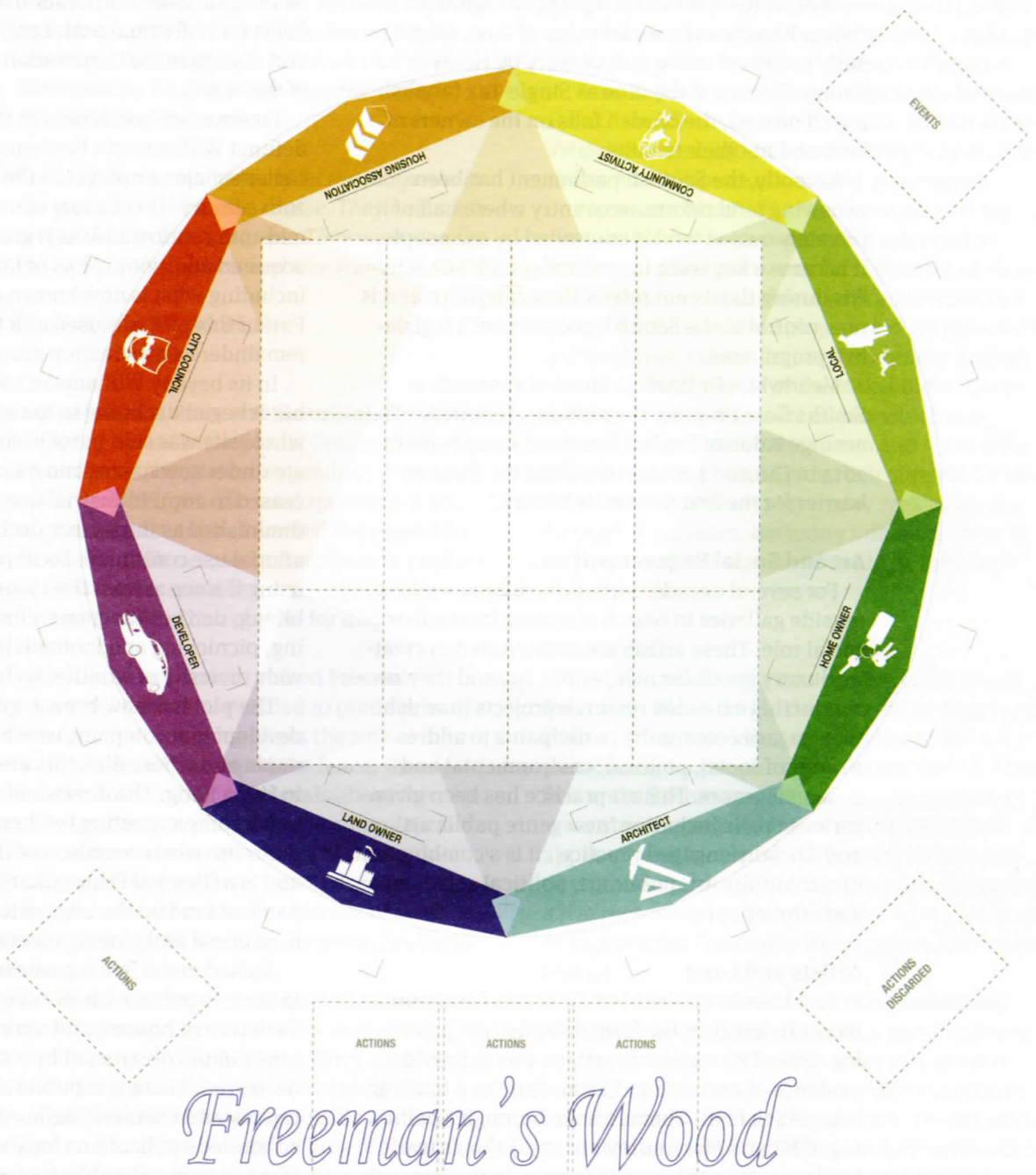


LANDED

by John Angus
illustration by Sans Façon



Landed is an exploration of land ownership through contemporary art. StoreyG2 is a small art organisation based in Lancaster, North West England. We've been running a project researching land ownership and its effects on people's lives. Landed (Freeman's Wood) is centred on a plot of land where the interests of a local community have collided with those of global capital.

Land Ownership

Ownership of land is fundamental to all socio-economic structures and unequal ownership provides socio-economic power. In England, around 69% of the land is owned by a mere 0.6% of the population. Even so, land ownership is a hidden political topic. "In this case, the elephant is the room," argued Ferdinand Mount in 2014. "There can be few enormous subjects more often dodged

than land ownership.”

This lack of debate around land ownership is, according to writer and activist George Monbiot, a “telling silence.” Writing in 2013 he claimed, “The issues politicians do not discuss are as telling and decisive as those they do... The loudest silence surrounds the issue of property taxes. It is... remarkable, in these...inequitable times, that land value tax is not at the heart of the current political debate.”

Land Value Taxation is a proposed annual charge based on the rental value of land, originally proposed in the 19th century by Henry George. Known at the time as Single-Tax (abolishing all others), the burden falls on the owners of land and not their tenants.

Recently, the Scottish parliament has been reviewing land reform—a country where half of its privately owned land is controlled by 432 people. It became a key issue for pro-independence activists during the recent referendum campaign and is now central to the Scottish government’s legislative programme.

Meanwhile Dr Beedell, Head of Research at Smiths Gore Property Consultants, reported, “The average value of English farmland rose by 4% in 2014 to £10,200 per acre, breaking the £10,000 barrier for the first time in its history.”

Art and Social Engagement

For several decades, artists have been working outside galleries in search of a more interactive social role. These artists aren’t interested in creating luxury goods for rich people. Instead they’re conducting extended research projects in which they engage community participants to address a range of social, political, environmental and economic issues. This art practice has been given various labels including ‘new genre public art’, and ‘socially engaged practice’. It is a combination of community art, public art, political activism and ethnography.

Artists and Land

Land has been a subject for artists for centuries, most obviously in the form of landscape painting. One of its earliest functions was to provide evidence of ownership, like an entry in a land register. Much later, Thomas Gainsborough’s painting of Mr and Mrs Andrews (c.1750) shows two landowners on the land they own. In the late 20th century artists started to work directly in and with land. These movements included Land Art, Site-specific Art and Environmental Art. More recently, artists have engaged with political and economic issues around land.

The Plot of Land—Freeman’s Wood

Our project considers a plot of land known as Freeman’s Wood, on the edge of the city of Lancaster. This site has been used recreationally by local people for decades. In 2012 fencing was

installed around it, angering those who viewed and used it as common land.

The site is bounded by an industrial estate, a cycle path, a public footpath and a public recreation ground. It is close to residential housing, open farmland, and the tidal estuary of the river Lune. The land is part of an area that was known as Lancaster Marsh. In the 18th century it was common pasture where the freemen of Lancaster had grazing rights. Then, in 1796, it was enclosed by the Lancaster Corporation and divided into fields for individual rent. Legislative Acts of 1864 and 1892 gave the Corporation power to sell parts of the Marsh.

Freeman’s Wood is next to the site of the now defunct Williamson’s linoleum factory, Lancaster’s major employer in the late 19th and early 20th century. This factory started nearby in the mid-19th century and, as it gradually expanded, acquired additional plots of land on the Marsh, including what is now known as Freeman’s Wood. Part of this plot was used as a factory tip, the remainder as a recreation ground for workers.

In its heyday Williamson’s was a huge factory, but it began declining in the 1950s and ‘60s. The whole site was sold in 1969, continuing to operate under new names and owners, until it finally ceased in 2001. Industrial use of Freeman’s Wood diminished as the factory declined, but recreational use continued. Local people have been using it since at least the 1950s for dog walking, biking, den building, tree-climbing, bird-watching, picnicking and football. It is also home to a wide diversity of wildlife, including deer.

The plot has now been acquired by a property development company, which is registered in Bermuda and whose directors are thought to be based in Hong Kong. The director of the planning consultancy company acting for them is chairman of the polo club where members of the royal family play, and is a friend of Prince Charles. So this scrubby patch of land on the edge of town has direct links to national and global power structures.

Spiked metal fencing was installed around it in 2012, together with *Warning—Keep Out* signs. Various tree houses, and a complex system of bike ramps constructed by local people, were destroyed. There was public outcry: the signs were rapidly and creatively defaced, and local people submitted applications for Town Green status and three designated public footpaths. Lancaster City Council imposed a Tree Protection Order.

The Project—Landed (Freeman’s Wood)

This situation at Freeman’s Wood offered an ideal illustrative example for an exploration of the issue of land ownership. I started by collecting extensive information about land ownership and the history of this plot.

I then appointed two Lancaster-based artists, Helen Hicks and Rachel-Ann Powers, to contact and interview local people about their memories

of Freeman's Wood and their wishes for its future. They recorded interviews with more than 30 people:

"With a space like Freeman's Wood you can just make it up as you go along. It's a creative space for kids to do whatever their imagination tells them they can do."

"We used it as our playground. We used to swing in the trees and bike ride along the paths. We would act out the film we had seen that week. We would be Tarzan in the trees one week, sword fencing the next."

"Local BMX riders had modified the footpaths in the wood to make a bike course. They had made artificial hillocks and ramps. They were wonderful, made out of pallets and tree stumps."

"The fence felt like an insult."

Commissioned Artists and Resulting Artworks

I selected artists Layla Curtis, Goldin+Senneby, and Sans Façon, because they produce high quality work, and their practice and approaches are appropriate for the topic. I wanted the project to reach a large audience, so I asked them to produce artworks in forms suitable for distribution on the internet, rather than objects for display in a gallery.

Layla, based in London, visited Freeman's Wood several times and decided to produce an iPhone app that would highlight the role of the fence. First, she GPS mapped the fence, then recorded conversations with locals about the site. The resulting audio tracks are compilations of these conversations: Memories of the recreational use of this land over recent decades are intertwined with discussions of issues of land ownership, trespass, territory, common land and activism.

The conversations were conducted on site, and the recorded sound tracks are GPS mapped, so users of the app, TRESPASS, can listen to them while walking where they were recorded. Conversations were recorded both outside and inside the area enclosed by the fence. Three of the audio tracks were recorded outside the boundary and are available to listeners anywhere in the world. However, to access those tracks that were recorded inside the fence, the listener must consider trespassing, and cross into Freeman's Wood itself.

Goldin+Senneby are a pair of artists, based in Stockholm, whose work addresses bureaucratic and financial systems. G+S decided that buying a plot of land was to be a core component of their project. They said, "We need to become complicit in what we are investigating." My preference was for a plot of land near Lancaster, but the ones we

found were too expensive. Eventually, for pragmatic reasons, they decided on a plot in Kent, in South East England.

Goldin+Senneby used this land as a stage from which to present ideas about land ownership. Their piece, A3-A Plot, presents an estate agent's For Sale details. These sale particulars feature a conversation between two people on the site that is a prologue for a play script, reached via an on-line link as a PDF document. G+S commissioned this script from playwright Pamela Carter, which imagines the history of the plot of land, exploring various aspects of land ownership in England.

Sans Façon is a collaborative practice between French architect Charles Blanc and British artist Tristan Surtees. After their visit they proposed to create a board game about land ownership.

Freeman's Wood—The Game involves verbal negotiation between players. It's intended to encourage players to consider the points of view of the various stakeholders with an interest in a plot of land. Individual players take on roles such as Developer, Councillor, or Community Activist, adopting the interests of the stakeholder. Cards are presented that feature events which may occur. Players react to the events and try to influence other players, and gain their support for their favoured response. A player may seek influence through discussion, bartering influence chips or buying votes. It is a game of strategy, influence and compromise.

Future Paths

We have produced a two-minute video about Freeman's Wood that features aerial footage taken from a drone, providing an overview of the site, particularly for people who have not visited. This film and all three artworks are on our website www.storey2g.org.uk. Although the TRESPASS app is currently only for iPhone, we plan to produce an Android version. We also hope to develop a live presentation of the script for A3-A Plot, and to improve the Freeman's Wood game after further testing.

The aim of this project is to raise awareness and discussion of land ownership and its effects on people's lives. We believe a key role of art is to imagine how things could be different, and to communicate with a wide audience. The art works produced in this project illustrate how artists can contribute to the understanding and dissemination of ideas around complex socio-political issues, and how art can shift perceptions and discourses. ●

John Angus is an artist, designer, print-maker, researcher, and curator, based in Lancaster, UK. He was director of Storey Gallery, curating a contemporary art programme until 2013, and is currently running its new version, StoreyG2.

www.storeyg2.org.uk/landed