

## ***Attempting horizontality***

Rachel Anderson

I joined Artangel as head of Interaction in 2007 having previously worked as manager of a youth project in East London and then Education and Outreach manager at the South London Gallery. When I arrived at Artangel, the Interaction programme had just received a grant from Arts Council England to develop a series of nine commissions over a three year period. Artangel doesn't work within the framework of a gallery and the intention was to develop new ways of engaging people who might not usually have access to the arts, in spaces where art would not usually be encountered.

### **The thinking behind the Interaction programme**

***Out beyond ideas of wrong doing and right doing, there is a field... I'll meet you there***

Rumi

From my experience of working within both the voluntary sector and gallery education I've become familiar with the usual model of education and outreach programming which delivers a policy of attempting to bring 'non arts audiences' into the gallery space to respond to the existing curatorial programme.

This approach comes with many complex issues, as well as a set of assumptions about how a 'non arts audience' might be. If the commissioners, curators and educators have a certain set of experiences, if we are predominately white, male (or female within arts education) heterosexual, middle/upper class, and formally educated, then this is often reflected in the programming or interpretive position, and a hierarchy is sustained which enforces a particular perspective and 'value position.'

In particular there are two types of 'value position' which I think it's important to recognise. Firstly, the majority of the art world is built around the value of the art 'product' a tangible outcome which can be bought and sold, visited, toured, re-contextualised, and owned.

Secondly, a socially based model invests in the perception that an investment in time and skill transfer might address, or even solve, a particular social problem. An investment in an art project (whether that be a public sculpture or a workshop) might achieve similar results as long term investment in social workers, drug councillors, youth workers and schools etc. The perceived value of Art is in its potential to transform conflict, rehabilitate and regenerate.

In terms of socially engaged commissioning the predominant model is a vertical structure where a government agenda or a funding body is at the top, below this is an arts organisation or gallery, below this is a curator, a social service provider, then eventually an artist and finally the participant or 'non-arts audience.' These roles can move and change positions but they most almost always remain vertical.

Producers/artists can find themselves in the position of managing a relationship between all of these parties; seeking to address a 'problem' often defined by a higher institution or authority (not by the participant) In these conditions it's easy for the creative process and collaborative relationships to become compromised, to feel forced leading to outcomes which are recognised by neither artist nor community.

An alternative to this would be to trust and invest in processes that give time and space to the growth and exploration of ideas. This often leads to more relevant co-ownership; potentially reaching beyond the original idea or intention.

### **Defining Artangel Interaction**

In defining the Interaction programme we were interested in attempting to work horizontally, to try not to impose our will, assumptions or agenda on another party and invite an open exchange that supports a fluid creative dialogue.

To truly embrace art's transformative power everyone needs to shift. A horizontal socially engaged practice must not only reach those perceived as most 'in need' but also those who assume the power of deciding what other people need, including the arts institution.

***If you've come here to help me you're wasting your time. But if you've come here because you believe your liberation somehow bound up in mine, stay and let us walk together***

Lilla Watson, Aboriginal educator

Interaction projects place value and emphasis on process. We are interested in how artists work, but more importantly in how artists can open up and expand the way they work to involve other people, how working with other people can enrich a project and transform ideas into something which couldn't have been imagined at that first conversation.

Everyone has a unique involvement; each person contributes differently and receives different things from participating. Our projects create their own boundaries, location, time length and form; we don't work inside the institution unless the project leads us to that institution. The value of Interaction projects is in the way they are revealed and the stories they tell us when they arrive.

### ***Did you kiss the foot that kicked you?***

**Ruth Ewan, 2007**

*Give me the making of the songs of the nation, and I care not who makes its laws*

**Andrew Fletcher, 1703**

Ruth Ewan developed a project with over one hundred buskers and musicians gathered through a public call out in 2007 The project was developed around a song written in 1964 by folk musician and political activist Ewan MacColl.

The *Ballad of Accounting* lyrics follow a simple structure; the song offers criticism as self-reflection, repeatedly posing provocative and direct questions:

*Did you stand aside and let them choose while you took second best?*

*Did you let them skim the cream off and then give to you the rest?*

Government records released in 2006 through The National Archive show that from 1932, security service MI5 held a file on MacColl. One report claims that he was 'a communist with very extreme views' who needed 'special attention'. The file also states, as a cause for concern, that MacColl had 'exceptional ability as a singer and musical organiser'.

*Did you kiss the foot that kicked you?* involved the coordination of buskers along the commuter routes into the City, performing both under and above ground, the buskers incorporated *Ballad of Accounting* into their usual repertoire.

A week-long series of twice daily performances slipped quietly into the rush-hour routine, a subconscious intervention; buskers performed individual acts in unison, connected by a shared set of questions.

Legislation has almost eradicated busking in London. By-laws and policing today keep most musicians from the streets. Changes to licensing of live music have applied pressure on the natural spontaneity of all musical performances. The project required lengthy negotiation with borough councils and police, and even though official channels were prepared to grant us permission to go ahead in principle, there was no system in place to do so. Technically, just standing still and singing in parts of London is against the law.

### ***The Museum of Non Participation*** **Karen Mirza and Brad Butler, 2007-2009**

Karen Mirza and Brad Butler conceived *The Museum of Non Participation* in 2007 when - during the Pakistani Lawyers movement in Islamabad - they viewed the protests and subsequent state violence from a window in The National Art Gallery.

Through *The Museum of Non Participation* they pursued ideas connected to their position that day - through conversation, images, activities and narratives following strands of dialogue to different people, places and contexts. Working over a two year period with street vendors, Urdu translators, architects, estate agents, housing activists, lawyers, hairdressers, filmmakers, newspaper printers, artists and writers, they have played out different manifestations of *The Museum of Non Participation*.

*The Museum of Non Participation* raises questions about resistance and the choice and consequence of action versus inaction. The structures of conflict, class and monetary divisions within a globalised world provoke engagement with the problems of participating or not participating in such a system, whether in Karachi, London or elsewhere; *The Museum of Non Participation* examines how our lives in one space have implications on the other.

### **Urdu/English language exchange**

The project first appeared as an English/Urdu language class in September 2008. The free class invited English and Urdu speakers to exchange conversational language under the guidance and mediation of Hasan Sheikh (recruited through advertising in a local shop) It became a space for cultural and linguistic exchange.

### **Karachi**

In collaboration with artist collective VASL, Mirza and Butler returned to Karachi in December 2008, where they occupied a space at the Pakistani Arts Council. This open space became a location to work through ideas with (non) participants and a base from which they conducted interventions outside in the streets of the city. They distributed newspapers as packaging for food sold by the tandoor wallas, presented performance interventions at Sunday Bazaar, and worked with sign writers and Urdu poets to produce text banners and wall paintings that demarcated the Museum as a pop-up institution, announcing a new way of moving through and looking at the city; in a city with almost no museums, the city itself became the museum.

### **Daily Jang collaboration**

On 20 September 2009 a newspaper publication featuring some of the different voices and interpretations of the title was distributed across the UK as a supplement of *The Daily Jang* - the international newspaper from Pakistan's oldest and largest media group.

This newspaper invited text and image contributions from all project participants, was designed by the Jang's London based designer Yousuf Haider and printed on their London printing press. Translated into Urdu and English the MONP newspaper was distributed as a Sunday Supplement during Eid and reached an audience of 60,000 readers.

### **London – a four week programme of talks and events**

The public face of *The Museum of Non Participation* consisted of a month-long programme of events at Yaseen barber's shop on Bethnal Green Road. It brought together the multiple **aspects** of the project in a programme of film screenings; talks; discussions; Urdu poetry; and performance delivered by a variety of project collaborators and invited guests. The space was transformed into an archive of the project showing elements from the process, slide shows, reading material, photography and print media.

### ***Invisible Food***

#### **Ceri Buck**

*Human conversation is the most ancient and easiest way to cultivate the conditions for change ... if we can sit together and talk about what's important to us, we begin to come alive. We share what we see, what we feel, and we listen to what others see and feel*

Meg Wheatly

Writer Ceri Buck began *Invisible food* by inviting her neighbours to take a walk with her. The project developed through playful walking, observation, conversation and eating in search of wild food in the Loughborough area of Brixton.

These walks slowly grew to become larger open events for residents to join, after walking, participants made or cooked something with the herbs, flowers or berries that they found.

*"Invisible food is no expert. We are an experiment arising from the fractured and isolated urban condition of having very little to do with plants. Invisible food is an excuse to learn. Invisible food is a project to discover the wild food growing quietly in the Loughborough area, food that can nourish local residents into health and resilience. Invisible food responds to the global necessity to live more locally, to rely less on transport – now that the blip of cheap oil is over – and to create stronger networking communities".*

Since the commission period *Invisible Food* has been registered as its own company, supported by a committee, it has raised additional funding to develop further outreach projects with local women's groups, the adventure playground, the local market and schools. The walks continue and are attended by up to forty people each month, through the project an allotment has been created on the estate where communal vegetable growing takes place.

### ***Smother***

#### **Sarah Cole and Coram young Parents project, 2008-2010**

*Smother* was developed over 18 months and evolved intensively through weekly activities with young parents and their children over the course of 9 months, culminating in a durational performance based installation inside a derelict house in Kings Cross.

Sarah Cole conducted a series of creative workshops every Friday afternoon within the existing structure of the Coram Young Parent's drop-in, these workshops were a vehicle to develop a shared language amongst the group. Metaphors developed, articulating a range of emotions and experiences that each person related to personally, through the memory of conversation and relationships within the project.

Positive social provision for young parents is rare and under resource. For many of the participants the weekly visit to Coram is their main access to support with urgent issues around housing and welfare. This project located itself within an institutional framework and had to consider a complex accommodation of needs including; the group (which was initially sporadic in attendance); individuals attending the group (teenagers and their babies ranging from new born to 10 yr olds); Coram employees; Coram as an institution with their funding and political agendas; Sarah's position as artist; the project's funding requirements and Artangel's agenda.

As the workshops developed, the importance of the domestic space and its significance in the lives of the young parents became increasingly clear. The symbolic connotations of the different interior spaces within a home, coupled with the transient and precarious nature of their situations - the practical difficulties of simply finding and maintaining a place to live - were all central issues for the young parents as they navigate their own adulthood alongside the complexities of parenthood.

In January 2010 the project moved into 101 Kings Cross Road – an unusually shaped three sided house built around 1874 with just one room on each floor, linked by a winding staircase. The weekly workshops moved from Coram to the house on Kings Cross Road, and the work quickly developed in direct relation to the space.

The work materialised as a series of performances, performed by professional actors inside the house. The actors were cast through a workshop process which the young parents and children were part of. The young parents worked alongside Sarah, in group and one to one scenarios, to develop the (unscripted) material with the actors.

The house consisted of five floors and was home to three inhabitants. The three inhabitants were female actors playing parts that represented the young parents. The characters articulated the range of emotions and experiences of young parenthood. In the basement, skating on a synthetic ice-rink is a young girl who represents a fifteen year old who has just discovered she is pregnant. She shifts between fear, anger and joy as she contemplates her imagined future. In the middle floors an older woman in her early twenties, who has the space to reflect on her experiences, navigates a complex relationship with an absent father and struggles to calm a child in the height of a tantrum. At the top of the house a new mother struggles with a shifting, sleepless routine and tries to keep up appearances for social services.

## **Conclusion**

Over the past two years we have worked with the University of Central Lancashire in a comparative research study to observe and articulate the interaction model; the results of which will be published in 2011.

The artists involved in the Interaction project have embraced this invitation in different ways to inspiring degrees. Handling their own struggle between the need to control a product and trusting that opening their practice will take them somewhere more amazing. Managing the expectations of

people we've met and worked with has taken careful negotiation, how do you answer the need to know what we're making; and why we are entering this process together.

Finding common ground to begin an enquiry of equal relevance and investment has been rewarding. Coram parents service, for example, has seen that an open artistic process can naturally create a space to address issues which are on their agenda; and have adopted a new arts policy affecting their entire service approach which will last long beyond our commissioning investment. *Invisible Food* too has grown far beyond the commission and become a project that continues, sustained by Ceri Buck and the people who work with her.

Karen Mirza and Brad Butler are still developing *The Museum of Non Participation*, further expanding the collaboration and ideas in different sites and contexts.

Time is one of the most precious resources. Maintaining an emphasis on horizontal practice, being constantly mindful of how fragile that balance is, the Interaction programme has been - and still is - an experiment; a bold but subtle shift in position, which challenges people more than I could have imagined. My challenge is still one of articulation, of developing a language through all involved that doesn't try to fix or define the impact that creativity can have on all of us. For me, it still presents itself as a feeling, an instinct and a connection.

Further information about all of the projects can be found at [artangel.org.uk](http://artangel.org.uk).