

The Return of the Greasy Pole

Introduction

This paper outlines a proposal to commission a unique public work of art for Egremont. Grizedale Arts' ambition is to work with the people of the town and with artists Jeremy Deller and Alan Kane to reinstate the Crab Fair's Greasy Pole as a permanent public sculpture in the market place.

Background

Grizedale Arts is an international research and development agency for artists based in the Lake District National Park. It has now gained a significant reputation for its groundbreaking programme and, in particular, for its projects which link local issues to our global culture.

Jeremy Deller is one of the UK's leading artists and has become known for his public projects and exhibitions which remix traditional culture with contemporary life. His work champions the indigenous folk and popular culture of the British Isles as something as vital and important as the established culture of heritage, museums and galleries.

Jeremy is widely recognised on the international stage, having recently undertaken commissions in the United States and Spain. On the basis of the latter, he was awarded the Turner Prize last December.

The artist regularly works and collaborates with another artist, Alan Kane, and they both have a long standing relationship with Egremont. Their current exhibition *Folk Archive* is currently on show at the Barbican in London and is touring the UK and Europe over the next two years. The show features and promotes the enormous range of art and creativity produced each year for the Crab Fair as part of a general survey of the folk art of these Islands.

The Greasy Pole

One aspect of the Fair, which they are particularly interested in, is the Greasy Pole event, which has played a central role in the 700 year history of the festival. Each year, at the beginning of Crab week, a twenty foot high wooden pole is erected in the market place and greased with lard. The objective is to climb to the top and retrieve a prize. Originally the prize was a hat, probably a top hat. The winner, normally an agile youth, paraded around the town wearing his prize. In 1852 the prize became a side of mutton which, if not won by the end of the day, was cut up and divided amongst the poor. The tradition continues to this day, and in addition to the main prize, ribbons are now attached to the pole which can be grabbed from lower levels and exchanged for gifts in the town.

The New Greasy Pole

Last year the Greasy Pole event was prevented from taking place, because public liability insurance could not be found for such a temporary structure. Not only was the Pole badly missed, but the historic festival was depleted of an important and iconic asset.

Jeremy Deller approached us to help ensure the longevity of the Pole, with the idea that the pole be brought back, but as a permanent public sculpture for the market square.

A new pole would be made and inserted in a new site, which is currently occupied by a redundant iron tree guard. This new pole would be finished to a fine standard and constructed from steel and hardwood to make sure it lasted well into the future. The pole would be used once a year for the traditional Greasy Pole event, but additionally it would serve as a familiar and well known landmark, signposting Egremont as the home of the Crab Fair.

Its relationship to maypoles and similar ritual public objects found in Europe would be clear, but, as the first public sculpture by Jeremy Deller, would also function as a contemporary work of art with international significance.

Benefits for Egremont

The work would attract considerable public interest, boosting the national and public profile of the town. Egremont would benefit enormously from the initial public relations generated by the event, but would gain long term benefit from the increased perception of the town as an active community, moving forward and engaging with contemporary culture at the highest level.

Why is it art?

Art of the last century has moved away from the idea a prized object on a museum plinth or gallery wall and certainly the politics of public sculpture have become extremely difficult to navigate. The pole will certainly fit into the long art history of ritual objects, but more importantly it reflects the wider shift taking place in the way art now works. Artists of today are now much more concerned with working out of galleries, in the real world and working with people and communities for the benefit of all. Jeremy's work and this project especially encapsulate the mood of our times, where his reputation can be used to bring back an important part of our heritage. The work of art in this case lies not in the actual object, but in the work and community action needed to negotiate the return of the pole.

This idea of this public work being realised in Egremont has already attracted interest from the Tate Gallery, the Arts Council of England, the Visual Arts and

Galleries Association and independent critics. It has also gained initial words of support from West Lakes Renaissance, Cumbria Council and Lord Egremont.

Summary

Grizedale has a continuing interest in the way art and culture influence regeneration and contribute to the rural economy. This project has much appeal because it is working in a constructive way, to bring back a traditional and historical artefact, whilst adding to the growth of the region.