

Participatory art **and the gallery**

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Participatory art practices and the contemporary art gallery have in previous decades represented opposite poles of the visual arts spectrum, yet in Britain today we see examples of the two coming together. I shall attempt to chart this changing relationship, looking at some of the possible origins, motives and implications of participatory practices beyond the gallery, comparing these with US models, whilst considering the significance of this work in the broader cultural and political context of the late 1990s.

This area covers the convergence of three previously distinct definitions of art practice: gallery art, community art and public art, each of which has strong traditions in Birmingham. Gallery art, possibly the most recognisable and easily defined historically, is art that is considered to be part of a system of bourgeois values, where the institutional context of the gallery, stereotypically seen to be fronted by columns and portico (e.g. the National Gallery or Tate Gallery, London and Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery), speaks louder than the art itself. In contrast, community art grew out of the late 60s belief in a new classless politics, giving 'power to the people'. Community art was also associated with political activism and creativity was effectively embraced as part of the radical struggle. An international

upsurge of radical activity at this time was influenced by Anti-Vietnam protests and the Black Panther movement with its highly developed cultural programme in the United States.

During this time, many opportunities for artists to work with people outside the gallery developed. These activities included residences, commissions and public art schemes. The *Artists' Placement Group* (later O+I), established by a group including John Latham and Barbara Steveni in the late 60s, was the first of its kind, convincing politicians and 'captains of industry' that artists should be employed as thinkers and decision-makers in business. Similar ideas inform the work of *Artway of Thinking* today, who work in Italy with politicians and industrialists. In the 70s and 80s the idea of artist placements and residencies in hospitals, schools and workplaces became widespread, with the Artists' Agency in Sunderland and the Scottish Arts Council being particularly strong supporters. It was generally assumed, however, that artists would continue to make their own work in these projects, perhaps inspired by the new environment, rather than embark on any form of collaborative practice.

The work of community arts organisations and artists can be distinguished from these developments by their alternative agenda. In 1972 the Association of Community Artists was formed primarily as a campaigning group for Arts Council funding on behalf of the booming community arts movement. By 1974 a directory of community artists listed 149 groups and 14 individuals active in Britain.

Free Form, *Bath Arts Workshop*, *Magic Lantern* and *The West Indian Carnival Committee* were among the first groups to be funded. Most of these groups consisted of loose collectives of artists or amateurs. In their work, the ideals of a shared process and participation were generally given more importance than an end product and the names of individual artists were played down. It was not technique that distinguished community artists, but rather their attitude towards the role of art in society, assisting those with whom they made contact to become more aware of their circumstances and their own creative powers, by providing them with facilities to make use of their abilities.

Community arts organisations were often involved in campaigns to provide resources and training for the production of posters, videos, photographs, murals or oral histories, amongst other products. They were concerned with processes of collective creativity, which stood in stark contrast to the model of 'individual creativity' which had previously dominated European 'High Art' or 'gallery art'. Owen Kelly in his book *Community, Art and the State*¹ has outlined how this movement became the victim of 'grant addiction', whereby funding bodies determined target groups and funding priorities. This resulted in community arts projects becoming funding-led, rather than artistically-led, underpinned by a notion of 'welfare arts' through which socially disadvantaged groups were prioritised

over artistic or political activism, which funding bodies may have considered to be more 'dangerous'.

In parallel to these developments, independent art galleries such as Ikon Gallery in Birmingham, Arnolfini in Bristol, The Serpentine Gallery and ICA in London became the Arts Council's flagship organisations and were supported as 'Centres of Excellence'. These galleries contributed to the network of publicly funded art organisations, including municipal art galleries with contemporary art programmes and visual art centres, which focused on the work of a contemporary and modern international avant-garde. In my view, during this early period, their shows were arguably little different from commercial galleries (they were sometimes accused of being showcases for commercial interests) except that they did not need to rely on the sale of work. Dr. Eric Moody has suggested that they encouraged a generation of curators who acted pretty much as private patrons but were funded by the public purse.²

Many artists felt that the gallery environment was not appropriate for their work, either because it was not open to more experimental practices or because they regarded it to be removed from the lives of 'ordinary people', or simply because they preferred to work in contexts other than the institutional 'white cube'. A number of non-gallery art organisations developed off-site programmes during the 1980s largely in response to artists' proposals, often devised with a specific site or context in mind. Some of the most prominent organisations working in this way

in the 1980s and 1990s have been *Locus+*, Newcastle (formerly *Projects UK*, formerly the *Basement Project*), *Hull Time Based Arts*, *Artangel*, the *Edge Biennales* and *TSWA3D* in the South West. These organisations have been particularly attractive to artists working on site-specific installations and those involved in Live Art, for whom audience interaction is often an integral element of the work. Arts Council funds to promote combined arts practice, particularly the New Collaborations Fund, have been significant in furthering these areas of work. Such funding has sustained artist groups such as TEA (Those Environmental Artists) in Manchester and Moti Roti in London (see Helen Denniston's conference report for details of Keith Khan and Moti Roti).³

The model adopted by non-gallery art organisations and artist groups was more akin to a film production company than an art gallery, with a basic office, possibly production facilities and a small core staff, who could bring in further expertise on a project by project basis. The absence of a space, permanently open to the public, gave these organisations a degree of freedom to work on one project over an extended period of time or to find different contexts for each project (as opposed to the commitment of a rolling exhibition programme). The skills developed by these organisations were often related to the negotiation of the temporary use of space, discussions with councils over such areas as health and safety

and fire regulations and attracting local press and media. These projects depended on art world visibility very much through the same channels as those used by galleries (e.g. direct mailing and art magazine advertising) and often found their audiences to be more international than local. While working outside the gallery walls might imply that works were more accessible, location alone would not guarantee this. In most cases, a concern for artistic integrity would precede questions of audience development. Projects were often more demanding on audiences than gallery art, which could at least be recognised as 'art' due to its location. Site-specific projects, however, often do bring with them intimate involvement with a natural audience who shares ownership of, or involvement with, the site. For example, in Stefan Gec's *Natural History*, an installation on the roof of a fire station which coincided with the anniversary of the Chernobyl Nuclear accident, discussions with the firemen were integral to the siting and meaning of the work;⁴ whilst, Rachel Whiteread's *House* demonstrated a polarity of views between a liberal art-going public, who responded to it as a significant work of art, and a section of the local community who had no sense of ownership of, or involvement with, the work and generally considered it an eyesore.⁵

The 1980s witnessed a growth in public art in Britain with the appointment of public art officers by local authorities to look at ways of compensating for the brutal planning and design decisions of the late 60s and 70s with the humanizing touch

of art. This management-led council programming, and the lengthy consultative processes involved in realising such schemes, often resulted in compromised public art projects that satisfied few. Rather than engaging people, public art was often devised on behalf of communities, and appeared like gallery art imposed on public space. The case of Richard Serra's *Titled Arc*, erected in New York in 1981 and finally removed by public demand in 1989, illustrated that the placement of monumental minimal art in public spaces was no solution to democratising culture.⁶ Public art agencies, such as PACA (Public Art Commissions Agency) and PADT (Public Art Development Trust), have since the 1980s embraced a more progressive way of working, responding to the needs of artists and particular communities and these ways of working can be seen to intersect with the development of galleries' participatory programmes.

In the 1990s, the arrival of the National Lottery and its dispersal of unprecedented funds, promised to shift the balance of the ownership of culture. As the Lottery is the beneficiary of ticket sales to a broad spectrum of the public, it seems imperative that the distribution of proceeds should reflect this diverse geographical and social spread and should increase access to the arts, encouraging training and opportunities for participation. Funding guidelines have aimed to ensure that grant applicants have genuine support

from the local community. These funding criteria may have helped to legitimise participatory art projects, yet the effectiveness of the Lottery in diversifying opportunities, rather than just reinforcing an omnipotent modernism and hegemonic culture, has yet to be proven.

Whilst it may be unfair to pay too much attention to the instrumental role of funding and economics in the development of participatory art projects, there is a polarity between art practices legitimised by the commercial gallery/national media/Tate nexus and those publicly-subsidised practices which aim towards a democratisation of culture. There still exists a myth perpetuated by art schools that working with people somehow dilutes the art. This is the case despite the fact that many fine art practices, such as photography, filmmaking or the casting of sculpture, often involve many other people besides the named artist. Yet what distinguishes this participatory process from the end product is the notion of authorship. When Anthony Gormley approached a Mexican community to make clay figures for his project *Field*⁷ in 1990, it was Gormley who retained rights of authorship over the work of art. Recognised ownership was not considered to be shared with the many individual makers who had contributed to the authenticity of the work. This notion of artist as individual author has gained credence once again with the cult status of many young British artists over the past few years.

With the late 80s economic crash seeming to close the shutters of commercial art galleries, discouraging them from taking risks with unknown

— Participants installing *Field*
— at Ikon Gallery, 1995



artists, Thatcher's children created opportunities for themselves rather than waiting to be discovered. The now famous shows *Freeze* (1988) and *Modern Medicine* (1989), organised by Damien Hirst et. al., provided a positive, new option. Critic, Julian Stallabrass, in his essay "Artist-Curators and the New British Art" argued that rather than presenting an alternative or creating a counter-culture, most of these artists were eager to join the establishment.⁸ This was realised with the award of the Turner Prize to Damien Hirst in 1995, the commodification of artist-run initiatives by the museum in the show *Life-Live* at the Musée d'Art Moderne in Paris and the exhibition *Sensation* at the Royal Academy in 1997. The legitimisation of artist-run initiatives has enabled a diverse range of groups to organise projects and gain recognition outside gallery spaces such as *Space Explorations* in London, Martin Vincent's *Annual Programme* in Manchester and TEA. Close links between artist-run spaces, dealers and international art museums can also be seen to have given some freedom to independent public galleries to consider other areas of programming beyond the commercially successful artists, who are perhaps already catered for: freedom to stand aside from the cult of stardom and celebrity which perpetuates an image of art as inaccessible and to develop communication between art and audience. This is where process and participatory art have a vital role

to play. Again we might ask the question, what prerogative do the existing publicly funded independent galleries have in this arena?

In the 1980s, many of these organisations developed extensive gallery education programmes, often specifically geared to the needs of schools groups or community groups through outreach activities, in addition to talks aimed at a more general audience. Ultimately, some of these programmes could be said to have attempted to engage more people in the 'civilising tastes' of the high art world with a kind of missionary zeal, rather than propose any alternative practice. The gallery exhibition, individual artist and oeuvre were still the focus around which the education programme was built separately, although there were exceptions.

The Whitechapel Art Gallery in London's East End became celebrated for its commitment to community education programmes and provided welcome work opportunities for many artists. A primary concern at the Whitechapel was to meet the interests of the ethnically diverse neighbourhood in which the gallery is situated. Their education and outreach programmes were conceived within the context of a rich history of community arts activity in the borough of Tower Hamlets including *THAP*, *The Art of Change* (formerly the *London Docklands Poster Collective*) and *Camerawork*. By comparison, the activities of these other organisations have remained almost invisible beyond their local communities. While organisations such as the Whitechapel have successfully broadened their

community programmes and challenged the accusations of elitism, the central focus of the organisation still remains the 'white cube' exhibition. Other examples include Walsall Museum and Art Gallery in the 1990s, where audience interests have become integrated in the programming of the gallery, rather than seeking audience involvement beyond the gallery.⁹

As part of expanding their notion of 'education', galleries and museums have had to reassess their role within an expanding leisure culture. W.J.T. Mitchell, in the opening pages of *Art and the Public Sphere*, asked, "Are we witnessing the liquidation of the public sphere by publicity, the final destruction of the possibility of free public discussion, deliberation and collective determination by a new culture of corporate, military and state media management, and the emergence of a new world order in which public art will be the province of 'spin doctors' and propagandists?"¹⁰ How could art ever compete with the allure of TV, cinema, the Internet or the shopping mall apart from relying on sensationalism? Some museums have invested heavily in interactives to entertain audiences with the proviso of providing effective learning tools, as witnessed in the basement of the Science Museum, London; others, including the Museum of the Moving Image, employ actors in period costume to entertain visitors. Viewers are not considered able to contemplate an object and draw

their own observations. The 'Millennium Experience', designed for the Greenwich Dome and inspired by Disneyland, is billed as a 'vision of the future'.¹¹ As an alternative to these interactive spectacles, art which engages people as participants, whose voices are valued and which encourages people to think for themselves and to value their own opinions, is surely a more democratic approach to sustaining culture. As the American phenomenologist John Dewey commented, "only if we are able as participants to ask critical questions are we able to understand the meaning of a statement or question".¹²

In the United States racism and social segregation, poverty and lack of welfare have provided a more extreme context for these projects than the UK. Community-based art programmes embraced the belief that art could act as a cultural catalyst. With NEA arts funding cuts and a significant reduction of art teaching in the American school system, the support infrastructure was very poor compared to Britain, so the case for art as a social cure had to be made to funders in clear political terms.

In parallel to this, a tradition of affirmative action campaigning had produced a series of programmes since the 60s, aimed at addressing the omission of diverse cultural groups in museums, examining the politics of display. Two conferences organised by the Smithsonian in 1988 and 1990 addressed these issues. In addition, a number of projects took place during the 1990s, in which artists from ethnic minority backgrounds have reinterpreted museum collections.

The installation *Mining the Museum*, created by artist Fred Wilson in 1992, was a key example of reinstating the presence of black history through the explosion of myths and perceptions.¹³ This took place at the Maryland Historical Society, which Wilson had originally considered to be alien territory. Further, feminist practices, the AIDS quilt in Washington and work by multi-cultural groups such as the *Border Arts Workshop* provided encouraging examples of collaborative practice as ways of 'empowering communities'.

A new genre of public art has thus developed in the United States from which work in the UK has gained credence. In the 1990s, projects initiated by Mary Jane Jacob including *Places With a Past: New Site-Specific Art* at Charleston's Spoleto Festival (1991), *Culture in Action* for Sculpture Chicago (1993) and *Conversations at the Castle* for the Art Festival of Atlanta (1996) have gained particular critical attention.¹⁴ These projects specifically addressed people who were not usually served by museums. Museum-goers would often find the unusual locations of these projects as alienating as the downtown museum might be to the local participants. Importantly, these projects gained some art world credence through the effective networking of the curator, who already had a reputation within the art establishment. She brought together panels including critics, artists and other experts as an integral component of each project and

ensured substantial documentation and critical writing were published after each project, so the work could not be ignored or forgotten and the case that it made could not go away.

One may ask, when do we consider a project truly participatory? What exactly are the motivations for making participatory work and what are the differences in the aesthetic criteria used in evaluating a participatory work as opposed to a finite gallery exhibition? By comparing a work produced for the gallery with a participatory project, we might attempt to explore this further.

The work of 1997 Turner Prize winner Gillian Wearing raises pertinent contemporary questions currently in the public domain about voyeurism, exploitation, representation and the media, but her work is unlikely to be considered participatory in relation to 'new genre public art'. The video work *Sacha and Mum* (1996) allows us to witness a series of acts which might be identified as an abusive mother-daughter relationship. In staging this scene the artist has engaged the participation of others, actors in this case. Wearing could be said to embrace the voyeuristic and exploitative tactics of the tabloid press and commercial TV journalism, if this work was read literally. We are supposedly unsure whether the characters are actors or the 'real thing'. In my opinion, the commodification of an abusive experience, reducing the identity of the two women to a reiteration of 'the battered' and 'the abuser' and the oscillation between laughter and crying, makes this piece powerfully disturbing but ultimately could be

seen to reinforce stereotypes of psychological and physical abuse. Perhaps the gallery context frames our response so that we can view Wearing's work intellectually as we do not consider it to be a real-life situation.

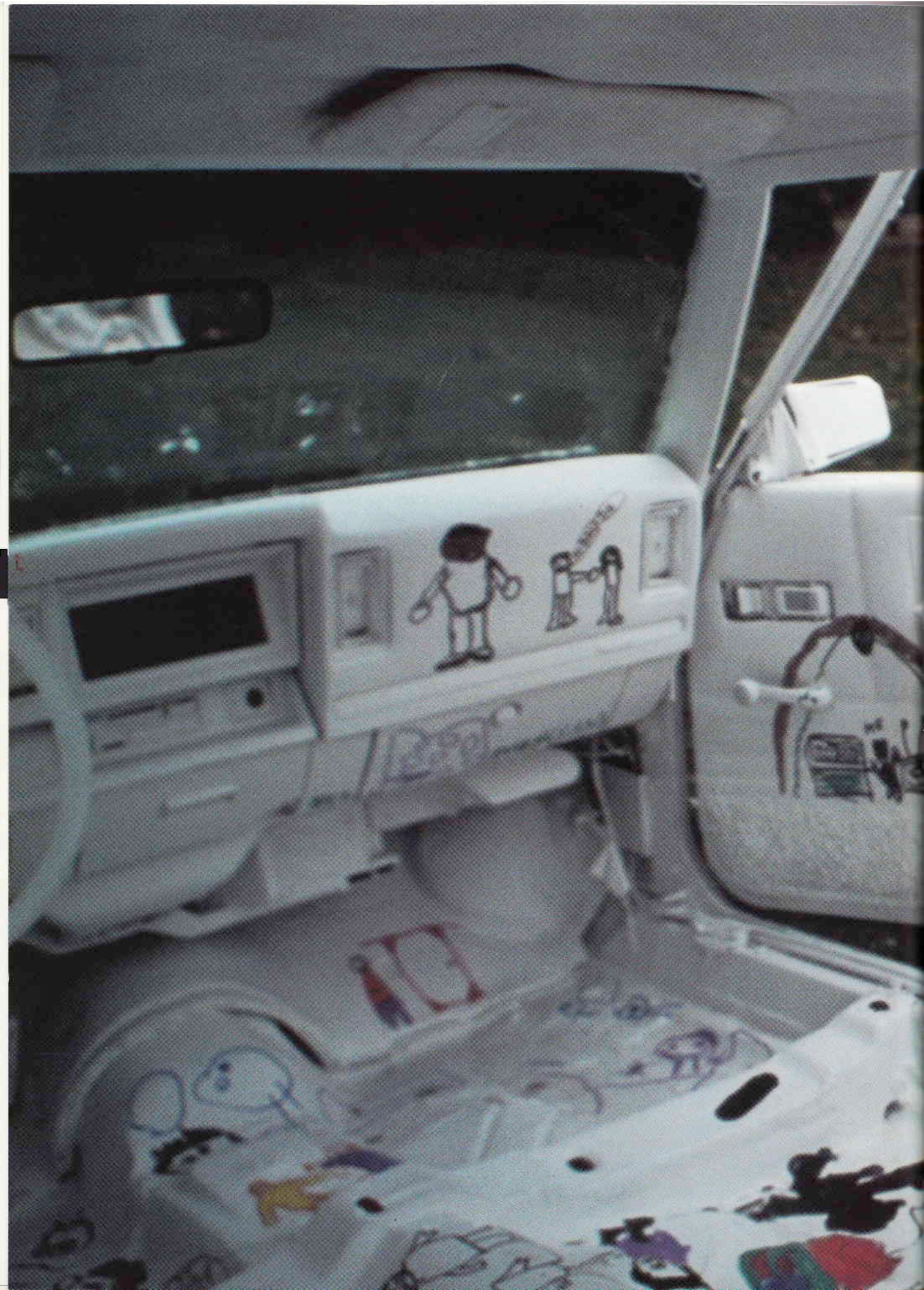
In comparison, considering the work of American artist Suzanne Lacy with victims of domestic violence, you could say that art is used here to heal the wounds of a social problem. Lacy gives voice and dignity to individuals who have been oppressed and silenced, enabling them to recognise and express their feelings about the world around them. Process is most important, but there is also an end product - a series of installations in wrecked cars, which are powerful and convincing because as viewers we act as witnesses to 'true confessions'. These works are not designed for an art public and viewing them in that manner could be seen as voyeuristic. The images produced by the children of these women have an authenticity and can be considered as 'legitimate' and 'genuine', compared to the staged emotions of Gillian Wearing's work, where it is supposedly unclear whether we are watching actors working to a script or a real-life drama.

In comparing these two projects, the discrepancies in judgement show that we apply different criteria according to context and motive, rather than applying formal detached criteria to an object in front of us. Further examples of participatory public projects reveal sensitive approaches to context.

— Overleaf: domestic violence project with Suzanne Lacy

The TV soap *Melrose Place* recently brought art to the lives of millions of US viewers live on screen. A Californian group of artists and activists, led by Mel Chin, succeeded in negotiating the placing of over 150 'gala products' onto the set of the TV show.¹⁵ This creative intervention into prime-time media space enabled the group to promote the AIDS debate and to develop serious discussion about art on mainstream TV through the script. They persuaded the programme makers to provide them with advance copies of the script, which eventually led to collaboration on a new character, the artist Samantha Riley, and a whole scene of the show set at the Los Angeles County Art Museum. In parallel, the group initiated a Website based on their invented character Eliza, using a *Melrose Place* fan as the front. The artists succeeded in placing their messages in a mainstream arena, collaborating with TV professionals in the process, although this attempt to hijack prime-time media space could never compete with the ongoing soap story.

In the UK, artist Anna Best initiated a participatory project that brought together previously 'invisible' communities by re-connecting them to their local histories. 'Pony Race' was conceived for the exhibition *Summer Collection* at South London Gallery, which ran from July to August 1997, for which ten artists were invited to make responses to the gallery's permanent collection. This is generally out of public view and includes works of local historical interest. Anna Best developed a participatory work inspired by a poster that she found, for a pony





I ride my
Bike
when
people fight



— Poster for *Pony Race*,
— Anna Best, 1997

race which took place 150 years previously in the local Burgess Park. She decided to invite local pony clubs and organisations from south east London to participate in a contemporary re-staging of the race for the camera. She created a pseudo-community event, in which mothers vied for position as their daughters fought it out on the track. The occasion possessed none of the pastiche of heritage culture, but rather was a contemporary reminder of a connection with history and place through community action. A video of the event along with documentation of the process became the gallery exhibit and all pony race participants were invited to the gallery and given the opportunity to order photos. It was suggested to the artist that she might re-stage this event in future

years or that she might organise other local events. The value of bringing communities together and the sense of occasion were by many people, whilst she also provided a conceptual art work for the gallery environment.

TEA (Those Environmental Artists) has produced a number of participatory public projects that aim to activate opinion and generate subjective difference. Perhaps their best-known work is *Other People's Shoes*, created in collaboration with The Impossible Theatre Company, which took place over 18 months from 1992 to 1994. In the project, members of the public were invited to become involved in all stages of shoe production, designing a prototype for a fantasy shoe, putting some of the shoes into production and setting up high street retail outlets in which to display the final results. The project involved hundreds of people through its different manifestations.¹⁶

This year, in a project initiated by *Blast Theory*, a performance company, a slick upbeat advert invited you to call an 0800 telephone number to register if you were interested in being kidnapped. The ad has been distributed as part of the Blipverts programme and has been seen by an estimated 3/4 million cinema-goers over the past year.¹⁷ This kind of project excited the public's imagination, highly relevant in the age of virtual fantasy, whilst also provided the audience with a challenge to participate if they dared. Rather than just providing 'sweeteners' or 'pacifiers', challenging art such as this provokes through its relevance to the times in which we live.

With participatory work, there is always a problem with endings. Once you have become intimately involved with a group of people, saying goodbye and moving on to the next project can

feel like letting them down. How many galleries and artists are prepared to make a commitment to a project over several years? It is always convenient to view projects as pilots and prototypes for new ways of working. For most galleries and artists, this challenge outweighs the long-term needs of individual participants, for whom the art project might provide a change from the everyday, a shift in perception or being. The hope is that involvement in decision-making or sharing experiences through art might have a long-term benefit beyond the project, but this is hard to quantify and difficult to sustain.

A participatory project should be one in which its participants direct the content and outcome. With the involvement of other bodies, however, such as galleries, funders and supporting organisations, as well as the attachment of an individual artist's name in some cases, there may be pressure for an end product and for the project never to fail nor dramatically change course. It could be considered, therefore, that the more galleries become involved in this area, with expectations of predetermined outcomes, time limits and fixed budgets, the more projects will be compromised and may shift from being public-led to stage managed. Risk and uncertainty may seem to go against institutional practice, but, as with other areas of contemporary art, the strength of these projects will lie in the willingness of the organisers and artists to take risks, to assert the right to fail and a determination to work without the peer group support of the commercial art world, with the satisfaction that a few individuals may have a life-enhancing experience.

Notes

1 Owen Kelly, *Community Art and the State*, Comedia, London, 1984

2 Eric Moody, "Curatorship in the Visual Arts: From Cause to Cure", *Developing the Visual Arts*, published conference report, City University, London, 1994

3 For more detailed accounts of individual projects see the recent publications Samantha Wilkinson (ed.), *Locus+* 1993-6, Locus+, Newcastle Upon Tyne, 1996; Andrea Phillips (ed.), *Out of Time: Hull Time Based Arts 1983 to 1998*, Hull Time Based Arts, 1998; Alison Raftery, *Open Lines*, London Arts Board, London, 1997; Jenni Walwin, *Low Tide*, Black Dog Publishing, London, 1997.

4 Stefan Gec, *Natural History*, 1995 organised by Locus+ at Pilgrim Fire Station, Newcastle Upon Tyne, see account in *Curating: The Contemporary Art Museum and Beyond*, Art and Design Profile, No.52, London 1997

5 See Rachel Whiteread, *House*, Phaidon Press, 1996

6 See account in Suzi Gablik, *The Reenchantment of Art*, Thames and Hudson, New York, 1991 and Virginia Maksymowicz, "Alternative Approaches to Public Art" in W.J.T. Mitchell (ed.), *Art and the Public Sphere*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1992.

7 See Anthony Gormley, *Oktagon/The Montreal Museum of Fine Arts*, 1993

8 Julian Stallabrass, "Artist Curators and the New British Art", *Curating: The Contemporary Art Museum and Beyond*, op. cit.

9 See Ivan Karp, Christine Mullen Kreamer and Steven D. Lavine (eds.), *Museums and Communities: The Politics of Public Culture*, Smithsonian, 1992.

10 W.J.T. Mitchell (ed.), op.cit.

11 *The Millennium Experience* publicity brochure, 1997

12 John Dewey, *The Later Works*, Vol.2., Carbondale, Illinois, 1984, p. 371

13 See *Mining the Museum*, exhibition catalogue, Museum of Contemporary Art/Maryland Historical Society, 1992, and Fred Wilson, "The Silent Museum", in Jean Fisher (ed.), *Global Visions: Towards a New Internationalism in the Visual Arts*, Kala Press in association with INIVA, London, 1994.

14 See Michael Brenson, Mary Jane Jacob & Eva M. Olson, *Culture in Action*, Bay Press, Seattle, 1994.

15 Part of a series of participatory art initiatives commissioned by MOCA, LA. This account is based upon a conference paper given by Constance Penley at Parallel Space, ICA, London on 5 July 1997. For further details see *Uncommon Sense*, exhibition catalogue, Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, 1997.

16 See interview with Susan Jones in *Public Art*, Art and Design Profile No. 46, 1997.

17 The Blipverts were commissioned, produced and toured by Chris Dorley Brown and Zbigniew Joroc as part of the Junction Multimedia programme, Cambridge.