

Flood is made of elements that will be demolished and recycled after the exhibition finishes. How does your work relate to temporality or duration?

Much of my past work has been temporary, concerned with fragility, used ephemeral materials and is probably related to my father's death. It is a shocking realisation to have at a young age that life is fragile and short. These installations are not meant to last and are by their nature temporary and so I borrow materials in huge quantities and then return them to the recycling chain after the event. I am not adding to the pollution or having to store work. It has a nice cyclical life.

What made you want to study art and become an artist?

A combination of things turned my attention to art. As a child I didn't enjoy school and was dyslexic. However I had a kind teacher who allowed me to paint all day long and my parents were always very supportive. I grew up in Manchester and at 18 travelled, spending time on a kibbutz which was cut short by the sudden and dramatic death of my father. I then went to New York where I worked as an assistant to an artist and was involved in New York's Lower East side life. It was then that I decided I wanted to become an artist.

Are politics important to you?

The politics in the work are very important to me but materials are my language and not words. I do feel passionately about issues such as pollution, inequality and corruption. I am a socialist and humanitarian hence my uses of materials that are every day like coffee, computer components and money. So whether the work is a monumental stack of computer components or an exquisite quilted map made from paper money it all comes back to the same issues, looking at and dissecting our culture, our consumerism and our impact on our environment. When I work intuitively with a material, playing with it, teasing out its inherent qualities and meanings and researching around that material then I find it more interesting, a dialogue develops and the work is richer as a result. As if through a process of osmosis the ideas, politics, materials, history and more comes through. However ideally I want my work to transcend politics, have universal appeal and be read on many levels.

The scale of your work hints at monumentality and permanence but in fact it is temporary and ephemeral. How do you reconcile this with selling or people who might want to collect your work? Do you feel a pressure to make a finished product?

In the past I was rigid about not producing work that is a commodity and part of the art market. I like the ecological, recycling aspect of my work. The materials are everyday and not precious as sculptural matter but for a brief moment they become a work of art or a sculpture that is treated very differently.

The work occupies a space in the world but it cannot be a commodity or art object. I think people find beauty in this fact. They can't own or possess it and that makes it more desirable. Funnily enough it was not until I began making work using money as a material that it began to sell more, however this was not the main motivation.

Documentation is an important strand of working in this manner. Is this something that you consider?

Because of the way some of my work exists, as temporary pieces, documentation is very important. Capturing a sculpture or installation in a site specific place is not easy and never replaces the real experience but catalogues are good records and the stop frame film 'used here for the first time to document the process is another way to capture the production of a piece of work like *Flood*.

There is a tension in your work between an exquisite detail and fragility combined with an obsessive repetition and monumentality. I am very aware of the labour involved and I wonder if you could talk about this?

My work is obsessive and I question artists' obsessions. I am curious about what happens when a point becomes reiterated and repeated and how this leads to a transformation. Often the aesthetic I create results from the repetitive process involved. People see or feel the labour and dedication and respond to that. There is something compelling about the relationship that I have to detail and then when combined with a monumental scale takes the private or intimate and makes it public. This creates a tension that I am fascinated by and I am exploring through the work.

When you are making a site specific installation like *Flood*, away from your studio and in a public space is there a fear of failure?

There is always the potential for failure when making art. I feel that failure is inevitable and it will happen from time to time and is necessary to learn from and move forward. I have made shows that do not work and there is a certain theatre involved in an exhibition but also professionalism as an artist and I am interested in this pressure. When working on this scale and in these contexts I adopt a different way of working, other people are involved in the production of the work and inevitably in decisions.

I think that placing something in a space is a very brave thing to do; it is an act of courage and there is not the same opportunity for rehearsal that I might have in my studio. I only tend to do a large installation like this once a year, as it is incredibly physical and demanding and at the same time challenging, exciting and rewarding.

Artist biography

Susan Stockwell's work takes many different forms from large-scale installations to small intimate studies, sculpture, drawings and collage. She is concerned with issues of ecology, geo-politics, mapping, trade and global commerce. She draws on everyday materials that are domestic, industrial and disposable, the products that pervade our everyday lives. These materials are manipulated and transformed into sculptures that are extraordinary.

Susan Stockwell exhibits in galleries and museums internationally. She has exhibited at the V&A, London, The Neuberger Museum, New York and The National Museum of China, Beijing. She has taught extensively and taken part in residencies and projects in Europe, America and Asia.

She currently lives and works in London with her husband Michael and their dog Toto.

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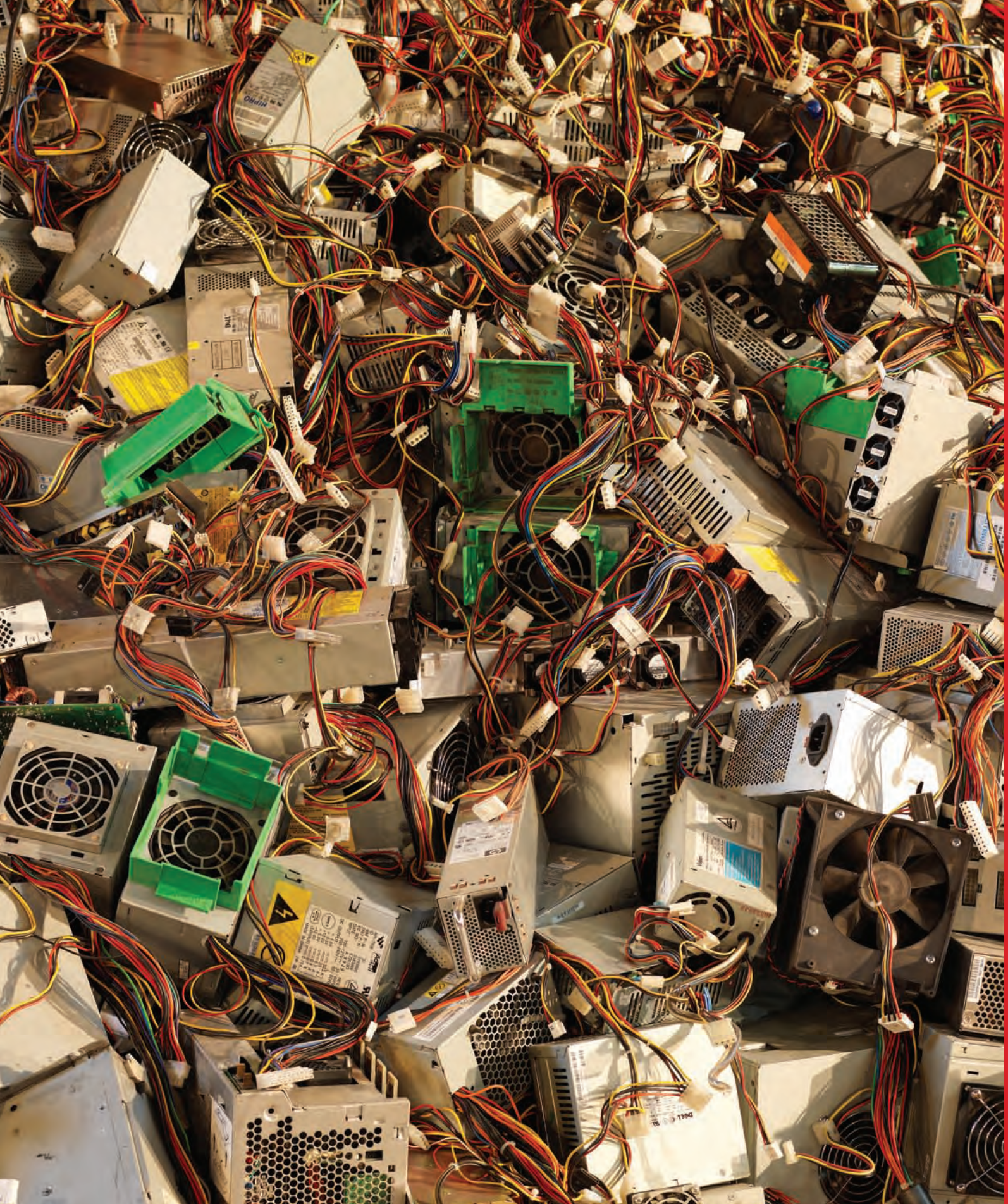
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Flood

by Susan Stockwell

Conversation

Susan Stockwell in conversation with Sarah Brown. York, May 2010

St Mary's Church has the highest spire in York and *Flood* references both the interior and exterior of the church. The spire is a useful navigation tool in York and can be seen across the city. I wonder if you could talk about how you chose to respond to this unique site and context?

I love to work site specifically, to make interventions that respond to the inside and outside of a space as well as the history, architecture and function. I think that this piece achieves that.

Flood is a cascade of recycled computer components, spilling from the ceiling down into the nave of the church. An altar piece made of the modern day communication tools that we build our lives around and are now so dependent upon. *Flood* echoes the Church's spire and invites the viewer to look upwards.

York is a city where there is a very real threat of flooding and we are all aware of climate change. Is this where the title *Flood* came from?

The title *Flood* came from a piece of work I made in Houston last year, which was much smaller. The work simply looked like a flood of stuff rushing down from the ceiling and filling the space. I liked the associations of computers taking over, waste filling the oceans, overwhelming floods of information and the inevitable religious connotations and visual stories that come with that.

I am interested in ecology and the environment of our planet. My work highlights the life of materials from their initial excavation to their eventual return in a very different form. For example, computer components have an eco system of their own comprised of so many different materials that quickly became redundant.

Though it might not be obvious at first the materials that you have used relate conceptually to a significant aspect of this church and the history of its role in communication. Was this your intention?

Though these computer components are now redundant, on a metaphysical level they are about communication and are central to our lives. They are used for a certain kind of communication, global and electronic, often not personal,

communal or spiritual. An empty church, like York St Mary's that has been deconsecrated and is no longer used for its original intention feels like there is absence of that extra mysterious dimension, soulful interaction or spiritual layer.

This begs questions for me about contemporary technology and spiritual worship, and what I think of as the theatre of religion and its relationship to art and the history of art. While I have been working here I have considered my own pilgrimages to Italian churches to see the Piero Della Francesca's, Paolo Uccello's and Giotto di Bondone's and this led me to consider York – a stunning historic city that has become a museum or theatre set.

I was aware of the theatrical aspect of *Flood* within this context and, although not originally considered, this theatre has now become part of the piece. The redundant characteristic of the components resonates with the ancient archaeology of the church. Without the drama of communal ritual the church is a shell, now used for contemporary art installations.

Is *Flood* quite different from works of art or projects that you have made previously. For example I am struck by your use of colour?

Colour was used in this context because I felt it was needed as a tool to draw the structure and church together. My choice of red came from the stained glass window behind the piece and worked with the inherent colour in the wire of the components. The significance of the colour red in religion provides another reading and it is also present in my recent works such as *River of Blood* currently on show at Iniva, London. The red worked on several levels and pulled the piece into the space.

Flood has a more gritty and raw feeling to it than much of my previous work. Though created in collaboration with the space, scale and materials this is an interesting development. I feel I am moving into new territories.

An element of your work contains a concern for everyday materials, objects that we handle or relate to in an everyday sense, could you talk about this?

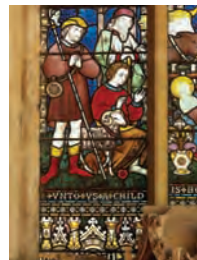
They are usually materials at the bottom of the material hierarchy, the underdogs of the material world! I often use materials that we seldom consider and take for

granted such as paper, rubber, old books, tea and money. However, I see these materials as just as important as any other and it is this very ordinary everydayness that I am interested in. Art comes from the everyday, small ideas, habit. Creativity comes from this. It's difficult to be creative without stability. I like to subvert the everyday, the way we see, to question our habitual natures, which inevitably means we become non-seeing and take things for granted. I guess this goes back to life's impermanence, to making the most of each moment in a Zen like way because it can be taken away in an instant.

It is interesting that you are using materials that came out of your experience of working in Asia and resonate with high-rise buildings, densely populated cities. I wondered how does this work in the context of a medieval city like York?

My experience of working in China and Taiwan was pivotal and although initially they were not countries that I was drawn to they had an impact on me. They were visually stimulating, had an incredible energy and were changing rapidly. I became aware of how Europe and America were the old world and whatever I might think about the speed of change it didn't matter because this change was happening before my eyes, transforming, metamorphosis – the new world is leaving us behind. I suppose I am bringing an element of this future to York and it is interesting to see the relationship of the contemporary urban components with the medieval church stone.

York St Mary's is in a medieval walled city that is a museum in its own right and might seem resistant to change. In a sense *Flood* brings in the contemporary world to a traditional context and looks at how they can co-exist. *Flood* is an awkward piece and this reflects an uncomfortable co-existence.



Introduction

York Museum Trust is delighted to present *Flood*, the sixth site specific installation commission for York St Mary's, by Susan Stockwell.

Back in 2004 we opened the deconsecrated church with a *light crescendo*, an exhibition of work by international artists, followed by *breathing space* by Caroline Broadhead in 2005, *Echo* by Susie McMurray in 2006 and for two years in 2007-8, *The Memory of Place* by Keiko Mukaide. In 2009 Matthew Collings and Emma Biggs made *Five Sisters*, a huge mosaic created with excavated pottery sherds from collections of the Yorkshire Museum, inspired by the famous stained glass window in York Minster.

Each artist responded to the church in very different ways and it has been fascinating to see how each artist has created new installations bringing out different aspects of the structure, history and meaning of this beautiful church.

The church of St Mary's was deconsecrated in the 1950's and thereby lost its congregation. With these new installations, artists have suggested new meanings to new 'congregations'.

Flood offers us the poetic image of the spire which connects us simultaneously to both the earth and the sky. York St Mary's spire is the tallest in the city. Spires reach upwards to the sky, but to the flying birds they might well seem to cascade down. From heaven tumbles the plenitude of creation as well as the fall of the hard rain of judgment. In *Flood* a spire form is built out of recycled computer components. Both the spire of York St Mary's and *Flood* are things in our world. One speaks of the grace of divine creation coming from another world. The other of dangerous toxic wastes that result from the virtual reality of our technological overreaching.

We are very grateful to Susan Stockwell for creating a new piece for this beautiful church and to the Arts Council Yorkshire for supporting the project. Thanks also to Sarah Brown as the project manager and the volunteers who helped with the installation. Colleagues from York Museums Trust have worked hard to make this happen and we are grateful to everyone who has helped realise this work.

Janet Barnes
Chief Executive
York Museums Trust

