

Getting Back to The Country: An 'Impassioned Deliberation'

"Artists often act in the interstices between old and new, in the possibility of spaces that are as yet socially unrecognisable"¹

In 2003 Shrewsbury's 16th century 'Old Market Hall' was transformed into a Film Theatre and Digital Media Centre. The manner in which the latter was undertaken was not only sensitive to the original interior architecture, but the final outcome revealed the distinctive timber roofbeams that had hitherto been 'hidden' from sight. Moreover, it returned the building to that of a significant public space, one that attracts visitors from across the county. As a result, the relationship, or dialogue, between the old and the new, was literally manifested by the environment in which the *Rural Art Space* symposium began. This location, it seemed, provided a most useful context, or 'space', into which to consider the future possibilities of contemporary art and curatorial practice within a rural context. Indeed the opening speakers, from Shrewsbury's Museum and Art Gallery, stressed the importance of connecting the 'old' with the 'new' in their programming and curatorial practices.

The morning's first presentation was by the General Public Agency, an organisation that works creatively within the areas of planning and regeneration seeking to 'make change happen'. Central to this organisation's way of working is the idea of substantial mapping and research, in the pre-planning stage, followed by a 'process of exchange' that engages local people. However, what became apparent from the case study discussed was the importance of 'time' in the effecting of change. That is, the suggestion that lasting change doesn't happen quickly but takes place over a long period of time. Significantly this 'issue of time', became one of the recurring themes of the day.

The symposium's second presentation was delivered by Kathrin Bohm, artist member of *myvillages.org* and Research Fellow at The University of Wolverhampton. This presentation took the form of a research paper in which she considered the role, or potential, of 'socially-engaged' art practices that take place beyond the gallery walls in a variety of 'outside' spaces; art practices in which participation and 'dialogue' are central. Could these practices themselves, her paper proposed, be read as 'spatial constructs'? To illustrate this proposition Kathrin related how, after developing her own art practice in the city, she returned to her childhood village and the latter became, both conceptually and literally, a new space for art. Central to the development of these new, as yet 'unrecognisable', spaces for art were strategies that encompassed experimentation and rigorous self-criticism (on the part of the artist), participation (on the part of the 'audience'), and an emphasis on 'common interests' (both parties). Perhaps this suggests a conception of space as a 'meeting ground'. Again the issue of time reoccurred in the papers' recognition of the importance of 'slow growth' in generating meaningful change within a rural environment.

Next we were taken on a humorous stroll through the work of Grizedale Arts; an 'arts institution' or, possibly more accurately, an 'arts network' based in the Lake District. Grizedale are certainly

approaching artistic activity and production in a new way. Having recently 'got rid' of their gallery, one of their key areas of work is engaging with people, through participation in art, in ways that are genuinely meaningful to local 'non-art' communities. Alongside seeking, and valuing, the importance of local knowledge, and finding common ground, provocation, tension and conflict, were also seen by this speaker as useful tools, or 'strategies', in the development of arts across a rural terrain. Again there seemed to be a genuine interest in 'making change happen', and simultaneously an acknowledgment that real change can only happen over the long-term.

Finally the morning's presentations ended with a review of the Bibliobox's tour in Shropshire. Certainly the box seems to have a life of its own; continually chancing upon new 'lasting encounters', creating new networks and, as one encountee of the box suggested, providing opportunities for sharing work: 'something that doesn't happen often'.

In the afternoon I attended the 'rural as a source for contextual art practice' workshop. This began with a presentation by the artist Richard Walker whose works engage with the landscape by way of, an almost 'post-romantic', sense of the impossibility of truly knowing, or coming to terms with, the immensity of that rural environment. The works take the form of spoken dialogue, music and video and seek to investigate our interaction(s) with the rural landscape. The 'characters' within his work also view the 'rural' as an idealised, albeit problematic, 'escape from society'. Richard approaches the distinctly traditional subject of 'landscape art' in an innovative way, both in his use of moving image and in his self-reflective responses to the rural landscapes in which he 'encounters'.

Richard's presentation was followed by the artist Matthew Cornford, one half of 'Cornford and Cross', whose collaborative arts practice produce works that critically engage with the specific contexts, situations, or 'spaces' in which those works are produced. Often the result of this is an undermining, or problematizing, of the dominant power structures that exist within those spaces. Their work seems particularly successful in exposing the connections between cultural, economic and political interests. In the light of recent events² one example of this type of work, their piece 'New Holland', seems worth mentioning. Drawing on the links between Norfolk's heavily industrialised agricultural landscape and the supermarkets that support that industry, they constructed a 'turkey breeding unit', from plans provided by Bernard Matthews, in the grounds adjoining the Sainsbury's Centre for Visual Arts in Norwich. Arguably, this 'clash' between the industrialised rural economy and the 'elegant' grounds of the Sainsbury's Centre, proved too great for the exhibition's organisers. As, prior to the arrival of the Sainsbury's family for their annual visit, the piece was removed. However, as it was installed in the summer, the grass beneath the structure had turned yellow. Instead of letting the 'meadow grass' return naturally to its original colour, the 'yellow area' was replaced with brand new grass, and this newly planted 'vivid green rectangle' became a perfect trace of the original work.

Finally Torange Khonsari an architect and member of *public works*, discussed the arts/architecture collective's latest residency at Wysing. Looking at how people use public spaces and engage with their environment, Torange talked about using the idea of a 'shared culture of walking' to explore the links between villages around Wysing. She suggested how existing 'informal paths' could become a tool in the development of 'people-led' networks in the area. As with the previous presentation issues relating to land, and 'public', ownership were

raised. (Notably, Torange cited a conversation with Kevin Cahill, author of the comprehensively researched book 'Who owns Britain'³)

Ultimately, what was most evident from many of the presentations was an underlying recognition of the relationship between art and the wider social and political worlds. Although ostensibly about 'public art'⁴ the following statement, by Patricia Phillips, seems particularly relevant to many of the symposium's presentations' concerns with interactive or collaborative art practices (and therefore, I feel, worth quoting in full):

Public Art is not the grinding, arduous discovery of a common denominator that absolutely everyone will understand and endorse. It actually assists in the identification of individuals and groups and what separates them, so that agreement of a common purpose is an impassioned deliberation rather than a thoughtless resignation.⁵

The acknowledgment of a 'common purpose', together with the simultaneous recognition of 'what separates' people, and, critically, the call for an 'impassioned deliberation', seems to reflect what took place during the symposium.

Following the close of a thoughtful event centred around the, problematic, subject of 'rural art space', the atmosphere amongst many of the delegates was one of tangible 'energy'. Consequently, I left with a positive, even tentatively hopeful, sense of something beginning: a 'key moment' for the arts in Shrewsbury and Shropshire. Undoubtedly the breadth of knowledge, broad range of interests and occupations gathered in one space was exceptional. And although there was no convergence in terms of defining 'rural art space', there was, I felt, a 'common purpose'. And that, I believe, was an 'impassioned' advocacy of the growing significance of 'the rural' as a fertile space for contemporary art practice. What's more, the event in itself served as a vehicle for deliberation and therefore, implicitly, endorsed the relevance of slow growth in generating lasting change within a predominantly rural environment. Finally, and perhaps most meaningfully, these 'impassioned deliberations' will support the expansion of those networks of people interested in developing the 'spaces for art' across rural environments.

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¹ Lippard, Lucy, from 'Mixed Blessings' (originally published in 1990), quoted in a Gavin Jantjes (ed), *A Fruitful Incoherence: Dialogues with Artists on Internationalism*, London, 1997

² At the time of writing the poultry industry has been dominating news headlines, as over 160,000 turkeys were culled after the H5N1 strain, 'bird flu' virus, was found at a 'turkey processing plant' in Suffolk in February 2007.

³ Cahill, Kevin, *Who Owns Britain*, Edinburgh, 2001

⁴ The book from which the following quote is taken looks at artists working outside of traditional venues for art, and rather than seeing those artists as the creators of art objects, many of the case studies included suggest how these artists are now often adopting strategies analogous to social activism and politics.

⁵ Phillips, Patricia, 'Public Constructions', Suzanne Lacy (ed), *Mapping the Terrain: New Genre Public Art*, Washington, 1995