

Artists Tania Kovats and Alex Hartley both make work that draws attention to the relationships between the natural world, the built environment and how we impact on and interact with them. Thirty years after they first met, they talk about their parallel practices, and what it's like to be two individual artists who are also life partners. Interview by *Helen Sumpter*. Portrait by *Philip Sinden*



Forces of nature

Above: Tania Kovats, *All the Sea*, 2012-14, installation view from 'Oceans' at the Fruitmarket Gallery, Edinburgh, 2014





COURTESY THE ARTISTS AND PIPPA HOLLDSWORTH GALLERY, LONDON. PHOTO BY RUTH CLARK



Tania Kovats' work combines drawing, sculpture, installation and project-based work. She received her MA from the Royal College of Art in 1990, winning the Barclays Young Artist Award the following year. She was a finalist in the 2015-17 Max Mara Art Prize for Women and is Professor of Drawing at Bath Spa University. Her latest project is an Art Fund-supported permanent ceiling commission for the public entrance of the Bodleian Library in Oxford's new Weston Library, titled *The Space of Reading*.

Alex Hartley's work combines photography, sculpture, architecture and large-scale installation. For his major project *Nowhereisland* (2004-12) he searched for and found a new Arctic island, revealed by the melting ice of a retreating glacier. He took the island out into international waters and declared it a 'new nation'. Members of the public were invited to sign up to become citizens of the new land. The island was accompanied on its UK coastal tour during the 2012 Olympics by its own land-based, mobile embassy. Hartley's recent exhibitions include the 2017 Yokohama and Folkestone Triennials.

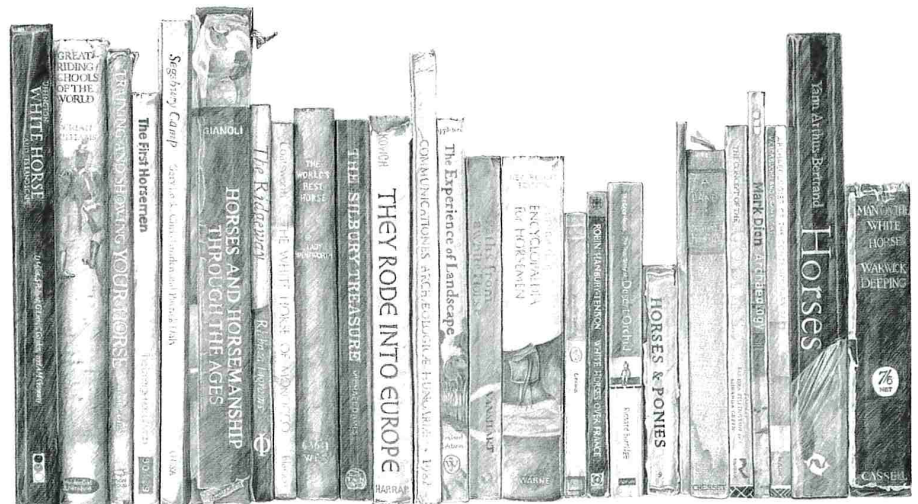
Helen Sumpter: Did you first meet through art?

Tania Kovats: Yes. We met as sculpture students in London at the Royal College of Art in the late 1980s, which was a hugely dynamic time, when everything seemed to be kicking off at Goldsmiths and other art schools, the emergence of the so-called YBAs, and an explosion of

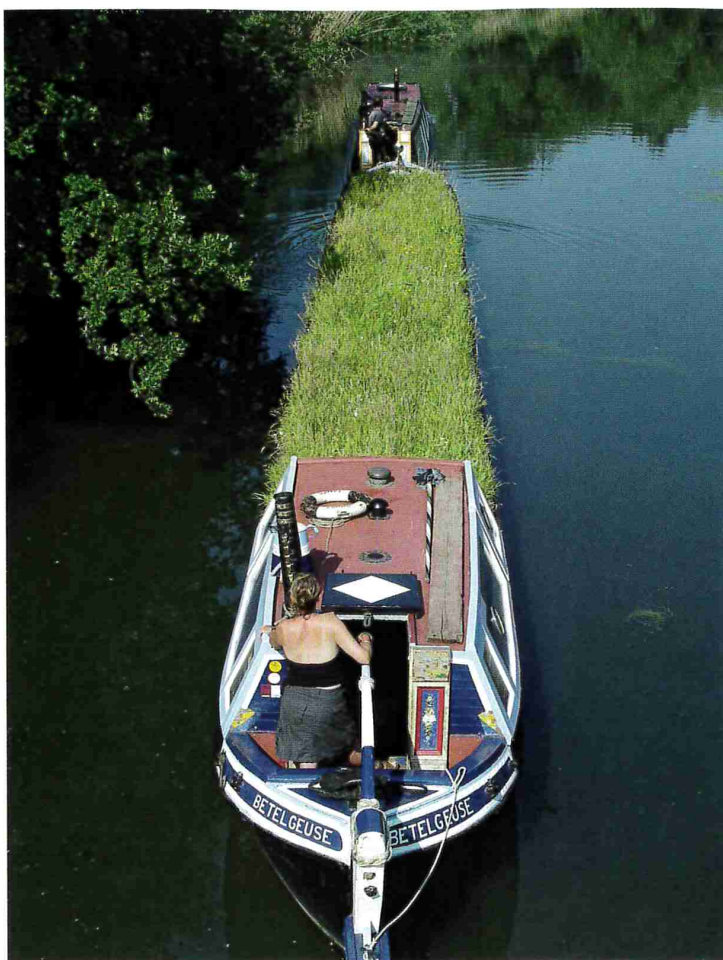
creative energy in London that was rewriting the story of how to be an artist. However, the Royal College steadfastly held on to the pre-existing narratives – we were being told that we wouldn't show our work until we were 40 – or maybe never as a woman artist. To counter all that, we had an empowering peer group including Jake Chapman and Elizabeth Wright, with Tracey Emin, Dinos Chapman and Anne-Marie Creamer and many others in the painting department. I ended up not wanting to make sculptural objects at all, and worked more with 'non-materials' and installation. For my MA show I worked with light and with the fabric of the building, removing the back wall of my studio and putting it back with

a tiny brightly lit gap all the way round the edge in order to 'float' the wall.

Alex Hartley: We basically ditched the structure of the course, putting a lot of energy into trying to change the course leadership, and ended up all going in after hours to get on with untutored work. But this was all at another time in education – our studios were incredibly generous, education was free and we received grants. This fostered experimentation and questioning. One time we broke into a disused and boarded-up embassy building and then cleaned, replastered, repainted and revarnished a corner of it, in order to make a photograph.



Facing page, top: Tania Kovats, *Tree*, 2009, Natural History Museum, London, installation view; bottom: *Books from the Museum of the White Horse Library, Non-Fiction*, 2007; right: *Meadow*, 2006



Religious imagery of Renaissance art had been my way into art history, and it was seeing the room of Rothko paintings at the Tate [now Tate Britain] that made me realise that modern art could also generate a spiritual experience. I just remembered something else we did together at that time: we'd photographed a lot of the early YBA shows and MA shows, and then pitched the idea to art schools in America that we would come and do slide talks to the students about what was happening in London. This was pre-internet and before the YBA artists had shown internationally. We generated enough interest to get British Council funding to do it, and it meant we went off on an amazing road trip from East to West Coast America.

AH: That was our first major travel together in big landscape, the American desert, the Grand Canyon, Arizona, Utah, Colorado, California, which began a relationship with those places that's been ongoing. Later on, in 2003, we ended up living in Los Angeles for a time. There was a definitive guidebook to architecture in LA that I took with me; I found all the iconic Modernist houses but had to climb over fences and through vegetation to photograph them. Images from those first trips still feature in my work now. Doing those random things was about retaining that sense of freedom to do anything. Another example of that was when I negotiated with a military base in Toronto to allow me to make a film of myself sitting in a wind tunnel until I became hypothermic [*Hyperthermia* (2002)]. The film lasts more than three hours, during which time I visibly age 30 years.

TK: I grew up in the Sussex Downs, so I'd always walked in landscape, but that's a very gentle chalk landscape. The scale and drama of the North American landscape had a big impact on me. I was frustrated with working with the light installations because they had become too predictable so I stopped. I then worked with religious landscapes that were in the background of Renaissance imagery, those strange rock formations, and set about modelling and casting them. This started a whole series of works about how landscapes make themselves, thinking about how a river had sculpted incredible spaces like the Grand Canyon, and then wanting to replicate those processes in the studio. I don't think I would have gone to those wild places on my own, but Alex was just at ease in them.

AH: Those sculptures were the beginning of a very clear jump from the minimalist work that you were making. You made a fantastic mountain machine [*Mountain*, 2002] that created sculptures by replicating how mountain ranges were formed [by rock being pushed up as folded layers]. I thought that was a really beautiful series. You also made works about the White Cliffs of Dover, including that big sculpture [*Vera*, 1997].

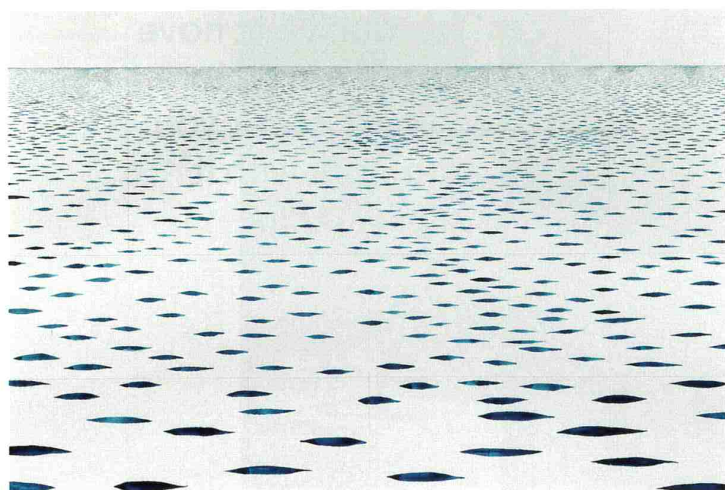
TK: Yes, that was earlier, during a four-month scholarship at the British School at Rome, which ended up being like a crash course in

It was about creating an illusion, reversing the dereliction, but you could see its edges – and the work only had an audience via the photograph. It was about the politics of property – and the energy of collaboration. That's probably one of the only pieces of work that has both our names on it.

TK: Yes, I think we'd only been together a couple of months when we did that. For me, being at the Royal College of Art was a time when I was still trying to work out what art actually was – how does it happen, where does it fit in to the system, and also what do people expect of it?

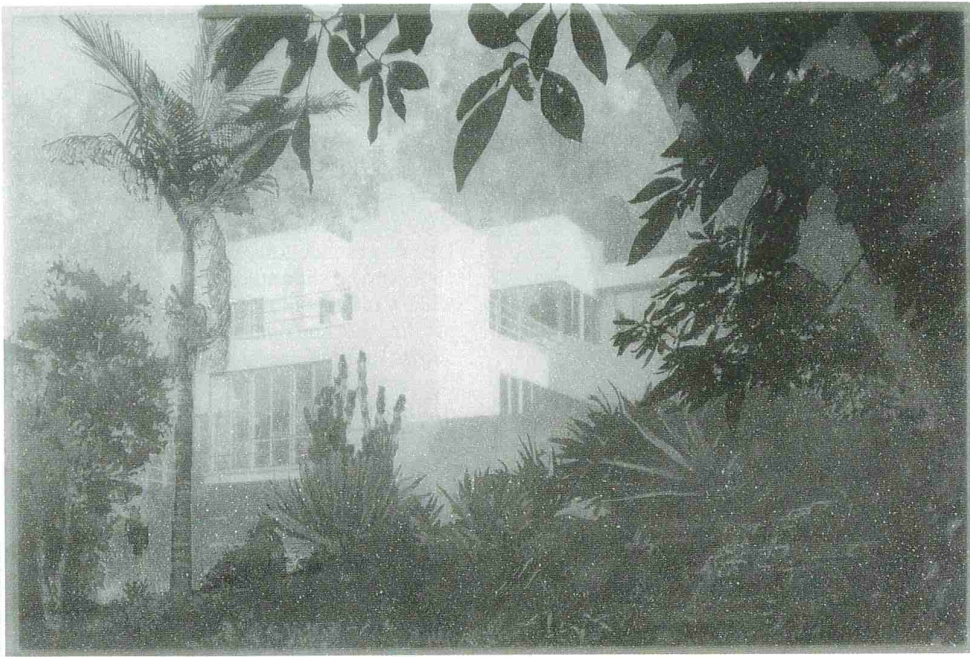
AH: Our aesthetics and content had some areas of crossover but distinct differences too. I was interested in the power of architecture, particularly the white cube of the gallery. To earn money I was taking the installation photographs for exhibitions – but I would also photograph the empty galleries and use these images to make work for myself.

TK: I had made a series of light pieces, which were working to explore that same 'white cube' architecture – the containers for art were the subject of the work, so I am sure you influenced that aspect of those works. They were part sci-fi as well as exploring a spiritual language.



Left: Tania Kovats, *Sea Mark (Prussian Blue IV)*, 2017

ABELL HOUSE © ALEX HARTLEY, COURTESY THE ARTIST AND VICTORIA MIRO, LONDON; VENICE THE CLEARING © ALEX HARTLEY/TOM JAMES, COURTESY COMPTON VERNEY, PHOTO BY THEO SIMPSON



Western art history – sculpture, in particular. I would actually play Vera Lynn's *The White Cliffs of Dover* in the studio when I was making it. It was meant to be ironic! But it was also exploring that critical distance that is only possible when you are somewhere else. I came back and then we had Frank, our son.

AH: Travelling is often the starting point for both of us. I first got invited to go to the Arctic in 2004, as part of Cape Farewell [the project, initiated in 2001 to use art to engage the public with climate change]. We've both travelled there, on different expeditions. It was on the expedition there in 2004 that *Nowhereisland* was first discovered. The overlap in our work during that period covers islands and their meanings.

TK: I think that artists have family trees where you put your 'parents', heroes and influences, and we share some family lines; we both have Robert Smithson [the American artist best known for creating *Spiral Jetty* in 1970, a giant spiral of earth off the shore of Great Salt Lake in Utah]. It was the idea that if you're interested in landscape you don't just have to make a picture of it, you can work with it, think about its timelines and have

all sorts of conversations around it. Smithsonian made a drawing of a tug pulling a group of trees transported from Central Park, around Manhattan on the Hudson. That drawing has been a piece of source material for both of us, and certainly inspired my work *Meadow* [2006], where I moved a wildflower meadow from Bath to London via the canals, and I know it's the same for you with *Nowhereisland*.

AH: Yes, totally. When I applied for the 2012 cultural Olympics project to transport *Nowhereisland*, I'd already discovered and made various works about it. I think we almost went into the Olympic application as a collaboration as I was aware that it would be borrowing from your work. The idea for the touring *Nowhereisland* Embassy definitely borrowed from *The Museum of the White Horse* [Kovats' 2007 project which took the form of a touring converted horsebox housing objects relating to the iconography of the white horse, a response to the chalk hill drawing the Uffington White Horse]. But *Nowhereisland* was a project with lots of collaboration, including Claire Doherty and Situations who produced it. It was a much richer project because of all those who were involved.

TK: It also changed the way I think about what art can be. And the conversations that went on around *Nowhereisland* about citizenship and identity, and how to imagine other futures, has an ongoing resonance, particularly in relation to climate change and migration.

AH: Using art to talk about climate change used to marginalise or ghettoise the work – but that's no longer the case now. The Modernist ruins I'm making, like this one we're sitting in front of [*A Gentle Collapsing II* (2016), temporarily installed in the canalside garden of Victoria Miro Gallery] have some idea of this global crisis as a cause, and about time running forward. Similarly, with *The Clearing* [2017-20, Hartley's collaborative project with Tom James for which they built a geodesic dome dwelling on the bank of the lake at Compton Verney Art Gallery & Park which, throughout 2017, people could stay in for a week and be taught survival and life skills]. People staying at *The Clearing* didn't actually have to 'survive' societal breakdown, but that was its conceptual starting point. The structure will remain there until 2020, but the work is really the community we built around it.

TK: I feel increasingly that now the purpose of the platforms that I have is to continue to address landscape as my subject but with an environmental imperative. With the exhibition 'Oceans' [Kovats' 2014 solo show at the Fruitmarket Gallery in Edinburgh which included drawing, sculpture and installation, that focused on the sea], it was only after I'd made the show that I started to see the geopolitical dialogue emerging more in the work. Up until that point it was much more about the psychological or poetic relationship with the sea – working with sea water as a material was my way of exploring the self, the liquid material as metaphor for how hard it is to express or contain the idea of the self. That was also important for me in relation to *Drawing Water* [Kovats' book, published the same year, featuring drawings by artists, writers, cartographers and others, all connected by the sea]. I want people to see that environmental issues underpin what is essential to everything else we might want to imagine into our future.

AH: In 2008 we decided to go travelling to South America and that affected some of this thinking; it was another encounter with big landscapes

Above: Alex Hartley, *Abell House*, 2018; right: Alex Hartley and Tom James, *The Clearing*, 2017-20



'You don't just have to make a picture of landscape, you can work with it'
Tania Kovats



including the jungle – that’s where we really felt things as a system or ecology. Frank, who was about eight at the time, was with us so we were travelling as a family this time which was great. We were away for six or seven months but came back because you found out that you had got the Darwin bicentenary commission for the Natural History Museum. We had sort of planned the trip according to Darwin’s travels, so the fact that you won it was amazing.

TK: Perhaps we’d still be travelling if not for that. That work [*Tree* (2009)], a thin slice of a 200-year-old oak tree, is now installed in the ceiling of the Treasures Gallery of the Natural

History Museum. It was when we came back from South America that there was the thought that having spent so much time travelling in and making work about landscape, that perhaps we could try living in it, which is how we ended up moving to Devon. Living there by a river changed my work again; that line of water is the most profound connective element in the landscape.

AH: We still travel; it feeds both our practices. We’ve been improving our sailing skills now that Frank has left home, we talk about swapping our house for a boat. I’m planning another journey to the Arctic, to where *Nowhereisland* came from, ultimately moving towards a new work for a

Danish institution in the form of a ‘hanging’ embassy building, onto which you can step, out of the bounded land. Lot of logistics to work through with that.

TK: I’m about to install *A Space for Reading* at the Bodleian Library in Oxford. It’s a celebration of that intimate space you share with the printed word in a book, which I experience as another form of travel; or the space you share and move through together when you read to or with your child. It will involve casts of books, which are taken from a very personal selection, all from Frank’s library. So, this work is about some specific books but also about the future books that will be written in that library. I make drawings of books too. The other piece I’m working on is part of a series of works about coral bleaching. I hope it will be part of a coral reef restoration project. It’s a modular reef sculpture, which could be installed in the sea, which new coral can be attached to. Again, it’s something that might make people think about the environment and their connection to it.

- Tania Kovats’ *A Space for Reading* opens late autumn at the Weston Library, Oxford. bodleian.ox.ac.uk, free to all. Work by Kovats can also be seen in ‘Future Knowledge’, Modern Art Oxford, 22 September to 28 October. modernartoxford.org.uk, free to all
- Alex Hartley’s *The Clearing* can be visited in the grounds of Compton Verney, Warwickshire until the end of 2020. comptonverney.org.uk, parkland free to all, house £6.80 with National Art Pass (£13.60 standard)

Above: Alex Hartley, *Nowhereisland* leaving Portsmouth in 2012; right: *Nowhereisland Travelling Embassy*, 2012

