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Accessing the lost libraries of the Silk Road

Can dead libraries speak? After an arrest in Egypt, misinformation in China, inaccessibility in Italy and state-propelled paranoia in Iran – artist **Abigail Reynolds** tells **Rob Mackinlay** how she listened for messages from the lost libraries of the Silk Road.

WHEN someone goes on an adventure we want to know what happens to them, whatever the pretext. Thankfully librarians have a good excuse for rubber-necking this one: Abigail Reynolds has visited 14 lost libraries located along the Silk Route, from Xi'an in China, to Pompei in Italy. The artist, based in St Just, Cornwall, won funding for her project through the Art Basel BMW Art Journey prize. Her work already focuses on literary culture, having studied English Literature at Oxford University before pursuing Fine Art, and also working as a bibliographical citations assistant for the Oxford English Dictionary (and as artist in residence at the OED 2003-04).

Why libraries?

Abigail says one of the key motivations was a local one, Glasney, 'A library destroyed during the dissolution of the monasteries that happened to be the site where all the Cornish texts were gathered. When they were burned it was pretty much the end of the Cornish language.' Abigail's children now learn a little Cornish at school, but with no literary record she says 'the chain to what it feels like to be speaking that language, that culture, has been cut off, and has had to be re-invented' adding 'I don't believe that libraries are symbols of something that is not necessary anymore. We might like to think that we can do everything by being connected digitally over huge geographic spaces, but we still have material bodies. When we meet, the unexpected can happen. But there's a sense that we're in a world that is closing down rather than opening up. I find libraries aren't that. They are very open systems and they are entered by the curious, and that's kind of my idea of a perfect world.'

Loss

She thinks that British culture may not be particularly fluid but 'we have a very

strong sense of British literary culture – a sense of a body of knowledge that we share and that we should all have access to.' In comparison she says, 'Many of the places I went to were culturally lost, their libraries and self-narration damaged, and fragmented. That's very wounding for a community.'

The crackle of negative energy still haunts the sites of lost libraries via political paranoia, toxic tourism and many forms of neglect. In Egypt and Iran – the sites of the most recently destroyed libraries she was able to visit – everything was affected, not just the lost libraries. In Egypt she was arrested 'because I did just what I was told not to do, which was to film around Tahrir Square', adding that she came to feel that 'by attempting to get in touch with somebody I might put them at risk of being put on some kind of list, on some kind of radar that they didn't want to be on.'

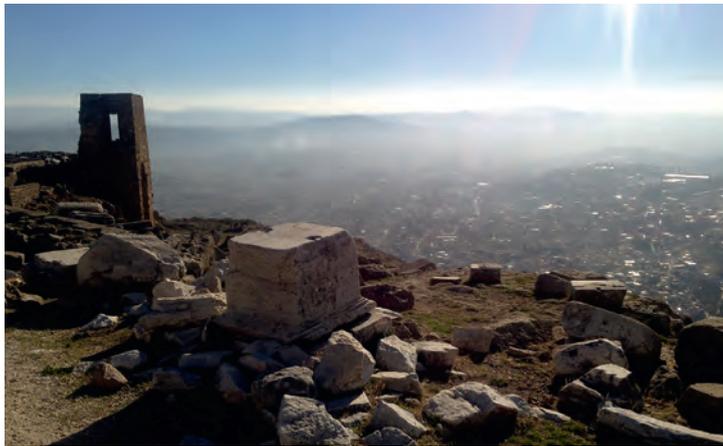
It was something she realised while trying



Abigail on the Silk Road at Neyshapur, north east Iran. Photo © BMW AG

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Overlooking the ancient city of Pergamum. Photo © BMW AG



Exploring the ruins of Nysa. Photo © BMW AG



Ancient text in Cairo. Photo © BMW AG



Film-recording Chinese script in Xi'an. Photo © BMW AG

to contact artists connected to a contemporary art gallery: 'The Egyptian government bulldozed the Townhouse Gallery because they didn't like the activity of that group of artists. Some governments don't like artists because they think they are trouble. Often they are trouble.'

Iran

Abigail's original submission to BMW included Iran to see how institutions and individuals had coped under a strict Islamic regime.

She said: 'The arts university in Tehran keeps a shadow library in which old master paintings have had nudes deleted. After the revolution they were on the shelves for many years, but now it's more relaxed and the nudes in the books can be viewed but they keep the other copies in an off-site store for when the wind changes and the nudes are no longer acceptable.' At an individual level she had hoped to speak to Iranian artists whose families had burned or buried items in case the regime saw them as evidence of impiety or subversion. But she ran into similar issues to those she came across in Egypt, where access to information posed a threat to personal safety.

Italy

A different negative energy buzzed in Italy. 'Herculaneum was intensely disappointing' she says. Access to the whole site, not just the carbonised papyri was denied: 'They suddenly closed the actual library to public

visits just before I arrived. The Italian government isn't funding access. I'm not an academic exactly, but my interest is serious, but they absolutely couldn't facilitate me. It's absurd that they couldn't find anyone that would meet me or give me any level of access to the library site or the carbonised scrolls. There was nothing I could do. It was deeply frustrating. I'm somebody who is totally happy to trespass with reason – I considered getting my hire car and standing

on the roof so I could leap over the wall to the library but it was way too high.'

China

Asked to prioritise her visits she put Herculaneum and Dunhuang (Cave 17, the Library Cave) at the top of her list because both were lost and then found. Unfortunately the latter was no less disappointing. 'The site has been modified for the most extreme numbers of tourists. The whole place is a one-way system, masses of tourists are funnelled through and not really allowed to stop – it's so miserable there. There was an obvious level of disrespect and negligence among the crowds. That is extremely depressing if you want to find a potency in that site.'

Why adventure?

Abigail suggests that adventure and the risk of failure is a requirement for any valuable experience: 'When I walk out of my house here in the summer I see people who have driven to the cliff top and they just sit there, in their cars. I have no idea why they don't get out. Why would you not want to hear the sea, feel the breeze, taste the salt?'

'BMW were proposing to send me on a journey and it was a chance to think of a big adventure. It's one time in my life when I have a level of institutional and financial support to allow me the freedom to follow where my head goes, rather than just go there in my head.'



A back-street bookshop/library in Tehran.

Photo © BMW AG

Where possible she travelled by motorbike: 'That's really getting out of the car and standing on the cliff, because then you're never enclosed. Experiences I value come like that, when you make yourself vulnerable.'

Information, knowledge

The aim of the project is to find something in these remains but not necessarily something historical. 'The flip side (of destruction) for me is that the contemplation of what has been lost might bring you to a different sort of knowledge or a different level of knowledge. Information should be kept in its place, it's not knowledge.'

Interpreting information and experiences is ongoing. 'It's all very fresh to me,' she says 'I only returned from the last libraries in January, and it's an all-encompassing subject, there are so many facets to explore.' 'I've made work now which is fully resolved but I feel like I'll be working on this for some time to come, considering different aspects of it. So I've concentrated in the work on the sense of certain things lost and disorientation.'

The art

The artwork includes freestanding sculptures based on book forms encountered on the journey, particularly the Forest of Stone Stelae, 'one of the Xi'an libraries comprised

vast books of stone absolutely covered in minute carved characters'.

The freestanding form mirrors these, but using materials like two-way mirror Abigail adds layers of disorientation and fragmentation.

The letters have become abstracted. 'I could read none of the languages I came across through the libraries, so I have instead a sense of form, of density, of fragmentation. That was my experience. The 'Stelae' sculptures produce that feeling of strangeness in the viewer. In the gallery you encounter something that's difficult to read and strange to you.'

Eclipse

Beneath this disorientation, there remains the loss of a library and her work looks at this: 'As I journeyed, I wanted to record some of my impressions, which I did in writing (see the journal entries at www.bmw-magazine.com/int/en/node/2985) or in long form at 'The Serving Library' www.servinglibrary.org/journal/12/lost-libraries) and by filming in 16mm colour stock, using a Bolex camera.

'I didn't shoot digitally because that wouldn't match the material that was missing'. Instead she used 16mm film 'a natural material that can be scratched, punched or burnt, or all the things that could happen to books' and she has punched holes into it 'so there's an eclipse of this information... it

allows you to contemplate what isn't in the image or what might be beyond it.'

Art and politics

'Looking at an artwork is like being seated next to a guest you haven't met before at a dinner party. If you immediately decide that you won't have an interesting dialogue with them, you probably won't. But if you come at it with a sense of tact and inquiry and you actually listen, you might be surprised. An artwork might not be something that grabs you at first sight – in the same way that a person might not. But if you approach it with a humility and a sense of inquiry, then you might well have a fascinating dialogue.'

'I like art works that provoke me to think around a question but don't offer an answer.'

'Personally I feel very strongly about the need for communities to own libraries. It distresses me that the UK government is not supporting our local libraries, but this is not explicit in my artwork', she says, adding: 'I wouldn't make this journey along an ancient track line that connected cultures and communities and has done for thousands of years if I didn't believe that was of value to us now, especially in the current Brexit climate. I wouldn't go to library sites that had been destroyed unless I found libraries deeply meaningful.' 



Abigail's artistic reflection on the Forest of Stone Stelae.
www.abigailreynolds.com/works/167/stelae/



A colour-patterned scroll at Mashhad. Photo © BMW AG



Library ruins in Rome. Photo © BMW AG