

The Artist has to decide whom to serve

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This paper is about the different that methods I have been using over the last 25 years to engage publics, and some of the ways I have failed, or the very long time it takes, to engage people in practice. The title refers to the question of the use value of art and the ways in which the artist can serve publics.

To me the investigative and explorative qualities of the arts should serve the purpose of collectively taking responsibility for the places where we live. Art should ask the question: how can cities engage in critical public issues, and what does it take to become an active citizen? Questions about publicness, social interaction and politics are constants in my practice, in which I ask how can places become public again, as platforms for meeting, discussion and conflict. As an artist I also inquire how I can work with my skills within complex urban environments. How can I put myself to work in areas that are undergoing rapid change and huge pressure from the forces of globalization? In all my work I question how I can be an instrument that gives us the ability to influence our daily environment. I like being an instrument, despite the discussions in which social art is understood as instrumentalised by governments and other powers. I like being an instrument *but* one that works on self-organization, collective ownership, and new forms of sociability.

I am concerned with the creation of spaces within which any person may speak. The key concepts in my work are 'acting', 'meeting' and 'communicating', activities which demand that both the viewer and initiator take responsibility. In order to induce such engagement, I try to create 'intermediate spaces' within communities. I see the arrangement and rearrangement of space – and space can be literal and also metaphorical (space in your head, space in your heart, space to share) – as a condition for bringing about changes, preferably improvements, in social structures. This non-representable process of communication and exchange forms the content and structure of the work of art.

My work is durational and I will discuss projects that took four days, four months and one that is taking more than four years. Normally in my works I am looking for questions rather than answers. Questions I deal with include: 'What does it mean for work to be participant and artist-led? What are the processes and ethics involved? How do people come to be defined through these practices? What are the respective roles of participants, artists and institutional actors? What are the expectations and desired outcomes? What is the position of the work in respect to the art institution and other institutional structures?

Public Faculty (Skopje)

Public Faculty is what I call my sketchbook. In durational projects, I can get very stuck in the details, especially in the lengthy conversations or negotiations with authorities. In order to keep my thinking alive, I need a way to sketch or freely explore the problems encountered in my work. The sketchbook I have devised is *Public Faculty*, which usually takes four days. It involves standing at a location where there is pressure in a city and speaking to whoever wants to engage in a

conversation about the issues at hand. *Public Faculty* comprises exercises in public conversation, with whoever wants to join in.

The first *Public Faculty* was in an abandoned park on Scotland. I stood on a stage area in an unloved public park and talked to people about the question of who should care about maintaining that park, and later, what would it take for the park to be revived. It took two days before anyone wanted to join in a conversation! For two days I walked up and down on the platform talking about art and meaning, and the necessity of caring, without any response until a resident came up and said 'Are you alright, love?' From that moment the conversation started, and more people joined the discussion. This process does not bring new answers or solutions to a problem. What is important is the way people formulate their answers to questions. I learn about how people relate to the conditions they live in, and if they believe they have any co-ownership in a situation. In this instance the discussion ranged from government responsibility for the care and policing of the park to citizens opening cafes.

Public Faculties are exercises in learning how to listen to people describing their daily conditions. Often they feel incapable of changing their conditions. An aim of the Faculties is to make an existing conflict productive, by learning to speak and collectively think about what it would take to regain being an active citizen, and demonstrating the different ways people can show the skills and potentials they can bring to a situation.

In Copenhagen we undertook a *Public Faculty* discussing the seeming never-ending economic crisis in perhaps the most inhospitable environment: the main shopping street, where people are adept at avoiding encounters with others. Our strategy was to announce forcefully that we were harmless. We stood there with placards saying: 'We just talk'.

In Copenhagen, there are a lot of people, mostly of Romanian and Bulgarian origin, carrying signs around the streets. Many were happy to join the *Public Faculty* and carry different signs, as long as I paid them. A number intervened more deeply, for example, one girl decided she would display how much she earned per hour carrying the placard. The result was that lots of people questioned what we were doing and joined in conversations. Many wanted to display their own questions about the economy, including an older Danish man who had recently lost his job. A psychologist came and told me I wasn't asking questions in the right way to get answers, so he participated and subsequently wrote a lengthy report.

We just talked. Talk is not cheap; it exposes your soul. Try talking to people on the street about something important. Most people will kindly refuse your offer. I do not blame them. Nothing would be easier than falling into the trap of lamenting the loss of seriousness in public life. But this is not a time for remorse; it is a time for a renewed insistence upon public discourse, and defending the idea of a public life that cannot be subsumed by the market. What is a public life?

The *Public Faculty* create what I call a field of interactions; a territory to confront and a set of questions that circumscribe particular problematics that are derived from a specific location and its population. I am interested in identifying a group of people that I call 'experts on location' or local residents who have knowledge of a situation. My projects start with the place and finding ways of collectively working for and with that place by creating some forms of co-production that tap into local skills and creativity with the aim of making the place productive and producing a sense of community or local identity together. *Public Faculty* is my sketchbook in this process. It is important exercise for practicing the skills of conversation and ways of engagement.

Four Months

A different project in Bordeaux, France took place for four months from 2010, and is relevant in terms of considering how art relates to institutions as well as community. I was invited to participate in Evento, an biannual event that takes place over 10 days and typically comprises sculptural interventions in public places. The artist Angelo Pistoletto was the creative director of this Evento. Pistoletto wanted to create a more citywide and community based project, with the title 'Shared Knowledge' (Savoir Partage). He invited me to work in San Michelle, a culturally diverse quarter in the south of the city. It was a challenge as there was a lot of public ill will against the Evento, which was provided with a budget of two million euro during a period of tough austerity measures.

All my work starts in a similar way to *Public Faculty*. In this case, I went door to door, trying to meet people in the interests of understanding the complexities of the terrain, the 'field of interactions' and to tap into the 'experts on location'. I discovered that in the area of St. Michel, with its 20,000 inhabitants, there were a hundred registered associations dealing with socio-political and art activities. All these associations were dealing with the city council, trying to protect their funding and secure their future and the future of their constituents. In addition, they rarely talked to each other; an association dealing with race relations was only four doors away from a new organisations for migrant rights but neither communicated with the other.

In the area there was a large market hall which had been abandoned for 15 years, and which people had been trying to access as a multi-use space for community activities. I suggested we use the hall for an event to promote the potential and the qualities of the area, create a ten day event in which the different associations could demonstrate their value to the community.

After talking with people I asked them to come to the hall and I made it very clear to that we had a large budget, €100,000, for a 10-day event. I indicated that I would like the event to be 24 hours a day, and that everybody should be present (I wanted to avoid stands with leaflets and booklets or council reports). I indicated that this was an opportunity for people to demonstrate what they brought to the community, and asked each person to bring two others. I also required the community organisations to be autonomous; to work together and demonstrate what they could do including making decisions about how to divide the money. It took four months for them to negotiate the budget, and after that

they collaborated on everything including the making furniture such as large tables for the purposes of group discussions, preparing and sharing meals or for on group, to dance on!

For 20 hours a week the hall was filled with activities from art therapy to children's workshops, food, theatre, recycling workshops, talks on domestic violence to ballroom dancing with wheelchairs. Talks about religion and its place in the city were necessary because political and religious associations had not been invited to the earlier discussions about use of the hall due to the separation between church and state in France. We invited all the associations and had three major discussions about these and other problematics of the city, including one with the Mayor called 'Participate or Die'. 'Participe ou mourir' was important in raising the question of the meaning of participation; to participate with whom and for what reason? Because participation in itself doesn't mean anything without clarifying the underlying reasons for participation.

There were 15 associations interested in using the building when I arrived, and 60 when I left. I hope the building will be a *home* for the community in its different organisations, and the different strengths those organisations bring. I have not been involved since 2011 but the association of organisations has continued and the council is making improvements on the hall, which is scheduled to open in 2015. Nevertheless, over this period people have tired of the struggles this involves and recently they wrote a letter to the Mayor saying could we have the artist back again? Just maybe for ten days? Sometimes it is useful not to be involved on a daily basis or live in the place where you work because then as an artist you have more freedom to cut through situations which you nevertheless understand. In this case I can say 'yes' as I have that energy that people have lost while battling the council for five years.

Four Years and more: *2Up 2Down/Homebaked*

Many projects reflect the numerous local zones of conflict generated by the current economic crisis in which neighbourhoods have become sites of the contestation of power. People are increasingly becoming disconnected from their government. One of the main issues in most of the places I've worked recently is affordable housing. Housing is not a product but a process. And yet how can we make it an inclusive process? What kind of strategies or micro-political tactics do we need to inhabit or intervene in this process? These are part of the larger question as to whether are we capable of creating a place and an associative capacity for public faculty, a public domain in which we can research, debate and face up to such situations and address one another as co-producers of the city?

With this background I came to north Liverpool in 2009 at the invitation of the Liverpool Biennial to begin working on a temporary project. The Liverpool Biennial includes a component of large-scale public artworks commissioned in the city. I ended up in Anfield, north Liverpool, an area mostly famous for its football club and the team song 'You Never Walk Alone'. I began as I always do walking through the neighbourhood and talking to people about what I see and listening to their responses.

An area of Anfield has fallen victim to a failed government scheme called the Housing Market Renewal Initiative. The initiative intended to get money flowing through nine areas of north England, places identified as 'market failures' where, unlike other parts of Britain, housing prices had stagnated. Under the scheme several thousand homes had been vacated in the Anfield-Breckfield area to be demolished in order for building new housing estates. It's a working-class area, and families were *forced* to sell their houses, many of which they had lived in for generations, through Compulsive Purchase Orders from the city. The maximum compensation for a house was £30,000, whereas a new house will cost £90,000. The population was predominantly unemployed and hence could not afford a mortgage. Consequently, many people were forced into debt or into rental property or to look for people to stay with.

In addition, after building about 80 houses development had halted at the onset of the GFC resulting in empty fields where 1500 buildings had been demolished, with the 2000 houses still standing being partly boarded up. A resident said to me: 'We are sick. Sick of waiting for something to happen. Sick of waiting for some kind of promise to be delivered or a glimpse of what our future might look like.' That is a condition, a life condition, about the right to live well.

In thinking about what to do that could counteract this sickness and was more than temporary my idea was to start making by asking 'How can we start producing our future or daily environment together again?' How can we create conditions of livability? What would an alternative to this situation look like? The first idea was to bring some of the empty houses in Grantham Road back to life. This would take time so I started workshops in the community centres with young people. We talked about sustainable development, learning what people wanted for the area and ideas for small scale development that could be collectively developed.

In 2011 we set up camp in a family bakery that was one of the last things in the area, it had been there for 60 years and had been forced to close as it bordered the demolition zone. The family had been waiting for the government compensation, which didn't eventuate. It was an important place for the community – offering fresh food, on the demolition line and facing the football stadium. We rented it from the family and set up an independent community working space. Over the first year a group of 20 young people worked with architects to re-model the building into a bakery with a training kitchen, and a housing scheme for two to four families. The bakery was re-opened as a community-run business following the initial idea of creating small scale alternatives including work and meeting places. Treating the community as a client, the group developed a deeper understanding of the needs of their neighbourhood and acquired new skills.

From this space we ran discussions about re-fitting the houses in ecologically friendly ways, in place of constructing new buildings. Through the workshops we started to rebuild a sense of community again and reduce the isolation that had arisen. People had expressed the fear that we were snotty artists who would offer empty promises when real action was needed. Yet people came when we

opened the door to conversations about what it would take to change the situation. We discussed what was needed: what form of self-organisaion, of micro economy, or skills to take matters into our own hands. We titled the project *2Up 2Down* after the style of the terrace houses, and developed the Home Baked Community Land Trust with a cross-generational group of people that collectively owned and operated the scheme. A community Land Trust is a non-profit, community led organisation, run on cooperative principles by volunteers, that develops housing and other assets for long-term community benefit.¹

2Up 2Down/Homebaked continues to aim to create a new model of people-centred, community-owned regeneration in Anfield. It offers a viable alternative to the stalled top-down initiatives that have left the area desolate, lacking in amenities and work opportunities and without a social centre. *Homebaked* proposes a small footprint that combines affordable housing with social space, green space and enterprise based in collective community ownership, allowing people to 'take matters back into their own hands' regarding the future of their neighbourhood. Its activities resulted in the lift of the demolition order on the bakery building, for example.

By the start of the biennale in 2012 the biennale organisers started to ask how this project was art. I had to make the argument that it was a monumental public art project and in the end they included us in the biennale festival in ways that made it clear we were not a pop-up café or a meeting room on a festival map. Biennale visitors could take the Anfield home tour during September to November 2012 and able to have a voice in the city's regeneration scheme and their vision of a collective future. The 'heritage' tour, conducted by Anfield residents, took a route through the landscape of slum clearance in Liverpool. Different residents rode on the bus for certain sectors talking about how they had or had not coped with the redevelopment through stories, poetry and music, as almost a performance that was designed by a local theatre director. The event culminated at the bakery where visitors could talk with the people they had met on the tour. The tours were extremely popular, attracting more than triple expected take up.

Although they distracted local people from the work of getting the bakery operating and lobbying for that and other properties to be sold to the communal land trust the p tours empowered the community to take a political stance. The local participants became advocates, speaking to others, not me. And the story went viral around the world, from *The New York Times* to *The Guardian*, raising commentary on the survival of this group of people. The interest was bittersweet, as it overlooked the ongoing struggle, and I worried that the media characterisations of *Homebaked* would overshadow the chaos and systematic imbalances the project has to navigate everyday including battling for funding and the survival of the bakery building.

¹ The value of any property owned and profit generated remains in the community in the Home Baked CLT.

While the community have taken ownership, started to fundraise for themselves, and are an operating bakery providing healthy food for the locality, we face an ongoing battle for the right to live and work well. As a result of long negotiations with the Council we have the opportunity to devise a new housing scheme that incorporates the bakery. We have only 18 months to create a business plan for 100 new affordable houses, including their financing which totals a few million pounds! Yet, what has been most affecting in this project is the way that people keep fighting. After the biennale local people kickstarted the project, talking on radio and to the Housing Minister and the Council, to demonstrate that they are a community and that we are taking matters into our own hands – we have to be reckoned with. We are the future of Anfield and we know how to manage land, run a business and relate to our neighbours.

I'm very proud that the art that comes out of these projects is by others not by me. What has been important in these projects was to find ways to reset the public value of art as a public faculty that can contribute greater solidarity. One of the core values of art is that it can create public values, it can serve. In the words of Britt, an Anfield resident 'We have found that in all the struggle we find ourselves in, it is really good to insert an injection of poetry and art and to continue having as much fun with it as we can.'