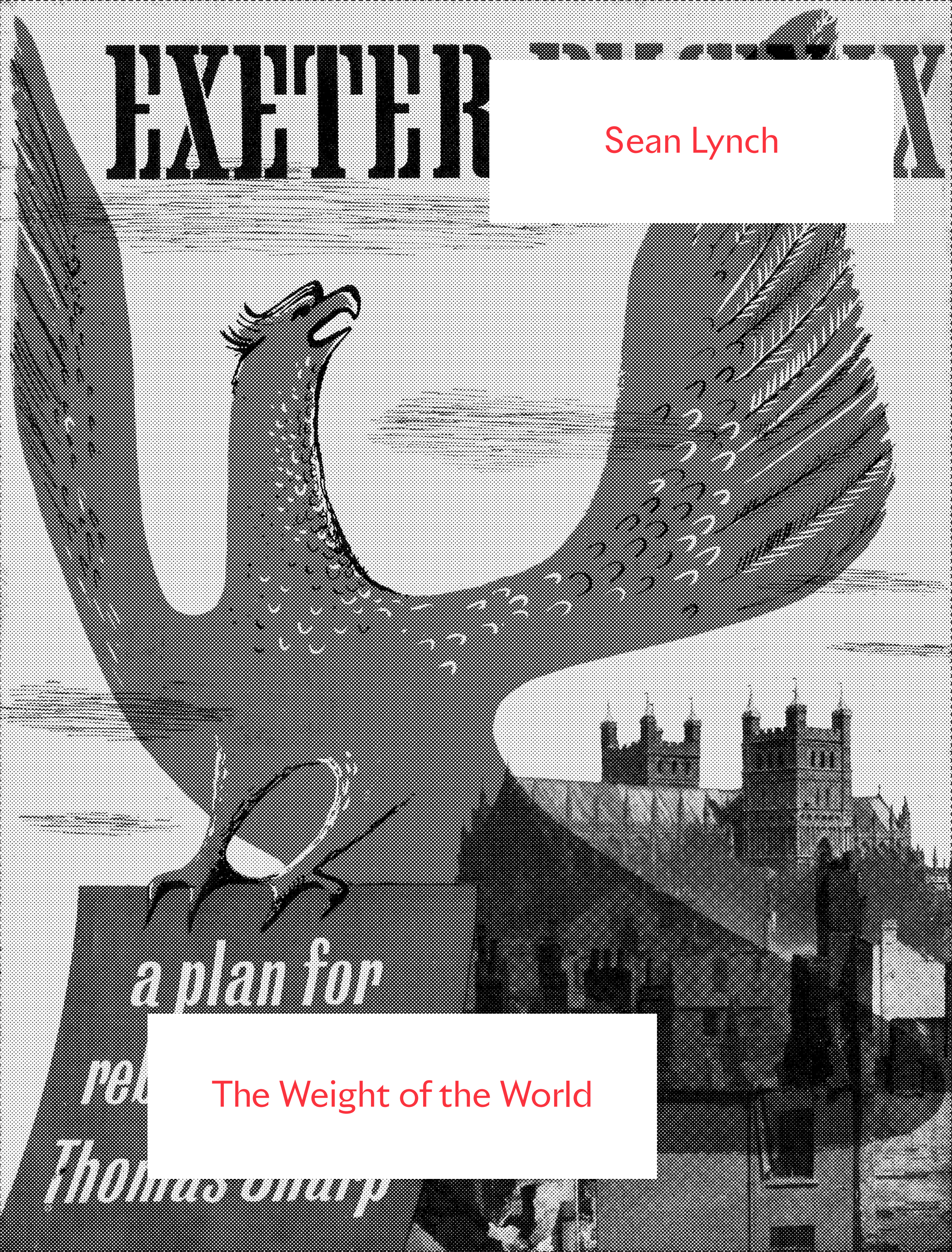
Sean Lynch



The Weight of the World

Foregrounding peripheral stories or forgotten moments, Sean Lynch's visual methodology offers nuanced ways of seeing the world. Akin to the actions of a bardic poet, he is interested in how allegories are transmitted and mutate over time. From this epistemological position, the slippages and deviations occurring between different accounts are wholeheartedly cherished, allowing space for fact, lore, myth and rumour to coexist. As political chroniclers, historical reciters and satirical observers of aristocratic society, bards belonged to a hereditary caste, yet Lynch imagines what might have transpired if the ruling classes had been vanquished. With authoritative rhythm and rhyme interrupted, the bard may have revelled in newfound freedoms, or turned his incisive commentary on the former power structures that once controlled him. In this way, the underdog is championed, idiosyncratic knowledge is privileged and prevailing narratives of the dominant hegemony (conservatism; nationalism; neoliberalism) become marginal throughout Lynch's practice, as counter-cultural activity takes centre-stage. His situation-specific artworks tend to function as excavation sites, where remnants of cultural activity – disparate artefacts, documents and ephemera – are unearthed, gathered together and presented as provisional montages.

Lynch's solo exhibition The Weight of the World constitutes a continuation of these processes and ideas. Organised by Spacex and exhibited in the Royal Albert Memorial Museum and Exeter Phoenix, the show presents deviations on existing artworks alongside three new commissions which have been broadly informed by the evolution of Exeter's built environment as well as various artefacts housed in RAMM's vast archives. In keeping with an archaeological analogy, the exhibition title conjures images of some undisclosed cache buried far below the surface of common consciousness.

Deep Time

In the late eighteenth century, Scottish experimental agriculturalist James Hutton established the theory of uniformitarianism – a pivotal idea which proved that the earth's crust is perpetually being formed – thus galvanising the field of geology as a rational and autonomous scientific discipline. Hutton recognised that by studying erosion and sedimentation in rock formation, the evolution of the Earth, and in turn, human life, could be mapped against a timescale known as 'deep time'. During the Enlightenment, these new insights created a sense of displacement, as people doubted their own traditions and narratives in relation to what seemed like a terrifying new index:

> As the science of Geology set about developing an empirical understanding of the 'abyss of time' and reconstructing Earth history, artists wrestled with a different problem: how to build new mythologies that situated humankind's sense of self in relationship to this longest of all time-signatures… Perhaps we can begin to accept that the Enlightenment, while bringing new freedoms and possibilities, also left a void to fill: the need for a creative mythology of self in relation to the rocks.[1]

Emerging from the 'rock-piles of history', the burgeoning field of geopoetics, according to Scottish poet Kenneth White, is 'concerned, fundamentally, with a relationship to the earth and with the opening of a world'[2]. It seems fitting to introduce these concepts in describing Lynch's compelling video projection *Adventure: Capital* – first presented as part of his representation of Ireland at the 2015 Venice Biennale and now in this multi-venue exhibition in Exeter – where rocks and stones recurrently feature as materials harnessed since the dawn of creation when 'lava was hurled from a crater… at blistering temperatures… in violent explosions'[3]. Guided by a roving narrator, Lynch's long-time collaborator Gina Moxley, the viewer journeys through prehistoric landscapes which predate modernity's social structures and systems of order.

Adventure: Capital (2014–15) installation views

In one scene, a small round stone is rotated steadily in the basin of a hemispherical stone beneath it, recalling a Neolithic 'bullaun' or cursing stone, which held ritualistic significance in pre-Christian Irish society. Usually either sandstone or granite, and generally worn smooth through centuries of use, the bullauns were turned anti-clockwise within their hollows while a curse was enacted on someone. It was believed that this circling motion strengthened the spell, allowing it to be carried further and faster than if it was uttered without the help of the stones. Ominously, if there was no just cause for the curse, it would rebound upon the curser and would be difficult, if not impossible, to undo[4].

Struggles of Stone

> With hammer, mallet and chisel we have shaped and fashioned rough boulders. We often curse our material, and often we speak to it kindly – we have to come to terms with it in order to master it, and it has a way of dictating to us sometimes – and then the struggle begins.[5]

As relayed in *Adventure: Capital*, there came a time when 'stones became regulated'; organised to create 'communal sites where rituals were initiated and laws established'[6]. Elevated from being blunt heavy instruments, stones became raw materials capable of being shaped by other, more sophisticated tools. As one of the earliest trades in civilisation, stonemasonry emerged during the Neolithic period and filled the world, first with primitive dwellings and later with ornate temples, palaces, monuments, churches and cathedrals throughout the Classical, Medieval and Renaissance ages. Lynch's installation *A blow by blow account of stonecarving in Oxford*, (2013–14), affectionately relayed the legacy of nineteenth century Irish stonecarvers John and James O'Shea, whose mischievous carvings are still visible on buildings in Oxford and Dublin. Following a similar line of inquiry, *The Vermiculation of Exeter* is a newly commissioned video work that points out stone facades around the city displaying vermiculation – a distinctive pattern, comprising dense, furrowing lines and irregular holes. Hardly noticed, but visible throughout cities in the western world, vermiculation animated many otherwise generic civic buildings and domestic dwellings of the nineteenth century. Intended to replicate the tracks of worms eating their way through stone, this decorative technique expresses the

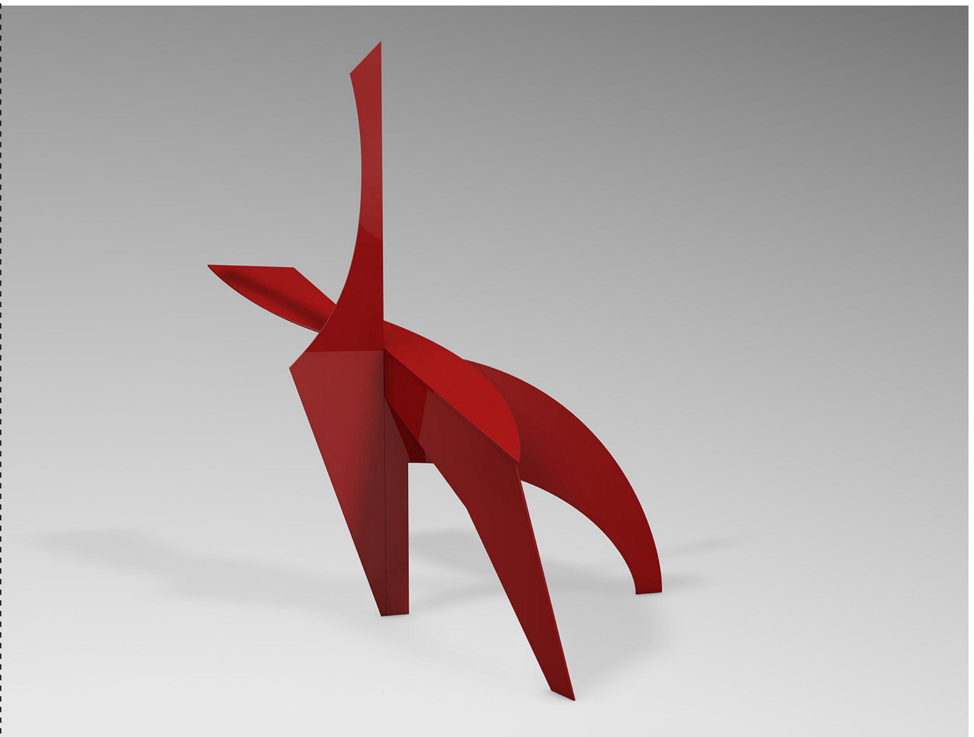
The Vermiculation of Exeter (2016) video stills

impermanence of architecture, suggesting that all will ultimately collapse into rubble – a concept that is heightened when we consider the institutional remits of particular buildings featured in the video, including stockbrokers, estate agents and HM Prison Exeter.

Embodying hidden allegories of the built environment, vermiculation, along with the craft culture of stonemasonry, has been gradually eclipsed by modernity. However the human impulse to create statues, monuments and totems has greatly expanded to encompass all manner of materials including concrete, steel and granite. Filmed in London, Portland Island, Dorset, and in a quarry in Cornwall amongst other locations, Adventure: Capital asserts that the standing stones of prehistory were prototypes for modern public artworks. Examples encountered in the film include the podgy Golden Boy of Pye Corner, a small gilded seventeenth century statue memorialising the Great Fire of London and warning its modern-day inhabitants about the repercussions of gluttony; the bronze effigy of John Lennon perceived by the narrator as being left in charge of Liverpool Airport; an act of vandalism which created an impromptu brick sculpture on a traffic roundabout; a proposed statue of footballer George Best; and a red steel Modernist sculpture abandoned in a muddy field, whose hard-edged formalism is revived in the film through 3D computer rendering, alienating it further from its original fabrication during a pre-digital era of heavy industry and shipbuilding.

Land Pirates:
The Shifting Status of Treasure

Another video, Campaign to Change the National Monuments Acts, was developed in response to RAMM's recent acquisition – one of the largest and best preserved hoards of Roman coins ever discovered in the UK. The 22,000 fourth century copper-alloy coins were unearthed by metal detector enthusiast Laurence Egerton in East Devon in 2013, and will soon be unveiled at the museum. Given the illegal status of metal detectors in Ireland, Lynch was particularly intrigued by the museum's relationship with metal detectorists in the region. Following the passing of 1996's Treasure Act in England and Wales, the Portable Antiquities Scheme was established to encourage the voluntary recording of archaeological objects found by members of the public, with the aim of 'advancing our understanding of the past'[7].



Adventure: Capital (2014–15) projected images and photographs. Following pages: *Campaign to Change the National Monuments Acts* (2016) video stills

The situation is quite different in the Irish context, however, where the unauthorised use of metal detectors to search for archaeological objects is against the law. Unless a Detection Consent Licence – notoriously difficult to obtain and granted only in exceptional circumstances – has been personally issued by the Minister for Arts, Heritage and the Gaeltacht, the use of metal detectors for archaeological purposes is subject to severe penalties, including imprisonment and/or fines, under the National Monuments Act. A blanket ban was issued in 1987 following national controversy surrounding the discovery of the Derrynaflan Hoard, an early medieval trove of five liturgical vessels, believed to have been secreted during Viking raids of the tenth to twelfth centuries, which was discovered on an ancient monastic site in county Tipperary in 1980. Following a protracted court case, the artefacts were donated to the Irish State. After its inaugural presentation in Exeter, Campaign to Change the National Monuments Acts will be shown at the Royal Hibernian Academy in Dublin, just a stone's throw away from the National Museum who, working with other state authorities and law enforcers, stringently enforces the detector ban today.

Advocating for potential changes in the attitudes and laws surrounding metal detecting in Ireland, Lynch's approach assembles various encounters surrounding this polemic. The video features footage from the inaugural meeting of the newly established European Council for Metal Detecting (held at the Holiday Inn near Birmingham Airport in April 2016), who will campaign for metal detecting to be recognised as a valid method of recovering the past in Ireland and other countries where similar bans are currently in place. Scenes from a Maplin Electronics store in an Irish retail park show detector components being purchased, despite the fact that, officially, they cannot be used. Elsewhere, a man walks through a field: looking, searching and thinking. Various artefacts from RAMM's collection traverse the screen, appearing to levitate. Stylised, commercial studio photography adds a sense of glamour to new detector products, as Lynch's scripted voiceover addresses the implications of 'community-led heritage' – a burgeoning ideology in the UK that places responsibility for the management and protection of national heritage assets at local level, where councils, amenity societies and the wider community provide vital provincial knowledge.

The paradox of heritage is ardently tackled in Patrick Wright's compelling book A Journey through Ruins: the Last Days of London, which tracks the transformation of British life during the Thatcher years[8]. A chapter entitled 'The Man with the Metal Detector'


0 2 4 6 8 10
TARGET INDICATOR
0
10
DISC/TONE


OFF
VOLUME
0
10
DISC/TONE
SENS
MODE
DISC
ALL
METAL
TONE
0
10

relays the story of a detectorist lobby group who challenge the crusade for national heritage mounted by archaeologists (the so-called 'heritage mafia') who stand accused of turning the country into a totalitarian theme park. Wright's insights offer a satirical commentary on the real-life anti-detectorist campaign coordinated by the Council of British Archaeology in the early eighties, aimed at distancing archaeology professionals from amateur hobbyists by portraying metal detectorists as little more than 'vandals' and 'land pirates'[9]. The metal detector community assembled an interesting defence, asserting that they are in fact the inheritors of old rights of common. However, as we know, commonage such as pasture lands and moorelands were slowly devoured through privatisation under neoliberal policies of the 1980s.

At a time when heritage industry professionals[10] (museum administrators, curators, archaeologists) were being encouraged to turn away from their object-oriented collections towards audio-visual display strategies, metal detectorists were actually defending the appreciation of history through study of the found object – a practice that Wright believes constituted the veritable reinvention of field archaeology[11]. In the end, the only conceivable way to regulate what was being dug up from the ground was for museums and archaeologists to work with the metal detector community.

On Garbage: Detritus & Broken Knowledge

> We are the rubbish, outmoded and unrequired. Dumped on wet pavings and left there for weeks, in the expectation of becoming art objects, a baleful warning. Nobody pays me to do this. It is my own choice, to identify with detritus.[12]

John Scanlan's book *On Garbage* presents unique insights into the world of rubbish. Forging conceptual links between the disposal of material waste and the shedding of residual or 'broken knowledge', Scanlan views Western philosophical, scientific and technological advancement as a 'prolonged act of cleansing' which produces endless reams of 'once constitutive but now expelled' prototypical knowledge[13]. Interesting propositions arise out of the revival of seemingly anachronistic customs. It is difficult to identify a more striking example than the plight of an endangered Irish fairy bush which featured on CNN and in the New York Times. A successful campaign by folklorist and storyteller Eddie Lenihan to reroute a new €90 million motorway in County Clare in 1999 is the subject of Lynch's video *Latoon*. Claiming that this whitethorn bush was an important meeting place for fairies in the region, Lenihan warned that if it was damaged, great misfortune would befall any motorists travelling on the proposed new road. While the people of modern Ireland 'scoff publicly at fairy stories'[14] – which have origins in pre-Celtic folklore and superstition – there are still residual understandings, described by the New York Times as 'strong vestigial belief in the fairies and reluctance to interfere in things which have an association with the other world'[15].

Latoon (2006–15) video stills

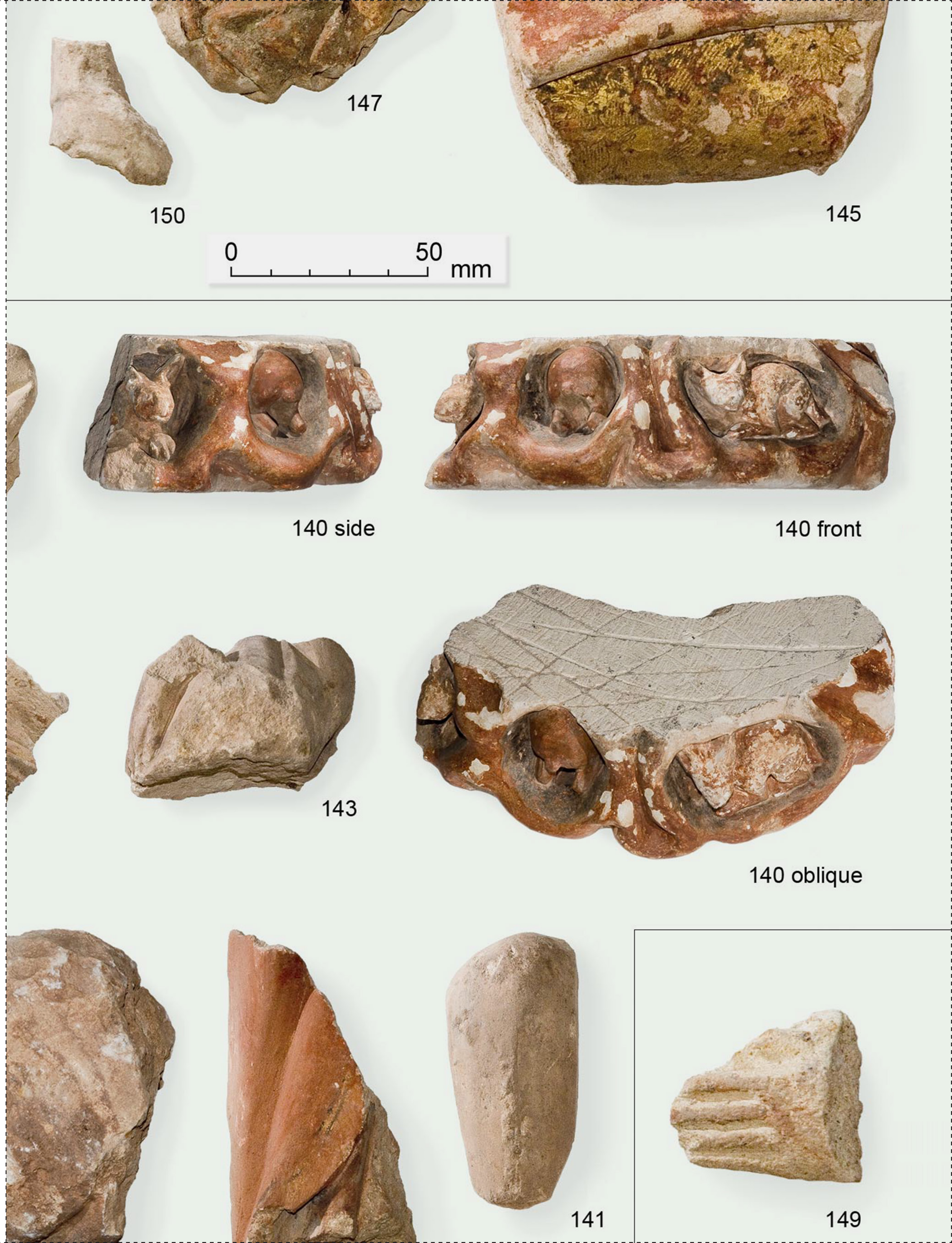
As a highly respected folklorist and storyteller, Lenihan became a 'circumstantial activist' through his defence of significant fairylore sites. Conversely, the critical ontologies of 'lifelong activists' develop incrementally over time through their participation in a broad base of community activism and social movements[16]. A noted example of the latter is British environmental protester Daniel Hooper, a.k.a 'Swampy', who participated in diverse campaigns throughout the 1990s, and came to national prominence as the last protestor evicted from a network of underground tunnels below the A30 road in Fairmile, close to Exeter, in 1997. With subsequent media attention, Swampy accrued celebrity status and was eulogised as the original eco-warrior[17]. A great deal of literature examines the marginal position of environmentalism within the mainstream media, including the portrayal of activists and their frequent subjugation into popular culture.[18] Cast in a melodrama of good versus evil, eco-warriors, defending their land with primitive strategies and people power, are pitted in a highly unequal battle against the faceless and omnipresent forces of the state. Despite coming to notoriety through activism, Swampy was offered his own column in the Sunday Mirror, and it was rumoured that Coronation Street's peace-loving activist character Geoffrey 'Spider' Nugent was based on him. The commodification of this flawed-but-lovable rogue ultimately reinforces the codes of hyper-individualisation promoted by consumer culture[19]. In a similar vein, Eddie Lenihan – then already a minor celebrity of children's television in Ireland – was depicted in the American media as a quintessentially eccentric Irish character, a portrayal which undoubtedly worked to his advantage. Critiquing the relentless pace of Celtic Tiger expansion, Lenihan's campaign conjured a beautiful détournement, using old-world enchantment as a vehicle to make visible the remnants of previously dominant belief systems.

Left: Daniel Hooper aka Swampy. Right: *Latoon* (2006–15) installation views

Relocation: Rag-pickers of History

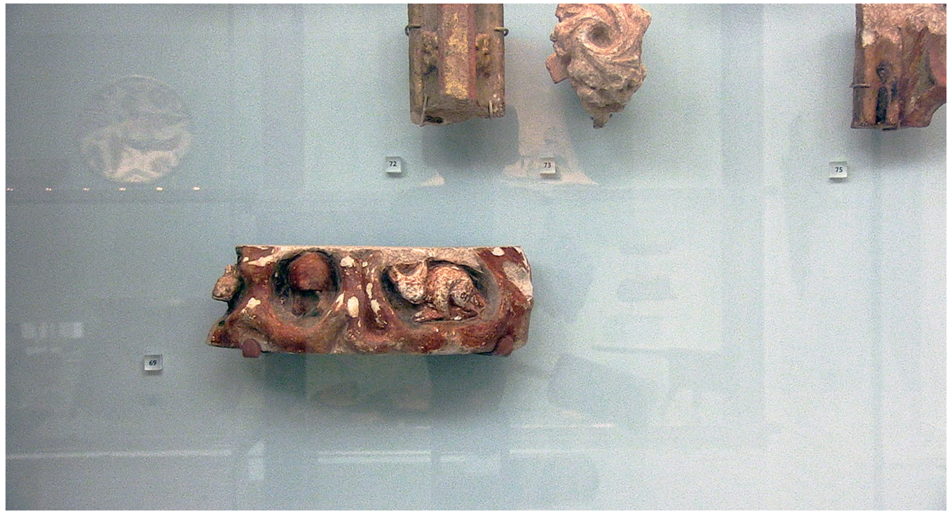
Lenihan's story – which now constitutes an additional layer of the bush's mythology – attests to the many ways in which public space might be negotiated or improvised. Over time Lynch has developed a presentation strategy involving the inclusion of various manmade objects collected from the verges and median areas of the rerouted M20 motorway. Returning to Scanlan's theorisation of garbage, it seems plausible that this worthless roadside detritus – buckled traffic cones; flattened drink cans; lacerated tyres; stray vehicle parts – can potentially accrue intrinsic cultural value when placed in an institutional setting. Exploring a reverse proposition, Lynch's The Weight of the World documents the temporary relocation of a museum object back to its original site. The relic in question is a red-gilded stone fragment from a fourteenth century Dominican Friary choir screen which, though chipped and worn, still retains the carved form of a rabbit – a common symbol in medieval iconography representing lust and fertility. Fragments of the choir screen – most likely smashed during Reformation times – were unearthed among other relics during excavation work for the foundations of Exeter's new shopping centre in 2005. Lynch's video depicts the removal of the stone from its display case in RAMM by the museum's curator Thomas Cadbury, and its subsequent transposition across Exeter city centre to its original priory site, now inhabited by high street department stores in the Princesshay shopping precinct[20]. Other museum paraphernalia used in this act of relocation included disposable white plastic gloves, polystyrene foam and a plastic box containing packaging. The artefact's movement seemed to hinge on the existence of these props. At the former site, Lynch and Cadbury placed the relic on the concrete pavement, partially blocking views of the Debenhams' spring fashion window display[21]. As an incongruous object imbued with institutional values, the stone fragment seems to highlight traditionally unseen museological practices such as classification, display and the assigning of historical provenance.

Although there is no easy reconciliation of the vexed relationships between artefacts and detritus, knowledge and institutions, it is important to recognise that, in drawing strands like these together, Lynch is very much engaged in a task of historiography, achieved through a synthesis of artistic work and its contextual production and reception. This approach could be likened to the methodology adopted by Walter Benjamin, whose project to reconfigure the material history of modernity



Detail of Architectural Fragments from the Princesshay Excavations of 2005–2006: Draft Report by Stuart Blaylock with photographs by Gary Young was conceived as an 'assemblage of found scriptural objects and textual fragments' composed of 'the refuse, the rags of history buried in the archive under layers of official history'[22]. Benjamin's ubiquitous figure of the 'rag-picker' ('chiffonier') is intimately and symbolically connected to this refuse. In the most inconspicuous corners of existence, he picks through and collects seemingly useless fragments, adopting a 'subterranean position… from which, ideally, to let the historical materials speak for themselves'[23]. Yet this is where Lynch's approach deviates, given the emphasis he places not just on the objects per se, but on their original conditions of production, associative politics and the hegemonic frameworks that have somehow stratified modern-day assumptions about their place in society. By amassing constellations of allegorical modes, Lynch bargains, hustles and improvises for freer associations to emerge beyond those that are immediately evident. Reality is portrayed as a historical construct linked to power. In studying these former structures, we can understand how they came into (and went out of) being, and how their legacies might continue to shape all spheres of contemporary life.

Following pages: *The Weight of the World* (2016) video stills




Russell&Bromley
otter


BURTON
Evans


KIMTECH


DEBENHAMS


DEBENHAMS


A match made in
DEBENHAMS


DEBENHAMS

1 Matt Baker and John Gordon, 'Unconformities, Schisms and Sutures – Geology and the Art of Mythology in Scotland,' in Elizabeth Ann Ellsworth and Jamie Kruse (eds), *Making the Geologic Now: Responses to Material Conditions of Contemporary Life* (New York, 2013) p 163.

2 Kenneth White 'Elements of Geopoetics', *Edinburgh Review*, no 88 (1992) pp 163–178.

3 Script excerpt from *Adventure: Capital*.

4 Patricia Monaghan, *The Encyclopaedia of Celtic Mythology and Folklore* (New York, 2008) p 112.

5 Seamus Murphy, *Stone Mad* (London, 1966) p 19.

6 Woodrow Kernohan, 'Shortening the Road', *Ireland at Venice 2015 – Sean Lynch Adventure: Capital Exhibition Guide*, unpaginated.

7 See Roger Bland, 'The Development and Future of the Treasure Act and the Portable Antiquities Scheme', in Suzie Thomas and Peter G Stone (eds.), *Metal Detecting and Archaeology* (Suffolk, 2009) pp 63–86.

8 Patrick Wright, *Journey Through Ruins: The Last Days of London* (London, 1991)

9 Patrick Wright in conversation with Tim Putnam, 'Sneering at the Theme Parks: An Encounter with the Heritage Industry', *The Journal Block*, no. 15 (Spring 1989) p 54.

10 The 'heritage industry' was a phrase coined in the late 1980s to describe the perceived sanitisation and commercialisation of past. It was suggested that 'heritage' was a structure largely imposed from above to appeal to 'middle-class nostalgia for a golden age' as a distraction from the socio-economic decline of post-war Britain. See Robert Hewison, *The Heritage Industry: Britain in a Climate of Decline* (London, 1987).

11 Wright and Putnam, p 55.

12 Iain Sinclair, *Hackney, That Rose-Red Empire: A Confidential Report* (London, 2009) p 7.

13 John Scanlan, *On Garbage* (London, 2005) p 40.

14 James F. Clarity, 'If You Believe in Fairies, Don't Bulldoze Their Lair', *New York Times*, 16 June 1999.

15 Ibid.

16 See Tracey Ollis, *A Critical Pedagogy of Embodied Education: Learning to Become an Activist. Postcolonial studies in Education* (New York, 2012) p 6.

17 The term 'eco-warrior' is generally used to describe a type of environmental activist who is willing to protect the environment by engaging in radical acts. The Canadian environmentalist Bob Hunter, a co-founder of Greenpeace, nis often credited with coining the term.

18 See for example Patrick McCurdy, 'Conceptualising celebrity activists: the case of Tamsin Omond', in *Celebrity Studies*, vol. 4, no. 3 (2013) pp 311–324.

19 Dan Brockington 'Powerful Environmentalisms: Conservation, Celebrity and Capitalism', in *Media, Culture & Society*, vol. 30 no. 2 (2008) p 551.

20 Selected Timeline of Exeter City Centre:
200 BC: Iron Age settlement established.
880: First coins minted in Exeter.
1232: King Henry III permits Dominican Friars to take stone from a nearby quarry to build a church.
1348: The Black Death reaches Exeter.
1549: English Reformation.
1869: The Royal Albert Memorial Museum is built.
1942: World War II 'Baedeker Blitz' destroyed much of the city.
1943: The last man executed at Exeter prison is hung on 6 April.
1949: The rebuilding of Exeter follows elements of urban planner Thomas Sharp's visionary concept, which proposed designing cities from the 'pedestrian perspective'. Princesshay became the first pedestrianised shopping street in the UK. A 'substitute road' was also built, to alleviate burgeoning city centre traffic congestion. See Thomas Sharp, *The Exeter Phoenix: A Plan for Rebuilding* (London, 1946).
2005: On 14 February, Princesshay was demolished and subsequently redeveloped by Land Securities Group, the largest commercial property investment company in the UK. Debenhams relocated to Bedford Street on 15 September.
2007: The new shopping precinct opened in September.

21 This intervention in the public realm builds on the legacies of previous artistic projects, including the exhibition *So It Goes* by Mike Ricketts at Exeter Phoenix in 2015. Examining the postwar history of Princesshay, Ricketts presented various sculptures, video works and appropriated artefacts. Among the high street stores, he covertly replaced some of the stainless steel markers, commonly used to delineate otherwise imperceptible boundaries between public and privately-managed street space, with new ones engraved with a date in 2207 when ground-leases for the shopping centre are due to expire.

22 Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, (English translation, London, 2001) p 460.

23 Irving Wohlfarth 'Et Cetera? The Historian as Chiffonier', *New German Critique*, no. 39 (1986) p 144.

Above: Mike Ricketts, *Pavement Demarcation Studs* (2015), stainless steel

Published on the occasion of *The Weight of the World*, an exhibition by Sean Lynch presented by Spacex at Exeter Phoenix and the Royal Albert Memorial Museum & Art Gallery in Exeter from 14 May–2 July 2016

Curated by Hannah Reeves and Kathy Norris (Spacex), Matt Burrows (Exeter Phoenix) and Thomas Cadbury (RAMM)

Essay: Joanne Laws
Publication design: Wayne Daly
Printed by Push, London

Artwork production: Carl Doran, Matt Gidney, Ray Griffin, Michael Holly, Michele Horrigan, Gina Moxley and Dave Phelan

Cover incorporates *Exeter Phoenix: A Plan for Rebuilding* by Thomas Sharp (Exeter, 1946)

Additional thanks:
Nick Davies, Nicola Hood, Emily Horrigan Lynch, Eddie Lenihan, Holly Morgenroth, Liam Nolan, Julien Parsons, Malcolm Robertson, Martin Thomas, Ronchini Gallery London, Kevin Kavanagh Gallery Dublin, Ireland at Venice 2015 and Askeaton Contemporary Arts

www.spacex.org.uk

Spacex

Supported by

Exeter City Council
Supported using public funding by ARTS COUNCIL ENGLAND
The Henry Moore Foundation
FOYLE FOUNDATION
The Elephant Trust
Culture Ireland Cultúr Éireann
awe

Partners

exeter phoenix
ramm ▸Home to a million thoughts

Exeter Phoenix
Royal Albert Memorial Museum & Art Gallery

14 May–2 July 2016
Tuesday–Saturday 10am–5pm

Spacex