Heavy Rock | Plymouth Sound 2015

Project Outline

KARST, Plymouth, 18th July - 18th September 2015

**Heavy Rock | Plymouth Sound** was an interdisciplinary project commissioned by Plymouth Museum and Art Gallery, as part of New Expressions 3, a national approach to collaboration between contemporary artists and museums to foster new perspectives on historic collections. Focussing on the hidden process of the regular placement of 100 tonne concrete Wave Breakers onto the Breakwater in Plymouth Sound, the project consisted of an exhibition at Karst and a live event that sought to publicly highlight the hidden breakwater construction process and to challenge common perceptions of concrete as a material in urban, post war brutalist architecture.

The catalyst for **Heavy Rock** was a painting in the PMAG collection, *Laying of the Foundation Stone of Plymouth Breakwate*r by George Barrett the Younger, 1812, which depicts a flotilla surrounding a ship carrying the first ceremonial stone to be laid on the breakwater, amongst them a boat hosting an orchestra. This image highlighted the uncelebrated, largely unknown and functional process today of seasonal placements of giant concrete blocks to defend the Plymouth breakwater. This led Harrison to the idea of a contemporary deconstructed recreation of George Barret’s painting in the form of a live intervention, in not only the casting process itself, but to make public the usually hidden process of dropping the concrete block into place on the Breakwater. This response to the city's history sought to forge new perspectives and connections, as well as challenge perceptions of brutalist construction by using the concrete Wavebreaker as a sacrificial form, that protects the breakwater and therefore Plymouth itself, and to celebrate the often anonymous work of those employed in Devonport Naval Dockyard to construct them.

In collaboration with Babcock International and the Ministry of Defence Harrison produced a 100-tonne Wavebreaker,modifying it by installing hydrophone sound technology so that the concrete block would become a conduit for relaying marine sounds from the breakwater back to the gallery during the exhibition. This newly cast block was scheduled to be dropped during the live event on 3rd August, accompanied by members of the public on boats, and a live performance by the HM Royal Navy band of a commissioned score by Will Gregory of Goldfrapp. Due to unpredictable aspects of the project the event had to be postponed a number of times, and the drop was finally made without ceremony, music, recordings or even the artist himself present on the 14th August 2015.

The exhibition of **Heavy Rock|Plymouth Sound** opened at KARST on 18th July and featured a wooden replica of the mould that Harrison had used to cast the 100 tonne Wavebreaker. On the opening night a performance by a quintet from the HM Royal Marine band played a classical repertoire inside the mould, interspersed with audio recordings relayed from the block whilst curing at Oreston Quay, which were played through vibration speakers that made the wooden mould into a speaker itself. This was in place of the originally planned live recordings from the breakwater. A commemorative plate, and a series of 1:20 edition concrete models of Harrison’s Wavebreaker explicitly celebrating the men who physically made the artist’s block, were exhibited together with an installation of A1 and A6 developmental drawings and Will Gregory’s printed score.

Due to the repeated cancellation of the original ceremony at the breakwater a special closing event at KARST was staged on 18th September to host the first public performance by the 24 piece HM Royal Marine Band of Will Gregory’s commissioned score, inspired by the Breakwater, and orchestrated by Tim Gardiner. Jared Schiller and Tim Knights filmed and recorded the event and their film is now on permanent display at The Box, Plymouth along with Harrisons 1:20 Wavebreaker model.

On October 10th 2015 a public boat trip was organised by Plymouth Museum and Art gallery from Royal William Yard Harbour to see the block in position. Will Gregory’s composition was played en route and Maritime curator Nigel Overton provided an historical overview of the breakwater and Plymouth Sound.