

WE DON'T WANT A PIECE OF THE PIE – WE WANT THE WHOLE F***ING BAKERY! *

Jes Fernie | January 2023

Who are we working for? Can our projects inspire structural change? Can they create the conditions for inter-species collaboration? How can we reimagine the memorial? These were some of the questions raised in the *Constellations ° Assemblies*; a programme of six public online talks that took place in 2022. Convened by three UK based organisations (UP Projects, Flat Time House, and Liverpool Biennial) and an independent curator (Jes Fernie), the programme aimed to bring artists, curators, thinkers, academics and organisers together to consider current issues in the field of public art and socially engaged artistic practice. The following text is an overview of subjects raised by speakers and audience members. The conversation is ongoing - we hope to arrange more talks like these in order to expand the possibilities for critical creative practice, and in the process, build an archive of current interests, projects, and approaches.

The 1960s saw a radical shift in the ways that art was made, thought about, positioned, valued and judged. The autonomy of art was questioned and old hierarchies broken down. Art began to move beyond the gallery realm into public spaces, lived lives and social structures. Interest in situating artistic practice within broader societal contexts blossomed and artists began to work within a specific locale with local communities in order to develop projects together. Working with the belief that given the right opportunity everyone is an artist, the community arts movement forged direct relationships between artists, youth workers, political activists and local groups.

Sprawling, experimental, messy, joyful and creative activities were carried out by thousands of people in towns and cities across the UK, activities that included the creation of adventure playgrounds for children, carnival programmes, community printshops, writing and photography workshops, and dance classes. This under-acknowledged contribution to the cultural landscape created the conditions for a nation-wide debate about the distribution of resources and the legitimacy of institutionally entrenched assumptions about what constitutes 'good art'.

The Artist Placement Group (APG), established by artists Barbara Steveni and John Latham in 1965, was a more focused endeavour. Members were interested in the idea that art could have a direct impact on society if artists formed a closer alliance with the institutions and structures that govern contemporary life. So, for example, Garth Evans went to British Steel, Ian Breakwell worked in the Department of Health and Social Security, and John Latham took up a placement with the National Coal Board. The outcome of many of these placements was often intangible, entering artists' practice in indirect ways. However, Breakwell managed to crack the closely guarded working practices of high security hospitals with his damning report on poor living conditions for patients when his research was used to inform a TV documentary for Yorkshire Television. He also developed a project that helped dementia patients reminisce in order to alleviate feelings of isolation which was eventually acquired and rolled out by Help the Aged.

WHAT'S NEW?

This idea of the artist as an agent of social change is still going strong sixty years later, but of course, the context is wildly different. In 1972 APG was refused Arts Council funding on the grounds that their work was 'more to do with social engineering than with pure art'. Today, the Arts Council's focus is firmly trained on the ways that art can improve the quality of people's lives and even enhance their life chances, and the ways that artists and institutions work with communities has developed in sophistication, ambition, and range.

Artists as makers of bread and soft drinks, lobbyists for better housing conditions, growers of vegetables and human relations, imparters of information about human rights, and arbitrators between community members and the police force - these are some of the roles that artists have carried out under the auspices of socially engaged art practice in recent years. The idea, broadly speaking, is to create the conditions for a more interconnected, equal civil society by equipping people with the tools to assume agency over their lives. Artists' skill at forming relationships ('attuning to the social'), critiquing systems of power, and thinking beyond accepted norms to create magical processes are powerful attractors in this field. Recognising that an increasing number of people feel disenfranchised from their lives and communities in contemporary capitalist societies, and in particular, in the UK after a decade of Tory austerity, these projects aim to create opportunities to collectively learn how to engage and act upon the world in order to renegotiate the conditions of our existence.

So, working within this context, what can be considered to be new? There's a renewed interest in grass-roots community action and a general disenfranchisement from systems of governance, that aims to bypass established gate-keepers to create radical systems of change and empowerment. Artists, commissioners, and communities are increasingly interested in mechanisms and projects that decentralise and democratise processes.

These projects provide platforms for people to act, change, and agitate, but should we also create spaces for sadness, boredom, and inaction? Are these projects too extractive, or perhaps overly demanding? Are we dictating the terms of engagement to a detrimental extent, asking for action where something else is required? Perhaps we should create systems that allow people to fall apart as well as ones that bring about societal change.

Care, empathy, equity, and solidarity as systems of praxis have entered the lexicon of much socially-engaged art projects, as well as the visual arts in general. A result of the pandemic as well as greater precarity and increased politicisation, there is an expressed will for those working in the cultural sector to look after each other, to institute a sense of care in professional relationships in the same way we are encouraged to invest in personal relationships. This extends to considerations around needs for participants and practitioners with disabilities or caring responsibilities, to a reappraisal of working conditions, wages, fees, and rights. Participants, community members, artists, administrators - they all require care - emotional, financial, physical, and psychological. This could include listening, relationship building, and a concept of shared longing. The afterlife of a project is rarely considered or catered for by institutions. We need a prolonged period of care to enable participants to express feelings and shake off hierarchies and accumulated baggage, as well as establish long-term relationships. This is a rare moment where shared knowledge can be expressed and learned from.

Working with the writing and theory of contemporary academics and activists such as Saidiya Hartman the power of speculative thinking and critical fabulation has become a productive catalyst for activity in the field. Within this framework, socially-engaged art is not just a way of improving living conditions or facilitating change, but also a route to imagining a better world - a different democratic ideal - in which we consider our desires and how might we attain them.

A questioning of who all this work is for, and in relation to memorials, who it represents has gained much traction over the last couple of years, particularly in the wake of the BLM protests. There is a drive to find more nuanced, imaginative ways to memorialise individuals and groups. We need to interrogate existing, entrenched representations of power, history, visibility and future possibilities. Who gets to stand on stage and who gets to speak in memory? Could memorials be used as opportunities to speculate on future alternatives rather than reinforce past memories? How can memorials reflect the shifting tides of public opinion and artistic practice? And how can we tell the stories of those who have been forgotten?

Consideration of the perilous state of our planet is perhaps the most pressing issue of all. In order to move beyond 'sustainability' we need to arrive at 'regenerative design', a process that ensures the built environment has a net positive impact on natural systems and provides for all species. In relation to socially-engaged art projects, this could entail the creation of projects that allow for interspecies communication, or ones which encourage the co-option of human-made structures by animals. Rather than positioning humanity and nature in separate silos, we must understand that we are nature. It's important that we work with local producers and commissioners in order to learn from local knowledge, use local resources, and create alternative economies that bypass capitalists systems of extraction.

Are these projects, with their aim to improve societal structures, living conditions and individual agency indicative of a move towards the instrumentalization of art? How much are we, the arts community, being asked to deal with the fall-out of 21st century life? In recent years, our welfare state and social infrastructure have been decimated. Communities suffering multiple levels of deprivation are being stripped of the most basic services and resources. Art can only do so much. It is unrealistic and problematic to demand that publicly funded arts organisations and artists fill the gap left by government. And, as an adjunct to this question, are the interests, needs and radical propositions of artists being side-lined in our scramble for democratic 'kin structures' that prioritise the needs and interests of community groups?

** Statement from participants in community-lead project Homebaked, Liverpool, initiated by artist Jeanne van Heeswijk*

Constellations also included the *Constellations* ° *Cohort*, a group of ten practitioners selected from across the UK who took part in seminars, workshops and mentoring sessions that underpinned and unpicked the *Assemblies* discussions. The final *Assembly*, *Who are we working for?* addressed a set of questions devised collectively by the *Constellations* ° *Cohort* that was informed by the in-depth analysis, critical thinking, and creative experimentation undertaken over the course of the *Constellations 2022* programme. This dynamic reciprocal process is something we hope to continue in future years.

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