

WE'RE ALL IN THIS TOGETHER; CONSIDERING BRITAIN'S HOUSING CRISIS



REFLECTIONS ON WORKING CREATIVELY WITH VULNERABLE COMMUNITY PARTICIPANTS

YOUNG & HOPEFUL

BUT

STILL HOMELESS

If you were running a campaign to draw people's attention to homelessness – particularly youth homelessness what would your slogan be (again about 5 words):

Young'n Hopeful But
Still Homeless

If you could ask David Cameron's government one question about their attitude and approach to housing what would that question be? :

Can you honestly look
at yourself in the mirror
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Reflections on working creatively with vulnerable community participants

I'm trying to write this not like a report because reports aren't very interesting, mostly.

What is this?

It's not an instructive or a guide - plenty, more accomplished, people have been doing this for many years and I don't necessarily feel the need to try to add my voice to the chorus.

It's not encouragement. We suffered a decade of austerity in this country and as soon as that was declared to be over, the pandemic began. Public cultural institutions and community services were, and continue to be, at the vanguard of funding cuts and precarities and miserable uncertainties huddle together densely like rain clouds. The 'real' substantive impact of social art projects, engagement initiatives and outreach activities - carried out either by independent artists or institutions - is spurious at best. But only the terminally cynical would argue that nothing is better than something.

It's not chastisement. This kind of work may not be for you. And even if it is, you might take exception to the approach I favour. If you're already doing these kinds of projects and doing them really badly, people will let you know about it, so you don't need me for that.

I think maybe this is a little group of reflections on a process that's both collective and highly individual. A process that has the potential to immeasurably enrich lives or to be approached so badly that it can cause irreparable damage. High-stakes and volatile.

The project that informed this writing was carried out over 8 months in 2016. It took place in the basement of a Church in Islington, the winter shelter for a Charity called the Pilion Trust. The Trust is committed to providing shelter for homeless young people aged 18 - 23 who are fleeing domestic violence, discrimination on the basis of their sexuality, leaving care or otherwise being forced onto the street. The work took the form of a series of discussions and workshops. Participants varied from week to week - due to the transient nature of the drop in shelter - and, in exchange for sharing their views on the housing crisis, they were taught how to silkscreen print. They kept the items they made, some showcasing them on social media, some gifting them and some selling them. The words and phrases they provided were turned into a series of digital prints on fabric, which then became 28 interlinking garments that joined to form an installation which took the shape of a domestic dwelling.

What follows are subjective observations, because absolute truth never existed to begin with.

How to know if you are making Social Art

A good way to tell if you are embarking on something that could be considered 'social art', is noticing how you feel when you stand in front of assembled participants to introduce your prospective project. If you feel small and silly and embarrassing and humbled then it's likely your venture can be defined as social art.

Feeling this way is not only right and proper, it is absolutely necessary.

The degree to which people feel these things is variable and discretionary but I'd argue if you don't feel them at all, you might be in the wrong place.

Social art is generally accepted to mean art that acknowledges and/or seeks to address social and political issues, typically with the involvement of collaborative community participants. A commonly desired goal is to attempt to bring about tangible, measurable change.

A key step in preparing to work this way is allaying yourself of grandiose notions. The resonance of your work most likely won't match your ambition. This, of course, does not make the production of social art redundant, it's just important to get the thing in perspective- not only for the sake of the participants -but for yourself. Its ok, you can do it, you're among friends here.

These 'truths' are crucial to imbibe, because they are a necessary part of recognising the role you play in the process of making social art; how you communicate ideas, negotiate and present outcomes, encourage reluctant participants, facilitate and learn - in every case an understanding of the dynamics and divisions are essential.

Even if you consider yourself to belong to the community you are working with, it was you who got the funding, assembled the group, will write about the work and submit it for consideration amongst peers, exhibit it, put it on your website, *bow for applause*. There is now a distance that will never be eradicated. After all, a documentary maker is still a documentary maker, even if they're filming in their own home town.

Accepting that you stand to gain more social, cultural and/or financial capital from this process than the people you are working with is the point where you (just about) earn the privilege of embarking on a social art project.

And the price you pay is feeling small and silly and embarrassing and humbled, to begin with at least.

Ok? ok.



Crash Pad - Pillion Trust.
Session 1: 01/03/16



No one owes you anything

Attentiveness is a finite resource, loyalty has to be earned and solidarity is a fashionable word that lots of people say, but don't really understand.

When I started this project I had ideas, big ideas, grand ideas. 0 the ideas I had. We were going to debate! The discourse would fly! There would be a clash of ideologies, I would diffuse the tension and we would all muse that we'd learned a thing or two! Life-long bonds would be forged and lives would be changed!

After the first session I realised I would not be in the position of control I had anticipated, the conversation would take its own turns and the only thing resembling the formation of a life-long bond was when, at the end of the project, one of the participants offered to be my dealer (drugs not art).

With the experience 4 years of teaching has afforded me, I imagine the shape of things may have been different if the project were happening now, but probably not much. You are in control of the process, to a point, but not the outcomes. The ability to be flexible is crucially important. Trusting that the conversation will go where it wants to and the agenda will evolve in line with the needs of the people involved is fundamental to its success.

This can be frustrating, unnerving and can take you far away from the 'measurable impact' your funders want to see.

Too bad.

Negotiation

Often it can seem like a good idea to negotiate a consensus on appropriate conduct when working with vulnerable groups.

These pseudo-contractual agreements are very popular at certain types of gatherings (mostly the kinds of assemblages attended by people who are so well-versed in the gentile conventions of a polite, politically correct conversation that they rarely benefit from the guidance.)

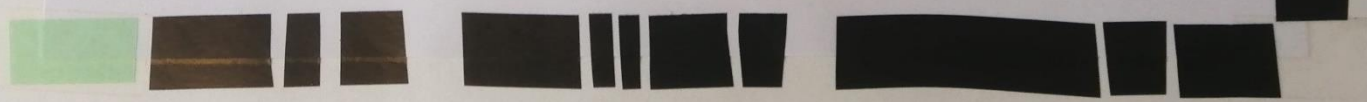
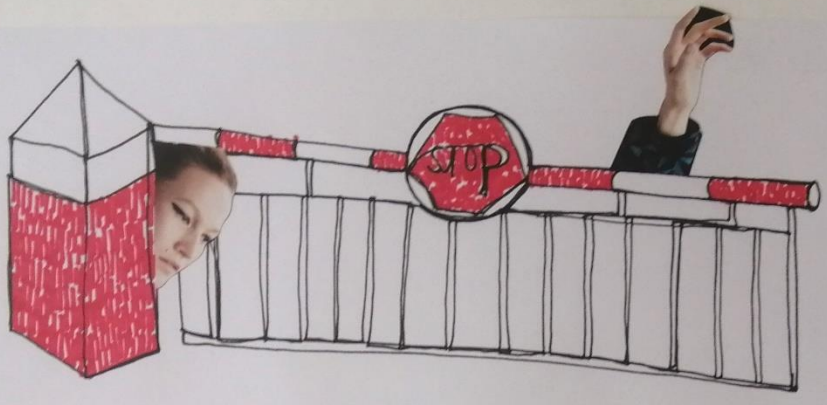
If you do decide to bring up this idea with the majority of people, expect blank looks. Most people know how to communicate respectfully and you can trust that social art participants have been successfully doing so, without your guidance, for most of their lives.

People won't always use the 'right' words for things, they might demonstrate outdated views, especially if they are older. Here you have to use your judgment. If the intent is not malicious then policing their language is unnecessary and will damage the fragile relationship you have built.

Encouraging the use of one kind of language over another is exclusionary and problematic, not because participants would be incapable of understanding 'academic/art speak', but because you are setting the terms of the interaction and taking people out of the methods of communication they feel most comfortable with. It's not your place to do either.

It's worth bearing in mind that at times there will be codes of conduct that you absolutely must comply with -as I found out to my detriment when I received a stern reprimand for failing to collect all the scalpels the group were using to cut stencils during one of our sessions. The shelter had a strict (and necessary) no weapons policy.





Addressing difficult subjects

Maybe you are making this work, with these people, in this time and place because you are completely embroiled in the issue at hand. You're living it and the work is documentation, representation, support, freedom and/or therapy. All respect and power to you.

It's likely however that, as an artist/art facilitator, you are - at best- adjacent to the issue you are working with. In this instance the importance of being resolutely, constantly and painfully aware that what, to you, is an interesting subject or issue is the reality of someone else's life.

In 2016 I wanted to make some work about London's housing crisis. As a property guardian of 8 years standing -having lived in some barely habitable spaces, mostly with permission, sometimes not - I felt I had adequate 'legitimacy' to discuss the issue. In an effort to get a broad range of views, I reached out to the Pillion Trust and starting working with the young people at the shelter.

After 5 sessions (each time intending, and failing, to raise the issue of homelessness) I realised I wasn't going to be able to bring myself to do it. I stood there, week after week, mortified at the very prospect. I came to understand that my circumstances were mostly the result of decisions- arguably 'bad' decisions, but still choices I had made along the way. Their circumstances had almost exclusively been externally imposed on them by hostile agents of chaos and trauma in their lives.

The way I eventually managed to broach this was by objectifying the issue with theoretical questions designed to create sufficient distance so as to make the conversation possible. "Given scenario X - which is not your situation - what would you say?" "If you were talking to X politician/authority figure, what would you say to them about this issue?"

You get the idea.

Relinquishing power -the way of the conduit

Authorship, ownership and direction are difficult to navigate anytime more than one person is involved in anything. This multiplies exponentially when 'representation', 'place making' and/or 'marginalised communities' are involved.

If you've participated in formal arts education you've been moulded in the solipsistic, neoliberal, Western tradition. You've been groomed to think that the value of something is in direct correlation with the personal gratification and recognition it affords you- that's how the system works. It feels very counterintuitive to accept any other outcome and social art projects are a constant lesson in handing over control, a lesson that needs to be learned over and over and over again.

Retraining yourself to embrace what can feel like a diminished role, the role of a facilitator or a conduit, some kind of conductive material that other people's ideas and creativity flow through, is not easy.

You may not entirely manage it. I haven't.

It's a process.

NAME: Gerrell Rose

Sum up how you feel about the housing crisis in 5 words:

Housing suffers to finance
war,

If you were running a campaign to draw people's attention to homelessness – particularly youth homelessness what would your slogan be (again about 5 words):

Youngin Hopeful But
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at yourself in the mirror
and say you done your
best?

NAME: SAX

Sum up how you feel about the housing crisis in 5 words:

Fuckingshit, Bollox, why when there is so much space,
discriminated, fix it up quick

If you were running a campaign to draw people's attention to homelessness – particularly youth homelessness what would your slogan be (again about 5 words):

Let ~~them~~ the homeless camp out in front of their
homes or make living space on all these
free land.

If you could ask David Cameron's government one question about their attitude and approach to housing what would that question be? :

What ~~you~~ would you do if your home
finished in 5 days.

Continuity and consistency

When you work in places where uncertainty is the only constant it's better not to make continuity an important part of your project. You won't necessarily see the same faces each time you go into a shelter, prison or mental health facility.

It's also worth bearing in mind that, even if you are meeting with the same people, there will very likely be days when your participants don't feel like participating.

Your project is probably very important to you, but you can't reasonably assume that it is to other people. Especially people engaged in the rather more pressing struggle of trying to survive in a world that would happily see them fail in that objective.

Creating an environment where people feel able to simply sit with their thoughts and feelings - picking up and setting down the activity as they need - is very important. Try not to have any specific outcomes planned, especially ones that are reliant on a cumulative process.

And remember, for people who have many alternative ways to spend their time and worries in abundance, every occasion they chose to engage is a compliment.

Remuneration

How do you make sure people are adequately rewarded for their time and involvement?

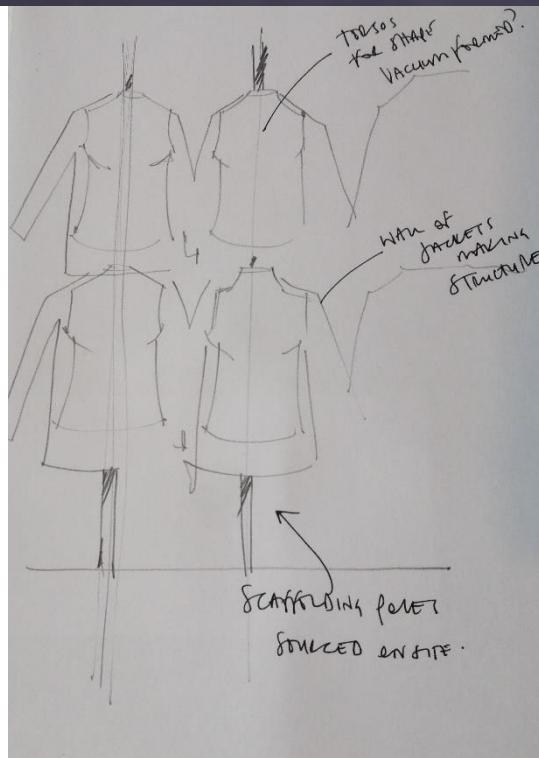
If you are able to pay people, pay them. If you are unable to do this then you need to think about exchange economies.

Maybe the warm glow of meeting kindred spirits and 'being a part of something' is enough for certain types of (financially robust/affluent) community participants, but people who are in precarious, vulnerable situations need and deserve pragmatic remuneration for their involvement.

In these circumstances anti-capitalist critique needs to be shelved and any attempt to theorise a 'justifiable' alternative to paying people for their time is inappropriate. Yes, ideally artistic endeavor should be its own reward. Yes, the experience of producing the art is valuable in its own way. No, you don't want to uphold and perpetuate problematic structures. And no, none of that matters when you're working with real people in the real world - or this present iteration of it anyway.

In lieu of cash, a skill that people can monetise or an item they can take that has value is the next best thing. Try to be honest about the likelihood of them actually using the skill you're 'paying' them with again in the future - does it take a long time to master, require specialist equipment, do they have access to the necessary platforms to convert the skill or the things made using that skill into money?

Think of participants as collaborators. If you would pay a collaborator to be involved in your project you should pay your participants. Again remember, the cultural capital this project generates will not be of any material value to the people you are working with. That is yours and yours alone, so what do they get?





Inconclusive conclusions

These words, are just words. On a page, that you can read, if you want to. They're not guarantees or lessons or even things that you will agree with necessarily.

That is ok.

The process of working with people to produce art work is complicated and littered with logistical, ethical and creative pit falls. Differences in ideology and approach are good, healthy and necessary.

Collaborative ecologies of knowledge production that transcend the tyranny of our bastardised, marketised education system won't simply emerge from the rubble once the inevitable collapse has taken place.

We can feel it coming, our collective sense of foreboding is ancient and wise.

We need to be open now, and generous with our language and our time. We need to minimise barriers to involvement and demonstrate our value in ways that don't involve our egos. We need to be ready with answers when people ask us 'what's the point of all this?'. We need to keep asking ourselves that same question and come up with a half way convincing answer.

The importance of the arts has rarely been acknowledged, even less celebrated, by the self-elected arbiters of 'value' in our society. So for that reason, if no other, we must know ourselves to be onto something worth preserving.

May all your challenges be surmountable and your lessons bittersweet and necessary.

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