

# 'I want this place to thrive' : volunteering, co-production and creative labour

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DOI:

[10.1111/area.12112](https://doi.org/10.1111/area.12112)

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*Document Version*

Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

*Citation for published version (Harvard):*

Warren, S 2014, 'I want this place to thrive' : volunteering, co-production and creative labour', *Area*, vol. 46, no. 3, pp. 278-284. <https://doi.org/10.1111/area.12112>

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# ‘I want this place to thrive’: volunteering, co-production and creative labour

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Revised manuscript received 21 May 2014

*Until now geographical research on creative labour has tended to characterise it either in terms of ‘hot’ jobs in ‘buzzing’ places or precarious, often poorly paid working conditions. This article argues for a subtler consideration of the complex combination of factors at play within the cultural ecology of art-making. The lure of creative labour has been explained by three key rationales: intrinsic motivators of personal satisfaction and social status; risk-taking; and the challenging, self-affirming nature of creative work. Place-making is advanced here as a fourth rationale for volunteering in creative labour. The co-production of Yorkshire Sculpture Park as an affective, practised and material (art) place is explored through the new concept of embodied and emotional philanthropy. Capturing the unbounded and processual qualities of place-making, this paper provides insights into how volunteers labour beside the artist and paid workers to help co-create an internationally renowned art and environmental attraction. Philanthropy is therefore opened from referring to rich, individualistic donors, to include those who gift time, passion and labour. The paper also argues that volunteering, as a form of gifting, is especially significant during times of economic instability.*

**Key words:** volunteering, co-production, creative labour, place-making, ethnography, Yorkshire

I spent a fortnight doing really hard work. . . . I suppose it’s given me almost a protective feel. I want to make sure that everyone loves and appreciates *Black Steps*. (Interview with Francis, 15/7/13, Yorkshire Sculpture Park)

## Introduction

Geographical research on creative labour has tended to characterise it either in terms of ‘cool’ jobs in ‘buzzing’ places (Florida 2002; Pratt 2002) or precarious, often poorly paid working conditions (Watson 2013; Reimer 2009; Oakley 2006). This article argues for a subtler consideration of the complex combination of factors at play within the cultural ecology of art-making. Specifically, it focuses on the role of unpaid labour and volunteering, a form of work that has largely been ignored in geographical scholarship on creative labour. This constitutes an important oversight given that volunteering is often relied upon – if not factored in economically – for large- and small-scale cultural organisations alike. For example, geographical study into the uneven working conditions of people in the music recording studio sector has revealed

a culture of freelance contracts and internships that effectively constitute free labour (Watson 2013). Nevertheless, volunteers can perform important roles in-between that of worker and visitor, despite tensions in social policy agendas, such as welfare-to-work in conjunction with the troubled rhetoric of the Big Society, which have threatened to devalue all non-monetised labour (Hardhill and Baines 2011, 7).

Turning instead to volunteering in an arts organisation, this article argues that in certain cases volunteering is gifted as a non-monetary form of support in hard times (although this gifting has economic dimensions). In so doing, it draws on recent scholarship on voluntarism that has explored the ‘surprise, unforeseen and unexpected opportunities of “helping out” or “pitching-in”’ (Mills 2013, 16). Psychological rewards, with an emphasis on social and environmental factors, have been analysed in relation to the experience of volunteers taking part in events (Nichols and Ralston 2012). Expanding upon Pierre-Michel Menger (1999) and Terry Flew’s (2012) schema on the paradoxical nature of artistic and creative

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labour markets – where high entry barriers are rewarded with unstable employment – this article argues for the role of place-making to better understand motivations for volunteering in the arts. As Sarah Mills (2013) suggests, volunteering is about more than adding value, reach and recognition to personal projects, or a means to gaining employment.

Volunteering is a gifting. Tracing case studies from the making of sculptor David Nash's exhibition at Yorkshire Sculpture Park, the article shows how volunteer experiences reflect a mix of hard labour, social networking, and, I propose, emotional and embodied acts of philanthropy. The interchangeability of the concept of philanthropy with volunteering, and other terms such as 'charity', 'giving', 'donating' and 'benevolence', reveal how the term is often used appraisively in relation to people, third sector and cultural endowments (see Daly 2012, 536). The etymological roots of philanthropy come from the Greek word *philanthropia*, meaning the 'love of humankind' (2012, 542). While philanthropy is often associated with 'acts of kindness or altruism to those who are perceived as outsiders' (Hardhill and Baines 2011), one of this paper's contributions is to argue for acts of philanthropy to place. In fact, as indicated by the case study group, volunteers in the arts can be viewed as philanthropists who give their labour, passion and time to place-making.

Yorkshire Sculpture Park brings together 500 acres of rural parkland, part of which is rented to a local farmer and his livestock, with artwork and recreation. The art organisation attracts around 300 000 visitors annually. In addition, there are 100 volunteers who work across gardening and landscape, visitor services and administration. The number of volunteers notably matches the number of paid employees. Yorkshire Sculpture Park suffered a 7 per cent cut in government funding in 2011, with a further 5 per cent cut in 2012, as a result of the Department of Culture, Media and Sport reducing by half the budget for Arts Council England. While under-addressed in geography, the role of volunteers in the production of art and tourism destinations more broadly is integral to the functioning of the creative and cultural sector. In fact the arts, along with recreation and social clubs, are the second most popular sector for formal volunteering (IVR 2013). Therefore, rather than focusing solely on the harsh reality of unemployment and welfare-to-work, or adding more weight to narratives of individualistic culture in the creative economy, shared goals and interests are instead brought to the fore through representing volunteer experiences. Reciprocity in place-making processes is not compensation for unpaid work. Nonetheless, the paper attends to the motivations and rewards for gifting labour to a public art organisation, which, I argue, is especially significant during times of economic instability.

## Writing about creative labour and co-production

Current discussions about creative labour have considered its relationship with the organisation of power and space. Creativity is defined by English academic Rob Pope in *Creativity: theory, history, practice* as 'the capacity to make, do or become something fresh and valuable with respect to others as well as ourselves' (2005, xvi). This capacity, however, is subject to socio-spatial contexts that shape the division of labour, visibility of creative producers and entry barriers to the sector. Kate Oakley draws attention to the 'unequal power relations' in creative labour that 'have the potential to create sharp patterns of labour market exclusion and division' (2006, 265). The distinction between perceptions and the reality of how the sector functions is pressed by Angela McRobbie:

There is an irony in that alongside the assumed openness of the [creative] network, the apparent embrace of non-hierarchical working practices, the various flows and fluidities . . . there are quite rigid closures and exclusions. (2002, 526)

The lure of artistic and creative work can be explained by a complex mix of monetary and non-monetary rewards: intrinsic motivators of personal satisfaction and social status; risk-taking despite the comparatively low probability of personal success; and the 'challenging and non-routine nature of creative work' (Flew 2012, 105; Menger 1999, 558). As Flew has argued, the 'willingness to internalise risk', or even to 'view endemic uncertainty as desirable', needs to be understood through the perception that artistic and creative workers are in:

'Cool' jobs in 'hot' industries, where the scope for autonomy, creativity and personal self-fulfilment is mixed with the appeal of celebrity, the visibility of their work and the sense that they 'own' the product . . . [which] bears the signature of their personal labour, creativity and skill. (Flew 2012, 105)

But far from 'cool' and 'free', casualised creative labour means individuals often work on a project-by-project basis, assuming the economic risks and social costs of creative output (see Bain 2005; Watson 2013). The result is a 'triumph of values' of enterprise culture and individualism over 'social justice and collective solidarity' (Flew 2012, 106).

As this article argues, however, it remains necessary to be vigilant of conflating the concerns and conditions of workers in different kinds of flexible labour arrangements (Hesmondhalgh 2012, 62), and more specifically in generalising across the many sub-sectors of the creative and cultural industries. Moreover while extant contributions attend to the lowly paid, to internships or the myriad roles

performed by academics, they do not turn to the multitude of workers who are unpaid by 'choice'; that is formal volunteers (those who give unpaid help through a group, club or organisation). Of particular interest, then, to developing geographical scholarship on creative labour is exploring how the subjective motivations and experiences of volunteers inform understanding of the dynamics and processes of artistic co-production within a particular place.

Three core ideas on co-production that speak to the dynamics of creative labour and place-making at Yorkshire Sculpture Park can be taken from the socio-material turn in cultural studies, anthropology and the sociology of art. Cultural production is recognised to evolve alongside: a social network of artistic co-operation and/or a 'struggle among agents' (Bourdieu 1993, 193; Hallam and Ingold 2007; Baxandall 1985); the active agency of the object (Akrich 1992); and a 'morphogenetic' entanglement with the natural world (Rubio 2012, 156). As a dimension of social networks, volunteering becomes enmeshed with the materialities of co-producing art and site in human–nonhuman relationships. The importance of volunteers providing time, energy and passion in creative labour is thus an integral part of the making, maintaining and re-making of Yorkshire Sculpture Park as an internationally renowned art and environmental space.

### Researching volunteering, creative labour and place-making

Volunteering has become a hotly debated topic in social policy and geography. In the UK, Conservative leader David Cameron talked of fostering 'a new culture of voluntarism, philanthropy and social action' under the banner of the Big Society (2010), which echoed New Labour leader Tony Blair's language on the societal benefits of volunteering as 'acts of community, that touch people's lives' (Blair 1999; Hardhill and Baines 2011, 1). From 1997 onwards, welfare reforms aimed to galvanise an 'active civil society with voluntary associations as its organized vanguard' (Fyfe and Milligan 2003, 398; Putnam 2000). Yet 'even the term "voluntary" is increasingly controversial', with marked differences between well-resourced large-scale professional organisations run predominantly on paid labour, and smaller-scale groups reliant on a volunteer labour force (Fyfe and Milligan 2003, 399).

The common non-monetary rewards of volunteering and employment challenge the traditional dichotomy between paid and unpaid work (see Taylor 2004). Volunteers, visitors and workers at any organisation perform overlapping roles. While there remains a paucity of research on the role of volunteers in creative labour, research on heritage tourism has shown an increase in

leisure-seeking as a motivation over work experience, with volunteers sharing similar motivations to visitors (Holmes 2003). Through emotions, volunteers can be motivated to 'take action to achieve something desired' or 'to avoid goal impairment' to valued things and places (DiEnno and Thompson 2013, 64; Higgins 2009). Importantly, emotion is 'relationally constituted', not static or fixed, 'and so subject to shifts in position and relative power' (Thien 2011, 312). Understanding the inherently emotional nature of embodied philanthropy helps to explain why for volunteers how they feel about – as well as think about – the value and purpose of their labour is integral to their level of satisfaction. Volunteering is further dependent on situated social and economic circumstances, and for some the lack of financial rewards will limit and challenge its status in relation to paid employment (see Nichols and Ralston 2012, 2974; Fyfe and Milligan 2003).

Mills (2013) recently wrote about taking part in voluntary work with public bodies and publics. Importantly, the non-linear and diverse roles of 'non-academic users' are acknowledged with reflection on how volunteering can be about 'helping out' an under-resourced organisation as well as 'the public, charities, young people, policy and other 'surprise' groups and individuals along the way' (2013, 21). Yorkshire Sculpture Park can be viewed as an affective, practised and material place that is sustained through volunteering, and interconnected working and visiting practices. Experience of place, or 'human practice that activates at the local level of human life', is mediated through 'the body as the subject of practice' which in turn acts upon and reconfigures the knowledge and meaning of place (Crouch 2000, 68).<sup>1</sup> Moving beyond the subjective, the roles of multiple volunteering practices have important implications for place-making; a social construction of meaning that helps to create a shared local identity (Loopmans *et al.* 2012; also see Massey 2004). An 'ongoing dialectic and contingent process', place-making reworks and reassembles social and material elements of a place, although the agency of individuals differs in place-making processes (Massey 2004, 700).

As part of a wider ethnographic project on audiencing practices – involving participant observation, walking tours and note-taking – semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted with 26 volunteers, recruited using a combination of opportunistic and snowball sampling. Volunteers, as a case study group, highlighted some of the shared spaces and practices of visitors and workers in the art organisation. The majority of participants in this study – undertaken over 11 months during 2009/10 – were female, which reflects the gender weighting of formal volunteers and workers at Yorkshire Sculpture Park and the arts sector more broadly (DCLG 2008/9).<sup>2</sup> The sample for the present study was also normative insofar as all the

participants were aged between 35–49 and 50–64; the two most likely age groups to formally volunteer (DCLG 2008/9). Interviews were recorded and transcribed, then iteratively coded and cross-coded to find key themes and common concerns, which provided the titular concepts for the sub-sections that follow (Strauss 1987).

## Volunteering on *David Nash*: messy spaces of privilege and exploitation?

### *Hierarchies and hard labour*

A volunteer was assigned to work on a new art commission named *Black Steps* – comprising 71 charred oak steps – to be installed outdoors on the south-east of the sculpture park. Ben, a local resident, volunteered to gain work experience and a paid post in the conservation team. Ben's aim was normative insofar as it was strategically orientated towards 'personal success in order to further or begin a career' as an environmental conservationist (Hardhill and Baines 2011, 3). Emphasis was given to the practical aspect of 'doing some steps', with the work spoken about in functional terms of its fit into the built environment: 'We've basically been digging out the slope . . . [Doing] the terracing and putting the steps in' (Ben, 26/3/10, YSP). However, working alongside the artist, the hard physical labour was recognised as producing an 'artwork, almost' (Ben, 26/3/10, YSP).

The importance of the living environment connects local knowledge with creative labour in the volunteer's experience. Attention was drawn to the springtime blossom of bluebells, which would bring an unanticipated dimension to *Black Steps*. Asked whether this annual flora had been explained to the artist, Ben responded:

No, no! Well I've mentioned it to some of the volunteers but I haven't mentioned it to David [Nash] as we're not supposed to mention any of our own ideas when he's around. We just dig. We just dig where he tells us to. (26/3/10, YSP)

This statement emphasises a hierarchy that impedes individual agency in the creative production of *Black Steps*. In contrast to a supposed celebration of non-hierarchical working practices in the creative sector (McRobbie 2002), awareness of power structures and a social conditioning of bodily behavioural codes are presented – the volunteer follows instructions on repetitive manual labour tasks. Ben occupies a more junior position to the artist, impacting upon the relatively unskilled physical labour given to him, and the right to communicate creative ideas. A pervasive distinction between manual and cerebral activity is further highlighted, with the suggestion that 'just' digging is an incomplete engagement in the process of creative production.

Creative hierarchies that underpin some volunteer experiences were echoed by the reflection of another volunteer that they are 'a little part, a cog' in a wider process:

I mean David Nash was very particular – this is what you do, you do that, you do that, and you do that, and that . . . And you follow that process. (Francis, 15/7/10, YSP)

Returning to literature on creative labour, it is evident that the willingness to participate cannot be explained through creative autonomy and a sense of ownership over the artwork (see Flew 2012). In this context, the co-production of the art with the materialities of the site means the 'maker isn't setting himself up as a master' (Warner 1994, 19). Nash nevertheless holds human social authority, which is particularly marked in art where legitimacy and significance have historically been bound with the conception of the direct hand of the artist. The artistic design process is unchallenged by the volunteers, and ultimately the art organisation, unless the budget or programming creates the need to re-negotiate creative power. As one curator noted, 'we're here to help the artist achieve his vision as much as possible' (Curator, 8/4/10, YSP).

The volunteering experiences signal how the work is tightly controlled. While the creative place-making is co-produced by the labour of the volunteers, it is mediated within unequal working and spatial relations. The non-monetary value and rewards for many volunteers can instead be explained by the affectual dimensions of co-working and place-making as the next section elaborates.

### *Social networking and status*

Despite hierarchies in creative labour, it became apparent that volunteer recognition of power differentials between paid and unpaid staff, and between staff and the artist, did not equate to a sense of disenfranchisement for most. In fact, one volunteer in particular spoke of 'a sense of pride that I was privileged enough to be part of . . . the whole process' (Marnie, 7/7/10, YSP). Another volunteer considered herself 'lucky' to be 'able to help David Nash' in producing commercial prints that would go on sale in the shop' (Marian, 7/7/10, YSP).

Core themes of social networking emerged across the motivations for volunteering. For instance, 'I come here to meet people who are involved in the artworld, it's a useful network place' (Alison, 26/2/10, YSP). Even though the volunteer was retired, the experience of volunteering enhanced her networks as an amateur artist. Another volunteer described meeting the artist as 'the pinnacle of that experience' (Francis, 15/7/10, YSP). Francis referred to 'the privilege' of working with Nash: 'he just accepted that there are people here ready to help him and produce this amazing exhibition' (Francis, 15/7/10, YSP). The artist

'was walking around, talking to people', which Marian noted 'was very exciting to be involved with' (7/7/10, YSP). Together these extracts indicate the pervasive force of the artist's creative persona and near celebrity status. The 'atmospheric qualities' of the sculpture park, and its 'very good buzz' also formed part of the favourable, affective dimensions of the volunteering experience (Marian, 7/7/2010, YSP). Integral to these senses of privilege and feelings of good luck were the intrinsic motivators of participating in creative labour, with rewards in social status: 'I'm the envy of all my friends' (Marian, 21/4/2010, YSP).

However these received notions on the reasons for taking part in poorly paid or unpaid creative labour are only part of the picture. Marnie volunteered to produce prints during the preparation of the exhibition and acted as a gallery attendant during its display. This multi-stage engagement meant she felt 'more related to the pieces and the process' (Marnie, 7/7/10, YSP). Elsewhere embodied practices of volunteering in the artistic process also appeared to strengthen an emotional connection with the artwork:

I look at each step and that process that I have actually done on those steps is there. I have an intimate connection with it. Absolutely. They almost feel like part of me, which is really lovely. (Francis, 15/7/10, YSP)

The art bears an imprint of the volunteers' creative labour, however, rather than self-directed autonomous creative labour, this process takes place within a situated socio-spatial and material environment. Co-productivity in *Black Steps* builds appreciation of the non-linear and placed value chain of artistic production and consumption. Volunteers as active and responsive agents simultaneously practice labouring, audiencing and place-making. In doing so, the volunteer experience suggests an unsettling and entanglement of the role-based and spatial distinctions between worker/visitor, human/non-human and body/mind, along with the emotionality of creative labour within a sculpture park.

### *Emotional and embodied philanthropy and place-making*

Francis travelled five hours from Tunbridge Wells, Kent, to volunteer for the David Nash exhibition. She incurred the costs of the train fare and two weeks of accommodation in the neighbouring village of West Bretton. In contrast to the earlier account of Ben, the experience of Francis reveals a strong positive connection between the affectual and material dimensions of volunteering in creative labour: 'I spent a fortnight doing really hard work, really working hard for 10 days . . . Loving the wood and experience' (Francis, 15/7/10, YSP).

Through physical exertion, volunteering in creative place-making is transformed into ways of knowing and becoming in emotional and embodied reciprocity with the materialities of the sculpture park. As Francis observes, 'Working here made me experience more of the park . . . gradually getting to know it and feeling and understanding more of what it is about' (15/7/10, YSP). Asked to explain why she committed this time and resource to volunteering at the sculpture park, Francis acted as advocate:

I love it and I'm very keen. I want this place to thrive and one of the reasons why it thrives is because of the people who come to visit. So it's very important to come to visit and to support it. (Francis, 15/7/10, YSP)

Power and hierarchy is reworked by the volunteer who stakes a claim to place through speaking on behalf of the sculpture park, unsettling predetermined social and spatial roles. Emotion is thus rendered political, with action stimulated by an attachment to things, objects and *places* perceived as under threat (see Thien 2011). Actively stimulating visitation was characteristic of the volunteers. As one stated: 'I often bring visitors . . . If I have visitors I bring them here' (Marian, 21/4/10, YSP). Advocacy on behalf of the organisation was also reinforced elsewhere:

Why do I volunteer? It's easy. Because I love the place. I love the park, I love the sculpture, the exhibitions which are put on. (Alison, 26/2/10, YSP)

Strong motivating factors contribute to place-making, with emotions – such as love and passion – informing volunteer behaviour. The extracts point towards a relationship between the individual and organisation in co-working practices, which is central in developing and retaining volunteers:

It was a very good buzz of team work. It was just more enlightening . . . I felt more related to the work. (Marnie, 7/7/10, YSP)

Reciprocity in creative labour extends beyond altruism and individual short- or even long-term gain. At the community level it is recognisable that collective effort can produce benefits that outweigh the individual input or benefits (Naughton 2014, 8). To which the significance for volunteers of producing benefits to a particular *place* must be emphasised. 'Most of all it's to do with the place itself . . . It's to do with the geography and the sculpture within the geography' (Francis, 15/7/10, YSP). Philanthropy has embodied and emotional dimensions where non-monetary gifting responds to certain goals, including sustaining an arts and environmental organisation facing an unstable economic future.

## Conclusion: creative volunteering and place-making

In extant research it has been documented that participation in volunteering shapes individual subjectivity; yet it also materially shapes places, and the cultural forms created with(in) places. Place is closely linked to and reworked by embodied human practices at the local level, including entwined volunteering, working and visiting practices. Volunteering in an extra-ordinary place such as Yorkshire Sculpture Park means that the non-monetary rewards of the experience comes from a complex, often uneven set of transactions between a person, the artist, the organisation, artwork and the environment. Yet it is this very multiplicity, complexity and richness in the spatial, sensorial and emotional experience of place-making that helps to elucidate reasons for why many people feel 'lucky' in volunteering acts of philanthropy in creative labour. Gifting labour, passion and time can therefore be recognised as part of the reciprocal inequities of unpaid labour and volunteering 'within the framework of institutions, values and social forces' that produce 'specific relationships of politics and power' (see Silk 2004, 229).

Capturing the unbounded and processual qualities of place-making, this paper provides insights into how volunteers labour alongside the artist and paid workers to help co-produce an internationally renowned art and environmental space. According to participants in the study, volunteering involved hard labour and being financially out of pocket. Yet, more positively, those whose motivations indicate non-monetary acts of philanthropy are also stimulated by a passion for place. Private gifting of labour for public purposes is relied on by non-profit organisations, particularly in times of economic austerity. By proposing the concept of emotional and embodied acts of philanthropy, one of the contributions of this paper is to open philanthropy from referring to rich, individualistic donors (Hay and Muller 2013), to include those who give their bodies, passion and time to a public art organisation because they believe in its value.

Ultimately, as the real impact from public sector cuts continue to bite, more research will be required on the ways public funding for culture, and its erosion, affects labour conditions, power-differentiated groups, and re-shapes human and nonhuman materialities at the local level. This research indicates the important emotional and embodied relationality of volunteers to the spaces of their unpaid work, but more research is needed on geographies of volunteering and philanthropy which takes as its methodological focus gender, along with race, sexuality, age and environmentalism, in creative labour and place-making. While creative labour discourses have emphasised the appeal of individual creative autonomy and risk-taking (Menger 1999, 558; Flew 2012, 105), they fail

to account for the lure of co-production in collective teamwork. Developing these lines of research would be invaluable for ongoing critical work on the politics and power relations in unpaid labour, creative labour and also geographies of care, bringing new approaches to – and ways of looking at – reciprocal dependence and co-production in the care of cultural forms and landscape (see Fine and Glendinning 2005).

Importantly, the paper does not seek to valorise or instrumentalise the emotional and affectual in relation to austerity and volunteering. By acknowledging the emotional and embodied dimensions of philanthropy, the paper builds upon the need to recognise the relationship between reason and emotion, and to further challenge that 'the realm of "personal" feelings, is distinct from wider (public) agendas and desirably so' (Thien 2005, 450). In a time of austerity, passion or love for a place can motivate volunteers (while others undoubtedly remain exploited). By recording these testimonies of under-represented and unpaid creative labourers, non-monetary forms of gifting are framed, arguably helping to re-democratise art organisations as cultural spaces. As such the paper argues for attending to the special, often complex and uneven relationship between labour and place, in particular the creative co-production of extra-ordinary places.

## Acknowledgements

This research was supported by the AHRC (CDA08/401). Many thanks to Phil Crang, Tariq Jazeel and Deborah Thien for their helpful comments on earlier drafts. Thank you to the anonymous reviewers for their insightful comments which have strengthened the paper.

## Notes

- 1 Informed by the work of Tim Cresswell, place is understood in this article, at its simplest, as: '[S]paces which people have made meaningful' (Cresswell 2004, 7). Moreover, place 'as an event is marked by openness and change rather than boundedness and permanence' (2004, 39).
- 2 Volunteers at Yorkshire Sculpture Park comprise 79 females and 38 males.

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