

Re-generation

a dialogue on the interface between participatory arts practice and higher education

John Cockram and Loraine Leeson

JC

The following text documents a dialogue between Loraine Leeson and myself conducted by e-mail. Our focus is a recent collaboration involving Loraine's organisation cSPACE and myself, as coordinator of the Student Artist in Residence Programme, in Architecture and the Visual Arts at the University of East London. Through this dialogue we shall explore, from our different perspectives, issues relating to the current debates around arts and regeneration. The dialogue structure has been chosen as it parallels the artistic collaboration in which we have been involved, reflecting the interactive methodology of the practice - the process that has enabled collective creative production. It is in effect, a compressed textual and cognitive *re-generation*.

Underpinning this conversation are a number of issues we have been considering over recent months in relation to participatory art practice, including:

- the relationship between practitioners, participants and partner institutions
- 'difference' and 'commonality' within participatory arts discourse
- the position of the artist within urban regeneration
- implications for creativity and learning

A useful focus for these considerations has been the Cascade project in which we have both been involved. Loraine, perhaps you would like describe the backdrop to this work and how the ideas have developed.

LL

Cascade has developed out of the drawing together of several different strands of interest which include mentoring as a creative process, and the opportunities offered to cSPACE arts organisation through its base in a higher education institution. Most importantly, the project is built around an interest in the way that collaborations, if structured well, are able to create a 'multiplication' of creative outcomes for those involved. By that I mean, when different skills, abilities and experiences can find a way to both co-exist and add to each other around a particular focus, new and innovative outcomes seem to result. The trick is how to enable these differences to come together without hitting up against each other and causing conflict. I have been working in this way now for many years and have developed a number of strategies, not least those learned from work in conflict transformation. One result of this has been the attempt to bring together the many different interests represented in Cascade, to the benefit of participants, who are enabled to make their own public statements on a common issue relevant to their futures. This annual project takes as its theme the regeneration of the Thames

Gateway, its potential impact on the lives of local people, and the wider global context of the issues raised.

This year we focused on the environmental implications of the bid for a 2012 London Olympics, the site for which would be in East London. The project is run through cSPACE, which I direct. Partners this year were the University of East London, Newham College of Further Education, North Beckton Primary School and Gunpowder Park, a centre for arts and sciences in the Lee Valley, just north of the proposed Olympic site. University students mentored young people from the local FE college and were then placed (with extensive support) in their mentoring pairs in a school, where they ran workshops for primary age children. By linking with research underway at the London East Research Institute, we were able to offer participants a range of up to date information on the issues, extended through site visits and expertise from Lee Valley. Students, young people and children all produced work around the theme, which was publicly exhibited at Gunpowder Park at the conclusion of the project. At this event children were able to put their questions to London 2012, the body behind the bid. They were recorded doing this by a student film crew for a production later to be screened at public venues (the ICA in London and New Society for Fine Arts in Berlin). The event was timed to follow the visit of the International Olympics Committee (IOC), which had a remit to observe community involvement and opinion. In this way participants could experience their ideas as both valuable and valued within the wider public domain.

The project has been constructed to enable skills and experience to pass down from the arts organisation and higher education to young people and children, but this 'cascade' may also be turned on its head, since the strength of the project lies in the way that each layer supports the other. The collaborations of Cascade have been created to both energise and nurture.

You may like to comment on your experience of this process John, since this year Cascade developed another layer. You became a creative participant in addition to your role as student co-ordinator, by making your own artwork as part of the project. Would you like to say more about this?

JC

In terms of my own positioning as artist/lecturer, there is invariably an accentuation of the Freirean notion within such projects: the student becoming the teacher and the teacher becoming the student¹ – facilitating equitable and profitable, though often very challenging, exchange. What struck me, despite the steep learning curves experienced by students, was the development of a distinct fluidity and synergy of thought and experience amongst many participants. This undoubtedly informed and lent impetus not only to my teaching but also my contribution in terms of art practice. The conception and construction of '*Build*', the artwork I created for the project, was directly informed by a cross-referencing of ideas and viewpoints around issues of urban regeneration thrown up by the Olympic site proposals. The construction itself was wrapped in hazard tape printed with the children's concerns about

the proposed development, generated through the creative work they did in the student run workshops; which, as you point out, they were able to express in person to London 2012.

For me, part of the 'glue' of the project, was the vibrancy of the interface between participants, with differing levels of expertise, experience and expectation. There is immense value for undergraduates in finding an opportunity to both broaden their creative outlook away from the studio base and develop the professional skills to sustain that investigation. The accessible nature of the East London regeneration theme provided a focus for collective thought and also for the application of creative collaboration in terms of the resulting outputs. This process created a very particular group dynamic evidenced by an increasingly rapid and incremental sense of 'exchange' and reciprocal self-reflection – a repeated 'testing' of the creative waters. Set against the backdrop of a high-profile project with, self-evidently, many people investing commitment and expectation, there was another outcome, which I found to be almost palpable. The sense of 'urgency' which permeated the high level of pressing practical considerations also accelerated the process of dealing with theoretical issues and lending insight. This created extremely effective 'group learning'. This was evident within two areas of 'regenerated' intellectual activity:

- A re-invested sense of individual awareness and creative development in terms of the potential role, creative application, and social impact, of the artist not only as practitioner but also 'negotiator'.
- A re-invested understanding of the above in relation to Higher Educational 'provision' and philosophy.

I'd like to ask you about the semantics of part of your text at this point Loraine – there is something which struck me as worthy of exploration which could inform both these areas. You talk about a process of problem solving and the identification of different agendas that serves to 'multiply' creative outcomes. You then relate this to your experience in 'conflict *transformation*'. I am intrigued by your choice not to use the term 'conflict resolution', perhaps you could elaborate a little?

LL

A good friend who is an experienced international mediator, has always maintained this as the preferable term. I have a lot of time for this position and my experience echoes these sentiments. 'Conflict resolution' implies a problem that needs to be solved. However conflict can be also seen more positively as a useful indicator of the co-inciding of difference. It is what happens next that matters. Anxiety and retrenchment, then fear and prejudice can always follow, however it is also possible to catch that moment and turn it into something more positive. This is what Cascade attempts to do, as indeed some of my other work, including the VOLCO project. These are predicated on situations where participants or partners have different needs or positions. Both projects create 'safe spaces' using imagination and creativity, and in some cases technology. They enable different parties to come together in a

way that allows each set of needs to be met, and each to benefit from an appropriate, though not necessarily identical, outcome. At the same time a shared product or set of products is created that by far exceeds the production capabilities of one alone.

JC

...and within this clarification I get a sense of a different emphasis and content which shifts away from 'resolution' and a 'linear' problem solving approach which leads to a finite point or conclusion, and towards one which is more suggestive of a cyclical process of reflection. This indicates to me an educational dimension to the regeneration theme, which I've already hinted at, centered on re-generated attitudes and reflections. With this more cyclical approach of 're-informing', it seems that the notion of 'problem' is, if not embraced, then acknowledged as a paradoxical marriage of the convergent and the divergent. The aspirations of the individuals or organisations may indeed 'conflict' in terms of precise creative outputs and the way they may be achieved, but the conflict is understood as the crucible for a new creative compound, to be ground out through the effort of participatory process...

LL

The projects I create are initially conceived in terms of the social change they can engender, whether that is in actual terms, or through internal shifts in the perceptions of participants. I regard 'participants' more as collaborators, since I don't set out to 'educate' them, but tend to see the process as each bringing our special expertise to bear on shared or related goals. The young people for example, bring first hand knowledge of growing up in the area, and have a personal stake in its future.

However since you are an educator as well as an artist John, perhaps you would be able to evaluate the same project in terms of learning. It would be interesting to see how and where you think the two positions interrelate...

JC

Do you mean the inter-relationship between my role as artist and educator, or the inter-relationship between myself as educator and yourself as activist?

LL

I guess I mean the connection between education and activism...

JC

Firstly, let me say that I understand entirely what you mean when you indicate that you don't 'set out' to educate - though would contend that your working process and project provision is, none the less, highly 'educational'. Whilst a prime concern for me *is* to 'educate', there is an important distinction to be made within that remit between 'teaching' and 'learning'. Within experiential

and problem-based learning, I would place more emphasis on student learning rather than tutor teaching. The former underscores the importance of student pro-activity and receptivity to change within cognitive development. The pro-activity I'm talking about within the context of live projects like this, impacts on students' direct response in terms of both their practical involvement, and articulation of their activity. It also forces them to consider the 'appropriateness' of the creative and educational environment within which they are operating and which they inform. Collectively, this is vital for the reciprocal 'co-inciding' with others within the participatory process, which you mentioned earlier.

One of the interesting things that links education and activism is that both are concerned with change brought about by collective action. Activism harnesses collective consciousness, while higher education develops this through group interaction and peer debate. Both begin with the individual and widen consciousness through interaction in the public domain.

Experience of residency practice combined with their drive for personal development often places UEL students between two quite distinct, educational frameworks: 'community' and 'institution'. This is not only about the challenge of creating art in an alternative context. The problem solving process they encounter often affects them at a far deeper level, engendering this 'regenerated' sense of self. It is brought about in several different ways, not least by the necessity of reconciling these different learning contexts through a range of sometimes opposing 'other' philosophies and expectations. The notion of 'co-inciding' which you describe [rather than its adversarial alternative 'confronting'] is helpful here. Considering this in relation to 'tolerance' and the different needs and expectations of participants, and the turning of this into 'something more positive' – *this* is the process of transformation.

What particularly unites education and activism however, is the value inherent in the 'relational' aspect of a participatory approach to practice. From the foundation of the 'relational' and 'transformative', come 'openness' and 'flux', qualitative pre-requisites for the building of real learning and social change. Within this socio-educational-political context, 'transformation' is a term suggestive of an emphasis upon *process* itself, rather than with a predominating focus on 'object'.

LL

I feel we have looked at some interesting distinctions and parallels between the nature of participatory practice and the potential educational process that emanates from it. You have identified this as a literal 're-generation' of that artistic process. The Cascade project also takes urban regeneration as its theme, and each year addresses specific issues for the East London region related to that topic. I would like us to consider some ways in which this 're-generative' learning process that you describe relates to the issue of using the arts within the context of regeneration itself.

JC

I have a number of responses to this:

Firstly, the use of the arts within urban regeneration, and its emphasis on 'change', informs student learning by providing a mechanism for introducing them to a 'specificity' in terms of three significant creative processes: conceptualization, fabrication and presentation. In this case constituency, site, thematic content, and political intent collectively determine the effectiveness of their communication, as well as their integration as artists within the public frame.

Secondly, the use of the arts within urban landscape, urban change and, specifically 're-generation', is a very powerful research issue. The process of creatively engaging with it can then be reflected upon and considered as a 'working metaphor' for the kind of cognitive, 'internal', re-generative process described; to which may be attached deeper-level reflections about personal change in terms of 'distance traveled', socially, politically, creatively and educationally.

Thirdly, the use of the arts within urban regeneration, having informed the 'internal' cognitive regeneration process I've outlined, can then link with an ongoing debate conducted on a structural and meta-level, about the potential for an 'institutional' and 'organisational' regeneration of educational structures and mechanisms of delivery. This debate questions 'a priori' assumptions about emphases within, and methods of, educational 'provision'. It is challenging for all involved, not least students who can find themselves thrown into a sophisticated level of engagement and application.

I wanted to make a further point about this structural debate, however before I do, it would be helpful if you could give us your take on some of the difficulties of positing and engaging Cascade within the broader framework of urban regeneration.

LL

One of the problems with this whole field is the way that the arts are being used as a social panacea within what is essentially a top-down, process of urban re-development. During the 90's many artists, consultants and others concerned with continued financial support for 'socially engaged' and public art, asserted the social values such practice can bring. However these arguments have now come full circle and borne fruit in what is sometimes a rather counter-productive way. Today the arts are seen as a necessary component to the agendas of most regeneration agencies. Funding available to galleries and other cultural institutions often requires artists to run community based workshops to accompany exhibitions, or as part of local regeneration schemes. However such activities are usually short-term and designed for quantitative evaluation. Numbers of people attending workshops, or pupils achieving 'improved attainment' are more likely to be seen as signs of success than the quality of the experience for participants or outputs

produced. The long term engagement frequently identified by those experienced in this field as essential for the establishment of meaningful practice and high quality work, is often impossible to establish under such circumstances.

These problems are seeded in the kind of commissioning process that regeneration funding fosters. There is now a younger generation of artists interested in developing their practice through community based work, whose experience of doing this has been solely through commission. The downwards flow of regeneration resources has made it much easier for institutions to bid for this work than individuals or small arts organizations. Despite their best intentions, many artists find themselves pawns in a game being played at a much higher level and with large contracts at stake. Under such circumstances, and particularly for the less experienced, there can be difficulties in ascertaining to which agenda they are working, and concerns as to whether this is even one they would choose to support. Meanwhile the results of their work tick all the right boxes of the government's 'social inclusion' policies.

Cascade has been developed to address regeneration issues, but skirts around regeneration funding. Its resources are drawn mainly from its partners, with some further additions, but it is not commissioned. This enables it to retain the flexibility required to develop and maintain the complex partnerships described earlier, and to respond to the changing needs of its participants. Although we do commissioned work, this would either be done where it coincides with our own, larger agenda, or has the flexibility to be adjusted to meet local needs.

JC

There are three issues that strike me in what you have said:

- Power relationships
- Reconciling artists agendas with external expectations/constraints
- Appropriateness of structure as conveyer of content

In terms of power relationships, you outline the inherent problem for artists working in this field, as emanating from vertical hierarchies. Against this you position Cascade, which is able to operate within a more lateral relationship of empowerment. There is a direct parallel between Cascade in this position, and that of university students as they filter into the disseminated geography of community and establish a matrix of relationships. In this sense they are stepping momentarily away from their own institutional hierarchy of power.

Then there is the issue of artists' agendas against the expectations, constraints and quantitative requirements of regeneration funding, which you describe as a game where artists may find themselves the 'pawns'. The parallel with students operating within the 'game' of education [Foucault in Said 1983²] in terms of course criteria and tutorial expectation, is not hard to draw. You were speaking about the importance of a 'safe space' earlier. Andrea Duncan, a former Fine Art tutor at UEL, suggested that students are

invariably so conscious of the hoops they need to jump through for assessment, that the safe place for genuine experimentation is often lost³. Perhaps, paradoxically, for many artists in the field, the commissioned space is both 'safe' and 'unsafe'. For both students and artists, the extent to which their creative space becomes 'unsafe' or unsustainable may be determined by the extent to which they contravene their hierarchical axis of power. Understandably, the ticking of the governmental boxes of which you speak sees its corollary within educational audit in such issues as employability, community involvement and access.

Lastly, I'd like to explore the 'appropriateness' of structure in relation to the content conveyed. What I think is crucial, is the value you assign to organisational flexibility. This same issue applies to the mechanism of higher education. You rightly point out that flexibility is 'required to develop and maintain the complex partnerships...[and]... respond to the changing needs of its participants'. In addition, and as I intimated earlier, organisations and institutions need to be flexible enough to respond, and be methodologically appropriate to evolving or different educational content and research 'in the field', that is, to be prepared for their own structural 'transformation'. Alongside this, is the constant need to [creatively] challenge 'a priori' assumptions about their own effectiveness in terms of the mediation and validation of experience they offer.

The concept of re-generation linked to arts intervention, student education or the structure of institutions, might therefore be seen as offering the opportunity of a consequent 'transformation', either in the physical and social environment or through a process of self-realisation. In both dimensions it hinges on the exploration and identification of possibilities with the 'other'.

A new compound is emerging, ground out in the participatory crucible of socially engaged practice. Despite differing agendas and vested interests, it is one that provides an appropriate catalyst for the questioning of assumptions, for reflection and for the re-generation of ideas and a creative sense of collective and individual identity - in the educational as well as the artistic arena. In the Beuysian tradition, everyone has the creative potential to contribute to such a process. If the Artists Placement Group suggested that the 'context is half the work'⁴, then I would suggest that the 'context is half the education'⁵.

¹ Freire, P. (1970) *Pedagogy of The Oppressed*. New York: Continuum. Translated by Myra Bergman Ramos, p61

² Said, E. W. (1983) 'Opponents, audiences, constituencies and community'. *Postmodern Culture*. Edited and introduced by Foster, H. 2nd impression. 1987. London, Australia: Pluto Press. p135

³ Duncan, A. (1996) 'What Do We Exchange?' – an interview with Andrea Duncan. [Interviewed by Ian Biggs] *Drawing Fire*. 1 [4] Autumn / Winter, p25-33

⁴ Harding, D. 1993 'The Context is Half The Work' *Art Education Beyond Studio Practice 0-special Conference Edition*. Issues in Architecture Art & Design, University Of East London

⁵ Cockram, J. (2004) *Stars, Bridges, Cocoons and Glass Houses: An Investigation of The Fine Art Department's Student Artist in Residence Programme at The University Of East London*. PhD Thesis. p185