

**The Art of Dispute and
Taking an Active Position**
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and Paula Orrell**





PO *In both of your practices there are similar resonances about how the artwork serves as a point of departure, medium or channel of communication to initiate social and ideological cognitive process. Buddleia and More Opportunities are stories of a place and relate to the practice of social anthropology and use processes of participant-observation. The concept of an artist's residency allows for the manifestation of such methods, as Plymouth is a developing city going through a long process of regeneration.*

BH I think the term social anthropology is a very big term and I'm always suspicious about using those encompassing terms. I am interested in people, in individuals as part of groups defined by certain circumstances. In Plymouth, I was interested in the structural change of the urban fabric due to regeneration and the effect these changes impose on the individual, in a situation where their recent past or even present become 'historical' very fast.

AB I remember coming across the term participant-observer in relation to ethnography when I was at college, without knowing how the term related to anthropology. I found it a succinct way of reacting against scientific connotations and describing my position as an artist within a specific context.

BH The liberty I take as an artist is that I do not have to follow the limitations of a scientific researcher. I observe, I interpret and I start a dialogue – without the safe distance of time or 'scientific methods'. That's why artworks differ from the results of scientific research fundamentally. They offer space for ambivalence, for interpretation, for multi-layered reading.

AB I met with the social anthropologist Justin Kenwick in Edinburgh in 2004 and there was actually a lot of shared territory in terms of our approaches, although, like you say, he was approaching it with an objectivity I've never felt. I'm not at all objective. It's all subjective, it's all autobiographical, and it's important to make that distinction.

PO *When anthropologists integrate themselves into society, it's an anecdotal approach to science, but immersing in a society is to really observe.*

AB Why is it that I don't like the idea that I immerse myself in a society? In a way I want to acknowledge my difference as an outsider, from another background or class, and I want to insist on a shared humanity. A key tension in my practice is that between taking part, being part of, and observing. The term anthropology also makes me think of the critique of the way the art world imports culture in order to regenerate a locality, disregarding indigenous culture. The questions arising from this critique are important, but someone visiting in the form of an artist residency is not necessarily a bad thing.

BH Residencies take up different shapes today, since artists are used to, and forced to, move very quickly. A residency creates a parallel life, which offers you to leave your usual everyday context and overlay it with an unknown situation. It offers an innocent approach, because you don't know the details about politics etc. That's why you can take risks. In Plymouth, I was offered insight into the regeneration processes from a privileged point of view – exactly at the time of urban changes and the changes of identity of Plymouthians.

AB The term residency is one of those words that get used because there isn't really another one. But it's a way of saying 'this is not a commission', if you know what I mean. And I was very aware last year that what I was doing at Plymouth Arts Centre wasn't a commission. I think for me the word residency has more of a generosity to it. It's more open-ended.

BH On an open-ended process, that's it exactly. Not aiming at a certain outcome.

AB The term commission is about producing a work for an event and a residency is about nurturing the artist's development.

BH But I think it's more about providing the possibility to do a project which has the potential to evolve along a certain time-line, to come back several times, with you, Paula, as a curator and you, Anna, as artist, offering a dialogue. The curator must also be willing to bear the sufferings of not knowing exactly what the outcome will be. This means taking risks as a curator as well.

PO *The success in the residency commissioning process comes from the responsibility of the*



commissioner to make connections and relationships between the work and its needs. Perhaps we could look at the issue of progressing ideas and concerns and how the residency situated your thinking. Anna, you've never made an artist's film before. Was that a challenge in terms of conceptual concerns and process?

AB My previous works had been so busy, full up with evidence of so much research. I really wanted to pare all that down completely. I have a strange feeling now about the film piece, like 'Oh you must be so lonely! Where's the contextualisation?' It's challenging to feel that this work is there and it's like a little shiny black nail in the middle of an empty room somehow. It's quite a spare thing in regard to past work and it's uncomfortable for me but, on the other hand, it feels like a step forward for my practice.

BH Do think you could put it together with your previous work?

AB Now, looking back, yes.

PO So the practical aspect of making a film was the change, in fact.

BH The parameters of a new medium.

AB The film-making process, which was done very much in collaboration with Jaime Feliu-Torres, forced me to be minimal, with only 30 minutes of film to shoot. That was completely different from video, where I would have shot hours and editing would have taken forever. Jaime helped me more-or-less devise a storyboard and plan the shots beforehand. Making creative decisions at this earlier point was key. It felt like making a commitment and taking a risk.

BH I did not know anything about Plymouth before my first visit. For me the challenge was to deal with completely new territory: as a pacifist, dealing with issues of the military in an unbiased way, taking advantage of coming from a different cultural and political background. I'm content with what I developed, but I have to ask myself: how come there's no reaction? I attacked Plymouth politics, urban politics, quite a bit with this piece.

PO *I think there is an effect in terms of ideas and discourse that builds a momentum that's serendipitous. On the radio, a member of the public who called in recognised that you were, as an 'outsider', actually reflecting the concerns of the community. As an artist, an international figure who has read the context and understands what is happening in Plymouth, you can question the regeneration of the city.*



BH When you look at Redrow developers and their clean housing development, neglecting the possibility to create an urban quality that is a contemporary expression of what used to be the city centre of Devonport, you understand very well the limits of Public Private Partnerships. The final point we seem to have accepted at the moment is that there is no more public, and no more open-endedness. What a city always needs are those undefined spaces – spaces that are just left open. The more the globalised economy ‘needs’ or asks these spaces to be filled up to the last square centimetre, to create money, the less people can develop their personalities. Frictions between individuals are eradicated. You just have mono-functional quarters that are observed by private security. You don’t even have to meet anymore – that’s maybe the ‘idealist’ image of the 21st century. No more friction, no more fight, no more communication except among people of the same kind. But that would probably also be the end of urban life. Then there is no more notion of the city.

AB I think you’re right. Plymouth feels like it’s being suburbanised and that seems a completely out of date idea of what a city can be, of what utopia is.

PO I think it would be interesting to talk a bit more about this idea of utopia in reference to Patrick

Abercrombie’s design plan for post-war Plymouth, which was very much a modernist concept. The idea of a city being very accessible, being able to drive about it – cars were the essence of the future, the modernist ideology. This new future for a city makes me think about your piece Shark Walking, Barbara – the references that you made to Voyage To The Bottom Of The Sea, the idea of 1960s futurism and encapsulated utopias, that the world can change through design and future thinking.

BH I think we were hardly ever so far away from any kind of visions or utopias as we are at the moment. At the same time, the longing for utopias is stronger than ever. It’s exactly the 40th anniversary of the 1968 revolutions and there is this really strong gap between now and how much we hear about how wonderful it was at that time, how exceptional.

There was this beautiful documentary with interviews of people from that time, most of them artists, and one said ‘you know you could come to a gallery the next day and you’d never know what to expect. Every single day there was something new. There was nothing that you could put into any kind of category – it was always something new.’

PO Can we return to the question of the impact of art in politics?

AB I did a talk at the Arts Centre with Malcolm Miles, who is Professor of Cultural Theory at Plymouth University. He has an interesting take on the problem of whether art can have a political impact, an impact that will engage with the powers that be and make a difference. Do you get involved with an institution or do you just use alternative processes and contexts? Do you ride on the back of the monster or do you just go off and do your own thing somewhere else? His take is that the only way you can make a difference is not to engage, is just to do your own thing, in your own way, on your own, in your own space. I've always thought that you should get involved, that you try to get on top of the monster and hang on to its ear lobe. But, after ten years, that approach is feeling very unsustainable. Very exhausting.

In art institutions, you spend x amount of time working with someone who's trying to make a

difference, and you're trying to make a difference, but there's someone else in power who won't listen. And then you leave and you do it again. It's just an unsustainable way of working. Malcolm's very much of the opinion that you just get out, you don't get public funding, you don't engage with the council.

PO *Working in a regional institution is localised, creating a curatorial programme in relation to a very specific place. In London, I didn't engage with the community, and now in Plymouth it's all about relationships, from partnering, to collective action, to the individual.*

AB I think you can make a change at a very grass roots level. It's like us three talking to each other. Potentially, we change each other's consciousness and perceptions and once you change an individual



you don't know what happens. When this change starts connecting with power, the city council or another body, it becomes difficult to know what the effect is.

BH You have to build relationships and you have to build an audience, but the audience wants art, they don't want problem solvers. They want art and they don't want the stupid artists who get into their territory. They want their creation of what they, or their advisors, think art is, on the wall. They want something that, if somebody walks in, is recognisable as art. What we are both producing, process-orientated art, cannot be hung on the wall. If it could, it would help us as well – we would achieve good prices at auctions. I'm seriously thinking about changing strategies.

PO *Are you? Seriously?*

BH Making nice pictures, nice pieces.

AB You did do that in Plymouth, which was very different.

BH It was very difficult for me. I enjoy making nice pieces to create poetic moments and the challenge for my work at Plymouth Arts Centre was to develop them in a way that they convey the shift, a reinterpretation of an everyday object or situation for a possible vision.

I recently came across Paul Auster and Sophie Calle's back-and-forth piece *Double Game* and was very intrigued by it. It started out with Paul Auster using Sophie Calle as the basis for one of his characters in *Leviathan*. Then Sophie Calle asked him in exchange to write a work of fiction for her to inhabit. And apparently she was a bit disappointed about it, since it seemed as if he had



not devoted much attention to the job, but she still executed it and published it in *Double Game*. I think this can be read as reference and synonym for many kinds of expectations in all different contexts of society, and how artists and other players in the game are intrigued, try to get a benefit out of a situation, and try to always be smarter than the move of the other before.

PO *During the last two years we have had many discussions about the purpose of socially-engaged and participatory practice. You both are now reconsidering this approach in your work. Perhaps this is question more for Anna, as there is quite a clear development. However, Barbara, in More Opportunities, you have made independent pieces that reflect more sculptural qualities than previous works that are 'sets' for the audience to engage with.*

AB It's become such a style. It's become a style and it's become a kind of category. I remember that, ten years ago, I really wanted to get people in the art world to understand and recognise this way of working. I felt that it was really important that it became more defined and more visible. Ten years down the line and that's all that has happened, so what do you do now? Because it's now more defined and mainstream, it has changed – the power has been taken away from the practice. It's still a useful strategy, at certain times, and it might happen again in my practice in a certain point in a project. I would hope to be able to juggle and choose between appropriate approaches at any point, to work as I desire. A daily challenge for me when I am making work is how institutionalisation, a terrible entropic process, can work from within as well as without.

BH Claire Doherty differentiates between three categories of how participation 'takes place' or is executed by different artists, and whether a dialogical relationship is established. I quote: 'a complicit engagement... but ultimately directed by the artist, or collaborative – in effect "social sculptures"... or where practices become peripatetic in the social fabric of the city, a distinction should be made between the strategies of the activist and the trickster, though their intentions may be similar – namely to provoke social conscience.' Well, I am quite apprehensive about categorisations altogether – in fact, I have always been trying to act against them. That's

how I developed my practice of 'sets' – which are sometimes more explicit and other times more disguised, like at Plymouth Arts Centre, where the performative aspect becomes part of the exhibition context. The sets I create offer 'second life', but in real life rather in virtual life. I would situate my practice in between the 'complicit engagement' and the 'collaborative – in effect "social sculptures"', offering sets, which are clearly defined in order for them to be transgressed. I relinquish control to the user/consumer, but then 'edit' the material. The frame of the set is made clear to everyone beforehand, and it is made clear that the authorship of the middle part is clearly attributed to the consumer and open to be used. So it reflects the 'real world', where we always play double roles but mostly unconsciously – the tension between the public face and behaviour we show and our personal self, which we often try to disguise.

Janey Hunt, who organised the demonstration, asked me at a certain point, what will happen if not many people sign up? And I told her that this was not the point: that it functions like a rehearsal, because it is not about mobilizing a crowd like for elections, with propaganda techniques, nor with looking for 'actors', staging a scenario for the artist's interest. It is what it is – and in this way it reflects well all the oftentimes-unheard demonstrations for subjects that don't seem to address issues of wider attention. So it also asked: what is worthwhile? For whom? Why engage? It is a counter-piece to spectacle.

AB The socially-engaged nature of my work is in the process, but I'm not overt. The work I've done is not attempting to be as overtly activist as the other artists who are within the 'socially engaged' bracket. I think there are a lot of people in socially-engaged practice within Britain, anyway, who almost want to leave art, the art world, behind completely. I would always like to have one foot in the art world and the whole idea of making art. Art is potentially very powerful. I like the tension I feel between wanting to abandon art altogether and finding its slipperiness extremely appealing.