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## ***Home* : the celebratory opening of the Kelpies at Helix Park, Falkirk**

**CLAIRE WARDEN**

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## ***Home* : the celebratory opening of the Kelpies at Helix Park, Falkirk**

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*At the heart of Falkirk's new Helix park, a reinvented green space to the west of Grangemouth oil refinery, stand two thirty-metre high statues. They are horses' (Kelpies') heads, the first bowed in a submissive, calm gesture, the second with muzzle pointed to the sky. Sculptor Andy Scott created these majestic pieces of public art as a tribute to the working horses of Scotland's industrial heritage. They opened in April 2014 with a spectacular event orchestrated by Uz Arts who commissioned pyrotechnic and lighting specialists Groupe F. The performance breathed a sense of dynamism into the sculptures leading to a series of questions about the complexion of the palimpsestic Scottish landscape, the intertwining of urban industrial and wild, untamed nature, and the relationship between Scotland's past and future, a vital enquiry in this year of referendum. This review aims to address these questions.*

*Keywords: public art, Groupe F, Uz Arts, landscape, site-specific performance*



To the west of Grangemouth oil refinery in Scotland's Forth Valley lies the new Helix Park. It combines wetland, woodland, green space and purpose built paths and aims to connect the sixteen Falkirk communities that surround it. At the heart of the new park stand two thirty-metre high statues created by sculptor Andy Scott, positioned either side of the canal which runs through the park. Known as the Kelpies, Scott modelled them on two real working horses—Duke and Baron—envisaging a tribute to the animals that helped to build Scotland's industrial landscape. Scott refers to them as 'equitecture' (Scott, 2014), a fused word suggesting the natural form and shape of the horse combined with the intentionally designed characteristics of human-instigated construction. Uz Arts' celebratory night-time opening of the Kelpies in April 2014, entitled *Home*, was a performance-based reading of the sculptures and the Park. The company embedded these two elements (manufacture and nature) into their event, intentionally commenting on the palimpsestic characteristics of Scottish landscape and identity. This article reviews *Home* by addressing the primary questions engendered by Uz Arts' collaborative reading of the Helix Park and the Kelpies

sculptures.

*Home* celebrated both the official opening of the Kelpies and, more broadly, the Helix Park vision for an inclusive, open, communal space. However, it was also part of the inaugural John Muir Festival, eulogising a figure revered on both sides of the Atlantic as a prominent and influential conservationist. Furthermore, *Home* contributed to the year-long *Homecoming Scotland 2014*, a collection of events and festivals that is as much about welcoming international visitors (particularly those with historical connections to Scotland) as it is about providing nation-defining gatherings for the local populace. Ultimately the Chairman of VisitScotland rather cryptically defined the launch of the Kelpies as ‘a unique experience on the theme—our Home’ (The Herald, 2014).

*Home’s* collation of meanings and intentions was mirrored in its profound and pleasing sense of fluid aesthetic multidimensionality. For example, road signs litter the park, informing travellers of the best ways in and out. One depicts a roundabout directing travellers towards the town, the football stadium, the oil refinery, and on to this sign was projected black-and-white film of a lost past: two figures digging for peat. The modern and the historical, the mechanical and the efforts of intense human labour, layered to form an ambiguous image of Scottish industry. This was augmented by peat fires lit along the route to the Kelpies which emitted an earthy, comforting, nostalgic smell. The artificial lights along waterside paths and the water sculptures in which children played initiated a similarly complex layering of meaning. The splashing noises of the water and the inorganic positioning of light again suggested an intricate relationship between the natural and the manufactured, a relationship extended by the stars which shone dimly in the encroaching murkiness of the night.

Walking along the paths and through these artistic interventions was a collegial experience. The crowd was diverse: Falkirk inhabitants keen to proudly celebrate their local park, inquisitive art-lovers from further afield, families, children, elderly folks, a subtle mixture of accents and cultures. The crowds confirmed the popularity and importance of public art. Reaching the Kelpies was cause for celebration and each fifteen-minute show met with applause.

As part of this event, Uz Arts commissioned French pyrotechnic and light specialists Groupe F to visually respond to the Kelpies. Groupe F are a collective who pride themselves on creating work with a 'strong communication value' (Groupe F, 2014), artistically responding to place and culture, demanding audience response which, in turn, changes the identity of the art object. In many ways Groupe F's multimedia celebration of the Kelpies reflected the identity, intentions and motives of the Helix Park more generally. The Park is defined as a 'Living Landmark' (The Helix, 2014); landmarks are customarily used to enable visitors or, more accurately, travellers to discern where they are. The Helix Park, therefore, is infused with a definitive sense of place, belonging and geographical specificity. Yet it is also living; it is not a monument to the past but is constantly changing and morphing as people engage with it. In a sense its intentions reflect the objectives of much site-specific performance, a mode Nick Kaye (2000, p.7) suggests, embodies a 'sense of mobility, of spaces and places defined in fluid, shifting and transient acts and relationships'. This sense of movement and interaction was integral to Groupe F's reading of site at the *Home* event.

These themes are embedded in the Helix Park more generally. As you approach the Kelpies, for example, the noise of motorway traffic provides a soundtrack. Quintessential emblems of moving modernity traverse the

area: pylons, canals, roads. The Helix Park is not a settled space and rejects the romantic notion of a disconnected rural idyll. Visitors are left in no doubt that this pastoral landscape is surrounded and, indeed, defined by its relationship to the industrial; as Raymond Williams (1993, p.297) suggests in his seminal *The Country and the City*, all places are inflected with changing socio-economic circumstances and it is vital to see the 'interrelations' rather than the contrasts between them.

In Helix Park visitors become wanderers in the landscape. The intertwining trails mean one does not walk in a straight line; the designers seemingly rejected the Taylorist patterns of industrial productivity with their focus on efficiency and minimal effort to, instead, produce a twisted evolution of paths. This reflects the biological understanding of the helix as a spiralling, three-dimensional pattern and produces a complex understanding of space. Despite its proximity to the oil refinery, the logical order of industry is counteracted by the innate human need for imaginative adventure. Indeed this reflects the Helix Park's over-riding objectives to create a space for exploration, fun, learning and health (The Helix, 2014).

Perhaps the co-existence of industrial and natural led to the decision to name it 'Helix Park', the helix as a concept integral to mathematically scientific geometrical patterns, the anatomy of the human body and the aesthetics of buildings: a distinguishably multi-dimensional concept. The 'equitecture' of the Kelpies imbibes a similar sense of spatial and semiotic complexity. Their identity as working horses illustrates the concurrent relationship of industry and nature. In addition, Scott manufactured them from stainless steel plates connected to a metal skeleton that strongly resembles the pylons that criss-cross the park (Scott, 2014).

So how did Groupe F respond to this multifaceted

environment? What sort of site-specific performative gesture did the park and its Kelpies engender? What did this event say about Falkirk and its communities or, more broadly speaking, Scotland and its history? In calling the event *Home*, the organisers were clearly aiming to generate particular associations. But what sort of 'home' did the experience create? How did the performance develop the concept of 'home' from an indoor space of personal ownership to a shared outdoor 'homeland'? The answers reflect the experiential open-endedness of the event, the park and the Kelpies.

Groupe F played with this fluid sense of home in their response to the Kelpies. The performance began with the identifiable sounds of horses: neighs and whinnies, and hooves hitting the ground. At the base of the Kelpies two actors in light suits slowly walked, seemingly unafraid of the enormity of the sculptures or the frequent bolts of fire shot into the air from flame projectors set along the canal. Their recurrent presence made the Kelpies appear even larger and grander, although there was no sense of threat; rather, the dependable working horses seemed to be protecting the two frail human figures from the dangers of the fires.



The typical horse noises slowly merged into synthesised music which began softly. Projected diamond shapes lit the Kelpies, connoting tartan patterns. The rhythmic hooves became the bass beat for the music. Gradually the natural horse sounds were replaced entirely by the distinctly modern, electronic music, and the speed and frequency of the flares increased adopting set predictable rhythms. A change in the music was met by a change in projection, the Kelpies illuminated with a rippling blue effect. This blue was overtaken by a fiery red and Groupe F switched between these two elemental images until the end: the former mirroring the canals, the lakes, the wetlands of the Park and the nearby Firth of Forth, the latter complementing the pyrotechnics and the fires of the Grangemouth refinery which burn continuously in the distance. The drumming intensified in conjunction with the ferocity of the flares which now lit the Kelpies entirely, along with their pastoral / industrial backdrop of green space and trees, canals and pylons. The end was sudden and the audience were plunged back into the darkness that had begun the show.

*Home* presented a palimpsestic landscape, a Scotland of industry and beauty and nature and wilderness and manufacturing and assiduous work ethic. It overlaid the past and the present, the historical and the contemporary, and used myriad materials and elements to do so. The awesome Kelpies, those loyal working horses, exemplify all these characteristics and priorities, and Groupe F's transformation of Scott's sculptures accentuated this layering. However, in this year of referendum, the multifaceted and fluidly experiential image of home seemed to take on political overtones. What sort of 'home' might be created in 2014? How will it reflect on, move away from, or build on historical conceptions of Scottish identity and landscape? How will it negotiate the complexities of community and individuality, industrial and rural, the past and the potential future? Ultimately Groupe F's



performance of the Kelpies offered a creative, heterogeneous understanding of Scottish home that could be widely celebrated whichever way you vote.

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