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NEIGHBOURING AND NETWORKS

ANNE EGGEBERT

NEST (PERFORMANCE DOCUMENTATION: *WALKING ON EGGSHELLS*) SARAH COLE, 2008, PHOTOGRAPH KEVIN DUTTON

'An approach an artist brings with them might be something new to people, offer an alternative view, a different way of doing things. It might take the form of a script, a template, a score, an invitation to invent, or could be in the shape of a question. This leads on to looking in different forgotten places, disrupting dominant narratives or putting something unexpected on a pedestal for a moment. It might involve a process of abstraction, juxtaposition or intervention in a familiar place to get us to look again'.
Sophie Hope Social Art Map July 2015

How can we begin to teach and learn the processes of social art

practice? Artists working in this area necessarily begin with a material practice (experimentation in the studio, generating an object, artefact, event) - even the dematerialized takes practice. Audience follows, and prompts questions on how we engage with or encounter the work, how we bring participants as an active audience and, further, into modes of production. What are the methodologies that can be deployed here?

Context may be important, the location and what it affords are interrogated and deployed as material form or frame for the work – the situation functioning both as content and form. On the face of it this all sounds relatively straight forward, but learning how to connect to and work with others takes 'dedication, commitment, generosity, persistence, enthusiasm and patience'[2] and, most particularly, trust. This approach for a student can be a huge ask. Nonetheless, supporting the development of social art practices, the construction of and investment in new networks and their potential, functions to enrich students' understanding of the sociopolitical context of their work. Students are asked to test the relationships between the studio, the cultural institution and publicness, through art as a destabilizing action.[3]

We ask students to engage in a shared experience of making – first through the networks that their studio affords, collaborating with their peers, and then connecting to networks of partner organisations and further to informal networks in the wider communities local to CSM Kings Cross.

The multi-directional complexities of these projects include BAFA students mentoring those aiming to enter HE; exchanges between young art students and local older people (who are themselves engaged in art making); developing work for, curating and performing a public carnival event in the Turbine Hall at Tate;[4] each project, in its own

unique way, develops new networks of social engagement. These new networks are not necessarily sustainable (students finishing their courses and the general flow of London life) but the momentary, fluid, short-lived connections can be as powerful as long-term relationships. They can be revelatory and teach us something about interdependency towards our next set of interconnections. They can also build long-term relationships and influences.

Networks of self-selecting / self-organising participants might operate as a counterculture – as Stephen Willats proposed in his 1982 essay 'Inside the Night',[5] these networks might offer an agreement as 'an active creative action between participants, a layering onto existing realities of new or different values and beliefs, so that perception and behaviour within the network are now changed. In this sense 'reality' is constructed by the psychology of individuals in association with the groupings or networks of relationships towards which they are drawn or in which they find themselves.' Self-organising networks might be developed through a rethinking of existing networks or bringing together two or more pre-existing networks to construct a new set of relationships.

Dialogue is often both the process and outcome of socially engaged art practice. If so what can provoke this, how might it be instigated, how should it be documented or translated into a new form? Or, indeed, stand as the work itself – the participants as both protagonists and audience (see Barby Asante and Teresa Cisneros's project with the sorryyoufeeluncomfortable Collective[6]). Conversation is not something that can be taught but the ethics, intentions, challenges of the project can be discussed, teased out, interrogated. This is where the material comes into play to prompt processes of engagement and the provocation towards dialogue – a set of actions or explorations with no specific outcome in mind, where the artist is alert to the revelation of

the unexpected. The material becomes the methodology.

A powerful example of social art practice is Sarah Cole's work Nest[7] that built a long-term relationship with the network of staff, parents, children and governors of an Essex primary school as a process of live research into lived experiences culminating in a promenade performance with the community. This extended three year project contributed to research that 'suggests a significant response to place from even the most temporary of denizens, the visiting or 'cuckoo' artists, implying that even when performing there briefly, strong relationships with a place can develop.'[8] Cole and Mackey go on to conclude that 'excess' contributes to the performance of place, that 'transgression, the non-quotidian and boundlessness – that can enhance participants' affective response to, and memories of, place.' Rather than place-making this process proposes an alternative articulation of place.

In the Kings Cross area students are a significant transient community through choice. The structure of their degree programme usually lasts three years (although BAFA students have an optional additional Diploma in Professional Studies sandwich year). International and EU students often return home during the summer break for financial or family reasons. Some will remain in the city after their degree for further study or work while others will disperse across Europe and globally. In the current climate of the mass movement of people, in a world city, 3-4 years might be understood as a significant period of habitation. Others, transient for economic reasons (e.g. leaving the city as the rising cost of accommodation far outstrips the Living Wage), migrants seeking work and refugees peace, do not have the luxury of choice. The twenty-first century's great obsession is with the menacing anthropocenic interglaciation and migration – we propel a populous into movement through our reconfiguration of the world and the lack

of distribution of its riches. In this climate connecting with our neighbours (transient or otherwise) offers a moment of exchange and the proposition of new subjectivities. Art offers a methodology for the engendering of these new relationships. Cross-generational connections, for example, between students and older local people, might offer a model for, or open up the possibility of, dialogue that exchanges and deploys the richness of difference.

SUPERANNUATES AND TENDERFEET
PROJECT DESCRIPTION

They are instant happy makers. CSM student
The unlikeliness of us. AgeUK member

The project began with a conversation between neighbours living on the edge of the city far from King's Cross – Anne Eggebert, XD Pathway Leader BAFA from CSM, and Jane Chambers, Network and Provider Services Manager for Age UK Islington. They discussed Age UK's aim to link their users with young long-term unemployed people to offer skills support and as the conversation unfolded it occurred to them that there may be potential to link art students with Age UK members.

Superannuates and Tenderfeet has been developed with Anna Hart who has established a curatorial practice of pairing people who might not normally meet and asking them to explore place together. The project proposes space for connections between art students and older members of the local community, to test possibilities of exchange and mutual production, and to examine the value of dialogic practice for everyone involved. Nine second year Fine Art students have been paired with nine members of AgeUK Islington's art groups over the spring and asked to make something in response to this pairing, either

individually or in collaboration. All the participants were invited to bring their on-going artistic concerns to these conversations and potential processes.

The initial sessions brought all eighteen individuals together as one group, visiting each others' 'studios' in the art school and the AgeUK day centre, presenting artworks to each other, and drinking a lot of tea. After some hesitancy from nearly everyone, the pairings were postponed until early April to allow further groups sessions that extended the initial conversations through doing things together, for example drawing each other.

The pairs have now been doing things together locally and further afield for six weeks, including going for walks, visiting exhibitions, exchanging techniques, writing each other letters, and drinking yet more tea. Destinations have included Tate Modern, South Bank Centre, Camley Street Nature Reserve, casinos in Leicester Square and cafes in Archway. They have made performances, films, prints, drawings, sculpture and text-based works. All the pairs have ended up making collaborative work.

A selection of outcomes will be shown this Friday in Conway Hall Library as an exhibition titled by the group 'Exchanging Time'. There will then be a final evaluation event on 25th May using Lynn Froggett's Visual Matrix method to explore what has happened for individuals. Anna Hart will also interview some individuals in May 2017 to look back at the experience.

'Exchanging Time' is a mystery, a thought, a moment, a discussion, a space, a unified phenomenon, a remarkable understanding. AgeUK member

http://www.airstudio.org/studios/superannuates-tenderfeet

REFERENCES

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