

MONO

Youth isolation in the rural context is a topic that, as in many rural towns and villages, comes up here again and again, confirmed in a recent survey written for Huntly's Aberdeenshire Towns Partnership. Jelka Plate was suggested to me as someone able to tackle this lingering subject matter in the town creatively. Jelka's interest when she first came here was compounded with her own background of growing up in a small rural community in Bavaria, where as a youngster she always thought the grass was greener on the other side of the hill. 'Things that interested me always seemed to happen in other places'. Understanding the universal phenomenon of 'boredom', with particular relation to young people, was something that interested her, in getting to grips with her own background. When she first started she called her project MONO, a metaphor for boredom, taken from graffiti on a newly plastered wall in the town's Gladstone Road.

When Jelka first came to Huntly, she was intrigued by the phenomenon of young people driving around in defined rhythms in a continual, almost performative manner. 'It reminded me of a performance by Abramovic and Ulay where they sat in a car and drove in a circle for an indefinite time. After about an hour one could see the rubber of the tyres start to draw a circle on the street...' To begin her research about car lovers, she put an article in our local Huntly Express, asking for people to tell their own stories about this - what the journalist called - 'ritual'. The article triggered a few reactions, amongst them a letter by a person concerned about what is called the 'cruising' – or here in Huntly the 'tubing' or 'fleeinaboot' activity. Whatever project and problem we – the arts organisation - are addressing, we will always trigger positive and negative reactions: all of them contribute to the dialogue, the research and ultimately to the success of the project. The issues raised in this particular letter questioned our role as an arts organisation to address such a controversial social problem in the town, and secondly charged us with celebrating the cruising by calling it a ritual. In summary the author of the letter asked:

- 1 Where does Deveron Arts get its funding from?
- 2 What do the patrons think of this project?
- 3 What does this have to do with 'The Arts'?

Question one is easy to answer: we are very grateful to our sponsors, the Scottish Arts Council and the Rural Challenge Fund, as well as for the continuous support of Aberdeenshire Council and the trust they give us for our work.

Question two, I am less sure. Who are our patrons? We have honorary patrons; they are people with some standing in society who lend their name and some degree of clout to the skies above us here in Huntly. We also have a board of Directors, a mix of local artists, curators, educationalists and people living in our community. They meet regularly and comment on the programme, process and progress. But above all, our patrons are the people in our community. Our community constitutes itself out of the local people here in Huntly and the wider national and international art community. They are our real patrons, in terms of being our collaborators, customers and peers. The challenge for us is to create what Nina Möntmann¹ calls 'a temporary model situation of community – one that can be experimental, provisional, informal and maybe prototypical, even Utopian.'

In the case of MONO the focus was to collaborate with people and their relationship to cars, as the artist assumed a link between youth boredom and the monotony of driving around in repeated circles. Those people would include car-lovers, people who make a living through cars or through policing them and people who hate cars and all the noise, speed and fear that comes with them. **In this discourse it is not our role to judge for or against car cruising, or ASBOs for that matter. This is**

¹ Nina Möntmann: Community Service, FRIEZE, Issue 102, Oct 2006, page 38

the role of other professionals. Our interest lies in the conversation, by providing a platform for the range of voices to be heard, seen and experienced.

In this case a strategy was developed that encompassed - a review of elements published on the subject, a house-to-house questionnaire and a number of structured interviews resulting in two events and the publication of this booklet.

Arriving in Huntly Jelka says, 'I wandered around for the first couple of days, watching the tubers who meet on the Market Muir and not sure how to approach them'. Her desk-research from reading back copies of the Huntly Express showed that any references to the cruisers focused on ASBOS (Anti-social behaviour orders) given to "anti-social drivers", zero tolerance policies and neighbours who suffer from the noise the cruisers produce with their revving engines, tooting horns and loud exhausts.

Right from the onset Jelka had the idea of doing something with, rather than for the car-lovers. The idea of a drive-in cinema on their site allowed her to generate the dialogue about their love of cars and driving. For the first drive-in cinema she chose a classic: *Rebel without a Cause*, a film that relates to the youngsters, their problems with the police and the older generations, showing the universality and timelessness of the problem. But also a film that would attract other generations and families to join in and create an event that could be enjoyed by the whole community.

Another part of her research was based on a house-to-house questionnaire to find out people's views about the cruising problem and the idea of the drive-in cinema. The resulting answers, some people excited, some indifferent and a few against, gave her the courage and legal basis required by the Roads Department to go ahead.

To do the drive-in Jelka needed to work with a number of local helpers and suppliers. Local coal merchant Kenneth McWilliam offered one of his lorries to set up the screen, and James Shearer, garage-owner, provided the sound system which made a huge contribution to the success of the evening in terms of numbers but also in terms of the mix of people that came: young, old, families and cruisers. All helped by warm weather, a popcorn stall and Jake Williams' cruiser songs. Building on the first drive-in event Jelka decided to do another one in collaboration with a group of youngsters, the aim being to keep the idea alive after Jelka has gone back to Berlin. A youth-worker affiliated to the pavilion and a group of youngsters, called by Jelka affectionately the 'famous five', was found to help with setting up the next drive-in, and to make plans for the future. The passion of the youngsters for sound systems for their cars turned out to generate vital skills for installing the P.A. The second drive-in was situated in the car park of the youth café pavilion and showed *Edward Scissorhands*. The new 'drive-in club' plans its next event at Easter time.

The result of the drive-in project research led into another line of investigation in which questions are formulated and posed in a totally different way. Jelka decided to carry out structured interviews with people who are involved in the issue of cars and cruising in a variety of ways, to gather all the perspectives on the subject. She interviewed a policeman, a driving instructor, cruisers themselves and a Market Muir resident; these interviews have been printed in the Huntly Express and can also be found in this booklet.

Going back to the letter of opposition, we are still left with question three (what has it got to do with art?), for which I have no simple answer. It is not possible for us to judge. What has become clear, however, is that the approach taken (a methodology mix that includes desk research, events organisation, survey, structured interviews and distribution of the findings to create the dialogue) as in any genuine participatory art - as distinct from art that deals with objects -, 'it is the participants themselves who

constitute the basic constant social factor². Her research reveals cruising as an interest that is not a result of boredom after all. Whether we like it or not, it is a form of expression, a form of entertainment based on shared experience. 'While I myself always wanted to have a car to escape from the boredom in the village I was brought up in', Jelka concludes 'the Huntly cruisers express themselves through their passion for their cars and staying loyal to the place they live in.'

Maybe it's not that mono after all.

Claudia Zeiske, Deveron Arts following an ongoing conversation with Jelka Plate

Definitions

To cruise: Aberdeen term for driving in a defined circle

Tubing or going on a tube: Huntly term

Fleeingaboot: Doric terminology

Being on a tour: term used in Keith (10 mls N of Huntly)

The *circuit* or the *lap*: terminology for fixed route that is for cruising; every circuit includes a car park

Market Muir: Huntly's circuit car park

Beach Boulevard pavement: Aberdeen's circuit car park

A *cruise*: term referred to a meeting in cars at a certain car park and includes going off for doing the circuit.

Boy racer: term used by police to describe tubers (NB: this terms would never be used by the car lovers themselves, due to the negative connotation attached to it).

Car modifier: person that puts alloys and other 'gadgets' on their car (NB: people put sound systems, spoilers, alloys, tinted glass etc. on their cars themselves, but spraying is done in a garage, because that is seen as quite an art to do).

www.crairaceway.co.uk: vast meeting of modified cars that race on a track, accompanied by techno music, supported by Maxpower magazine

² Ibid. page 40