
Docklands Community Poster Project

- Peter Dunn and Loraine Leeson¹ interviewed by Javier Rodrigo for *Transductores*, Granada 2009

In 1981 the Docklands Community Poster Project carried out a political and visual campaign in defence of London's dockland, using various projects and cultural media (community photomurals, posters, radical actions, party-demonstrations, travelling exhibitions, etc.). The aim of this campaign was to visualize and communicate the problems of the communities in the area as regards the overall process of urban development that had marked out the docklands as new territory for neo-liberal speculation and exploitation. All the projects and actions carried out were an instrument at the disposal of the various communities in East London that worked in close collaboration with a committee representing them, trade unions and local groups from five London districts affected by the closure and reshaping of the docks.

This is a community cooperative founded in 1981 by the artists Peter Dunn and Loraine Leeson, with the aim of organizing a local resistance campaign in East London using various media. The DCPD carried on from the founders' experience working with trade unions in the late 1970s to prevent closure of public hospitals. The artists were contracted by a committee representing all the workers' communities, after regular exchange meetings with the local initiative committee, local action groups, activists, tenants, and local administration. The project was active for ten years, working constantly on negotiation and dialogue with numerous local agents and experts forming various work groups. Art was understood as a process of dialogue and collaboration with the various local networks, adapting and testing different media and representational devices, and simultaneously as a manner of visualizing, making aware and opening up new possibilities of collective action inside the framework of cultural activism as part of social movements and networks.

Origin of the project and its evolution

During the late 1970s the Labour party was following a mild socialist agenda, trades unions were a force protecting workers' rights and there was a great deal of 'grass roots' activism. The international Oil Crisis, and Government proposals to nationalize the 'impending bonanza of North Sea Oil and Gas', created a run on the pound and the International Monetary Fund made deep cuts to public spending part of the conditions of their loan. This put the Government and Labour movement in direct confrontation, leading to the

¹ This description is based on the replies of Peter Dunn and Loraine Leeson. In some sections the authors' answers are specified.

'Winter of Discontent' (78/9). This laid the ground for a Conservative Party victory headed by Margaret Thatcher in the following election. Recognising the market potential of the land surrounding the partly disused London docks, the first Enterprise zone and Urban Development Corporation were designated to take over this area, effectively removing the local democratic control of land across five London (Labour controlled) 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 we had already been collaborating for a number of years with 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 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. The Docklands Community Poster Project involved six paid part-time staff: ourselves as artist/coordinators, supported by a designer, administrator and support workers who assisted with photo-mural production and installation.

Methodology and results

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 aesthetics, visuals were discussed in terms of their meanings and representation. Each member of the group was considered an expert in their field, and it would have been similarly inappropriate for us to promote personal views on the issues. The project steering group met regularly to feed back on current issues of the campaigning and identify where action was needed. Siting of the photo-mural structures plus the messages to be conveyed and were decided at its monthly meetings. As artists we then worked to represent these themes, bringing imagery back to the group to check how well it conveyed its meaning, and visual styles might be discussed in terms of how it might represent a period of history (in the Housing Sequence for example). In this way the Docklands Community Poster Project was able to build on the model of the steering group developed for the East London Health Project, which had allowed each member of the collaborative team to use their best skills and avoided a 'lowest common denominator' approach. This process of decision making and co-

operation enabled a multiplication of skills and experience to be focused on the work. It provided a hub of creative energy that sustained the project throughout its ten-year duration and laid the foundations for all our subsequent collaborative work.

Links, networks and dissemination

Loraine Leeson (L.L.): 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.

Peter Dunn (P.D.): During that ten years the networking transformed from a number of isolated tenants organizations, confined to the localized territories, to a system that extended across the whole area - eight square miles in total – with Docklands Wide organizations such as the Joint Docklands Action Group, Democracy For Docklands and Docklands Forum, as well as our steering group. Through the Roadshow the work was shown in many other towns where docklands developments were about to happen and abroad in Amsterdam. That extended even wider through articles in publications over the years and events like this – the learning continues.

References and learning

L.L.: Lucy Lippard's 1973 book *Dematerialisation of the Art Object* marked a growing interest in artistic processes. At that time the role of the artist and individual authorship was also being called into question, and Marxist theory as understood by Gramsci was very important for activist art. Owen Nelly's *Community, Art and the State* and its relation with socially committed art work was also significant. The practical side of the theory was exemplified by such artists as Conrad Atkinson in his *Strike at Brannans* exhibition at the London ICA in 1972, or Hans Haacke, Klaus Staeck and above all Joseph Beuys and the constitution of the Free University, which brought together education, social action and art, sweeping away traditional boundaries. These practices were decisively affected by the concept of "cultural democracy" and particularly the emergence of so-called "community art" in the 1970s in the UK, with the assistance of the Association of Community Artists. We can mention here the influence of key lectures and conferences in the UK, such as *Friends and Allies* (Salisbury, 1983) and *Another Standard* (Sheffield, 1986), in parallel with *ImaginAction* (Boston, 1986) in the USA. The emergence of left-wing Labour in the 1980s was also very important as a political movement directly promoting local artists and community work. Finally, there was decisive input from formerly oppressed, voiceless groups from the 1960s and 1970s (collectives of gays, lesbians, young or black people), transformed into organised groups, together with feminist thinking and the new forms of art and technology we experienced in the 1990s.

P. D.: From roughly the mid 1970s to mid 80s there was an enormous surge of critical, visual and intellectual creativity. Seminal work around the politics of representation and identities – issues of class, race, gender and sexuality were put squarely on agenda to challenge the artworld and its institutions and lay them bare. It is however a ‘forgotten decade’ in the mainstream chronicles. The evidence of this surge of creativity may be fragmented but it exists. On the theoretical end of the spectrum were Journals such as *Art and Language*, *Frameworks*, *Control Magazine*, *Radical Philosophy*, *Black Phoenix*, *Third Text*, *Block*, and *AND magazine*. Critical theory in the UK that had a major impact were exemplified by: Birmingham’s Cultural Studies Unit, led by Stuart Hall; John Berger; Raymond Williams, Terry Eagleton, E.P. Thompson, John Tag and Laura Mulvey; Griselda Pollock; or Rashid Aareen. There were also a series of shows and related conferences and seminars: *Art in Revolution* was exhibited at The Hayward Gallery in 1971, Heartfield and Rodchenko’s work was also shown around the same time. The debates were taken up by *Art into Society*, *Society into Art*, ICA London (1974); *Art and Politics*, Air Gallery London (1977); *Art for Whom?*, Serpentine Gallery, London(1978); *Art For Society*, Whitechapel Art Gallery London and Ulster Museum Belfast (1978) and *Who’s Art, What Society*, Art & Research Exchange Belfast, (1979) The early eighties saw a push by black and asian artists, initially in small and regional galleries until the seminal *Thin Black Line*, at the ICA London, 1985.

Challenges and difficulties

L.L. The greatest weakness of this practice is the unsustainable nature of the financial and institutional support that it is currently possible to access. This means that the practice follows my own survival, which is always on a knife-edge and could collapse at any moment. The finance for projects usually has to be raised incrementally, which means that we rarely know for certain if we can finish what we have started.

P.D. That’s true and also it demonstrates the limitations of what Manuel Castells has called “Resistance Identity”, in that it is formed and can only exist in relation to the ‘Legitimising Identity’ of the dominant authority. It is essentially reactive, and unless it can develop into ‘Project Identity’ – to be proactive in capturing the agenda for change – then it will remain a moment of protest while the juggernaut of history rumbles on. Some of the community organisations began that process and we took that approach into the creation of The Art of Change. I have endeavoured to push this further in my Global Town Square projects, Futuretown and Beyond and Poplar Futures, where the communities set the agenda before the developers come up with their proposals.

Noteworthy aspects – weak and strong points

L.L. That the work takes place at all, develops and gets better! In terms of the content of the work, it is at its best when all the different factors come

together, for example as they did at the launch of the Young Person's Guide to East London – where all the individuals, groups and institutions come together and found themselves supporting each other.

P. D. The critical mass too was amazing – over 2000 people taking to boats in the People's Armada to Parliament – and direct action against luxury building projects that were on land designated for re-housing the poor. There were some stunning victories on a local level. But ultimately because there was no change in government, the forces were too overwhelming and relentless – it was after all, the extension of the financial centre to make London 'Globalisation-Ready'. We weren't just fighting government we were also fighting the tide of international capital. We weren't ready for that at the time but lessons were learned and are still being learned.