HOW DO WE INVITE OTHERS TO PARTICIPATE? NOTES ON EMPATHY, FAILURE AND POWER

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How do we invite others to participate? Notes on empathy, failure and power is a text written in response to *What is the role of democracy in social practice - can all voices be heard?*, the third of a series of six online *Constellations ° Assemblies*. The event took place on 15 June 2022 and was held within UP Projects' digital participation space, *The Hall*.

What is the role of democracy in social practice - can all voices be heard? was moderated by Ulrika Flink, Artistic Director for Konsthall C, and invited Magda Fabianczyk, artist, educator, and the co-founder of Polish Migrants Organise for Change (POMOC), and Adam James, artist, to explore power dynamics and decision-making processes when co-creating work with communities.

After a brief introduction about Konsthall C's mission and its role in the wider socially engaged art ecology in Sweden, Ulrika referenced the writing of Édouard Glissant pointing to how seeing others in oneself was considered by the French Caribbean poet and philosopher one of life's moral pillars. This immediately raised questions about the role art can play in facilitating our ability to listen and to be in relation to others. Can art strengthen democracy in the realisation of a more interconnected civil society?


Adam James - Art Inspiring Change, What is the role of democracy in social practice - can all voices be heard?, 15 June 2022

Adam's response to this question focused on Live Action Role Play (LARP), a methodology at the core of his practice that involves people creating characters and acting out various fictional scenarios. Resisting the "socially engaged" label and presenting his practice as one that is rather primarily focused on engaging people, Adam's use of LARP is aimed at encouraging empathy amongst participants. The argument here is that by helping us put ourselves in other people's positions, we are able to make better informed decisions that may impact and affect the conditions of our own lives and the lives of others. One of the case studies referenced during his presentation was *Art Inspiring Change*, a children-led art project at Turner Contemporary in 2016-17 realised in collaboration with Tivoli Woods Primary School in Margate.

Through this project, the children who themselves had selected Adam as artist-facilitator, had the opportunity to pitch a proposal to the Thanet District Council for a public artwork in an abandoned woodland area. Adam used LARP as a way to encourage the children to put themselves in the position of others. As part of the engagement in the lead up to the pitch, half of the group role played as the board members of the council, whereas the other half were pitching the project.

The LARP was not only a way to prepare the children in advance of having to present their proposal to the council, but according to Adam, also a way to *"put them in a position where they could be the voice of 'no' and then come back to that position with a more empathetic understanding of what it means to be a council member that might object to the proposal"*.
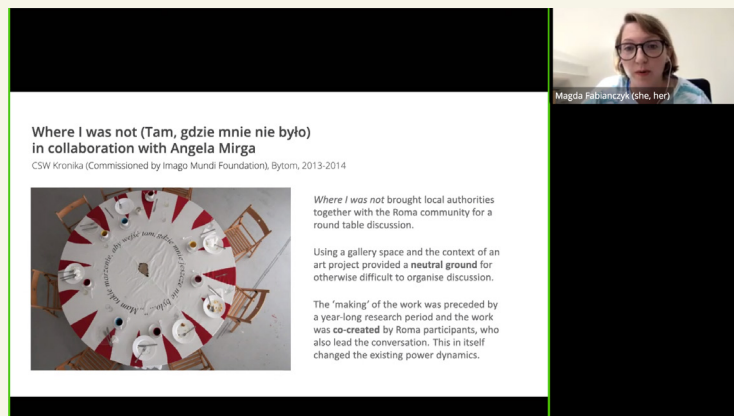
Magda Fabianczyk - Where I was not, What is the role of democracy in social practice - can all voices be heard?, 15 June 2022

Linking back to the idea of empathy, during her presentation Magda talked about the importance of looking at others as adversaries rather than enemies, advocating for a more compassionate and human approach to conflict. Drawing on Chantalle Mouffe's definition of "agonistic pluralism", and on the idea of the artist as an "uninvited guest", Magda introduced the project *Where I was not* realised in 2013-14, the result of a 16-month collaboration between herself and members of a Roma community from the post-industrial city Bytom, in Poland.

The first meeting, which took place in Primary School No. 16, was the first opportunity the community had to meet people who held power in the area, namely local authorities, police members and church representatives. It was important that this was a closed event, rather than one with a public audience, and that the conversation was led by Roma members with the facilitation of artist and local Roma activist, Angela Mirga-Piotrowska who later became co-creator of the project. Raising awareness on the lack of safety around public spaces for members of the Roma community, the event placed power dynamics

between different members of the community on a centre stage, enabling a dialogue aided by artistic interventions that would not have otherwise taken place.

Following the two presentations, Ulrika raised a valuable point about failure and the role it plays in supporting the development of best practice. In response to the comment, both speakers talked about how failing in the past has led them to reflect carefully on their motivations for working with people, understanding who the work they produce is for; whom it benefits and what the offer is for participants. Being authentic about the answers to these questions leads to a deeper and more empathetic understanding of the other. Both speakers also acknowledged that when working with communities one often encounters different agendas and that fully understanding the hierarchies, power dynamics and priorities that exist within and across different groups, could provide the basis for a longer legacy once the creative element of the project is over.

To the point about legacy of socially engaged projects, Adam shared some of the LARP methods and working models offering possible tools and solutions to anyone working with people on both long-term and short-term projects. The LARP post-play care for example, is a debrief attended by all participants after the play. Each participant has a minute to express their feelings about what the LARP was like, creating a non-hierarchical space where the authors and designers would speak last and where participants had the option not to speak. Among other methods, participants are encouraged to have a party after the LARP and to introduce an aftercare buddy system which allows them to check in with one another, helping them deal with the aftermath of potentially profound experiences.

Towards the end of the event, an audience member asked: *"Do we need to move beyond the narrowly defined constraints of the visual art infrastructure to be more inclusive, productive, democratic. And if we do, what do we lose?"*

In answer to this question, Magda reflected on the fact that while artists often operate in fragmented ways, there is space for collaboration as well as potential for art to take inspiration from social movements. Not only can art mobilise communities, but it can also bring people closer to electoral voting processes. Magda argued that the more inclusive and democratic our projects become, the less we would need to deal with problematic notions of success and competition which are embedded in the funding structures that support our work. The inevitable consequence is that there wouldn't be as many superstars in the art world; but would that be so undesirable? In Magda's words: "*I think that's ok. I would rather we have a stronger dark matter. We should vote for solidarity that disrupts how things are done at the moment*".

This event asked how decisions should be made during the process of collaboration between artists and communities. Can all voices be truly heard, represented, and included? In answering these questions, the speakers reflected on the importance of empathy and failure as conditions that are inherently linked to the ways in which we navigate power. Anyone with a collaborative creative practice has had to reflect not only on how we acknowledge the existing power structures we all regularly inhabit, but also on how we promote a culture of self-reflection: how can the collaborative and creative spaces that we create for community participation resist perpetuating the very same inequalities we seek to challenge? How do we create the conditions for our collaborators to move from receiving or choosing existing knowledge, to creating narratives and shaping new futures and possibilities? As Magda suggested, there is a lot that the arts can learn from social justice movements, and this can start from a nuanced understanding of power, and more specifically how it differs from empowerment. Alicia Garza, innovator, strategist, organiser, and co-founder of Black Lives Matter, presents a compelling perspective in her latest book: "*Power is about who makes the rules (...). One can wake up in the morning feeling empowered – but empowerment is different from power. Sure, I am empowered to decide what I eat for breakfast today, but larger forces create the options I can choose from – or whether or not breakfast is even available to me*" (The purpose of power: how to build movements for the 21st century", 2020 p. 187). These words come as a reminder that when developing socially engaged projects we must consider how the process of creating and shaping narratives can be realised with participants rather than for them, and how we can support the transformation of empowerment into power.

You can now watch *What is the role of democracy in social practice - can all voices be heard?* as an accessible event recording with closed captions and BSL interpretation.

Ulrika Flink, Adam James, Magda Fabianczyk, What is the role of democracy in social practice - can all voices be heard?, 15 June 2022