

Value Added: Conference report

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Overview

This recent conference organised jointly by Artquest and Space Studios was based around a small series of case studies which illustrated different facets of 'socially engaged practice' in the field of visual arts.

Speakers included artists, curators and commissioners. All the contributors were well placed to discuss the experience they have of multi-partnership working as a means by which they develop projects that offer possibilities for audiences to engage with art beyond the formal gallery space.

Chaired by Alicia Miller, together with the audience they reflected upon a variety of contexts in which this activity takes place and the critical value socially engaged practice has for artists, for commissioners and for the audiences at whom it is aimed.

The conference was timed to coincide with the fortieth anniversary of the founding of Space Studios in East London and Space Place provided the conference venue.

With the development of the Olympic Park proceeding just a stone's throw way, the location for 'Value Added' was a timely reminder of the need to assert the value of well-planned public arts infrastructure; particularly physical spaces and facilities for artistic production and distribution. Without secure workspace artists are less able to function effectively in fostering public debate.

The conference considered three key questions:

1. What is the context for socially engaged practice now?
2. What is valuable about it?
3. How might it develop in future?

Caroline Jenkinson Head of Arts & Tourism LB Camden set the scene with an overview of the current policy context affecting the arts across both central and local government. The defining characteristic is complexity: multiple policies and priorities have to coexist but they may be divergent in nature and policies subject to frequent change. While terminology also shifts as fast as quicksand, the fundamental reason for resourcing the arts is constant – *fostering public engagement*. In the current context more and more emphasis is being placed by public funding bodies upon understanding who does *not* engage and *why*. Coupled with a growing comprehension that a far more sophisticated understanding is required about the ‘needs, attitudes and motivations of our existing and potential audiences’¹ this implies a need to think afresh about how to collect and use evidence.

Jenkinson cited her recent experience of organising a public cultural programme as part of the Olympic Torch relay ceremony through London during summer 2008. Events that occurred on the day of the relay demonstrated that there is a strong underlying appetite for opportunities to take part in public activities, but it did not arise from the cultural events organised to celebrate the relay. Rather, it was a political imperative - the protest movement which surrounded the relay - that ignited a desire to be present and be involved; publicly visible, publicly engaged.

This example shows starkly how the impulse to predict and measure ‘outputs’ from projects can be so stifling as to be fruitless. The torch relay also revealed the difficulty of mounting large scale set-piece cultural events in a manner designed to appeal to multiple interest groups, but in a context where single issue campaigns can be rapidly-mounted using viral information and communication networks, through which cultural production can be organised in a manner which bypasses institutional frameworks.

The result of this experience is a reassessment by LB Camden of the value of small-scale art interventions as a means by which to involve and engage

¹ Gerri Morris & Andrew McIntyre, *Insight Required* p3 www.lateralthinkers.com

audiences in public activity in future. For Jenkinson this change of direction correlates with the freedom to set higher risk tolerances around some public projects, reducing the demand for highly specified project 'outputs' and opening up new possibilities for artists, participants and audiences in the public realm.

For artist **David Cotterrell** questions of risk have become a defining feature informing how he has both thought about and undertaken his artistic practice over the past twelve months. Cotterrell recently returned from Afghanistan where he spent time as an official War Artist; a posting which had entailed the application of official MOD risk assessments concerning both the threat posed to him by the battlefield context and the threat his professional status of 'artist' might represent. (Rather comfortingly the MOD concluded it could ascribe no certainty of status to the latter).

Through a talk entitled *Value Added?* he reflected upon the idea of risk as it applies to artworks made in public contexts. As the scale of any public project increases he observed that the process of commissioning, developing and producing work invariably becomes influenced by a more conservative context. There is a tendency for the commissioners to need the artwork to reflect and share their agenda and the artist is more likely to find themselves operating in a design or architectural team context rather than acting autonomously.

Notwithstanding his generous respect for the professional competencies and the quality of work produced by architects and designers in commissioning contexts, Cotterrell identified that there is often an inherent tension between the stated objective of involving an artist and the realities of the working context which flows from that invitation.

In his view, many artists relinquish economic security in order to exercise the freedom to take risks and to assert their authorial independence. These are therefore the distinctive 'values' (or qualities) which artists should be invited and indeed expected to demonstrate when undertaking a commission. For

Cotterrell the potential to exercise this independence will depend on the clarity of the commissioner's brief. In particular he looks for evidence that the commission offers a role in which he as an artist can express the particular values that govern his practice and that it is not a design brief in disguise. Without this clarity, the artist has insufficient information to make a decision about whether or not to engage with any given project in relation to their own political, philosophical, theoretical, practical and economic concerns.

Both Cotterrell and Jenkinson discussed the degree to which the quality of the 'back office' operations which surround any public art project also have a bearing on the value of public art projects. The ability of specialist facilitators who work hard to provide a bridge between the artist, the commissioner and the wider public interest will also determine how much social capital can be generated through any arts project and is an undoubted factor in the success or failure of many ventures.

Ultimately, Cotterrell identifies the attitude of commissioners as the critical factor in defining genuine creative opportunity in public projects. As he observed, the greatest mark of confidence an artist can hope for from a commissioner is the expectation that there will be dissent, coupled with a willingness to make space for conflicting views to be genuinely exercised and tested within commissioning process. While this is by definition a high risk activity, being prepared to expect the unexpected is a paradox which can pay true dividends.

For both **Margaret Sheehy, Director of MSL Project Management and Consultancy** and **Viv Reiss Freelance Arts Consultant** the ability to assume multiple roles and to manage complex and wide ranging partnerships has been a defining feature of their respective practices over the past thirty years. Both have a passionate interest in the voice of the audience, both have worked in local authority and national funding policy contexts and both are cultural producers with a special interest in working with artists in contexts that create opportunities for very direct forms of public engagement.

Their joint presentation illustrated the complexity of delivering projects which require transactions to be agreed between multiple partners in order to deliver artistic projects which value and reflect the web of social, economic and cultural relationships at stake in each given context. They underlined the importance of the role of the cultural broker in first preparing a space within which a creative project can occur and likened this process to 'orchestrating cacophony'.

Greenwich Peninsular is one of the largest regeneration sites in London with a tiny resident population but a large daily visitor base due to the location of the O2 centre.

As Co-Artistic Director for Greenwich Peninsular, Viv Reiss has been responsible for developing the first phase of an arts programme designed to develop a sense of place and to engage a diverse local population in reflecting upon their locality, as it goes through a twenty five year re-development process, led by English Partnerships and the local authority.

Despite the scale of the planned redevelopment, the budgets allocated for cultural activity are very small. The anticipated release of additional funds through the application of Section 106 agreements has also halted because most building projects have been mothballed in response to the recession and the future of the cultural programme has yet to be determined.

The Directors have made a virtue out of the financial constraints in the first phase. They developed a programme which is primarily event based, flexible enough to allow a variety of interest groups to work with local and international artists and regional cultural partners and which is designed to take advantage of London wide cultural festivals such as the London Festival of Architecture, in order to generate maximum exposure and to secure extra resources. In every case the groups with whom each artist worked were invited to participate in developing the project brief and to contribute to the artist selection process facilitated by the Directors.

Both speakers discussed the role of expert brokers in adding value to public programmes located in regeneration contexts: for example by generating activities which are focused around the skills, resources and creativity of local individuals, by leveraging in additional funding and by negotiating on behalf of the local population with developers and other investors to establish common ground and to build shared agendas for future development and use of space where possible. Comprehensive evaluation methods are applied to every project and the information gathered is shared with all the partners.

Where skilled brokers are not in play, and good preparatory work to establish common ground has not been carried out, cultural development opportunities can be lost to local communities. Margaret Sheehy described the current response in Hastings, East Sussex to the potential development of a new contemporary gallery in the town. A major charitable trust has recently offered to invest in a new public space providing it can be demonstrated that local people genuinely want this to happen. The proposed site for the gallery will threaten the location of currently valuable local trading activity in an economically depressed region. A simple solution to addressing the concerns of traders which can be reconciled with a new development is theoretically possible but in the absence of a broker skilled in negotiation and communication to advance this case, public hostility to the project has mushroomed. The issue of control of public space and understanding of its current and future potential 'value' has polarised. Recent cultural festivals have acted as a public forum within which frustration and tension has been visibly and symbolically vented over the issue. This tension has been characterised crudely as the established community versus incomers, but in reality more complex issues of class, inward migration, social and economic deprivation are in play.

The 'value' of public art programmes undertaken in regeneration contexts can often emerge on a piecemeal basis. For the artists involved at Greenwich it has a tangible effect on their career and for the local population who participated in making art it has had a social impact. At a structural level skills and knowledge have been transferred to local arts organisations through their

involvement in the programme. Whether the artists have made a lasting recognisable contribution to developing a sense of place (one of the defining aims for the programme) is less easy to evaluate and points to the need for more longitudinal studies to be conducted which also track attitudes to future options for participation and engagement.

The complex relationships which underpin the delivery of her programme described by Viv Reiss show that a simple model to define engagement will not suffice. A further question that arises is can we have one without the other; or is engagement only ever an outcome of participation? Engagement will occur in different ways at different stages in any artistic process, as will the focus of who is engaged and for what purpose. Margaret Sheehy also offered several possible interpretations about what defines 'engagement' with contemporary art. She made it clear that we need to develop more sophisticated models to understand the value of this process. Both contributors underlined the interest in, but also the challenges associated with, developing plural measures of value in a way which does full justice to the experiences of audiences at different points in any process.

Artist **Faisal Abdu'Allah**, discussed his current show called *Spine* at the Swiss Cottage Library Gallery and another recent project he has completed titled *Goldfinger* which was exhibited at Cafe Gallery, London. *Spine* investigates the different relationships we have with books. For this project Faisal invited twenty people, all of whom were personally important to him, to select a book which is then displayed, like a sculptural object, in the gallery. A 'twin' of each selected book has then been placed in the library, but each work is in a different section to where it would normally be found. Faisal was attracted to the library because of its historical and contemporary significance as a site within which ideas are freely available through books. The experience of mounting the show raised several key questions for Faisal concerning the privilege of the 'authorial' voice – his own as the person who conceived the exhibition, that of the contributors of books and that of the authors who wrote them. His interest in how audiences respond to *Spine*

concerns the degree to which they value his contribution as a 'voice of reason' rather than the 'gospel'.

Goldfinger, a recent set of photographic portraits produced by the artist in collaboration with the British mafia presents a very different set of problems around value for Abdu'Allah. His sitters were fascinated by the potential value of the works on the art market and concerned to share the proceeds in any sale – for which there is no known contemporary precedent. This presents a moral and a practical dilemma for the artist which he has yet to resolve.

Mark Sealy, Director of Autograph ABP, reflected upon the shifting territory of public engagement over the twenty year period since Autograph was founded. Initially Autograph concerned itself with tackling issues of race and representation through the medium of photography. It commissioned and exhibited artists who had been excluded from the mainstream and presented content to audiences who previously had very few opportunities to explore ideas and images which reflected a complex and rich set of experiences arising out of diaspora in general and identity politics in particular. Now in the position of co-managing a new purpose built home shared with inIVA, Autograph is using both its exhibition and publishing platforms to extend its campaigning role once again.

Through the medium of photography, Autograph is stimulating new forms of engagement which challenge the stereotypical narratives suggested by much of the photography currently in public circulation which documents African, Asian and South American communities.

Working with partners in Brazil, Autograph has been engaged in a project over a long period of time which is designed to empower street children through giving them direct authorship – a voice – in documenting and publishing images of their lives.

Through collaboration with Brazilian photographers Julian Germain, Murilo Godoy and Patricia Azevedo and using inexpensive point-and-shoot cameras,

the children of Belo Horizonte, Brazil's third largest city, have been taking photographs over more than ten years.

Content is solely controlled by the children; they set the terms upon which they allow themselves to be seen. The photographs are now being published by the children in the 'Beautiful Horizon' newspaper, a free news sheet which they distribute on the streets.

This process is contributing to the development of social activism among this community, tackling severe dis-enfranchisement by giving these children access to the means of production and communication denied to them in most other aspects of their lives. The newspaper allows their experiences to transcend the street and find a way into the hands of those who routinely ignore the existence of this community. The local impact of this project has been powerful, and out of it a national public debate has developed concerning the plight of young people in similar conditions all over Brazil. Their photographic work will become a major international touring exhibition accompanied by a conference in 2010.

The rationale for Autograph's programme now is - as it has always been - to engage with issues of the day that require a growth in public awareness and understanding. From identity politics to human rights, civil liberties to social justice Autograph projects are developed on the basis of what artists using photography have to say about fundamental human concerns, whether this is the quality of mental health provision or human trafficking. The distinctive role that Autograph seeks to play is to enable these issues to be publicly debated through creating appropriate platforms and partnerships which marry debate and dialogue with the visual, rather than 'displaying' images; each project is developed according to how it can best empower and give voice to the subject in an equitable way rather than to present a spectacle.

Summary

Key themes that were explored throughout the day can be summarised as the privilege and responsibility of authorship, the importance of skilled brokers in creating spaces within which projects can happen, the necessity for an explicit expression of purpose by commissioners in artistic briefs, the scale of projects and the impact this can have on risk taking and the complexity of establishing and measuring 'value' especially with audiences.

Authorship

The reasons for engaging artists in public projects are plural and complex as any artist discovers once immersed in the process. Is it possible for public institutions to offer truly open briefs to artists and simultaneously meet their public accountability obligations? Can artists make critical interventions in this kind of commissioning context or not? If not, does this reduce the artistic process to the equivalent of a service industry or is it simply about recognising that certain kinds of commission briefs concerned with encouraging social engagement come with explicit obligations attached to them? In this case, is the ability to manage complex negotiations a core skill both necessary to inform the whole commission process and a means to influence the values and expectations of both commissioner and audience? 'Socially engaged practice' means by definition being prepared to engage in varied and complex social transactions as part of any artistic development process. Are adversarial or challenging responses necessarily helpful in such a context or is the ability to give a 'voice' to an alternative point of view the real measure or value of accomplishment in such a context?

Making spaces

Artists need to make informed decisions, in the same way that any other professional practitioner does, about whether or not to engage with particular types of project. However their ability to do so is contingent upon the commissioner providing as much clarity and transparency as possible concerning their motives for the project in the first place.

Artists should not be tempted to view these factors as implying a necessary flight from experimentation, rendering their involvement null and void. Rather they need to focus on offering to describe the processes they propose to apply and to make a commitment to share the results of their research, adding value to the project possibilities – but only in response to very clearly defined and detailed briefs set by commissioners. A well prepared brief is a key tool which allows the artist to inform themselves and to explore, challenge and respond to the motive of the commissioner and is the means by which a genuinely open space can be created for critical public engagement. The formation of a really good brief requires expertise.

Risk or dare?

Many professions are very familiar with the concept of risk management; they understand that risks cannot be eliminated, identify what they are and plan how they deal with them if they do occur. There can be an unhelpful tendency to foreground the right of the artist to fail. This is something no other profession would dream of claiming for itself and it is a claim that does artists no favours in most public situations.

Where artists share their research methodologies and discuss with confidence the risks entailed in making new works for any particular situation, this can create a shared comprehension of professional skills possessed by artists among all those with an interest in the project. It also develops wider public appreciation of artistic methodologies and can increase the exercise of judgement in favour of the presumption that the artist can be trusted, thus expanding the creative possibilities. Good advocacy results in a softening of the client impulse to demand highly specified outputs at the start of any commission process and can shift the focus to establishing a range of possible outcomes. Being able to reference case studies which describe projects where this has happened will help build confidence in new commissioners.

Creating value

The development of trust between project delivery partners depends upon sufficient time being made available for dialogue to agree clear aims, objectives and outcomes in multi-partnership projects, to review progress and to carry out advocacy activity. It is also necessary to ensure that there is adequate capacity to employ different professional languages appropriate to each context in which advocacy must take place and to provide tailored information explaining what is happening at regular intervals to different audiences. This is where expert brokers can play such a valuable role.

The way in which artworks produced are valued is always going to be contingent upon the social cultural, political and economic contexts within which they have been formed. Artworks which respond to the conflict in Afghanistan or constitute a social statement made by individuals about the condition of homelessness in Belo Horizonte, are subject to particular moral considerations concerning their location in public or private environments. For those who participated in the production of artworks arising from public processes we need to better understand how they view their contribution to 'creating value' through such processes and consider what they may recoup from the process – how else might we share the value?

As a result of converging media, increasing bandwidth and falling technical costs, the means of independent cultural production have never been so widely available to the individual DIY enthusiast. Dialogue is a central means by which public engagement occurs, a record of that dialogue must surely be a central feature of any activity which seeks to establish the value of artistic transactions which occur in public spaces. As Charles Leadbeater has observed:

'In an increasingly democratic and demanding age, artists have to establish the value of what they do through conversation with their audiences, peers and stakeholders.'²

² Leadbeater, C. Arts Council England, 2005 *Arts organisations in the 21st century: ten challenges*, p 6.

In future, those charged with observing and recording the value of any given project – and this is must be a collective endeavour not the purview of a sole authoritative evaluator – will need to think more about the role that media tools can play.

The matrix by which we explore 'value' must now include virtual tools with which audiences are very familiar and which extend their ability to provide direct testimonial to us and to one another about how their public encounters with art affect their curiosity and future behaviour - in opting in or out of sustained public dialogue – surely the key reason for an interest in socially engaged practice in the first place.