



UOA D32

ART AND DESIGN:
HISTORY, THEORY AND PRACTICE



RESEARCHER

Ewan Robertson

OUTPUT TITLE

Cloud Dialogue

OUTPUT TYPE

Artefact: Sculpture

DATE

2014 – ongoing

FIG. 1

Ewan Robertson, *Cloud Dialogue*,
720 x 500 x 120cm at Royal Scottish
Academy, Edinburgh, 2019. Photo
Ewan Robertson.



01 / STATEMENT

Cloud Dialogue is a sculpture (approximate dimensions 7.5 x 11.5 x 2.6m) which investigates the potentials of iron as a sculptural material.

The work expands the expressive, associative and poetic potential of iron within the context of contemporary art. The work was conceived, made and installed by Ewan Robertson in collaboration with Scottish sculptor Gordon Munro.

The research builds on the symbolism and the historical associations of iron, as a ubiquitous element of our lives. Through the creation of a large-scale sculpture and experimentation with techniques of fabrication, it challenges perceptions of iron as a utilitarian material.

Cloud Dialogue has been made in several iterations, with different combinations of nodes and arms. Each form conjures different symbolic associations whilst responding to their different sites. As such, the research is also an extended experiment in site-specific installation.

Four iterations of *Cloud Dialogue* have been made and publicly presented:

2014

Reclaimed – The Second Life of Sculpture,
The Briggait, Glasgow International.

2017

Iron: Origins and Destinations,
Creative Laboratories, Edinburgh
Sculpture Workshop.

2018

Iron: Artefacts and Actions,
The Park Gallery, Callendar House, Falkirk.

2019

Annual Exhibition,
Royal Scottish Academy, Edinburgh.



FIGS. 2-4
Ewan Robertson, *Cloud Dialogue*,
in 'Iron: Actions and Artefacts',
The Park Gallery, Falkirk, 2018.
Photos Ewan Robertson.



FIG. 5
Ewan Robertson, *Cloud Dialogue*
in 'Iron: Origins and Destinations',
Edinburgh Sculpture Workshop,
2017. Photo Ewan Robertson.



FIG. 6
Ewan Robertson, *Cloud Dialogue* at
'Reclaimed – The Second Life of
Sculpture', The Briggait, Glasgow
International, 2014. Photo Ewan
Robertson.



FIG. 7
Ewan Robertson, *Cloud Dialogue*
aerial view at 'Reclaimed – The
Second Life of Sculpture', The
Briggait, Glasgow International,
2014. Photo Ewan Robertson.

02 / RESEARCH DIMENSIONS



FIG. 8
Ewan Robertson, *Cloud Dialogue*,
node joint detail. Photo Ewan
Robertson.

The research investigates the potential of iron as an expressive and aesthetic medium in contemporary sculpture.

It is situated within the context of 20th century post-minimalist sculptural practices that use iron as primary material (.e.g. David Smith, Anthony Caro, Joseph Beuys) and builds on such work through a focused investigation into iron across historical, geological, art historical and chemical perspectives.

The process of construction underpinning *Cloud Dialogue* was unusual in so far as each piece of metal was joined to each other through a specially designed joint that recalled traditional iron construction. These junctions and joined elements combine to produce an abstracted symbolic language of construction.

Like a cloud, the open form of the resultant object resists the enclosure of the sculpture as a self-contained object. It is designed as a form open in space and time, interacting with the changing spatial environments in which it is installed and the temporary result of a chronologically iterative experiment.

Cloud Dialogue is one of the major works made by Robertson through his long-standing collaboration with Scottish sculptor Gordon Munro.

03 / ORIGINALITY

The material and visual qualities of iron are under-explored within the field of contemporary sculpture.

The practices associated with its making – such as casting and welding – are often viewed as utilitarian rather than vehicles of expression in their own right. Iron sculpture is also often perceived of as fixed, or durable, in contrast to sculpture made in other materials – and this has been seen as a limiting factor in its artistic use. Robertson and Munro set out to challenge these preconceptions of iron, by investing it as an expressive medium, embodying a sense of duration.

Investigating the material

Initial research involved understanding the diverse manifestations of iron in the world, from its elemental presence in the earth's core to its presence in everyday tools. The artists handled objects such as a 4 billion-year old meteorite held in the National Museum of Scotland Museum and interviewed Peter Davidson, Senior Curator of Minerals.

They also made visits to sites associated with iron working, such as the iron mine on the Hebridean island of Raasay (operational 1917–28). They subsequently made a short film *Iron: Origins and Destinations* based on this visit. See Appendix, page 24.

Research through making

The investigative research process of *Cloud Dialogue* was undertaken to challenge preconceived ways of working with the material and explore new ways of making sculpture with iron.

Robertson and Munro established a bespoke foundry to test the processes of fabricating iron, and experiment with the degree of control they could assume at each stage of the production of an object. This ensured that, at all stages, the artist, rather than a foundry technician, remained in control of fabrication. Although small scale (up to 50kg mass per pour) they succeeded in pouring in moulds and templates made of large and small-scale ceramic shell, resin-bonded sand, and green sand.

As such, each pour represented an incremental gain in knowledge that foregrounded the agency of the material and its dynamic relationship with studio processes and artistic intentions.

Research through exhibiting

The iterative exhibition of the work, through which the overall form changed in response to the spaces of its presentation, whilst the constituent elements remained the same, challenged the traditionally fixed form of sculptural works, and particularly the tradition of works made of iron which, due to the extreme density of the material, are usually fixed in their forms.

This temporary quality of the work in turn drew attention to the huge variation of timescales that iron can inhabit – archaeological, mesological and utilitarian time.



FIG. 9
Iron meteorite cross section
sample from National Museum
of Scotland collection. Image
courtesy of Rachel Nolan.



FIG. 10
Raasay iron mine, still from short
film *Iron: Origins and Destinations*.
Image courtesy of Rachel Nolan.

FIG. 11
Pouring of test works in green sand. Image courtesy of Kate Ive.



FIG. 12
Public iron casting demo, 2017,
at the iron foundry at
Edinburgh Sculpture
Workshop. The foundry was
built from scratch through
wider investigations of iron
casting practice. Image courtesy
of Graeme Yule.





FIGS. 13-14
Ewan Robertson, *Cloud Dialogue*,
shown as part of 'Material Rites',
2011, a curated group show at
Inspace, University of Edinburgh.
Photo Ewan Robertson.



FIG. 15
Ewan Robertson, *Cloud Dialogue*
at Haus Hohenbusch, Ekelenz,
Germany. Photo Ewan Robertson.

FIG. 16

Ewan Robertson, *Cloud Dialogue*
at 'Reclaimed – The Second Life
of Sculpture', The Briggait,
Glasgow International, 2014.
Photo Ewan Robertson.



04 / RIGOUR

The cast forms were carefully designed to form a 'kit' of junction pieces or node elements.

Research through making: designing nodes

The nodes were first made as wooden patterns and then cast either at the studio foundry or commercially for the larger nodes.

The design of each node element derives from different sources: tools, found objects, simple physical processes like flow, magnetism or heat exchange. Their forms are pared back and raw, unified by their mid-rust surface.

Research through making: the overall 'object'

The node elements were used to connect lengths of iron rod using directional spigots. Rough spherical elbow and corner connectors allowed multiple forms to be achieved, meaning that the overall form of the sculpture could be iteratively varied.

This enabled an iterative process of installation – an exploration, mapping and occupation of space through a set of objects interconnected in a linear fashion.

An alternative to the singular object on the plinth, the entry on a museum shelf catalogue, or an exhibit in a vitrine, *Cloud Dialogue* is more akin to a working diagram. The visual language reduced to a three-dimensional drawing made using singular unitary material.

A 'dialogue' is invited through associative ideas, images and readings generated through both the work's internal and external relations.



FIG. 17
Studio development of early node elements, 2014. Photo Ewan Robertson.



FIG. 18
Cloud Dialogue, Glasgow International, 2014. Node detail from gallery installation. Photo Ewan Robertson.



FIG. 19
Cloud Dialogue at 'Reclaimed - The Second Life of Sculpture', Glasgow International, 2014. Photo Ewan Robertson.



FIG. 20
Installation detail showing connection nodes. Photo Ewan Robertson.

05 / SIGNIFICANCE



FIG. 21
Installation details of *Cloud Dialogue* at 'Reclaimed – The Second Life of Sculpture', Glasgow International, 2014.
Photo Ewan Robertson.

Cloud Dialogue is an ongoing sculptural experiment that has been presented in iterative formations in 4 public exhibitions across Europe, involving both indoor and outdoor installation.

4 – 21 April 2014

Reclaimed – The Second Life of Sculpture,
The Briggait, Glasgow International.

6 – 20 May 2017

Iron: Origins and Destinations,
Creative Laboratories, Edinburgh Sculpture
Workshop.

27 January – 27 May 2018

Iron: Artefacts and Actions, The Park Gallery,
Callendar House, Falkirk.

2 November – 11 December 2019

Annual exhibition, Royal Scottish Academy,
Edinburgh.

06 / APPENDIX

Film

'Iron: Origins and Destinations', 2016.

Website

'Reclaimed – The Second Life of Sculpture',
Sculpture Placement Group.

[https://www.sculptureplacementgroup.org.uk/
projects/reclaimed-the-second-life-of-sculpture/](https://www.sculptureplacementgroup.org.uk/projects/reclaimed-the-second-life-of-sculpture/)

'*Reclaimed – The Second Life of Sculpture* features work held in long-term storage, including historical, modern and contemporary pieces, some of which have not been seen by the public for over two decades. The exhibition celebrates a multitude of sculptural practices, whilst addressing significant issues surrounding the production and collection of three dimensional work.'

From *Reclaimed – The Second Life of Sculpture*,
Sculpture Placement Group website.



FIG. 22
Installation details of *Cloud Dialogue* (G.I.) at 'Reclaimed – The Second Life of Sculpture', Glasgow International, 2014. Photo Ewan Robertson.



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ISBN: 978-1-83645-057-3
DOI: 10.2218/ED.9781836450573

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May 2020

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