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Groundwork, An Ambitious Programme of Contemporary Art Across Cornwall

For its dynamic five-month rolling programme this Summer, diverse works explore the intersections of art and science in relation to place

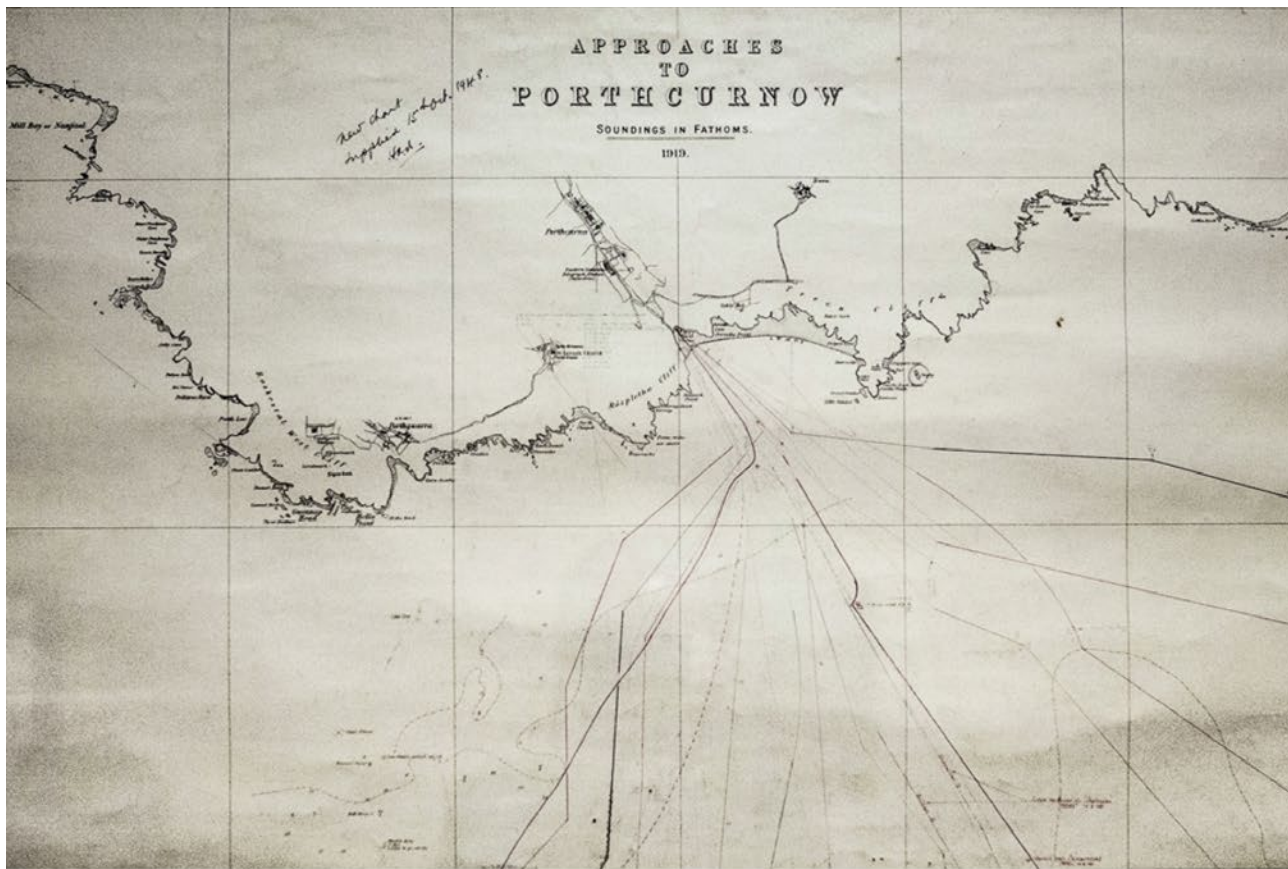
BY DAVID TRIGG

Goonhilly Earth Station is a site as curious as its name. Located on Cornwall's Lizard peninsula, the southernmost tip of mainland Britain, the remote radio communications facility is dominated by a series of huge parabolic satellite dishes that once received transatlantic television broadcasts. Underfoot, strong serpentine bedrock provides the perfect foundation for these hulking 1,000-tonne superstructures, which are now employed in deep space research. For Groundwork, an ambitious programme of contemporary art and events at venues across West Cornwall, Goonhilly's defunct battery store has been transformed into a slick exhibition venue. Here, in the shadow of the site's oldest dish, films by Semiconductor and Simon Starling explore the intersection of art and science in relation to place, a key theme of Groundwork's dynamic five-month rolling programme, which is curated by Teresa Gleadowe in her role as director of the Cornubian Arts and Science Trust (CAST).



Goonhilly Earth Station, the venue for two films in May 2018 for Groundwork: *Black Drop* (2012) by Simon Starling and *As the World Turns* (2018) by Semiconductor.
Courtesy: Richard Broomhall

Semiconductor's *As the World Turns* (2018) is one of Groundwork's several new commissions. Goonhilly and its environs appear throughout the meandering film, whose script mixes whimsical musings inspired by the site with snippets from scientific papers. It is as much an ode to Goonhilly as a meditation on technological progress and the contemporary quest to plumb the depths of the cosmos. Traversing similar territory, Starling's single-channel film *Black Drop* (2012) proposes a link between 19th century experiments in astronomy and the birth of cinema. The dry, documentary-style narration is provided by the familiar voice of Peter Capaldi – well known for his small-screen portrayal of Doctor Who – suggesting that art, science and fiction are fields far from alien to each other.



Steve Rowell, *Points of Presence*, 2013–18, still from two-screen slide projection with sound presented for Groundwork at the Telegraph Museum Porthcurno, June 2018 – April 2019. Courtesy: the artist

Telecommunications of a more earthbound nature are explored in Steve Rowell's *Points of Presence* (2013–18), which is displayed adjacent to banks of antiquated tech at Porthcurno's Telegraph Museum. The two-channel video presents a quick-fire succession of photographs taken at sites on either side of the North Atlantic, including Porthcurno, where submarine cables connecting the continents emerge from the ocean floor. Obsolete telegraph lines, the decaying remnants of a pre-digital age, are shown rusting on beaches suggesting the death of international cable networks. Yet, as Rowell underscores, the internet, which we tend to think of in dematerialized terms, has an equally material reality; its physical infrastructure, in which Porthcurno plays an integral role, carries terabits of data around the globe via modern fibre optic cables that, like their forerunners, remain hidden from view. A final image of a Cold War computer system, modelled in miniature by the National Security Agency, hints at the dark underbelly of Rowell's field research: an emerging history of cyber insurgency and digital espionage ignored by the Museum's laudatory and uncritical displays. Hitting the point home is the creepy synthesized text-to-speech soundtrack, derived from the malicious Stuxnet code that wreaked havoc with Iran's nuclear capabilities in 2010.



Christina Mackie, *The Judges II*, 2012–18, presented for Groundwork in the King's Room at National Trust Godolphin, 5 May – 24 June 2018. Courtesy: Jamie Woodley © CAST (Cornubian Arts & Science Trust)

Cornwall's mining history is obliquely addressed by the inclusion of Christina Mackie's sprawling sculptural installation *The Judges II* (2012) and Steve McQueen's short film *Gravesend* (2007). Presented respectively at the National Trust's Godolphin Estate and CAST's Victorian schoolhouse headquarters in Helston, these are prime examples of the way that Groundwork converges existing works with locally-situated discourses. At Godolphin, Mackie's apparently incongruous tabletop display of assorted drawings, watercolours, ceramics, photographs, films and pigmented sand is installed in The King's Room adjoining the estate's Tudor mansion. Its theme of geology and extraction resonates with the site, once owned by the powerful Godolphin family who derived their wealth from copper and tin mining. *The Judges II* asks how history will judge our exploitation of the earth's natural resources in pursuit of prosperity, a question that might also be pondered while watching McQueen's *Gravesend*. Beautifully installed at CAST, the film contrasts the mining of coltan – a rare Central African mineral and vital ingredient in smartphones and laptops – with its European processing in a pristine, automated laboratory. With explicit reference to Joseph Conrad's 1899 novella *Heart of Darkness*, *Gravesend's* unsettling vision of a globalized, neo-colonial industry implicates us all.



Janet Cardiff, *Forty Part Motet*, 2001, presented for Groundwork in Richmond Chapel, Penzance, by Newlyn Art Gallery & The Exchange, 25 May – 27 August 2018. Courtesy: Steve Tanner © CAST (Cornubian Arts & Science Trust)

Elsewhere, works marked by a subtle optimism point to the transformative power of art. Commissioned for Groundwork and displayed at the delightful converted farmstead of Kestle Barton gallery near Helford, Manon de Boer's film *Bella, Maia and Nick (From nothing to something to something else, part 1)* (2018) celebrates the youthful potential of three young musicians as they playfully experiment with sounds and rhythms against an ocean backdrop at Porthmeor Studios. In Penzance, reanimating an abandoned Wesleyan chapel, is a stunning presentation of Janet Cardiff's *Forty Part Motet* (2001) where a circle of 40 speakers play a rousing reworking of Thomas Tallis' 1570 choral masterpiece *Spem in Alium*. The supreme hopefulness of Tallis' composition, experienced amid Richmond Chapel's crumbling, peeling interior, is echoed in Porthleven at the Bickford-Smith Institute Snooker Club, where Chris Fite-Wassilak and Sophie Mallett's *To whom it was given* (2018) speaks to the future of a very different yet similarly dilapidated building. Placed amid the club's cluttered noticeboards and local history displays are texts describing alternative, and at times absurd, pasts and futures for the 19th century building, while textile covers produced for the hall's snooker tables feature imagery derived from its decaying corners. In highlighting the building's desperate plight, Mallett and Fite-Wassilak suggest that, as with the privately owned Richmond Chapel, art might be instrumental in its rehabilitation.



Adam Chodzko taking a passenger on a voyage in *Ghost* off the coast of the Lizard peninsula in Cornwall for Groundwork, May 2018. Courtesy: Steve Tanner © CAST (Cornubian Arts & Science Trust)

As one might expect, Groundwork is a masterclass in curating, even though its staggered programme may frustrate visitors travelling from further afield. Indeed, only locals or the most dedicated out-of-towners could hope to catch everything (especially the fleeting performative contributions of Andy Holden, Adam Chodzko and Rosemary Lee, among others). In this, however, the rationale of Groundwork and its associated fieldtrips, residential workshops and learning programme is revealed. In contrast to other large-scale, multi-venue exhibitions, it seems less interested in attracting tourists, commerce and cultural capital than in enriching Cornwall's contemporary art ecology by presenting outstanding work to a primarily local audience. It remains to be seen what superstructures Groundwork might inspire. One thing is certain, though: the foundations are rock solid.

Groundwork <<https://groundwork.art/>> continues until 30 September 2018. Steve Rowell's *Points of Presence* runs at Porthcurno Telegraph Museum until April 2019.

Main image: Rosemary Lee, *Passage for Par*, 2018, a performance specially created on Par Sands beach for Groundwork, June 2018. Image: Graham Gaunt © CAST (Cornubian Arts & Science Trust)

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