

MOVING FROM A PLACE OF KNOWING

I think I'm going to maintain a position of not knowing today because it's the need to 'not know' that bought us to take part in this comparative research and it's the need to not know that leads us through the commissioning process and to projects such as Smother.

Perhaps 'not knowing' isn't the best description, because in so many ways we absolutely do 'know', it's more a lack of articulation or language. Because description and anecdotes rarely come close to the power of the moment when we do 'know' which for each of us - means something different - is liable to constant change- and is rarely something that occupies the head.

Trusting not knowing-

Underpinning the Interaction programme at Artangel is a consistent desire to re-examine 'value', because in a society and an art world that is saturated by the capitalist market value is taken for granted as something that can be counted, owned, evidenced and sold.

For an interaction project currencies vary and value is a fluid development of varying forms, means, exchange and personal insight.

In the background the commissioning process seeks to disrupt a model – shown here in its crudest form

>Pyramid of Power model<

>Horizontal practice<

These may seem oversimplified but I've found that a constant mindfulness and articulation of this intention is essential to the grounding and development of a process. In their simplest forms they describe the intention at every stage of the work.

>But how can we maintain the integrity of this model at every step of the journey. Take today for example. We are on a platform that enforces a hierarchy that buys into the structure of 'knowing' of expertise, of having an answer. How can we disseminate and articulate the findings of this research in a way that continues the integrity of collaborative process that the study examines?

How can it be useful and accessible to people who don't already 'know'
How can it offer a language to those who do 'know' but are unable to articulate what they 'know' (because isn't 'knowing really about doing)

The problem I find is that when we pursue answers we miss great opportunities - only one person at a time can be the expert... were moving back into that hierarchical space and closing the doors to other ways of doing things, of seeing and of hearing.

In our commissioning process we defend a space without answers, we defend our right not to describe an outcome until it arrives (and even then we may not describe it) and we find other ways of answering the questions so often posed to us by collaborating organisations or funders such as 'what will we be doing', 'how many people can take part' 'what will the end result be'

The point is that as soon as you fix these into the realm of something we all 'know' then we lose the interesting possibilities that 'not knowing afford us. When we keep them open we increase the likelihood of something being created that everyone can value – because everyone can be visible in the process and the 'outcome' is recognizable, reflective of process, representative, and familiar, even though it could never have been imagined when we began.

I used to think of my role as a mediator – bridging different worlds, but more increasingly I think of this role in terms of 'translator'. Projects take us into unfamiliar territory and if we are true to our model we enter unknown worlds, were not seeking to colonize but we are on thin ice and we have a complex philanthropic legacy to constantly negotiate.

As translator my domain is value, it's not enough to reflect – a translator knows that to increase understanding the content must be contextualized in relevant ways, otherwise words and actions can be shallow and meaningless. To establish a healthy long term relationship its important to listen to the needs, interests, pressures, anxieties and dreams of each participant so that the process whilst remaining pure in its essence– can be understood, valued and owned by each participant (when I refer to participant I mean anyone participating – including artist, institution, individual, employed staff, funder, manager and so on)

HOUSING THE WORK

So in another sense the translator's job is to meet various 'needs' or more ideally to support someone to recognize and meet their own needs through the work; I trust that anyone who works in education practice will agree that the value of biscuits and tea in a workshop is priceless, we may even take it further and provide wheat free options, fruit, savory snacks, herbal teas and fruit juice.

By meeting one of the most basic human needs we begin to encourage a feeling of safety and create space for getting involved.

Structurally the housing of the process therefore needs to be consistent, stable reliable and efficient in its basic state, but also adaptable and responsive.

As producers we maintained a consistent presence at Coram – I attended every session, and when Sarah was away for holiday periods I worked with Coram project workers to provide complimentary activities in order to maintain our commitment but also to demonstrate our valuing of the exchange and commitment to the relationship.

Developed through a nine month collaboration (following an eighteen month development) Smother paralleled the first home we all share an experience of. A gestation period housing, possibilities, fears, anxieties, hopes and needs.

For some participants) who demonstrated a vast range of needs the complexities of this house were apparent,

>floor map image<

In an early exercise, continuing a series of activities which attempted to articulate emotions Sarah demarcated the floor with a basic home plan- a bedroom, living room, bathroom, kitchen and hall in an attempt to emotionally map the domestic spaces- where do you go to cry, where do you go to laugh, etc.

We were faced by something that now seems obvious– that people living in one room do not have the privilege of different spaces, living in precarious housing, or under 24 hour surveillance, doesn't translate into a two up two down.

As one of the couples attending the group accurately pointed out ‘why do you (the art project) get a house when we are two and a baby living in one room?

We were working with an aspiration and a fantasy and a feeling of what home ‘should’ be like but not a direct experience to reference.

This tension directly mirrors the process we were housing as the vehicle for making work – maintaining a space where ideas could not be pinned down to a fixed form or attached to immature fantasies or ideas of what are acceptable, expected and approved of.

A fantasy home, a dolls house, an unachievable notion of security, of unconditional support, of plentiful resources, of connection without pain...

Our house needed to not provide answers, but nurture endless opportunities not to know.