

Mary Ann Rogers

Mary Ann Rogers Gallery

West Woodburn

Hexham NE48 2SE



re: Objection to 'Ascendant' at Cold Law.

My name is Mary Ann Rogers. I am an artist and gallery owner at West Woodburn, just a few miles from the site of 'Ascendant', which, I believe, would be visible from the east facing windows of the gallery. I am a founder member of 'Keep the Wannies Wild'.

I have lived in this house/studio/gallery for 34 years, and am a native of Northumberland. Over the years, I have played an active part within the artistic community, including voluntary positions as trustee of Queens Hall Arts, Hexham; Director of 'Network Artists', Northumberland; trustee of Chilli Arts Studios- a mental health charity supporting people through creativity; Chair of 'The Art Tour' open studios event, Northumberland; Chair of 'Tapping into Tourism' an initiative to promote tourism through connecting artists with accommodation providers.

My work has led to many inclusions within art publications, radio broadcasts and TV programmes over the years. I also undertake several unpaid commitments within schools and art groups each year.

I am a walker, a wildlife enthusiast and artist who uses the Wannies regularly.

I believe 'Ascendant' is an inappropriate piece of art in the proposed environment.

Cold Law is part of a wider area known as 'The Wannies', a stretch of north facing crags, set within open moorland which is synonymous with wildness and exposure. It is a location used for both hill farming and economic forestry, which comes and goes over the years as trees are felled and re-planted. There is a network of forest tracks which are used by the community and visitors to the area, in particular during lambing time, when it is inappropriate to walk dogs through fields.

My own personal connection with the area began in my teens, when I was struck by this wild, open place, and drawn to the rugged crags for scrambling up, to achieve vast uninterrupted views to the coast, to Cumbria and Scotland. Driving home across 'the Wannies' road from the A696 to the A68 is invariably exciting, whether it is in the summer, when encounters with wildlife are commonplace, or in the winter months, when the weather can cause treacherous conditions, and have more than once come across a vehicle which has either slid into a ditch, or overturned in icy conditions, and passengers have been rescued. Invariably, the views to the north, including my own home, upon driving past Cold Law lift my heart. It is a very special place to me.

When I first came to live in West Woodburn I would frequently go to the Wannies with my drawing and painting gear, and paint the crags from the forest tracks to the north. I felt a somewhat 'visceral'

connection, and my response was to paint. I would frequently watch roe deer, raptors hunting, and often almost tread on an adder on a warm day, as they sunbathe on the tracks in the open.

I believe what makes this area so special, and what has prompted so many people to join the protest group, (over 1,800 to date) and write letters in opposition to 'Ascendant' is the sense of wildness, the wildlife, the open spaces and the romance of the north facing crags. To build a man-made tourist attraction goes completely against the very thing which attracts people to this place, and may well drive them away.

There is no evidence that 'Ascendant' would generate appreciable numbers of visitors, and even if it did, there are little or no facilities in this area for visitors. There are no public toilets, very limited offering from the nearest pubs (one is for sale, the other may possibly be purchased by the community) and only a very small village shop within a few miles of the proposed site. I believe the type of visitor would be more likely to include organised school/community groups, where the lack of facilities - toilets, café, souvenir shop etc would be keenly felt.

There was no consultation with local businesses prior to the initial application, which seems very odd. I have run a well-promoted commercial art gallery for over 20 years within sight of the site, and could have shared my experience and thoughts about the people who make the trip to my gallery. I could have explained that the wildlife and landscape paintings, so closely connected to this part of Northumberland, are what my visitors are interested in. I could have shown my visitor books, collected over many years, with comments about the place, the wildlife and the reasons why people come to my gallery. None of the other local business owners who I know, including 'Slate & Nature', 'The Bay Horse Inn' or the local accommodation providers were consulted either.

As an artist I understand that a brief for a 55m high monument was created by the landowner, and Simon Hitchings worked within that brief. I personally do not find the design sensitive, responsive or attractive, rather I find it invasive, rapier-like and inappropriate in size, style and medium for this location. It is the type of art which had it's day back in the 70's, and represents a very different economic and artistic climate. It is no surprise that large, steel pieces like this are no longer created for public spaces, and commissioners and artists are working in a much more environmentally sensitive climate now.

The very idea of cleaving open this little piece of hill, pouring many, many tons of concrete into the ground in order to stabilise a 55m high piece of steel for absolutely no reason beyond creating a purposeless feature in an otherwise beautiful landscape is anathema to most people.

It is my belief that art should connect with the viewer and communicate at a deep level. None of the landowner's references- eg, commonwealth capitals; solstice; relative height to Hepple Heugh hold any water and would be meaningless without explanations on interpretation boards, a sure sign of failure to communicate.

The Wannies has a cultural heritage of its own. It is known for the poetry, paintings and music it has inspired. It is loved by walkers and climbers. The Wannie Line railway (closed in the 1960's) has gone down in folklore, and is a place of pilgrimage for railway enthusiasts. 'Ascendant' will add nothing to this, and may well have a negative effect on the perception of this special area.

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