities sought by organisms eager for life.

‘Like people, material things are processes, brought into being through production, embroiled in ongoing social projects, and requiring attentive engagement. Their very materialness provides them with the capacity to redirect human intentions and engender reflection on the conditions and nature of being. This is where their real agency resides, because they cannot always be captured and contained.’ [[1]](#footnote-1)

Art practices then, can be understood as ongoing processes of cultivation which require responsiveness and flexibility. As the project gathers pace, and abstractions become realities, requests and problems are met with ingenuity and generosity on the part of the gardeners, administrators, technicians, teachers, publicists and artists. The work of art is so much more than one of producing objects to be valued or discarded in a globalized market. The process is not easy, tenacity and resilience are asked for. There is an intensification of energies leading up to the rituals of public exhibition, and the project changes gear as the works come to realize their independence from their creators. Something has been accomplished and there is a standing back to review the process. Perhaps this is the most important time at this stage of the collaborative project. The production of works have so far been sustained and maintained with the support of the educational institutions involved, but now they are exposed to the unpredictability of circumstance, to diverse cultural readings, public discrimination and evaluation. Hopefully by this exposure the works are understood to have engaged with a far richer and more complex topography than envisaged at the beginning, and therefore invite new questions.

Taking the time for reflection is critical. What has changedfor the artists as a result of this projectandwhat will be the lasting significance of work ‘done’? The discrete artworks existed in the time and space of Ritsurin Garden, but have now been removed and have ceased to exist in the same form. Were material resources and conversational opportunities with public visitors and on site staff fully explored? Can documentation possibly represent the core of the experience and achievements? New communities of interest have been established and through these, stories are told. There may be stories over which the individual artist has little control and which may serve diverse interests, but there are also new possibilities released by the telling - a retrospective understanding of what has been done, and renewed excitement for what is to come. Art practice here is a process of enablement, a way of going on and a new departure.

This project could only come about not only through the labour, generosity and goodwill of everyone involved, and also through the complex and unpredictable webs of technologies employed. If any of these should falter or fail, (as they often do), then the question of what communities, collaborations, movements and changes are possible will need to be re-worked and with it our assumptions of what art practice is, or is for. Today, this is a serious challenge.

1. Pollard, Joshua. ‘The Art of Decay and the Transformation of Substance”, in ‘Substance, Memory, Display’, 60. Eds. Renfrew, Gosden and De Marrais. McDonald Institute for Archaeological Research, University of Cambridge, 2004. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)