

BETH DERBYSHIRE

Art as Social Witness: Projects in Context (2003–2026)

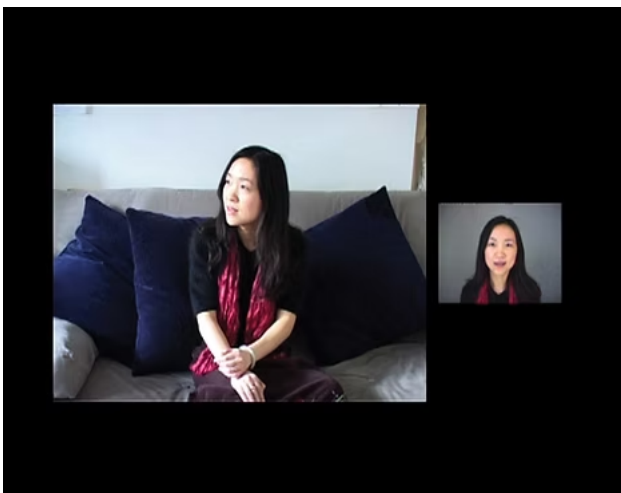
Beth Derbyshire's practice has consistently engaged with questions of citizenship, language, nationalism, migration, environmental change, remembrance, and collective identity. Since graduating from Chelsea College of Art in 1996, her work has been shaped by three interconnected themes: silence and society; nationality, language and identity; and conflict and memory. Working across film, performance, installation and public art, Derbyshire explores how individual and collective identities are formed through communication, belonging, memory and cultural exchange. Her projects often emerge in response to contemporary social and political conditions, creating spaces for dialogue around citizenship, voice, displacement, nationalism, commemoration and the ways in which personal histories intersect with wider public narratives.

Taken together, these works form a sustained inquiry into how societies define themselves through public expression language formed of landscape, ritual, memory and participation. Often anticipating wider public debates, they provide a lens through which to consider issues of multiculturalism, social cohesion, environmental change and collective remembrance. Rather than responding to events retrospectively, many of the works appear remarkably prescient, anticipating debates around citizenship, multiculturalism, climate change, collective memory and social cohesion that continue to shape public life today.

This timeline traces the development of Derbyshire's practice in relation to the social and political contexts that have shaped, and been reflected within her work.

2003-2007: citizenship, migration, language and belonging.

2003



Babel

Video Installation

Exhibited: Peterborough Museum, 2003 Sharjah Biennale, United Arab Emirates, 2003 Brussels Art Fair, 2004, selected for special projects.

Themes: Voice, representation, language rights, national identity

Produced alongside the introduction of citizenship ceremonies and loyalty pledges in Britain, Babel juxtaposes personal stories of migration with the formal oath of allegiance required to become British. Citizenship ceremonies were introduced as part of reforms designed to strengthen notions of national belonging.

Social and Political Context

- Introduction of British citizenship ceremonies and citizenship tests in 2002.
- Ongoing effects of global migration.
- Growing political discussion around integration and social cohesion.

While government policy sought a singular idea of citizenship, Babel revealed its complexity, showing nationality as something layered, emotional and multilingual.

See link for project.

<https://www.bethderbyshire.co.uk/babel>



God Save the Queen, I want to be free

Video Installation

Exhibited: Sharjah Biennial (2003) Shedhalle Zürich (2008), Tape, 291 Gallery.

Themes: Citizenship, migration, belonging, multiculturalism

Created at a moment when British Sign Language (BSL) was only just gaining recognition, the work foregrounded deaf culture through the performance of the national anthem in sign language. BSL was formally recognised by the UK Government in March 2003, following decades of campaigning.

Social and Political Context

- Formal recognition of BSL in the UK (2003).
- Growing debates around whose voices are represented within British public life.
- Post-9/11 anxieties around nationality, citizenship and belonging.

The piece asks who has the right to represent the nation. By replacing spoken language with sign language, Derbyshire exposes the exclusions embedded within national symbols and official narratives.

See link for project.

<https://www.bethderbyshire.co.uk/godsavethequeen>

2005-2009: remembrance, nationalism and collective identity

2005



Message

Televised Public Performance, Exhibition and publication

Exhibited: Commissioned by the National Maritime Museum and London Underground's Platform for Art. Funded by Arts Council England.

Themes: War, remembrance, communication, collective memory

A city-wide project addressing war and remembrance, centred on a live semaphore performance along the River Thames. The work was broadcast nationally by the BBC on Remembrance Day. A publication documenting the project was subsequently published by Thames & Hudson.

"There are a number of facets to Message: it has been realised in this publication, as an event on Remembrance Sunday, an exhibition in the National Maritime Museum's Queens House, a commission by Platform for Art at Piccadilly Circus Underground station, and also in the more intangible public consciousness of the project created through media coverage and word of mouth descriptions."

Lisa Le Feuvre, Curator, New Visions NMM

Created in the same year as the London bombings and amid continuing public debate about Britain's role in Iraq and Afghanistan, Message reflected on remembrance and the transmission of memory through semaphore and public performance.

Social and Political Context

- London bombings (7 July 2005).
- Intense public discussion about war, national security and identity.
- Renewed interest in remembrance and public commemoration.

The project treated communication itself as an act of remembrance, questioning how societies carry memories of conflict across generations.

See link for project

<https://www.bethderbyshire.co.uk/message>

2006



United

Premiered Lichfield festival, Funded by Arts Council England.

Themes: Patriotism, nationalism, internationalism

United examines patriotism, identity, and shared human history through a combined musical and visual performance. The work proposes an alternative national anthem by weaving together elements from five national anthems and patriotic songs into a new composition and text. Created with German composer Ulrike Haage, United merged fragments of several national anthems into a shared composition.

Social and Political Context

- Ongoing debate about "British values" and multiculturalism in the aftermath of the 2005 bombings.
- Rising concerns about integration and national identity across Europe.
- The Governance of Britain Green Paper (2007). Introduced by Prime Minister Gordon Brown, moved beyond purely structural constitutional reform to directly address national identity, citizenship, and the symbols of Britishness.

Rather than treating national identity as fixed, the work proposed a fluid and collaborative alternative, suggesting commonality instead of division.

See link for project

<https://www.bethderbyshire.co.uk/united>

2007



Ensemble

City Wide project

A city-wide public art project commissioned for Crack the Sky / Remuer ciel et terre. La Biennale de Montréal (5th Edition), supported by the British Council.

Themes: Language, identity, public space

Produced in Montréal, a city shaped by linguistic politics. The work explored ideas of nationhood, identity, cultural diversity, and mass communication.. Working in partnership with the Société de transport de Montréal (STM), Derbyshire created a special edition metro transfer ticket featuring the word "Ensemble" distributed throughout the city's transport network. Alongside the transit interventions, light installations and related works were presented at École Bourget, one of the Biennale's principal venues.

Social and Political Context

- Quebec debates around cultural accommodation, identity and language intensified between 2006 and 2008, leading to the Bouchard-Taylor Commission.
- Public debate over immigration, integration and linguistic identity

By embedding itself within the transport network, Ensemble made visible the ways language structures belonging, citizenship and public life.

See link for project:

<https://www.bethderbyshire.co.uk/ensemble>



Together

Laser Projection

Commissioned by the Gulf Art Fair

Themes: Cross-cultural communication, language, coexistence

The project was a site-specific exploration of language, nationhood and identity, featuring a large-scale 3D laser projection of the word "together" in English and Arabic. The illuminated letterforms became fluid marks interacting with the surrounding architecture, using language and place to celebrate cultural exchange at a time when relationships between Western and Arab worlds were highly politicised.

Social and Political Context

- Ongoing aftermath of Iraq and the "War on Terror".
- Rising public discussion about intercultural dialogue.

Its simplicity becomes political. The meeting of languages becomes a metaphor for coexistence rather than conflict.

See link for project:

<https://www.bethderbyshire.co.uk/together>

2009-2013: environmental consciousness, sustainability and place

2009



Anthem

Video Installation and choral work

Commissioned by Cape Farewell and The Eden project. Funded by Arts Council England. Exhibited: SHIFT Festival at the Southbank.

Themes: Nationalism, landscape, climate, collective voice

A trilogy of choral musical films exploring ideas on land, place and nation. First presented as a hanging installation at the Eden Project alongside a live performance by Stile Antico. Anthem emerged during a period when climate change was becoming a central global concern.

Social and Political Context

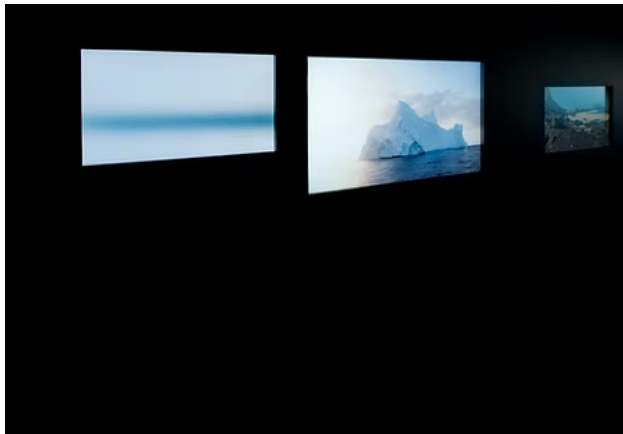
- Copenhagen Climate Summit (COP15).
- Growing international concern around environmental futures.

The project transformed the anthem, traditionally a nationalistic form, into a meditation on shared planetary responsibility. Anthem studied the shifting cultural, historical, and political relationships between humans and nature. The Eden Project is globally recognized for showcasing the interconnectedness of humanity and the living world, making it the resonant spatial "home" for these themes.

See link for project:

<https://www.bethderbyshire.co.uk/anthem>

2011



Seven Seas

Video Installation.

Commissioned and premiered as part of Selfridges' Project Ocean campaign. A seven-screen video installation featuring waters from the UK to the Pacific.

Themes: Ocean, environment, geography, imagination

Seven Seas comprises seven films created from seven unique journeys at sea. Each film responds to a particular cultural, political, or historical interpretation of place. Together, the works reflect our fascination with the sea and its enduring influence on imagination, myth, and human endeavour.

Social and Political Context

- Major public awareness campaigns around overfishing and marine conservation. Project Ocean explicitly foregrounded sustainability, endangered fish species and marine protection.
- Publication of the UK National Ecosystem Assessment highlighting the value of nature to society.

The films situate the sea as both ecological reality and cultural imagination, responding to increasing awareness of environmental fragility.

See link for project:

<https://www.bethderbyshire.co.uk/sevenseas>

2012



The Rootless Forest

Canal based public artwork, soundscape and talks programme *Beyond the Pale*

Canal & River Trust, Birmingham City University. Funded by Arts Council England and Birmingham City University. Exhibited at New Art Gallery Walsall

Themes: Conflict, remembrance, displacement, home, landscape

A moving forest carried along Birmingham's waterways, broadcasting the voices of British military families and Afghan communities affected by the war in Afghanistan. Created for Birmingham and New Art Gallery Walsall, the project reached an audience of 1.9 million. Real trees and soil were planted on a canal boat to create a moving forest with an embedded soundscape, engaging the public in an immersive experience of sound, nature, memory and narrative.

Social and Political Context

- Britain remained involved in the Afghanistan War in 2012. Birmingham brought together military communities and Afghan communities displaced by the conflict, while public acts of repatriation had made war, loss and remembrance increasingly visible.

The "rootless" forest became a metaphor for conflict, displacement and home. Moving slowly through the city while carrying testimonies from those affected by the Afghanistan War, the work brought together experiences of leaving and returning, loss and survival, remembrance and renewal.

See link for project:

<https://www.bethderbyshire.co.uk/the-rootless-forest>

2013-2016: community resilience, industrial memory and historical reflection

2013



The Ark

Canal based Public Artwork, five films and public engagement programme

Currents.

Commissioned by Creativity Works and the Canal & River Trust. Funded by Arts Council England.

Themes: Community, landscape, heritage, participation

A floating sculpture and film wall that travelled along the Leeds–Liverpool Canal from Blackburn to Brierfield. It showcased five new films celebrating the diversity and heritage of the Pennine Lancashire landscape through a layered, community-based artwork. Combining a floating installation with an extensive public engagement programme, the project explored themes of home, landscape, community and cultural ecology.

Social and Political Context

- Continuing austerity policies affecting local communities, culture and public infrastructure.
- Increased emphasis on community-led cultural projects and place-making.

The project positioned culture as a form of resilience, bringing communities together through shared stories and local heritage.

See link for project:

<https://www.bethderbyshire.co.uk/theark>

2016



Surrender

Light Installation

Commissioned by Longbridge Light Festival, The Shadow Factory.

Themes: industry, labour, conflict, remembrance

A light installation that served both as a memorial to local soldiers and a stark reminder of how the human body was industrialised during the World Wars. Installed in Longbridge's former industrial landscape, Surrender connected military remembrance with industrial histories.

Social and Political Context

- Ongoing First World War centenary commemorations (2014-2018).
- Public reflection on manufacturing decline, labour history and national identity.
- The Brexit referendum intensified debates about history, nationhood and belonging.

By linking the soldier's body with industrial production, the work connected personal sacrifice to wider systems of labour, war and manufacturing.

See link for project:

<https://www.bethderbyshire.co.uk/surrender>

2025–2026: migration, belonging, inherited memory and collective voice.

2026



What Lies Beneath us

Canal based Public Artwork

Commissioned Canal & River Trust. Funded by Arts Council England.

Themes: Collective voice, belonging, migration, place, language, contested identity

Developed through a residency at Smethwick Library, What Lies Beneath Us brings together the words, memories and experiences of local residents in a collectively authored text presented across 215 coloured pennants extending for half a kilometre along the canal. Drawing on the colours of geological maps, the work connects what lies physically beneath the landscape with less visible layers of memory, migration and belonging.

Social and Political Context

- Contemporary debates around migration, belonging, identity and social cohesion shape how communities represent themselves.
- Renewed investment in Smethwick foregrounds heritage, regeneration and connectivity.
- Smethwick Imaginarium responds to the area's cultural diversity, canal heritage and community spirit through collaboration with local communities.

Exploring identity, migration, belonging and who has the right to represent place, in the age of social media the work asks: "Who gets heard?" Against contemporary debates around visibility, polarisation and national identity, Derbyshire's pennants use colour and flag-like forms to carry multiple voices rather than a singular identity.

At a time when public displays of flags have become increasingly contested symbols within debates about migration, identity and belonging, Derbyshire reimagines the flag as a vehicle for memory, conversation and shared experience.

See link for project:

<https://www.bethderbyshire.co.uk/whatliesbeneathus>

2026

Revelations

Sculpture Public Artwork

Commissioned Canal & River Trust. Funded by Arts Council England.

Themes: Migration, displacement, memory, inheritance, absence

Revelations accompanies What Lies Beneath Us and consists of nine limestone casts of suitcase interiors. Lines from the collectively authored text are inscribed onto tablets positioned alongside them. The ownerless suitcases evoke journeys of arrival and departure while



connecting earlier migrations to the generations living in Smethwick today.

Social and Political Context

- Questions surrounding migration, citizenship, belonging and national identity remain central to contemporary British public life.
- At a local level, the work emerges within a programme explicitly examining cultural diversity, community, heritage and people's relationship with the Galton Valley Canal.

Revelations moves from the collective voices of the living community towards the absent and inherited histories that underpin it. The empty suitcase becomes a container for memory, connecting migration not simply to movement but to what is carried, left behind and passed between generations. The work therefore brings Derbyshire's longstanding concerns with conflict and memory, nationality and identity, and silence and society into a contemporary consideration of migration, inheritance and belonging.

See link for project:

<https://www.bethderbyshire.co.uk/revelations>