

Clyde Reflections

- a film and audio-visual installation

*Artist Stephen Hurrell &
Social Ecologist Ruth Brennan*

Firth of Clyde (Still from Clyde Reflections video)

A thirty-minute film and audio-visual installation based around interviews with seven people, which explore their unique perceptions of the marine environment of the Firth of Clyde.

Interviewees represent three different islands in the Firth of Clyde: Cumbrae, Arran and Holy Isle. They include fishing, scientific, philosophical, ecological, conservationist, underwater and spiritual perspectives with a main focus on what the interviewees perceive as being 'natural' and 'not natural' in the Firth of Clyde. The result is an immersive and poetic film that takes the viewer on a journey reflecting the shifting nature of relationships between people and place.



Opening Title (Still from Clyde Reflections video)

Clyde Reflections grew out of ideas and working methods employed within recent marine-based film, digital media and social science projects that we have undertaken, both as a collaborative art-science team and independently.

Stephen:

In terms of collaborative work, Ruth and I have been working together on art-science projects since 2011. This collaborative activity began after meeting on a Cape Farewell (art-science) expedition, which involved sailing to several islands in the Outer Hebrides to explore ideas around sustainability. Following that trip I was offered a Cape Farewell commission to produce a short film. I chose Barra as my location, as I have family connections to the island and I wanted to re-visit it as an artist/filmmaker. I had also become aware that the research methods that Ruth was using as a social ecologist on Barra were similar to approaches that I, and other artists involved in socially-engaged art practice, had used. So it seemed a good opportunity to explore possible crossovers.

Ruth:

My research aimed to gain insights into the roots of a conflict over the creation of two marine protected areas off the coast of Barra through exploring the cultural, social and historical context of the local community. I used this cultural groundwork to shed light on how, in Barra, people and place function together within, and as, an ecosystem. My initial research approach was to engage in unstructured 'conversations in context' with locals carrying out their daily activities, and to allow ideas to emerge from these interactions rather than creating a pre-ordained structure or design through which to explore the conflict.

It became evident that there were meeting points in terms of working methods and areas of interest, and that we could both benefit from the sharing of information, ideas and skills. Our first collaboration (which also involved social ecologist Iain MacKinnon) resulted in the publication *Dùthchas na Mara/Belonging to the Sea**. Following this, we developed a proposal that expanded on the research for the publication, and that engaged further with the people of Barra. That year-long project resulted in the online cultural map of the sea *Sgeulachdan na Mara/Sea Stories: Barra***.

* *Dùthchas na Mara/Belonging to the Sea, 2012*
(Authors: MacKinnon I. and Brennan R. Photography, cover design: Hurrel S)

** *Sgeulachdan na Mara/Sea Stories: Barra, an online cultural map of the sea, was produced by Hurrel and Brennan in association with Voluntary Action Barra & Vatersay and funded by a First in a Lifetime Creative Scotland Award 2012-2013. (www.mappingthesea.net)*

Our close engagement with Barra, and a confidence in our art-science working partnership provided a good basis to approach the Imagining Natural Scotland (INS) commission. We had realised that there were other meeting points in our work, including an interest in exploring different people's perceptions of the same landscape as a way to reveal hidden relationships within natural and man-made environments.

Stephen:

In terms of filmmaking, I had mainly explored how image and sound could function together as a way of creating a type of poetic, cinematic experience. For my Barra film I had also focused on the idea of 'naming' as a way of relating to, and being located within, a place. The inclusion of voice (spoken word) in that film was a way of adding another layer to what the images and the soundtrack were suggesting. In formal terms, the use of voice in relation to soundtrack and image was an area I was interested in exploring further.

Ruth:

In my research process on Barra, I used a visual participatory methodology (based on photographs provided by research participants) to explore different understandings of the meaning of 'conservation' by local people. I had come to understand that the intertwining of people and nature is both functional - in terms of the thrift and ingenuity needed, in particular by islanders, to survive with limited resources - and metaphorical - in terms of the intangible cultural heritage bound up in place, and especially visible in the rich tradition of oral history related to the sea around Barra. I was keen to continue to use visual methods to explore and articulate the complex relationship between humans and nature and to challenge simplistic perceptions of conservation.

Stephen:

Our independent projects had also helped to inform the Clyde-based proposal. I had recently undertaken a Sublime residency at The Lighthouse Field Station, Cromarty - a marine-biology research station of Aberdeen University. On this residency I was able to work alongside marine researchers as they engaged with their immediate environments. During this time I mainly worked with video and sound and was able to utilise underwater cameras and sound recording equipment from the Station. That residency provided a unique insight into how marine scientists relate to the natural world, and how they incorporate visual media, data, bio-acoustic recordings and GPS tracking into their research.

With this combination of independent and collaborative marine-based projects, it became clear that we had a good foundation on which to develop a new project. The INS commission brief was quite open, which suited us, but it also provided an ideal framework in which to respond to our chosen environment. We developed a proposal based around the Firth of Clyde that combined our shared interests and included the crucial ingredients of speculation and curiosity.

Why the Firth of Clyde?

Our initial idea was to engage in an exploratory process to reveal the complexity of an area of sea that is not normally evident when looked at by an outsider. By engaging with people who connect deeply with their environment, we wanted to create a multi-perspective representation of a particular marine area that would challenge a simplistic representation of a familiar environment. We believed this could provide a creative example of how 'landscape' is not a fixed entity, or separate from people, but is dynamic in terms of its socio-ecological properties as well as how it can be perceived.

We chose the Firth of Clyde for several reasons. We had recently collaborated on a proposal based around the Clyde and had also independently worked with the context of the River Clyde and the Firth of Clyde in previous (unrelated) art and science projects. We also realised it would be more productive to focus on an area that was geographically close, taking into account budget and timeframe constraints. In addition to this we wanted to respond to an environment that is often seen as picturesque, natural and seemingly unaffected by interactions with people – on the surface, from a distance, it can look pristine. It is only when you begin to understand the complexity of the environment, and start to see the precarious balancing act that is going on within it, that your perception of it changes, and awareness expands.

Ruth:

While my experience and knowledge of the Clyde centred around engagement with Clyde fishermen, Isle of Arran conservationists and the socio-political context surrounding Scotland's first no-take zone (a marine protected area created in Lamlash Bay, off the Isle of Arran, in 2008), Stephen's experience of the Clyde was more personal.

Stephen:

Being brought up in the Clyde-coastal town of Dunoon has influenced how I relate to ideas of landscape and nature. Although Dunoon is a tourist destination, the nearby Faslane Navy Base at Gare Loch and the US Navy Base in the Holy Loch (up to 1992) meant that sleek nuclear submarines had an on-going presence on the Clyde. I perceived this kind of nature/man-made coexistence as normal – I remember when canoeing as a boy that we would look out for big waves from the wake of passing submarines so we could catch them to canoe-surf back to shore. For me that was a natural state of affairs at the time.

For *Clyde Reflections* we were more interested in revealing a multi-layered reading of place than presenting a negative perspective. We were also clear that we did not want the film to adopt a moral conservationist tone. We envisaged setting the richness and diversity of perceptions of the Firth of Clyde against the backdrop of a marine environment that has been altered by people, as well as enriched by the intertwining of intangible cultural heritage with that physical environment.

With this in mind we developed a series of themes that would act as a framework to direct the interviews, as opposed to a list of specific questions. This enabled the interviews to evolve organically with a main focus being on what the interviewees perceived as being natural and not natural in the Firth of Clyde.

We compiled a list of potential interviewees encompassing a range of professions and activities in relation to the Firth of Clyde. We contacted about a dozen people and began interviewing those who responded to us. We realised afterwards that our pool of seven interviewees represented three different islands in the Firth of Clyde: Cumbrae, Arran and Holy Isle. These included fishing, scientific, philosophical, ecological, conservationist, underwater and spiritual perspectives.

Ruth:

While I was focused on the richness of the interviews that could emerge from 'conversations in context', Stephen was concerned about getting a balance between engaging with people in their own environment and the process of filming and recording sound. As we had decided to approach the film in a non-traditional documentary way, with the interviewees not actually appearing on screen, it became important that when we met them in their own environments that it was also a controlled situation. This would create the best conditions to capture good quality recordings as well as personal, focused responses.

I started each interview by asking the interviewee to tell us about his/her connection with the Firth of Clyde and then let the conversation unfold from there.

Our approach of allowing material to emerge rather than be imposed or overly shaped by us once again made it evident that the emergent manner in which we both work is a point of significant overlap between our art and science practices.

Structure and mood of the film

From the outset we were both in agreement that we did not want to create a 'straight' documentary about the Firth of Clyde. Instead we wanted to create an immersive experience that takes the viewer on a journey by creating a specific mood and pace. We provided a preview of the feel of the film at the INS conference by leading delegates through a short meditative experience.

Stephen:

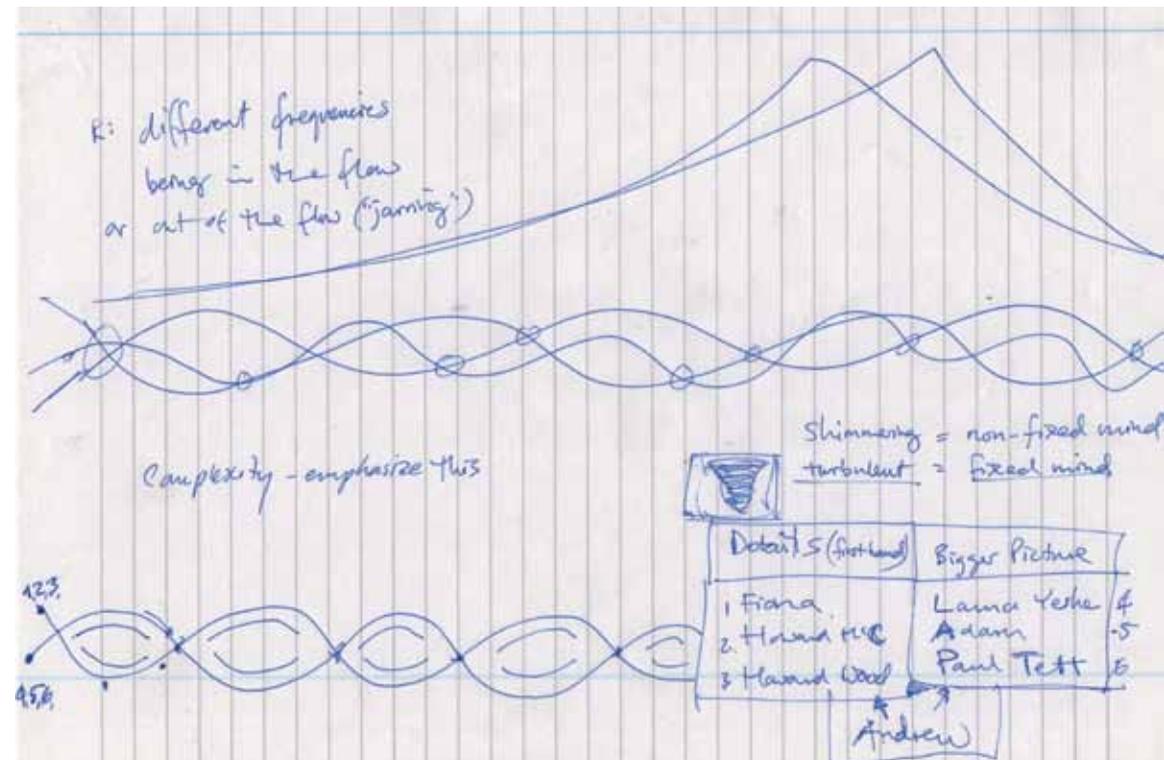
The abstract, ambient, nature of the film meant that it was important to employ an underlying structure to anchor its fragmented narrative.

At this point I was also thinking about the contrast between the grounded nature of the voice and the more abstract, fluid nature of the visual images.



Text cut out from pages. © Ruth Brennan

Wave/film structure drawing by Stephen Hurrell.



Ruth:

To me, Stephen's 'wave' drawing had a similar structure to a meditative experience – moving from the noise of the outer world to the more peaceful and spacious inner realm, with passing thoughts represented by the fragments of voice.

As part of the interview process we were not only able to get an insight into how our participants perceived the Clyde but at times to also see how they interacted with it. As both Fiona Hannah and Howard Wood used photography and video in their work, we were able to view photos of the dynamic, microscopic worlds that Fiona investigates, and to watch videos of the colourful underwater landscapes where Howard Wood scuba dives.

Stephen:

At an early stage of the project Ruth and I had discussed the idea of participants contributing visual material from their specific environments. So it was an exciting prospect to have an opportunity to access high quality visual material that would normally only be available to specialist audiences, and to work with it creatively. In particular, I was able to select a wide range of underwater video footage from years of recordings by Howard Wood. This footage became an important foundation on which to build and structure the film.

*Still from video
Stephen Hurrell (from underwater footage courtesy Howard Wood)*



The filmmaking process

As this was the first time we had worked on a film project as a collaborative process, we found that there were certain areas that were natural for each of us to take a lead on, according to our individual skills. However, there were also aspects of the filmmaking/editing process where it was essential that both of us work closely together on the content, to draw out the key themes, connections and contradictions in the material as the project unfolded. This included selecting, shaping and ordering the text fragments for the film. Once again an overlap between our practices was revealed as the visual and structural way in which we worked with the text-based material was familiar to both of us.

Ruth

As my research practice involves looking for patterns in data and making these visible, I was naturally immersed in the detail of the transcribed words and the recorded voices. I highlighted connections and contradictions between, and within, the interviews and between the thematic categories we had identified. For example reflections on the theme of natural vs. non-natural connected and overlapped with reflections on the wider context of sustainability, as interviewees pondered whether adaptation was possible. While it became evident that a short film would only be able to convey a glimpse of the complexity of the patterns and richness of the material we had gathered, it was here that I really appreciated Stephen's work with the visual material, as what could not be explicitly conveyed was nonetheless there, implicitly, within the images. As a result, I found it easier to let go of those words and voices that would otherwise have cluttered the simplicity and spaciousness of the film. While previously I had worked with static images (photographs) and text in my own research, the Clyde Reflections filmmaking process opened up, for me, a whole new way of exploring and visualising research material.

Stephen

In terms of video production it was obviously my responsibility to record and source the video and audio material and to then work with it creatively. As with the interviews this was at times a fairly organic and intuitive process. It involved responding to locations we visited when undertaking interviews, and being open to possibilities to access material from participants or organisations. In the case of microscopic footage featured in the film, for example, we spent time with Ruth's colleagues filming diatoms from the Culture Collection of Algae and Protozoa (CCAP) at SAMS in Oban.

During the editing process itself, I realised that using fragments of voice within the context of producing an ambient, meditative-type film would present a new set of challenges. It was often the case that what was being said would interrupt the meditative nature of the video image, or create an overly literal reading of that image. Although at first this seemed to introduce a certain conflict in terms of the editing process it actually led to the film opening up and taking on a slower pace. This suited the floating, drifting nature of the visual material.

In addition to this, although editing a film is mostly a solitary endeavour, it is important to get a fresh perspective on it at specific stages of the process. There were occasions when, after a week of being locked away, and being very involved in the details of editing the video material, it was difficult to get a wider perspective on how it was flowing, or what impact it may be having on the viewer. So at key points in the editing process Ruth was able to take a fresh look at the current edit and identify areas that perhaps jarred or seemed out of place. We were both quite clear on what we were ultimately aiming for with the film, so it was good to have another critical, and creative, eye on the job. This worked particularly well as we actually agreed on practically all aspects that had to be changed or altered.



iMac and text on studio wall

Moving forward

The INS commission has contributed to our development as an innovative art-science working partnership. Our grounded as well as creative approach is now being recognised as an important contribution to research being undertaken within the wider policy environment. In April 2014 we were awarded funding by Gothenburg University's Centre for Marine Research to collaborate as an art-science partnership alongside a multidisciplinary research team developing new marine spatial planning approaches in Scandinavia. During May 2014 we worked on a project in Mexico that will allow us to continue to explore complexities of relationships between nature and culture.

At the outset of this project we wondered how feasible it would be to combine a documentary-style approach for the interview stage with a more ambient, meditative and poetic rendering of that material. Although we belong to seemingly distinct disciplines, we have found that the overlaps between our working practices, as well as a shared aesthetic sensibility, are more important than the differences that exist within our respective fields. A defining characteristic of our work, therefore, is that we are able to draw on a range of different material and to respond to it in a structured as well as intuitive manner. This approach allows us to create work that opens up space for contemplation by reflecting the unfixed, shifting nature of relationships between people and place.

Lead participants

Stephen Hurrel works with video, sound, sculpture and text to explore relationships between people and places. His artworks combine art, science and digital media to explore and record interactions and tensions between nature and contemporary society. They draw our attention to current ecological issues such as the impact of industry on the natural environment. As well as making art for the gallery, Hurrel produces commissioned artworks responding to specific environments such as rural landscapes and marine environments.

Rope and Sea (Still from video)

Ruth Brennan works as a social ecologist at the Scottish Association for Marine Science (SAMS) where she studies the kinds of relationship that people in coastal communities have with their marine environment, and the ways in which they perceive and express those relationships. Her research interests include identifying and exploring the issues underlying conservation conflicts in coastal communities with a focus on social history and cultural influences that shape relations between humans and nature; the coupled social-ecological aspects of marine policy; and art-science collaborations.

*Hurrel and Brennan would like to thank all their collaborators on this project. Each participant is mentioned on the credits of the film *Clyde Reflections*, which is available to watch at: www.vimeo.com/89793693.*

All photos ©Stephen Hurrel