

KB: I read that you discuss your projects and if agreed, the text you write becomes a contract between you. If the project is unrealised, the proposition still stands.

Cross: Yes, we have found that you don't have to realise a proposal materially — if the reasons for its rejection are ideological. The relationship between ideology and culture is enormously important. Culture isn't some grand pageant that unites all people — it's produced by specific groups to support their worldview and to construct the limits of the possible. Testing this with a rhetorical proposition gets people talking. When talking about something that is on one hand, hypothetical, and on the other, possible, it shows things don't have to be the way they are. When this is established as a principle many things open up.

KB: Shouldn't a project be resolved?

Cornford: Although I find it easier to discuss projects we did a long time ago, like *Camelot*, I don't think anything we have done has been resolved. I see ours as an unresolved practice.

DC: Camelot used punched steel fencing before it was part of the vocabulary of street furniture. I did a project about closed circuit TV on the Central Line, when it was introduced during the IRA ceasefire and it was still a novelty. It is interesting how time affects our perception of events.

Cross: One of our jobs is to spot things as they emerge and imagine them expanded and mislocated, in the hope that we might head them off.

Cornford: It's disturbing that some of the potential situations satirized in our projects have become accepted as a practical reality. For instance, our proposal to install a section of pipeline across Afghanistan in 2001 was rejected as irrelevant by the Imperial War Museum — yet in 2008 a pipeline was installed right across Afghanistan not as art, but as infrastructure. I don't recall a huge outcry about it. This is worrying in terms of the future, which looks quite bleak.

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Transmission

Provocation

Guest: Cornford & Cross

Host: David Cotterrell

Interviewer: Keith Barley

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KB: I am interested in your projects' engagement with context. For instance David Cotterrell, in the Forest of Dean you installed *Hill33*, a massive ziggurat constructed from military barrier technology. Cornford and Cross, you've converted a nuclear bunker.

Cornford: No, we blocked access to a disused nuclear bunker in South London. It was the Cold War era control centre for Southwark, two minutes warning across from the Council chambers.

Cross: The bunker was hidden under a piece of urban wasteland; a rusty hatch in the ground led

down to a network of corridors and rooms. We engaged with the site by making a temporary peace garden, as an antithesis to the battlefield. We chose three trees — a laurel, a palm and an olive — for their connotations of peace and plenty for different civilisations and faiths. To emphasise the contingent nature of a peace garden under late capitalism we kept the trees in their transit tubs.

Cornford: We positioned heavy steel plates over the entrance to the bunker, sealing it like a tomb. We then bought the largest trees we could afford on our budget and placed them on top. We never knew quite where that olive tree came from...

Cross: In the Occupied Territories many olive groves are being grubbed up by the Israeli army and it's more than possible that they find their way onto the market. While the olive could have come from a golf course in Portugal, equally it could have been stolen from Palestine. So its ambiguous status as a commodity was enormously widened.

KB: There seems to be a lot of

diversity in your ideas and interests... but what might be the philosophy about your work?

DC: I had to argue this recently in the Forest of Dean, that there were several contexts – community and audience participants, the environment that you walk into, and the historical context. But there is also the context of your own practice. When you give a talk, through the layers of narrative and the relations between projects, what is profoundly explained is the understated context seen in the connections – your intellectual framework, the methodology, the intention, the enquiry that follows through different intentions and stimuli.

Cornford: I'm beginning to see connections between our projects, which might once have appeared disparate. We published a book recently, and had to order the work, but how – round a theme, such as militarism, consumerism or public space? Or around our strategies such as negation, displacement or 'amplification'? We could put some projects in one category and some in another but they wanted to go across. Hopefully this can be seen as strength of the work.

Finally we ordered the works in a chronology.

Cross: A while ago I was asked by someone in my university to write an essay about the relation between my teaching and my research. The best way seemed to be to look at my practice. I started exploring the collaborative practice that Matthew and I have developed and how it relates to the university idea of research: the production of new knowledge or the achievement of new insights or however it may be phrased. Then back to teaching, and whether it is possible to teach while simultaneously learning? Exploring the split between theory and practice, I looked at [Tom Bottomore's] *Dictionary of Marxist Thought*, going back to Aristotle, who said we shouldn't split theory from practice but rather, proposed a three-part model based on *theoria*, *poiesis*, and *praxis*. *Theoria* is the pursuit of truth, *poiesis* is the bringing forth of beauty or production, and *praxis* is a transformative action. Action has been lost in a way. In the theory-practice split, you're allowed to theorise or to make objects but the idea that you might act has been put aside. I like the

idea that instead of practice we have *praxis*, the enlightened, self-aware, self-transformative form of action. That's what many of our adventures are about. When we go into situations where we don't know what we're doing it makes us feel more alive.

KB: Do you know what you're doing?

Cornford: I have moments when I really wonder! Sometimes, if we knew what we were doing, we wouldn't do it. I imagine that's one of the problems of being an expert – you don't do things unless you know they can be done. We don't know the limits in advance; we find them out. Making our proposals – such as drawing an anarchy sign in the sky with a fighter jet – is very different to making them happen.

DC: There are organisations like Artangel that could solve those legal, technical and logistical problems for you. But your work is self-directed in that you insist in finding the way. Though you may have institutional support, it's part of the journey, isn't it, wandering into unknown territory?

Cross: Unlike you, I've never

been through... which valley in Afghanistan was it? We go on journeys into unknown territory but I don't think we are ever physically at risk.

DC: It's more of a risk to your practice. Does that relate to your choice not to engage with the commercial art scene in that you haven't constructed a brand? Each time there is an element of risk because rather than consolidate a position, you push the boundaries of your territory.

Cross: It's never possible to predict who will support and who will block a project. We constantly have to rethink our assumptions. It's a gamble every time. That's exciting because it can go horribly wrong...

DC: Is there a conscious decision not to engage with or revisit territory you have previously explored?

Cornford: In what is becoming a very conservative and risk-averse future in the new climate of funding cuts, the pressure to repeat a successful strategy might be too much to resist individually. But in collaboration either one of us can say, 'no, that's not quite there...'