

## Landscaping Islands: Alex Hartley's *Nowhereisland* and Floating Histories in Contemporary British Art

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## Outside In: Reflections of British Landscape in the Long Anthropocene

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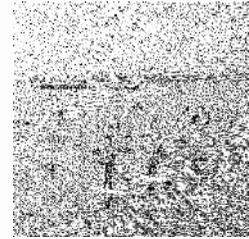
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# Landscaping Islands: Alex Hartley's *Nowhereisland* and Floating Histories in Contemporary British Art

Article by Gill Perry

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## Abstract

Drawing on examples of installation, film, photography, and performance, this article explores the significance of the island theme in contemporary British art. Focusing on Alex Hartley's *Nowhereisland*, a floating construction that travelled from the Arctic to the south coast of England during the 2012 Olympics, it considers several recent island projects and how these contribute not only to aesthetic and visual culture, but also to an understanding of wider political and cultural issues. *Nowhereisland* challenged many themes and tropes, not only of nationhood, mobility, and "islandness", but also of the relationship of place to landscape. As a mobile, participatory, and transitory sculpted landscape, Hartley's floating island undermines any sense of landscape being apparently "natural" or fixed. The article explores both the pre-history of Hartley's floating project and the significance of the creative potential and contemporary relevance of the broader island theme in contemporary multimedia and sculptural practice in Britain, drawing upon works by Katrina Palmer, Lucy Orta, and Rachel Whiteread.

## Introduction

In the summer of 2012, holidaymakers relaxing on beaches along the south coast of England were intrigued to see a strange rocky island approaching from northern waters, towed by a tug (fig. 1). It proceeded around the south-west coast, arriving at Weymouth at the end of July, and then continued along the Devon coast, stopping off at various holiday resorts. Conceived by the English artist Alex Hartley, this carefully planned nautical journey coincided with the opening of the Olympic Games in London that summer. The floating construction was called *Nowhereisland*, also pronounced as Now-here-is-land, and partly made up of soil and rocks taken from an island that had appeared in the Norwegian archipelago of Svalbard in the High Arctic (fig. 2). The land was revealed as the result of the retreating Sonklarbreen glacier—a direct effect of global warming. Hartley claimed to have discovered the island in 2004 on the Cape Farewell Arctic expedition, when he found it absent from all existing maps and charts. There followed a lengthy correspondence with the Norwegian authorities and Governor of Svalbard in which Hartley sought to name and claim the island as a secessionist micro-nation with multinational citizens, and its own system of government (fig. 3, fig. 4).<sup>1</sup>

This was part of a much longer, drawn-out story in which Hartley made a claim on the island, only to be refused by the Norwegian government. He eventually won permission to remove a small part of *Nymark* (as he named it) and towed it south in 2012. He declared its independence, and established it as an island nation, seeking citizens from around the world. A total of 23,003 people from 135 countries signed up to be citizens of *Nowhereisland* on its website and through its mobile embassy. In the wake of the 2016 Brexit vote to assert the UK's separate island status, reduce immigration, and supposedly “take back control”, it is hard to ignore the political and ironic potential of this ambitious project.

*Nowhereisland* was not just an island, but a floating piece of land. It was perpetually moving its geographical coordinates and its borders were open to all to claim citizenship (fig. 5). As a mobile, transitory landscape, *Nowhereisland* challenged many tropes not only of nationhood and “islandness”, but also of the idea of a stable relationship between landscape and space or place. It undermines any sense of landscape being apparently “natural” or fixed, and as a participatory project, also clouds the boundaries between representation and the real. Moreover, access to *Nowhereisland* is now entirely through photographic and filmed records and materials, reminding us of the problem of what constitutes the “archive”.



Figure 1

Alex Hartley, *Nowhereisland (arctic island)*, being towed by a tug off the South Coast, 2012. Digital image courtesy of Alex Hartley (all rights reserved).



Figure 2

Alex Hartley, *Alex Hartley claiming Nymark (rebuilding the cairn originally made in 2014)*, 2004. Digital image courtesy of Alex Hartley (all rights reserved).



Figure 3

Alex Hartley, *Alex Hartley Claiming Nymark*, 2004. Digital image courtesy of Alex Hartley (all rights reserved).



Figure 4

Alex Hartley, *Nowhereisland on its journey south (Arctic island and tug boat)*, 2012. Digital image courtesy of Alex Hartley (all rights reserved).



Figure 5

Alex Hartley, *Nymark in the Arctic*, expedition team revisiting the island, 2010. Digital image courtesy of Alex Hartley (all rights reserved).

## Metaphors and Legacies

The idea of the island is a much-used metaphor in everyday speech, and has been adopted in many disciplines to connote isolation or uniqueness, and a more complex notion of “islandness”.<sup>2</sup> In an era wrestling with problems of climate change, migration, and globalisation, not to mention post-Brexit fantasies in Britain specifically of “separate island status”, the island theme resonates with literal and metaphorical possibilities for many contemporary artists and writers. Its significant literary legacy is also rich in utopian or dystopian possibilities: from Greek mythology (the mythical island of *Atlantis*, or the islands visited in Homer’s *Odyssey*) to Shakespeare’s *The Tempest* (1611); and encompassing works such as Thomas Moore’s *Utopia* (1516), Francis Bacon’s *New Atlantis* (1627), Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe* (1719), and Jonathan Swift’s *Gulliver’s Travels* (1723), the theme has inspired literary, philosophical, and epistemological musings on the nature of humanity.<sup>3</sup> Modern writers such as William Golding (*Lord of the Flies*, 1954) and Aldous Huxley (*Island*, 1962), have also engaged with the dystopian possibilities of the theme and its relevance to contemporary culture. While literary history has increasingly explored the idea of the island, in the visual arts there is still some work to be done mapping the artistic uses of the theme and its wider imaginative potential.

As Hartley's project demonstrated, the subcategory of the *floating* island can also carry powerful metaphorical baggage and symbolic resonances, as is revealed in literary history. In 1673, a satirical novel by Richard Head was published under the title of *The Floating Island*, a spoof travel narrative recounting the adventures of its debt-ridden protagonist Captain Robert Owe—much in supposedly distant lands. In fact, the voyage turns out to be a faintly disguised crossing from the south to the north bank of the Thames and results in a scatological tour of the City of London.<sup>4</sup> In the nineteenth century, Jules Verne's novel *The Floating Island* of 1896, first published in French as *L'Île à hélice (Propeller Island)* in 1895, constructs another nautical fantasy in which a French String Quartet is abducted to an immense constructed island reserved for the super wealthy and which travels around the Pacific Ocean.<sup>5</sup> Verne's original French version contained some overt social commentary deemed critical of the Americans and the British, which was cut by his British publishers. Although separated by centuries, for both Head and Verne, the floating island theme was rich in metaphorical possibilities and observations on—or critiques of—contemporary society.<sup>6</sup> My interest as an art historian focuses on how such ideas have been imaginatively mediated through recent artistic practice, especially by visual artists, who use the theme to explore issues of critical relevance to contemporary culture, and to transform some traditional notions of landscape. In the introduction to his first edition of *Landscape and Power*, W.J.T. Mitchell wrote that the aim of his book was “to change ‘landscape’ from a noun to a verb”. He argued for the representation of landscape not simply as an object or view to be seen, but more like a process “by which social and subjective identities are formed”.<sup>7</sup> As I argue, Hartley's floating artwork presents the viewer with a performative project that continually changes and redefines the landscape around it. Making landscape is understood as an active, cultural practice.

Hartley's *Nowhereisland* seeks to combine a natural resource (the Norwegian rocks) and a complex manufactured or sculpted object. In this process, he acknowledges the important legacy of several artists working in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, including the influential American artists Robert Smithson and Andrea Zittel. Smithson is known for his land art and sculptural and photographic projects, and in 2005, his *Floating Island* was launched off the island of Manhattan. Never executed in his lifetime, it was constructed by Balmori Associates from a single sketch drawn in 1970 (he died in 1973) and a few notes. For two weekends in September 2005, a 90-foot barge landscaped with trees, rocks, and shrubs from New York's Central Park was towed around a part of Manhattan Island (fig. 6). Many of Smithson's preferred sites for his so-called “earth art” projects were those “that had been disrupted by industry, reckless urbanisation or nature's own devastation.”<sup>8</sup> Although this stretch of the Hudson River hardly represents the devastation of some of his other urban sites, the work did present an artificial and displaced island, a counter to the relative rootedness of Manhattan—which was itself a symbol of ruthless (perhaps also “reckless”) modern urbanisation. As it travelled along the Hudson, it was highly visible to New York's residents and commuters. It drew attention to our tenuous relationship to land, place, and the natural world. It also reminded its audience that the space of Central Park, from which Smithson took his trees and rocks, was itself a carefully constructed urban landscape.<sup>9</sup>



Figure 6

Robert Smithson (concept design) and Balmori Associates (construction), *Floating Island, Manhattan, New York*, designed in 1970, built in 2005, barge landscaped with earth, rocks, and native trees and shrubs, towed by a tugboat, 30 × 90 foot. Digital image courtesy of The Estate of Robert Smithson/VAGA, New York/DACS, London 2018. Photo: Nicholas Desbiens.

Some similar effects and aims are evident in *Nowhereisland*, although the rocks that formed the heart of this work were, of course, of entirely natural origins, albeit recently revealed by the effects of climate change. Like Smithson, Hartley also combined sculpture and performance. Both islands were dependent on a messy sculptural process of making and constructing a floating structure. And both involved a performance through time which (it was hoped) would engage local spectators, whose own responses would complete the art work. That said, one cannot be sure that Smithson would have approved of the posthumous public performance and media attention that was involved in his project. It created the kind of spectacle that he usually sought to avoid in his choice of sites (or, as he called them “Non-Sites”). But his works were often full of contradictions and ambiguities.<sup>10</sup>

In several respects, *Nowhereisland* went beyond Smithson’s Manhattan project in that it challenged many popular tropes not only of “islandness”, but also of fixed nationhood and national boundaries. But both works share a concern with the relationship of place and space to landscape. As a mobile, durational project (like Smithson’s *Floating Island*) *Nowhereisland* undermines any sense of a landscape being apparently “natural” and fixed. As such, it also reminds us of the problem of what constitutes the “archive”. Is the archive made up of the filmed, photographic representations of the work and events? Or are these representational processes, along with the posthumous reconstruction itself, also part of the work? Hartley’s landscapes are re-presented to subsequent audiences through filmed and photographic images, many of which are now substitutes for the original performance.<sup>11</sup>

Some similar questions around space, place, and identity have been raised by the work of the artist Andrea Zittel, who has long been fascinated with the theme of floating islands, and whose influence is acknowledged by Hartley. In the 1990s, she constructed her *A–Z Pocket Property* (1998–1999), a 44-ton concrete island, which she anchored off the coast of Denmark (fig. 7) and lived on for a month, as an experiment in escapism and isolation.<sup>12</sup> The work was partly an

exploration of how we construct our notions of place, and the title (*A–Z Pocket Property*) references a series of housing projects by Zittel, which explore the modern tendency for “pocket” living in small urban spaces.<sup>13</sup> Ironically, this small-scale, habitable island eventually had to be destroyed as it was too large to be maintained.



Figure 7

Andrea Zittel, *A-Z Pocket Property*, 1998-1999, floating concrete island anchored off the coast of Denmark, on which the artist lived for one month, 44 tons, 23 × 54 feet. Digital image courtesy of Andrea Zittel | Photo: Thomas Stevenson.

Hartley is clearly indebted to both Smithson and Zittel but there are some interesting differences. Hartley and Smithson self-consciously take fragments (rocks, stones, soil) from their respective sites and transplant them, changing their narrative histories whereas nearly every part of Zittel’s island is constructed—with sprayed concrete. Like her other works on the island theme, it is a self-conscious fabrication that mimics natural landscape. That said, it could be argued that whatever materials are used, all three projects are engaged in some kind of constructed mimicry of natural landscape.

Zittel has created several other floating island projects, including her *Island in 100 acres* in the Virginia B. Fairbanks Art and Nature Park at the Indianapolis Museum of Art, 2010. This was more obviously artificial in appearance—a rounded pod structure like a dome-shaped igloo, made from polystyrene foam coated with fibreglass resin, and floated on a dock structure. Developing her interests in place and how we construct our dwellings and create identities for them, Zittel invited people to volunteer to become temporary residents of the island in the summer, and to personalise the space. Through this performative, interactive process, the boundaries between art and life were perpetually blurred. In an interview given at the time of this work, she described her interests as follows:

*The idea of an island appeals to me as representation of many of the values that we strive for in our 21st-century culture: individualism, independence, autonomy, and self-sufficiency. Yet at the same time, these are the same desires that isolate us and lessen collective social and political power. I am fascinated at how the things that set us free are also the same things that oppress us; you could say that the concept of the deserted island is both our greatest fantasy and our greatest fear.*<sup>14</sup>

Zittel touches on one of the paradoxes at the centre of the island motif and metaphor. It can both liberate us from social or political control, and at the same time, separate us from an enabling collective social process. Her *Indianapolis Island* explored various forms of social and economic exchange and collective dwelling. It became its own fantasy, with perpetually blurred boundaries

between art-making, identity, and inhabiting. Similarly, blurred boundaries between ideas of art-making, separateness, and nationhood were explored in Hartley's participatory *Nowhereisland*. Hartley's first trip to the Arctic in 2004, when he "discovered" his island, was documented and that archive was exhibited in 2006 as part of the group show *The Ship: Art & Climate Change* (named after the ship they had travelled in) at the Natural History Museum in London. The show included photographic records and new works inspired by several Cape Farewell expeditions that took artists and writers to the High Arctic. Hartley's installation *Undiscovered Island* was also included in the Liverpool Biennale of that year (fig. 8). Hartley's installation includes photographs of the discovery and the Cape Farewell expedition, the remote Arctic landscape, and framed letters to the Norwegian government requesting that they secede the island from the Kingdom of Norway. As the artist intended, these documents used landscape and text to chart what Clare Doherty called "a deliberate act of colonisation".<sup>15</sup> Several photos of Hartley staking his claim on Nymark are mischievously transgressive and mock the heroics of colonial conquest (see fig. 3 and fig. 4). The Liverpool installation of photographs also provides a vivid example of the archive actually being orchestrated by the artist to become part of the ongoing work.



Figure 8

Alex Hartley, *Undiscovered Island*, installation exhibited at the Liverpool Biennale as part of *The Art of Climate Change*, a collaborative exhibition by Cape Farewell, the Natural Conservation Center and the Natural History Museum, 2006. Digital image courtesy of Alex Hartley (all rights reserved).



Figure 9

Alex Hartley, *Nowhereisland with mobile embassy off the Cornish coast (Megavissey)*, 2012, arctic island. Digital image courtesy of Alex Hartley (all rights reserved).

By 2010, Hartley knew that he had been shortlisted for the Artists Taking the Lead Award for the South West, Arts Council England's flagship project for the 2012 Olympics. He won the commission and this helped to finally persuade the Norwegian government to allow him to remove part of the island, sail it out into international waters, and tow it around the south-west coast. In 2010, he set sail to the Svalbard Archipelago with an expedition team of seventeen, retracing the earlier voyage. Instead of the more scientific team of geologists and climate change scientists who accompanied the Cape Farewell trip, people were selected who might form the foundations of a "new nation": these included a human geographer, a psychologist, a linguist, a feminist journalist, an environmental activist, a constitutional lawyer, an educationalist, and a magician. Once they had broken off sections of rock and soil, and installed them on floats, it was towed into international waters. A declaration of independence was made, along with an invitation to citizenship—which could be claimed online or at the mobile embassy, which was opened at each subsequent port of call (fig. 9). *Nowhereisland* arrived in Weymouth on 25 July 2012, four days before the Olympic sailing races took place at Weymouth Bay. It continued its

slow journey around the south-west coast as an open, visiting nation, hosted by Devon and Cornwall's famous ports, towns, and cities (fig. 10). It ended up in Bristol, leaving the port on 9 September to be broken into pieces, which were sent to each of its 23,003 citizens all over the world.



Figure 10

Alex Hartley, *Nowhereisland off Plymouth*, 2012. Digital image courtesy of Alex Hartley (all rights reserved).

## Olympic Landscapes



Figure 11

Anish Kapoor, *Orbit*, 2012, steel sculpture, 115 meters high. Digital image courtesy of Anish Kapoor, DACS 2018 | Photo: Cmglee (all rights reserved).

*Nowhereisland* was one of several major art commissions supported by the Arts Council and other funders of the 2012 Olympics. Many of the more centrally sited Olympic commissions were designed to affirm the UK's status as an internationally esteemed creative hub, and London as a site for Olympic (and Olympian) display. Much better known is the monumental tower—or colossus—that is Anish Kapoor's *Orbit*, which is now graced with the world's longest tunnel slide by the artist Carsten Höller (fig. 11). Claimed to be the tallest sculpture in the UK (114 metres high), it is nearly seven metres taller than the Statue of Liberty. Its £23 million cost was largely financed by the steel magnate Arcelor Mittal. Praised by some as an awe-inspiring feat of modern engineering, and critiqued by others as a hubristic vanity project pursued by Mayor Boris Johnson, it has transformed the East London skyline, reshaping that London landscape as a brazen celebration of its Olympic past, with according to the press release: “unparalleled views of the entire 250

acres of the Olympic Park and London's skyline from a special viewing platform."<sup>16</sup> What has since happened to the surrounding Olympic village is, of course, more controversial.<sup>17</sup> Both *Orbit* and *Nowhereisland* were pursued and developed as part of the UK's Olympic celebrations, as evidence of its thriving creative industries. Yet they could be seen as diametrically opposed commissions in what they sought to—and have been seen to—represent. *Orbit* hubristically rose to the skies like a cathedral, creating and revealing new London landscapes, especially the highly symbolic Olympic skyline. The viewing platform created a new panoramic vista—a celebratory landscape of an expanding capital city, helping to construct new narratives of the London landscape. In contrast, *Nowhereisland* suggested a bleak Arctic topography—barren, rocky, and icy. And this was an anti-nation island, perpetually mobile, against ideas of exclusive national identity, and paradoxically uninhabited, although it did have a mobile embassy following it on land. While *Orbit* twisted and turned as it reached to the skies like a tower of Babel, *Nowhereisland* was bleakly horizontal.<sup>18</sup> But Hartley's project was also creating new (albeit transitory) landscapes: as it was towed around the south coast, it transformed some of those Devon holiday landscapes (fig. 12). Beach holidays and postcard views were interrupted and altered with the presence of this strange floating construction.



Figure 12

Alex Hartley, *Nowhereisland off the Cornish coast (Newquay)*, 2012. Digital image courtesy of Alex Hartley (all rights reserved).

No one was more surprised than Hartley when the Arts Council agreed to sponsor his provocative project. Given some of its underlying themes, it is unlikely that it would have seen the light of day, if he had proposed it in the current political climate.<sup>19</sup> Even then it provoked controversy and in 2011, *The Daily Mail* online included an angry feature:

*The Arts Council is spending a staggering £500,000 on floating a huge piece of Arctic rock more than 2,000 miles from Norway to England.*

*Once in the UK the newly-named Nowhereisland, which is the size of a football pitch and was only “found” because of the partial melting of a glacier, will then be sculpted and toured 500 miles around the south coast.*

*The project, which forms part of its 2012 Cultural Olympiad, has been hailed by artists as an important and innovative way of looking at the dangers posed by climate change. But critics have branded it a “complete waste of public money”.<sup>20</sup>*

Critics were also divided in some other more left-leaning papers. Rachel Cooke described the project admirably as a “piece of madness/genius” in *The Guardian* in November 2011, two months after Leo Hickman had expressed his own sense of outrage in the same paper.<sup>21</sup> He wrote: “It’s not that often that you will find me squaring up in support behind the likes of the *Daily Mail*, the Tax Payers’ Alliance and the more reactionary elements of the Conservative party. But on this particular issue, they have called it correct.”<sup>22</sup>

## Islands and Citizenship

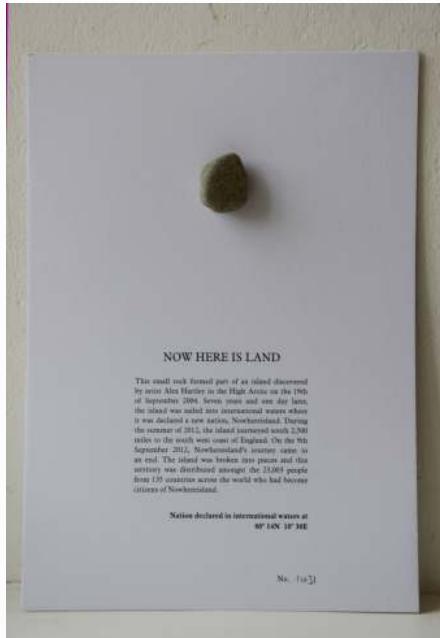


Figure 13

Alex Hartley, *Piece of rock from Nowhereisland*, 2012, rock. Digital image courtesy of Alex Hartley (all rights reserved).

Claire Doherty has described the evolution of *Nowhereisland* from the artist’s studio-based, photographic, and sculptural practice into a socially engaged “post-practice” (which I take to mean an evolving, performative project) with significant political, territorial, and economic implications: “*Nowhereisland* was not simply an island sculpture on the move—but to see it, to really see the work as a whole, you had to engage with the propositions, exchanges, disagreements, desires and demands of the *Nowhereisland* citizens.”<sup>23</sup> Through its example, the project both issued a utopian call for open and unrestricted citizenship and promoted open governance. All signed-up citizens were rewarded with a small piece of rock at the end of the project (fig. 13).<sup>24</sup> It also had a constitution of sorts, which was put together though invited contributions from its citizens. Following the Declaration of *Nowhereisland* as a new nation on 20 September 2011, Hartley and the expedition team suggested that the constitution should be an ongoing

collaborative document written by its citizens, using digital technology. They devised an online tool by which propositions of 120 characters (suitable for Twitter) could be proposed for the constitution, and also in turn retweeted or disliked. Through a system of continuous ranking, the less popular proposals sank to the bottom of the list.<sup>25</sup>

*Nowhereisland* was never intended to offer a literal political form of “citizenship”—itself a complex and much debated notion.<sup>26</sup> That said, Hartley was using a form of mimicry and metaphor to address a contemporary preoccupation with national identity, so-called “sovereignty”, and what has been called “the resurgence of the nation state”. Of course art, even performance art, always functions as some kind of metaphor for the real, and can encourage us to reflect on our relationship with “the real world”. Inevitably, many contemporary writers and theorists are engaging with the problem of the nation state in rather more complex ways, among them the novelist and essayist Rana Dasgupta. In a recent article exploring issues in his book *After Nations*,<sup>27</sup> he argues forcefully that the nation state is no longer capable of rising to the challenges imposed by an increasingly internationalised world; he claims we need new global conceptions of citizenship, democracy, and financial regulation.<sup>28</sup> To that list, I would add new

global environmental regulations beyond those supposedly signed up to. I cite these issues to encourage readings of this artistic practice that take us into areas of quite complex political and economic debate—all of them topical. Given subsequent developments in the wake of the UK’s 2016 Brexit vote, Hartley’s call for open citizenship has a powerful prescience.

Hartley is one of many contemporary artists who have referenced ideas of international citizenship in island projects that deploy multifaceted and multimedia activities. For example, the artists Lucy and Jorge Orta (who work in London and Paris) directly engage with the theme in their ongoing *Antarctica Project*. In 2007, they went on an expedition to the Antarctic (itself a large island), aided by the team of scientists stationed at the Antarctica base on Seymour-Marambio Island (fig. 14). Here they found a site for their temporary encampment comprised of fifty domed tent dwellings. These were hand-stitched with sections of flags and clothing fragments from countries around the world, designed to symbolise the multiplicity and diversity of peoples, and reminiscent of images of refugee camps. The flags and fragments were emblazoned with silkscreen motifs referencing the UN Declaration for Human Rights freedom of movement. The artists hoped this could represent a physical embodiment of (or at least a metaphor for) a new “Global Village”. Although this project was not staged on a floating island, there was a sense in which this was a *mobile* global village. Tents, of course, are infinitely mobile.



Figure 14

Lucy + Jorge Orta, *Antarctica Village No Borders*, 2007, installation consisting of 50 dome dwellings, hand stitched nation flags, fragments of clothing, webbing, silkscreen print, dimensions variable. Digital image courtesy of Lucy + Jorge Orta | Photo: Thierry Bal.

The artists conceived this Antarctic Village project as a symbol of the plight of those struggling to cross borders to escape political and social conflict. The project has evolved to include many further Antarctic installations and the issue of so-called “Antarctica World Passports”. The contents of the passport are a kind of manifesto for a borderless form of citizenship, for which Antarctica is seen as a symbolic model.<sup>29</sup> In signing up for one of these passports the art viewer is (in theory at least) signing to support their Amendment to Article 1.3 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights which reads: “Everyone has the right to move freely and cross frontiers to their chosen territory. No individual should have an inferior status to that of capital, trade, telecommunication, or pollution that traverse all borders.”<sup>30</sup> The fact that you could obtain one of these passports for free at another mobile embassy at the London Frieze art fair of 2017,

comes with its own ironies and reminds us of the (sometimes difficult) relationship with the market that is often part of contemporary performative art practice. For the artists, this Antarctic landscape is perceived as a mobile and potentially political zone. Mock passports were issued (like Hartley's invitation to sign up for citizenship) in a bid to encourage art visitors to symbolically transfer their individual national identity into that of a collective world citizen.

## Landscape and Place

*Nowhereisland* has much to contribute to the debates that surround notions of “place”—traditionally a major concern of geographers. Of course place, like home, is a profoundly interdisciplinary concept, and like home has been appropriated, reviewed, and debated by scholars of art history and visual culture. Moreover, the relationship between landscape and place is complex and contested. Landscape is often seen as an intensely visual concept, and as a material topography. The geographer Tim Cresswell (who was part of Hartley's Arctic expedition) argues that in “most definitions of landscape the viewer is outside of it”, a quality that differentiates it from place.<sup>31</sup> Place is seen then, in contrast with landscape, as a lived experience—a social construction around an identifiable neighbourhood or geographical area. Place can be a spatial imaginary tied to a landscape; it is heavily invested with meaning which is social, political, cultural, and so on. But what Hartley's work suggests is that landscape—that is the visual, artistic project—can be equally unstable. It is both literally and metaphorically a floating signifier, a verb rather than a noun. The aesthetic and political economies of *Nowhereisland* are explicitly linked.<sup>32</sup>

It was also a sculptural exploration of place, made from fragments of Norwegian rock and natural debris, which are central to the wider narrative of the project. Rocks, pebbles, walrus bones, and other local objects found on Nymark were displayed in the mobile land-based embassy that followed the floating island around the south coast of England. These included a tiny piece of moon rock found on the island; this constituted a part of both the larger work and the archive (that is, the objects and fragments displayed in the mobile embassy). The artist Tania Kovats, who was part of the expedition, has described the fluid—and even global—function of this archive:

*One of the objects in the Nowhereisland embassy was a tiny fragment of a lunar meteorite. This object was the smallest item in the archive, yet it added the most to reflections on the nature of mobile territories. Nothing you could touch could bring you closer from something further away.*<sup>33</sup>

At the same time, these objects can be perceived as evidence of the distinct “islandness” of the project; fragments provide archival evidence of its particular geological characteristics, its presence as part of the bleak, rocky formations of the Arctic Circle. Fragments then constitute further evidence of the deliberate contradictions at the heart of this floating island.

Hartley has also engaged with the island home theme in some of his earlier works, especially a series on and around the Scottish archipelagos, an area of the UK, which has long inspired some British artists.<sup>34</sup> For Hartley, motifs of home, northern remoteness, and the seemingly infinite aspects of surrounding water are recurring themes. While working on a series on the Outer Hebrides, he exploited the absurd notion of scaling a simple crofter's cottage in a desolate area of the island of Skye (fig. 15).<sup>35</sup> He is renowned for his practice of so-called “buildering”, which often involves a transgressive activity of scaling or climbing—or trespassing in and on buildings, and has climbed many modern buildings. The latter are more often scaled for repair and cleaning in areas of affluent high-rise structures, adding to the absurdity of his performance on a crofter's

cottage. Moreover, it could be argued that he was deliberately trespassing on, and damaging, Norwegian territory in *Nowhereisland*, as his initial claim on the island was rejected by the Norwegian government. Hartley's island projects then often involve some kind of mischievously aggressive act that serves to de-romanticise the associations of specific places and landscapes.



Figure 15

Alex Hartley, *Gnomic.4c.46ft (Kilmuir)*, 2007, C-type colour photograph mounted on aluminium, 83.5 × 99 cm. Digital image courtesy of Alex Hartley (all rights reserved).

Ideas of place and their metaphorical potential inspired another multimedia island project on the south coast of England. Commissioned by the Arts Charity Artangel in 2015, the sculptor Katrina Palmer took the Isle of Portland as her subject matter: the project included an audio walk titled *The Loss Adjusters*, a book *End Matter* (fig. 16), and a radio broadcast on BBC Radio 4 called *The Quarryman's Daughters*.<sup>36</sup> The artist lived on the island for several months while researching, and her project shared Hartley's interest in geological histories and the significance of place and identity in the shaping of local landscapes. Although conceived by a sculptor, her "art works" paradoxically featured the absence of physical matter as a central theme. Portland is a curious island, shaped like a lamb chop or a flamingo's head and joined to the south coast mainland by a famous shingle isthmus, namely, Chesil Beach (fig. 17). Located on the historic English Jurassic coast, its luminous white stone has been extensively quarried over the centuries and forms part of many of London's best-known landmarks and monuments, including the Tower of London, many Wren churches, Buckingham Palace, the Cenotaph and Broadcasting House in Portland Place. The construction of these buildings, rich with symbolism of Britain's imperial, ecclesiastical, and colonial pasts has contributed to the hollowing out of the Isle of Portland, whose identity has become synonymous with this much coveted pale limestone.

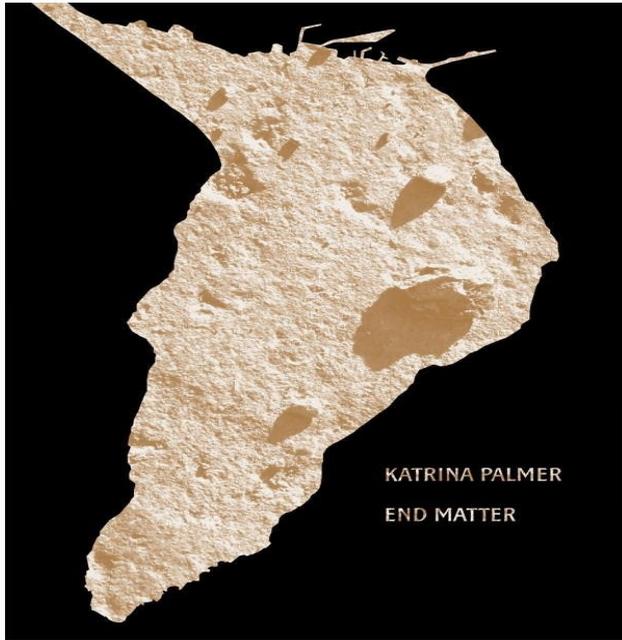


Figure 16

Katrina Palmer, *End Matter*, book cover (London: Book Works and Artangel, 2015), 12 × 18 cm. Digital image courtesy of Katrina Palmer. Book Works, Artangel | Design: James Langdon.



Figure 17

Gill Perry, *View of Portland Island and causeway*, 2018, photograph. Digital image courtesy of Gill Perry (all rights reserved).

Palmer's conceptual approach to landscape focuses on the loss of this desirable white stone. Portland's many quarries, and more recently underground mines, have progressively emptied out the underbelly of the island. Once defined by Thomas Hardy as "a single stone",<sup>37</sup> Portland becomes an inverted sculpture defined by the absence of the stone of which it is made. Hence, the literal and metaphorical significance of "Loss Adjusters" at the heart of this work. Other artistic imaginings or reworkings of the island theme by contemporary British artists are often merged with images or representations of "home" or dwelling. Ideas of "islandness", place, and dwelling (or inhabiting) are often enmeshed—in life—as in representation. Rachel Whiteread's recent *Cabin* (2016), on the Hills of the Governors Island, overlooking New York harbour (fig. 18), references the idea of remote living, divided from—yet within range of (and connected to)—the seething metropolitan mainland. *Cabin* is a negative concrete cast of the interior of a simple cabin. Inside the cabin, Whiteread has strewn discarded objects found on the island such as bottles and cans, echoing Hartley's archival fragments. The solitary nature of this installation—a simple space for introspection—is accentuated by the island site. Cut off from the metropolitan mainland, which is at the same time all too visible on the horizon, Whiteread's *Cabin* invokes the local landscape as a series of contradictions: a simple, hut-like dwelling space situated on a peaceful island mediates the force and spectacle of the New York City skyline.



Figure 18

Rachel Whiteread, *Cabin on Governor's island, New York*, 2016, concrete reverse cast of wooden shed. Digital image courtesy of Rachel Whiteread, DACS 2018. Photo: Sherman Clarke.

Whiteread's work is, of course, much closer to single object sculpture than Hartley's multifaceted, transitory project. Her permanent, concrete cast stands as a monument to past activity on the Governor's Island—a ghostly, material memory. In contrast, Hartley's project lives on through its surviving archival fragments and photographic representations. It was the engaged citizens of *Nowhereisland*, alongside the artist, who also helped to develop the creative illusion through their part in the ongoing performance, following the voyage and its associated events. As Hartley's work demonstrates, representations of the "island" theme have been significantly enriched by developments in the expanded field, enabling participatory and interdisciplinary engagements with artistic material. His project is marked out from some of its utopian predecessors as a durational, floating island, perpetually changing its landscape and its performative history as it travelled from the High Arctic to south-west Britain. Like Palmer's multimedia project on the Isle of Portland, it now leaves little sculptural trace (apart from fragments dispatched to citizens), and depends on photographic and digital archives to provide a visual history. As such, it also reminds us that topographies of landscape are constantly evolving and are enmeshed with our shifting ideas of both place and space. As Doreen Massey has written in a fitting quote from her "Landscape as a Provocation: Reflections on Moving Mountains" of 2006: "bearing in mind the movement of the rocks, both space and landscape could be imagined as provisionally intertwined simultaneities of ongoing, unfinished stories."<sup>38</sup> *Nowhereisland* offered its audiences an unfinished story of landscape, rich in imaginative possibilities and ongoing tales of social and cultural collaboration.

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## About the author

Gill Perry is Emeritus Professor of Art History at the Open University and Honorary Visiting Professor at Birkbeck College, University of London. She has published widely on eighteenth-century British art and modern and contemporary art. Her publications include *Themes in Contemporary Art*, co-edited and co-authored with Paul Wood (London: Yale University Press, 2004); *Spectacular Flirtations: Viewing the Actress in British Art 1768–1820* (London: Yale University Press for the Paul Mellon Centre for Studies in British Art, 2007); and *The First Actresses: Nell Gwynn to Sarah Siddons* (London: National Portrait Gallery 2011). Recent publications have explored relationships between gender, “home”, and identity, including *Playing at Home: The House in Contemporary Art* (London: Reaktion Books, 2013), and the catalogue essay “Traces of Home and Changes of Skin”, for the exhibition *Women House, Paris and Washington, 2017–2018*. Her forthcoming book explores issues of “home”, landscape, and cultural geography: *Islands in Contemporary Art* (London: Reaktion Books, 2020).

## Footnotes

1. For a full illustrated account of the project, see Alex Hartley, *Nowhereisland*, with Tim Cresswell, Claire Doherty, Jeffrey Kastner, and Tania Kovats (London: Cornerhouse/Victoria Miro, 2015).
2. For example, island metaphors have informed anthropological theory, and in biology, the metaphor is often used in descriptions of isolated gene pools and close eco-systems. However, the notion of societies and cultures as closed social and symbolic structures have increasingly been criticised in recent years. See Thomas Hylland Eriksen, “In What Sense do Cultural Islands Exist?”, *Social Anthropology* 1, no. 1B, (1993): 133–147. The study of islands across disciplines is developing within modern scholarship, and “island studies” is now increasingly recognised as a separate discipline, often encompassing anthropology, geography, environmental studies, sociology, cultural studies, etc. The cross-disciplinary *Island Studies Journal* was founded in 2006, <https://www.islandstudies.ca/>. The term “islandness” is sometimes used to denote a sense of a separate contained culture, constantly fearing the threat of incorporation by other larger nations, but definitions of this concept are constantly debated and disputed by island scholars. Some researchers now argue for a more fluid, global notion of “islandness” that also takes account of modern communications, the effects of increased travel, and the different contexts and histories that characterise different islands. These issues are reviewed in an article by Pete Hay, “A Phenomenology of Islands”, *Island Studies Journal* 1, no. 1 (2006): 19–42.
3. *Atlantis* is a fictional island mentioned by Plato within an allegory of the *hubris* of nations in his works *Timaeus* and *Critias*. It represents the naval power that besieges ancient Athens (the embodiment of Plato’s ideal state in *The Republic*), but offends the Gods and is submerged in the Atlantic Ocean. The allegorical significance of *Atlantis* has had a major impact on subsequent literature, including sixteenth-century works such as Francis Bacon’s *New Atlantis* and Thomas Moore’s *Utopia* (both cited above).
4. Richard Head, *The Floating Island* Whitefish, MT: Kessinger Publishing, 2018 [1695]). The full title begins *The Floating Island: OR A NEW DISCOVERY, RELATING to the strange*

*Adventure on a late VOYAGE FROM LAMBETHANA TO VILLA FRANCA, ALIAS RAMALLA...*

5. Jules Verne, *The Floating Island or The Pearl of the Pacific*, first published in English by Donohue Brothers, New York in 1896 (facsimile edition, Milton Keynes: Wildside Books, 2017).
6. Of course, the idea of floating islands has not just emerged from cultural fantasies and literary and artistic legacies. Geographers, ethnographers, and biologists have long been studying natural floating islands found in many parts of the world, which usually consist of floating aquatic plants, peat, and mud, and are often found on marshlands and lakes, as in the famous La Rota in Posta Fibreno Lake, Italy. The Uru (or Uros) people of Peru and Bolivia live on over 40 floating islands made of reeds on Lake Titicaca near Puno.
7. W.J.T. Mitchell (ed.) *Landscape and Power*, 2nd edn (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2004 [1994]), 1.
8. John Haber, "Inside Out and Outside In", *Haber's Art Reviews*, 24 September, 2005, [www.haberarts.com/smithson.htm](http://www.haberarts.com/smithson.htm). Accessed 12 June 2018.
9. Central Park was established in 1857 on 778 acres of land acquired by the city of New York. In 1858, the landscape architect Frederick Law Olmsted and the architect/designer Calvert Vaux won a competition to develop the park, which was opened to the public in 1858.
10. Smithson's concept of "Non-Sites" and some of the contradictions at the heart of his practice are explored in his extensive writings, edited by Jack Flam: *Robert Smithson: The Collected Writings* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1996).
11. See discussion below of the installation of *Nowhereisland* photographs at Liverpool in 2006. The photographic archive has since acquired value as part of the (ongoing) work, re-presenting landscapes along the south coast of the UK in 2012 as island vistas. Much has now been written across disciplines on the nature and function of the idea of the archive and its theoretical underpinnings, including what has been described as "the dialectic between storage and retrieval". This is relevant to modern performance art and its photographic representations, which as some might argue are perpetually reinstated as part of an ongoing work, although separate from the original event. In this sense, the archive becomes a part of the extended original work, and is accorded value. In his book, *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1996), Derrida argues from Freudian psychoanalytic theory, that the need to build and keep archives is a product of the repetition compulsion (also described as the "death drive"). A key point (of relevance to this study) made by Derrida is that: "The archivization produces as much as it records the event." Thus, archiving technology determines "the very institution of the archivable event". For a useful overview of these issues, see Walker Sampson, "From my Archive: Derrida's *Archive Fever*", 10 April 2011, <https://wsampson.blog/2011/04/10/from-my-archives-derridas-archive-fever/>. Accessed 18 May 2018.
12. Zittel explains the aims of this project in an interview first published in 2003, and republished in 2011, see "Pocket Property", *Art 21*, November 2011, <https://art21.org/read/andrea-zittel-pocket-property/>. Accessed 23 March 2018.
13. In a series of works from the 1990s and onwards, Zittel has explored minimal self-sufficient dwelling spaces, in which everyday actions such as sleeping, eating, cooking, bathing, and socialising are transformed into acts of art. "A-Z West", for example, is a series of small self-sufficient structures in the Californian desert near Joshua Tree. See Richard Julin, *Andrea Zittel: Lay of My Land* (New York: Prestel, 2011).

14. Interview in *Art21 Magazine*, 10 January 2010, <http://magazine.art21.org/2010/01/21/the-island-in-100-acres-an-interview-with-andrea-zittel/#.W0cni9JKjIU>. Accessed 16 January 2018.
15. Claire Doherty, in “Foreword” to Hartley, *Nowhereisland* (London: Cornerhouse, 2015), 11.
16. The official website for Arcelor Mittal Orbit is <http://arcelormittalorbit.com/>. Accessed 10 October 2017.
17. Much has been written on the controversial housing policies that followed the 2012 Olympic Park development. A *Guardian* review of 27 July 2017 was titled “Legacy, What Legacy? Five Years on the London Olympic Park Battle Still Lingers On”. The author Tim Burrows argues that the promised “affordable” housing commitment has not taken shape: “Family-friendly utopia or part-privatised nightmare? Revitalised wasteland or monument to social cleansing? The story didn’t end once the Games were over.” *The Guardian*, 27 July 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/cities/2017/jul/27/london-olympic-park-success-five-years-depends>. Accessed 20 September, 2017.
18. The ideological implications and ambitions of modernist architecture that “reached for the skies” like a Tower of Babel are discussed in Mark Crinson’s fascinating book: *Rebuilding Babel: Modern Architecture and Internationalism* (London: I.B.Tauris, 2017).
19. As suggested by Hartley in an interview with the artist, July 2017.
20. *The Daily Mail online*, 22 September 2011: <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2040107/Artist-Alex-Hartley-gets-500k-taxpayers-money-transport-Arctic-rock-.html>. Accessed 11 October 2017.
21. Rachel Cooke, “Alex Hartley: The World is Still Big”, *The Guardian online*, 27 November 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2011/nov/27/alex-hartley-nowhereisland-cultural-olympiad>. Accessed 30 October 2018.
22. Leo Hickman, “Olympic Arctic Art Project Deserves to Sink”, *The Guardian*, 22 September 2011, <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/blog/2011/sep/22/olympic-arctic-art>. Accessed 11 October 2017.
23. Claire Doherty, “The Island as Social Form”, in Hartley, *Nowhereisland*, 155.
24. The utopian aspects of the project were acknowledged by Hartley, who referenced Thomas Moore’s *Utopia* on the website and in lectures given on the subject. As Philip Hoare, among others, has pointed out “Set apart as it is, the island, real or fictional, aspires to Utopia” (from *The Power of Islands* and quoted in Hartley, *Nowhereisland*, 113). Of course, “utopia” is itself a much-debated notion and Moore’s *Utopia* an imaginary island society. Moreover, the term “utopia” derives from the Greek terms *ou-topos* (meaning no place or nowhere) and *eu-topos* (meaning a “good place”). Carl Gardner reflects on the problems of defining utopia and what the island should *not* be in his essay “What Constitutes an Island State” in Hartley’s *Nowhereisland* publication, 108.
25. Hartley, *Nowhereisland*, 156–157.
26. Citizenship is, of course, a contested notion. Political theorists, sociologists, and anthropologists are engaged in debates as to what the concept can mean across disciplines. A useful overview of “Concepts of Citizenship” has been published by the Institute of Development Studies: Emma Jones and John Gaventa (eds), *Concepts of Citizenship: A Review* (Brighton: Institute of Development Studies, 2002).
27. Rana Dasgupta, *After Nations* (London: 2019), forthcoming at the time of writing.
28. See “The Demise of the Nation State”, *The Guardian*, 5 April 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/news/2018/apr/05/demise-of-the-nation-state-rana-dasgupta>.

Accessed 5 April 2018.

29. The opening page of text of the “Antarctica World Passport” (issued 2017) reads: “The 1959 Antarctic Treaty counts 53 signatory nations who have declared Antarctica a common territory. The Madrid Protocol, ratified in 1991, has frozen mining until 2048 and banned industrial research or exploitation for 50 years. Military activity is similarly prohibited. Antarctica has become a land of peace, scientific research and international cooperation.”
30. Quoted in the “Antarctica World Passport” (issued 2017).
31. Tim Cresswell, *Place: An Introduction* (Oxford: Wiley Blackwell, 2015), 17.
32. Although beyond the remit of this article, it is worth noting that the metaphor of *floating* identities (and meanings) enmeshed within various art practices has become ubiquitous in some areas of contemporary art. For example, The Lyon Art Biennale of 2016 was called *Mondes Flottantes (Floating Worlds)*, and the 2017 Venice Biennale included many projects that engaged with themes of fluid global identities, perhaps also emphasising the fact that the Venice Biennale takes place on an island or group of islands on the Italian coast.
33. Hartley, *Nowhereisland*, 175.
34. Other British artists have turned the geography and geology of British Islands into complex aesthetic projects. For example, Alison Turnbull’s works on the Scottish Cape Farewell project of 2011–2012 charts the activities of clouds and planets over island maps, as in *North and South*, which shows stars over a map grid of Barra Island.
35. See Alex Hartley, *Not Part of Your World* (Edinburgh: The Fruitmarket Gallery, 2007), 10–11.
36. For details of the Artangel project, see <https://www.artangel.org.uk/project/end-matter/>. Accessed 21 May 2018.
37. “The peninsula carved by time out of a single stone ...”, Thomas Hardy, *The Well-Beloved: A Sketch of a Temperament* (London: Wordsworth Classics, 2000), 3.
38. Doreen Massey, “Landscape as a Provocation: Reflections on Moving Mountains”, *Journal of Material Culture* 11 (2006): 33. These ideas are also developed in her book *For Space* (London: Sage, 2005).

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