

# **WATERMARKS**

A series of site specific artworks in central Bristol, exploring potential future flood scenarios

## THE WATERMARKS PROJECT

**The high water** levels of major flood events have been marked out on buildings, walls, bridges and other structures throughout history. This is a worldwide practice – almost every country has its records of minor floods and catastrophic events. These marks are most often made by local people who happen to be in the vicinity of the flood waters and have the forethought and courage to mark the position of the water surface at its height. Often these marks are scratched into stonework, inscribed with chalk, charcoal or marker pen or whatever comes to hand. In many cases, where the flood was a particularly significant one, these marks have been formed into more permanent records - through the creation of metal plaques or cut by masons, directly into stonework.

This project picks up on this tradition. However, instead of marking actual floods at the time they occur, it uses the same image system to ‘mark’ the position of possible future floods. It is proposed that, ‘flood marks’ would be projected onto the side of buildings, walls and other structures using digital projectors.

The positions of the projected flood marks are intended to be accurate in terms of the topography of the city. That is, the level marked represents the actual level the flood waters would reach in a real flood event. As well as being specific and accurate in terms of their height / position, they would also be based on scientific projections of possible future flood scenarios. An expert in climate change induced sea level rises will be available as part of this project, to answer questions regarding the science behind the installations.

The use of projection as a way of producing these level markers is significant. The prediction of future events based on present trends is spoken of as a projection (e.g. stock market projections) The relationship between projected images and the projected data on which they are based is symbolically significant. Projections are impermanent fleeting, made only of light and do not materially affect the surfaces on which they fall. In the same way, projections of future events are provisional - never ‘carved in stone’ whereas actual historical events often quite literally are.

On a practical level, the use of projection allows the ‘marks’ to appear on any kind of surface, to be highly visible / luminous and to be displayed at height. This technique would necessitate projection from one side of a street (or other public space) to the other. Where traffic and passing people cut across the projected beams, fragments of text and strips of light would momentarily appear on clothing, skin and on the side of buses and cars. This dynamic relationship between the projected flood marks and the movement of people and vehicles through the city would strengthen the experience, piquing curiosity and allowing for a degree of interaction. Where the image is projected horizontally, at a low level, walking through the beam would become the equivalent of wading through the flood waters.

It is conceived that the text accompanying each flood mark will be in multiple languages – each language being displayed for a time before being replaced by another. This not only reflects the multiplicity of languages spoken in the city but also the global nature of the phenomena described. The use of Bengali (Bangla),

Mandarin Chinese and Dutch, for example, hint at how these countries would be affected.

As an experience, this ability to see, directly, possible flood levels is intended to be a way of making some of the potential effects of climate change less abstract. To turn scientific data into a social, cultural experience that is played out in everyday, public places. Flood marks help us imagine the depth and extent of floods, to measure them against ourselves, to understand them in relation to the scale of our own bodies within familiar environments. We can see where the water level could come up to on a particular building and from this, imagine how these floods could affect other buildings, places and familiar objects, and consequently the impact they might have on our lives. It is hoped that by being accessible and by representing dramatic scenarios in familiar surroundings, these works would provide a catalyst for debate and discussion by a wide range of people.

The cycling of the images will also include an invitation to engage in discussion. E.g. What do you think? [www.watermarksproject.org](http://www.watermarksproject.org). The accompanying website will form an important part of the project and provide a forum for discussion which, it is hoped, will be a crucial part of the work itself, extending the scope beyond the initial projected images.

The images showing flood mark projections on the website are all photomontages and are indicative only, designed to give a visual impression of the proposed project. They do not, at this stage, accurately represent actual predicted flood levels. The sites shown are also representative of the type of site to be used rather than specific chosen locations.

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## **EXCERPTS FROM THE WATERMARKS PROPOSAL SUBMITTED TO THE ARTS COUNCIL, ENGLAND SW**

### **What you want to achieve through the activity, and how it fits in with your current work and its future development?**

My current work involves the exploration flooding and our relationship to water in general. This work includes the practical and cultural aspects of flooding.

As a landscape architect, I am working with water at a practical level. This includes the creation of sustainable urban drainage systems, (attenuating storm water runoff into storage ponds that also act as public space, ecological habitats and provide natural filtration as well as preventing flooding) and river flood compensation schemes, creating space for the river.

My current fine art practice involves the exploration of the meanings of flooding; it's dual nature, the destructive, regenerative and mythopoetic aspects. It looks at how destructive or beneficial floods are is much to do with how we relate our buildings, infrastructure and agricultural landscapes to the water. The work explores the current situation as well as projecting more extreme scenarios involving rising sea levels. I have used photomontage and collage (environment agency data, navigation charts, maps etc, juxtaposing the language of open water with that of dry land) The work project proposed here has developed out of this work.

I believe that how we design, build and provide solutions depends on how we frame, conceptualise and imagine, especially in the face of the new and unpredictable phenomena. Art helps to question the terms of engagement and can build a dialogue between the public and the built environment professions in a way that 'public consultation' often fails to do. My aim is to develop a practice that works with the territory between art and landscape architecture / architecture and urbanism and involve as many people as possible in the wider debate.

### **How the public will benefit from the activity, or your work in general, either immediately or in the long term ?**

For the public/audience, it is intended that this project will prompt discussion or reflection, either formally through the website or more informally through conversation, passing comments or private thoughts or some kind of action. In the longer term it seeks to be a small part of the movement that makes our response to our changing climate a shared cultural phenomenon as much as a scientific/ technological/professional one. It also aims to be educational by presenting scientific data in a way that is easy to relate to.

### **Details about the people the activity will reach, including those who may not normally be reached by the arts (for example, the audiences or people taking part)**

By siting the works in the centre of the city, close to major nodes and intersections, it is intended that the work will be visible to as wide and diverse an audience as possible, from all corners of the city. The use of multiple languages in

the work is also intended to reflect the multi-cultural make up of Bristol as well as the global nature of the phenomena described. Although not specifically aimed at particular groups, it is hoped that the use of multiple languages will help to engage non-English speakers or members of communities where other languages are predominantly used.

Throughout the project, the environmental impact of the project will be minimised by using local suppliers, using green tariff electricity where possible. At the end of the project, an assessment of the carbon produced in its implementation will be made and an appropriate amount of money invested into a 'Gold Standard' carbon offset scheme.

### **How your work will support the policies or aims of relevant local authorities or other public organisations**

*The proposed project is in accordance with the spirit of Bristol City Council's "Public Art Strategy". In particular it addresses the following aims:*

*"...encourage the commission of temporary and permanent public artworks using new technologies, new materials and in new formats, to challenge and build new audiences for contemporary art." \**

*"...achieve lifelong learning where the arts are a significant vehicle for developing learning opportunities for people outside the formal educational sector..." \**

*...that "Good public art is site specific" \**

**\* Bristol City Council. 'Public Art Strategy, Bristol – City Centre – Legible City - Outer Neighbourhoods'**