



UEL Research & Knowledge Exchange Conference 2013

Call for Abstracts

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| Name & Title of Presenter: | Dr. Luis C. Sotelo |
| School: | ADI |
| Co investigators: | |
| Title of Abstract: | THE CLEANERS' VOICE |
| Key Theme/ Key words: | Participatory Art and Performance |

Abstract (No more than 400 words):

I propose to discuss a community art project of mine in which I collaborated with a number of cleaning staff from UEL, a songwriter, members of the union, and other lecturers campaigning for the implementation of the London Living Wage.

The Cleaners Voice is a project in which UEL cleaning staff were invited to form a 'complaints choir' so as to present to the wider community some of their most pressing and personal complaints against the contractor they were working for at the time (Spring 2011). The 'complaints choir' is a community-based performance method by which participants compose a song and they perform it later in the context of a public event.

The video documenting that process was uploaded to youtube, and became a piece of activist work in its own right. Within hours of its release, it had received more than hundred and fifty views, and the University Management was made aware of the increased pressure for the cleaning staff to be granted better working conditions. This resulted in a number of measures benefiting the cleaners. The project was a collaborative effort in which the political and the artistic came together to effect change.

In this presentation I use The Cleaners' Voice as a case study to discuss two key questions about participatory, collaborative, socially engaged performance.

First, how does such a project accommodate different and at times contradictory interests: the artistic interest on one side, and the work-related, real life complaints of the cleaners on the other side; the interest of the union, and the interest of the London Living Wage campaigners?

Second, I explore the question about the role of the video documentation of the process as a tool of activism. In this case, the dissemination of the video clip on youtube is the main outcome of the project in terms of its effects and socio-political and cultural resonance. Interestingly, the uses and effects of this clip escape the control of the artist, those reinforcing his role as a facilitator.