

ENGAGED ART ACTION AND INSTITUTIONS

INTRODUCTION

In 2005 I received an Arts Council England research and development grant under the heading ENGAGED ART ACTION AND INSTITUTIONS. As the instigator of the Live Art practice Engaged Art Action I travelled to meet artists and curators in Holland, Sweden, Finland and to three cities in the United States, (New York, Chicago, Los Angeles). Despite geographic differences there was, among those I spoke with, commonality in individual and collective attempts to apply creative endeavours to social issues. This social engagement had its roots in Live Art practice yet both artist and curator saw the organic creative life in broader terms than art production.

I was brought to follow this investigation because of my understanding of the limitations of my solo engagement. I wanted to find the most suitable siting for my participatory practice. My experience of working allied to art centres led me to question the role, purpose and potential of existing institutions and to seek out those already doing so.

I started with the intention of writing a summa of my research. What has come through further findings is a simple manifesto for a socially engaged practice working with existing publically funded art centres. These suggestions come from my evolution as a socially engaged Live Artist. Within the writing I lay out how I arrived at some current ideas as well as highlighting the immense influence recent travel and dialogue has provided my progression.

I am an artist committed to instigating solution based creative action therefore I present this document as practical. None of the suggestions have come without some trial and a good deal of error. I would not, however, of taken so long in presenting this formula had I not wholeheartedly believed in the usefulness of its implementation.

Denis Buckley
February 2006

THE “WOT FOR?”

In 1993 a work of art was commissioned to stand on some open land near Bow in London’s East End. Rachael Whiteread’s HOUSE was in part funded by the then Arts Council of Great Britain. The piece raised many questions on the practice and pertinence of publicly funded contemporary art, a debate that was set off around the presence and siting of the work in itself.

The local authority, in this case the London Borough of Tower Hamlets, deliberated to allow access for the work to take place. The deliberation was noted first by local and then national press. The decision went marginally in favour of the sculpture but with very vocal opposition from some of the

council officers. Some time later the council decided to demolish the work with little public support for their decision. Visitors to the site of the work were so numerous that an early day motion was tabled in the House of Commons calling upon Tower Hamlets to allow a time extension and to consult with local people as to whether it should be destroyed. It didn't carry and the artwork was demolished.

The work in itself was a sculpture, which was simultaneously in and outside the monumental public art tradition. A cast yet also a mould of the inside of a Victorian house which stood on a street of such dwellings, that had recently been pulled down and the occupants rehoused. Detail such as the grate of fireplaces and the print of the stairwell remained in the final fix. The work stood separated from its former shell, isolated from the neighbours which had stood on both sides for over a century.

The work was destroyed after three months of its completion. The controversy ran the preparation, the construction and the destruction of the sculpture. Ideas for and against ranged from the anti modernist argument on the one hand to accusations of contemporary art's refusal to make a stand on the other. Public Art had rarely been as public.

During its display the set concrete sculpture remained grey and untouched until someone intervened and clandestinely commented directly onto the work. One morning the words "WOT FOR?" appeared writ large on the side of the sculpture. The question changed the experience for the viewer. The work was no longer a statement. By the physical intent of the action, this artwork became a dialogue.

The "WOT FOR?" was an intervention. The very public nature of the sculpture and its impetus meant that recourse to the anonymous urban dialectic of graffiti was in some ways inevitable. The "WOT FOR?" cut into the debate by direct action and let the concept of a physical presence of an artwork into a wider organic life. The "WOT FOR?" conscious or not of its intention entered forcefully into the debate of public spending on the arts. Many had questioned the use of public money on artistic projects such as HOUSE. There was strong feeling that preferred and demanded to have the funds directed to a visual tangible such as homes. The fact the commissioned artwork had chosen to comment, (albeit in the stylised language of contemporary art), on the issue of housing and re housing made the question or "WOT FOR" all the more pertinent.

The "WOT FOR" was an aesthetic political comment on an aesthetic making a political comment. I felt I was prepared to accept both as equally valid expression and could not come to condemn the action as vandalous.

I grew up in Southern Ireland in the 1970's. My understanding of the role of an artist and the responsibility of an artist to comment on social issues was learned there. Art and artistic practice was then, to my youthful understanding, directly of and about the socio-political environment in which that work was created and the endeavour of this art was to help us all to "be better". This is what I understood as artistic social engagement.

I lived in London as a visual artist during the tenure of the Thatcher government when the relevance of the arts to individuals was an opened debate. I made artwork that reflected the experience of living in the United Kingdom at this time. Using a solo art practice I concentrated on the social exclusion free market capitalism brought to those who did not benefit from the wealth creation. I made statements through the work which, as it felt then, went through the proper channels. There was also a feeling back then that we, artists and disenfranchised both, were losing. More so we were tolerated or encouraged to comment which paradoxically would show the freedom inherent in the new ideology but invariably with little change in policy. I was socially engaged but with a clause and the clause was ownership.

The encounter with the “WOT FOR” proved to be a catalyst. I decided to split my practice into two interfeeding one off the other. I would, in solo practice, continue to explore my experience of being but would invite multiple experiences into a creative endeavour so that we may collectively try and “be better”.

ENGAGED ART ACTION

The objective to be socially engaged through my work came from the background I grew in and from an evolution of a standard autonomous art school background. Training as I did in the early 1980's there was a distinct reaction from the excesses of experimentation and politicisation of art schools during the previous 10 years. I was given the awareness to contemplate object but I struggled to align that investigation with perceived social responsibility.

It was the free access to London museums that allowed my education as a socially responsible artist to be nurtured. By repeated physical access to the works of history I began to understand somewhat clearer what it took for those works to come into being and to be seen. Alongside constant practice, the unrestricted availability of the public galleries galvanised what I saw as my failures into my experience. My awareness of the importance in arts funding was forged here. I travelled to other countries and saw that free access to public museums elsewhere is a privilege not a right.

I became aware of the collective potential of communal art projects when working with marginalised young people on estates around NorthWest London during the 1980's. I saw here that public funding in projects responding to localised endeavours had advantages in tangible terms but also saw the limitations of some proposals due to the dept and complexity of the issues dealt with and the brevity of the project duration. It was there also I learned to refer to any action that spoke of understanding the experience of being, be it education, working or living as creative.

Within my solo creative practice I looked at my emotional responses to my being in the world while it became clear that in my collective practice I should attempt to divert creativity to solution based ideas.

To emphasise my commitment to social engagement I chose to leave the studio and make Live Art interventions on the streets. The street and the interventions complemented one another as questions of everyday visual phenomena were incorporated into notions of public space usage and ownership. I made spontaneous actions allowing the viewer or passer by to make quick decisions on the nature of the encounter. I used the language of every day street message communication such that the viewer would at first be confused, as no obvious sale was forthcoming.

In 2000 I went through London's financial district wearing a sandwich board on which the words UP and DOWN were written on either side. I handed out labels with the phrase "UP DOWN the last shirt has no pockets". My living at this time was involved in applying creative usage of the principles of Engaged Zen Buddhism and I used the term Engaged Art Action to define collective creative action and to minimise my importance in the collective.

Engaged Buddhism is founded on the belief that genuine spiritual practice requires an active involvement in society. The core of the principle is interdependence; the decision made by one has ramifications for all. By walking through London's financial district I hoped to pass on the message to workers of the interdependence of their work actions

Engaged Art Action soon moved into clubs, galleries, theatres as well as the street from where I instigated collective action. I would invite the participants to input from their own experience usually in the process changing my physicality or the surroundings we were in. These durational actions were led by the participation but called also on the participants to act creatively in their lives. From these actions grew the notion, which still guides Engaged Art Action, namely that the most creative act one can make is to transform your own life.

To be Engaged one cannot be passive. Suffering and its causes are the responsibility of all. From this it is clear that one must act peacefully to oppose any wasteful destruction of human life. As the governments of Britain and the United States took an unskilful decision to imagine the American War in Iraq I began a series of actions which came to define that collective potential of Engaged Art Action and the possibility of creative living and its application.

During anti war marches I made pro peace actions suggesting that the struggle for peace resides in the personal evolution of those marching. I sent out an email call in early 2003. I asked people in the UK to make a decision to act peacefully for the coming season of Lent, a time traditionally given over by those in the Christian tradition for abstinence. I then asked those people to email me their pledges and told them I would take them to New York. The war was imminent and bombing did begin on the week I was to travel. I displayed the pledges in a shop front on 42nd street and in a gallery on the Lower East Side. New Yorkers were to see the personal decisions that were made in the UK. These commitments were intended to transform the individuals who undertook a creative act of living peacefully but in turn

transformed those who came into contact with their decision. The display and the dialogue in New York meant that similar pledges were made and added by US participants, thus extending the physical life of the work in itself.

It became obvious about this time that large gestures of opposition to governmental decision making had in this case failed. The largest man march in UK history had not stopped British involvement in the American War. The potential for transformation had energy but no way of dispensing that energy.

Back in the UK I returned to the studio to investigate my own angry responses to needless war. I came to see the corrosive and damaging effects of ill channelled anger and sought to meet men who had suffered more than others as a result of their anger and had tried to find a solution.

In WHY ARE MEN ANGRY 2004 I invited men who had been violent to communicate with me so that I may include their expression in a live performance. The experience was transformative. I found that in the application of creative thinking by a collective of those ostracised for their violence, lessons for our societal well being can be discovered. We saw through the engagement that many men were untrained in the language necessary to communicate their frustration and had been educated into believing that demonstration of strength by force was acceptable.

To share our findings and let experiments based on the experience time to evolve would need a common place in which to store and generate the energy of such a practice. To extend the findings and maximise the investment with other concerned agencies, a centre or base would be required to house the investigation. I came to see that the publicly funded art centre with its reach and purpose could be the location whereby a broader more detailed research in this area could influence future skilful decision making

Shortly after the research on WHY ARE MEN ANGRY terminated I went into discussion with Bluecoat Arts Centre in Liverpool to make a week long piece, RIGHT TO THINK, for Liverpool Live, the Liverpool Biennial Live Art programme. I suggested that I live for a week in retreat in a house we built in the gallery engaging audience on questions of the social responsibility of the publicly funded art institution. Working as an artist alienated to, yet independent of, the institution meant that I could identify with the passing audience. By night, alone, I decorated the house with the fruit of the day's discussions. The time at Bluecoat showed me the potential for a socially engaged art institution allying autonomy with responsibility.

I went on to work with the City Arts Centre in Dublin for the engagement HOME. Working from a city centre shop window I wrote on the walls of the experiences of Irish emigrants I recorded in London. I began a text communication with passers by based on the writings relating to the rise of racism in contemporary Ireland. The action showed the possibility of on line and off site engagement that is the non physical presence of the institution.

Both projects could not fully investigate the social issues in a broader context due to the structure of those particular commissions.

From there I have visited and spoken to artists, curators, and audiences all over Scandinavia and the United States. I went to investigate practices of creative living in Swedish and Finnish institutions where undertakings are of longer duration and move from art practice to questions of institutional or state responsibility. In America I met with artists and curators who do not have a similar facility as in Europe but sought none the less to claim space, virtual and physical, to ask questions of social importance and to raise the profile of people left helpless to impact on their surroundings.

UK art institutions are benefiting from increased investment in physical redevelopment of sites. New practices springing from new technologies are changing both facilities and usage. Currently the predominant form of encounter favours presentation over participation. Creative autonomy is always required to further uninhibited exploration of our being but in order to “be better” I have come to believe we need practical endeavours stemming from creative usage of collective realisation through engaged participation.

Curator Charles Esche, when taking over Rooseum the former electricity works turned art centre in the Swedish city of Malmo, suggested that what may be required of a contemporary art institution for the city at this time may be, “part community centre, part laboratory, part academy with less need for the established showroom function”¹.

UK art centres are in a unique situation in that a response to facilitating current practices has altered the physical structure of the space yet the purpose remains largely unquestioned.

I wish to propose to art institutions participatory creative intervention dealing in localised social issues. This intervention instigates longer term engaged research by sharing and evolving of knowledge and findings which can in turn be implemented back to the society from where the concern arose.

THE INSTITUTIONS

In the ten years since its inception in 1994 the National Lottery has invested over £2 billion in the arts in Britain*. Over £1.32 billion has been invested in capital projects*. This outlay has coincided with an emphasis by the Arts Council manifesto (Ambitions for the Arts 2002)* on a “central belief that the arts have power to transform lives, communities and opportunities for people throughout the country”. When Lord Keynes wrote in July 1945 of his hopes for the foundation of a state funded arts policy he called for public support for those, “which are striving with serious purpose and a reasonable prospect of success to present for public enjoyment the arts of drama, music and painting”². One can see within the relatively brief span of its life that there is an evolutionary nature to public funding of the arts in this country. These changes are creative responses to what those concerned in public funding of the arts have found out by practice.

The effect of capital expenditure is that there are public centres based in most UK cities with the expressed concern for the cultural life of its inhabitants. The institutions receive funding from our elected government which the Arts Council in turn distributes based on the fulfilment of the policies it lays down for responsibility to the public served by the institution. The institutions have a broad playing field of autonomy but ultimately the funds are public funds and therefore the responsibility is relative.

The institution will adapt their house policy for localised intention but the Keynesian notion of accessibility is still paramount. Alongside arbitration of what the directors of institutions see as examples of current practice in Visual Arts, theatre, dance, live art and literature there is usually in place a community adjunct feeding from the ongoing programme. Talks, courses and other events serve to compliment the existing programmes yet sometimes function separately of the house programme.

The post war belief in access to the arts lending a “civilising” influence has given way to diverse exploration of human condition. Solo artists or companies present views or explorations taken from their perception of the life around them. The audience encounters the views and broadens the experience by discussion, with artists or others, of their understanding of the artworks.

The physical structure of institutions too has changed to reflect the influence in funding and the catchment of inclusion for accessibility. New buildings have incorporated the facility for present day modes of communication and older buildings have undergone changes to accommodate contemporary discourse and its resonance.

Funding collectively we provide a challenge to think in designated physical premises. It is clear that as a society we still have a healthy concern for our intellectual well being to support centres for creative thinking. But are these premises able to be more capable of harnessing and distributing the power mentioned in the manifesto?

In 2005 I was funded by Arts Council England to carry out a research and development period looking first hand at institutions, artists and curators around Europe and the United States who are looking to impact their social engagement in real terms.

In the Swedish city of Malmo the Rooseum the smaller of the city’s art institution sought under its then director Charles Esche to “rethink the purpose and audience for this provincial Kunsthalle”³. From this, the projects and the physical space were used for broader societal questioning. In long running projects such as IN 2050 MALMO WILL NO LONGER BE SWEDISH and WHAT EVER HAPPENED TO SOCIAL DEMOCRACY?⁴ the institution facilitated art interventions, (mostly based offsite) which went to the heart of the changing demographic of Swedish society. The institution made its space available to public talks and a critical studies test site to explore the themes raised.

The Danish artist’s group Superflex 5 refer to their artistic activity as socio-economic integration. In their SuperGas project they collaborate with

Danish and African engineers to construct a portable biogas unit that can produce enough gas for the cooking and lighting needs of an African family. In SuperTropical the group travelled to Brazil to offer alternative possibilities for co operative production of the fruit guarana to facilitate survival under the multinational cartels.

In the American city of Chicago, another artist group Temporary Services 6 find non distinction between art practice and other creative endeavours. Through their dialogue with an incarcerated artist in a maximum security facility, (PRISONERS INVENTIONS) the group have been awakened to the inhuman treatment of long term prisoners and work to provide legal and public support to change hitherto ignored cases.

In 2005 Temporary Services took over some waste ground on a corner of Sunset Boulevard in Los Angeles. The space became a site for collective creativity, a gallery in progress as it were. CONSTRUCTION SITE was hosted by Outpost for Contemporary Art6 based in California. Having no physical site to operate from, Outpost instigates work in found virtual and real space. The potential for socially engagement by participatory action finds on line and on the street a medium suitable for the practice.

Artists based in New York and Chicago turn to the rich visual phenomena of their city to engage. During artist led walks around 1960's built project schemes on Chicago's West Side, one can find the reality of American inner city living. In STILL WE RIDE7 a film around New York City's crack down on the critical mass monthly bicycle rally, one can watch creativity used to skilful effect in highlighting little known facts on right to protest that has ramifications for free speech in today's United States. What American socially engaged artists lamented most when looking at their European counterparts was the breath of the public funding system and access to physical space to explore ideas.

In Dublin the City Arts Centre8 ran the Civil Arts Inquiry. This institutional research began from the premise that art is a social process then through a mixture of gallery and off site engagements commissioned work that explored the intent and purpose of this belief. From the commissions artist's work was questioning the relevance to society of a creative practice and was put under scrutiny for doing so. Artist Mick O'Kelly's proposal to place a van capable of serving food to people suffering homelessness in Dublin's Temple Bar Galley began a debate around the complexity of prevention and cause. What was enlightening about Civil Arts Inquiry's approach is that the artist and the gallery were questioned publically by people working in the mental health system, rough sleeper units and charities. The conclusion of this participatory discussion, Civil Arts Inquiry Document 16, is a blueprint for collective creative action in socially engaged practice.

What became evident from my own practice and my investigation this year is that socially engaged creative practice can have far reaching effect in real terms. When this practice is allied to an existing respected art centre with its reach and purpose the potential for change at micro level is increased.

I wish to suggest ways in which the practice I have experience in can work allied to an existing institution. I stress that the practice is evolutionary, in that, the suggestions are demonstrations of the ethic that any eventual outcome should inherent.

ENGAGED ART ACTION AND INSTITUTIONS

In the Arts council England publication THE ARTS AND YOUNG PEOPLE AT RISK OF OFFENDING 2005⁹, seven strategic objectives are pinpointed in realising the plan to instigate creative practice to support longer term change to the cycle of offending and re-offending amongst those aged 10-17. One of the seven objectives under the heading Networking suggests “Encouraging the establishment of professional networks bringing together artists, arts organisations, youth professionals and relevant agencies regionally and nationally to share effective practice”. This is skilful use of creative thinking and needs a consistent centre to site such an endeavour. The publically funded art centre is the right location, I believe, for creative exploration of social concern over a long duration. This can allow maximum potential for participation plotting often complex issues through in a creative evolutionary collective manner.

My participatory practice has come from the understanding that everyone is not an artist but that everybody is creative. The source of this creative energy is the life experience of the individual. Collectively used this information provides a powerful demonstration of change potential. To have a site where this potential is fully maximised is the challenge now.

I more often that not instigate participatory practice in the area relating to mental well being. The wealth of a community is in the quality of its mental health. That is the social economy of our society and that social economy of human experience is material by which transform society by.

I am not a social worker and do not consider myself to be a community arts worker. I am a socially engaged Live Artist. My current practice and concerns are the result of an evolution, the evolution from a solo practice of personal transformation to a collective creative endeavour which addresses underlying causes of suffering so that sound solutions for change may be reached.

The research on WHY ARE MEN ANGRY highlighted the cost of anger to an individual but also questioned the motivation of random street violence. Why, I wondered, is this violence specific to the UK and Ireland? Instead of forming a fiction to look at the condition I went to speak to men who had been violent and who had sought to transform their behaviour. I wanted the men to speak their experience as part of a participatory live action. We would through our collective experience give an understanding of a condition which was open with potential for further exploration. The action I had hoped would be part of a broader discussion on the violence on our streets. I also hoped that greater involvement from interested parties on the

condition would extend the creative approach. This is where institutional involvement is essential.

We, who participated on WHY ARE MEN ANGRY, came to know the difficulty in being emotionally demonstrative was a precursor to the cycle of frustration that led to violence. Mental health professionals concurred that formative training was crucial in the development of sound social relations. From the initial creative intervention we are now at formative development and invariably the education system.

The institution with its reach and facility can support the structure that allows the thinking to be progressed allowing potential for creative curatorial action thus extending the concept of an institution outside its physical presence.

This could happen for this particular concern by,

- Using the reach of the institution to facilitate local involvement in a live realisation Of WHY ARE MEN ANGRY
- Setting up a temporary work station related to the live work within the institution with wall and table space.
- Make available a selection of reading relating to current thought on the roots and causes of male violence, local statistics including police and hospital records of the effects of violence, where to seek help if you suffer from violence alongside printed transcription of direct experience of male violence and its consequences.
- Give over wall space for anonymous comment from participants creating an ongoing dialogue around the issue.
- Encourage participation off site through on line action; also the outside of the physical premises can reflect the concern during the times when the institution is not open for access.
- Instigate a discussion, on site, based on the issue with participants who are professionally involved in treatment or those who may have been affected by or from violent action, and concerned citizens. The result is transcribed and printed as a document. The document is published by the institution.
- Allowing the engagement open time to support the non spectacle aspect of personal and collective realisation.

The factors inherent in this particular engagement prioritise a far degree of anonymity. This dictates the action. Another example of social issue driven institutional engagement may use the non-physical space but maximise the siting of the venue in real and virtual space.

Cocaine usage in the UK directly funds rape, torture and murder in the countries exporting the drug. The drug is increasingly becoming commonplace while the profit from sales causes great suffering in those too poor to have an alternative means of income.

In WHERE DOES YOUR DRUG MONEY GO? I suggest an engagement that demonstrates the principal of interdependence. The institutional role here in creative social responsibility can be,

- Allowing a stall on site distributing freely clothing bearing the phrase WHERE DOES YOUR DRUG MONEY GO?
- Liaising with local authorities to allow bill postering of the phrase WHERE DOES YOUR DRUG MONEY GO? Advertising the phrase in local papers.
- In facilitating instigation of on line participatory action (linked to institution web site) asking for anonymous posting of experience based on the consumption, distribution and effects of drug money
- In facilitating distribution of currency sized maps of the route of drug distribution carrying the phrase WHERE DOES YOUR DRUG MONEY GO?

The examples used here are concerns that may effect nationally. In some cases the concerns are localised and can be learned by using the art centre as a site for polling experience. The produce of the participatory action is for the most part ephemeral and time based so issues of local or national importance can be addressed. In the case of exceptional circumstances such as decisions to war institutions can, using the experience of interventionist Live Art action, become active in facilitating public concern quickly outside of the ongoing programme which cannot pre-empt such incidents.

The publically funded art centre is a physical, virtual and familiar presence sited in the commercial heart of the cities they serve. This makes the institution ideal to facilitate socially engaged Live Art practice because,

- The physical presence gives access to the commodity of exterior space, (the message potential of the outside of the premises).
- The virtual presence extends the idea of the institution outside its physical presence and allows participatory anonymous action relating to the concerns.
- The familiar presence allows greater access to live participatory action due to its existing co relation with other public institutions in the region.

CONCLUSION

The Live Art practice of social intervention came from artists seeking to find ways in which their practice could impact on transforming their surroundings for the better. Most, like me, were individuals, some formed artist groups to maximise their collective energy. Nearly all socially engaged artists are concerned with communicating and access to space for communication.

The street was and remains a preferred site of communication although concerns over public safety in recent years have made spontaneous actions difficult to sustain. For my particular practice I choose, for some time, to work on the street and outside institutions. I found that the participatory practice I instigated needed access to a greater number of people. The social concerns to which I applied my energy are those which go to the centre of

our collective well being. I came to see that the publically funded art centre is the most suitable siting for such engagement.

The art centre or creative centre can help in facilitating creative thinking. As not everyone can practice as an artist a centre for creative thinking can instigate ingenuity in any human endeavour helping to foster solution based ideas for better living.

It was perhaps a failing of previous generations that they believed that they could change our world; it is a failure of my generation is that we now believe we cannot. Far from this being a limitation on proactive social engagement I see here liberation. Freed from the weary attempts to instigate change on a global scale the exciting challenge is to practice change on a personal level. When this micro change is multiplied by creative participation we, collectively, realise ways to proceed as just that, an interdependent organism susceptible to experience the suffering of others as our own. It then becomes imperative to act in the best interest of all and not just ourselves.

As creative artist I have thought of the best way to distribute my energy to facilitate the alleviation of suffering. I believe, through skilfully used creative intervention in an individual's continuing maintenance of the conditions which give rise to suffering, transformation is possible. The transformation in turn transforms the society.

I have come to believe that the excising centres for creative thinking are the best environments for facilitating this transformation. With its space and reach the institution can accommodate and vibrate the energy of collective creative endeavours. We can also as individuals, within a community, collectively protect ideas and civilising principles that may, in time, become more and more difficult to justify as a legitimate public expense.