CHAPTER 30

Case study: engaging older people in creative thinking—the Active Energy project

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Geezer power

I first met the members of the Geezers Club in 2007 through an art commission from SPACE Studios London, initiated in response to a research programme at Queen Mary University of London on the democratization of technology. The arts have always been a useful tool in helping communities instigate change by bringing their ideas into the public domain in an engaging and accessible way, and this commission followed several decades of my art practice doing just this. While educational or therapeutic outcomes had never been a central purpose of my work, these nevertheless often play a key part in its process.

The Geezers Club was set up in 2006 following research (Davidson 2006) on older people's attendance at clubs and classes in the London Borough of Tower Hamlets. Tower Hamlets is one of the poorest boroughs in the United Kingdom, and isolation for older people is a particular issue due to the lack of resources available to help residents have an active social life. In particular the research identified how few older men were taking part in group activities and that widowers often lacked the social infrastructure through which lone women alleviate loneliness, concluding that men are more likely to need activities addressed specifically to their needs and interests. The Geezers Club at AgeUK in Bow was founded to reduce the isolation of retired men over 50 by encouraging them out of their homes and back into the community. Members gain access to social activities, participate in outings, and receive talks by outside professionals, mainly on health-related topics. However, they are also keen to do more. Following my first visit, one member commented that they were always being talked to about their disintegrating bodies and how much they welcomed the opportunity to exercise their minds and develop their ideas. The group also placed immense value on the fact that the activity was not just for its own sake or to pass the time.

I have found an important aspect of the creative work I conduct with communities to be its functional outcome, achieved through each participant contributing his or her skills and expertise to a meaningful task, and bringing in outside expertise as required. To this I bring my own experience in visual media, creative facilitation, and knowledge of how to take on board the ideas of others. These may commence as individual contributions, but are combined through the project's structure to become part of a shared outcome, as in VOLCO, a planet in cyberspace created entirely out of the vivid imaginations of children. Over a period of 10 years a thousand young people between the ages of 7 and 13 interacted online with others of different cultures and life experiences to build a new virtual world based on cooperation and collective imagination. Another project drew on the local knowledge of 400 London teenagers, who created *The Young Person's Guide to East London* (<http://www.ypg2el.co.uk/>), subsequently used by thousands of visitors to the London 2012 Olympics. Similarly, the lifelong experiences of older people in the Active Energy project (http://www.active-energy-london.org/) have begun to inform new developments in technology with an altruism fuelled by the desire to leave a mark and a legacy for future generations. This is, after all, what most of us wish to do, but it can become forgotten in work with older people, whose experience too often becomes trivialized.

I have to admit that I too approached the group with limited expectations. My brief from SPACE was to create work over 6 weeks to be shown in their Not Quite Yet exhibition. Unused to such a short development period, I was tempted to imagine suggestions for gadgets and devices that would make life easier or more interesting for Geezers Club members. Nevertheless I adhered to the process of framing a proposition that would allow their ideas to emerge. My question 'What technology would you like to see developed that you feel would support your life, or that of your community?' was initially met with a few responses that supported my preconceptions. However, one member of the group posed a question in return: 'When electricity prices prevent older people from heating their homes, and the River Thames is just down the road, why are we not using it to power our city?' We debated the historical use of water wheels, one of which had been in use on London Bridge centuries earlier, and questioned the demise of the tidal power research that most remembered hitting the headlines in the 1980s before its support was withdrawn by the Thatcher government. By the end of our first session all 14 members of the group were fired up with the topic and wanted to take part in the project. While knowing nothing about the subject, my role was to enable the group to develop their idea, and I resolved to take them as far with this as I could.

Fig. 30.1 Visualization of tidal turbines on the Thames Barrier with project participants: The Not Quite Yet, SPACE, London, 25 January–29 February 2008.

A conversation with the director of the Sustainability Research Institute at the nearby University of East London revealed tidal power to be his pet project. Under his guidance the group organized minibus outings to look at locally sited wind turbines that would most easily adapt for underwater use and a visit to the Thames Barrier proved this to be a suitable ready-made barrage for potential turbine installation. From visual materials gathered in our research I was able to create a large-scale photomontage of how turbines might function in this location. The group's new knowledge coupled with their understanding of its potential benefits for the lives of local people made them highly effective advocates of the sustainability argument. To capture this, projected video interviews with its members accompanied the photovisualization in the exhibition, the enormous scale of the projections that towered over the viewer lending a weight of authority to the views of the speakers portrayed. The impact of this installation on gallery visitors was further reflected in its significant local press coverage. In the eyes of the media the senior years of the project's participants clearly added to the public interest. Despite little experience of public speaking, eight members of the group presented the project to great acclaim at the On the Margins of Technology symposium accompanying the exhibition (Fig. 30.1).

It could not stop there. After the exhibition we found funding to equip the Geezers Club with a laptop and other equipment that would allow its members to learn the skills to research online and share findings. Engineering expertise presented itself in the form of Toby Borland, a highly creative mechanical engineer who ran a prototyping laboratory at the University of East London, and Professor Stephen Dodds, renowned for his development of the control system for the European Space Commission. Both gave freely of their time and knowledge out of interest in the project. The SPACE arts organization, which had worked alongside Queen Mary University of London to offer the original arts commission, rejoined the project for similar reasons, raising funds to support intergenerational work with a local school and continue the project. This gave the Geezers an opportunity to further share their accumulated wisdom through mentoring teenage boys in workshops that introduced them to the concept of renewable energy—a touching scenario in which isolated men were able to support underachieving boys in their own community. The workshops culminated in the creation of a wind turbine for the roof of the AgeUK centre. As it spun, the turbine generated the energy to spell out in light the words 'Geezer power' (Fig. 30.2).

In tandem with the school workshops, the Geezers had been developing their own ideas for tidal turbines. As working class men with backgrounds in manual trades they held between them a range of practical skills. One had been a steam turbine engineer, another a mechanic, and it seemed that most knew how to strip down and reassemble a motorcycle. The group spontaneously came up with proposals for improvements to existing turbine designs, as well as some new ideas. With engineer Toby Borland's

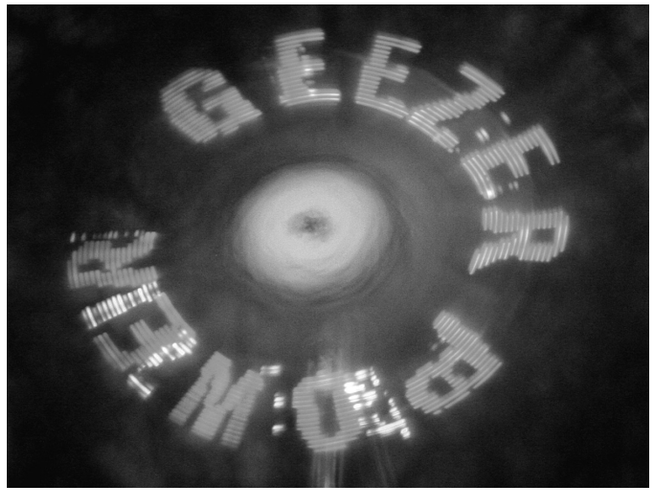

Fig. 30.2 The turbine programmed with the project's message, February 2010.

Fig. 30.3 Testing turbine efficiency at University of East London, March 2010.

help these were further developed at the university prototyping laboratory and tested in a specialist water tank where the energy output of each could be measured (Fig. 30.3).

In the meantime social scientist Professor Ann Light, who had led the original democratizing technology research, became interested in how the project had emerged as an initiative in its own right, and rejoined the expanding, though informal, project team. In 2011 she invited the group to the Participants United workshop at the University of Central Lancashire, where the group was studied as a model of good practice in how innovation can be successfully developed in a participatory setting. Here the Active Energy group presented the project for the second time as part of a growing multidisciplinary team, and have since contributed to other academic research.

In 2012 I was invited to participate in a residency and exhibition at the Mattress Factory Museum of installation in the United States and saw this as an opportunity to both enrich the project and test its methods. I put the question asked of the Geezers in London to a group from Northside Seniors in Pittsburgh, and showed them the work of their UK counterparts. Amid much excitement we were able to connect the two groups through Skype to share their experiences. Northside Seniors' choice of topic was Alzheimer's research. They felt concerned that not only was there still no cure for this disease, but also that lack of accessible information undermined their own generation's experience of warning signs and symptoms, preventing friends and family from adequately supporting sufferers. We found professional expertise on this topic at the Alzheimer's Disease Research Centre, University of Pittsburgh, where researchers welcomed the narrative of personal experiences supplied by participants that was able to give a human face to their work. Members of the seniors' group were similarly delighted that their concerns should be valued in this way. Together we put together an installation with large-scale video interviews of Northside Seniors, placing these alongside those undertaken with the Geezers from the first exhibition. Each was further accompanied by the factual information that supported the case they were making. The effect of the large room filled with monumental 'talking heads' describing key contemporary issues, was a reminder of the seniority of the elders in the community and the value of their experience to society. Outside the exhibition room a video booth was available for visitors to add their experiences to those being expressed in the installation, and contribute to the research at the Alzheimer's Centre. An education programme also provided opportunities for young people to visit the gallery with members of the seniors' group available as experts to answer questions on ageing (Fig. 30.4).

In October 2013 the Geezers tested a turbine on a Thames barge opposite the Houses of Parliament, piloting what we was believed to be the first small-scale turbine for slow-moving tidal rivers. Its low-cost manufacture offers additional potential for use in developing countries. However, the Geezers will not cease their work until they see renewable energy powering their own East London community (Fig. 30.5).

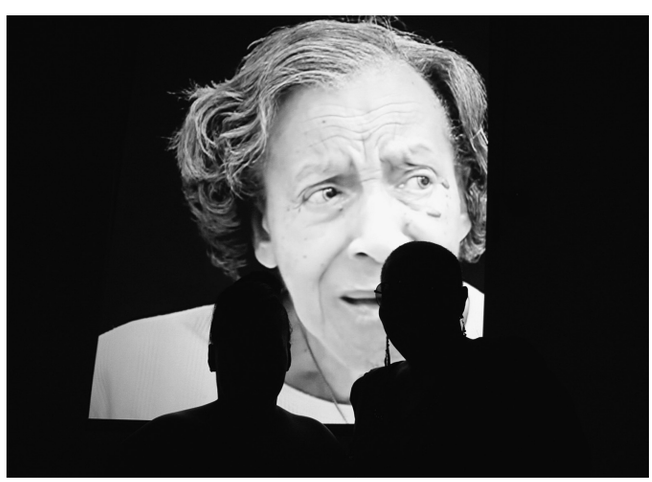

Fig. 30.4 Active Energy, Pittsburgh, at the Mattress Factory, Pittsburgh, United States, September 2012–May 2013. A six-projector video installation.

Fig. 30.5 Celebrating the testing of the Geezers' tidal turbine on the River Thames, 15 October 2013.

Conclusions

The significance of the Active Energy project in terms of the well-being of its participants lies in the motivation experienced by those involved. As an artist I worked alongside the people in these groups rather than delivering a service to them, supporting the choice of issues that they considered to be important. The project worked from the premise that the accumulated life experience of older people is of value to the wider society and its implicit task was to find creative ways to uncover what each had to offer. The Centre for Health Promotion at University of Toronto (2012) defines quality of life as: 'The degree to which a person enjoys the important possibilities of his or her life'. I see it as the business of the arts if not to create meaning per se, then to pull together meanings from lived experience, and in participatory arts this means facilitating the realization of these possibilities. Art is also particularly effective in re-presenting these ideas within the public domain in a way that is able to engage others, promote dialogue, confer social value, and elicit feedback and respect for those who have shared their ideas. Energy levels certainly remained high for participants in both Active Energy groups, while in the longer-term engagement at the Geezers Club it was reported how some members suffering from depression had only come out of their shells through this project. Although the participatory approach described here may use less traditional forms than workshops offered through museum and gallery partnerships, such as the 'object handling' described by Camic and Chatterjee (2013, p. 67), its ability to place at its centre the needs and concerns of those involved gives it a distinct and effective role to play in stimulating older people's active creativity and contributing to their quality of life and well-being.

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