a·n

Research Paper

Social Art Summit

A collection of reflections on Social Art Network's two-day event in Sheffield, November 2018, convening over 300 practitioners for an artist-led review of socially engaged practices.

a-n.co.uk

Social Art Summit

A collection of reflections on a two-day
event in Sheffield, November 2018.

The Social Art Summit took place in Sheffield, 1-2 November 2018, convening over 300 practitioners and wider audiences for an artist-led review of socially engaged practice. It was organised by Social Art Network, co-founded by Eelyn Lee and R.M. Sánchez-Camus (Marcelo) in 2016 as 'a UK based community of artists committed to building agency for the field of social art practice with four goals: creating a platform to showcase and discuss current work, expanding critical and reflective dialogue around the work, developing a national network of artists to strengthen peer support and artists' development, and by doing this building a database of current, past and historic projects.' The Social Art Summit was co-convened by Eelyn and Marcelo with guest-convener Ian Nesbitt.

As a supporting partner of the event a-n The Artists Information Company has commissioned this publication to disseminate ideas and content from the Summit. Dr Cara Courage, Head of Tate Exchange, was invited to contribute a central essay; and a range of short contributions from participants, reflecting on specific themes and issues arising, were selected from an open call.

Published in April 2019 to coincide with Social Art Assembly, a follow-on event at Tate Exchange reflecting on the Social Art Summit and exploring where Social Art Network can go from here.

Find out more:

Social Art Summit: www.socialartsummit.com
Social Art Network: www.socialartsummit.com/social-art-network
Social Art Network Facebook: www.facebook.com/socialartnetwork

Contents

Archiving the practice 22

Henry Mulhall responds to Sophie Hope's Lab on archiving socially engaged practice. While some socially engaged practitioners resist archiving due to power dynamics that contribute to their construction, we also need archives to proliferate and support socially engaged practice. Mulhall advocates a performative approach that intends to mediate these positions. Rather than resisting archives he suggests a shift in the way people learn to make and use them.

What's your problem? 24

Raksha Patel discusses Harold Offeh's Lab 'What's your problem?: Art, diversity and inclusion in galleries' and how the issues and themes relate to her own experiences.

The shit in the phonebox 26

Laurie Cummins reflects on Anna Francis and Rebecca Davies' Lab 'Representing the change: Rules of engagement' which confronted and exposed the challenges of working in social contexts.

Presenting two sides of a social arts project 29

Anna Francis, who co-presented the Lab 'Representing the change: Rules of engagement', discusses why there is a need to be honest about the challenges for artists and the importance of sharing the full picture.

NOTHING MEANS ANYTHING
EVERYTHING IS FUCKED
AND THERE IS NO POINT
TRYING TO CHANGE IT

EVERYTHING MEANS SOMETHING
ALL IS NOT LOST
AND THE POINT IS
KEEP TRYING TO CHANGE IT

The elephant in the room

Dr Cara Courage, Head of Tate Exchange, reflects on an artist-led and collectively owned event, seeing it as social practice in its own right and seeking to find commonality amongst the disparate experiences.

Two elephants in the room. The one elephant, optimism, the belief in self and in action to change things. The other elephant, pessimism, the feeling of being ineffective, brow-beaten. The two elephants sit opposite each other. The viewer plays a continuous game of tennis with their gaze from one to the other, with their being from one to the other. The dual, ambivalent nature of the social practice artist. We are faced with this ambivalence all the time in the work that we do. We see this in the people we work with, the places that we work in. Unlike the elephant in the room of the adage, we talked about our elephants at the Summit.

From the first invitation to attend the summit – the placard postcard with its 'to challenge the politics of isolation we need tactics for togetherness' message – the summit was a time and place to talk about the lived condition of being a socially engaged artist. The buzz in the room, of hellos of long-distance collaborators meeting again, the chatter of people united by a common interest, was a testament itself for the need for this time and place for conversation and reflection. What happens 'out there', in the places we do our work, happens in a hyperreal time where we have a 360-degree view at all times and it comes at us in all direction real quick. The Summit then was a time to ground, to stop and think, to development though dialogue with others.

Summit as social practice

From the opening address, I began to see the Summit as a social practice project in its own right. Convened by artists but with authorial agency given over and shared amongst the group, here we all were joined in a common endeavour, talking things through, questioning, doing, taking thoughts into action.

In their opening address, Eelyn Lee and R.M. Sánchez-Camus (Marcelo) stated their clear intent that the Summit was to be artist-led – the format of the discussion over the course of the two days bore this out – and that we were all engaged in a collective action. As Sánchez-Camus stated, 'we have opened the door to all in the room', we all owned this Summit. The intent behind the Summit was to offer the purview of an artform that is concerned with others before itself, yet to also give voice to artists and practitioners where other similar gatherings before us may have led with an institutional voice. The Summit was the outcome of seeking a way to come together as a practice that was more than a conference, an action of, as Lee proposed, 'creating a DIY approach to create our own platform.'

Each of our journeys to the Summit were bespoke to us – the trajectory through practice and the cars, trains, buses and bikes that brought us here from all corners of the UK and from overseas. We each had a completely unique journey through

the Summit too with options of fifty-one sessions over two days (not counting the informal sessions that we had walking and talking between venues). Could we find a commonality amongst this disparate experience?

To begin to answer this, and extending the analogy of the Summit as social practice further, I turn to John Reardon's *Five Pillars*, offered to us at the 'Social Practice in Higher Education' session. The *Five Pillars* are: material, context, duration, distribution, public(s) and process. Each fold into each other, and through our personal journeys through the Summit, these concerns folded into our conversations and questions.

Our material condition: what is it that facilitates the kind of practice we want to be doing? What do we need to do to attain that? What is the known and the unknown of this? What questions are we asking of the material context of our work? Context: where do we work? What effect does context have on what we do? This questioning opens up to a matter of belonging: how we all belong in the world and how this belonging, this sense of mattering too, might bring about change. Where we are then moves on to how long we are there: duration. Does it matter if our work is temporary or permanent, if its legacy is forever an active, live one? What does 'permanent' mean anyway? What needs to happen to make permanent happen? How long is temporary? If temporary moves from place to place, it is temporary or durational? What is temporary made of, what is its material condition? Distribution: how do people encounter work? Are people viewers, participants, co-producers, sole authors? What are the qualities of these various modes of encounter, and what impact do they each variously and differently have? How do we document and present work that has already taken place? How do we share what has happened? Lastly – but

certainly not least – where and who are the public of our work? Are they a clearly defined group, by interest, place, organisation? Are they individuals or a sum of individuals in the moment? Are they part of the working process or its audience at the end? What do they bring into this encounter? How?

The *Five Pillars* gives a structure for issues that are live for us on a continual, ever-evolving and time and place-specific context – what we might think on them at one point and place in time may be different to another. We might have hard and fast rules of practice that we never break, we might have others that are malleable and contingent on where we are, who has funded us, how much time we have, or how we wake up that morning. The huge span of concern of the *Five Pillars* was the stuff of our ever-evolving conversations, had in our sessions, over coffee and lunch, had in the spaces in-between during our peripatetic traversing of the Summit and Sheffield.

The condition of our site

We of course discussed the condition of the site in which we work. The wonderfully poetic and provocative keynote from Rasheedah Phillips, in the Black Quantum Futurism that opened Friday's proceedings, gave us a bold statement – we take the future for granted, but where does social practice sit in relation to this, to change the now and to influence the future? Temporality is a site of our work as much as the spatial and the two are symbiotic. If we accept the proposition that we take the future for granted, this means the spatial is privileged over the temporal – how do we change this site condition? If we don't accept this proposition though, we are still left with a vital question – is what we do enough to change the future and does what we do work?

Our site is also the social, economic, political and environmental context in which we work, a holistic, interwoven ecology. This demands of us rigorous, complex work and it is a tough and relentless site condition to operate in. As one put it, this is 'the nightmare of the situation', met with sympathetic nods of agreement in the room when said (during Harold Offeh's 'What's your problem?'). Questions of institutional, infrastructural, financial internalised and physical barriers to us doing the work and working with collective or individual others, were live in the room and the urgency of countering this – 'when the world is about to end, what do we do?' said one. More knowing nods of agreement.

The conditions of ourselves

The 'nightmare of the situation' is draining. It can be our muse, our grist to the mill, the fire in our belly. But it can take its toll. This is where the consideration of ourselves as our site comes into consideration.

We spoke of dismantling the perpetuation of the sole authorial (authoritarian?) artist, and as Anna Francis, in the 'Representing the change' session showed, we are the community, we are the people. However, perhaps as was to be expected from a gathering of a practice, a language use crept in of an 'us and them', us the artists, them the other of the institution, the gallery, the funders, the politicians, the community. The Summit was born from a need to join as one, to talk about the particularities of our practice amongst ourselves – we became an 'us' positioned as separate or different to 'them.' It makes a pragmatic sense. Yet of course, and we know this, there is no 'other.' We are part of the communities in which we work, whether we join them for a day or are a resident next-door neighbour. This work is not about bringing people into our orbit but entering into mutual dialogue and finding out about each other.

What was loud and clear through the Summit was the personal responsibility we all feel in the work that we do. But there was also a pragmatism: how much is this responsibility internalised and does this help or hinder us? What is our position and role as artist in social practice? Here the Summit came into its own – a place to talk and walk (and a nod here to Sally Labern's 'Walking Lab' and its post-walk discussion) self-care and make the connections through and then out of the Summit to peer and regional network forming.

If I am left with one memory from the Summit, it is of 'sense of place.' We found a place, our place. We found our place as colleagues, with our heritage, we became each other's neighbours in the moment of Sheffield and continuing as we reach forward. We continued a conversation started with the Dadaists, the Situationists, the Avant-Garde, and carried on by community artists and public artists.

Harold Offeh asked us, 'what it is we want?', the group extended this with 'what is it we need?' The answers to this were as numerous as the people in the room, but common cause was articulated in the need to advocate for social practice with funders and institutions, a feeling our practice is not either recognised enough by most or not understood, and that the current interest in social practice is an opportunity to speak out about how we want the future of the sector to be. Powerfully, we also spoke of us being our own leaders, and as a collective, having the agency to be the agents of this change. Sophie Hope's 'Archiving the practice' then functioned as a timely reminder of the long heritage on which we draw, the shoulders we stand on today. But the session also challenged the idea of a linear and authored history instead locating our knowledge in the collective and in the cultural. We are the living archive, a praxis of embodied, tacit and active knowledges. It is

both our collective responsibility and the work of the Summit going forward to be the connector of the rhizomes of this praxis knowledge: of our intersectional selves, across practice, across geography and of the intra space we operate in with those sectors in the arts and society that we intersect with.

Dr Cara Courage is Head of Tate Exchange, Tate's platform for socially engaged and participative art, and is a social practice researcher, curator and practitioner.

New ways of seeing, making and telling

Elsa James, whose Lab at the Summit addressed barriers to participation and involvement in the arts for BAME communities, provides further insight into the thinking behind and outcomes of the session.

Talking about race, inequality, visibility, representation and 'blackness' in Britain is an impassioned discussion I have been having since – well since as far back as I can remember! I can recall countless upsetting stories that I overheard as a child of my Windrush generation parents discussing with my aunts and uncles about the blatant everyday racism and unfairness they would encounter. Later I would encounter institutional racism with my school years spanning the 1970s through to the mid-1980s. A tragic consequence of my childhood in 1970's Britain, was that my sisters and I played 'Let's be white girls' to escape from our realities. These discussions haven't stopped and I continue to have them on a regular basis with trusted friends and family.

Being invited to devise a two-hour lab to create a framework for dialogue that reflects my practice at the Social Art Summit was an opportunity to have these important issues discussed in a public forum, where I can share this context with others. I took the Creative Case for Diversity – Arts Council England's 'blueprint' and strategic approach to diversity for all those working in arts and culture in Britain – as a key point of departure, to examine how we can genuinely address barriers to participation and involvement in the arts for black, Asian and minority ethnic communities.

I set about devising a lab thinking about the space as a 'whole' experience through the use of provocation, transparency, perception, territory, power and privilege. The space consisted of a composite of quotes taken from the three Creative Case for Diversity Data Reports, quotes from key figures who have contributed to its advocacy, alongside an assemblage of images displayed on protest-style placards. I opened the lab with a 'performative' introduction with my guest artist contributor, Priya Mistry aka Tropical Awkward Bastard. Delegates were then invited to anonymously comment on three questions in two voting-booth-style areas that I positioned on opposite sides of the space. If you identified as 'black, Asian or minority ethnic' you were asked to make your comments on one side of the space, and if you did not, on the other. All the completed comments were added to the gallery wall.

At the first opportunity, two attacking questions quickly launched into the filled space of 50 plus listening delegates. A white male raised his concerns regarding the grammar of the three questions. I paused and apologetically pointed out that I am dyslexic. I began to feel tense and worried where this was going. He launched his second question – why was he needed to be segregated to make his comments? Could this perhaps have been the first time he was made to think about and be judged on his 'white identity'? My point was made. But then came a counter-attack from a number of other delegates. He was from this point on, the visible token white privileged older middle-class male. Things got hotter, so we took a break.

We resumed by moving into smaller groups with meaningful exchanges and discussion arising from the questions and comments.

'New ways of seeing, making and telling' does not end here. With 145 individual comments collected and time needed to reflect on the white male response, I am processing what framework it could become so that I can share and continue an evolved dialogue at the Social Art Assembly day taking place at Tate Exchange in April 2019.

Elsa James is an artist, producer and creative activist based in Southend-on-Sea, Essex.

A brief reflection on the importance of safety in groups

Mary Stephanou discusses her experience of the 'New ways of seeing, making and telling' Lab. Focused on the safety and ethical implications of practice, she addresses the fine line between feeling uncomfortable as a participant as a method of learning and the point where it becomes dangerous and unsafe (for artists as well as participants).

Content warning: this text touches on themes of marginalization, misogynoir and racism.

Please note: My reflections, feelings and thoughts are subjective and do not intend to represent the people who facilitated or attended the workshop. I have used acronyms and terms that group people together and hope that the reader will do further research using the hyperlinks as starting points, and not assume that I am describing diverse and nuanced identities as monolithic groups. For the facilitators detailed outline of the workshop mentioned below, please first read their blog post.

Spontaneously, we stood on chairs in the café of Site Gallery and bellowed: *"I want a dyke for president..."* People crowded around in curiosity and filmed us in action. We were a small group of white, black and brown women, queer womxn, queer people of colour (QPOC), and gender non-conforming (GNC) folks. We had left halfway through a workshop entitled: 'New ways of seeing, telling and making: Addressing barriers to participation for BAME communities', after an incident that breached the Social Art Summit's Safer Spaces Policy.

An older white man had interrupted the two BAME, female facilitators whilst they were talking, to aggressively express that he felt that the activity didn't include him. Next he demanded to know why the group was split by race to vote at the booths. The provocation to feel what it might be like to be BAME in the arts was blatant.

However, the man's unequivocal anger and white, male privilege, demanded the space, plus the emotional labour of the BAME female facilitators, pushing the invisible boundary from uncomfortable, to unsafe.

The tipping point was when one facilitator started to apologize to the man shouting at her. I wondered whether she was attempting to soothe the man who could become violent. I wondered whether she was beginning to internalize his projections of shame. Both facilitators managed the situation professionally and with empathy.

On black women and emotional labour Amari Gaiter writes:

"We are not tools for your learning, but instead individuals with feelings and emotions. Recognize the emotional labor you ask from us, and attempt to take some of the burden for yourself... Think about the impact your words can have on those in our community before you speak".

The workshop highlighted the racism (and sexism) that exists systematically and institutionally. Groups are powerful, and can act as microcosms of wider society, hence being capable of amplifying and reinforcing oppression as well as challenging it. My ethical concern is that if we consider oppression as trauma, then trauma was surfacing and it felt dangerous.

Participants should be given an informed choice as to how they can keep themselves safe, eg by warning folks beforehand that such incidents might occur, so they can emotionally prepare or duck out. The Summit had provided a Safer Spaces Policy, but not one workshop/lab I had attended acknowledged or reminded delegates of the terms.

Artists who facilitate groups in communities need to ensure that our methodologies are intersectional. We need to hold trauma and safety in mind when planning an arts-based workshop or project that seeks to encourage positive change and transformation. There's a real risk of triggering people, which might prevent folks from accessing spaces, thus perpetuating the marginalisation.

There's a fine line between using discomfort as a pedagogy to affirmative change – to danger. It's vital that ground-rules are created, made explicitly clear beforehand. Only then can it be a space to play, learn, be creative, reflect and expand.

A small number of us fled and couldn't come back. Instead, we licked our wounds, expressed our anger, soothed one another, laughed, then spontaneously stood on chairs, bellowing collectively *"I want a dyke for president…"*

Mary Stephanou is an Art Psychotherapist, Associate Lecturer, Mentor, Creative Expressive Therapies Practitioner, Facilitator, Artist, Activist and an Intersectional Feminist.

Suggested further reading:

Zoe Leonard's 'I want a president...', 1992, full text available here:

www.iwantapresident.wordpress.com/i-want-a-president-zoe-leonard-1992/

SAS Safer Spaces Policy:

www.simplebooklet.com/socialartsummit#page=10

Social Art Summit website:

www.socialartsummit.com

Safe space definition for girls and women:

www.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/resource-pdf/woman%20space%20E.pdf

Elsa James' website post on workshop:

www.elsajames.com/social-art-summit

Article on intersectionality:

www.sisteroutrider.wordpress.com/2016/07/27/intersectionality-a-definition-history-and-guide/

Article on black emotional labour:

www.columbiaspectator.com/opinion/2018/03/28/black-emotional-labor-is-core-to-my-columbia-experience/

Article on privilege and oppression:

www.everydayfeminism.com/2014/09/what-is-privilege/

Glossary of LGBT terms:

www.stonewall.org.uk/help-advice/glossary-terms

Misogynoir definition and article:

www.moyazb.tumblr.com/post/84048113369/more-on-the-origin-of-misogynoir

Article on anti-racism:

www.theestablishment.co/welcome-to-the-anti-racism-movement-heres-what-you-ve-missed-711089cb7d34/

Article on white privilege and emotional labour:

www.everydayfeminism.com/2018/07/white-people-this-is-how-to-check-your-privilege-when-asking-people-of-color-for-their-labor/

Article on equity and justice in institutions:

www.insidehighered.com/views/2017/03/30/colleges-need-language-shift-not-one-you-think-essay

Website on oppression and trauma:

www.traumaandnonviolence.com/chapter4.html

Power and influence

Dan Russell highlights some themes of the Summit, answering questions often asked of this area of practice and demonstrating the power of artists coming together.

Following: Social Art Summit. Photo: Nina Thomas.

The Social Art Summit demonstrated that social practice artists should be influencing the opinions, expectations and agendas of institutions and funding bodies. Other events (including March's enjoyably chaotic *Uncommon Ground*), rehash the content in the same old forms. The debate has moved on. Here's a list of recurring questions with answers from the Summit, and a case study to conclude:

What even is social art?

The language used to describe what we do is a classic barrier to action. In Sheffield this was touched on but it was deemed less important than actually doing things. Socially Engaged Art; Social Practice; Dialogical Art; Participatory Art; Community Art: they may mean different things, but the essence is the same.

The visual artists, the theatre practitioners and the old-school community artists hate each other.

Predominantly represented by the visual arts, the Summit featured nod to the vast antecedent family tree for this kind of work: activists of the 60s and 70s, radical pedagogies, theatre of the oppressed, Artists Placement Group, and yes, old-school community art.

Isn't all social practice an instrument of the state and artists are just following the money?

There's a spotlight on social practice in the hope that artists can somehow hold together the crumbling state structures of support. This may attract a few naive people compromising their ideas to fit funding stipulations, but in reality there's a lot of dedicated practitioners who have made a commitment to working with people. They go into new situations well-prepared and with an understanding of the contexts.

If you are so concerned with working with people, where are all the participants?

Unlike many other conferences this Summit was not awash with bemused looking people bussed in to answer this question. This was deliberate, as although one of the aims of social practice may be to level the playing field between catalyst and participant, because of project timelines and funding cycles, there aren't many cases where this truly occurs. To bring participants along to a space where artists are talking frankly between themselves would be disingenuous.

But is it even art?

Yes. Even conferences about social practice can be art. To demonstrate this, and the progress made by this Summit, let's focus in on another pertinent topic: that of the Creative Case for Diversity.

Moving beyond tokenistic discussion, Harold Offeh and Sharna Jackson's seat-at-the-long-table session brought power to the fore – with form and content hand in hand. Elsa James and Priya Mistry's fantastic performance session built on this, and actually made people visibly upset and verbally uncomfortable in acknowledging their

own privilege. By flipping the very frame we have been handed to view diversity and equality, we were bluntly shown the difference between truly understanding and paying lip service.

This highlighted the power of artists coming together to challenge the structures in which we operate. The Social Art Summit went beyond the usual moanfests* to set about sharing and equipping us with the tools to do something about it.

*as written about by Maurice Carlin elsewhere on this site: www.a-n.co.uk/news/platforms-change-artists-really-want-arts-organisations/

Dan Russell is an artist who does stuff with people. He is Artist Development Coordinator with the NewBridge Project in Gateshead and Newcastle and helps organise a Social Practice Forum for the North East.

What exactly is social art practice?

Kerry Morrison explores how the different ideas evident at the Summit challenged her understanding of socially engaged art and social art practice.

An important, and in many ways, a long overdue event that brought socially engaged practitioners, from all over the UK, together, in one Summit, to discuss, debate, and share all things around and connected to social art and socially engaged art practice.

With lively debates, activities and presentations, opinions about, and practice within social art were shared from differing perspectives:

    Ethics of…
    BAME in…
    Queering spaces
    … in higher education
    Pedagogy
    Archiving
    Engaging communities
    Rules of engagement
    Photography in …
    Barriers to participation
    Collaboration
    Support for artists and self care
    Practice – talks, screenings, walks, games,
    actions and temporary interventions

So much to attend
So much to participate in
So much to take in
So much to take away
However,
One thing was not addressed: Social Art practice
What is Social Art Practice?

In his handbook *Education for Socially Engaged Art*, Pablo Helguera (2011) writes that socially engaged art is often referred to as social art practice. And at the Summit, socially engaged art and social art practice did appear to be interchangeable terms. So what exactly is social arts practice?
Did we all know what we were talking about?
In the various sessions I attended it appeared we had and have differing definitions and understandings. Or at least, what I understand as socially engaged art and social art practice was challenged. In the various sessions I attended, I heard socially engaged art and social art practice described as:

    An umbrella term, which covers all art that has a social element
    Art that is social
    Art that addresses societal issues
    Community art
    Artists working with people
    Art produced by an artist (or artists) incorporating people's voices and stories
    Art co-created with communities
    Art that brings about social change
    Art in the social realm
    A practice of provocation within communities that challenges the status quo
    A practice that gives voice to minority and protected characteristic groups
    Art that empowers vulnerable members of society
    Art within institutions, for examples, schools and prisons

Has socially engaged art and social art practice become interchangeable? Is 'it' now an overarching umbrella term that covers all art practice with people?

I surmise that there were at least six distinct and different practices being discussed at the Summit under the umbrella of social arts practice:

Socially engaged art
Community art
Participatory art
Political activist art
Embedded, co-created art
Art workshops

There may be, and most likely is, overlaps within and across the above. Aesthetics will play a role within all of the above; however, the aesthetic will likely be what differentiates between practices. Intent will also be a differentiator. As will be: levels of engagement/participation, democracy, intellectual property rights, and authorship.

For understandings of our practice, for us to communicate our practice to others, for us to practice with integrity, to generate new knowledge, and to be archived, we should be able to clearly and simply articulate what it is we do: what art we practice. A lack of clarity leads to misunderstandings. And,
contested
unclear
fuzzy
terminology
becomes meaningless

I left the Summit no longer wanting to call what I do socially engaged art or social art practice; it is too muddy as a definition; too fuzzy.

I feel there is an urgency to begin to sort out terminology from a UK perspective and to proudly name what we do and to be proud of the differences. If social art practice has become an umbrella term we need to let this be known and perhaps scribe a lexicon of social art practice.

In 2011 Kerry Morrison co-founded In-Situ, an arts organisation embedded in Pendle, Lancashire. Through embedded and responsive processes that build relationships, partnerships, and collaborative working, In-Situ nurtures into existence art that addresses local issues with the aim to make a positive difference to people's lives and the environment. Kerry is currently an Associate Artist with In-Situ. Kerry and In-Situ abide by a code of human and environmental ethics.

Kerry Morrison is an artist with an interdisciplinary approach, her work and collaborations examine social and environmental challenges within local contexts.

Archiving the practice

Henry Mulhall responds to Sophie Hope's Lab on archiving socially engaged practice. While some socially engaged practitioners resist archiving due to power dynamics that contribute to their construction, we also need archives to proliferate and support socially engaged practice. Mulhall advocates a performative approach that intends to mediate these positions. Rather than resisting archives he suggests a shift in the way people learn to make and use them.

Following: Social Art Summit. Photo: Julian Lister.

Much of the discussion around the room was framed in terms of power structures that dictate documenting processes or archive construction. This is understandable for at least two reasons. Firstly, the shape of an archive is dictated by the people who decide what goes in and what doesn't. This reflects a sense that the powerful can shape the tools with which we read history; the powerful set the narrative. Second, if an event is supposed to be taken up through a collective social engagement, or the live presence of bodies in a specific space and time, then a document can only ever offer a reduced experience. When delving into an archive we are faced with inanimate fossils rather than living creatures.

These are legitimate concerns but a counter argument runs along the lines that socially engaged practices are marginalised, in fact, socially engaged practitioners often work in the margins intentionally. For these ephemeral, context-dependant practices to grow, be understood and evaluated, it is vital that they are shared with a wider audience. Possible audiences might not have been at an original event due to geography, access, wherewithal, or a whole host of other barriers. For the like-minded to find each other there must be a trace of their actions, a trail for others to follow.

Both perspectives have compelling aspects, I suppose I agree with both sides to a certain extent. This leaves me in a bit of a paradox. So instead of choosing a side I'd rather reframe the argument slightly.

Instead of thinking of archives as solid objects how about we see them as fluctuating and amorphous. The people involved (either through viewing or participation) in a socially engaged practice have individual interpretations of an activity. Their performance in a given context makes that ephemeral, context-dependant entity what it is. Authorship is an action that affects the world, so documents and archives are also performative. Further to this, the reading of archival material is performative, and this offers the important shift.

Archives are only set by the powerful if we read them as the powerful intended. Archives do not only act upon us, we can act upon them as well.

This shift asks for a reappraisal of what can be considered knowledge. To open up to a constant state of learning – I need to look at myself as much as I look at archival material. In the same way that no one can dictate the reception of a live performed action, no one can dictate the reading of an archive. This makes the issue a pedagogic point. How can we learn to read between the lines of an archive, to see through preconceived, or preordained interpretations? Viewing archival reading as performative asks for a shift in (auto) didactic thinking in relation to archives. Archives are not sites of knowledge, they are sites of knowledge production.

Henry Mulhall is a practice-based PhD student at Birkbeck, University of London. His research looks at how constellations of arts organisations can form communities and publics through the language they use.

What's your problem?

Raksha Patel discusses Harold Offeh's Lab 'What's your problem?: Art, diversity and inclusion in galleries' and how the issues and themes relate to her own experiences.

The title's provocative nature evoked uncomfortable emotions relating to my personal experiences of diversity and exclusion within galleries. During the Lab there were a number of conversations about how we can make gallery spaces inclusive, and air of frustration was felt as although we knew the answers to change things, much of it was out of our hands.

The word exclusion is strong, and one that we don't necessarily associate with galleries today; however I find that exclusion is alive in many forms. It can range from what gallery collections are made up of, to who selects artists for collections and why. The ranges of exhibitions that we see are selected for us by curators working in organisations, and in the large part are not fully representative of the expanse of artistic practices out there.

Many artists working with galleries are participatory artist-educators. Galleries are seemingly the perfect platforms to creatively explore and in some cases this is true, however, when working with institutions artists have to adhere to sets of rules and this can dampen creativity. I have found that when I'm 'allowed' to be open as I am in my studio it depends on the member of gallery staff that I am working with. I've found that when the learning manager is/was a practising artist, then the working relationship is easier as there is an understanding about how an artist approaches a project. This coupled with trust lets creativity flourish; anything else can leave an artist feeling like they are simply providing a service in order to satisfy funders.

How does all of this fit in with diversity and exclusion? I have found that when I have worked with gallery staff that have experienced exclusion themselves because of skin colour, sexuality or gender, it is easier to discuss issues of diversity with them because of their awareness and sensitivity of the area. Projects on race and cultural identity/heritage that have been developed in galleries (sometimes to widen participation) are stronger when there has been a deeper dialogue due to lived experiences.

It can be problematic when working with people who see the artist of colour as the person who will bring the ideas on race to the table alone, and that race being an area outside of their experience is therefore not their responsibility. At times race and diversity can end up being a neat package that is to be dealt with by some, not all. However, these issues can be overcome with the willingness to listen, take training and dedicate time to understanding issues surrounding diversity.

We could argue that all artworks can be interpreted in ways that make them relevant to audience experiences and this is true to an extent, but when artworks that have been made to deliberately question and challenge ideas of inequality then we can talk about these issues directly in the gallery space. It is what the artist whose work on display intended and wanted us

to think about. However when there is a lack of diversity on gallery walls, it limits the kinds of conversations that are available to us as artists and for audiences to participate in.

So, what's my problem? If galleries are to be truly inclusive then staffing structures need to change so that diversity is seen at all levels within an institution.

Raksha Patel is an artist. She lives and works in London.

The shit in the phonebox

Laurie Cummins reflects on Anna Francis and Rebecca Davies' Lab 'Representing the change: Rules of engagement' which confronted and exposed the challenges of working in social contexts.

Above:
Rules of Engagement: Be honest.
Illustration: Rebecca Davies.

Sharing their practice and personal involvement in a particular part of Stoke-on-Trent, this session was centred around 'practice rooted in regeneration contexts with a focus on housing and development'. Key to the session was the sharing of harrowing situations to which they had been exposed as a result of their commitment to a deprived area. Their frankness created a palpable sense of relief for attendees and a space in which to share our own stories.

There's a side to 'Social Art' that has often been left unmentioned. The two leading artists talked about 'the shit in the phonebox' (exactly what it sounds like), a problem frequently encountered in the course of their practice and a result of the social realities of their community. This phrase became a metaphor for attendees own personal struggles; everybody seemed to have their own 'shit in the phonebox'.

While 'Social Art' consists of a wide variety of practices, many common issues emerged. The benefits and pitfalls of having experience of poverty and regeneration was prominent. An artist may be more invested in this 'community' work, but how do you protect yourself from triggers upon returning to this situation? Indeed, the concept of 'self-care' repeatedly surfaced, agreed by most to be fundamental to good and sustainable practice. However, asked some, is this truly possible? Should the responsibility of

protection fall on each individual, regardless of the barriers they face, whether they work alone or as a group, the specifics of their work? Fundamentally, discussion centred around boundaries and control.

The honesty employed by Francis and Davies showed their vulnerability, loosening their own boundaries. This was unusual, holding the attention of all. Formal settings for sharing work don't lend themselves to emotional or personal negative response; artists can feel that things need to be hidden from participants or funders. In an arena of limited resources and requirements to 'prove' positive impact, admission of vulnerability or hesitation can feel like failure. Here, artists made admissions that demonstrated their own vulnerabilities: unwittingly putting themselves in dangerous situations; playing a role in gentrification schemes by property developers; fundamentally being unsure of their work's implications. This outpouring of vulnerability showed the importance of airing the topic.

The session resulted in guidance for other practitioners (see Rules of Engagement guide on www.a-n.co.uk). This is important to have – missteps can be grave for all involved. However, for an area that concerns itself with the vulnerable, with precarity and a loss of control, assumed authority or steps towards universalism cannot be the answer. Social artists would do well to follow the lead of Francis and Davies and create forums where confrontation of the challenges is welcome and encouraged. Protection of a diversity of social artists and better control over boundaries can only be achieved with an outlet for fear and vulnerability.

Laurie Cummins is an interdisciplinary creative producer, researcher, artist, and writer. She currently works with The Art House Wakefield, an artists' support organisation, studio complex, and gallery.

Rules · of · engagement
Guiding · principles · for · artists · working · in · social · contexts

- Recognise that people are experts in the places they live and work.
- Be CLEAR that social change is the aim, ART is the tool.
- Build in space for the voice of the community.
- Know that having enough Time is CRITICAL.
- Be HONEST; know your INTENTIONS + SHARE THEM.
- DON'T make assumptions.
- PRACTICE SELF CARE; know when to stop.
- Value the artist's ROLE in THIS CONTEXT (we bring something different).
- BE a SUPPORTER + CHAMPION for other ARTISTS WORKING IN these contexts.
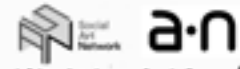- WORK collaboratively.

illustration by Rebecca davies.

Presenting two sides of a social arts project

Anna Francis, who co-presented the Lab 'Representing the change: Rules of engagement', discusses why there is a need to be honest about the challenges for artists and the importance of sharing the full picture.

In planning a lab for the Social Art Summit, I saw an opportunity to create a safe space for open and honest discussion with other practitioners, to (just for a moment) centralise the position of the artist, in relation to the social contexts we are working within, and to be frank about the challenges, and sometimes personal cost that making the work requires.

Planning the lab came at the end of a long and varied summer of action for The Portland Inn Project – which I work on with collaborator and fellow social artist Rebecca Davies, who, with The NewBridge Project's Dan Russell, delivered the lab alongside me.

As we put together slides for the lab, we began to discuss how, particularly with social practice, we tend to show the positive parts of the project, the things that went well, the smiling faces of participants, but rarely do we present the other side; the boring bits, the awful bits where it feels like everything is collapsing, the moments of failure and the dirty bits. We discussed that in leaving out the challenges, we fail to show what really goes into making the work happen and more, we make it easy for the true value of what we do to be missed. It was for this reason then, that Rebecca and I decided to present the two sides of our project; the side we always share, which we are careful to represent thoughtfully but often positively, but also to present the second part which we usually neglect to speak about; the more challenging aspects of making the work.

We felt it important to set out why we often err towards the positive when representing the work that we do, so we set out our **Reasons to be cheerful**:

1. Negative stigma – In the area where we are working the community has had to overcome and battle with negative press and judgement for so long; part of the work is about rewriting the story with local residents. Although we may want to discuss the problems which the area faces, we are aware that in doing so, we are at risk of adding to the negative stigma.

2. Morale – For our project, and projects like ours, it can feel important to keep positive. The celebratory aspects of a project are important locally for hope and to keep up morale (of residents and ourselves as practitioners).

3. Conscious of audience – It is a concern that funders may see it as a risk to invest in an area with many visible challenges (something we have heard directly from funders about the work we do). This may make them think twice about funding projects if the difficulties faced in delivering the work are openly discussed.

4. Ethics – How on earth do you document, share and expose some of the really difficult challenges, for example drug use and dealing which we are navigating within our project, when doing so can be seen as insensitive or, at worst, unethical?

We planned in space within the lab to say why now feels like an important moment to share the challenges.

An increasing number of artists are working in this way.

This means it's ever more important to be truthful and clear about the two sides to the story, that we as artists have to negotiate. It feels important to make the true work more visible in order to benefit the audience and those who want to work in this way.

If we don't show the full picture, the full impact will never be understood.

In the context of enormous cuts to the arts and public services it is becoming increasingly difficult to secure funding for art projects. In addition, the role and remit of the artist is expanding in some respects, as public sector cuts mean that organisations that would have supported the work previously are no longer equipped to do so. If we fail to demonstrate the true scope of the work that we are doing then we make it easy to undervalue what the impact is. A project's impact isn't demonstrated by how many people came; in most cases, art happening in social contexts is more nuanced and challenging than that. It is important to be vocal about the gaps we're filling. Our job title is expanding, while the support to do the job is diminishing.

So, we shared the two sides of our project; the successful parts which are making a difference to the community and location we are working within, but also the parts which are really hard

to deal with. We shared the moments of risk and failure and the sometimes personally troubling aspects of working in a precarious context. This opened up space for group discussion, and time to reflect on what social artists are juggling, navigating and at times quietly shouldering.

The group attending (consisting of artists, curators, educators and representatives from community projects from across the UK) worked together to form some guiding principles for ourselves for the coming years. After the Summit, the longlist of points was put into a survey, enabling a wider group of artists to contribute to the resource – see Rules of Engagement guide on www.a-n.co.uk.

Anna Francis is an artist and researcher whose practice aims to rethink city resources, through participatory art interventions. She is Associate Professor of Fine Art and Social Practice at Staffordshire University.

www.annafrancis.blogspot.com

a-n.co.uk