

## The British art show 8 Norwich: transformative experiences fade away

BRADBY, Lawrence and STEWART, Judith

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## **The British Art Show 8 Norwich: transformative experiences fade away**

Lawrence Bradby & Judith Stewart

Our story is about British Art Show 8 (BAS8) in Norwich. It is a story of high ambition and hard work. It is a story of diverse individuals who self-identify as 'artist'. It is a story of creative industries and inflexible thinking. It is a story of dedicated arts practice within a system not designed to support it. It is a story of labouring in harness. It's the cart before the horse.

### **Heavy Horse Incident**

On a Saturday morning there is a small parade of heavy horses: Percherons, Shires and Suffolk Punches, thirteen in all, pulling their carts past the shops and cafes in the city centre. They pause in a narrow street. A crowd of about two hundred has gathered to admire their sleek coats, their brasses and their leather tack. A driver, seated high up on one of the carts, unclips himself from the belt-harness that secures the horses' reins and anchors him in his seat. He searches for something in the pocket of his stiff woollen jacket. In that brief moment one horse shakes the blinkers loose from its eyes and abruptly becomes restless, lunging and pulling. Its partner, harnessed alongside, is yanked sideways across the flagstones. The driver lurches, clips himself back in and snatches for the reins. The heavy cart he is sitting in jolts and bucks. Horse handlers, who are accompanying the parade on foot, run over to soothe the troubled horse.

The disturbance lasts less than a minute, quite long enough to see the latent power of these immense and beautiful beasts. The crowd has flattened itself against the walls. The event marshals try to urge them further back. Everyone looks ashen. One family was separated in the panic. A pale child is brought back to its parents.

In the days after, subtle signs of the troubled horse remained. The tungsten-tipped nails of its shoes left scratches and a dense peppering of indentations, pale against the grey-brown of the flagstones. These were visible for many months, but now, in early 2020, even when I get on my knees, there's no trace at all.

### **Threat, Spectacle or Self-determinism**

In this article we look at the impact of BAS8 on audiences, artists and small-scale arts organisations in Norwich and the surrounding region. Did BAS8 give us something sleek and powerful to admire? Did it offer power we could harness and ride off in our desired direction? Did it threaten to trample us? Or, to unhitch the equine metaphor, how did it integrate into existing gallery learning programmes in the region? With its national function and its London purview (almost all of the artists shown in BAS8 lived and worked in London),

how could it make a significant contribution to our particular artistic ecology in Norwich?

We ask these questions within a broader theoretical framework:

What does art do?

Who cares for art?

When we ask 'what does art do?' we mean what does it do to viewers and participants? What is its affective potential? How does the art give form to issues or feelings that are urgent for the audiences? Does it offer a 'liberating self-determinism through art practice as cultural activism' or does it 'lessen the self-determination' of those who interact with the art? (1)

When we ask 'who cares for art?' we are evoking Shannon Jackson's description of the precarious boundaries of the aesthetic object, and of the logic that divides 'the inside of the art object from the outside of the material, institutional and social relations on which the art object relies' (2).

### **Bring the Best to the Regions**

The first BAS took place in 1979, 'initiated by the Arts Council of Great Britain with the intention to bring the best of British contemporary art to the regions' (3) and as a touring equivalent to the Hayward Annual show, with its emphasis on 'the contemporary and the controversial' (4). Since then BAS has taken place every five years, which, says Roger Malbert (in 2016 the Head of Hayward Touring), is 'long enough to have a new wave of artists' (5). The exhibition aims for national reach, promising a 'vital overview of the most exciting contemporary art produced in this country' (6).

The eighth iteration of BAS took place during 2015 and 2016, touring over 100 works by 42 artists to Leeds, then Edinburgh, Norwich and finally Southampton. The BAS planning process involves venues in each prospective city putting in a collaborative bid to host the exhibition. Norwich was chosen as a destination thanks to the collaborative bid by Norwich Castle Museum & Art Gallery (NCMAG) and Norwich University of the Arts (NUA).

Hayward Touring raised additional funding from Arts Council England's Strategic Touring Fund (STF), which meant that public engagement in all four cities for BAS8 was better resourced than in previous years. Hayward Touring set out ambitious plans for the host venues to 'develop their relationships with local communities' and to 'address the mental barriers to participation'. Meanwhile artists would 'orchestrate transformative experiences for people from least-engaged communities' (7) with participants in these creative projects making 'the physical, psychological and emotional link back to the venues.' (8) The Hayward itself would 'develop a model of audience development for touring major visual art exhibitions'. (9)

There is a ring of familiarity about these aims, which have been at the forefront of arts organisations' priorities for two decades. 'Engagement' and 'participation' are very fluid terms but in the context of this journal we shall assume that they are synonymous with efforts to involve an audience that reflects the demography of the region. Again, there are different ways to categorise engagement and non-engagement but research continues to show that 'two of the most important factors influencing whether somebody attends or participates in arts and cultural activities are educational attainment and socio-economic background'. (10)

Hayward Touring's focus on the host venues and their audiences also suggests that the sustainability of programmes based on a single event has been a problem. As well as audiences, sustainability needs to include existing arts organisations. As the evaluation of Hull UK City of Culture 2017 shows, high profile events can divert resources away from grassroots arts organisations (volunteers, sponsors, spaces) making their survival even more precarious. (11)

### **Sounding Board**

In 2016 we were both positioned close to the action. We were able to witness, and take part in, the attempts to put these high ambitions for BAS8 into action. Lawrence, a freelance artist with extensive experience of public engagement, was appointed in March 2016 to the role of City Co-ordinator for BAS8. Judith was a lecturer at Norwich University of the Arts (NUA), one of the partner organisations hosting the show. Our discussions of the public engagement aspects of BAS8 assumed a model we had adopted when working together previously at Firstsite in Colchester: Judith acting as a sounding-board and critical friend to the issues Lawrence was facing in delivering a public programme.

### **Our Approach**

Our article uses material we gathered during our lived experience of BAS8: diary entries, working documents and notes of conversations during meetings. To support this, in January 2020, we contacted seven of the artists and community organisations involved in the BAS8 outreach programme, asking them about their experience.

This material allows us re-assess the participatory aspects of BAS8. Our findings do not always coincide with the 'celebratory rhetoric' of the organisers. This rhetoric, Belfiore has observed, 'obscures, and thus shelters from scrutiny, power imbalances, unequal distribution of cultural authority in society, and unequal access to the means of symbolic representation and meaning-making'. (12) It is this gap, between the rhetoric of engagement and the actual experience of it, which we explore in the rest of this article.

### **Between Two Stools**

The British Art Show can be thought of as two separate parts. First, there is the Hayward Touring staff, along with guest curators who are appointed fresh for each iteration. They are a small mobile team, based in London and travelling the country. Second, in each of the chosen locations, local organisations form a partnership to deliver the exhibition. (13)

Significantly, neither the mobile London-based team, nor the city-based partnerships were responsible for the outreach programme of BAS8. This heap of high ideals was pushed together into a new role and designated as 'City Coordinator'.(14) Each host city had a City Coordinator, and in Norwich, Lawrence was appointed to the role. While the Norwich partnership had started meeting over two years before the arrival of BAS8, the City Coordinator post began only three months before. This structure and timing of BAS8 ensured, enshrined even, a working procedure: while the two powerful pre-existing organisations were competing-cooperating on the complex exhibition install, outreach fell in the gap between.

The central issue in the BAS public engagement was the failure to connect the participatory aspects to the central concerns of the BAS: which is to develop and promote a new generation of artists for circulation in the circuit of commercial galleries and biennials. These are different audiences and it is time to acknowledge that neither needs the other.

### **Work Horse**

Let's look at the City Coordinator role in more detail. The job description listed the major duties as:

- the Ambassadors scheme (developing sub-projects with six local community organisations);
- the Creative Outreach Programmes ('Communities working directly with world class artists, nominated by the curators of BAS8' (15));
- the symposium;
- the digital engagement programme (including the blog with the requirement of 'a minimum of one blog post per week (as well as additional film and writers content'). (16)

Now squeeze that list of duties into a 0.5 FTE appointment whose fixed-term six-month duration ends two days *before* the Norwich BAS8 exhibition closes (Hayward Touring later found funding to extend the contract slightly). As well as allowing the engagement role to drop between the national and local aspects of BAS8, the scale of the City Coordinator role seems intentionally unachievable. (18)

### **Broad Spectrum**

The ambassadors scheme was one of the more flexible and open parts of the Hayward Touring outreach strategy. Six ambassadors would be recruited in each city. They would come from 'a broad spectrum of age, ethnicity and

gender, particularly targeting predefined areas of low engagement with the intention that project partners can build on these new and emerging audiences after BAS8 with continued contact and further projects'. (19) The role of 'ambassador' could be taken up by an individual (an artist with a community practice) or by an organisation.

### **The Ambassadors**

That the main BAS programme is not considered as meeting 'public engagement' criteria is an interesting aspect; that the 'add-on' programmes are given less time (and resources) is another. Although they did not attract the most attention, the bulk of the participatory projects were developed and led by these ambassadors. They ranged from Common Ground (20), a collaborative practice led by two third-year NUA BA Illustration students, to artists with more established practices of successfully working with different groups. So perhaps it is in the ambassadors' projects that we should look for productive engagement and sustainability.

Our request for feedback from former ambassadors addressed the question at the heart of this journal: how does an event which is both intermittent and peripatetic promote sustainable engagement with visual art? The responses were more varied than we expected. Whilst it is a sample of only seven, professional youth/community workers tended to comment more on the success of their particular project, speaking in very positive terms. The artists, whilst also noting the positives of their particular engagement, were more aware of the (tediously familiar) underlying problems: feeling like an 'add-on', the short-lived nature of the engagement, the failure to involve artists in the planning stages, and the need to respond to funding. It became clear as BAS8 unfolded that the institutions were less than fully committed to these 'add-on' practices. An example of this can be seen in the experiences of two of the ambassador projects: Eyebrow Arts and Common Ground.

Eyebrow Arts (21), an arts organisation working with adults who have learning difficulties, made multiple visits to the BAS8 exhibition at the NCMAG and shaped their responses into a live-art performance. The group – artists and vulnerable adults together – presented this performance within the public BAS8 exhibition. In their recent communications with us, Eyebrow Arts commented on 'how open minded and brave the Castle Gallery felt about letting us and our group of adults with learning difficulties engage and respond to the artwork'. (22) Common Ground had a different experience. Their three workshops were designed to move from Anglia Square (the run-down 1960s shopping centre in Norwich city centre where they invited participants to collect shapes and patterns) to the NCMAG (where this visual material would be stitched into a patchwork quilt). For some time, and without explaining why, the institution was resistant to the workshop taking place in their gallery. After discussions, the NCMAG curators suggested that noise from Common

Ground's sewing machine might compromise the soundtrack of the Bedwyr Williams' film in the gallery. Eventually, following persuasion from Lawrence (as City Coordinator) and crucial intervention from Natalie Walton (National Coordinator for BAS8), Common Ground and their sewing machine (23) were allowed in. It was clear that Bedwyr Williams, as an artist chosen by the BAS8 curators, took precedence over artists chosen by the City Coordinator and local venues.

Why this difference between the response to Eyebrow Arts and Common Ground? Possibly NCMAG staff felt more comfortable with Eyebrow Arts because they had made a number of visits before they proposed their performance. Common Ground, on the other hand, took at face value the idea that 'Engaging with wider groups ... previously not engaged with art practices, and providing a physical, psychological and emotional link back to the venues' would be welcomed by those very venues. (23) Whatever the reason, it is clear that there was a lack of infrastructure in place to fully integrate ambassador projects with BAS8 work and venues.

### **Non-transformation**

The ambassadors were not the only artists delivering public engagement projects. Another aspect of the Hayward Touring's plan for 'Creative Outreach / Socially Engaged Practice' was 'communities working directly with world class artists, nominated by the curators of BAS8' (24)

In Norwich the chosen BAS8 artists were Jessica Warboys and Alan Kane. When selected for BAS8, neither of them had expected to develop a participatory project. As Warboys commented in a planning meeting with Lawrence and Natalie Walton, 'It seems uncomfortable that I would make another work. I am very happy with my contribution to BAS. It's complete.' (25) Kane also had reservations about this additional role stating, in response to suggestions that he develop other strands to *The History Train*: 'I don't want to get people to do something other than what they do already. I'm not interested in transforming people.' (26)

Kane and Warboys' response to requests to develop participatory elements to their artwork is completely reasonable. Why would two artists with no experience of working in this way be expected to co-create with communities of people with whom they have no connection? At the same time, this community work was in the plan: 'situate an artist specialising in socially engaged practice in specific communities' (27) but we have no insight as to how Kane and Warboys were chosen to fulfil this role. What we do know is that the structure made it hard for Warboys to say 'no'. There were weeks of uncertainty as she and her team suggested projects that would use the STF budget allocation (£7,000) but which were clearly artist commissions rather than community collaborations.

Eventually, Warboys decided that she would like to work with young people experiencing mental health issues. Then it was Lawrence's role to recruit potential participants. A partnership developed with the Mancroft Advice Project (MAP). By now it was late spring, and many of the target group were already committed to other activities. Seven or eight young people attended preliminary meetings but it soon became clear that the interests of these participants were secondary to the creation of the artwork. It was evident to Lawrence that Warboys had neither the experience nor the time to address issues that might arise when supporting or collaborating with other people's creative explorations. For example, her desire to situate the planned painting activity in a visible location on a public footpath beside the River Wensum, with plenty of passers by, made her participants anxious. While MAP's Senior Participation Youth Worker, Jess Barnard, recollected the positive aspects of this as a means of young people overcoming anxieties (28), an artist more experienced at working with people might have considered, and prepared for, potential issues.

In her role of national coordinator for BAS8, Natalie Walton took responsibility for shaping the project, trying to ensure it created genuine opportunities for people in Norwich. But this type of participatory involvement needs sensitive management. In this case too much expectation was placed on the artist with too little time or support. Lawrence not only noted the lack of any involvement from the BAS8 curators, but also the lack of opportunity for the artist to say 'no'.

Unlike Warboys, BAS8 artist Alan Kane had been developing his project for over a year before the opening of the exhibition. He worked closely with Norfolk Museums Service (NMS), particularly curator Harriet Loffler and Gressenhall Farm Manager Richard Dalton. Kane's proposal, *The History Train*, drew on Norwich's tradition of heavy horse parades. The idea was for horses to process through the city centre delivering the crates of BAS8 artworks to the venues.

Although Loffler was successful in raising considerable additional funds to support the concept of *The History Train*, Hayward Touring ruled out putting expensive and delicate artworks into horse-drawn carts with wooden wheels. This wasn't the only problem. Like Warboys, Kane was uncertain how to add a participatory element to his project. In its initial conception *The History Train* deployed bodies in space, but did not ask them to participate. Kane used the term 'service art', saying 'I saw the work as being something that would serve a functional purpose on a certain level, delivering works to the venues.' (29)

The additional public funding from Arts Council England (the STF grant) was specifically to reach new communities for contemporary visual art by means of community engagement projects led by artists. Neither Kane nor NMS saw *The History Train* as an artist-led community engagement project and it continued to be referred to in meetings and emails as an 'artist's commission'.



There was no artist's brief for Kane at the start of the project, and Loffler later explained the mismatch between funding and outcome in this way: 'What I originally said to him was that we needed a project that involved people in an authentic way and I think he has met this.' (30) This led to a stand off between NCMAG and Hayward Touring. When Lawrence took up the City Coordinator role in March 2016 Hayward Touring still had not released the funding to pay for *The History Train*.

A compromise was finally reached by attempting a series of retro-fixes and add-ons designed to draw 'the public', from 'areas of low engagement', into *The History Train*. As these orphaned sub-projects were either rushed into action or were vetoed by the artist, we were having conversations about the ethical compromises Lawrence was facing, his evident complicity in attempts to round up new participants, or to restyle the participants that existed. These add-ons to *The History Train* did not change the fundamental structure of the artwork so, in Grant Kester's terms, the project remained 'rooted in conventional paradigms of authorial sovereignty and pedagogical hierarchy'. (31) All of this underlines the lack of agency attached to the role of the city coordinator and to that of 'participant' - the decisions were made, we just had to admire the outcomes and decorate them when requested. One of the ambassadors, artist Liz Ballard, confirmed this (in our recent exchanges): 'The work we were doing felt like an add on, rather than integrated into the wider BAS8 programme.' (32)

One of these 'add-on' projects involved Kane and the organisers putting out a call to the public in a local Norfolk newspaper to submit designs for horse brasses. Twenty-six designs were received, fabricated by Kane and NUA technician James Castle, and worn by the horses at the parade. These brasses, like dense tokens of authenticity, were referred to in all of the evaluations and reports, yet Kane's contact with this self-selected group of 'designers' was minimal. For us, the horse brasses are an example of 'attendant creativity' (33): creativity occurring as a result of, an accompaniment to, but not altering in any way the main artwork. Inviting the public to design and then making the brasses, provided visibility and acknowledgment to the creative work of the general public without agency. Their work was not allowed to pervade or alter the form of *The History Train* in any way.

This was explicitly mentioned in the official BAS8 evaluation by Annabel Jackson:

The partners felt that the horse brasses produced by local people in the History Train project should have been exhibited as part of the British Art Show. However, the artist thought that the visual comparison between professional and community art would have been intimidating for the latter, so this didn't happen. (34)

## Legacy

The institutional evaluations from BAS8 Norwich abound with Belfiore's 'celebratory rhetoric'. Jackson's evaluation for Hayward Touring describes *The History Train* as almost exact opposite to our version: 'co-creation with local communities ... a perfect example of making an artwork of local significance, which really maximised the impact of the Strategic Touring project through its wide appeal.' (35) The NCMAG evaluation avoids these claims of creative involvement by non-artists, but still makes great claims for *The History Train* as 'a unique event ... employed to deliver the crates containing the BAS8 art works ... [that] married the county's rich past with brand new contemporary art to create an extraordinary spectacle and landmark commission'. (36)

Just as the hoof marks have faded from the pavement, the public engagement aspects of BAS8 have left little trace in Norwich. The ambassadors have moved on to 'transform' other participants through new (temporary) projects, as they continue their precarious lives as itinerant artists. Factors external to the arts ecology – high rents and the need to find work – have led to the two Common Ground artists leaving Norwich.

Both Common Ground and Eyebrow Arts saw their projects travel beyond Norwich to the Royal Festival Hall for a celebration event of all the BAS8 'ambassadors' and to the final BAS8 location in Southampton respectively. For Eyebrow the benefits of this didn't last:

...Unfortunately the end of our practical involvement in BAS8 here in Norwich also meant the end of Lawrence's involvement and therefore communication with the organisers ceased. We have no knowledge of how our artwork/performance props were installed or received. In fact, we never got them back which was a disappointing end to what had been a positive model of respecting participatory engagement. (37)

More difficult to gauge is the legacy of the BAS8 experience of the participants from Earlham Early Years Centre and of one particular family who Steph Harding, the Head of the Nursery, said had never visited the Castle Museum before and who '...found excursions as a whole family difficult'. Harding commented on the positive impact museum members of staff had made, 'helping everyone to have an enjoyable visit' (38). But what is also worth noting is that the success of this, like so many participatory projects, is as much a result of the Hawthorne effect (39) rather than engagement with leading contemporary art.

But we'll finish as we began, with a story. This time from Jevan Watkins Jones, the artist working with Earlham Early Years Centre:

We took the bus to the BAS8 at Norwich Castle, taking it in turns to look through my home made Viennetta camera obscura box at the people and sites upside down. There was an excitement in seeing the world from the double decker in anticipation of an excitement in seeing the art .... We entered the exhibition, deadly quiet and serious now. Back at the [children's] centre we had looked in the glossy catalogue at the textures of Simon Fujiwara's *Fabulous Beasts* (2015) and Alexandre da Cunha's *Kentucky* (2010) but I knew the children would not be able to touch them. ... We head for the black curtain of the projection room containing Mikhail Karikis' *Children of Unquiet* (2013-14) and we are immediately rewarded, first by the moving image and mouthed sounds, and then [by] seeing that it is children who are playing as we did back in the playground, re-imagining the landscape, as children do. The dark room was ... unlike the sterility of the air between the artworks in the gallery.

On the way home Sammy asked if he could have my Viennetta. I'm not going to lie I didn't want him to have it, but I if I was to leave something meaningful with him from our time together at the BAS8 it had to be the camera obscura box that now housed his memories, albeit upside down and remote. (40)

### **Post-script**

British Art Show 9 (BAS9) takes place this year, moving between Manchester, Wolverhampton, Aberdeen and Plymouth. When the curators were announced they looked forward to 'producing an exciting exhibition that is also an exchange between artists, venues and audience.' From our experience, we would urge the curators, and the whole travelling ensemble of BAS9, to take that idea seriously. We hope they do not think of their venues and the surrounding populace as an artless void to be filled with what they bring, but instead as locations with rich, complex, contradictory cultural textures already in operation, and to see how they can enrich those. Arts organisations of all stripes and sizes often *want* audiences, but what they *need* are people who can address them as equals, rather than as superiors.

Or, to put it more briefly: Hayward – hold your horses! Populace – don't hold your breath. Don't hold it, let it out, let it out in a vast compelling multi-vocal poly-tonal hymn of who you are, what you think, and how BAS9 can be part of that.

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