

## **A good question can change the world.**

At precisely the moment when humanity might gain a proper sense of its (modest) place in the natural world it seems to be speeding its own departure. Biodiversity loss, desertification, deforestation, resource depletion and climate change are brewing what the UK Government Chief Scientist, John Beddington, calls a 'perfect storm' of threats to human security. Of all these problems climate change is the most far-reaching and complex. Making sense of the interactions between biosphere, geosphere, atmosphere and anthroposphere represents one of the greatest intellectual challenges of the day. Furthermore, acting collectively and purposefully in the face of uncertainties throws up immense political obstacles. It provokes questions about justice in the present and distant future, and tests existing boundaries of ethical and political community.

Yet it is precisely those things that set humans apart from other species that give us our best chance of achieving sustainable societies. The practice of posing a question, of framing a challenge in a way that guides us purposefully towards an answer, has propelled the naked ape towards startling achievements. The **100 Questions Project** applies this talent for questioning in pursuit of sustainability, and is collating a body of the key questions that humanity must address over the next decade. The project was launched at a gathering of Nobel laureates at St James' Palace in May 2009. They were asked to write out the question they felt to be most important. The bookbinder Tracey Rowledge was invited to consider how their questions might be both preserved for the future, and also displayed in such a way that people might be inspired to add their own questions.

Tracey suggested that instead of a making a bookbinding she might work with furniture maker Carl Clerkin so that the questions could be presented instead on a desk that would focus attention on the 100 Questions Project for people seeing it for the first time.

Although Tracey is a bookbinder, the word doesn't really sum up her experimental and innovative work. Much of it is about revealing the possibilities of a flat surface. Her works on paper and bookbinding criss-cross the boundary of craft and art. Starting often with found objects such as discarded shopping lists, or with briskly made marks using felt tips she transforms these hasty everyday gestures into slowly and carefully constructed objects of permanence and value. The inset leather panel of the desk has been made using traditional bookbinding materials and techniques. The leather is Nigerian goatskin, tanned and dyed in Northamptonshire (UK). The gold leaf was hand beaten by George M. Whiley Ltd, a UK gold beaters that no longer exists. The deep red dye, the grain and scent of the skin, the gold leaf, and the texture of the tooling all suggest a treasure, a thing of permanence – and despite the contemporary form and marks – an heirloom.

Carl, a furniture maker, designed and made a table that could serve both as a display cabinet for the pieces of paper that hold questions generated by the

Nobel laureates, a drawer that provides a safe store for them and also as a desk setting for Tracey's precious tooled and gilded panel. His earlier works, 'broom cupboard' (1999) and 'bucket seat' (2003) do solid work as furniture, but are playful with both titles and form. Similarly the outsize desk for the 100 Questions Project is scaled to an outsized problem. Tracey and Carl's collaborative piece both stores and displays the work of the original questioners, and inspires the viewer to ponder on and write out new ones of their own.

The image isn't a direct representation of data but is suggestive of experimenting, mapping and plotting. The tooling is derived from felt tip marks Tracey made on a large piece of flimsy paper. She suggests that the viewer should do their own work with the image, and pause long enough to follow their own thoughts. It seems likely that the work responds to her Arctic voyage with the arts organisation Cape Farewell in October 2008. Travelling up the coast of West Greenland with scientists and other artists Tracey made a body of pictures – or rather she worked *with* felt tips suspended from a chair, a shallow tank of seawater, the boat and the movement of the sea to co-create a body of images – of data - about humans in a changeable world. In similar ways the dynamic and urgent sketch – perhaps a private note of some glimpse of an important revelation – is transformed into an enduring record on the desktop. Dynamism and urgency: the words both characterise the way climate change is understood. But they also recruit the same qualities to our response.

And how should we respond? Some people have proposed that we should develop the role of 'stewards of the Earth'. The earth systems scientist James Lovelock amends the phrase and has suggested that instead we should become the shop stewards for the Earth – the articulate representatives of its long-term interests. The most important role for the shop stewards in the near term is to be demanding of government, business and other leaders – to ask good questions and make sure they get good answers. The 100 Questions Project, and Tracey and Carl's piece that embodies it, get us into the habit of hard questioning.

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