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Strange Cargo:
the future
of *cultural*
participation

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The work of Strange Cargo over the last fifteen years has featured a range of public events and celebrations, from touring carnivals, heritage-themed performances, sculptural bonfires, skate park art, with cultural exchanges involving winter lanterns, publically displayed photographs from family photo albums, kinetic and soundscape art in public walkways, cast bronze handprints exhibited at the railway station, film and photography projects for children, urban space installations for young people, and an alternative guidebook to Folkestone, featuring many otherwise overlooked sites of everyday life identified by its inhabitants. It is 'art for everyone', event-driven, and social accessibility is its hallmark. On the face of it, at least for your average contemporary artist, this is a recipe for artistic suicide. However, Strange Cargo projects are never simply what they seem.¹ In this short essay I will be unpacking their unique approach to contemporary community.



Like the Back of my Hand, 2000 © Strange Cargo.

A Golden Age

The world of contemporary art is paradoxical – it comprises a billion dollar international art market, wrapped by successive layers of public culture, often in the form of underfunded institutions and small independent arts organizations. If there is one great myth that reigns supreme in the public cultural sector, it is that for a vibrant, creative and productive social culture to emerge, we need riches comparable to the art markets. Culture requires wealth. That 'wealth' has largely been the public subsidy that has been forthcoming in recent times of prosperity – sustaining many professional arts organizations, and without a doubt providing opportunities for innovation and development across the sector.

Throughout the years of New Labour, public investment in culture and the arts reached unprecedented levels. Christopher Frayling, then Chairman of Arts Council England (consistent funders of Strange Cargo's projects) famously called the Labour Government's first decade, '...a golden age for the arts in Britain'.² However, given the current complexion of economic forecasting for the next decade, we can only anticipate a radical deflation in cultural development. This is not simply a matter of the quantities of cash available, but a reversing of the favourable effects of past economies of scale – declining resources usually entails inflating bureaucratic procedures and administrative labour costs (and then of course heightened risk-aversion, lowering creative horizons on the part of commissioners and agents, and increasingly demoralized artists). This is a logical anticipation, but here I am going to point out a few ways in which the work of Strange Cargo points to another direction, and another way of thinking about cultural life...a culture that is not predicated on 'wealth'.²

Strange Cargo was established two years before New Labour's election victory in 1997. Artist Brigitte Orasinski (now artistic Director) joined the company that year, and to some extent Strange Cargo are symptomatic of this 'golden age' of cultural development. They have engineered large and colourful art projects and publically-funded festive and community events in and around Folkestone. They have extended the creative production of art, arts pedagogy, cultural event management and community engagement (local, regional and national) beyond anything that could have been witnessed before 1995.

The explosion of art in the public realm is one of the cultural legacies of New Labour, and whatever its checkered successes, organizations like Strange Cargo since the millennium year 2000 have developed genuinely new means of intervention into urban and social spaces, education, and the places where social community matters. They have also been symptomatic in the changing profile of the professional artist, developing an extraordinary range of cultural skills. The norm for the artistic community, even until the mid-1990s, was still the protracted romanticism of sub-cultural isolation and maverick creativity. New generation arts organizations like Strange Cargo quickly developed a range of capabilities, in collective production, collaborations and partnerships, project management, public consultancy, strategic pedagogy, social and community relations, giving them access to the broad field of social institutions outside of the rarified sector of fine arts.

While some may deride any direct engagement by artists in society as 'instrumental' (what we may define as the application of 'art formulas' to social or economic problems), since 1997 Strange Cargo remained interconnected with the contemporary art scene, working with and curating the work of over 1000 artists from their centre in Georges House Gallery. The area around the gallery has since become a 'creative quarter' in part inspired by the advocacy of Strange Cargo, now key stakeholders in the broader cultural regeneration of the area. As an organisation, Strange Cargo began as a celebratory arts company, but now more accurately thought about as 'participatory arts', where the critical-creative impulse in contemporary art takes the concern for public space common to the older model of public art, and proceeds with a need for direct engagement, previously the preserve of community art.

Strange Cargo raises what previously would have been a single-minded artistic idea, the product of the imagination of one artist, to the level of an organisation. The artistic idea becomes an organizing principle for a collaborative project, and so

where the multiplicity of culture and the diversity of the social environment can be adequately addressed. In an era when it is still true to say the expensive public commissions are awarded to big-name artists for adding a single privileged art object to a civic space (rationalized by policy-makers as a key ingredient of a 'visitor economy' strategy), Strange Cargo are not concerned so much with adding things, but unearthing or reconstructing. They must be understood in terms of the cultural production of 'community'. We tend to think of community as a social entity; community art to one side – for Strange Cargo, community is a cultural experience, wrought through active cultural participation.



Tour de France, 2007 © Strange Cargo.

Community-based public culture

What is left of 'community'? Or of the notional 'bonds' that enable individual people to develop something more than a role in the economic, in self-interested advancement, or endless consumption? Who are we, and why are we living this way? In theoretical terms – how can culture be formative for social reproduction and social relations in a time when the very concept of a single coherent society is coming apart? What resources do contemporary artists have or can develop? Folkestone has registered the impact of the last decade of social change – immigration, radically changing values, shifting cultural reference points, new allegiances, fading aspirations, neo-liberal globalised patterns of labour, changing family life. Why does walking down the street feel so different these days?

This short essay is not a summary of Strange Cargo's work – its purpose is rather to 'frame' their work in the context of current cultural policy questions on the rationale for supporting public participatory arts organizations. And what I have to say will be largely theoretical (understanding the structure of cultural production in this context) and is relevant to how Strange Cargo is currently developing, not just what they

have done in the last fifteen years. We are in era of cultural decline, where there are more important things to worry about than art. My interest in Strange Cargo is that they worry about more than art.

With some irony, the New Labour era of massive public funding for culture was also the era of neo-liberal individualism, dispersed and instrumentalised patterns of labour, and the decline of community and family life. Quite what will come next, with a heightening of economic instrumentalism as well as decline in public culture, is a fraught question. And yet the polemical side to this essay will argue that Strange Cargo has offered some measure of hope, in what looks like a dull future for cultural innovation. Of course, all organizations have operating costs and require a certain level of revenue under their breakeven threshold simply in order to function. My point in raising the question of 'wealth' is that Strange Cargo's work over the last decade provokes some central questions on the problem of cultural production in an age of relative scarcity, and the way we understand 'value' in a cultural context. The discourse of 'cultural decline' (simply put – decreased funding) is futile; we need a discourse of public hope, where significant cultural production is possible without massive financial investment.

Strange Cargo have developed a multi-faceted type of participatory art practice – that often operates through patterns of life, events and community activity that already exist, and is part of the fabric of the social everyday. They set up projects that are not dominated by the professional artist or an abstract agenda foreign to the embedded concerned of that locale. They work with individuals, schools, local authority cultural directorates, events, public events organizers, often with hundreds of participants, and sometimes more. 'Participation' is a central trend in contemporary art, largely where the viewer is involved in the production, circulation or dissemination of the artwork. Participation involves a range of objectives – but mostly features installation art, where the 'work of art' (even if that work is a performance) retains both an aesthetic identity, firmly branded with the identity of the artist. The art of participation (indeed all art) is effective to the degree it creates its own space of aesthetic deliberation, bracketed from the world around it, forming an alternate or cognate sphere of thought and experience (which in turn forms a part of the creative economy that is 'the artworld').

Strange Cargo's projects often work in the opposite direction. They begin for the most part with the event of social engagement – the situation, the partnership, the problem, the policy concern, the event. The creative process of production is constructed in and through the social engagement with concrete cultural circumstances. Traditional community art, for sure, emerges from the interactions of a social constituency, mediated through art. However, this is not what Strange Cargo do – the objective is not the consolidation or development of an existing order of social relations or of social skills. Art does not mediate social objectives – the objectives are community culture, are public and cultural. They maintain a measure of credibility in the artworld economy, but we find another kind of economy emerging here, a community-based economy of public culture.

The term 'public culture' signifies little: the term 'public' is so common as to be only meaningful when pitted against the 'private', and not the 'personal private' so much as the interests of 'the corporate'. The fate of community, society, everything we think we are, or were, is bound up with the fate of the 'public', and what stands as *public culture*. Public culture is a common language on social life and a shared sensibility through which collective self-determination is formed in a particular location. The public is a cultural sphere that mediates the struggle for social

resources, generates the construction of social identities, allows for individual self-transformation, and is the platform through which collective rights and responsibilities are forged. Between cultural and urban public policy spheres the 'public' is still, however, a fatally ambivalent concept. And approaching an era in which anything 'public' is regarded as a luxury, or at least supra-economic and hence always open to 'cutting back', we need to demonstrate the necessity of the public to the very formation of social community.

Across the Field of Art

I will make one main point about Strange Cargo, which would be part of a broader argument on their importance for a developing public culture (and their embedded local presence in Folkestone is part of that). My main point about public culture itself is that it is only effective through collective participation, and the conditions of participation lie through cultural capital. I use the term 'cultural capital' (coined by French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu) in part as it is now a familiar term, if not fully explored in art contexts.³ Identifying culture as a form of 'capital' at once admits that culture is inseparable from the economy and the commerce of consumer society, but also that culture is *not* reducible to monetary value (as capital takes many non-monetary forms). Nor is cultural capital reducible to other forms of capital, such as 'social' capital (the assets you possess that enable social mobility, your education, qualifications, connections, membership of various institutions, and so on). The significant point about 'cultural capital' historically in Britain (which of course Bourdieu was not concerned with) is that cultural capital is intimately interconnected with economic and social capital: culture (which includes education) has always been a sociopolitical gateway. This is where the question of public culture connects with the work of Strange Cargo – their community participation is invested in the creation of cultural capital.

'Culture' for Strange Cargo – as can be perceived in their approach to artistic commissions – is not just about shared norms and values, or a vehicle of social development, or of fine art practice. It is a form of power, whose activity is embodied in institutionalized life. It is our education system, workplace, community, its streets and housing and distribution of social resources, and the historical emergence of all of these. Culture is everyday life and starts with the locale, and therefore never just an art project. The 'power' here is what I would call the 'deep political' – the spectrum of fundamental capabilities that empower a person in any given social space, which involves articulating an identity, possessing a voice, and a role in shaping their environment (if only that means shaping their own cognitive-aesthetic relation to that environment). Strange Cargo's projects therefore often involve the basic mediation and mobilization of literacy, movement and social interconnections in public space, intra-communal communication, creative decision-making and role-taking in collective events. Their work revolves around this deep political spectrum of social capabilities, which, in a particular 'public' configuration can turn into cultural capital.

For Bourdieu, cultural capital has three major dimensions – the embodied, the objectified and the institutionalized. An individual develops his or her 'embodied' capital (knowledge, aesthetic sensibility, language and capacity for discrimination, and so on), acquires the 'objective' or material extensions of culture (whether books, CDs, or works of art, even types of clothes) and that capital is 'institutionalized' in the sense of both being registered by social institutions (giving you 'qualifications' or credentials) or other mechanisms of identity and allegiance that admit you to the expanse of institutional life (whether the art world, associations and clubs, or

university circles, and so on).

Obtaining the optimum level of cultural capital would of course entail possessing the full powers afforded to the ideal 'citizen' by a democratic society. Yet Bourdieu has to grapple with a contradiction, whereby it is that the economy of monopoly capitalism that underpins democratic societies in the West that is active in *preventing* most of its citizens from becoming actors in the public sphere. The mechanisms by which capital is distributed and accumulated prevent the majority from playing a role in the discourses and institutions that shape their socio-urban environment. They are prevented, as the route to cultural capital is through economic and then social forms of capital. From your parents to your school, you can find yourself facing a lifetime of capital poverty, sealed at age five.



People's guide book to Folkestone, 2011 © Strange Cargo.

The communist dream of radical redistribution and equalitarian State management of capital is, of course, 'logical', but not much of a practical option. We need more contingent, place-specific, individual-focused and pragmatic forms of capital development – forms of capital development that don't maintain universal pretensions to change the world, but do address structural conditions in specific locations of our present consumer society. What is needed is somehow of subverting the intractable inaccessibility of the economic and social for most ordinary people: we need a way of being able to participate in the public sphere without the normal entrance requirements. We need an alternative way of understanding public participation through the *cultural*.

Strange Cargo have gradually made their way through the Girl Guides, Mencap, an Alzheimer's centre, a traditional fete, parades at the beachfront. It all seems excruciatingly provincial stuff, yet forms a concerted attempt to inhabit the rhetoric of community and the everyday social. Each time, the creative approach to these places involves a reflective rehearsal of the lost, missing or vivified forms of community discourse – roles and positions, conviviality, camaraderie, group

empowerment, which is why at times it seems nostalgic. Strange Cargo motivates everyone to be involved in cultural activities they know only too well, but at the same time only 'know' like some lost legend or something their grandparents used to do. As artists, Strange Cargo aim to inhabit the disenfranchised place of those without a cultural language, through imaginative projection develop processes that are at once immediately attractive, and then absorbing, inspiring a commitment. A commitment to culture is analogous to a political commitment in so many ways. It involves an application of the self towards developing a capacity for rhetoric (self expression) and dialogue (engagement with others undergoing the same process).

'Practice' for Bourdieu is an important concept – it concerns the individual capability to mobilize their interests from resources already possessed, and to forge a sense of trajectory through a social 'field'. As an equation, he defines it like this:

[habitus/capital] + Field = Practice.⁴ First, 'capital' is not just something earned, but co-dependent on the environment that you are part of (the 'habitus'). It is like the determining effect of our upbringing or home life, where our very sensibility or perceptual grasp of the social world is so decisively formed. However, it is not the irrevocable environment of upbringing – for habitus is co-dependent on capital, which in turn only functions within a 'field'. Logically, the relation between capital and field have a determining effect on what makes for 'habitus'. Strange Cargo's long-term commitments to its locale, is a habitus-forming commitment: their commitment to the half-dead rhetoric of community is a means by which everyone is reminded that habitus is socially constructed and not inevitable. Creative projects, self-generative and collaborative (whose terms of engagement are open and free of rarified art world lingo), rehearse 'habitus', and as I indicated above, involve the deep political spectrum of social capabilities, which, in a particular 'public' configuration can turn into cultural capital. This is the potential for this kind of community-based creative action – to construct its own provisional cultural embodiment, objectification and institutionalization, where the collective can do what lone individuals have simply missed out on.

The 'field' for Bourdieu is the spectrum of institutional life, which can be a social network or expanse of social activity like an art world or university system. The world of school, university, and work are co-extensive, in a way economic, social and cultural capital appear to be co-extensive. The individual's capital, however, is entirely relative to that field, and is dynamic, so must be actively developed. Class ideology will tell you that it's all largely fixed up, and don't bother trying too hard to change your lot in life. It's not true: individuals build capital by working the field, finding a trajectory through it, trading and bargaining with their capital.

A third important observation is that 'practice' may well centre around individual determination, but socioeconomic life is not simply the matching of aspiration with attainment in a situation created by rationale choice (doing well at school, making the right career choices). It is a context-dependent activity – a matter of inhabiting institutionalized networks reflexively, participating in the economies of capital building, in which individuals together determine what it is that 'counts' as capital.

My excursus on Bourdieu is my way of underlining the way Strange Cargo is concerned about more than just 'artistic' engagement, but penetrates everyday life and the world of ordinary people in significant ways. Strange Cargo are not class-based, or a form of 'poverty activism'. They are place-based, involve everyone, and are concerned with the fate of localities, towns, regions, and the deep meaning of social existence. They are not portentous – their work can involve the lightness, frivolity and carnival mayhem of popular culture. But in their collaborative projects I

find a significant cognitive dimension – re-thinking the role of cultural participation in context of hopelessness. The hopelessness is not a reflection of concrete social conditions, but is a contemporary ideology, where the choices offered to ordinary people are the participation in the building of economic capital, then social capital proportionate to that attainment, then the acquisition of cultural capital as a symbolic mediation of capital achievements. Or else you live a culturally devoid existence, exempt from any role in determining the nature of the environment you live in. Taking Bourdieu’s way of understanding the social field of practice and the nature of capital, however, we can understand this otherwise – as a route for changing the nature of interactions in the field. And reconfiguring the acquisition of cultural capital can be a way of subverting the established routes to the economic and social. This, in the political age we are in, can only be imagined community-by-community, city by city.



Other People's Photos, 2008 © Strange Cargo.

A politics of hope

The type of society that Bourdieu depicts (based on France in the 1960s), is of course rigid, and so embedded with power and interests that his concept of change is limited. Consider Britain in the present day – the structural relation between class, economic and social capital is pulling apart. Culture, in an age of declining State sponsorship, will fade in its symbolic power for consolidating the legitimacy of the holders of economic and social capital – that level of symbolic power is always a luxury, and ultimately unnecessary. The situation is becoming fluid, and paradoxically more open to change.

Here is where I insert the otherwise suspicious term ‘the politics of hope’: the

dissolution of fixed structures, and with it the symbolic economy of cultural provision, or the inveterate social regulation of political meanings, is something that only comes around once a generation. Where culture was a series of public 'services', defined as 'art for audiences' (albeit diverse ones), requiring expensive facilities, bureaucracy, government approval, all desperately involved in reparation work on the social damage wrought by neoliberal labour patterns, it is time to find another understanding of cultural production. This is not motivated by abstract political theory, but the work of artists and producers themselves – real and already functioning.

It is in Strange Cargo I find one such model – they are of course small, but having just emerged from a decade of a State-sponsored billion-pound national-scale cultural investment, we can perhaps assert that size in itself is not a criterion of credibility. Strange Cargo find their sense of public value in the locale, micro-engagements, and generic acts of community culture, where few barriers to access exist. They find their value in their ability to take a generic, popular cultural ritual – a local school end of term event – and make it matter, make that event a site of creative action.

Their projects are various and diverse. To mention a random few from 2008: In response to the exclusion and 'dispersal orders' on young people in public space across the region, the Bench project (called *Pimp my Bench*) asked groups of under-18s to redesign a traditional park bench, making its object-function spatially 'alive'. The resulting benches became legitimate sites for music, meetings, relaxing. A series of short films, workshops and discussions addressed the complex of issues around youth identity, where policing and surveillance are emphatic conditions of social experience. The field of cultural production, as Bourdieu once described it, is a space through which Strange Cargo takes the otherwise uninitiated, unqualified and otherwise uninterested. Through a provisional realm of cultural interaction, dynamics of collaboration are formed, meanings constructed, and social issues worked out, providing provisional conditions for the development of capital. Similarly their education-based ventures, involving reflective devices like film and photography, introduce young people to the politics of the public sphere, of constructing an identity, finding a voice, and a position from which to speak. The work is formative and basic, but fundamentals are what we are dealing with.

The projects of Strange Cargo are not simply about 'impact' on participants, but the long-term influence and presence of such a cultural capability in the town. In another project, a commissioned team gathered hundreds of personal photographs, each representing life in every street in Folkestone. Converted into metal signs, the photos were re-embedded in their street – along with two digital maps and an image archive of 1600 stories and photographs displayed on screens in the shopping centre. The archive remains a resource; different levels of temporality were opened up at street level – present past and past-present; ownership and property were visibly renegotiated in a space where the history of people was once again the governing force in the symbolic order of everyday life.

An earlier project – for the opening ceremony of the 2005 Canterbury Festival – saw Strange Cargo ritually destroying six tonnes of Kentish Apples in protest over EU subsidy cuts. Called *Fallen Fruit*, the event was a collaboration with composer Orlando Gough and choirmaster Jeremy Avis, who directing 300 local singers, percussionists, and a contemporary choir called The Shout, provided a vocal accompaniment to an apple crusher. The crusher was a sculpture by Andrew Baldwin, which churned tonnes of the fruit, a symbolic performance of the crushing

and destruction of thousands of fruit trees deemed 'not viable' in the new EU economy. The performance was not an exercise in 'Euroscepticism' as such. Beyond the false dichotomies continually driven through public discourse by the all-powerful media, this was an emotive enactment of the loss of a part of the regional economy, which emerging from an historic interaction with nature, was also a loss of something communal and hence social. Where once, even a few decades ago, this would have seemed part of the inherent 'progress' of capital, and if of capital then of unquestioned benefit to all. This is no longer the case.



Fallen Fruit, 2005 © Strange Cargo.

The field of cultural production (as Bourdieu once described it) is here extended into the urban and social community – and in this hinterland, away from the billion dollar art markets, a space is created through which Strange Cargo takes the otherwise uninitiated, unqualified and otherwise uninterested. The capital here, however, is not the privileged capital of the social mainstream, but a provisional economy, a fledgling community-based economy of public culture. It is not the moral economy of neoliberal capital – self-interested advancement. It is a commitment to discovering what public means, or should mean.

The work of Strange Cargo suggests to me that the conditions of public culture unavailable in our current social economy can be provisionally constructed through community-grounded art projects, engaging with the very processes of dissolution, confusion and absent meaning. This is not some vain attempt at social solidarity,

but a developing means of creating the conditions of literacy, and negotiating the fact of cultural capital. It develops aptitudes for the 'deep political', communal awareness of the embeddedness of the everyday in the urban environs. This is not an art based on political doctrines, but it does require political imagination, to enable an art project to serve as the site and frame for the development of language, social sensibility. Political imagination does not require wealth – human experience, commitment, interaction and participation can assume public formation for surprisingly little. It only requires space and the political will to use the materials and media all around us. At the end of an age of extraordinary over-production – material for communal creativity is everywhere.

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