

100 Alphabets

Detailed proposal
for an environmental sculpture
exhibition and book

Angus Reid



'...The very stones seem talkative, sympathetic, brotherly. No wonder when we consider that we all have the same Father and Mother...'

John Muir, 1911, *My First Summer in the Sierra*

Contents

- 1. Aims**
- 2. Phases and Conventions**
- 3. Environmental Impact**
- 4. Social Impact**
- 5. Artist's Practise**
- 6. Partners**

100 Alphabets

Aims

The aim is to make a large-scale, long-term, open-air sculpture that is created with the local community, which has zero environmental impact, and which enhances the experience of the John Muir way for those that use it. Broadly, the proposal is this:



At Dunglass burn, which is the border between East Lothian and Berwickshire, the John Muir way turns inland to Cockburnspath, and this turning announces the end of the walk for the majority of walkers. My proposal is to take 2600 pebbles from the Berwickshire side of Dunglass Burn – a part of the beach called ‘Gutcher’s Hole’ - to engrave each with a letter of the alphabet, and then to return them to the beach on the East Lothian side of the burn, Bilsdean beach. I imagine a number of social groups being involved in the return of the pebbles, comprising school children, locals and artists. Each would be given a bag, like a bag of grain, and would ‘sow’ them like seed up the beach, towards the natural arches.

The aim is to allow the last section of the coast-walk, which is a natural haunt for beachcombers, to provide an unexpected gift for those with an eye to collecting pebbles. It is a gesture intended to emphasise the symbiosis of the human and the natural on the John Muir way.

It is exceedingly likely that the stones would last on the beach for a very long time, even hundreds of years, and slowly find their way eastwards with the prevailing force of the wind and the sea.

Phases and Conventions

The pebbles have lain on the beach for tens of thousands of years in a continuous and restless daily rearrangement. I propose to interrupt the millennial destiny of 100 alphabets-worth, to take them out of time for a moment, and to use that interruption to give each one the identity – like an initial – that comes with a letter, and then to assemble this company of time-travellers in one place for people to reflect upon, before returning them to the beach. Almost everyone has picked up a stone on the beach, and this is an opportunity to deepen that relationship to a natural object, in a way that is specific to the place. By taking them off the beach for a while, I intend to encourage people to use the stones to reflect on what we know of time past, and then to participate, in an optimistic and artistic way, in a notion of the future.

I also intend to celebrate the specific nature of Gutchers Hole, the beach from which they come, by playing the sound that the beach makes at high tide - which is truly an astonishing cacophony of voices - in the gallery where the stones will be displayed. As we will displace the pebbles to the other side of Dunglass burn, this is the last time that the pebbles will hear their collective voice on the beach from which they originate. I do not intend to write a poem with these letters, but to allow the lettered pebbles and the environment to interact with people as chance directs that they find them. My role as *a human in a natural place* is simply to supply the basic blocks of language, and to do it in a concrete way that can last beyond my own lifetime. It is important to me that the reaction of people as they find the pebbles is both unknowable and undetermined.

In order to communicate this idea I propose a number of **phases**, to take place over a number of months in 2012:

- *Research* with local geologists, historians and schools,
- *Gathering* the stones in the light of these discoveries and recording the sound of the beach,
- *Engraving* each pebble with a specialist,
- *Exhibition* of the stones as a group as part of a gallery installation that comprises a sound installation and a poetry installation as a minimum, using the stones as pointers towards the past of the coastline in terms of three kinds of time; *geological time*, *local history time* and *personal time*. This is the first major ‘public’ outing for the project that will be used to communicate the idea to schools and the local community and to invite their participation,
- *Action*, which will require 10 separate ‘sowers’ from across the community to cast the pebbles randomly onto the beach at high tide on an appropriate day,
- *Documentation* of the action in both moving and still image, and subsequent documentation of the pebbles as they find themselves on the beach *without picking them up*,
- *Gathering and engraving poems on stones for exhibition which can be rearranged like fridge magnets*, such as: ‘*the beach is a poem that the moon rewrites each day*’ (Ken Cockburn), and ‘*the very stones seem talkative, sympathetic, brotherly*’ (John Muir), and others.
- *The creation of a book*, envisaged as a concertina ‘alphabet book’ that assembles the documentation and the discoveries, and provides an attractive and concrete outcome of the work, able to memorialise the idea for

distribution in the community, and to art galleries and bookshops nationally and internationally.

I also propose a number of **conventions** to safeguard the meaning and integrity of the work:

- All those involved in the gathering and sowing of the pebbles are *forbidden* from collecting them,
- The sowing will take place at high tide, in the evening, and will involve 10 people or, better, 10 *families* of people with 260 stones each, *and all wearing waders*. The action will involve wading waist-deep into the sea and casting the stones into the water, in an echo of the Celtic ceremony of casting seed onto the waves. This will have the desirable outcome that the position of the pebbles is as arbitrary as possible, and also that a number of hours and an entire night will elapse before the stones are uncovered, placing a distance in time between the sowing and the results of the action.
- *The participation of children is essential* as this is a trans-generational project, and this will be reflected in the outcome: it is intended that the ‘adult’ alphabet book will be accompanied by a ‘childrens’ alphabet book.
- As I know from experience that these pebbles make very attractive objects, I shall allay the temptation to steal them, for those that participate, with the offer of a free book as a gesture of thanks and a memento.



Environmental Impact

While the concept of the project is universal and could, perhaps, be applied to any beach anywhere in the world, it must be emphasised that the idea belongs specifically to the Cockburnspath end of the John Muir Way. It was here that, for the first time in my life, I picked up a pebble, engraved it, and gave it to someone as a token of love. The idea of using a pebble as a gift came from the time I spent living with the Navaho people in Arizona, USA, where it is a recognised custom to give a stone as a gesture of friendship. It is very encouraging that my own experience of living with the native peoples of America resonates with that of John Muir himself.

I have lived extensively in Dunglass and met many people as they finished walking the John Muir Way. The beach, Gutcher's Hole, from which I will collect the pebbles is beyond the John Muir way and has an enormous quantity of pebbles, probably millions. The beach to which I shall return the pebbles also has a vast quantity, but is one of the few beach-walks on the John Muir Way. I think it should be like the 'gift shop' at the end of the tourist route. It is this unique combination of factors, both human and natural, that give this project its specificity and its universal appeal: it is both specific to a single site, and universal in scope.

In terms of the impact of the whole project upon the beach environment, it is anticipated that we shall co-operate fully with local rangers. Essentially, the impact of the project is no more than picking up a pebble, and putting it back. The 2600 that I intend to use are a tiny fraction of the hundreds of thousands on the beach itself.

Gutcher's Hole is a treasure-trove of different kinds of pebbles and reflects the geological history of East Lothian. Part of the meaning of the project involves tracing the history of these rocks, and speculating as to how they arrived, like walkers of the John Muir Way, on this particular part of the coast. This is a major avenue to explore with a local geologist, and to develop as part of the installation/exhibition. That aim is not to reproduce the knowledge, but to play with it:

A gates
B reccias
C alcite ...and so on

Also, this proposal is not the first intervention on the beach. There are traces of an Iron Age fort, 'Castledykes', on the cliff behind the beach, and the Hall family, when they were owners of the Dunglass estate, made a number of interventions, building the crenelated wall at the foot of Bilsdean burn, making a cold store for fish and installing an iron handrail to allow for low-tide bathing in the rock-pools. Part of the meaning of the project involves tracing the history of these people, and speculating as to how they used the beach. It is also interesting that James VI made a detour across the beach in 1604. I am particularly interested to know the names of people, insofar as they are recoverable, and to find other traces of them – photographs, letters, *handwriting* etc – and to use the letter on the pebble to signify their identity.

B ilsdean
C astledykes
D unglass ... and so on

Social Impact

This is social artwork in that it is designed to involve large numbers of people from across the community. This group can be split into two kinds of people: *people in the present*, and *people in the future*. In order to research the project I will need to involve a number of local inhabitants and specialists: those who know the geological history of the place and those who know the local social history of the place. This knowledge will inform the first major point of contact with the local community, the installation/exhibition of the work. While the exhibition will attract visitors, it will be important to involve the community directly in the creation of that exhibition. This is envisaged, principally by making workshops in schools prior to the showing, and in the gallery during the showing. The aim of this involvement will be to *play with the pebbles*, and in the course of that game to discover, to teach and to nourish the networks of connection to the place. To *supercharge* the meanings of the pebbles. Also, the aim of this process will be to find the 10 volunteers, or better, volunteering families to take part in the 'sowing' of the pebbles back onto the beach. These 10 individuals or families will have a special connection to the project. Each will be given a set of waders and a 'sowing bag', like the one in Millet's painting, and will be entrusted to undertake the action and not to remove a single pebble. Each will receive a book as a token of gratitude. The book itself will be the tangible trace of the project that remains in the community after the project is complete, as well as the principal signifier of the project to the wider world. The book will be in two editions: an adult's edition that is largely documentation, and a child's version that is a provocation to play and to learn using the alphabet.

The second group that the project intends to impact are the future and unknown users of the John Muir way. The aim of the project is to meet these people innocently and by chance. It would be best if they knew little or nothing of the project. The pebbles should be unexpected and unexplained discoveries that address themselves to the finder, and the finder's inner life, and with no 'author' to disturb the chemistry of that moment. For this reason I propose *alphabets*, as they are an impersonal system that we share to make signifiers, and *100 alphabets* as a minimum number. A lesser number would be both too few to find and have too short a life-span. My hope is that they will be relatively hard to find, and that they will lie for a long time on the beach.

It is important for the *people in the present*, who will collaborate in the creation of the project, to imagine the second group, *the people in the future*, for whom the project is made. I hope that this will lead to a positive curiosity about the people who walk the beach. In a sense, all those who participate in the project now are participating in *an experiment on the future*. It is hoped, therefore, that this will lead not just to a greater awareness of and curiosity about the value of the local environment, but also to a greater awareness of and curiosity about other people.

The pebbles, and the whole sculpture will continuously move and slowly diminish over a very long period of time. It is only in terms of this extended 'half-life' with no foreseeable end that the project has a relationship to Torness Nuclear Power station. If the waste material at Torness is *radioactive* for thousands of years, then the material of 100 Alphabets aims to remain *interactive* - to remain social and poetic - for perhaps the same period. It is encouraging that Iron Age artefacts continue to be found at Castledykes, when they can only be very few.

Artist's Practise

This is an exciting extension of my working practise as a writer and artist, as well as someone whose work has always had an eye on the innovative forms that lie within what Joseph Beuys called '...*the Invisible Sculpture*...', the social network.

It began with a series of self-imposed residencies in Dunglass, to which I retreated to write poetry. In the course of these I walked the John Muir way to Dunbar and back, and found myself picking up pebbles. These palm-sized stones fascinated me not only for what they told me about the place, but also as gifts. I engraved letters onto them because I had never seen anyone do that before, and this developed, alongside my other work, into an alphabet project. They complimented an alphabet I made with my son when I was teaching him to write, and another alphabet project using found objects, oyster shells from Blackness. It was similar to the way that Tom Philips describes the genesis of '*The Humument*': a peripheral project that never ceased to fascinate and that began to intervene in my life in strange and compelling ways.

The turning point came when I was invited to read my Dunglass poems to a writers group in Dunbar, at John Muir's birthplace. There was an immediate and very strong connection between my concerns, my observations of the local environment, and the underlying ideology of both attention to the natural environment, and the search to find ways to intervene in it as an artist, to bring others into positive symbiosis with it.

This has been a theme in my work for more than twenty years. In 1991 I devised and lead a series of artists residencies in the north of Scotland, in Sutherland and Papa Westray, and this work was exactly research into *the means by which an artist's intervention can make a difference*. One of the group, a sculptor and life model called Torquil Anderson covered a red phone cabin in peat for 24 hours. While only a few saw this action, the memory of it is still discussed and even cherished in that remote community. This shows that it is possible to make a unique and strange intervention that remains in the memory of the community as a meaningful act. It was a revelation to me as I had never before encountered the power of temporary performance-based art in quite that way. Torquil's action was based outside the gallery and outside the theatre, and yet it has proved the most resilient, and made a decisive impact. I think that the *100 Alphabets* project can do the same for the East Lothian community.

It also provides me with the means to make something that has been a long-standing ambition, namely: *to find the form for a long-term, large-scale public sculpture, whose form is continuously in flux, and that addresses its audience as a participant*. The crux is that the concept and the form are designed *to erase the artist's ego*, and to erase the notion that the artist should make work as a vehicle of personal expression. The meanings to be made from the *100 Alphabets* will always be private, subjective, internal and *arising*, rather than public, objective, external and *imposed*; it depends on the action of the person that finds them, it depends on their attention to the place, and the thoughts and intentions that accompany that attention. And then, in turn, it rewards that attention. The smallest pebble can do this, and John Muir himself both knew it and expressed it in the wonderful and poetic characterisation of small stones as '*...talkative, sympathetic, brotherly...*'.

Overall, this amounts to a mechanism for the activation of engagement with art that seems to me to be extremely interesting, and highly innovative.

But if one dimension of the project is designed to erase my authorship of the sculpture, the other dimensions will require the fullest possible commitment of the various skills I have as an artist. It seems to me that if the pebbles are really to detonate a significance in the minds of those that find them, then they should be, in almost a ceremonial way, *supercharged with social significance* prior to their dispersal on the beach. They should be explored, and not just for what they are, geologically, but for the private meanings they have for people. My intention is to invite as many individuals as possible, and both adults and children, to make associations with them, and to use the exhibition to show what I hope will be hundreds, or maybe thousands of different associations. While this will explore aspects of local history, I will encourage purely subjective association as well – dreams, loves, commemorations, poems, photographs, drawings. I think that if people cherish what the stones represent to them, then the stones will have a greater chance to express something to the unknown people who find them. While it is possible to conceive that those who cherish them will protect and care for the spirit of the project and the beach itself, it is also likely, in my view, that a whole range of new and unforeseeable connections will be made.

I am looking forward to the challenge of making the exhibition and designing it. As I have said, one intention is to give people the feel of the millennial life-cycle of the pebble, and to achieve this through sound, and a quadrophonic sound installation. Another is to use them to display a range of meanings and associations throughout the community. And another is to create a unique space that allows stones and poetry to intermingle, and pointers indicating my approach can be found in my recent work installing poetry in public spaces such as the ‘Call for a Constitution’, as seen below.



This was an interactive piece, asking people to consider what kind of country they wish to live in. I proposed a form of words to defend five principle values - like we have five fingers on the hand - and for people to leave a handprint if they agreed. I am very motivated to continue to explore this kind of 'poetry on a corner' as it is the principle form in which I write and wish to exhibit, and it has been proven to work well in all kinds of public spaces. My existing collaborator for the design and installation of poetry on this scale is a local company in Dunbar. This would be accompanied by the showing of a number of larger stones upon which short poems and quotations have been engraved, to be re-arranged by the human hands of visitors to the exhibition (like a fridge-magnet game), just as the pebbles themselves will be rearranged by the larger hand of the sea.

The other aspect of the project that is very exciting, and speaks to my experience as a visual artist and film-maker is the creation of the books. I have created a number of artist's books, but never yet an extended concertina book as I propose here. The content of the book will draw from the sculpture itself, from people's responses, from research, and from photographs, drawings and films that document the project. The concertina form will emphasise the alphabet as the principal structuring device.

When I include *films* in the list of documentation material this is not just because I am a film-maker, but because I imagine that the action of the 'sowing' - a dynamic action that will take a relatively short period of time, involve a relatively large group, and that will take place *in the sea* - would be best recorded as a silent super 8 film. In my imagination it has specifically the quality of super 8, rather than video, digital image or a bigger film format. Somehow, I envision it as something *already in the past*, and this is the quality that super 8 will bring to it. This film will be principal tool in a subsequent phase of exhibiting and launching the books themselves.

As the books will be the ambassador for the project and its tangible trace, they need to be of a very high quality, as well as an attractive and coherent compilation of all the material. I can confirm the commitment of Barrie Tullett to the *100 Alphabets* project. He is the designer of many artists' books including my own, as well as those of Alec Finlay, Ken Cockburn and many others. His commitment is a major strength in my proposal, and a guarantee of the quality of the work that will represent it.

Finally, I wish to emphasise that this proposal derives from and is specific to one part of the John Muir way, the last beach and the last corner and is intended to celebrate the existence of the path, the way it is used and the ideology that underpins its existence. The genesis of the idea and the siting of the sculpture derives from the confluence of these various elements. It is also a unique proposal as, to the best of my knowledge, *it has never been done before*. It was a happy coincidence to discover that James Hutton had set off with James Hall to discover his 'unconformity' from the very same beach where I propose my own. In its way, this proposal addresses formal ideas and practises that belong to the avant-garde, and my hope is that it can come to represent the unique capacity of this part of the coastline to inspire original art that reaches out from the specifics of the place to universal themes and wide audiences.

Partners

Susie Goodwin	Co-ordinator of Northlight
Colin Will	Local Geologist
Robert Moss	Mason
Scott Hunter	Photographer
CCA signs	Vinyl Lettering
Barrie Tullett	Book Designer
Burnside cottage	Local Headquarters of the project
Sound Recordist	tbc
Park Ranger	tbc
Gallery	tbc