

## Putting (Political) Policy into (Art) Practice

On the 26<sup>th</sup> of September 2007, a collaborative arts exhibition (produced and curated by six Leeds-based community groups) opened to public audiences at East Street Arts. The exhibition titled *Showing: Expectations* had two concerns. One being to show – as in reveal – peoples' expectations of artists and art practices, and the other to raise issues relating to the political drive to widen participation in the higher education sector.

The project was conceptualised by Leonor da Silva (a PhD student at the University of Leeds). Leonor was aware that the University is given funding towards widening participation, (some of which is allocated to community groups whose members are identified as under-represented in the higher education sector). She began to consider the positive possibilities that might arise if the University were to offer the groups the use of its art gallery, so they could produce and curate their own art exhibition. Such access would provide people with opportunities to actively engage with the institution on their own terms rather than being the passive recipients of, say, a taster session to the subject of art history. This is often the institutional approach... whereby each faculty nominates a Widening Participation Officer who is responsible for facilitating inclusive events which aim to tick those boxes that comply with funding requirements.

I was invited to collaborate in the *Showing: Expectations* project shortly after completing my PhD in fine art practice. My research was founded on my experiences of working for an economically driven education sector that didn't enable teachers and learners to pursue knowledge for its own sake – so they might further develop more positive and meaningful relationships... with themselves, with others and with the world. This is a serious matter, for learning strategies driven by economically targeted aims present a barrier to critical pedagogic processes, and their potential to transform, enable and empower. My PhD had explored how humanity and art exceed the limits of the audit culture that defines contemporary art education, and I was struck by an awareness of how – in just the same way, humanity also exceeds the rhetorical limits that define educational and cultural access policies. And so I agreed to collaborate.

The intent wasn't to apply an alternative widening participation strategy, but to use existing frameworks to provide people with opportunities to access the mainframe on their own terms, if they so wanted. We knew it would be difficult to persuade *any* institution or organisation to accept the project (as it involved high levels of trust and risk), but then it was also ripe with possibility – a means to rethinking knowledge and power relations through aesthetic processes and practices. It was imperative, as the project was seeking to put widening participation *policy* into arts *practice*, that the

exhibition must be located in a space with a financial obligation to widen access, and also, that it should be a mainstream arts environment. This was so the exhibition would not be defined (by default) as being alternative or amateur. To be alternative or amateur doesn't infer a level of status that's *different but equal*. Once classified thus, the power to act and to be heard becomes reduced.

The concept for *Showing: Expectations* was to invite six community groups to participate in, and curate, their own art exhibition. Those who accepted our invitation to become involved were; Workers' Educational Association, St Anne's Resource Centre, Gypsy Roma Traveller Achievement Service, Emmaus, South Leeds Health for All and St George's Crypt. The contributory and curatorial concept was based around a seven-week process involving people from all of the groups. Voluntary participants were asked to contribute something to the exhibition that was meaningful to their lives, and also to curate another person's contribution. The idea was, that at the beginning of every week – a group consisting of two people (from each community) would visit the exhibition space and leave behind something that was meaningful to their lives. A second group would then visit the space – to curate what the previous group had left, leaving behind their own meaningful contribution when they departed for a third group to curate the following week (and so on). This accumulative process was to be repeated weekly, resulting in a continually altered exhibitions programme. After six-weeks the exhibition would situate everything that had been submitted throughout.

The proposal for *Showing: Expectations* was first submitted to the University of Leeds Art Gallery who said they were unable to accept the project. We then approached Leeds Met Gallery but they also felt unable to accept the project. Eventually, East Street Arts approved our proposal and agreed to the exhibition being held in their Project Space.

Offering people the opportunity to act autonomously can undoubtedly be risky. Some arts professionals, (encumbered by their attachments to aesthetic conventions), seemed to think the invitation we'd extended to the community groups was naïve. In particular, people were skeptical that participants would attain the qualitative levels demanded by arts audiences. For example, an email was received from an academic who asked, 'Are you prepared for the possibility that the show might be visually uninteresting?'<sup>1</sup> And another academic questioned what would happen if the groups were to submit '*ten sunsets*'<sup>2</sup> to the project. These comments reduce art practice to being a method for generating object-based outcomes within the context of value regimes that

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<sup>1</sup> Please refer to the documented email on the *Showing: Expectations* website, available online, <<http://showingexpectations.co.uk/doc5/index.shtml>> Accessed 21 August 2008.

<sup>2</sup> *Ten sunsets* in this context, signifies the production of multiple, repetitive, stereotypical, clichéd representations of amateur art practice.

contrast amateur with professional status. But we didn't worry about what people might submit. This wasn't neglectful behaviour, we'd made a critical and ethical decision to accept that participants would contribute whatever they chose to contribute. Our role wasn't to judge, edit or appraise, but to be supportive, and to focus on providing a positive environment in which people would be trusted.

While the community group key-workers had initially expected us to deliver creative workshops, they became intrigued by the possibilities that might emerge when we said this would not be the case. It was never our intent to teach anything to anyone, although we were aware that the project carried the potential to generate mutually beneficial teaching and learning encounters.

A question we were often asked was, 'how do you intend to communicate the concept of curating to people?' Our response was... 'We don't'. Options were discussed and choices were made at the direction of the participants and both they and we learnt a great deal through this conversational process. Each indexical moment of every event, act and exchange was valued. Things didn't go as planned, but then we'd allowed for this in our planning. There were no neat conclusions but there are infinite *loose ends*. Andrew Warstat wrote about the contributions that were made to the exhibition in his essay, *The Ethics of Surprise*:

'By focusing on the stuff generated by lived lives, *Showing: Expectations* engaged the rich bodily excess of people, into the aesthetic regime of the gallery space. (The gallery is understood, here, to be a space marshalled by competing aesthetic claims and discourses). What was seen in the exhibition space during the course of the show didn't make *sense* in terms of beauty or categories of form. Rather, the work was meaningful as fragile, funny, human things, and the objects were surprising and disarming because they were valuable to people. To suggest that the objects were in some sense *not interesting*, was already to have engaged in a thought process that escaped the ethical demand of the objects'.<sup>3</sup>

But a representative of Leeds Initiative (speaking at one of the discussion events we'd organised) wasn't merely disinterested in the *Showing: Expectations* exhibition, she made her judgment known by saying, 'I don't really give a toss about the exhibition. It's horrible'.<sup>4</sup> This reaction was extreme but not isolated. Any innovative arts practice must involve questioning existing orders, and as such, the creative sector is uniquely positioned to be responsive to being critically challenged. For example, our proposal hadn't guaranteed any outcomes other than the *unexpected*, and yet, when East Street Arts had accepted it, they'd not grasped the critical significance of the approach that was

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<sup>3</sup> Andrew Warstat, *The Ethics of Surprise*, available online <<http://www.showingexpectations.co.uk/criticalreflections/index.shtml>> Accessed 24 August 2008.

<sup>4</sup> The full transcript of the discussion event from which this quote is cited, *Critical Art & Pedagogical Practices/ Widening Participation*, is available to download as a .pdf file, available online <<http://www.showingexpectations.co.uk/criticalreflections/index.shtml>> Accessed 26 August 2008.

being proposed nor its implications. Rather, they'd read the proposal superficially, thinking it would fit nicely within their own (socially engaged) programme of events. I think it's relevant to consider the organisation's Mission Statement:

'East Street Arts is a contemporary visual arts organisation working across artists' needs, that believes a vibrant creative sector is important to a healthy society. We take a holistic approach to working with artists on a professional level, to empower them to realise their potential. We do this by providing an appropriate environment, professional and contextual support, while maintaining a critical and outward facing programme'.<sup>5</sup>

East Street Arts agenda is committed to professional arts practice and, strategically, this provides a relatively straightforward, organisational focus. It's their desire to simultaneously 'maintain a critical and outward facing programme' that presents *the fly in the ointment*. Corporately, organisationally and institutionally funded arts practices are critically restricted by the needs of funding bodies, trustees and patrons. It's positive that East Street Arts seeks to link with critical art practices, but the problem for the *Showing: Expectations* project was that it hadn't been fully appreciated how a critical approach could fundamentally challenge the organisations' own professional values. East Street Arts' had expressed a commitment to being critically receptive, and our proposal met with that commitment. So where did the tensions arise? In trying to better understand these issues, it's been useful to reflect on some comments that were made, at a meeting we attended with the managerial team:

**Question:** 'How do we deliver the product to audiences?'

**Response:** 'We want to allow people's voices to emerge, not to edit and reduce them to sound bites. The project provokes an intelligent engagement. It deliberately requires time, effort and active agents. This is our critical strategy'.

**Question:** 'Why aren't you working with, for example, property developers? Why people who struggle?'

**Response:** 'As it states in our proposal, we are engaging specifically with widening participation strategies'.

**Response:** 'I'll be honest with you. I'm not interested in people, I'm interested in theorising the object'.<sup>6</sup>

This exchange articulates points of disjuncture between differing approaches. For some, *Showing: Expectations* was an aesthetic product, to be presented for consumption by arts audiences. And yet to me, *Showing: Expectations* was a critical process that demanded an ethical approach because it involved humanity, with all of its vulnerabilities, frailties, and potential for shared learning and responsibility.

It'd been expected that we'd lead the *Showing: Expectations* project and claim aesthetic authorship of its outcomes. But because we didn't do this, people were denied the reassurance of being able to determine... who the artists and curators were and

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<sup>5</sup> *East Street Arts: Facilitating Visual Artists*, available online <[http://www.esaweb.org.uk/page.asp?sectionIdentifier=2005119\\_59563845](http://www.esaweb.org.uk/page.asp?sectionIdentifier=2005119_59563845)> Accessed 25 August 2008.

<sup>6</sup> Personal notes made during our meeting with ESA, Thursday 25 October 2007.

where the art could be located. As Sarah Pierce has stated, 'It's about shifting the dynamics. So that notions of power, and the institution, and the curator, and the artist become less predictable'.<sup>7</sup>

The *Showing: Expectations* project was distanced from professionally isolated aesthetic zones and in close proximity to the frailties and excesses associated with life's struggles. But all people experience difficulties. To struggle is the human condition. A seemingly functional person is one who controls or conceals their difficulties, which is something that most people, (if they have the means), will seek to do. A struggle exposed is perceived to be both a weakness and a threat. This is why comments that were documented during the project are so revealing of people's expectations... not only of artists and art practices, but also of issues relating to class, wealth, poverty and opportunity.

I've explored my specific experiences of working with East Street Arts because they offer primary research material. But I don't want to limit my thinking to these personal micro experiences. What's interesting is how they reference macro concerns. The problems we encountered (though particular) are not unique. A recent review of art teaching by The Group for Learning in Art and Design (GLAD) states, 'the creative industries are an important part of the economy, and teaching needs to evolve to keep up with industry developments. The review recommends stronger business involvement in art & design courses'.<sup>8</sup> The currency of corporate linguistics is familiar, giving rise to terms such as; the creative industries, cultural citizenship, socially engaged art practice, artist-led consultancies, the knowledge industry, and so on. But these key words signify the current language of the professional arts circuit. They relate to the *art business* and *not* to the business of making art. The former is motivated, brokered and constrained by cultural value regimes and aesthetic economic capital and the latter is activated through meaningful, critical, aesthetic undertakings, and constrained only by the limits of conceptual thinking and material resources. The products of both these fields of activity may be called *art*, but there are significant differences between them.

During the project we held two discussion events. One involved an academic audience and the other was an open conversation with participants and key-workers. I'd like to conclude by reading some comments that were made during these events. The former were made in the academic discussion, and the latter during the open conversation:

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<sup>7</sup> Sarah Pierce, *Metropolitan Complex, Paper No. 6*, available online <<http://www.themetropolitancomplex.com/index.php?id=papers>> Accessed 15 September 2008.

<sup>8</sup> Zoë Corbyn, 'Shake-up urged in art teaching', *Times Higher Education*, (TSL Education: England), 4 September 2008, p. 15.

'We've talked about the *White Cube*, but does the work stand up to the same rigours? The work that goes into the artists' work, [the artist] who has to jump through so many hoops, through so many barriers and negotiations, *for years*, to actually reach the level where perhaps an artist would show? Now, I wonder whether this work is actually being put under the same scrutiny that professional artists' work is put under. But, an' I don't know how other professional artists here feel about this, whether there's some conflict here, between what's being presented... And actually, does that undermine our practices?'<sup>9</sup>

...and the comments from the open conversation...

'A gallery is often a space of reverence and authority, and, y'know, we all feel slightly awed and humbled... when we come in and abase ourselves in front of these edified works of art. But this space, because of the way the exhibitions' been constructed, and the way it's very open and mutual, it seems to be a shared, a sanctuary type space, where people feel able to make themselves more vulnerable than they would normally. An' I find it very moving what people have contributed. But it seems to be in response to the way the structure of the show allows you to be open. Because no one's more important than anyone else here. An' that has enabled gestures and actions that maybe otherwise wouldn't be possible. So in that sense it's a really interesting experiment as to what the *White Cube* of a gallery can be. There's a way that community projects are often felt to be... I mean there's often a sense of the patronising about them, as in, 'we know what you, as a deprived community, need'. But this was a genuinely open project in the name of 'widening participation'. An' I mean one of the ironies about widening participation is that it's set around a very narrow agenda. So this was a very wide notion of widening participation, which caused problems 'cos it was a challenge to institutional frameworks. It does show expectations, and it raises expectations about showing, an' I think alerts us all to the endless potential for the aesthetic. It's as much to do with us as the object in that sense'.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> The full transcript of the discussion event from which this quote is cited, *Critical Art & Pedagogical Practices/ Widening Participation*, is available to download as a .pdf file, available online <<http://www.showingexpectations.co.uk/criticalreflections/index.shtml>> Accessed 26 August 2008.

<sup>10</sup> The full transcript of the discussion event from which this quote is cited, *In Conversation With the Participants*, is available to download as a .pdf file, available online <<http://www.showingexpectations.co.uk/criticalreflections/index.shtml>> Accessed 26 August 2008.