SOMEWHERE OTHER THAN HERE

In the spring of 2021, as the UK was taking tentative steps towards re-opening after a year of Covid-19 restrictions, UP Projects worked together with Public Art Network UK to deliver a series of online events for curators, producers and practitioners. The aim was to explore issues and good practice in the expanded field of public art, looking specifically at current shifts in socially-engaged curatorial and artistic practice. The following text is an overview of the issues raised by speakers and audience members. It is written by Jes Fernie, independent curator and co-organiser of the *Assembly* programme.

▶ WHAT NEEDS TO CHANGE?

A conversation about socially-engaged practice inevitably involves a discussion about the relationship of artists and communities to 'the institution': the arcane, coded hierarchical system embedded within it; the frustratingly slow pace of change in the governance and management systems that form it; and our powerful, insistent need to feel validation through a relation to it. Institutions often 'use' socially engaged projects to achieve their own ends, but very rarely form an authentic alliance with them.

How can the incredible range of knowledge, experience, and practice that artists and communities bring to these projects be brought into the institution and channelled into programming and management structures? Could we create ruptures for new configurations to be imagined and realised?

The foundational character of the visual arts is antithetical to the aims of socially-engaged practice. While the official discourse of art is exclusive by design, socially-engaged projects are intended to be inclusive, welcoming and non-judgemental. Some organisations are beginning to understand the ways in which the language they use, the people they employ, and the atmosphere they project acts as a barrier to potential visitors or participants, but there is much work to be done. Entrenched class, race, and gender structures provide a deeply problematic context in which socially-engaged projects are positioned and realised.

The neo-liberal, extractive, capitalist system in which we work forces us to follow metrics, tick boxes, and implement short-term agendas which contrast wildly with the methodologies and ambitions of socially-engaged projects. Opaque and bureaucratic funding programmes complicate this framework, as does the significant disparity in funding and support systems outside of London, which has led to a lack of cultural infrastructure in impoverished towns across the UK.

The conditions of precarity, stress, and low pay that many artists, curators and producers are required to work under, in order to realise socially-engaged projects, are unsustainable, and often unethical. The emotional labour required to deliver these projects is unparalleled in artistic and curatorial contexts, resulting in a situation where burnout and exhaustion become the norm. Is it a surprise that women far outweigh men in this field?

▶ WHAT IS CHANGING?

We are by-passing the institution, self-organising, making our own spaces, rules and working methodologies. Community activism has played a significant role here, one in which we acknowledge the actions of our forebears working to achieve change in the 1960s and 70s. Where institutions are involved in our projects, there is a growing insistence that they should act as a facilitator and space for critical collaboration rather than a subsumer of ideas and practice.

Our increased understanding of the effects of racism, marginalisation, and entrenched, exclusionary societal structures, highlighted through the Black Lives Matter movement, the fall-out of the Covid-19 pandemic, and the effects of ten years of austerity in the UK, is impacting on the ways that art commissioning programmes are devised, delivered and publicised. Many projects now actively seek to create platforms for those who are unheard, unseen, and not 'present' in public

life, and there is a sense of urgency around creating opportunities for young people, and people of colour, to take part in cultural activities and decision-making processes.

This ambition to bring hitherto marginalised voices into the field extends to the workforce: there is a small but noticeable increase in the number of Black and Asian artists, curators and producers working on these projects (although it should be noted that coincidentally, the point at which Black and Asian women began calling themselves curators, the term became increasingly contested and critiqued by curators themselves, who began to use other monikers such as 'producer' or 'facilitator'). The professionalisation of the field that has taken place over the last twenty years, forged up by the many curating courses offered by UK universities, is being challenged, with the understanding that a degree in anthropology, economics, history or politics and / or direct experience of working with communities, is potentially more relevant or useful than a curating degree. What is needed is an authentic sense of self, in order to support artists and produce things that are real and touches people's lives.

Artist groups, curatorial collectives, and community groups are experimenting with new modes of organisational structures, including the concept of 'radical friendship' - a form of practice that involves intersectional, feminist strategies of economies of work and labour.

This approach recognises the physical, intuitive, bodily experiences of employment and attempts to re-code the ways we work together, consciously attempting to dismantle the neo-liberal, extractive structures we have been taught to accept as the inescapable norm. There is a growing understanding that these projects should no longer serve the small and niche interests of the art world, or result in superficial moments in the public realm, but must effect change, be transformative in some way, and bring people together to find a collective voice. An increasing number of projects are actively imagining and enacting a rupture in the status quo, challenging societal structures and institutional norms.

After twenty years of adherence to the 'site-specific' mantra in which artists respond to the physical make-up of a site and perhaps its history, we are now moving towards a focus on 'context-specific' approaches, that harnesses broader contextual considerations including societal, social, and political realities. There is also an expressed aim to move beyond participatory modes of engagement in order to work with more radical forms of practice that embraces the concept of 'co-production'. The aim is to recognise the skills, knowledge, and ambition that is embedded within local communities and to make projects together, rather than impose a hierarchical relationship whereby artists, curators and visual arts organisations dictate the terms of engagement. Along with this shift comes an inevitable a set of questions: Who is the author of these co-produced projects? How are those involved remunerated or acknowledged? Do we

need to do more to make these projects empowering rather than tokenistic?

The increasingly privatised public realm, along with the fall-out of the Covid-19 pandemic, have significantly extended the parameters of public space into the digital world. Might this lead to a reconfiguration of the artworld - one which challenges long-entrenched, hierarchical structures and modes of practice? The digital realm has the potential to offer a radically different de-centralised, inter-sectional, autonomous, democratic space that facilitates experimentation, collaboration, activism, artist-led activity and community organising. It challenges our concept of the local and the global, and provides a space to create a discourse around re-distribution of wealth and power. This forever-expanding, amorphous arena is not, however, without its own barriers – technological, linguistic, and social – all of which form a challenge to current and future curators, artists and producers.

We clearly need to be somewhere other than here, but exciting things are unfolding beneath the radar. The challenge for artists, curators, institutions, commissioners, and funders is to create a viable, dynamic structure in which this radical practice can flourish. These pressing issues will be critiqued, debated, and challenged by a cohort of artists, curators, and producers enrolled on the next *Constellations* course, run in 2022 by UP Projects in partnership with Flat Time House and Liverpool Biennial.

- Jes Fernie, 2021