

MAiLOUT focus on new projects

Response by Loraine Leeson
Director, cSPACE

An Art of Change

In response to the question concerning the growth of new organisations working in the field of participatory, community and social inclusion areas of the arts, I would like to propose my own analysis of the current situation. Though cSPACE is only two years old, it constitutes the latest in a series of arts organisations that I have founded and directed over the last 25 years. Neither the fact that I have chosen to found a new organisation, nor the mode of its being are co-incident, but rather a sign of the times.

The late seventies and early eighties in the UK saw a proliferation of arts work engaging with communities and addressing social and political issues. Artists at that time became highly organised and through pressure on the arts council, managed to secure recognition and public funding for this kind of work. London became the centre of a bizarre political scenario, when shortly after the first election of the Thatcher government in 1979, Londoners voted in a left labour Greater London Council (GLC) led by Ken Livingstone. The GLC's radical policies transformed many aspects of life in the capital, including the arts, as the millions of pounds that had previously been distributed amongst 'centres of excellence' came under the scrutiny of its Community Arts and Ethnic Arts sub-committees. For five years there was a burgeoning of socially based art practice. Not only was the cultural life of the city transformed, but emphasis shifted away from 'high art', as the regional arts board lost its monopoly on policy, and all became swept along in the fervour of new organisations, ideas and processes of social and cultural engagement.

So successful was the GLC in its policies and practice across the board, that the Tory government could find no way to stop them other than abolishing all Metropolitan Authorities. In 1986 the GLC was dissolved, and with it went the funding that had supported our own local cultural revolution. Thatcherism re-asserted itself, 'Brit Art' came to the fore, and 'community art' became a word associated with bad murals and lack of aesthetic rigour. Many organisations fell. Others kept their heads down, and described their practices in terms more acceptable to the new climate of conservatism.

This is the context within which we re-named the *Docklands Community Poster Project*, which I had co-directed throughout the 80's, as *The Art of Change*. The former organisation had enjoyed 90% funding, while the latter managed only 50%. Our organisational structure (though not our practice) changed to enable income generation, and to take advantage of the new lottery funding available for public art. Due to the unpopularity of some of its early commissions, arts lottery funding introduced a requirement for community involvement, and for a time created an appropriate context for socially engaged practice. However arts funding fashions change, and soon public art fell out of favour with London's regional arts board, as did artist-led, production-based organisations. After ten years and several policy changes on their own behalf, they pulled the funding plug on *The Art of Change* in the late 90's.

So what does one do with a wealth of experience, a thriving practice, but no subsidy? Anyone who works in the arts knows that art takes time, and no commissions, residencies or project

funding actually truly cover the core costs of running even the most efficient of organisations. Our initial act was to split the practice. My co-director founded a new organisation to continue his work with art in the built environment. I had become increasingly interested in the participatory aspect of the practice and the new arena that cyberspace was opening up for this field. My work had also found ways of operating with and through education, and I decided that the best hope for survival would be through partnership with a higher education institution.

I was already a Visiting Fellow of the University of East London, and this is where I eventually founded cSPACE. The organisation engages with the research and teaching of the university, while extending its resources into the wider community. The university does not provide funding, and we have no other form of revenue. All income is derived from projects, though overheads (kept to a minimum), are covered by our host. We operate very efficiently with only one full time member of staff and part-time administrator. In this way we are able to manage large outreach projects staffed by free-lancers and myself. You might describe our organisation as not so much a tree, as some rather vigorous ivy. We can climb high through our host, yet are not dependant upon it, nor are we prey the institution's very slow means of operation. We can move up, around and through as necessary, while bridging the gap between the host institution and its surrounds.

Our continuing survival is due to a number of factors. Most significant amongst these is the wider political situation. It has taken over a decade to ride the backwash of Thatcherism. Untold damage was done to a generation of artists pioneering community based practice in the 80's. Though New Labour is far from socialist and their top-down, social inclusion policies flawed, the social and cultural climate has shifted. Social issues are once again on the agenda, creativity in education is visible on the horizon, while regeneration is the name of the game, despite its sometimes gruesome reality. Young and emerging artists are inventing new methods of social engagement, generally unaware of the largely undocumented experience of two decades previously.

So where do we go from here? The situation of cSPACE in this unfunded state can only be precarious. Though we are highly successfully in fundraising, run major projects, have an ever-growing international profile, and continue to break even financially after more than two years operation, there is no slack. The only cash flow is my own salary. The idea of a fallback position is an interesting thought, though I fear that one false move, illness or a less than successful project outcome, and the only way is down. We nevertheless take whatever help is on offer, are building yet another business plan, and have every intention of surviving into the future. Our VOLCO project is being developed into an educational resource that we aim to market, and is likely to generate some income. I believe our best hope however, will be to develop deeper roots within our host institution. This would enable us to expand the breadth of the work without losing our footing. We may be overlooked in terms of the arts in this country, but we retain a creativity that has allowed us to duck and dive our way through the system for a lifetime of practice. What's more, our habit is tenacious.