

## **PUBLIC ART, THE ENVIRONMENT AND PRIVATE SPONSORSHIP: REPRESENTING 'RESTORATION FIRST'**

**Deborah Chambers and David Baines**  
**School of Arts and Cultures,**  
**Newcastle University**

This paper investigates how public art projects are being promoted, publicised and mediated as part of environmental regeneration in a climate of corporate sponsorship. It focuses on the use of public art in defining, reconfiguring and re-presenting spaces and communities damaged by mining. The land sculpture Northumberlandia (2012) is selected as a case study to address the role played by private 'public' art in what has been presented as environmental regeneration.



Photo: David Baines

Composed of waste from an open cast coal mine in South East Northumberland, Northumberlandia is a stylized reclining female figure designed by American landscape artist, Charles Jencks. The sculpture was jointly commissioned by the colliery and landowner as a 'Restoration First' strategy to facilitate planning permission for the mining, against community opposition. Referred to in the media as 'Slag Alice', and variously called 'Lady of the North', 'Goddess of the North', 'Fat Slag' and 'Big Lass', the

contest over the naming of Northumberlandia indicates struggles between artist/commissioners, the community and the media in managing the contradictory meanings associated with the sculpture. It raises questions about emerging patterns of corporately funded public art and how spaces and communities are defined and managed through such schemes in the context of mining ventures. Notwithstanding the success of the Angel of the North, the challenging nature of culturally rebranding an area is indicated by recent controversies associated with shale gas drilling exemplified by Lord Howell's suggestion of restricting fracking to the '*desolate North East*' (July 2013). The 'Inspire' project – the South East Northumberland Public Art Initiative project set up in 2003 – is addressed in distinction to the Northumberlandia scheme. A key objective was to commission new artwork to overcome the negative image of the area. By commissioning regional artists, Inspire used art to improve people's sense of place and belonging.



Photo: David Baines



Photo: David Baines

By contrast, local community opposition to the Northumberlandia scheme by residents, local businesses and local authorities highlight questions about the public accountability of privately funded public art initiatives, especially in environmentally damaged spaces. The scheme shows how public art serves as a powerful PR tool not only to overcome community opposition but also to justify the renaissance of the surface coal mining industry. Through an alliance between the coal mining consortium and the regional tourism industry, surface mining is being presented as an opportunity to generate 'tourist' and 'community' facilities. The negative impact of mining on communities and the wider debate about fossil fuels versus renewables is thereby obscured. Public art functions to present the damaging effects of coal mining as a morally acceptable and positive endeavour. The Northumberlandia 'Restoration First' scheme has been presented as a rural planning success: named as the finest example of planning in a rural area at the Royal Town Planning Institute North East's 2012 annual awards and won in the Tourism and Leisure category of the 2013 Royal Institution of Chartered Surveyors North East Renaissance Awards.