

## ***The Windmills of Innerleithen* – the New Readymades and Menhirs of the North**

In an interview for the newspaper *Le Temps* on 14 February 1887, Monsieur Gustave Eiffel said: "For my part I believe that the Tower will possess its own beauty. Are we to believe that because one is an engineer, one is not preoccupied by beauty in one's constructions, or that one does not seek to create elegance as well as solidity and durability? Is it not true that the very conditions which give strength also conform to the hidden rules of harmony?"

In 1917 artist Marcel Duchamp, the grandfather of conceptual art, proposed to appropriate the tallest building in the world at the time as one of his works known as readymades. By selecting the Woolworths Building, the neo-gothic landmark on New York's Broadway, Duchamp was revolutionising the concept of art. Not unlike Eiffel, Duchamp attributed aesthetic value to a piece of urban architecture. Ordinary objects were elevated to the dignity of a work of art by the mere choice of an artist and a shift of context.

In 2004, nearly a hundred years after the Eiffel Tower polemics and a long artistic tradition of readymades, three award-winning artists Richard Ashrowan, Alexander Hamilton and Shannon Tofts have come together to create *The Windmills of Innerleithen* – a series of artworks which capture the power and beauty of wind energy. "The modern wind turbines, these rural readymades, contain all the attributes of minimal, land and new media art", says Hamilton, highly recognised for his environmentally specific artistic practice. "These are monuments which challenge our perception of public space and the trajectories of energy today".

Comprising an immersive cinematic experience of an artists' film, a photographic installation and an adventure trip to these monuments of energy, *The Windmills of Innerleithen* have emerged from independent artists' research. Sharing a fascination with wind farms and a passion for innovation, the three artists charted a whole new territory guided by the pioneers of public art, the legends of video and sound art, and advocates of community engagement. To map out this terra incognita, soon to be known as *The Windmills of Innerleithen* Ashrowan, Hamilton and Tofts didn't have to travel far. Based

within minutes of Innerleithen, Hamilton was joined by the other artists and they often travelled to the Bowbeat Hill Wind Farm – the site that inspired their collaboration.

In his recent book *The Art of Travel* (Hamish Hamilton, 2002) philosopher Alain de Botton revisited John Ruskin's views from the 1850s about humans' innate tendency to respond to beauty and to desire to possess it. To possess beauty properly, reassures de Botton, comes through understanding it, through making ourselves conscious of the psychological and visual factors that are responsible for it. The most effective way of pursuing this conscious understanding is by attempting to describe beautiful places through art, through writing or drawing them, irrespective of whether we have any talent for it or not. Not short of artistic talents and combining their diverse skills, Ashrowan, Hamilton and Tofts embarked on a Ruskin-esque journey up and down the windmills hill, moving from the position of looking to noticing, from observing beauty in a loose way to acquiring a deep understanding of its constituent parts and hence more secure memories of it. Perfecting the art of seeing and indulging into the art of travel to the enchanted hills overlooking Innerleithen, led to the authoring of a series of artists' films and photography.

As if to demystify the craftsmanship and to offer a Ruskin moment of seeing, as part of the world premiere of their work, the artists extended the invitation for a special adventure trip to the people of Innerleithen and their guests. In the belief that the sight is more important than the film, the artists will become tour guides. A proposal for a journey, which could bring alive the magic captured by the artists' cameras. People could see for themselves the dance of the winter clouds serenading around the gracious turbines and remember when the sunlight pierced through the south, melting away the snow of the sky. People could experience for themselves the humbling Yush! Yush! Yush! of the wind playing the giant instruments of the blades as if directed by an invisible conductor. Perhaps they would see the sunset – golden, delicate and rusted with open sky of amber yellow above and lonely windmills bathed in dark chocolate below. And if this were reminiscent of the artists' works, then the wind and the sky, too common and too vain otherwise, would be worthy of a Ruskin moment of watchfulness.

Ruskin was not the only one who judged that art is not an architectural afterthought. Robert Smithson, arguably the most important artist to define the territory of land art and site-specificity in art wrote in 1969 in *Studio International*: 'Art is no longer an object to

attach to a building after it is finished, but rather a total engagement with the building process from the ground up and from the sky down. The old landscape of naturalism and realism is being replaced by the new landscape of abstraction and artifice'. Following in the footsteps of Duchamp and Smithson, Ashrowan, Hamilton and Tofts know that contemporary art can use the actual territory, the landscaped or natural environment as a medium. They know that artists could modify the way the observer perceives these territories, re-presenting them in new light, revealing hidden aesthetic values.

The monuments of energy depicted in the artists' works appear as kinetic sculptures in the heart of the landscaped architecture near Innerleithen – an area traversed over the centuries by water power points, manmade forests, managed mineral springs and road arteries. Once again, we can't help but acknowledge that Innerleithen is a place made attractive and re-discovered every time it is seen through the ideas of great artists.

In May 1787 poet Robert Burns visited the then village and described it as 'a famous spa', alluding to the healing waters of the mineral springs to be found in the lower slopes of nearby Lee Pen. A young boy with a limp who became Sir Walter Scott, also visited the spa with his mother and sister, and when his novel *St. Ronan's Well* was published, enterprising locals immediately associated the 'watering place' in the story with Innerleithen.

In May 2004, artists Ashrowan, Hamilton and Tofts auditioned the wind turbines of Innerleithen as the main characters and the wind as the lead composer of the score in their video and photography installation, then converted an abandoned cafe on the High Street into a micro cinema for one week only. More than a creative documentary *The Windmills of Innerleithen* was designed for an immersive cinematic environment with looped, multi-channel projections on all 3 walls and surround sound. In this scenario the uphill journey feels as a fast-speed drama but soon gives way to the delicious views from the hill top and the windmills dance floor. The hypnotic rhythm of the turbine blades forms a duet with the Aeolian wind harps of guest musician Roger Winfield – both revealing the invisible power of the wind like 'a soft floating witchery of sound' (See S.T. Coleridge *The Aeolian Harp*, 1795)

A busload of people from Innerleithen guided by the artists were the first invited to admire the fabled land as seen in the film and photographs – a story which seems to confirm the contention that we tend to seek corners of the world only once they have been painted, filmed and written about by artists. This is not to say that no one paid any attention to the cypresses in Provence before Van Gogh or to Paris before Eiffel finished his Tower. Art can contribute to enthusiasm and guide us to be more conscious of feelings that we might previously have experienced only tentatively or hurriedly. But that may be enough to influence where we choose to go next year and a new tourist office in Innerleithen may be able to capitalize on it.

The woollen and yarn spinning mills that brought in the Industrial Revolution to Innerleithen and turned it into a thriving mill town were also the first to wind down with the decline of the global demand for woollen textiles. The information revolution brought in the new windmills to Innerleithen, with each able to power 22,000 60W light bulbs and all 24 turbines able to generate enough clean electricity to supply all homes in the town more than ten times over. Without seeking to offer a public display of monumental sculptures, the wind farm company is intrinsically linked to the artists' film providing both the subject matter and the medium of the electronic, digital artwork. The sculptures, constantly bowing their heads for the wind to pass, create electrical energy for us to use and benefit from even when viewing the windmills on film.

A brief detour to psychogeography can enlighten our understanding of renewable energy production and consumption. Why are so many people hostile to these much-needed monuments of safe, green energy? Why do visitors rail against this abuse and degrading of the natural ecology and wildlife? The story of what the windmills reveal is partly hidden from view or even kept obscure. The turbines sit fixed within the landscape as menhirs – those long, standing stones, which the nomadic hunters and shepherds of the Palaeolithic period erected first and unwittingly established the architecture of open space.

The menhirs of today are smart obelisks, able to accept and respond to commands through remote technology that manage their output to global energy requirements. Without any explicit rhetoric the artists' film seems to carry a few subtle subtitles. How is our sense of place affected knowing that the power generated by the windmills is traded across national and international markets? Do we feel part of a wider community on a

world stage guided by the remote control team who watch the turbines on their screens, operating them by advanced telecommunications? Can we celebrate the ever-changing Scottish scenery – the barren hillsides once covered by native woodland but cleared or felled out of management over the years and now growing these new species of intelligent trees? How does the shift in the ‘iconic’ Scottish landscape impact on our collective identity? Can we re-claim the windmills of Innerleithen for the local people as rural readymades?

During 1920s, the Eiffel Tower became a symbol of modernity and the avant-garde, intensifying the artistic debate that had opened thirty years earlier. The abstract qualities, the purity of design and the practical environmental purpose of today’s Eiffel Towers, will hopefully continue to inspire visionary poets, photographers and film-makers. Visit the Windmills of Innerleithen if you dare and step into the magical circle of the wind dance and walk the energy lines created by these menhirs of the North.

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