

# Creativity as a Two-way Flow

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Art, education, place - what can be engendered through the interaction of these three components? The *Reversible Actions* conference questions how these factors might be brought together to help inform the design of new projects. Here I draw on some of my own experiences to look at ways in which issues arising from context or location can become mediated through cultural production to create a multi-directional educational experience with the potential to give rise to new knowledge, insight and, by extension, social change.

The two projects I will be using as examples have taken place in the same location, though twenty years apart. Very different approaches and processes were involved in each and I hope that this contrast can help throw light on factors that have remained true for both, while also demonstrating that there is no formula for 'good practice'. If projects are to make a difference they need to be able to respond creatively to the requirements of people, place and circumstance, and have the opportunity to develop through dialogue and research. An understanding of how such work comes about might help to indicate how it can be best supported.

## Docklands Community Poster Project 1981-91

The first of these projects took place at a time when there was clear difference in the UK between the politics of Left and Right. The Labour party was following a broadly socialist agenda, trades unions were a force protecting workers' rights and there was a great deal of 'grass roots' activism. Individual creative authorship was coming under question, as was the role of the artist in relation to society. Oppressed groups were becoming militant and organised. In *Community, Art and the State* (1984), Owen Kelly characterised his understanding of the 'socially engaged' work emanating from this period as three distinct types. The first was the creation of new and liberating forms of expression, as in the work of the Arts Lab (precursor to London's Institute of Contemporary Arts). The second was the movement of fine artists out of the gallery and onto the streets. The third was a 'new kind' of political activist who believed creativity to be an essential tool in any kind of radical struggle.

It was in this climate that a Conservative government, headed by Margaret Thatcher, came to power. Recognising the market potential of the land surrounding the partly disused London docks, an Urban Development Corporation was designated to take over this area, effectively removing the democratic local control of land across five London boroughs, with the aim of transferring it into private ownership. There were enormous implications for the local population. The kind of homes, services and jobs that would benefit

these mainly working class communities, would not only fail to receive urgent improvements, but were in danger of disappearing altogether.

At that time I had already been collaborating for a number of years with artist Peter Dunn and East London trades unions on posters and exhibitions to support campaigns against cuts in the National Health Service. We were now invited by the local trades council to produce a poster alerting local people to the re-development about to take place in the Docklands. Consultation with the highly organised tenants and action groups that characterised these boroughs followed, revealing a scenario much more extensive than initially envisaged. Over time, and with support from the local boroughs, regional arts association and finally the Greater London Council, we were able to develop a community co-op<sup>1</sup> led by a steering group of local people to create not just a poster, but eventually a decade of cultural production to address the issues. Changing photo-mural sequences were displayed on eight billboards constructed by the organisation in and around the Docklands, while posters and graphics were produced to support individual campaigns. A series of laminated exhibitions designed for display at community venues, festivals and meetings communicated issues in greater depth. Collaboration with the Joint Docklands Action Group led to docklands-wide campaigns and events such as the *People's Armadas to Parliament* and a touring roadshow which took the lessons of Docklands around the country. Locations, campaigns, and events were all documented, and this archive of negatives now serves as the only photographic record of this era from a community perspective held by London's Museum in Docklands.

The Docklands Community Poster Project was intrinsically linked to 'place', and the project driven by its local communities. This enabled us to focus on tangible issues which, though having wider ramifications, were essentially problem-solving exercises aimed at specific local outcomes. Most members of the community would not have cared about whether this was art - only whether it worked. However the 'invitation'<sup>2</sup> to become involved in the campaigning had come from someone who had an understanding of the link between culture and politics. Dan Jones (now a key figure in Amnesty International UK) was a trade unionist, member of the local trades council, social worker and artist. His input had been integral to our earlier union-led work on health issues and he understood how it might now be brought to support campaigning over the future of the London Docklands. Clifford Geertz defined culture as "conceptions expressed in symbolic forms by means of which people communicate, perpetuate and develop their knowledge about and attitudes toward life" (1973: 89). The way that we used art to serve the docklands context did not differ from this. Its function was to consolidate meaning, facilitate communication and enable the emergence of new ideas for the future.

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1 The Docklands Community Poster Project involved six paid part-time staff. Peter Dunn and myself acted as artist/coordinators, supported by a designer, administrator and support workers who assisted with photo-mural production and installation.

2 In 'An Outburst of Frankness' (2004) Ailbhe Murphy discusses the importance to a project of the "quality of this invitation".

The effectiveness of the Docklands Community Poster Project as an activist cultural strategy was largely due to the dialogic process at its heart. Not only did we attend the meetings of docklands groups, but representatives of these local action groups also formed a 'steering group' for the organisation, which initially came together on a monthly basis. Meetings would commence with a report back from each neighbourhood, followed by consideration of the cultural approaches that could be employed around different issues. The steering group did not however comment on the appearance of the work. Visuals were discussed in terms of their meanings, not their aesthetics. Each member of the group was considered an expert in their field, and it would have been similarly inappropriate for Peter or I to promote personal views on the issues.

This project continued for ten years while the campaigning lasted. However lessons learned from the experience extended much further. Processes of negotiation, collaboration across difference, production of artwork through collective input as well as the power of propositional campaigning have continued to underpin my practice to the present day.

### **Cascade (1999 - 2008)**

*Cascade* is the name I have given to a collaborative process that maximises the educational potential of projects through the involvement of young people and students from three levels of education in collective cultural production. University students act as mentors to support 17/18 year olds from colleges of further education. These pairs of students are then placed in school classes to facilitate workshops, where production work takes place. All this is heavily facilitated by a team of collaborating artists with a high level of skill in inter-personal communications and conflict resolution.

This and other recent projects may take different forms, but their aims are not dissimilar to that of the Docklands Community Poster Project. In each, cultural means are used to bring the concerns, issues and aspirations of ordinary people, and particularly those whose voice is least heard, into the public domain. The role of the young people within projects, like the activists, is that of experts in their field, whether this is through first hand experience of an issue or location, or the power of their imaginations. As Freire puts it:

Educands' concrete localisation is the point of departure for the knowledge they create of the world. Their world in the last analysis, is the primary and inescapable face of the world itself. (1992: 85)

The agenda of each project remains a joint one, to which we each bring our specific knowledge and abilities. My role as an artist has been to use visual and organisational experience to create the frameworks through which this expertise can be brought together to make a difference. *Cascade* has been one of these initiatives. Its process underpins a series of projects that have taken place over nearly a decade, with locations and issues overlapping those

of the earlier work in the docklands. This time the focus is on the regeneration of the Thames Gateway, an initiative of the current Labour government. Their plan is to solve the housing problems of the South East by building on the flood plains bordering the river, eastwards from the London Docklands to the North Sea. It also encompasses the re-development accompanying the 2012 London Olympics. Participants in the *Cascade* projects live in these areas, and constitute some of its potential future residents who will benefit or otherwise from the changes taking place there now. Their role is to draw on their experience of life in East London and consider the kind of future that they wish for themselves and their communities. Their ideas are then communicated through a range of different cultural outputs in the public domain.

*Cascade* describes the two-way flow of skills and experience that takes place through these projects. The youngest cohort hold most of the expertise about 'place' while benefiting from the support of slightly older students who are more 'buddy' than teacher. Undergraduates demonstrate their work to the college students, describing their often circuitous routes into higher education. Through these personal stories the younger students gain glimpses of different ways to realise their dreams and ambitions. At the same time the older students gain skills in running workshop and frequently comment on how much they have gained from their contact with the younger participants. The role of myself and other collaborating artists is to manage the relationships so that participants may concentrate on production, underpinned by many levels of learning. All contribute in different ways to the final outcomes, which have at different times included exhibitions, books and web sites. The current *Cascade* project focuses on the making of a *Young Person's Guide to East London*, an online resource being constructed over several years by hundreds of East London teenagers. It will provide an ongoing resource for local youth and offer their view of the region to the thousands of visitors attending the Olympics in 2012.

Although sharing a similar location to the Docklands Community Poster Project, the inception of these projects has significantly differed, reflecting both changes in the social and political climate and the kinds of opportunity on offer. What the projects share is a similarly organic developmental process based on dialogue, circumstance and interaction at both personal and institutional level. Each has taken into account the potential for finance, but neither have been 'funding-led'. The 1980's project nevertheless benefited from the long-term support of the Greater London Council, while *Cascade* progresses through a series of small, unconnected funds which frequently leave it on the edge of a financial precipice.

From experience, the 'design' of an art project with social and educational value needs to be flexible enough to allow it to build organically on community relationships and to uncover need. If the project can tap into where energy is already flowing it is more likely to engender long-term and developmental outcomes. This however contradicts many well-intentioned initiatives in the art world that stem from a curatorial desire to create something 'new'. In the UK at the moment, the process of commissioning is rapidly overtaking financial

support for artist-led projects, while public funding for the arts is beginning to mimic our increasingly target-driven economy. Although the latter might seem a counterpoint to the negative practice of 'parachuting' artists into communities, the imposition of a governmental 'social inclusion' agenda from above is also highly problematic. This is particularly so where it extends to insistence on particular forms of the 'bottom up' instigation of projects. As can be seen from the examples given, a formulaic approach cannot hope to fit all. It can also prevent creative innovation and lead either to simplistic work invented to fulfil funding directives, or a misdirection of creativity to give the appearance of doing so. It is heartbreaking to see how lessons in the social value of art have become turned on their head through this 'top down' approach, which is now supporting the widespread use of artists as a cheap panacea for society's ills.

As a warning from a practitioner in one country to policy makers in another: do it differently. Social benefits do not require social control. Where possible give support to existing initiatives and offer development money rather than commissions. Don't force collaborations - enable them to happen. Prioritise core funding to artist-led organisations over project finance and build educational initiatives around artistic production. Find new models for the interaction of art, education and place that we can learn from, but above all help to create the conditions where this can come about. As Catherine Wilson has recently reminded us:

The possibilities of artists engendering profound challenges to constructed cultural and social dichotomies, and influencing wider actions and thinking, is as infinite as the creative process itself. Nevertheless, tak[e] responsibility for the process, but [understand] that social outcomes rely on nodes of interaction in the wider public realm that the artist does not control (2008: 6).

## References

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