
David Cotterrell: Channel 16 : Saltley Geyser (v)

Birmingham Live

Date: 20th July 1998

A short cable news feature, documenting the 'Saltley Geyser' project, broadcast on 20th July, 1998.

Cotterrells contribution to this Environmental Art Community Consultation was a work of mystery: an inexplicable geyser in the middle of a Birmingham suburb, which from May to August daily shot 500 litres of water in a column 30 metres high. Saltley has a long history of immigrant populations: Victorian industry attracted Irish and European workers from a variety of faiths and today many residents are from Southern Asia. A large proportion of the area is fluent in Urdu or Bengali but many speak little or no English. Cotterrell was interested in creating a piece of public work capable of transcending language barriers. Like the party atmosphere of a Brooklyn summer, when fire hydrants are tampered with to allow water play, Cotterrells geyser served as a meeting point for the local community of Couchman Road Park. A hole measuring 10 metres in depth and 30 cm in diameter was dug by Roger Bullivant Ltd using a mini digger powered by an hydraulic engine. The hole was reinforced with steel sheets and a pump was suspended close to its bottom. Midlands Electricity Board supplied a 3-phase electricity inverter to power the pump. Piping was attached to the pump and fed up to a nozzle concealed just below ground level. Cotterrell dug a 20metre trench from the road into the park, into which a pipe, supplied by Severn Trent Water, was fed to supply the geysers requisite 500 litres of water a day. At 4pm, The Saltley Geyser would promptly erupt. Local residents gathered in the park to witness the event. Within days of its installation, news of the phenomenon had spread, and people were making an effort to meet at the geyser in order to chat, catch up on gossip and watch their children play in the water. This public green space was in a state of decline: many residents avoided the park as there seemed to be constant supply of burnt out cars decorating its landscape. But the same people responsible for various acts of vandalism took ownership of Cotterrells geyser; keeping the site secure became de rigueur for local teenagers in the months their geyser was operational.