The Scales of Socially-Engaged Practice: Towards a Shared Language

By Hannah Hull

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Introduction

In this essay I will plot a scale of socially-engaged practice across a broad field of specialisms. This ranges from practice that is socially-engaged purely through the nature of the practice – for example architecture in unavoidably engaged with society – to practice which consciously engages society at every stage of a project, from it's conception to it's realisation.

There are socially-engaged practitioners using art, theatre, architecture, design, and/or the design and policy of community services provision, with shared processes, theories and aims based around dialogue and extensive engagement with society. I will show that highly-engaged social practice is not just cross-disciplinary practice, but an independent discipline.

A major problem facing socially-engaged practitioners is how to differentiate themselves from others using the same tools and producing what superficially appear to be similar 'products'. For example a socially-engaged architect and a builder. Commissioners and users expect certain things of certain practices. A lack of more complex terminology in the language of commissioning public projects means an architect is seen to simply designs buildings, a Public Artist just makes visually aesthetic ornamentation, and a theatre company's success can be measured by 'bums on seats'. These expectations can be valid for many projects in the social realm, but it undermines a complex, nuanced and often time-consuming approach being pioneered by many contemporary practitioners.

I will suggest how the use of more specialised language can be the solution that allows more accurate recognition, application and sustainability of highly-engaged social practice, to the benefit of both the practitioner and commissioner.

To develop this specialised language, I consider it important that the similarities and shared concerns of the broad range of highly-engaged social practitioners are examined. To exemplify these similarities and shared concerns I will examine six intertwined key issues within such practices. The selected issues came out of a seminar I hosted in October 2006 with a carefully selected range of people working within the scale of socially-engaged practice[1].

My route into this subject is Fine Art and Art Theory, thus my suggested model of discerning between different ways of practicing in the social realm is based on the distinctions made within this discipline. Three key terms - Public Art, Community Art and New Genre Public Art – present a comprehensive scale of social engagement in Fine Art practice. I will break down these terms, which I find to present a useful model of criteria that are transferable between social practices. This will point towards the value of developing a language shared between highly-engaged social practices.

I will begin by presenting a definition of each of these three terms before going to examine the six issues that emerged from the seminar.

A. Theoretical Background

Here I will unpack three key terms - Public Art, Community Art and New Genre Public Art – to suggest a scale of social engagement used in Fine Art. I will demonstrate the fundamentals of each method of practice, to be compared with methods of broader practice in the second part of this essay.

I. Public Art

Traditionally, Public Art is "sculptures and installation sited in public places"[2]. This suggests that all art in the public realm could come under this heading. This term is used less ambiguously within Fine Art to describe art in the public realm that isn't particularly socially-engaged.

Public Art can be anything from civic statues to projections onto buildings, including: Thomson and Craighead's *Decorative Newsfeeds* (fig. 0), Forest Hill, comprising three coloured curving lines of LED text in a live news stream in Sainsbury's shop front.; Andy Webster, Jon Bird and Joe Faith's *Tabula Rasa* (fig. 0), Croydon, 2002, comprising 60 films projected on spaces where one would normally expect advertising; and Alfred Gilbert's *The Statue of Eros* (fig. 0), Piccadilly Circus, 1892, erected in memory of the Earl of Shaftesbury, Victorian politician and philanthropist.

The community value of such pieces as these is decoration and creating a visually dynamic environment: 'place making'[3]. Their intention are straight forward: *Decorative Newsfeeds* as *"a pleasant sculpture allowing viewers to keep informed whilst contemplating a kind of sculpture"*; the central aim of *Tabula Rasa* was to situate *"films in a non-art institutional context, [allowing the work to] blend into the urban environment and be viewed by people as they casually went about their business"*; and the purpose of *The Statue of Eros* is commemoration.

Sited in public space, such pieces typically have no specific community reference. They may play with the notion of the public context and viewer and/or be site-specific, but not community specific. They can be 'place-making' with no ulterior purpose.

II.   Community Art

Community Art – like Public Art – often culminates in a physical product in a publicly accessible space. Community Art – unlike Public Art and by definition - at some point and to some degree must engage the community. This may be consultation or collaboration in producing an artwork, or an artwork that creates a dialogue with or within the community. The scale from Public to Community Art is based on the level of engagement either in the production of the piece or of the final piece itself.

Anthony Gormley did not consult or collaborate with the public in the creation of *Angel of the North* [4]*(1998)* (fig. 0). This sculpture, dependant on Gormley's intention, could be classed as Public or Community Art. Gormley used materials and a concept he thought to be meaningful to the people, subsequently engaging the community's language and values[5]. This predictive method of working is more engaged than *Decorative Newsfeeds*, but less than other projects. This piece represents a point on the scale between Public and Community Art.

A project firmly entrenched in the Community Art genre is Gormley's *Domain Field*[6] *(2004)* (fig. 0). This engaged numerous people in the physical process of making the work[7], but the concept, meaning and aesthetic was left un-touched by the community. This was entirely conceived by Gormley, and chiefly concerned with the use of fractal geometry to create a visual representation of memory.

This is a text book model of Community Art: engaging the locals in the making process, demystification of art and provision of skills development and employment, with the artist being able to present a clear physical end result of the project for approval of the commissioning agency, thus not involving anyone in the conceptual development process.

This scale of public to Community Art leads onto New Genre Public Art in terms of levels of engagement with the public.

III.   New Genre Public Art

New Genre Public Art (NGPA) takes the idea of collaboration when producing Community Art to its fullest, with the public involved in the conception, development and realisation of the work. Suzanne Lacy's definition of NGPA: "New Genre Public Art – visual art that uses both traditional and non-traditional media to communicate and interact with a broad and diversified audience about issues directly relevant to their lives – is based on engagement."[8] The key is a dialogue being produced and used: there need not be any physical object produced. A useful metaphor in thinking about this type of work is that the medium is society, a community, or people; the tools are the systems, social constructs or habits people work and live within; and the technique is dialogue; the 'finished' piece, as such, is a 'social sculpture'[9]

A good example of NGPA is *The Roof is on Fire* performance (1994) (fig. 0) organised by Suzanne Lacy, with Annice Jacoby and Chris Johnson[10]. Lacy collaborated transparently with those key in the situation – the press, the youths and the community who read/watch the press - with a creative representative activism that enabled different sects of the community to contextualise themselves against each other. The press and the local people were invited to listen to the conversations that took place in the car park. This first hand and representative account was then depicted in the media. The students were given lessons in media literacy and were given the chance to influence their image.

All physical objects used in this piece are specific and relational. For example, the use of a car park and cars for the conversations to take place in. This as a place for conversation was familiar to the students, and the image of the students hanging out in their cars was familiar to the community also. This apparently straight-forward decision is highly specific and fundamental to the concept. Such familiar images of a discriminated group are intertwined with stereotype and prejudice, and as such, the pulling apart of such an image is important to Lacy's intentions with this project. In this work Lacy can be seen to manipulate or 'sculpt' elements of this complex issue in such a way to create a familiar but subverted sense of the original issue. She forces a breaking down of the previous nuances of prejudice through juxtaposition and reappropriation of such nuances. She creates a new system through which the press, the teenagers and the public can have a conversation, supported by recognisable things: the kids talking in their cars; a press release; a revelation on the local news. Through conversation: the teens learn how the press work and develop a broader sense of the complexities of their situation of prejudice and how to take control of this through communication; the press witness a different aspect of the teens; the public witness or are presented with an alternative view.

Physical objects playing a supporting and non-visually aesthetic role to the central concept contrasts significantly with how Gormley works, wherein a visually stimulating piece may be used to involve elements of social relevance and involvement.

Lacy's entirely conversational and wholly collaborative piece, supported by the visually aesthetic in a relational manner, and tackling social issues in a long-term and sustainable manner is archetypical of NGPA[11]. To denote the reference of practitioners working in this way the prefix 'dialogical' will be used. For example, dialogical architect.

The term 'Public Art' is used in an even less specific manner within government policy. Most local planning authorities have Public Art Policies promoting the incorporation of Public Art into developments. Local authorities play an important role in encouraging the commissioning of artists who work in the public realm.

Typical of Local Authority Public Art Policies is Croydon Council's *Public Art Supplementary Planning Document* (SPD)[12]. It specifies how developers in Croydon should integrate Public Art into developments in accordance with Croydon's Percent-for-Art scheme. This SPD states *"sculpture, lighting effects, street furniture, paving, railings and signs"[13]* are all considered Public Art. This often translates into decorative Juliet balconies and decorative railings (fig. 0) - usually not by artists.

This is not to debase such decorative features. These features can help develop the individuality of a town or city. They are comparable to public sculptures and installation in their potential to build a sense of place: cultural landmarks that the citizens of an area can feel a sense of pride about.

Public Art is often tokenistic, producing aesthetically pleasing work occurring within the public realm. This has a value of creating character but is often implemented under the assumption that this is what Public Art is in its entirety.

Key Issues within Social Practice

The following six issues emerged from a seminar I hosted in October 2006: "Show and Tell: A Seminar for Socially-engaged Practitioners". The carefully selected participants included representatives of socially-engaged practice within theatre, architecture, the design of NHS services provision, social design and Community Art, as well as a representative of a freelance company who advise those wishing to commission art in a non-gallery context. The results of open questions asked prior to the seminar formed a structure of topics to discuss, which led into a debate on the shared issues facing all participants[14]. I will break down each issue by looking at the work of practitioners from the seminar and their similarities and differences, placing this in a context of the scale of social art practice and art and social theory, government policy and other practitioners within the field of Public Art. I will demonstrate how these issues point to the same solutions.

I. **Collaboration/ consultation**

The word consultation has become a 'buzz word' in socially-engaged projects. The perceived benefit of the public's 'seal of approval' is such that the Government request Local Authorities to substantiate most action within the public realm with public consultation[15]. Often this is statutory.

For social practitioners, consultation constitutes a more or less important role. When non-statutory, some practitioners skip this process altogether. When statutory, some take a tick box approach. For others, consultation is integral to their practice. In this section I will explore how Local Authority Policy affects the implementation of consultative social practice and demonstrate how and why highly collaborative approaches are taken across the sphere of social practice.

The aforementioned *Decorative Newsfeeds* by Thomson & Craighead demonstrates zero consultation. It attends to the bare minimum requirements of the Public Art appendix in the Forest Hill SPD. This piece has no community relevance and was not made for the site. Simply an artwork that Sainsbury's liked and would fit the shop front, this piece is neither site-specific nor community-specific.

In *Road Ribbon* (fig. 0), Tower Hamlets, 2004, Theresa Smith, Community Artist/ Designer and founder of Mooch Design, took a more consultative approach, comparable to the 'tick-box' approach described. The lit concrete band across a road marking the beginning of a home zone was designed by Smith and a fairly finalised version of this design was presented to the public for their approval, with some further decisions made through consultation. This method ensures the piece has little or no meaning to the public, rendering consultation pointless.

Smith prefers to call herself and artist/designer. Presumably this is to mark a less engaged approach than her view of a Community Artist and the strong visually aesthetic of her practice. Her practice is comparable to designers of visually aesthetic objects that predict or, arguably, create peoples taste. The role of aesthetic can appear confusing, but many dialogical designers create visually aesthetic pieces of which the point is not visual aesthetics, but a tool to prompt the consideration of social issues.

Designers US-Creates take a highly collaborative and dialogical approach to their work, overseen by a visually aesthetic eye. This visually pleasing element of their work does not detract from the core purpose of their practice; rather it attracts people to an object, subsequently engaging them in the concept. This is their take on design as an educational and dialogical tool. For example *Doilies with a Twist* (fig. 0) (2006) encourage the sharing of food through directional arrows as part of the doilies cutaway design. These visually aesthetic doilies encourage thought and - due to their social use - dialogue surrounding the nature of sharing and interaction. US-Creates highly collaborative and dialogical approach enables them to locate social discrepancies and design socially integrated solutions.

This 'bottom-up' approach is akin to Community Artist Loraine Leeson. Leeson collaborates with sections of the community to create posters and bill boards: she has an idea of a visual outcome, but only in terms of a generic format, which she has chosen for its social currency. All further decisions are fully collaborative. *West Meets East (1992)* (fig. 0) was a collaboration with some Bengali girls from Bow School, Docklands. The image produced represents how the girls position themselves living between two cultures[16]. Leeson facilitated and guided an empowering creative process that produced a piece for public display that the participants felt ownership over.

Artist and writer Stephen Willats speaks of the importance of engaging people in this manner: "This actual personal creative experience [is] more meaningful to people than their innate position as passive witnesses to referential experience in the traditional

audience role", "operating within the domain of the 'audience', using their language and priorities"[17]. This ethos succinctly describes the role of collaboration within NGPA, and demonstrates how Leeson's methodology fits into the arena of NGPA where Smith's 'top-down' approach does not.

A practice within architecture working in the manner prescribed by Willats is AOC (Agent's of Change). For the *Lift New Parliament* project [18](fig. 0) (Summer 2008-Summer 2033), AOC has chosen the generic structure of a tent. This chosen because it fulfilled three quotas: versatility in manipulation, transportability and global and cultural familiarity of the object and technology.

After this initial practical solution, AOC have undertaken a comprehensive series of workshops with various community groups all over London[19]. Open questions were asked about how these groups would use the space, in order to attempt to create a space as versatile as the communities it represents are diverse.

The necessity of the knowledge of skilled architects in this project is tricky. This can never be a start-to-end, fully collaborative project. In order to ensure the physical design of the tent doesn't wander from the ideas of the communities consulted, a *Lift New Parliament Constitution* is being assembled for a "reflection group" – a selection of consulted individuals – to periodically test AOC's further decisions against, maintaining a form of the collaboration they value so highly.

In conclusion, the incorporation of optional or minimum standard consultation into policy documents does not always have the intended affect on public practice. As with the term 'Public Art', the word 'consultation' is an all-encompassing word used by the Government that is subject to distortion by those under them. Tokenistic consultation undermines the inclusion of it in such documents, making it appear that such a process has little use[20]. However, many practitioners are committed to consultative/collaborative approach regardless of the policy context. Social practitioners are taking a highly collaborative approach comparable to NGPA order to make more meaningful and representative work.

The role of aesthetic in highly collaborative and dialogical practice often relates back to the role of aesthetic within the practitioners specialism, but plays a supporting role to the core social intention and dialogical process of the work.

II. Funding

Public-funding goes a long way in creating a sustainable social practice. It is rare for a practice not to have experience of this process. As Mary Warnock relates in the introduction to *Art for All,* "There has been State subsidy of the arts since pre-classical times, and in what we think of as the greatest periods for art, both in Greece and Rome, public finance was an essential condition"[21]. Indeed, the Art's Council distribute over £1bn of public money from the government and the National Lottery[22].

One challenge funding altering socially-engaged projects through a meeting of agendas. Often in Fine Art an ideal of autonomy is still referred to. In this context, many argue that the more agendas involved the less "pure" the work produced[23].

In this section I will explain how this negotiation in the process of funding can be conceptually important to social practice. I will also exemplify how the language surrounding funding can be detrimental to the perceived value of socially-engaged art practice, through a lack of diversified language in the running of schemes such as Percent-for-Art.

In social practice, undertaking publicly-funded projects in the social realm is made difficult by the consideration of a commercial agenda. Social theorist Clement Greenburg proposed that in order to maintain culture within a capitalist climate, cultural practices must become autonomous, thus resilient against capitalist venture. Practitioners, however, are embracing 'capitalist' interest as an opportunity for social change.

Entering into a debate surrounding the intentions of a piece of work often involves the practitioner taking a socio-political stance expressed actively in dialogue with an often commercially biased organisation. To some extent the commissioner is forced to alter their plans in accordance with the social practitioner, recognising his values. This action theoretically leads to eventual change in the organisation through broadening of thought.

This practice was pioneered by the Artist's Placement Group (APG)[24], founded by John Latham and Barbara Stevini in the early 1970's. 'Artists-in-Residence' were sited in a broad range of working situations. Unlike traditional Artist-in-Residence schemes, the artist was paid the wage of other professionals in the company. Work was undertaken on an

"open brief": the artist's work comprised of the actions he/she saw fit for the environment. This ranged from traditional art pieces to strategic policy suggestions, often within the same placement[25]. Artist Andrew Dipper who undertook a placement with Esso Petroleum made several Super-8 films and stimulated the crew to document their experiences at sea through his own interest in taking photos of mundane objects and vistas; he then raised concerns of the proximity of the ships bar to the engine room[26].

APG's work led to an official memorandum from the Civil Service in 1972 recommending government agencies to include artists in public planning processes. This led onto the development and implementation of Percent-for-Art schemes. Paradoxically, such schemes now pose a threat towards the sustainability of collaborative practice with long-term objectives such as those demonstrated by APG.

Despite their long-termist and highly-engaged roots, Percent-for-Art Schemes can now be seen to be detrimental to social practice, producing ineffective, tokenistic work that is not created by artists and raises questions in the public realm regarding the point of such schemes[27].

In addition, this Percent-for-Art scheme (which suggests that large developments contribute the 1% or £40K[28] of the build costs for Public Art in their budget) includes the condition that in certain circumstances, when good reason is given, this percentage can be given as a donation to Public Art rather than being included in the build. This has resulted in developers seeing this amount as what Croydon Council the £40K towards Public Art as long as it doesn't take place within the development.

The demonstrated 'short-cuts' taken within the Croydon scheme clearly goes against Latham's original intentions. The founding influence of Percent-for-Art schemes demonstrates that undertaking a collaborative process with an artist can shed an important light on such a development, paradoxically with particular reference to long-term social solutions. According to art theorist Grant H. Kester, Latham's vehement support of such schemes was based on "the contention that industry and government tend to be dominated by short-term problem solving responses and that conventional planners and administrators find it difficult to envision the long-term implications of their actions."[29]

According to Latham, the durational thinking needed to balance this short-term approach is precisely the way an artist works. The first APG placement, with British Steel, lasted for 4 years. These placements were long-term, with long-term affect, due to the

artists proposing their involvement in making reports, policy making and so on. There is a clear argument here for artists to work with developers on a long-term basis in the form of a placement.

At a point where many Public Artists have a time-consuming and ambitious social agenda, to achieve the funding opportunities they need for a sustainable practice there must be a language available to commissioners that express the different values of different practices. A climate where the meaning of Public Art can be seen as DIY lighting affects discourage the commissioning of artists and undervalue their potential.

SPD is a key communication point wherein the varying definitions and benefits of the range of artistic practice can be portrayed. For some developments, the insertion of a sculpture of visually aesthetic value and of no community relevance may be appropriate, whereas others may benefit from the highly-engaged collaborative practice of a New Genre Public Artist. Without any definitions of what is what, there is no scope for affective decision making and commissioning, and no awareness raised of the diversity of Public Artists at hand, and rich variety of roles that art can play within the public realm.

This lack of definition affects many social practices, not just artists, during the funding process. The generic term 'consultation' in government policies has already been seen to be problematic. For AOC, the 'consultation' that took place in *Lift New Parliament* is, to them, and within Fine Art, specifically collaboration. The term 'consultation' enters the equation when interpreting more complex ideas into a simpler language used in policy. This includes the 'tick-box' substantiation of funding.

This 'language barrier' is also reflected in theatre group Knee High's *The Three Islands Project (2003-2006)*[30] (fig. 0). The measurement of this highly socially-engaged project's success was deemed by Local Authorities was - as expressed by Knee High member Lewis Davies – "bums on seats". None of the dialogue, education opportunity offered to locals, number of people working wage free demonstrating a passion for the project, earning possibility offered to local actors, development of a sense of community or local political engagement, was deemed as or more valuable than the number of the local community that attended the play.

If this is the main criteria for successful theatre in the community it would have been much cheaper to simply put on a straight-forward play. Without more representative judgement criteria there will be no money for highly-engaged, community specific theatre.

In conclusion, these examples demonstrate elements of practice key to social practitioners are overlooked by policy that simple require "art in the public realm", or, in Knee High's case, "theatre in the public realm". The important community developing aspects are overlooked due to lack of definition or education of what could be in place and the affect therein. The time-consuming approach of groups such as Knee High and AOC who work in a dialogical, highly community engaged and educational manner will lose out if they continue to be measured against superficially similar schemes: they will either lose out on commissions due to the extra cost of this unrecognised approach, compromise their practice or do more for less money. This is not equal a sustainable - or fulfilling - practice.

This attitude is detrimental to the survival of such practice. The example of the implementation of Percent-for-Art schemes are delivered can be seen to be actively contributing to practice that contradicts the original purpose of such schemes and questions the value of maintaining such programmes.

Once again, the point is made: a more complex language is needed to deal with such initiatives affectively.

III.   Dialogue

One key aspect that differentiates Public Art, Community Art and NGPA is the role of dialogue in the work. Stephen Willats emphasises the importance of engaging the public in the development of art, using the public's language and values in order to make more meaningful and relevant work.

In this section I will specifically explore the theoretical importance and role specifically of dialogue within socially-engaged practice according to Fine Art practice. I will explain how in NGPA dialogue can be the verbal dialogue already touched upon and a non-verbal dialogue. This non-verbal dialogue relates to the traditional "banking" of meaning inherent in a piece of art that is later extracted by a knowledgeable individual. In the case of NGPA this knowledgeable person is not a person with an understanding of art, rather, due to the relational aspect of such work, they can be anyone.

I will further explore the detrimental affect of commissioners overlooking the importance of this dialogue which is integral to certain practitioners who often continue to

work in a dialogical manner regardless, as previously discussed in the 'Funding' section of this essay.

Willats' *A Socially interactive Model of Art Practice* (fig. 0), suggests model of dialogical practice. It ensures dynamic verbal and non-verbal dialogue in a more dynamic way than the traditional relationship between artwork and artist, exemplified by Willats' *Conventional Relationship of an Artwork between Artist and Audience* (fig. 0) in which a dialogue happens between the artist and the artwork, and then, separately, the viewer and the artwork. Kester describes how Willat's theories regarding dialogue surrounding his model for socially-engaged practice enable the challenging of artistic 'presuppositions' through this interactive approach to creating artwork. Through "direct collaboration and feedback"[31] the artist cannot work in a purely theoretical manner.

NGPA can be seen as the direct application of Willats' model of conversational practice. The afore-mentioned project *The Roof is on Fire* by Suzanne Lacy, given as an archetypical example of NGPA, is demonstrative of this. Lacy is simultaneously in dialogue – a two way conversation, both verbal and non-verbal - with: the context – racial prejudice (the youths in an area of California where racial prejudice against them is rife, through other youths, the media, and society at large); the audience – the users of the 'artwork' (the audience of the work is the same as the audience of the press and indeed the press itself. In addition the youths are the audience of their situation though the process of defining what constitutes this situation); and the artwork –a model for dialogue that embodies the socially interactive model itself (a rearranging of the physical elements used in the creation and sustaining of prejudice in such a way to break down this prejudice by defamiliarisation of the links between these recognizable physical elements). Lacy is in dialogue, interacting with all of these elements, simultaneously bouncing off them and influencing them. These elements - within and without the artwork - are in dialogue with each other.

Willats' model is reflected in work of Us–Creates, "designers for social change"[32]. *Un-Ready Meal Bag*[33] *(2006)* (fig. 0) is one design developed to tackle their current concern: the 'obesity crisis'. In this piece, US-Creates have carefully observed and integrated the variety of interrelated issues surrounding the 'obesity crisis' into an accessible solution. Children ask for things in the supermarket, children get restless in the supermarket, and taking children shopping with you is often unavoidable; one of the 'reasons' for the 'obesity crisis' is often pinpointed to be lack of time associated with being a busy parent, which correlates with taking him/her shopping with you.

The process of developing this solution was a simultaneous conversation between:

the artist – US-Creates; the context – the situation of obesity; the audience – the users of the object and subjects of the 'obesity crisis'; and the artwork - again the 'artwork' (in this case the bag) is produced via these conversations and embodies this dialogical model in they way it works. Through 'direct collaboration and feedback', this heavily considered way of working produces highly affective and sustainable change.

As suggested by Latham, a short-term economy is in place. The government like quick and specific solutions. One such short-term method currently being used by Ulster Teachers Union to deal with racism is the sending out leaflets to its members[34]. In addition, a current attempt at fighting the 'obesity crisis' in Britain is the use of "traffic light labels" to flag up unhealthy foods. This has proved itself to make minimal difference to peoples shopping habits. This method has been accused by the British Retail Consortium of "demonizing food"[35] and not tackling the real issue of bad diets. Rather, it is creating "artificially" bad foods such as cheese and meat, which are in fact "diet staples". It is quite clear that these short-term, 'crisis management' solutions are unsustainable: minimal engagement points to minimal affectivity.

So in conclusion, dialogue can be key to the development of water-tight social solutions. It provides a loop for testing theory and gaining important feedback. This affective, process-based method of practising can be overseen by the government when other solutions, for example the 'traffic-light' labelling of foods, may appear easier and more tangible. Once again, the key here is the recognition of the variety of practices, and which practices are most suited to which situations, which can only be done through the use of more complex terminology available to the realm of funding.

IV.   Accessibility/ Demystification

One core reason for taking a more engaged approach to art, architecture, theatre and/or the design and policy of community services provision has been an attempt to respond to the inaccessibility of these areas for sections of the public. In this section I will discuss how within Fine Art there is an argument to make work *less* accessible in order to, as artist Brecht and linguistic theorist Shklovsky[36] suggests, induce a way of thinking that enables us to know the world in its full complexity. Mary Warnock, in her introduction to *Art for All*, expresses the government's assertion that "art must be 'accessible' but it must also be 'subversive' and 'challenging'"[37]. I will explore how, although apparently opposing

this stance, socially-engaged practice draws an interesting parallel with it.

Open House was originally set up in the 1990's by Victoria Thornton as a charity intending to 'open up' architecture, design and the built environment to the public. Through one of their programmes, *Open House Weekend,* hundreds of buildings, usually inaccessible to the public, open their doors once a year. Architects are on hand to explain their work[38] and the weekend enables the public to see and approach their surroundings in a different, more questioning and understanding light.

A similar example in the field of art is Tate Modern's attempt to make modern art more accessible. Open all day everyday, this free, public gallery attracted more than 4 million visitors in 2004. It had guided tours, audio tours, strategically placed signs explaining various artworks and terms, a bookshop selling everything from pencil sharpeners to paintbrushes and *The Art Book*[39] to *Art in Theory*[40], online archives and tutorials, free talks and substantial concessions on workshops and seminars. It is one of the most accessible and most visited public modern art galleries in the world.

In 1993 Mary Jane Jacob curated *Culture in Action: New Public Art in Chicago*, an important exhibition in the history of NGPA. *Culture in Action* was partially in reaction to the 1989 *Sculpture Chicago*[41] summer program's attempt at making sculpture more accessible, which, as Miwon Kwon notes, Jacob found "naïve"[42]. Exposure to the technical process of making provides limited knowledge of the art-making process. The application of materials and skills plays a more important role in some art practices than others – to some a mere means for expressing the conceptual. The idea of purely witnessing this aspect of art practice as demystifying art practice is inadequate.

Culture in Action was developed without the use of any such specialist skills, completely cutting out the element that *Sculpture Chicago* considered so important. The public were deemed the professionals of the public realm. Artworks as diverse as a multi-ethnic parade to a candy bar, a hydroponic garden to grow food for HIV/AIDS patients and paint charts reflecting the lives of public housing residents. These entirely collaborative works, by and for the public, did not just open up the process of art making. They showed the public what art in its broadest and fullest sense *could* be.

AOC's Lift New Parliament is the ultimate accessible building. AOC are breaking down every possible boundary between buildings and people. They have the difficult task

of making a physical space that can be exactly what people need and can relate to in communities across the globe. The tent structure immediately removes the role of the architect as the maker of the built environment: anyone can make a tent. As in *Culture in Action*, AOC position people as the professionals of their own space, asking them directly what architecture could mean to them.

There is an argument within Fine Art against making culture more accessible. In *Conversation Pieces: Community and Communication in Modern Art*, Grant Kester speaks of Viktor Shklovsky and Bertolt Brecht's interrelated theories on the accessibility of art. Kester explains: "In Shklovsky's writing we encounter the characteristic to make art 'difficult': to thicken and complicate its formal appearance in order to focus the viewer on the materiality of language itself."[43] He goes on to relate how Shklovsky believes that in this manner we can aid our recognition of "the world in its full complexity", currently held back by our dependence on "existing linguistic conventions" which "encourages a 'habitual' form of perception". This top-down approach to what is - at its simplest - lateral thinking is mirrored in Brecht's bold statement: "Alienation is necessary to all understanding".

The skill of social art, as prescribed by Willats, is the manipulation of a familiar language in a manner that encourages a new way of seeing things. This can be clearly seen to be 'breaking of habitual forms of perception' as per Shklovsky's theorem. This is well demonstrated in Lacy's manipulation of the familiar to create the unfamiliar in *The Roof is on Fire*. A notable aspect of NGPA is the testing of social art theory as per Willats' *Socially interactive Model of Art Practice*. Here it is suggested that Greenberg and Shklovsky's 'pre-suppositions' are causing them to work in a 'purely theoretical manner', the antithesis of NGPA's intent, yet there is an interesting parallel between these modes of thinking.

In conclusion, practitioners are breaking down the walls of their practices under the belief that people are the real experts on how they do and want to live, and that architecture, public art, community theatre, and social design should serve and empower its audience and users. These practitioners knowledge of their specialisms are used to break down and subvert those specialisms. Demystifying practice in this way empowers people by giving them the freedom to take control of their own environment.

V.   Intention/Affect

In this section I will suggest how the dialogical practice affectively works towards the aims of many governmental policies/plans. The language of such policies reflects that of dialogical practice, but a lack of their knowledge of such practice disables them from recognising just how valuable such work can be.

I will also suggest the commercial 'trend' for initiatives that superficially appear to be working in a similar way as dialogical projects mentioned, and how such initiatives have limited or detrimental use.

As a contextual basis for this section I will expand on an aspect of Latham's theories. Kester explains how Latham believed the "accounting system" of the market to be responsible a short-termist problem solving. This is to say that the general attitude towards solving social issues relates to short-term money making investments in the stock market. Investments in cultural practice with clear, accountable short-term benefits are favoured over long-term, uncertain investments. A lack of a cohesive body of examples showing the success of long-term cultural planning means a sustained reluctance to invest in this manner.

The London Plan expresses uses terms familiar or identical to the language of dialogical practice in a broad range of policies[44]: empowerment, access, tackling social exclusion, accessible/affordable community spaces, gaps in the provision of social infrastructure, sustainable communities, social wellbeing, social networks, and sense of community.

Socially-engaged practitioners naturally knit themselves with the issues listed above. There is no need for a specific brief, just a specific choice of practitioner, who will then 'build' the brief with the commissioner. Due to a lack of informed understanding of the broad range of practitioners working methods this is currently rarely possible. Because intentions can not be laid out as simply as 'this is my intention and this will be the result', practitioners are failing to be commissioned on this 'open' basis.

Despite pointing towards activities akin to APG in the London Plan, the Mayor of London's choice of words in specifying that these activities need to relational – i.e. "tailored to local circumstances"[45] - has brought about a distortion in such schemes application. A change in the specifics policies and advice on what is meant by - and *how* to go about – relational projects is needed to relieve this problem.

Schemes that *resemble* the intentions of dialogical practitioners increasingly occur commercially. The television programme *Monty Don – Growing out of Trouble* for example. This programme assumes the role of social work, with celebrity TV gardener Monty Don taking drug addicts into the countryside and teaching them the laws of the land in order to open their minds to a world that is not steeped in addiction. In this there is no proof that this will be useful. This programme is not complex in its intentions: make good TV out of drug addicts under a guise of a 'good cause'.

Superficially similar is a jam-making session run by artist Katrin Böhm. She took residents of a socially divided council estate into the countryside to pick berries and make jam. This can be seen to be a more genuine and sustainable approach to social change. Procedures for aiding drug addicts through recovery are firmly in place; procedures for dealing with socially divided council estates are not. Unlike Böhm's scheme, the model created in *Growing out of Trouble* is not one that can be assumed as a standard model of practice: take a small gang of drug addicts into the country where a celebrity gardener teaches them how to garden.

The result of the jam making session is that through a process of learning together and being taken into an unfamiliar environment led to conversations that eased the tensions felt prior to the jam making. This initiative being funded by the council ensures the possibility of following up long-term affect. The step from crack addict to land-loving gardener is notably larger and less attainable than the step from arguing with your neighbours to not arguing with your neighbours. The former, of course, makes better TV. *Growing out of Trouble* is sponsored by the BBC, leaving the chances of following up the affect on the participants of this programme fairly slim.

The intention of this programmes is to make a good TV show, and the project revolves around this. A naïve attempt at projecting good intention is in reality based on spectacle and prejudice. No consultation of what crack addicts need is in place and no attainable goal can be met or indeed sustained. Monty Don cannot offer himself up as a 'sponsor'[46] and the extremities at play are not bridged - despite Monty Don's claims that he knows where the kids are 'coming from'. Instead of creating a sustainable change, programmes such as this reinforce an inexplicable divide in social strata: the celebrity and the underprivileged.[47] This project remains a naïve attempt at social work, where the jam making makes a sustainable and accountable change.

In conclusion, we can see that many pseudo-socially-engaged commercial projects are in place. In comparison to highly socially-engaged project these seem naïve, tokenistic, and un-sustainable. In governmental plans we see the language used by socially-engaged practitioners throughout this essay. This again highlights the need for greater understanding of the broad range of social practice to enable Local Authorities to commission wisely.

Conclusion

I have demonstrated the relevance of this dialogical practice to Government initiatives, and the benefits to company's long-term strategies (as verified by APG placements) in working with these practitioners. Yet such practice is still being placed on a par with others who are superficially producing similar work. This is detrimental to dialogical practitioners who struggle to sustain their practice whilst earning the same income per project as those with less time-consuming practices. APG artists spent a minimum of one month on site drawing together a proposal of what type of work they saw fit to undertake. This was then put forward to the company who negotiate a contract with the artist. The artist was paid an equivalent wage to a professional within the industry.

A solution to the problem of sustainability lies in the development of dialogical practice as an individual, commonly recognised practice in its own right, inclusive of the varied specialisms employed. An adaptation of Greenberg's theory on how to create a resilient practice is applicable here. As Greenberg suggests, this can be done through entrenching a practice in the unique features of that practice. In this case, this is the production of sustainable solutions that fully integrate the broad range of problematic nuances at play within one clearly definable social issue. It is the application of a form of social science through professional-level mediums. These practitioners have an in-depth understanding of – and are motivated by - how their practice does and can positively affect the social.

The difficulties of funding facing practitioners encourage a less engaged practice. In order to resist compromising their practice, there is a need for such practitioners to distinguish themselves from other modes of practice superficially similar. Through this a cohesive archive of affective dialogical projects will be formed, thus providing extensive proof that the commissioning of such practices is worthwhile. Therein the clearly defined time-consuming practice can be recognised and appropriately renumerated.

This coherency of practice will generate a shared language that can be used to inform policies. The clear segregation of this style of working will allow the specific inclusion of such methods of working in policies, rather than the ambiguous, indeterminate and ineffective inclusion of 'public art' to 'improve the public realm'[48] or demands for 'community engagement'. Specifity in documents such as the London Plan with enable specificity in policies created by Local Authorities.

Despite having equivalent practices, many practitioners are unaware of others working in the same way in other fields. This is partially due the tendency for practices to measure themselves against their own peers and traditions, for example architects to measure themselves against the history of architecture and the architectural profession. Paradoxically this inward-looking attitude is one prescribed by Greenberg.

From this angle, the first step to tackling the issue of sustainability is the recognition of and dialogue between other practitioners working in the same way. A valuable first step would be the staging of selective and interdisciplinary seminars, evolving into the creation of online resources, writing and collaborative projects. I hope that the seminar I organised in writing this essay provides a useful and positive example.

So far the seminar has stimulated plans for collaboration between architect Vincent Lacovara of AOC and myself. Vincent has recommended US-Creates for participation in an event he was unable to partake in. Event invitations are being circulated between participants. I was invited to lunch by the director of Think Public for further conversation. Invited practitioners who were unable to attend have been keen that another seminar is organised, and the attendees were enthusiastic to continue the conversation. Due to the success of this event, I am organising a second seminar in Spring 2007. Hopefully, the second of many.

1   See Appendix 1 for list of participants

2   Miwon Kwon, *One Place After Another: Site-Specific Art and Locational Identity* (Cambridge, Mass.: MITPress, 2002) p 105

3   This term is discussed in works such as *The Image of the City* by renowned city planner Kevin Lynch. It describes the creation and preservation of unique and visually interesting aspects of cities. Kevin Lynch, *The Image of the City* (Cambridge Mass: MIT Press, 1960).

4   Angel of the North is a 66 foot tall steel sculpture of an angel, its wings spanning 178 feet, sited in Tyneside, Newcastle.

5   The steel used is representative of the industrial area and the angel is said to watch over the people.

6   Domain Field comprised approximately fifty life-size figures made from 4.76mm x 4.76mm steel bars made via moulds of Newcastle residents ranging from age two to eighty-four years old.

7   Gormley used local people for the casting process, which ensured the community felt an attachment to the final piece - the figures were people they knew or related to, or even themselves. Local students were employed to do the casting and welding process and more involved in erecting the life size abstract figures. This 'opening-up' of the process of making demystified the terrain of the artist, making the final piece more accessible. The provision of skills development for the students and short-term employment also adds to its community engagement.

8   Kwon, One Place after Another, p 105

9   This term was first coined by artist, teacher and writer Joseph Bueys in the 1960's. Bueys' theories are too rich and complex to be discussed at any length here, but his view was that everyone was an inherently artist capable of moulding or 'sculpting' society. Joseph Beuys Study Day. 18.02.05 held at Tate Modern.

10   This performance comprised of 220 Latino and African American high school students from California, sitting in cars on a roof car park, enacting improvised conversations on racial issues surrounding young people. This was in response to a seminar hosted by Lacy in an Oakland high school wherein she observed how the representation of these youths in local media affected them, and affected how society at large viewed these youths.

11   It is important to note that the language surrounding this high awareness of social effect and affect as a core element of social practice in part grew out of Richard Serra's *Tilted Arc,* 1981, New York City Federal Plaza (Fig. 16). This imposing 120 foot long and 12 foot high curving wall of steel caused controversy amongst the users of the space leading to its eventual removal. This public siting was important to Serra in the way it made people more aware of their surroundings, but did not take deem people's opinions as important. This piece demonstrates how Public Art does not necessarily engage the users of the space where the work is sited despite unavoidably doing so, or, where relevant, consult those whom the work is 'about'. Serra proclaimed that "Art is not democratic. It is not for the people." This led to a demand for greater responsibility from artists to the public in the siting of Public Art, and a call for the standardisation of a consultative approach to such public installations. *Culture Shock: The TV Series and Beyond* website <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/cultureshock/flashpoints/visualarts/tiltedarc_a.html> [accessed 14.12.06]

12   Croydon Council's *Public Art Supplementary Planning Document* (SPD) 30.10.03. Croydon Council Website <http://www.croydon.gov.uk/environment/dcande/UDP/spgs/publisartspg.pdf> [accessed 04.12.06]

13   London Borough of Croydon quoting the Government and Commission of Architecture and the Built Environment (CABE) in Croydon Council's *Public Art SPD*, ibid.

14   See Appendix 2 for questions.

15   Such as new developments, acts of regeneration, or the writing of new policies.

16   The image shows a young Bengali woman's hands sewing together a sari and a denim jacket using an industrial sewing machine, surrounded by a border of traditional Indian images and commercial Western images. The hands of the women sewing is decorated with traditional henna wedding patterns, painted on using nail varnish.

17   Stephen Willats, Art and Social Function. (London: Ellipsis, 2000) p8.

18   AOC were invited to design a temporary, transportable performance and meeting space that would travel around the world for 25 years, starting at Stratford Circus theatre (2008-2033). The brief was to create a meeting and performance space to provide a physical arena for exchange that doesn't readily exist already in the community it is visiting. It is to be a space like no other space, for aspirations, debates, dancing, exhibitions, playing, performing – whatever the community want or need. Each visited community would make an addition to Lift New Parliament, to be taken with it when it moves on to the next community: a travelling scrap book.

19   These included the Albany Arts Centre in Deptford, Goldsmiths University of London theatre department in New Cross and a voluntary community regeneration centre in Bromley by Bow.

20   It is worth noting that, often, the route of consultative substantiation is through Neighbourhood Partnerships, wherein meetings are held between the Local Authorities and local people to discuss new initiatives and to hear what the people wish to comment on regarding life in a particular borough. This is intended to give the public a sense of ownership over what is happening in their area, a sense of empowerment. Many projects achieve a public 'seal of approval' through being pushed through this process, consulting people who are not representative of the people individual projects will affect. Through the ways these events are advertised and arranged, a biased group of people attend. Zlatinka Hristova - Croydon Councils Art's Development Officer – explained how those who attend are usually not young and not working, often with an "axe to grind". (*Interview with Zlatinka Hristova*, Public Arts Development Officer, Croydon Council., 05.12.06)

21   Mary Warnock, introduction to *Art for All* (Great Britain: Peer, 2002)

22   *Arts Council England make two key leadership appointments.* Online article, author unknown, 01.12.06. Arts Council Website. <http://www.artscouncil.org.uk/pressnews/press_detail.php?rid=0&sid=&browse=recent&id=756> [accessed 17.12.06]

23   As discussed by Clement Greenburg, *Modernist Painting.* Excerpted by editors C. Harrison and P. Wood, Art in Theory (Great Britain: Blackwell Publishers, 1992) p 754-760, and Avant-Garde and Kitsch (ibid) p 529-541.

24   Recently changed to Organisation and Imagination (O+I).

25   The artists needed a broad range of skills to apply to any given social situation, not just be able to paint or generate a performance piece from their experience. This is akin to contemporary social practitioners needing a broad range of skills that are applicable to a range of situations. For example, AOC need to know much more than how to design a building.

26 *Repositioning Art in the Decision-Making processes of Society (in government, commerce, the disciplines and professions)*. Transcript of lecture by Barbara Stevini. Date unknown. Interrupt Website <http://www.interrupt-symposia.org/articles/read.cgi?bs_educator_1> [accessed 29.11.06]

[27] A note-worthy example includes a recent proposal from Fairview New Homes for a build in Croydon. It was proposed that on the roof of an office block being converted into flats a series of four wind turbines be placed, painted in "Andy Warhol colours". These turbines would then be lit up at night in order to emphasise the eco status of the company. This was combining Croydon Councils planning stipulations that for this size of build there must be 10% renewable energy and 1% for Public Art. It has been estimated that the lighting of the turbines uses more energy than the turbines produce.

[28] This is a recently introduced way of contributing, preferred by Croydon Council. It has been seen that, using the Percent-for-Art scheme, developers hide certain building costs in order to contribute less to Public Art. (*Interview with Zlatinka Hristova,* Public Arts Development Officer, Croydon Council., 05.12.06)

[29] Grant H. Kester, *Conversation Pieces: Community and Communications in Modern Art* (University of California Press, 2004) p 62

[30] This three-year project involved the specific re-telling of the short story *A Very Old Man with Enormous Wings* by Gabriel Garcia Marquez. The play was re-appropriated to three different locations: Hayle in Cornwall, Birgu in Malta and a derelict taverna right next to the Ledra Palace Gate in Cyprus. The plot remained the same, but the plot points varied between places. Knee High employed local actors to perform smaller parts, collaborated with the community to adapt the play to become relevant to the area, and asked the community to use their history and local skills to help design and make the sets.

[31] Grant H. Kester, *Conversation Pieces*, p 92

[32] US-Creates website <http://www.us-creates.com/home.html> [Accessed 09.12.06]

[33] These see-through bags, aimed at children, have the outlines of raw ingredients needed to make meals such as Spaghetti Bolognese. Children then 'fill-in' the pictures with the ingredients as the go around the supermarket. Intended to encourage people away from ready meals and back to simple recipes, these bags provide a puzzle like game and learning experience for children. The bags would be placed at the front of the supermarket in the way recipe cards are.

[34] Author unknown, *Teachers Tackle Racist Bullying.* Online article, BBC News Website. http://news.bbc.co.uk/go/pr/fr/-/1/hi/northern_ireland/4399069 [Accessed 06.01.07)

[35] Kevin Hawkins, British Retail Consortium director. Quoted by Clare Matherson, *Food lobby weighs in on obesity crisis.* Online article, BBC News Website. <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/business/3750127.stm> [accessed 02.01.07]

[36] Of the same modernist vein as Greenberg.

[37] Mary Warnock, *Art for All* (Great Britain: Peer, 2000) p 10

[38] Except for in the case of architecture whose designer is no longer alive, in which case a 'tour guide' is at hand.

[39] Well-known 'coffee table' art book.

[40] An anthology of art theory since 1900. Also a useful door-stop.

[41] Ten sculptors were invited to work in tents set up outdoors, in the public realm and accessible to the public. The public could then witness the construction of these sculptors work.

[42] Miwon Kwon, *One Place After Another,* p 102

[43] Kester, *Community and Communications,* p 82-85.

[44] See Appendix 3 for excerpts.

45   The Mayor of London, *The London Plan,* p 138.

46   Alcoholics' Anonymous offer recovering alcoholics a 'sponsor': a recovered alcoholic who is available to offer advice and support at any time.

47   Interestingly, a similar show Jamie's School Dinner's featuring celebrity TV chef Jamie Oliver going into schools and improving school dinners did raise enough awareness to directly cause a change in government policy. Paradoxically this is a top-down affect, rather than the bottom-up affect suggested by the 'hands-on' nature of the show. Unfortunately the supposed honest 'hands-on' style of the show was marred by the tabloid revelation that Jamie's on-screen anger at the failure of one project was unfounded and the scheme in this school was very successful. This emphasised the core intention of the show: making 'good' TV.

48   Croydon Council Public Art Supplementary Planning Document (SPD), p 1

Additional Research

Reading

Bishop, Claire, *The Social Turn: Collaboration and its Discontents.* (ArtForum, February 2006) p 178-183.

Bourriaud, Nicholas, *Relational Aesthetics.* (France: Les Presses du reel, 1998, translated 2002)

Lewitt, Sol, *Sentences on Conceptual Art*. (*Art-Language*, 1969) p 11-13. Excerpted by editor Peter Osborne, *Conceptual Art* (London: Phaidon Press Limited, 2002) p 222

Mayor of London, The, *London – Cultural Capital: Realising the Potential of a World Class City.* (London: Greater London Authority, 2004)

Websites of Practitioners invited to "Show and Tell: A Seminar for Socially-Engaged Practitioners"

(Attendees and non-attendees)

Cook, Mary Rose, Us-Creates www.us-creates.com

Cummins, Ben, artist www.utrophia.net/utrophia%20site/site/visual/ben%20cummins.html

Davies, Lewis, Knee High www.kneehigh.co.uk

Harrison, Ellie, artist www.ellieharrison.com

Harrison, Ellie, curator of Day to Data, www.daytodaydata.com/welcome.html

Foxton, Justin, Comment UK www.commentuk.co.uk

Gormley, Ivo, ThinkPublic www.thinkpublic.com

Jordan, Mel, Free www.freee.org.uk/

Lacovara, Vincent, AOC www.theaoc.co.uk

Priestley, Robin, Space Hijackers www.spacehijackers.org

Prince, Adele, artist www.admin.adeleprince.com/adele/index.html

Philip, Yvonne, Artedutainment www.artedutain.org

Smith, Theresa, Mooch Design www.moochdesign.com

Stevenson, Ian, artist www.ilikedrawing.co.uk

Young, Carey, artist www.careyyoung.com

Exhibitions/ Seminars/ Symposia

AOC. Lift New Parliament Sharing Event. Stratford Circus, Theatre Square, Stratford. 09.11.06.

APG. Latham, John and Steveni, Barbara. 1980. *Art as social Strategy in Institutions and Organisation with the Artist Placement Group (APG) London.* Published as part of *APG Archive - Art and Social Intervention: The Incidental Person* symposia pack. Symposia held at Tate Britain 23.03.05.

APG. Art and Social Intervention: The Incidental Person Symposia. 23.03.05 held at Tate Britain.

Loraine Leeson Retrospective. Private view with talk from the artist. Space Gallery, 129-131 Mare St, Hackney. 10.11.06.