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EXPLODING THE FRAME

Projects and Context 1975-2005

Loraine Leeson

Project Summary:

- 1975-76 *London/Berlin Series* – performance, video and installations between London and Berlin, questioning the context of art and role of the artist.
- 1977 *The Present Day Creates History* – photo/text exhibition exploring lessons drawn from the concurrent development of two towns with very different histories.
- 1978 Work for the campaign to save Bethnal Green Hospital – video, posters and exhibition in support of health workers occupying an East London hospital under threat of closure.
- 1979-80 *East London Health Project* – a series of 'visual pamphlets' created in collaboration with representatives of health workers' unions.
- 1981-91 *Docklands Community Poster Project* – ten years of cultural campaigning with tenants and action groups in the London Docklands. Photo-murals, graphics, exhibitions, photographic documentation and events.
- 1992-02 *The Art of Change* – projects focusing on the transformation of the urban environment and its impact upon quality of life and cultural identity. Variety of visual media, public artworks and increasing use of digital technology.
- 2002-05 *cSPACE* – development of VOLCO plus arts projects linking research, education and community within a framework of higher education.

This exhibition has offered a very welcome opportunity to examine and re-evaluate the practice in which I have been engaged for thirty years. It feels fitting that the invitation for such an event has been initiated in Berlin, a city to which I felt drawn to complete my studies those three decades ago. It was in Germany in the seventies that much innovative work by artists very much concerned with bridging the gap between art and society seemed to be taking place, complementing and extending the art activism already underway in the UK¹. Since that time Berlin's Institut für Kunst in Kontext has promoted key educational innovation in this field. I feel very privileged that Katja Jedermann, Carmen Mörsch and others have selected my practice on which to focus their energies and highly developed critical perspectives. I am grateful to Grant Kester for applying his sophisticated theoretical understanding to the methodologies that have underpinned the work. I would also like to thank the other catalogue contributors, who have brought a breadth of perspective and critique that not only reflects but also surveys the current cultural landscape. In tune with the organisers, I am concerned that lessons learned from earlier decades may begin to productively inform the work of younger artists asking similar questions, though within a very different social and political climate. I hope that this exhibition and the debate surrounding it may feed usefully into an inter-generational dialogue.

¹ In 1972 Conrad Atkinson, staged his *Strike at Brannans* exhibition at the ICA, documenting an ongoing strike at a factory in Cumbria. Workers held meetings in the gallery, and one result of this public event was the unionisation of the factory's London branch. Margaret Harrison was addressing issues affecting women such as home-working, rape and sexual exploitation. Artist run groups such as the Poster Film Collective were evolving and producing a variety of work in the public domain emanating from community involvement and reflecting social issues.

London/Berlin Series 1975-76

- The square confines creativity
- Art activity must be framed by a context
- The square is now to be orientated towards a wider context
- Art activity must explode its frame in order to become creative within society

As an undergraduate student during the early seventies, many of my most significant influences in terms of understanding a social and political role for art, had come from Germany. While John Heartfield provided a backdrop, the more contemporary work of Hans Haacke, Klaus Staeck and Joseph Beuys brought new concepts and processes to this field of thinking. Thus on completion of my undergraduate studies, I applied to the British Council for a DAAD² scholarship, which brought me to Berlin in the autumn of 1975.

I was not prepared for the traditionalism of the institution in which I found myself. The Hochschule der Bildenden Künste [HdK] trained student artists for six years under the same professor, mainly in highly conventional media. At that time it offered little of the debate or critique for which I had been searching and which became manifest in subsequent years³. This was in contrast to the cultural activism of the 70's art school scene in the UK, and particularly my experience at the Slade School of Art in London where I was an associate student. In response to these contrasting experiences, I began a series of simultaneous performances in collaboration with student artist Peter Dunn between the HdK and the Slade. These questioned the context of art, the role of the artist, the relation of the individual to the group and the nature of collective cultural action. Initially enacted through a series of telephone conversations and personally transported written instructions, this work was to be a precursor to the digital projects involving communications media of recent years⁴. The questions are ones that are still relevant for my practice today.

The first performance took place with Peter creating a drawing as an individual in his London studio, while I worked with a group in Berlin to translate this into physical form, using earth and other tactile materials, on the floor of a communal studio at the HdK. The questions were written into the 'frame' we had created, debated, and amendments phoned back to Peter, who in turn incorporated these new ideas into his own design. Photographic and video documentation of these events was then used at a group event at

² The Deutsche Akademische Austauschdienst in partnership with the British Council offered bursaries for postgraduate study

³ Studies in the contextual practice of art were developed in same institution during the late 70's, leading to the establishment of the Institut für Kunst in Kontext, which has been offering an MA in this field since 2002.

⁴ The VOLCO project (2000-ongoing) using a database website and online discussion forum, takes a similar approach to the development of ideas through dialogue across geographical and cultural divides, feeding these back into an evolving body of knowledge (in this case a virtual planet).

the Slade, where the issues became further developed. Finally all the material returned to Berlin for the German end of the debate. A further addition to the exhibition and discussion had been made in response to the isolation of the educational experience of students at the HdK. Knocking on the door of every (locked) studio of its vast neoclassical building, I asked any students present to photograph the interior and write a comment on communication. These were then pasted onto a plan of the building, bringing to light interior spaces, and indeed whole departments hitherto unknown to its inhabitants, as well as many common concerns on communication issues.

Partnership working proved very fruitful in this project that was itself based on dialogue, and Peter and myself continued to collaborate on projects and through organisations that we founded, for another twenty years.

The Present Day Creates History 1976-77

The London/Berlin Series had been questioning the role of art in society. It advocated breaking out of the institutional frame, even though it had not itself done so. The next step was to find a way to create a meaningful cultural intervention outside of a fine art context. To understand how this might happen, we visited UK artist Stuart Brisley, who was beginning an Artist Placement Group [APG]⁵ residency in the new town of Peterlee in County Durham. He showed us the results of an early artist residency there by Victor Pasmore, which had resulted in cuboid buildings and sculpted mounds of communal lawns. Stuart's desire was to do something that could engage more meaningfully with the needs of the new inhabitants, recently displaced from their mining village communities. He thus offered us a model of the artist working from within a community outwards, with social engagement as the starting point.

We chose to compare the development of the imposed urban development of Peterlee with a very different model, that of Ruislip, a ribbon suburb of London where I grew up. The aim was to expose the decision-making processes that underpinned each location, taking Brecht's perspective on the making of history through the actions of the present day. Our methodology was to uncover these processes through interviews and interaction with local residents, then to feed this material back through an exhibition in public venues where discussion could take place.

The exhibition entitled *The Present Day Creates History*, comprised image and text derived from personal interview, family photographs, press cuttings, and local archives. Displayed in libraries and other public venues, it highlighted the social and political contexts that had framed the different

⁵ The Artists Placement Group (APG 1966-1989, renamed Organisation and Imagination or O+I in 1989) was initiated by Barbara Steveni and John Latham. APG emerged from the idea that artists are a human resource underused by society, and placed artists in government, commercial and industrial organisations.

development of each town, and indicated choices for the future. However despite the dialogue that emanated from this, the material gathered from local people, the fact that one location was my own home-town where I had history and local knowledge, there was something missing. People asked why we were doing it. We had answers, but I'm not sure we really knew. We understood that we wanted to support social change, and that we were well positioned as artists to operate in 'peripheral' spaces and to facilitate dialogue and questioning unlikely to occur within institutions. However what did we think we were going to achieve in the minds of a handful of local residents who were puzzled as to why we were there at all? If we wanted to support social change did we not need to be less a drop in the ocean and more part of a groundswell? It was our first real lesson concerning collective action. The second lesson was offered by a campaign to save an East London hospital from closure.

Bethnal Green Hospital Campaign 1977-78

The seventies in Britain saw the first wave of cutbacks in the National Health Service, carried out initially by the Tories, then continued through the Labour government newly elected in 1974. As part of this policy, many small hospitals were closed. The Bethnal Green Hospital in East London served the local population as a community hospital and was valued for its continuity of care and accessibility to local residents. It was still working to capacity and if its facilities became withdrawn, patients would have nowhere to go except to join and extend already over-long waiting lists in other hospitals. In 1977, following orders for closure, its staff decided to 'occupy' the hospital while a campaign was mounted to safeguard its future. The only people to move out of the hospital were therefore the administrators. Doctors, nurses and other staff continued to perform their duties, GP's referred their patients, people attended the casualty department and ambulance drivers still responded to emergency calls. While patients remained at the hospital, the health authority had a duty to pay staff salaries – and so the occupation took effect.

I had recently taken up a Greater London Arts fellowship, shared with Peter Dunn, with a remit to set up and run film and video workshops in that area. Dan Jones, a local social worker, artist and member of the Bethnal Green Hospital campaign committee (now Head of Education at Amnesty International UK), approached us with the offer of the hospital as a 'workshop location', hoping for a video production that could be used by the campaign. This provided an opportunity to use our practice in a way that could support issues of relevance to local people.

Initially we attempted to produce a campaign video through the workshops. It soon became apparent however that process and product were at odds. In the workshop activities non-specialists needed to learn at their own pace, while the campaign video had to be rapidly produced. To be effective it also

had to work aesthetically. We soon found ourselves editing out camera shake and other results of inexpert involvement, feeling torn between providing positive learning experiences for participants, and the result that was needed. Eventually a reasonable outcome was produced in the form of the 'Emergency' documentary. At the same time we resolved to find a better working process.

Campaigning posters were then requested, and this time we found a more satisfactory way of working directly with members of the campaign committee. During the months of making the video, we had become increasingly involved in the campaign itself, and had taken to photographically documenting events. When it became apparent that there was need for a more in-depth explanation of the issues for people entering the hospital, we therefore had plenty of material on which to draw. An exhibition was devised to place the specific campaign within its wider social and political context, and to communicate this complex information in an accessible way. It was through this work that we developed our use of photomontage into an artistic and political tool.

While the exhibition fulfilled its purpose in the hospital, another function emerged. Around the same time, the art critic Richard Cork had been asked to curate an exhibition for the Serpentine Gallery in London. Entitled *Art for Whom?* it was to reflect a growing interest in the potential audience for art beyond the gallery going public. Other artists exhibiting in the show included Conrad Atkinson, the Islington Schools Environmental Project, the Public Art Workshop and Stephen Willats. Between them they demonstrated that art was indeed a medium that could deal effectively with issues affecting the lives of ordinary people.

East London Health Project 1978–81

In 1978 the East London trades councils wished to disseminate information about health issues to the local population in light of the cuts being made to the National Health Service. They had a small amount of funding remaining from some recent campaigning, which they had originally intended to use for the production of leaflets. Dan Jones, an experienced campaigner and an artist in his own right, understood that there was a role for art in social change. Appreciating the commitment and political understanding demonstrated in our work for the Bethnal Green Hospital campaign, he proposed that the trades councils take the risk of developing a new, visual approach to the broader campaigning.

A small steering committee was instigated including representatives from the health workers unions NALGO and NUPE [National Association of Government Officers and national Union of Public Employees], the East

London Trades Councils and Tower Hamlets Health Campaign. We worked with this steering committee to determine the visual form most suited to its potential audience, and arrived at the idea of the 'visual pamphlet' - essentially a poster containing information that could be used in doctors' surgeries and waiting areas of other health venues. The steering group provided us with an important learning experience. The role of each member was to share their specialist knowledge. The health representatives did not attempt to make aesthetic judgements, and we as artists did not assume expertise in the issues. The visuals that emanated from these discussions were evaluated in terms of their effectiveness in conveying meanings, rather than by their appearance. This approach to collaboration proved highly successful in the way it resulted in a 'multiplication' of skills and experience, and through the creative energy it generated; it was also a vigorous response to the 'design by committee' criticism often directed at collectively produced artwork of the time. This method of collaboration was to provide the structural foundations for our subsequent art practice.

Eight different posters were produced over the two years of the project. These were widely distributed within the health sector, and also intervened in the art world through inclusion in such exhibitions as *'Issue – Social Strategies by Women Artists'*, curated by Lucy Lippard for the Institute of Contemporary Arts in London in 1980.

Docklands Community Poster Project 1981–91

I co-founded the Docklands Community Poster Project with Peter in 1981 as a response to the concerns of East London communities over proposed plans for an extensive re-development programme in the area. The newly elected Conservative government under Margaret Thatcher designated the land surrounding the working docks, from St Katherine's Dock east of Tower Bridge downriver to the Royal Docks, as an Urban Development Corporation. This effectively removed local control from an area crossing five London boroughs, with the aim of transferring it into private ownership. However, this land, now known as the London Docklands, not only incorporated docks and warehouses, but was also home and workplace to 56,000 people. Historically East London communities had been poor but politically active. In this case they were not against development, but wanted it to also meet their own needs. A struggle ensued...

The local trades council, as a result of our recent work around health issues in the area, asked us to produce a poster alerting local people to what was to come. However following a period of consultation with tenants and action groups, it soon became clear that this would not be enough. Posters were indeed wanted, but 'large ones' to match the scale of the proposals. Design work to help with individual campaigns, documentation of the area before it changed and a record of each battle as it ensued was also requested. In addition, there was a need for easily accessible information that examined key issues such as housing and specific development sites in more depth.

With all this in mind, but with no funding, we developed a plan that would deliver art and design work for these key areas. Most importantly, and based on our recent experience, we created a steering committee for the project. Tenants in the area were already federated into action groups for each locality, and since the proposed re-development of the Docklands, they had also formed a representative Joint Docklands Action Group (JDAG). The Docklands Community Poster Project (DCPP) organised itself along similar lines and representatives from each area met regularly to report on local developments, identify where action was needed, agree issues to be represented and consider the audience that the artwork should serve. A small amount of funding was eventually raised from the local boroughs and the regional arts board. This was finally matched by a significant grant from the new Labour controlled Greater London Council (GLC). The steering group became a community co-op, and part-time staff were employed to fulfil roles of administration, design and technical support. Thus an arts project that began as a request for a poster eventually became the cultural arm of an extraordinary campaigning community over a period of ten years.

From Photo-Murals to People's Armadas

One of the main activities of the DCPP was the production of the large posters requested by the Docklands groups. The steering group considered carefully who the main audience for these posters should be and decided that the Docklands communities themselves were the most important. Most people were unaware of what was going on. They only knew the miles of corrugated iron now surrounding what was left of the docks, and that they had been left stranded in poor housing with few facilities. We also needed to consider how these images would be made and sited.

Commercial billboards, aimed at communicating a simple brand name, tend to be situated in locations where they can best attract the attention of passing motorists. Since the DCPP's information was aimed at local people, it was decided that they should be constructed on sites where they could be seen over time by passing pedestrians. To this end, we built our own billboard structures. Initially one was constructed in Wapping, and when funds became available, seven more in and around the Docklands area. Some were temporary, though at any one time six sites were in operation.

The images themselves were developed with these large multiple billboards in mind. They were designed to change gradually through replacement of individual sections, and develop a narrative like a slow motion animation film. In practical terms this meant the images could be transferred from one site to another, enabling the story of Docklands to unfold through time and space. Inspiration for the format of the photo-murals came from Chinese wall posters, which had brought information to the people during the Cultural Revolution. Messages to be conveyed came out of the discussions of the DCPP steering group.

The DCPD appointed a designer Sandra Buchanan, who took over the production of posters and other materials to support local direct action. In addition Peter and myself documented the development sites, campaigns and community initiatives. Between us we attended all meetings and events around these issues, creating a photographic archive to ensure visual representation from a community perspective. Together we also produced exhibitions dealing with specific issues in greater depth than the photo-murals, for display at meetings, festivals and other events. Towards the end of the 80's these were drawn together into the Docklands Roadshow which toured the UK and abroad, accompanied by workshops run by the many specialists involved in the campaigning. During the late 80's the Docklands Roadshow delivered information and strategies to other communities coming under Thatcher's new non-democratic Urban Development Corporations.

A significant outcome of our long term involvement with this campaigning was a shift in recognition of the value of cultural campaigning. When originally involved in this work we had been regarded as artists peripheral to the main activity. After the first few years this effective culturally based approach began to be taken on board by others involved in the campaigning. Organisations approached us first with ideas for action. New methods also emerged out of the constant dialogue, and the nature of the campaigning itself shifted, taking on a pro-active rather than re-active stance, an approach that continues to underpin my current practice.

One of the best examples of this pro-active practice was the People's Armada to Parliament. This began as an idea to highlight the real needs of people living in the Docklands and evolved through a series of local meetings. Starting with a suggestion to deliver a petition to parliament, it ended with over a thousand people taking to the river in an event that was simultaneously a direct action, a political rally and a community festival. Co-ordination was undertaken by the Joint Docklands Action Group while the DCPD created designs for banners, logos and a host of ephemera. We involved other arts groups who transformed the lead barge and other boats, provided music and pyrotechnics and who took part in the event near parliament where the festivities culminated. Members of the Labour shadow cabinet were invited to publicly state how they would address the issues affecting the people of Docklands from the first day of coming to power. This was a key strategy of the campaigning that without government support would only have limited effectiveness. Each politician was presented with a copy of the People's Charter for Docklands, reminding them of their pledge. The People's Armada became an annual event between the years of 1984 and 1986.

The Docklands re-development continued through three terms of aggressive Thatcherism, and much of the land was eventually sold off. Despite this, some positive outcomes were achieved through the campaigning. Riverside sites in this area now contain affordable and rented housing. A road that would have decimated Wapping has been re-routed, and an urban farm on the isle of Dogs continues to provide open green space and amenities for local residents. Importantly outputs from community organisation of that period are

still regarded as models of good practice to inform present and future thinking⁶.

Today this area continues as a focus for regeneration within the wider Thames Gateway region. Twenty years later people continue to live in the same run down tower blocks bordering the Royal Docks, and the new unelected Urban Development Corporation, this time formed by a Labour government, controls an area many times the size of the Docklands. Interestingly, people are looking back to the 80's when so much was lost, as a heyday of the kind of community organisation government agencies are now trying to foster⁷. For my own practice it was a moment of integration, when politics, social organisation, issues and ideas came together in a way that made a meaningful arts intervention possible. It was also a significant moment of learning, and I continually revisit lessons understood from those experienced activists. The new millennium brings less cohesion and far more complexity...

The Art of Change 1991–2001

'...a visual arts organisation concerned with issues of change - particularly transformation of the urban environment and its impact upon quality of life and cultural identity⁸.'

The left labour controlled Greater London Council of the early 80's proved too popular for Margaret Thatcher's ultra right wing cabinet. Following failure to block GLC policies, the government resorted to the only means possible, which was to remove from the whole country the tier of government they represented. It took several years to achieve, but in 1985 a Local Government Act was passed to abolish the GLC and six other Metropolitan County Councils. As a result of this, funding that had supported so many community based initiatives in London gradually came to an end.

Though the Docklands Community Poster Project managed to continue for a few years with other income, its scope was severely diminished. It was time to take stock and look at what could still be achieved. We had by that time worked for ten years around issues of planning and development. Although the loss of our main source of funding was serious, we also welcomed the opportunity to address other issues relating to the many changes in London's

6 The People's Plan for the Royal Docks (designed by the DCP) was produced by local residents of Silvertown supported by the GLC's Popular Planning Unit, which employed key political strategists on its staff. Sheila Rowbotham and Hilary Wainwright (co-authors of the seminal socialist feminist book 'Beyond the Fragments') worked with local people to develop alternative plans to the airport proposed for this site. Their plan was in turn informed by the alternative strategies developed by the Lucas Aerospace Shop Stewards Combine of a decade before. The People's Plan was successful in winning a public enquiry, though the airport still went ahead.

7 Regeneration programmes such as SRB (Single Regeneration Budget and NDC (New Deal for Communities), create accountable structures for delivering funds for development. However they do this through a 'top down' approach.

⁸ From the Art of Change mission statement

East End, and the way these were impacting on people's lives. The DCPP was lucky to retain 50% of its former funding, which now came through the regional arts board. The remaining shortfall was addressed through a plan to raise money on individual projects, and expand the now diminished staff team. A designer was taken on to develop work for the voluntary sector, and a business development officer was employed to fundraise and explore new opportunities for the work. The new salaries were to be covered by the income they generated. Though these strategies were never entirely effective, they kept the organisation afloat for a further decade and allowed us to produce work through many different, separately funded projects, around our common theme. Peter and I co-directed the organisation, though we now seldom worked together on creative projects. The new emphasis however opened up a new range of collaborative partners, plus possibilities for alternative approaches. The organisation was re-named The Art of Change.

New national lottery funding which supported involvement of communities in the development of artworks for the public domain, supplemented by bids to trusts, foundations and public bodies, covered many of our costs. Commissions for public art consultancies as well as artworks and educational projects for galleries extended the range of the projects we were able to undertake. Most important for me were opportunities to work with young people, and the innovations being made in digital technology throughout the 90's.

I had started my artistic life in the 70's using photography film and video. My subsequent collaboration with Peter led to processes of photomontage using 'cut and paste' techniques for our early poster and exhibition work with health issues, which later expanded into the Docklands photo-murals. All incorporated a filmic use of narrative and sequence. During the 90's imaging software enhanced montage techniques, while scanning and digital photography created flexibility with source materials. This became pertinent in work with schools, where pupils were able to make artwork in a size or medium appropriate to the classroom, making best use of teachers' skills. As the Internet and communications technologies became more widespread, new ways of working with groups became possible. The web offered interaction in terms of both communication and narrative, plus a virtual domain for the public siting of process and product.

The collaborative relationships with activist groups in the 70's and 80's now informed the schools work. A particular value of young people's involvement in public projects, is knowledge and understanding of their own lived experience (in this case within an inner city undergoing significant regeneration). This age group also has imagination in abundance, and a stake in the future of their society. Whether working with infants or teenagers, I found that a collaborative approach towards a shared goal to be of continued relevance, even though each may benefit differently from the process and outcome. In this sense I did not set out to 'educate', though I acknowledged the original meaning of that word - 'to draw out' - which precisely describes the process of enabling participants to express their ideas.

During the late 80's, as a result of involvement in co-operative and collective organisational structures, I became trained in conflict resolution. I came to understand that conflict often occurred at the coming together of difference, though it was fear rather than the differences themselves, that often caused the problems. I learned about the creation of 'safe spaces' where diverse ideas could be expressed. I also learned that underlying needs, once uncovered, may not always be at odds; and that where all else fails, creativity is the most useful tool. Above all, I came to understand that when the differences that lead to the conflict can coincide without fear, and underlying needs are addressed, real innovation is often the outcome - the greater the difference, the greater the possibility for innovation. This experience fed into the collaborative work I began at The Art of Change and further developed through cSPACE. Recognition of the possibility of involving numerous different parties, holding different interests, who could nevertheless benefit from each other, became the key to the multi-collaborations of the later work.

Projects with schools in the early 90's initially made use of the billboards originally constructed for the Docklands Community Poster Project. A publicly accessible output remained important to the work's social remit, while it also became clear that the personal gain of participants was far greater if their work fed into a publicly valued, collective outcome of professional quality, clearly embodying their own ideas. It had to be both good and irrefutably theirs. I perceived that one of my roles as an artist was to enable these factors to co-exist. To this end I developed structures that allowed the power of participants' ideas to come through, without being diminished by their lack of skill. Both aesthetic and organisational, these frameworks offered boundaries which also facilitated creativity in the process of production. The frameworks ranged from the physical borders and production techniques of *West Meets East* and *Celebrating the Difference*, to the digital montages and structured writing of web projects such as *I.D* and *Infinity Story*.

The Art of Change embodied a decade of participatory and collaborative projects that embraced public art, education, digital interactivity and a growing interest in sustainability. It came to an end at the turn of the millennium following a change in policy of the London Arts Board, which for ten years had been its principal source of funding. At the same time Peter and myself decided to go our separate ways, both professionally and personally.

Summary of Art of Change Projects

Lead or co-authored by Loraine Leeson

1991 *Digital Highways* Multimedia installation commissioned by the Agnes Etherington Gallery, Kingston, Ontario, as part of their exhibition and conference *Fragmented Power: Art Voices for 2000*. Collaboration with Peter Dunn and Canadian artists Karl Beverage and Carole Conde.

1992 *West Meets East* 16 ft x 12 ft photo-mural and touring exhibition. Produced with teenage Bengali girls from Bow, East London. The project explored the theme of their experience of living in two cultures.

1993-4 *Celebrating the Difference* Digital montage displayed as a 16 ft x 12 ft photomural. Produced with pupils from the Isle of Dogs, East London. Working with a group of culturally mixed teenagers, the project dealt with issues of culture and identity, commonality and difference in an inner city area fraught with racial tension.

1994 *Between Family Lines* Four-projector tape slide production and exhibition made with women from five cultures who had suffered under fundamentalism or orthodoxy. Collaboration with Karen Merkel of Cultural Partnerships and Women Against Fundamentalism, who used the materials for their education and support work.

1995-6 *Awakenings*, after Stanley Spencer's painting *Resurrection*. Commission by the Tate Gallery and exhibited at their Millbank site 1995/6. Digital montage as a 13 ft x 7 ft Cibachrome print produced with pupils from an East London school. The young people explored works in the Tate's collection, deconstructing what was historically, culturally, class and gender specific, and then 'changed places' with the artist to re-make the work about themselves and their lives. Collaboration with Peter Dunn.

1996 *Putting Ourselves in the Picture* Alpona panels and beadwork hangings created with women and children from East London's Bengali community, combining traditional skills with digital processes. The panels inspired design of the Jagonari Asian Women's Centre cafe, where they are on permanent display. Collaboration with Language 2000.

1996 *Beyond the Classroom* Co-ordination of a project to support schools in the commissioning and production of public artworks. Instigated and funded by the Lee Valley Park Authority with London Arts Board. Evaluated by Art and Society.

1996-7 *Through Our Own Eyes* Development of an 'artists in schools' residency programme, which gave training and support to six recent graduates who wished to develop their art practice within an educational context. Collaboration with the University of East London and the Tate Gallery, Millbank.

1997 *A Welcoming Change* Commission by the Royal London Hospital for research and development towards the refurbishment of its main entrance. Proposals were produced for permanent and temporary artworks to create a welcoming and comfortable environment reflecting the needs, concerns and cultures of the hospital's main users and communities. Collaboration with Anne Thorne Architects.

1997 *Infinity Story* Interactive illustrated story produced with input from 300 East London junior school children. Crossing the IT, Literacy and Art areas of the curriculum, the project developed an online creative resource for schools. Collaboration with artist Camille Dorney. www.cspace.org.uk/infinity

1998 *Forging a Gateway* Arts strategy for Cityside Regeneration's refurbishment of the Aldgate subways complex. Produced as part of a multicultural artist team with Kinsi Abdullah and Meena Thakor. Organised by Anne Thorne Architects and funded by an RSA Art for Architecture award.

1998-9 *I.D* Commission by the Tate Gallery, Millbank to create a website project taking inspiration from the Tate's John Singer Sargent exhibition. The work was undertaken with two secondary schools in London Borough of Tower Hamlets. www.cspace.org.uk/id

1999 *Momentos* Commission by the Art Gallery of Ontario to create a website project with four high schools in Toronto, taking inspiration from their exhibition of works by 19th century Canadian artist Cornelius Krieghoff. Resulted in an online resource and set of virtual postcards.

Collaboration with artist Peter Dunn. www.ago.net/momentos

1999- 2001 *Widening Participation* A partnership initiative with Chelsea College of Art and Design, incorporating undergraduate involvement into projects, establishment of a higher education mentoring scheme for young people in East London, and a postgraduate placement with The Art of Change.

1998 - 2002 *The Catch* Gateway public artwork for Barking town centre also involving workshops with local children. In collaboration with Anne Thorne Architects. Commission by LB Barking and Dagenham www.the-catch.net

1999/02 *Unlocking the Grid* Period of consultation funded by the Arts Council of England to research and develop opportunities for the creation of content for the National Grid for Learning in schools using the arts across the curriculum.

cSPACE 2002–ongoing

*'...uses the visual arts, media and opportunities of cyberspace to support local communities, children and young people in the expression of their visions, dreams and aspirations around issues of regeneration. This is done through the production of collective, collaborative and participatory artworks in and for the public domain.'*⁹

Following the demise of The Art of Change, Peter and I split the practice into two new organisations. He continued with work in the built environment through his new organisation Art.e, and I founded cSPACE at the University of East London's Docklands campus, to further develop the work with digital media and education. cSPACE has been established as a not-for-profit company limited by guarantee' and is registered as a charity. This structure places the organisation in a good position to generate income for projects, enabling me to work full time on arts initiatives supported by a part-time administrator. The organisation remains small, but the projects are large in scale and involve a number of freelancers, while its university base has opened up opportunities to interface with research and higher education.

VOLCO

One of the main projects of cSPACE has been VOLCO, initiated as a pilot in 2000 at The Art of Change. This is an evolving Virtual Online Co-Operative environment, a planet in cyberspace constructed by children and young people using the Internet to link creatively across cultural and geographical divides. Hundreds of young people with different backgrounds and life experiences, combine their ideas and upload their own visual and written materials into its database web site. In this way a new, virtual society is emerging out of their combined imaginations.

⁹ cSPACE mission statement. See www.cspace.co.uk.

By early 2005 the web site contained the imaginary identities of over six hundred children. Initially I ran the project myself in schools, though I now train teachers and artists to do it themselves, which allows children to gain access in far greater numbers. At the time of writing I have trained many teachers in East London, and now also in Berlin primary schools and artists. In Chicago I have trained artists to run the project with children in hospitals. Plans are underway to involve participants from a growing number of disparate locations, which currently include the Shetland Isles, Austria, Venezuela and Ireland.

The project was devised in the UK during the late 90's, in the wake of the National Grid for Learning¹⁰ and the advent of computers in significant numbers in the classroom. It was developed in the interstice between policy and the process of computerisation with which teachers were struggling, and out of my own direct experience in schools as parent, governor and artist. VOLCO not only set out to interface with the curriculum, but also to address new directives for cross-curricular learning, the use of digital technology across all subject areas, and a renewed recognition of the role of creativity in learning¹¹. In this way it offered a practical resource to schools, while remaining to me an intriguing exercise in collective art practice.

VOLCO builds on and extends my interest in conflict resolution. In this case the 'safe spaces' are furnished through the anonymous online identities adopted by participants and the virtual environment within which interaction takes place. On starting the project I suspected that children from different backgrounds may find more in common through their imaginary lives than their lived realities. The *Infinity Story*¹² identified the capacity of children of this age to bring the benefit of their own experience to bear on, and their willingness to interact with, each other's stories. It also made use of imagination as the 'safe' environment where this could be enacted. Participants engage in VOLCO on a level of fantasy, though video conferencing is also used at the conclusion of the online interaction so that the children can finally meet their online partners in the (virtual) flesh. Following the pilot project between an elementary school in North Carolina and a primary school in East London, participants were linked for the first time via primitive video conferencing. The use of a uniform template for the creation of online identities had ensured that participants had been able to decode and understand the visual imagery uploaded by their counterparts.

¹⁰The National Grid for Learning (NGfL) strategy for information and communications technology (ICT) in education and lifelong learning was first outlined in the 'Open for Learning, Open for Business' challenge document, published in November 1998. Its main aims were:

- * to provide a gateway to educationally-valuable content on the internet (the NGfL portal)
- * to develop an infrastructure in schools, libraries, colleges, universities, workplaces and homes to support access to the internet
- * to provide a programme of training to develop ICT good practice.

¹¹ Robinson, K. 1999, *All Our Futures – Creativity and Culture in Education*, DfES, Suffolk.

¹² *The Art of Change: 1997 Infinity Story* Interactive illustrated story produced with input from 300 East London junior school children. Crossing the IT, Literacy and Art areas of the curriculum, the project developed an online creative resource for schools. Collaboration with artist Camille Dorney. www.cspace.org.uk/infinity

They had communicated using the English language. Although there had been differences in both the kinds of imagery and language used, this had, within this context, served to increase their interest in each other. When they 'met' however, the UK children were struck by the southern drawl of their US partners, while it became clear that the US children had imagined all the Londoners to be white and speak like the Queen. Rather than feeling inhibited by their differences however, both sides were very excited to see and talk to the alien characters with whom they had invented the planet, and were now keen to know about each others' actual lives and experiences.

VOLCO is ultimately about re-engagement with real life, offering preparation for a world where future generations will need to make creative use of whatever technologies are at their disposal, through teamwork, in a multi-cultural environment. Inventing VOLCO together is about encouraging young people to explore new, imaginative and co-operative ways of creating a better life for their own planet.

Cascade

Another cSPACE project has been Cascade, developed in relation to the regeneration of the Thames Gateway within which cSPACE is situated. Reputedly the largest regeneration site in Europe, the proposed developments stretch from Tower Bridge at its western extremity, incorporating the London Docklands, downriver to the North Sea. The extensive physical, social and environmental changes destined for this area will impact significantly on the lives of present and future generations. Within the University of East London a research institute has been created solely to address the issues arising from this.

Cascade intervenes in this context taking a multi-collaborative approach that aims to give young people a means of bringing their views on the future into the public domain. The project draws on university research plus local expertise and uses a mentoring process to link students with young people in further education and children in local schools, who all make artwork around the same theme. I developed this process at Chelsea School of Art in the late 90's, and since moving to the University of East London have extended the scope of the project to involve a range of different partners.

Like VOLCO, Cascade builds on the conflict resolution inspired processes developed through earlier projects, incorporating a 'win/win' approach to collaboration at a far more complex level. Groups from several different institutions are involved, and the project hinges on the benefits for participants when linking one to another. Skills and experience are passed from professionals and academics to students, young people and the children while each is engaged in learning experiences with the other, so that the 'cascade' both energises and nurtures. All benefit from the interaction, the introduction of new skills and the public showcasing of the work. It is central to this project that participants see their ideas as both valuable and valued. Cascade grows and develops each year in response to changing issues in the local environment, to the needs of partners and participants, and to the opportunities that arise. In this sense, like Planet VOLCO, it evolves more than it is planned, albeit within a

structured framework. More directly than other projects, it spans a divide between art and education, between the artist as catalyst and as instigator of collective production.

Within the current work, issues of the previous thirty years therefore remain central. The assertions of the London/Berlin series, though posed within an institutional context still apply:

- The square (framework) confines creativity
- Art activity must be framed by a context
- The square (framework) is now to be orientated towards a wider context
- Art activity must explode its frame in order to become creative within society

What I would now add is that a framework if imposed rigidly will confine, but that structure used appropriately enables creativity. That art activity, though always framed by a context, does well to acknowledge and engage in what this is. That orienting art production towards a wider context can prove very fruitful for all concerned, so long as it is rooted in the needs of those it serves. That moving largely out of the art institutional frame is necessary when one wants to be effective in a social sense. Finally, that exploding the frame has been a very rewarding, if precarious, business for half a lifetime's work. I shall be endeavouring during the next thirty years to develop a process of reconstruction suitable for the more equitable society that I hope we can together begin to create.