

## **An introduction to the publication PRAKTIKA by Deveron Arts**

### RENDERING DISCUSSIONS

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Socially engaged art practice, as the name suggests, has to address in some way the social context as a key element, and in this respect all of the works presented demonstrated some form of collaboration or participation. There is a difference between collaboration and participation. The former suggests that artists share with others in the development of the idea, the concept. The latter suggests that at some later stage others are brought into the work, not simply in a tokenistic way but in a way that completes the work. Without the participation the work would not be an artwork. It is with the participation of others that the work becomes art.

Eva Merz's *'Get a Fucking Job'* was an idea conceived by her but its development into a book soon became a collaboration with one of the street beggars in Aberdeen and the participation of others. Shauna McMullan's *'Travelling the Distance'* was also a concept developed by the artist which relied on the participation of numerous others. It was commented that this work is a good example of the artist 'calling' and the participants 'responding'.

There is an ongoing discourse problematising participation in art. In Art Monthly (April 08) artist Dave Beech says, "In both politics and art, participation is an image of a much longed for social reconciliation but it is not a mechanism for bringing about the required transformation.... In art, participation seems to offer to heal the rift between art and social life without the need for any messy and painful confrontations between cultural rivals."

Anthony Schrag had felt some of this messiness while working on *Blind Faith*, a six-month residency working with young people in east end of Glasgow. This was one of several works commissioned by the Gallery of Modern Art in Glasgow for an exhibition in the gallery looking at sectarianism and its related issues of neighbourhood, identity and territorialism. He felt there was a huge gap between the well-intentioned design of the project and the reality of people's lives. The dilemma was summed up by Janie Nicoll, "With these residencies...we don't do this work just for a career. We want to work with people. But society is using artists as sticking plasters."

In an online interview with Jennifer Roche (see bibliography) critic Claire Bishop refers to the notion of the aesthetic as defined by philosopher Jacques Rancière who said that, "the aesthetic is the ability to think contradiction." Do socially engaged artists think contradiction as part of their practice? Is contradiction part of the work? Is that what made for the intensity and focus in Schrag's presentation and the subsequent discussion?

Some of the questions raised about participation in the discussions were about agency - the modes of participating. "How did people participate? Are people consciously contributing? Does participation feed into the outcome and legacy of the project?" For Sylvia Grace Borda's *EK Modernism* and Jacques Coetzer's *Science of Place* public

engagement in their research was the main mode of participation. Alhena Katsoff's *A. K. Vermin* is an ongoing work providing a domestic context, her home, for others to make work. Most of her participants are artists, which raises the issue of who participants may be in socially engaged art practice.

In *Object Scores* Kirsty Stansfield was experimenting with different modes of participation. She saw her practice-based, research residency as a score for engagement - sometimes being directive, sometimes non-directive and sometimes collaborative. A question which arose in her discussion was about showing video images of an elderly participant working with a choreographer and the sensitivities around that, even when she had permission. The question was raised, "Is there a way of bringing intimate relations into the public realm?" One suggestion was that the choreographer could have used the footage as research for a movement piece.

The level of engagement of the participants was raised and discussed in a number of the presentations and in some ways was a marker of 'success' or 'failure'. In her presentation referencing *The Ricochet Project*, Pam So recounted how the group of elderly Chinese people in the Stills Gallery Digital lab 'took over' on their fourth session with her and started directing the artist and trainees in Photoshop processes to get the images they wanted. They were so pleased with their results they stood in front of their work on the opening night of the exhibition for four hours. In the discussion following her presentation, some commented that the process had gone beyond the control of the artist - that she was working for the participants, and that it was very much their own work. This 'magic moment' of a shift of power from artist/facilitator or artist/educator to participants is a familiar high for socially engaged artists. Katsoff remarked, "conversations do happen, exciting moments reoccur."

For Deborah Beeson a magic moment occurred in *Pot(AT)o Hom(E)age* when two veteran potato growers had a fascinating conversation with her in her colourful potato maze. It was about the loss of variety and colour on the march to supermarket potato perfection. Coetzer commented, "The potato is a very accessible object - like the maze and the rainbow - simple elements, socially engaged and understood. They are formal elements of symbolism." However magic moments can't be planned for and don't happen all the time. And if highs can happen then so can lows.

Will Foster presented what he considered a 'low' in his project *Skills Bank* in the Royal Edinburgh Psychiatric Hospital. This was a research project that attempted to set up exchanges between patients and staff as an alternative means of exchanging services, without the need for money, in a way that was flexible enough for anyone to take part. Participants volunteered skills they could offer and skills they were looking for, which he wrote up on a small blackboards. They were then displayed for all to see. The 'low' for him was that only one exchange happened. In the discussion that followed his presentation, it was suggested that it had worked as an implied project, with himself as the architect, rather than the implementer. It was a vision plan that needed dialogue. Pressure on staff and fragility of patients contributed to lack of follow-up. It was a successful conceptual work, 'safe and non-toxic', as described by Alex Hetherington.

By her own admission Merz, in *Get a Fucking Job*, went too far and became isolated. She turned things around but it is difficult to fight a local council and a prejudiced press.

The outcome is the book of the work and the rest is creative social activism. There are many examples of artists being social activists. The problem is that some get caught up in the activism so that the work becomes very local, very particular. While addressing the local, the work must also be about how you use it to make a universal statement. In this case the book goes some way to achieving this.

The different roles artists played in the different contexts and situations they found themselves in was a recurring theme - artist as facilitator through their own practice, artist as activist, megaphone, juggler, entertainer, bridge, researcher. Janie Nicoll raised the question, "is it the role of the artist to look at life or to involve themselves in transformation?"

The motivation for doing the work ranged broadly too - working with people, rather than alone in a studio, gifting and hospitality, working out-with a gallery context. Among the artist-initiated projects, motivation was a strong element of the work. In *Legacy of Blind Faith*, Schrag needed to find an effective way of raising questions about the project with the commissioners. In *Get a Fucking Job*, Merz was incensed by Aberdeen City Council's attempt to ban begging by law. "I was angry because you can't ban people's problems. It's so disrespectful." Iseult Timmermans started on *Multi-Story* because she was horrified by the prejudice refugees and asylum seekers encounter. Funding is a huge issue for self initiated projects. It took four years to raise the funding for the first *Multi-Story* project. Now however, after several years of running the project more funding is in place for another three years. This is in stark contrast to the short-termism of many projects.

The works of So, Timmermans and Stansfield were exhibited in galleries. So was lead artist on *Ricochet*, part of a Stills Gallery programme of social inclusion projects. It was a short, intensive and demanding project working with a Chinese Elderly Support Centre. While the project was successful in terms of the participants' engagement, in the discussion, the split between the artist's work and that of the participants in the exhibition was not seen as a productive brief for an artist to work with. *Multi-Story* involved several artists working with refugees and asylum seekers. The works exhibited in Street Level Gallery were also by both the artists and the participants. On the other hand, Stansfield made an installation, a separate work, drawn from her experience of working in the Victoria Hospital and exhibited that in Tramway. She commented, "the gallery wasn't necessarily the best place. Maybe it would be best back in the home/hospital. But the hospital brings a whole other set of issues....The installation replicated the hospital process. I would love to close the loop."

An interesting question raised in these and other projects was about where does the artist's work reside? Timmermans made the case that part of her art practice was the process involved in guiding and stimulating the participants in making work. In both *Multi-Story* and *Ricochet* it is in the imaginative and skilful handling of the whole project while the artist's 'own' work resides alongside those works made by the participants. McMullan in *Travelling the Distance* usefully differentiated between process, artwork and practice, saying her practice was the whole project.

In the course of the discussions, points emerged about organisational contexts and curation. For some artists who were working to briefs set by arts organisations and

curators there was a frustration that, “the briefs for projects and the cultural imperatives are out of the control of artists. A five minute conversation with the artist would inform a project.” “What often happens is that projects are designed as packages – a five week package, 9 sessions, 9 hours, 9 groups. All the boxes can be ticked for different ethnic groups, the opening event is full of people and the artist is run ragged.”

In recent years many residencies have funded time for the artist’s own work and practice development as part of the project. This is usually 50% working with participants and 50% on one’s own work. This was the case with the Nicoll/Hetherington collaboration *Meddle with the Devil* in Falkirk and for So’s project. While the intention is benign in aiming to ring-fence time and money to support the artist’s practice, in reality it can feel like a straight jacket for socially engaged artists who work more organically – “this forced distinction between your work and participants.” As a curator, Claudia Zeiske refuses to implement a 50/50 split. Instead she chooses the right artists for whom socially engaged practice IS their own work. When Timmermans was commissioning an artist for *Multi-Story* the contract was simply, “three days a week for three years to work collaboratively.”

Some of the works derived from artists writing their own briefs. Merz, Timmermans, Borda, Stansfield, Schrag and Katsoff all, to a greater or lesser extent, wrote their own briefs for their ensuing work. McMullan’s *Travelling the Distance* was a concept developed out of a specific brief which was nevertheless open to interpretation. Whatever the genesis of the brief, informed curation of the project was a significant factor for artists. This was evident in the presentations of Beeson, Borda, Coetzer, McMullan and Stansfield.

The Artist Placement Group was prescient in the early seventies when it articulated the need for contemporary artists on a ‘placement’ to be offered an ‘open brief’ leading to a ‘feasibility study’. If the proposals of the ‘feasibility study’ were agreed by both the host and the artist, then the work would progress. In Borda’s case, in East Kilbride, the original one month photographic residency turned into a feasibility study, in negotiation with the curator/commissioner, leading to a much longer project lasting three years. It is also strongly evident in this case, and worth noting, the value of the stranger, the newcomer, who sees things with a fresh eye. The context here is very definitely the physical and the architectural, and the outcome is the changed perception which she brought about in how people view East Kilbride.

Legacy is another issue for contemporary artists, arts organisations, commissioners and curators. As Katsoff said, “...social application, accumulation of history and into meta-narrative. Is it our responsibility or not?” A response to *Travelling the Distance* was that there was potential to take the work further. McMullan was clear however that her practice is in geography, mapping, cartography rather than in continuing a historical project. The question was asked, “is it the responsibility of the commissioners to consider possibilities for taking the work further?”. What happens in projects where participants’ expectations have been raised and they want to keep going, to do more. Who responds to outcomes? Can there be a follow up?

As the two days unfolded and the story and subtle nuances of each project emerged, there was a sense that what you often see and hear of socially engaged work is the tip of the

iceberg. Perhaps this is true of all art. However because of the complexity of the process of making socially engaged work there was a sense that the process should be made visible. As Stansfield said, "In socially engaged practice there's a frustration that the nuts and bolts aren't documented. They tell you so much - in addition to the work itself. In relational aesthetics there's not enough information about the projects." A question was asked, "are nuts and bolts interesting to artists?" And an answer, "It's a human interest."

What are the conditions needed for the evolution of this area of art practice? What would nourish the field and create critique, legacy and scholarship? There is a need for informed critical writing and journal reviews of the work. In the 'reading room' interview Claire Bishop is asked why she thinks the discourse surrounding socially engaged art has lapsed in the critical examination of the field. Bishop posits that there has been a shift in influence from critic to curator since the early 90's. "As we know, curatorial writing is on the whole affirmative and rarely expresses reservations about a given artist.... I was struck by the fact that most of the project documentation was written by curators. To an extent this is logistical: socially engaged and participatory projects are so complex, sprawling and context-based that the only person with a handle on the overall project is invariably the curator."

There is also a need for informed curators, funders and administrators who understand this complexity and, for example, embrace the sprawling nature of the projects as rich in potential. Rather than try to use artists as instruments of social change and transformation, which is highly problematic anyway, let them focus on 'the art'. Perhaps the time for social application is when the work emerges and manifests itself.

Praktika aimed to provide a 'critical context for socially engaged artists in Scotland' and there is no doubt that the two days and three nights in Huntly provided that. This may be the first time that such a formal and professionally organised event of this kind has taken place. The artists had to be willing to present their work for critical examination by their peers. On the evidence of the event it was obvious that this did not present a problem. All of course had been through this kind of group crit during their years in art school. It was therefore a useful and illuminating experience for all the participants as the discussion ranged across key topics such as process, production, outcomes and evaluation. Those participating learned from each other, learned about other work going on, discovered mutual problems and new networks were set up. There was no intention to come up with a conclusive definition of socially engaged art practice but that rather, in the words of Merz, paraphrased here, the practice should be defined by the work through which it manifests itself.