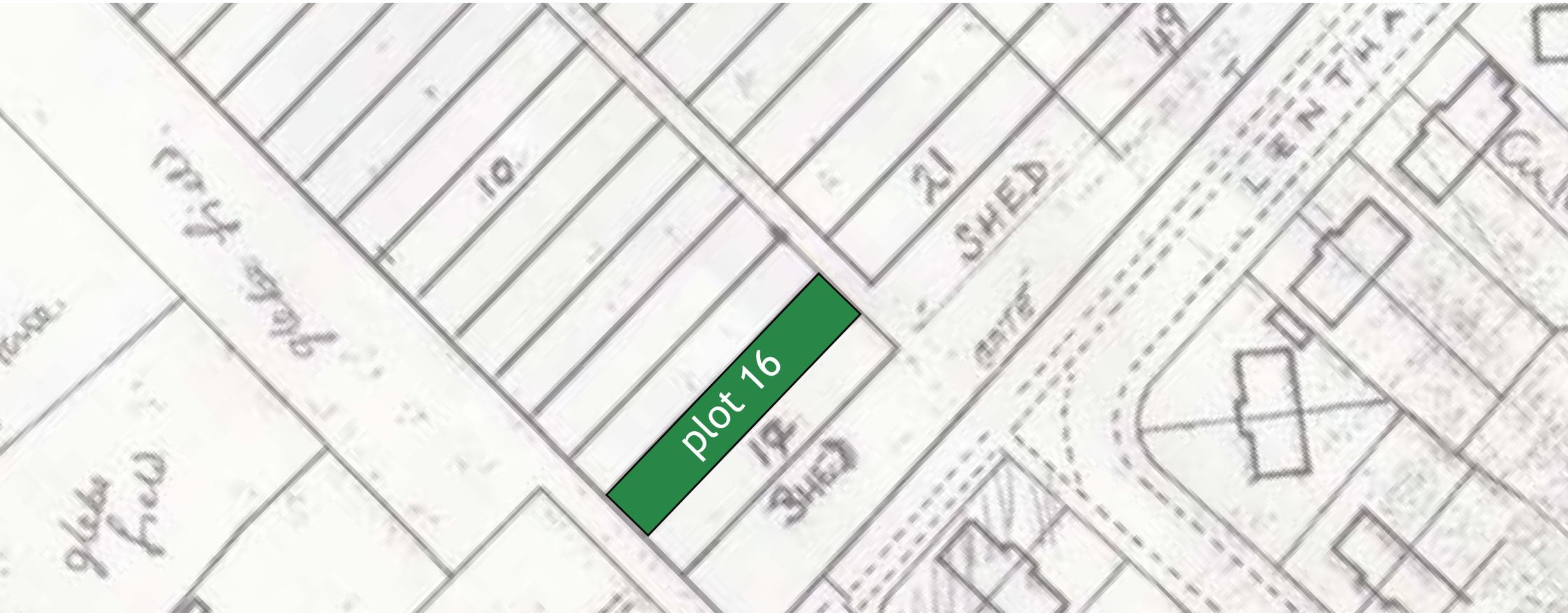


**The Fermenting Room (return of the rhizome)  
Plot 16 Residency - Art in Rose Hill  
Modern Art Oxford**



**Introduction by Sarah Mossop  
Artists' Thoughts by brook and black**

## The Fermenting Room (return of the rhizome)

### Plot 16 Residency - Art in Rose Hill

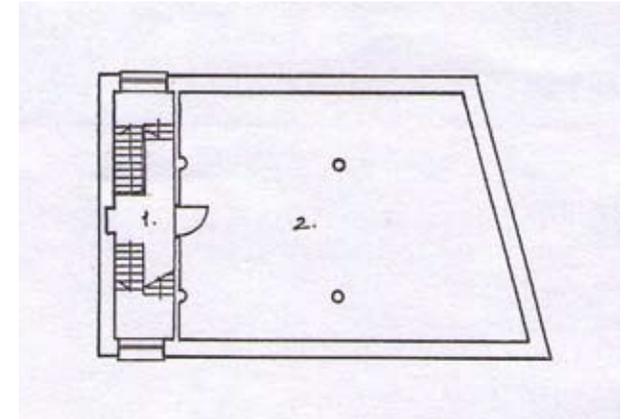
#### Modern Art Oxford

##### Introduction

A rhizome, with its associated network of offshoots that develop into new plants, is an apt metaphor for the evolution of Modern Art Oxford's (MAO) Art in Rose Hill programme. It reflects well how brook & black, the artistic partnership of Leora Brook and Tiffany Black, came to be involved as artists in residence at Plot 16, an allotment at Rose Hill, growing hops (from rhizomes) and making beer, and creating a large sculptural work. The original plan for the off-site programme, which centred on inviting artists 'to make work in response to and within the communities of Rose Hill' did not include taking on an allotment, and as such presented a challenge, as well as an opportunity, to take an innovative approach to nurturing new work.

The idea of the gallery commissioning new work to take place in Rose Hill was the inspiration of Andrew Nairne, Director at MAO in 2007. Until this time, the Learning Team had worked on numerous offsite community partnership projects, but none of them had lasted beyond a few months, and Andrew was keen for the gallery to develop closer, more sustained partnerships, within one particular community in order to widen access to contemporary art and better understand the dynamics of this mode of working. It was also seen as an opportunity to explore areas of contemporary art practice generally referred to as socially engaged and/or participatory practice that often take place beyond the gallery setting. In audience development terms Rose Hill's population included a significant number of people who were not traditionally amongst the gallery's visitors, and whilst wary of assuming that the impact to a community of participating in an art programme would be positive (with the inherent risk of appearing patronising), there was a genuine desire to be more inclusive in our learning and curatorial practice. After consulting local community groups and getting a clear sense that our proposal was welcomed, we made a successful application to the Paul Hamlyn Foundation to support the programme, initially for a pilot year, followed by a further three years, the end coinciding with brook & blacks last season at Plot 16.

Taking on an allotment in Art in Rose Hill occurred by chance, rather than design; while walking round the estate with Maria Pask, an artist based in Holland who was commissioned to work on



the programme towards the end of 2009, and the new gallery Director, Michael Stanley, Maria spotted the open allotment gates and popped in to take a look. One of the allotment committee members happened to be on duty and his enthusiasm encouraged Maria to take on a plot as part of her project. Although featuring in her subsequent film, *Déjà vu*, the plot's cultivation wasn't included in her plan and we were left with the choice of either handing it back to the association or finding a creative way of using the site.

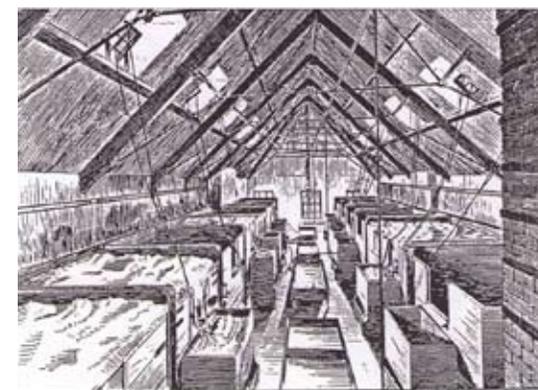
Working with brook & black, whose practice is collaborative, had a particular advantage as the idea of cooperation and dialogue seemed to spread beyond their own collaboration. This extended to and embedded relationships they developed with other allotment holders, as well as with gallery staff and the general public in and around Rose Hill. Cultivating connections beyond their relationship with the Project Managers (Erica Burton for the first year of the project, followed by Natasha Vicars in the final nine months) to include colleagues across MAO's departments (Marketing, Retail, the Café, Curators and the Gallery Manager) proved important in raising the profile of a project that might otherwise have lacked visibility within the organisation or to the gallery's main visitors.

Sessions of cross-team digging and planting resulting in a first year crop of vegetables to share (and include in the café's menu), proved as productive as many highly priced team-building workshops delivered by consultants!

It's likely that as Tiffany lived locally, and that she had previous connections with both the gallery and Rose Hill, it made it easier to gain the trust of long-standing allotment holders, who might otherwise have been resistant to the idea of an art project on site. brook & black's joint commitment to attending Lenthall Road Allotment Association meetings, and their involvement in allotment events established the project, and by association the gallery, as a positive addition to community activity.

By the time we took on the allotment we'd established a reflective approach to our work on the estate, and with the help of the Art in Rose Hill Forum Group, key MAO staff involved in the programme, and in consultation with the programme evaluator, we were thinking about how our community relationships were developing through the projects. Many of the characteristics of brook & black's residency - a willingness to share, communicate clearly, join-in, and take an interest in others, alongside an enquiring energy and ambition - helped us identify the essential ingredients to foster dynamic, productive and creative relationships.

We embarked on the Plot 16 residency with the aim of helping brook & black realize their plan to construct a sculpture on the site, to grow hops over it, and to make a limited edition beer



NEW FERMENTING ROOM.

from them, what we hadn't anticipated were the many offshoots that would arise from the project, and the importance of being willing to be responsive and allowing creative energy to thrive. Other material offshoots included: a newspaper format publication describing the project and its origins, in the brook & black lyrical signature style; two, rather than one, limited edition Plot 16 beers - the first a green hop variety, the second a more long-lasting bitter; a wonderful video made from images taken by a time-lapse camera installed discreetly near the plot to record the hop growth through the seasons, fleetingly capturing the comings and goings of cars delivering bulky items to the site.

In response to the many issues that arose during the residency, a discussion forum event was devised by the artists that explored the conditions and constraints for artists working in the public realm. 'Art in Public Spaces' brought together practitioner Sophie Hope, curator and public art consultant Frances Lord, and the audience to question more closely some of the constraints and dilemmas presented by off-site work. The important question relating to who is actually gaining from this activity is: are the artists the un-invited guests? Can we, the curators, provide real creative opportunities whilst trying to fulfil funding criteria, ie increasing audience numbers and engaging hard to reach audiences? What is the responsibility and impact on artists, personally and professionally, in being part of artist-led regeneration projects? These and many other questions were raised and discussed.

In addition, a moving and insightful talk at MAO by author Iain Sinclair took the work back into more poetical, narrative territory. This was the place that brook & black seemed to occupy and extend in the culmination of the project with not only the work on site, but an event that included an improvised cello and poetry duo, a live band and morris dancing. Here, finally, up in Rose Hill, it was evident that not only local residents, the allottees, beer makers, artists and visitors to MAO, came together to enjoy not only the moment, but a collective delight in the work.

Finally, a connection has continued beyond the project through brook & black working on a new commission with Oxford City Council and members of the Rose Hill community as part of the regeneration programme funding commitment. All of these offshoots emerged like new 'plants' from the projects original rhizomatic framework, contributing to the legacy of Plot 16: The Fermenting Room, and testament to the imagination and creative energy of brook & black's partnership.



*Sarah Mossop was Head of Learning & Partnerships at Modern Art Oxford, 2002 - 2012. In 2010 Sarah developed The Project Space, a programmed location for new work and artists' residencies at the gallery. This, in conjunction with her role leading on the Art in Rose Hill Programme, meant that she curated and worked closely with brook & black throughout the commission.*

*Sarah is now working as a Freelance Visual Arts Consultant: Learning & Engagement Specialist. She has over twenty years experience in gallery education leading the development of learning, participation and community engagement programmes at major galleries including Modern Art Oxford and the former Crafts Council gallery.*

## Artists' Thoughts

One of the surprising things about being invited to undertake an off-site commission is the sense of being at the end of the pier before you even begin, you look back to dry land; the solidity of the gallery is there, looking ahead is the extra-ordinariness of everyday space, the sense of anything being possible. The horizon is a dotted line of connective shifting points, ideas in the making, people and places, but it is so blurry, so out of focus, so exciting to leap off into the vast expanse of the public realm, the realm of unknown possibilities, nothing is static, all is to be navigated and negotiated.

The work we made for Modern Art Oxford (MAO) challenged us in many ways. We considered the past of the building, its connections to the people of Oxford, to other breweries still in use, and to growing. We walked and talked between ourselves and with those we met on and around the site. We made drawings, explored architectural plans, read about the building of the estate, the way the land changed over time. We thought about digging, planting, growing and whether or how any of that very physical work could be part of our practice.

The question of why we were there in relation to Rose Hill was very present in our minds. Yes, we had responded to the Brief, but in making that initial response questions arose in relation to our practice and whether any interest in 'social engagement' was due to the opportunity it provided or whether we had a genuine interest to work with, spend time with, a community of people we did not know. We were aware of much artwork being made as a response to 'site', and to artists working with plant or land cultivation, from ecological, environmental or political perspectives. We acknowledged the beautiful work made by John Newling for Chatham Vines <sup>(1)</sup> and our own work has often 'retraced' outlines of another place, sometimes imagined, sometimes real. But here, the connection between the site, the idea of growing hops and tracing the architectural outline of MAO jostled together over a period of time and emerged



when images, thoughts and a stomping over the frozen ground had taken place.

As the work emerged and time was spent with people on site, the relationship between ourselves as artists, the land and the community did indeed strengthen. At the beginning we were very aware of driving 'into Rose Hill', of sensing that our hosts were via the gallery, not the local people. However that began to change as we continued to be there, to do the same as others, to dig and to build. A terrible fire took place that burnt down the hop houses, where our first crop was drying in a nearby farm. We had to pick again, find a local brewery, we had to act quickly, we needed help and people responded in all directions. We borrowed and lent tools, and time was made for conversations about art and vegetables, mildew, fires and architectural outlines. The contact made with the farmer, the brewery, all the people on site, the people at the gallery and visitors on open days and others dropping by, they all seemed to provide a space, a shared space well beyond the gallery, for reconsidering the project at every point, for new conversations that shifted its interpretation and meaning. The gallery seemed to reduce in significance; there was not one point of control, but many, the strongest being the weather.

Shortly after the conclusion of the Plot 16 residency we were invited to participate in *Cultivation Field*, a symposium and exhibition initiated and curated by Kate Corder at Reading University and here the work took on another aspect, re- contextualized within current dialogues about art, the environment and growing.

On Plot 16, in Lenthall Road allotments, out of all the possibilities, all the connections that could have been made, the Fermenting Room, through a series of questions, accidents, negotiations, flukes and trials, emerged. The work became what the viewer wanted it to be and for us it referenced an architects' blueprint, a nod to Sol LeWitt and more formal ways of considering the position of the viewer, in real time and space.

Our echo of a structure, of abstract order, a white ghostly proposition in a material green landscape, came as an ethereal visitor to be claimed by the wirey hop bins, held down, over-run for two seasons, two crops, and then released.

A year on...life on the allotment continues as before, but now all the participants are connected by memories of digging, asking, advising, brewing, laughing, looking, pouring, enjoying and wondering.



*brook & black are an arts partnership formed in 2003. Their work brings together a combination of skills rooted in contemporary fine art practice through the use of installation, sound, video, printmaking, photography and sculpture. From a process of research, investigation and experimentation brook & black work in response to specific sites or contexts in order to shift the viewer's perspective, enabling new readings and connections to be made and new emotional responses evoked. They have exhibited both in the UK and abroad, with solo commissions for the Musee Toulouse Lautrec, France, the Wallace Collection, London, The Stephen Lawrence Gallery, London, The Pitt Rivers Museum, Oxford, and many group shows and public art commissions.*

brook & black at: <http://www.axisweb.org/>



## Project Credits

### At Modern Art Oxford

Michael Stanley  
Sarah Mossop  
Natasha Vicars & Erica Burton  
Kayleigh Hellin  
Iain Sinclair  
Francis Lord & Sophie Hope

Director, Modern Art Oxford  
Project Curator  
Project Management  
Publicity  
Author, Public Talk  
Public Discussion Forum

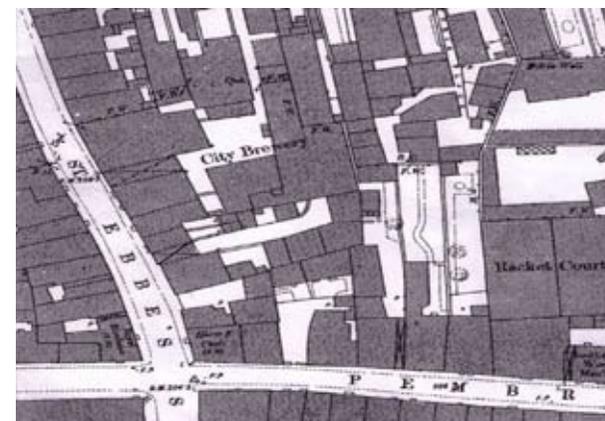
### On-Site

Lenthall Road Allotment Association  
Josh Brindley, Holly Cooper, Jack Eden  
Cathy Gibb, Terry Kirkby, Andrew Benfield and others  
Bruno Guastalla  
Matt Black  
Horns of Plenty  
Headington Morris Men  
Ed Murray at Shotover Brewing Company Ltd, Horspath, Oxford. [www.shotoverbrewing.com](http://www.shotoverbrewing.com)  
Tim Payne: freelance engineer to the artistic world, Eynsham

Building  
Endless Help  
Musician  
Poet  
Band  
Dancers

### With advice from

Mr Blanchard, Berkshire Hops Ltd, Kingston Bagpuize, Oxfordshire  
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p.7 Images & Voices, Oxfordshire County Council

p.8 Top: Modern Art Oxford

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Michael Stanley at Plot 16 launch party, 2011