

## **Introduction**

I simply wanted to change the world. That is not as outrageous as it sounds. Adulthood started for me in the early seventies when many in my generation rebelled against the conventional lives achieved by our parents and grandparents who had survived two world wars. Brought up in greater security, we challenged the establishment with an optimism underpinned by Marxist thought and eastern spirituality. With this new information we sought alternatives to individualism, the Cold War, capitalism, nuclear arms and radioactive waste, supported feminism and collectivism and recognised that if enough people intent on making a more equitable and peaceful society joined together, the world would indeed change. Despite the enormous societal changes that have intervened, many decades on these principles are still not far from my core values.

Although immersion in art pre-dated my political awareness, the latter brought with it some recognition of the role of culture in society, reinforced by the radical practices of other artists together with the writings of critical thinkers such as Raymond Williams, who so influenced the Left in my formative years. Of particular significance was the working collaboration and personal relationship I developed with artist Peter Dunn from the early seventies. With each other's support and insight we were able to try out a practical re-thinking of how an art that was directly contributing to social change could be realised.

For the subsequent forty years, initially with Peter and then with others, I have been using my skills as an artist to explore ways of supporting communities engaged knowingly or implicitly in transforming society, resulting in the projects outlined in the first part of this book. While the work has been frequently described and its wider political context addressed, little has yet been written concerning the processes involved in its development and realisation, nor the means through which broad intention became enacted through the hands-on practicalities of production. I am therefore specifically focusing here on how methodologies of organisation and social interactions have addressed the work's wider cultural and social agenda, together with the roles of aesthetics and functionality in process, product and outcomes. The present climate of increased activism and a growing interest in socially engaged practice would seem to make this an appropriate moment to bring this information into the public domain so that hands-on experience can contribute to current debates around these issues. These pages therefore constitute a process of excavation into those regularly occurring procedures that have woven their way through the practice, starting from what is known through the process of active involvement, but infrequently articulated. The intuitive enactment of art that is realised through interaction with other people is of course not unlike any other creative process. 'Gut' feelings, intuition and underlying, but sometimes barely conscious, evaluative reflection inform work in the public realm as much as they do in the studio. At the same time this work takes on board the thoughts and ideas of others together with wider social or political considerations. I will be attempting to identify the specific nature of the creative process in relation to this kind of practice and uncover some of those decisions and actions made 'on the run', often in time-

pressured situations, that can play a key role in the outcomes and wider social ramifications of the work. The nature of the collaborations and interactions that lie behind individual projects will also be examined, together with their specificity and significance. The issue of finance will be frequently addressed, both in terms of how and from where projects are funded and the impact this has made on the way the work is developed and delivered. It is one of those many hidden issues that is often left unconsidered when looking only at the outcome of a work, although in my own experience it has required at least as much time and an equal amount of creativity to the artistic production.

By taking a long view I have been able to identify factors such as these and other themes that have emerged through constant re-use and re-appraisal. Rather than an argument of concepts then, the starting point for the book is the work itself from which embedded knowledge and experience are extrapolated. If there is an argument or proposal to be made here, it is represented through the totality of the practice as described. This writing project in fact parallels the methods of the art practice, where products emerge after having being developed over time and through a continuum of ongoing dialogue. In this case interactions with colleagues through informal conversations, joint initiatives, conferences, books and articles, and not least the supervision process for the doctoral thesis that preceded this publication, have brought the valuable experience of people with different knowledge and expertise to bear on my emerging thoughts. I should point out that the book is written from my own perspective as an arts practitioner in the UK, and therefore some of the contextual information may not be relevant to those living and working elsewhere in the world. I hope however that its main points will nevertheless come through and can serve as a useful point of reference to others wherever they are located.

A previous publication has also looked at my work in some detail. *Art for Change: Lorraine Leeson, Works from 1975–2005* was a catalogue produced in 2005 by the Neue Gesellschaft für bildende Kunst to accompany a retrospective of my work in their Berlin gallery. It contained essays in English and German by key thinkers, curators, art historians and practitioners, including one by myself, that explored different aspects of the practice, accompanied by reproductions of the images. This former publication did not address the methodologies of the work however, and therefore does not duplicate or share the same intentions as the content of this book.

The first part of the book outlines the span of the work within its social and political contexts and sets out the material that is later to be interrogated in terms of issues and approaches. There is a chapter dedicated to each of four decades, within which projects are listed chronologically to identify the changing social and political environment of that time. This temporal layout also emphasises the processes and procedures through which the practice has evolved and the way that the relationships underpinning each creative undertaking together with the lessons learned from that experience have laid the foundations for subsequent activity.

Chapter 1 begins with contextual information on how the ‘process art’ of the sixties fed through to the activist and community art of the seventies, touching on the impact of Marxism and feminism. Early influences on my own practice are introduced here, including the commencement of the longstanding collaboration with Peter, followed by our first attempts to move the work from an institutional framework into the social sphere. Projects summarised

include the *London/Berlin Series*, which involved interactive events conducted when Peter was a postgraduate at the Slade and I was on a scholarship year in Germany. Next I describe the challenges of the image and text work of *The Present Day Creates History*, shown in local libraries, a precursor to our first activist work using video, posters and exhibition in support of the *Bethnal Green Hospital Campaign*. The chapter ends with a description of the collaboration with health workers' unions on the *East London Health Project*, for which we produced 'visual pamphlets' addressing the potential effects of the first round of government cuts on the National Health Service.

The next chapter offers background information on the development of the London Docklands in the eighties. It demonstrates how and why the Docklands Community Poster Project came into being and the principles on which it was founded, with a description of how community representatives collaborated with the project team to provide contextual information and steer the content of the artefacts produced. The work of this time included large-scale photo-murals with imagery created through montaged black and white photographs that changed to reveal unfolding narratives on the community's response to the development. Support in the form of graphics and ephemera was also given to specific campaigns, with travelling exhibitions created for display at meetings and festivals, culminating in a *Docklands Roadshow* that took the lessons of the London Docklands to other development zones in the UK and continental Europe. Notable initiatives of the campaign included the *People's Armadas to Parliament*, which saw thousands of people take to the river to publicise the issues and persuade parliamentarians to implement the changes outlined in the People's Charter for Docklands from day one of the Labour Party coming into power. The Docklands Community Poster Project also designed the *People's Plan*

*for the Royal Docks*, an initiative led by local people and supported by the Greater London Council's Popular Planning Unit, which is still widely used as a model for community-led planning.

At the beginning of the nineties the Docklands Community Poster Project transformed into The Art of Change and Chapter 3 describes the practice I undertook through this organisation for the rest of this decade. Work was conducted from this time through discrete projects, many with schools, which aimed to address the impact that changes in the urban environment were having on people's quality of life and cultural identity. The first examples described, *West Meets East* and *Celebrating the Difference*, made use of the previously constructed photo-mural sites through work with secondary schools to explore issues of identity and diversity. *Between Family Lines* next combined the technologies of tape/slide and sound to critique a widespread return to 'family values' that was at this time taking place across cultures. Commissions by the Tate and Art Gallery of Ontario followed in the form of *Awakenings*, *I.D* and *Momentos*, through which young people explored identity in response to works in the gallery collection. These projects made particular use of advances in digital imaging and the worldwide web, the latter progressed through *The Infinity Story*, undertaken with the whole cohort of a junior school. This project with its primitive use of interactive technologies, was to lay the foundations for new work that made extensive use of the Internet for collective creativity.

Chapter 4 outlines work conducted through cSPACE, initially established at University of East London following the demise of the Art of Change at the turn of the millennium. This era was characterised by a more individualistic politics, while the social value of art finally became

accepted, with artistic input incorporated into many government run schemes designed to counteract social exclusion. Projects of this time included *The Catch* public artwork, involving local children in a commission that supported the regeneration of Barking town centre. *VOLCO* was a decade long initiative that picked up on the previous experiments with the rapidly developing Internet, setting out to counteract lack of creativity in the school curriculum while introducing young minds to the idea that they could indeed create a new world. The mentoring scheme *Cascade* took place in tandem with this over a period of five years, involving three levels of education to address issues of local regeneration. In its last stages it culminated in an online guide to the Royal Docks produced by and for young people. This led to *The Young Person's Guide to East London*, which used the 2012 Olympics as an opportunity to involve, disseminate and value the knowledge and creative production of East London youth. Growing consciousness about the environment led to collaboration with a scientist on issues of biodiversity in the tidal Thames, as explored through *Lambeth Floating Marsh*, which created new habitat for micro-organisms in the urban reaches of that river, using pavement projections to attract the interest of passers by. The final project described is *Active Energy*, of eight years duration and still ongoing at the time of writing. I describe the project's development and its many spin-offs as the self-named senior's group The Geezers strive to introduce renewable energy into their community supported by myself and as much other professional help as we can muster.

The last chapter in Part One observes and comments on approaches that have run through the work. I identify a process of 'joining up' that has helped to facilitate the input of diverse sources of expertise to projects, and note how all the projects described have woven together elements of need, opportunity, research, skills, context and funding. I also pinpoint some key aspects of the

artist's role including the construction of organisational and material 'frameworks' to facilitate the gathering of community experience, and the requirement to 'hold' a project while disparate elements combine to produce sometimes surprising results. I observe how 'staying true' to the input of each participant has proved important to the authenticity and social effectiveness of the work, as has ensuring that the 'drivers' of the content are those with direct experience of the issues involved. The chapter ends with a comment on the personal and financial precarity of working in this field.

Having laid out the practice in some detail in Part One, Part Two then considers the methodologies that have been involved. Chapter 6 begins this process by focusing on particular issues relating to development, realisation and outcomes. After looking at how initial ideas and the impetus for a project are built up through collaboration and dialogue, it explores the visual and organisational structuring that enables different parties to interact, and through which the work can finally be realised. I go on to identify those processes required in participatory projects to capture, hold and combine multiple ideas, visual or otherwise, and demonstrate how these frameworks ultimately create a means for collective expression.

Practitioners and critics in this field of art are often interested in the 'underside' of projects - the difficulties encountered, and the failures that are rarely discussed, as this is where much of the learning takes place. I therefore explore some of the challenges that have arisen and indicate the strategies employed to address them. I will show why collaborative projects require careful management and how minor difficulties can become amplified and potentially destructive, particularly where multiple partners are involved. In relation to this I indicate the relevance of



Freire's 'problem posing' approach and how it can be helpful to see a process of ongoing troubleshooting as an integral part of a project's realisation.

The next section on 'outcomes and products' deals with the pragmatics of bringing a material or virtual output into being through collective endeavour. Here I highlight ways in which an arts project can provide a vehicle for addressing the diverse needs of partners, collaborators and participants, each with a different interest and stake in the work. The process/product continuum of this nature of work is then examined, together with the problematics of exhibiting process-based outputs, and the significance of a project's 'afterlife', particularly in relation to its potential transferability and sustainability. Finally, I consider the role of evaluation both in relation to funding and policy, as well as those informal procedures that feed back into projects to inform progress and facilitate future development. This section ends with a critical look at notions of 'good practice' as frequently used in institutional funding, commissioning and evaluation procedures, and a warning of how these can be of detriment to the very artistic innovation that is being sought.

Chapter 7 addresses some of the wider issues that are thrown up by the practice. Definitions of 'collaboration' and 'participation' are questioned using examples drawn from past projects to demonstrate how the interweaving of different relationships determines their evolution. I then look at the relevance of interdisciplinary working in relation to social change including the early influence of Joseph Beuys on my own work, noting the importance of understanding one's own discipline and referring particularly to Alana Jelinek's differentiation between art and activism. Here I also address the value of creating spaces, real or virtual, that facilitate interaction between

people with different life experiences. A number of years ago I coined the phrase ‘dynamics of difference’ to describe the creative energy produced by this process, and in relation to this I will consider how the practice has addressed issues of ethnic diversity and migration against a backdrop of increasingly imposed and institutionalised notions of multiculturalism. Identity was a central theme of the politics of the eighties and nineties, also reflected in my work of that era, and I will note a shift in the practice from an activist approach towards one that has increasingly taken on board issues of identity and recognition.

Education has always been regarded as a poor relation to culture by mainstream art institutions in the UK. As an art practitioner it has generally been a label to avoid due to its widespread institutional use as a repository where community-based work could be kept safely away from the mainstream. While I will return in Chapter 8 to look at this in relation to the wider issue of functionality in art, here I concentrate on the positive connections between creative production and learning. The educational value that can be derived from art projects that directly involve others, particularly the young, is potentially immense and much of my practice has addressed the educational agenda in a more direct way - albeit with a cultural and social rather than a pedagogic goal. Indeed it has frequently directly embraced the UK’s restrictive National Curriculum, and I will be discussing those aspects of my work since the nineties that have been conducted through schools and educational establishments. In this section I will also ask what happens when the spheres of cultural production and educational process collide, and relate the experience of some instances where the encompassing of both has been achieved.

Technology has underpinned all my work, incorporating photographic and montage techniques from analogue to digital. The rise of the Internet since the mid-nineties opened up new possibilities for collective interaction. Indeed, most of my projects in the new millennium have involved web sites and digital interactivity. I will look at both positive and negative outcomes of this on the work's social agenda, questioning whether the online involvement of larger numbers of participants has reduced the experience for each individual. This section will also consider the extent to which technologies have impacted on the nature of the work itself and shaped subsequent practice.

Although there are many artist-led group initiatives in the UK, the most common perception of the visual artist is still that of an autonomous producer. Early in the eighties I made a decision with Peter to create an organisation through which the practice could be better realised. I will revisit that move, looking at my choice of working through an organisational base from that time to the present. Sifting through the benefits and problems of different company structures and related administrative frameworks, I will also identify the contribution to the work made by others involved in these organisations - trustees, advisory members, employees, freelance artists and other professionals. These issues connect directly to the matter of funding and the next section is devoted to how projects have been financed, and the extent to which shifts in public funding practices have affected the work over time. Arts policy will also be considered in relation to the growing trend of 'top-down' approaches to funding and commissioning by institutions and public agencies. I will assess the impact of this on specific projects, questioning if and how socially situated work with a different agenda to the mainstream might continue to survive.

The policies that drive public funding are closely related to the regeneration issues that have formed a constant to much of my practice, from the redevelopment of the London Docklands through to the building programmes associated with Thames Gateway and the London 2012 Olympics. Over recent decades artists and cultural agencies have been increasingly identified as having a role to play in urban regeneration. This has served to reinforce the institutionalisation of arts-led social outcomes while nevertheless expanding opportunities for artists through commissioned projects. I will ask whether such an environment can foster or even accommodate work that benefits people over commercial or institutional priorities, and identify some of the strategies I have developed for weaving a way through this minefield. Most importantly I will consider useful roles that art with a social agenda might continue to take in relation to large-scale development.

Consideration of social change itself concludes Chapter 7, with a look at the wider social impact that can be made through art and how this might be ascertained and understood. I mention the archiving function that art can carry, intentional or otherwise, and also relate some of the project strategies to Chantal Mouffe's concept of 'new resistances' that are re-shaping society from the bottom up. I then regard more closely the notion of 'giving voice' in terms of creating opportunity for the wider society to hear articulation of knowledge that rarely reaches the public domain, as well as the strategy of developing alternative models, as learned through the Docklands campaigning. Finally I consider if and how social change brought about through an arts project can be assessed, and if so, what kind of legacy a successful project can hope to achieve.

Chapter 8 is concerned with issues of aesthetics in relation to the field of socially situated practice, both in terms of its more traditional meaning of visual power, as well as those other ‘rules and principles’ through which my own work has been realised. My first task is to ‘locate the aesthetic’ in disparate projects, asking how it may best be considered, and to what end. In his first book *Conversation Pieces* Grant Kester usefully sited this field of work within a notion of ‘dialogical aesthetics’, circumnavigating the formalist arguments put forward by Nicolas Bourriaud’s in *Relational Aesthetics*. While my own focus in this book is on artworks created through a dialogic process, I am also aware of the significance of their tangible outputs. I therefore explore the role of visual and imaginative resonance in this work, despite the fact that it operates within a different paradigm to the avant-garde approach to social engagement advocated by Claire Bishop in her 2006 article for *Artforum*.

This leads me to consider the issue of function in art as it pulls away from the thinking originating in the Enlightenment that placed artistic function wholly within the realm of the aesthetic. At that time it served to liberate art from the utilitarian focus of the impending Industrial Revolution, but continued to be held sacrosanct by the art world for centuries, and was still pervasive for most of my career. Despite the fact that in recent times practical function has become a regular feature of socially engaged art practice, even desirable, during my working life this aspect of the work was frequently denigrated and criticised for being more akin to education or social work. I therefore make the case for utility and why it has been such an important and necessary element of my projects, but also indicate the problems that can be caused when institutions or government agencies embrace this feature for their own ends.

The book culminates in consideration of the wider political and cultural context against which some community-based visual arts developed via public art into the more recently termed ‘social practice’. Arts policies by the UK’s various political parties as well as its Arts Councils are examined here together with the more radical socialist strategies of a recently re-formed Labour Party and the potential for change in both social and arts policy in the event of a change of government at the next general election. ‘Socially engaged art’ is now developing on a global scale, with a new widespread spirit of activism and significant critique of this field, although the latter to date stems mainly from the US. I outline how these initiatives have the potential to open up possibilities for art to take a renewed role in social change, so long as they can escape co-option. I end by laying out what is needed for the support and encouragement of an art of change without bringing about even greater institutional control of this sector, but also signal the challenges that may lay ahead in the light of the current move to the right in western politics.

When embarking on the research that eventually led to this book I was driven by a desire to develop my understanding of the processes underpinning community-based art against the larger intention of social change. I was also curious to discover where the practice was situated in relation to the ‘cultural democracy’ debates of the eighties, the shifting ideologies of the nineties and the aesthetic considerations of social practice in the present. That journey has eventually brought me to somewhere familiar that I had not previously known, to discover that the value, validity and authority I sought were to be found within the practice itself, which only had to be interrogated to offer up its lessons. The following is the result of my desire to place these findings in the public domain so that new generations of artists will not have to ‘reinvent the

wheel’, but can instead take the best of the old and re-fashion with new strategies to help bring the power of art to the heart of social transformation.

## References

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