

Floodplain Meadows Partnership Conference

Day Three – 15 October 2021 pm – Session 3

Introduction

Emma: Hi everybody. Welcome back to the final session of our conference today and to the final session of our conference focusing on community art and the announcement of our Arts and Craft competition winners. For those that may have only just now joined us, we have been showcasing some of our Art and Craft competition entries throughout the 3 days in our start and ending slides, but you will get to see many more throughout this session. Our first speaker for this session is Clare Purcell, Executive Director at Meadow Arts. Clare has worked as a producer and events manager for over 20 years, including 10 years as artist manager for the International Hay Festival. She's done freelance contracts for Channel Four TV, corporate relations and Education Departments, as well as the Green Man Festival and the Globe at Hay Arts Centre. She has been working with us on Beauty and Utility, a community arts project in Pershore. I'm going to hand over to you Clare, thank you very much.

Clare Purcell: A community arts project at Avon Meadows, Worcestershire.

Clare: Hi. Thank you and thanks everybody for joining us on this last session and for listening in. Good to see everybody. This is a presentation from Meadow Arts about community arts in public spaces. The project at Avon Meadows is called Beauty and Utility. So I'm going to introduce Meadow Arts to you and the floodplain meadows project at Avon Meadows in Pershore. I'll talk about the artists we work with, the community engagement aspect and then some legacy work. I just put on this slide our Meadow Arts.org website address should anyone want to look us up after the talk.

So who are Meadow Arts? We are a contemporary visual arts charity that delivers ambitious projects all over the counties of Shropshire, Herefordshire and Worcestershire. We're also national portfolio clients of the Arts Council of England, which means that we meet all of their ambitions and best practice and standards regarding high quality art. We were established in 2004 and well over a million people have visited our exhibitions since that time. Our exhibitions are often chosen, their themes or the artistic works they contain, to challenge established notions of where and how excellent art can happen and who can access it. We're committed to delivering the highest quality work to diverse audiences and to people who may not normally engage in contemporary art, who might think of themselves as not arty. So we don't have a venue so all of our work is delivered in partnership as this project was a case in point. It often responds to a place so it's context responsive. We work to commission new works, but we also borrow existing works to make up exhibitions and we have a rich education and engagement element to our work. The little picture here shows our current exhibition which is at a National Trust property in Herefordshire called Croft Castle and the theme there is aloneness and this particular piece I adore, it's a floating rock. So you can see a beautiful pond there

which itself is rich in biodiversity, and a rock that just levitates above the water's surface.

So the project at Avon Meadows in Pershore, in 2019 we were approached by Emma from the Flood Plains Meadows Partnership, and she was looking to partner with an arts organisation to help raise awareness about the multifunction role of floodplain meadows in capturing carbon, increasing biodiversity, offering the public leisure space, providing sustainable food production methods and alleviating flooding and a myriad of other important factors. Emma felt that an art project could help the public understand this multiple role of floodplains and raise awareness about them. I think she literally Googled meadows and arts and found Meadow Arts. We looked at the map she sent of all the floodplain meadows across England and we chose to work at Avon Meadows, Pershore because that's in Worcestershire, which is part of our patch.

So the next thing we did was go and visit the site where we met Emma along with the local representative from Wychavon District Council and there's a local Friends group there called the Friends of Avon Meadows. So we met up with all of those people and then we planned our project.

Avon Meadows itself is a beautiful site covering 24 acres. On one side it's bounded by the River Avon and on the other side there's a large housing estate. There's well established walkways between the housing estate and Pershore town and when we were there we could see that the surfaces was such that you could access the route with a wheelchair or with a pushchair. So there were areas of the site that obviously got more foot traffic than others. It was also possible to find peaceful solitude there in the shadow of beautiful Pershore Abbey and there was a great sense of history and nature, of open green space and overgrown wilderness. But as the District Council showed us there was also evidence of vandalism where young people, possibly bored, were trying to set fire to the bird hides, one of the bird hides on our visit had been literally rolled over. So the District Council wanted to talk to us about how we might use art to engage the young people in the site. Teenagers I'm meaning when I say young, and how they might learn about the site and therefore learn to love it and respect it, as well as working with those who already totally got the site. Later on in the project when the first lockdown came along, we were told that it was literally a lifeline, that 24 acres of beautiful open space provided a lifeline to people living in the area.

So the project was a partnership with Meadow Arts, the Floodplain Meadows Partnership, Wychavon District Council and the Friends of Avon Meadows. So we had to come up with ideas that met everybody's aims about raising awareness of the site, and to try and engage young people and to engage artists from our end who would get the project and get the site. So after some thought we decided rather than commissioning an artist to kind of plonk an artwork there, we needed to work with the community. That's what we would call an engagement-based project, to involve members of the community, and our artists network of artists who are trained and have the right insurance and DBS checks to work in community groups situations.

So our Creative Practitioner Network has about 30 freelance artists from right across the region. Some of them have specialisms or particular interests such as the environment, and others are just extremely adaptable in any sort of given group situation. So the initial plan had been to run very direct, physically on site in the space, community workshops where we would bring artists in to engage the community in the site. We sent out an artistic brief and we selected 3 artists who responded to the brief, who all were able to get to Avon Meadows and had artistic practices that would work in large open air spaces. Then COVID came along and all our plans had to be rejigged. So more of the actual engagement was delivered online with the artist visiting Avon Meadows on their own and we were less able to physically work there with groups. The artists that we worked with were Andrew Howe, who has an environmental science background, and he did the first part of the year from January to March. Then Melanie Woodhead, she has a lovely Instagram feed, you might like to look her up. On Instagram Melanie is very preoccupied with the space that's between her front door, her back door and the woodlands at the end of her garden and her sole Instagram feed is photographs, very interesting and quite deep photographs of the plants and the nature between her back door and the woodland. So Melanie did that middle period when winter begins to bloom into spring and then Kate Raggett came along at the end to do the really beautiful period, the June-July just before the hay cut when the meadows are looking at their absolute best, and Kate Raggett's artwork I love. I find them very unique. She does large landscape artworks that are very much based in the physical place of the site, and she uses natural materials such as sheep's wool in place of paint or ink. So she uses natural materials to colour in the artworks.

So looking in a little bit more detail at what Andrew did. So he's an artist and an environmental scientist with over 30 years' experience as a civil engineer and environmental consultant working on a lot of projects but including water management. Then he'd also gone on to have a degree in Creative Arts. So this picture shows Andrew in his studio in Shrewsbury making paper. So he visited Avon Meadows quite a few times between January and March and he collected plant materials to make the paper and then other plant materials to dye the paper. He filmed a workshop from his studio about how to make and dye homemade paper.

So you can see the picture on the left, beautiful, it shows a whole colour palette of handmade papers coloured using plants dyes. Then the next picture shows his little advert he did for his eco-print Digital Workshop which we hosted at a weekend. So for Andrew he was particularly interested in the independent relationship between humans and the wildlife that exists at Avon Meadows. He wrote about the project quite a lot. He did 3 website blog posts which were featured by Meadow Arts and the Friends of Avon Meadows and also the Floodplain Meadows Partnership, so that brought the project a bit of wider recognition. After collecting the plants and berries and soil and other materials at the Avon Meadows site, he used reeds and silver birch to make the paper. He then made dyes and pigments to dye the paper using a variety of plant materials and that was meant to illustrate the biodiversity of the site. The online workshop he delivered for us on 13th March was delivered via Instagram Live, which Meadow Arts finds is a very good platform to access audiences. It

actually reached 244 people which is brilliant for a Saturday morning in March. Obviously it's significantly more people than would have ever attended a real live workshop on site had COVID not have happened. He then went on to lead a much smaller and more intimate workshop with just the Friends of Avon Meadows and he did that on Zoom. The artwork he made in the end, I just think is really wonderful. Here's a picture of it. It consists of 3 panels, and in total measures 1.5m by 0.75m. It's called The Rivers Breathing and it relates to themes of flooding and the floodplain meadow's role in natural flood alleviation. It also shows how the floodplain meadow collecting that water can alleviate peak flow rates downstream. The design is based on 2 hydrographs and this is the scientist in Andrew coming out, which illustrate how the floodplains' storage has the effect of flattening the curve to lower the flood depth and delay the peak so that the impact downstream is lessened. The piece is 3 panel reliefs each 50x75cms on handmade paper made from reeds and silver birch and dyed with plant dyes. I think Wychavon District Council like it so much they're going to display it permanently at their offices, which is also a place for the public of Wychavon District to go, I think there's a popular cafe there and stuff. So there'll be a lovely legacy with that artwork remaining in the public realm long after the project has ended. We're planning on having a celebration event of everything that we did in that year this coming April, so around Easter 2022, which will also launch our next phase of the project but I think we'll show Andrew's film at that point.

So the next artist who did the next phase was Melanie Woodhead and as I've already said she's a photographic artist. She is quite a quiet person and quite a very thinking person and so she chose to visit Avon Meadows nearly every week between March and May and to feel and get that sense for how it blooms out of winter as spring emerges. She says she saw carpets of lesser celandines and cuckoo flowers emerging. Her weekly diary of Avon Meadows she posted on social media and as I've said she has a very good Instagram account and Meadow Arts we're able to share that with her on our Instagram account. So again the voice of Avon Meadows and the artistic interpretation of that voice travelled a lot further than any project that might have just happened as a one-off event with a small group on site. So Melanie says that she uses photographs as a meaningful way of noticing and connecting with the natural world and as a means of sharing that experience with a wider audience. We helped her quite a lot to promote what she was doing and what she did she takes your normal photograph and then she plays with it using Transaqua types, which is when you take the photograph and you add water to the inks and chlorophyll prints and other things that she did. The engagement workshop that Melanie did was with Pershore High School, the GCSE Photography students there and it was brilliant because she managed to do it in a slight window in the lockdown. So the students, I think there were 11 students and their teacher, were able to go to the Avon Meadows following a visit that Melanie had made to the school where she taught the children about these different photographic techniques and explained what they would be doing on site. So then they had a wonderful day on site with these 11 students and their teacher really engaging in the plants and the wildlife and the space at Avon Meadows and then developing their own photographs back at school. Here's an example of one of the wooden walkways at Avon Meadow

surrounded by all the bullrushes and the plants, but Melanie has added water and it's turned into a Transaqua type and so she's transformed the printed image.

So whereas Melanie works in quite small close up intimate ways, our final artist Kate Raggett is completely the opposite. Kate works on largescale. She describes herself as an environmental artist making earthwork drawings using natural found materials. They're always temporary, and they're always site-specific and they're made in direct response to the rhythms and the patterns of the land where they're made. I've just put Kate's website up there, KateRaggett.com. You'll see some amazing pieces she's made over the years. So in this instance you can see a group there on an area of strimmed land. So the groundsman at Wychavon District Council kindly strimmed a bit of the meadow for us. This was just before the hay cut. So when Melanie arrived with a group from the community the area was strimmed right back and Melanie actually made 2 pieces. She made a sedge warbler with a group of young people from the Riverside Youth Centre, which was the place the District Council had asked us to engage, possibly some of the people that use the Youth Centre were some of the people that might have been causing the vandalism before. So we went directly there to engage them with the site. So the first picture of Kate's work shows the sedge warbler and then the main piece she did for us had a 50 foot diameter and that was a solo piece that depicted a natural swirling pattern that she felt would be representative of the natural flows and the little eddies within the river that's beside the site, and also the circular pattern of the wind and the kind of circular nature of the meadow surrounded by the community. Her large solo piece was coloured in with sheep's fleece and that was the sheep that the floodplain meadow has to graze it to manage the grasslands. So the sheep are very much connected with the site, the colour of their fleece was all part of that connection with the site. Then kindly the site team from Wychavon District Council also used their drone to photograph the pieces because Kate's work has to be seen from above. On our website and on Kate's website, you'll see that we have a video of that drone going up above this beautiful pattern that Kate had made.

So here's another picture on the left. It's the youth leader from Riverside Youth Centre with some of the young people and you'll see using just simple bamboo poles Kate had made some interpretation panels so any passers-by would know what they were up to. Then on the right there you see her absolutely beautiful, quite dynamic movement orientated final work that had the 50 foot diameter and was made with sheep's wool and if you look Meadow Arts up on Instagram and you go back through the dates on 11th July we posted that that film footage.

So finally, I just wanted you to see the beautiful sedge warbler that was made with the people that attend the Riverside Youth Centre and I wanted to let you know that the project didn't stop there. Although originally we'd thought it would, it didn't stop there. So we've also been engaging with a young neurodiverse artist called Emma Plover and her work is often about nature and the outdoors and landscape, but she represents the voice of those who often go unheard or unnoticed. People that for reasons of mental health might not be so able to get out and about in public spaces as the rest of us might not think twice about. So the work with Emma Plover has

been longer and slower to realise, but she did make a site visit to Avon Meadows. She went to capture a series of audio recordings capturing the natural sounds of the site, the birdsong, the wind in the grasses, the ripple of the river as you walk around there, and we're currently working with a digital audio sound editor to really perfect the sound quality of her pieces. But when done, there will be QR codes attached to fence posts and information signs on the site from the point where they were recorded, and somebody would be able to hold their phone over that QR code and scan it, and then hear the sound. But for anybody that can't physically get around Avon Meadows, or lives too far away, or for whatever reason can't go there, we've also found a digital App where you can make maps interactive, so we have a map of Avon Meadows and it'll be on our website when the audio editing is completed. But there'll be a map of Avon Meadows and you can put your cursor on that map and at the point where the sound recording was made, you'd click and you'd be able to hear the sound. So if you were someone living in Edinburgh, or if you were an older person who couldn't get out and about and you were in your home you'd still be able to hear the wonders of Avon Meadows as if you were there for real. There's a little picture there with a feather of a previous artwork made by Emma. Again the point is her work is always trying to think about making places and spaces and art accessible to those who are often forgotten. So that's quite an important part of her involvement in this project.

Then we also are working longer term with the group of young people at the Riverside Youth Centre. So this is why we're planning on coming back in April 2022 and launching a next phase of the project because we've started to go to the youth centre more often and we're fundraising separately to work with them on a longer term project that works with the young people to think about the place where they live, what they like about it, what they don't like about it, and to think about what the area could offer them that perhaps is under explored and the floodplain meadow will be very much part of that creative process. We're just beginning with this group and the first thing we've done is we took them to that exhibition I mentioned at the beginning of my talk. We took them to Croft Castle, the National Trust property in Herefordshire, to our All Alone exhibition, and my colleague who is our Engagement Manager just said it was hilarious. They were so rowdy compared to your normal National Trust group but the kids absolutely loved ripping round that valley and looking at all the artworks that were hidden in the woodlands or that levitating rock that hovers above the fish pool. So in doing that we've showed the group this is what art in open spaces can mean, can do, can make you think about, we hope it makes you think about art in a very different way, we hope it makes you think about Avon Meadows and how you can connect with it and have fun there and express yourselves there, but also express what the meadows mean to you, and how you can connect with places and spaces around you in a positive way. So that's been the Meadow Arts involvement in this project and it's been a really great experience and we hope to carry on long beyond the actual period of the initial programme. Thanks Emma. That's me.

Emma: That's fantastic. Thank you very much Clare. It was a lovely summary of what we have found has been a really interesting and different project for us to be

involved with. I really hope that we can carry on the relationship that is developing and I love the range of stuff that Clare has just talked about there. There's a bit of time for questions. Has anybody got any questions for Clare? Catriona and Kevan have asked in the chat if you can give them the link to the App that you mentioned.

Questions

Clare: My colleague has it, not me. But it's called Mapbox.

Olivia: No questions, everyone's just overwhelmed. You've had some lovely comments, everyone saying it's just very creative and really inspiring.

Clare: We're here all the time, come and find us. It's MeadowArts.org.

Emma: Clare Cornish has made a comment in the chat that she finds it quite difficult to think of engaging art events for meadows, any tips?

Clare: I do hear that. In a way it needs to start with the artists because they're the creative people and that's really what we felt. Often if you take an artist to an amazing landscape they just respond, they can't help it. So then you think, well, there we are. That's great. Now we need to think about what groups in the community would enjoy doing that kind of thing. So you put the 2 together and it kind of happens. I think you just have to be mindful about your budgets and your timeframe and also being inclusive which is very important these days. But whilst it's very easy to find groups that are at the tip of your tongue, who are you forgetting when you do that and so that's why this project has so many different versions.

Emma: Yes, I think starting with the artists, and that's something that I have learned through working with you is that you go to them and put them in the landscape, and then let them do that stuff.

Clare: When we get feedback from artists, it nearly always says what I loved about Meadow Arts where there were no boundaries. They never said, 'We want you to do this'. They just said, 'Feel it. See what you think. Come back to us'. Of course, it just makes sense when you think of it like that.

Emma: Well that's a really good tip I think and hopefully there'll be some people on the call who will take that away and start having a go. But I think we'll probably wrap up there in that case because we'll move on to our next session. But thanks ever so much Clare for that, really good, lovely. Bye, bye.