

Practice-based Research

Participatory Art Methods in Practice: An Artist's Tentative Steps into Field Research

Laura Bradshaw-Heap

London Metropolitan University

Abstract

This project aimed to examine if community projects can have a positive impact on art jewellery practice. This was done through the development of a community project with a group of Irish Traveller women, in collaboration with Brent Irish Advisory Services (B.I.A.S.) and a number of volunteers. This was then treated as a case study and analysed. A qualitative research approach was taken, within a naturalistic context and the project was further contextualized by investigating a selection of other jewellers' practices. The objects made during the project were not treated as data, though professional reviews were carried out on completion. The project led to the development of a new collection of jewellery and a book inspired by my experiences.

Introduction

I began this research as an artist and jeweller with a desire to develop my work in a way that would move my practice away from the isolation of the jeweller's bench. The jeweller and writer Benjamin Lignel highlights the fact that although jewellery as a discipline is understood, art jewellery as a concept means little to anyone outside the profession (2006). He goes further, stating that the contemporary art jewellery market works on such a small scale that 'its lack of visibility questions its existence'. Indeed, Tim Joss notes that artists' proneness to insularity often prevents them from fully engaging with society (Joss 2008: 15). Lignel also calls on jewellers to communicate

more, to engage more. For any discipline to survive and thrive, connection with a wider audience is essential (Lignel 2006). John Dewey, the American educationalist, stated that although an artwork often starts as an expression of the artist, it must be experienced and become meaningful to others to make it come alive (Dewey 2005: 36-59). Jewellery is infused with a perceived symbolic power to make social connections; it is therefore adapted as a medium to engage. This led me to the question: ‘Can participatory arts have a positive impact on art jewellery practices?’

As part of this research, I looked at a small selection of projects where interactive, collaborative and participatory methods have been employed, with each artist/jeweller finding ways to adapt and develop participatory techniques to best suit his or her practice. Although this short reflection does not allow for a full review of these (see Bradshaw-Heap 2011a), there are a number of surveys which indicate that participation in art projects based in the community can have a significant impact on people’s lives (Matarasso 1997, Kelly 1984). As Lewis, Morley and Southwood state, ‘The community arts are, amongst other things, an attempt to reach those parts other arts cannot reach’ (1986: 1). Although this research is focused on community art projects, I believe it is fair to suggest that when employed effectively, participatory art projects can produce similar results, for both participant and artist.

Methodology

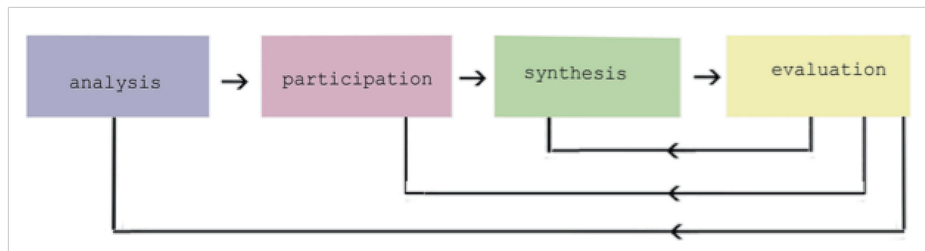
I have undertaken qualitative research, within a naturalistic context, in combination with an arts-based practice for this pilot project. Arts-based practice places the artist as the creator, collaborator and reflexive critic of their own actions (Sullivan 2005). Qualitative methods for recording and analysing human experience are more usually associated with social science research, yet this combination is becoming more common within arts research (Gray & Malins 2004: 130). The naturalistic style of inquiry is suggested as an appropriate research strategy as it focuses on how the participants behave when interacting in real life situations. This focus allows for a deeper understanding of the participants than would have been possible within a laboratory setting. Case studies were also used to contextualise the project (Robson 2011: 194-229; Gray & Malins 2004: 72; Bradshaw-Heap 2011a: 12).

Fieldwork

The project ‘This is Me’ began as part of this research. It involved a group of seven Traveller women based in London, an artist (myself), and the Brent Irish Advisory

Services (BIAS), and consisted of weekly two-hour workshops over the course of five weeks. The creation of jewellery during the project was used as a tool to develop an informal atmosphere. Informal conversation about the women's lives, culture and experiences were recorded and later transcribed. The art produced by the participants did not serve as data, but the project was judged by participant evaluation, through the means of a professional review with the participants. The professional review is an alternative to the questionnaire, which was not appropriate in this project due to a large variation in reading abilities within the group. An individual trusted by the group but who did not have an active role in the project asked a set of questions with the answers recorded.

The diagram in Figure 1 is based on Brian Lawson's generalized map of the design process. As he states, the design process is often less clear and linear than this, however the general structure of this graph is still useful (2006: 38). I have added the role of participation between analysis and synthesis, as it is the role that participation



plays following the analysis of an idea that will allow for the development of my designs (synthesis).

Figure 1: Design process, based on Lawson (2006).

For this participatory project I concentrated on developing a structure around the concept of the 'co-conspirator', as laid out by Jon Lockhart (2011). Rather than prescribing set materials, examples of work and outcomes, Lockhart turns the attention of the participants to a common problem, to be solved by everyone within the group. In adopting this technique, the question posed to the group was: how can we use jewellery making to learn about each other?

Three main constraints shaped the project. As said before, it was restricted to two hours per week, over five weeks. The project would have benefited from an extra five weeks, to allow the women to develop their ideas creatively and to work on new techniques. Also, because the women did not know each other or the organizers, it took some time for everyone to relax into the group. Although by the end of the project we had developed a good relationship. The third constraint was a lack of funding for the

project. Because of these constraints, it was decided early on in the project to simply ‘play’ with the materials, develop ideas, get to know each other and make plans for future projects in these initial five weeks.

The Participants’ Background

Irish Travellers are a nomadic ethnic group originating from Ireland. There are no official records of the numbers living in the UK, though the 2006 Irish Census counted 22,369 Travellers.¹ Many Travellers come to the UK because of well-established migrant networks (Delaney 2002: 3). Irish Travellers, both in the UK and Ireland, face a number of issues such as high unemployment, widespread discrimination, poor education and overcrowded and unsuitable settlement sites (Castles & Miller 1998: 22). The core value of Traveller culture is nomadism – ‘not necessarily the intention to keep travelling, but the nomadic mind-set’ (Kenny 1996: 179).

Aims of Those Involved in the Project

Three distinct parties took part in this project: the artist, BIAS and the women, each bringing our own aims to the project. The aim of this project for me was to assess if participatory art methods as designed for this project, had a positive impact on my own practice. I aimed to do this by teaching jewellery making and using this as a tool to create a shared dialogue with the women, learning about Irish Traveller culture and experiences, and then creating my own jewellery informed by the project. In return I shared my expertise and provided the project with recycled materials. BIAS’s aim was to create a place for women in the Irish Traveller community to come together on a regular basis, outside the site. The Traveller women in the project wanted to show that life as a Traveller was not how it was portrayed in the Channel 4 series *Big Fat Gypsy Weddings* (2010). These shows have had a significant impact on the wider public’s impressions of their culture and lives. They felt that the media highlighted elements that portrayed a negative and unrepresentative view of Traveller life. As one woman said:

Automatically, it’s the Travellers that get blamed for robbing [...] when it could be their neighbours ... that’s what we live with, that’s what it is, and that’s what it boils down to.²

Project Outcomes

To begin with, the expectations of the women were simply to be involved in something different. As one woman said, ‘It’s nice just to get out than being stuck inside

constantly. It feels like I've done something for the day, instead of being just stuck at home...'. However, as the project developed, so did the group's confidence. Another woman noted during the participant feedback session, 'It's pride in ourselves, like what we're actually coming up with, it's good.' Learning jewellery-making skills appealed to all the participants and this acted as an incentive to the women who took part. When the project was conceived, all parties had hoped to develop traditional jewellery-making techniques, however, as stated previously, a number of constraints led to the decision to 'play' or experiment with the materials instead.

In considering the question, 'how can we use jewellery-making to learn about each other?', it was found that the act of creating jewellery helped relax the members of the group. It gave us something to focus on while we got to know each other and it allowed conversation to flow in a relaxed manner. As a result, I was able to ask questions about the women's lives and culture in a natural way.

The women's aim, as previously mentioned, was to show a wider audience that life as an Irish Traveller was not as it was portrayed in *Big Fat Gypsy Weddings*. It was decided that a good way to do this would be to present the project in a book format. This book could then be used to describe the project and show the positive aspects of community projects like this and of the women involved in the project. As the book design progressed, the group was shown examples ensuring that they could be comfortable with the outcome. Klimt02, a well-known art jewellery website and forum, and Yellow Chrome Books, the specialists in contemporary European art and craft publications, have already agreed to sell the book. The book will also be available on Amazon. A book launch at the Irish Embassy in London is planned for autumn 2012. This will expose a wider audience to the project and the group of women who took part.

Figure 2: Example spread from book. Image courtesy of Vita Dobson (See Bradshaw-



Heap 2011b).

As mentioned earlier, BIAS's aim

was to create a group that would be regularly attended by Irish Traveller women so that they could socialise and learn new skills. Their participation throughout the jewellery project was promising. Sharon O' Regan, the Traveller co-ordinator at BIAS said that she had attempted to start Traveller groups in the past, but had failed due to 'unreliable time keeping' and poor attendance rates.³ At the end of the project, the women were happy with my involvement and said that they would like to continue. As one woman remarked, 'You are part of the group now, whether you like it or not, you'll not get rid [of us] that easily'.

Finally, my own aim was to investigate how community projects can positively affect art jewellery practices. The project directly and positively affected the development of my new body of work and resulted in the development of two series: 'This is Me Today' and 'Like/Different'. From the beginning of the project, I aimed to use the data collected during the project as well as the use of participation as a means to inform my designs. If we refer back to the graph in Figure 1, I had placed participation after the initial analysis and before the synthesis of an idea, with evaluation happening at the end of this process. Within the graph, I allowed for evaluation to feedback into each part of the design process but in actual fact, each stage fed into the others continuously. This meant that at every stage the project was analysed, evaluated and altered, allowing it to develop and evolve as needed.

It could be argued that the role of participation was unnecessary in this project. After all, jewellery has long been designed through traditional means of research. I believe, however, that although I could have developed designs through reading, gathering images and watching programs about Irish Traveller culture, the ability to actually meet, engage, work, and develop a relationship with women from the Irish Traveller community greatly aided my ability to develop designs which avoid clichés and stereotypes. Yet, through the participatory project, I observed none of the gaudy, over the top and often overtly suggestive wardrobes as shown on recent televised media. I witnessed a community that was, like all other communities, made up of individuals, each with their own sense of style, outlook and opinions.

In my design, I actively integrate key quotes that came up during the project, as part of my titles for each individual piece. The Irish Traveller women I met were bright, cheerful, open and enthusiastic. Theirs was a council-run site in London and though they did not have much money, a real pride could plainly be seen. This was portrayed in their appearance, as bright colours and creative accessories were worn regularly.

The 'This is Me Today' and 'Like/Different' series focus on this love for colour and sparkle, while the use of materials stay true to the reality that in order to achieve the desired effect on such a limited budget, the women often had to adapt, alter and restyle existing items themselves, using the limited resources available to them.



Figure 3: Example of necklace from 'Like/Different' series created by Laura Bradshaw-Heap. Title: 'I don't judge a person for who they are or where they come from or what they are known as...' Image courtesy of Jennika Argent.

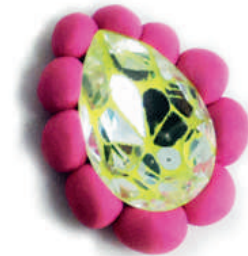


Figure 4: Example of brooch from 'This is Me' series created by Laura Bradshaw-Heap. Title 'This is Me (Jen)' Image courtesy of Laura Bradshaw-Heap.

Final Thoughts

Many jewellers have begun to tackle the issue of engagement and participation within their practices. Laura Cave, Kiff Slimmons, Yuka Oyama and David Walker all have attempted to find a means to integrate participatory art methods into one's practice (Bradshaw-Heap, 2011a). The flexibility within community art and participatory art allows each jeweller to develop a project in a way that works best for their practice. All the jewellers I talked to were positive about their experiences and all intended to continue working in this manner.

Through the development of the 'This is Me' project, I showed how it was possible to combine the aims from a number of different parties – the organizers, the artist and

the participants – to create a project that satisfies all. Issues such as a lack of funding and time constraints threatened to diminish the outcomes of the project. However, by creating a shared dialogue between all involved and ensuring everyone had a say in how the project would develop, it created a sense of shared ownership over the project.

Since the 1960s, contemporary artists have been developing means to engage, be it through performance or community projects, with peers or with the public. This resulted in the development of performance art and interactive art, leading to a wealth of practitioners who have embodied the concept of engagement within their practices (Bishop 2006, Kester 2004). Yet, art jewellers still work in isolation. As mentioned above, for the discipline to connect with a wider public and to allow for its very survival, jewellers need to come out from behind their jewellery benches and engage more. This was done through this project and showed that participatory projects can be developed in a way that positively affects art jewellery practices. I believe that the development of participatory projects is a realistic alternative practice that can offer new means of investigating, researching and inspiring future designs. This way of working will not suit all, but I do suggest that developing projects that engage, when done correctly, can have a positive impact on art jewellery practices as well as on the communities involved.

1. This is approx. 0.5 percent of the total national population in the Republic of Ireland. Central Statistics Office. *Census 2006 Volume 5 – Ethnic or Cultural Background (including the Irish Traveller Community)* (Prn A7/1445) Dublin: Stationery Office.

2. Quote from conversation recorded during project. It was also noted that practices such as ‘grabbing’ were given prominence in this program. This is when a teenage boy ‘grabs’ a young girl and attempts to get a kiss from her by means of force. However, none of the women had come across this practice before. One woman described it as ‘real sexual harassment that was shocking’. A study cited in a paper by the Equality and Human Rights Commission in 2007 found that 81% of Irish Travellers had experienced domestic abuse. Another report from Ireland, states that ‘The participation of young Travellers in post-primary education remains virtually non-existent’, due to a number of social, cultural, economic and systemic issues. (Harran 1999).

3. Bad time keeping was something the women in the group commented on themselves, saying it was common for Irish Travellers to be late.

Biography

Laura Bradshaw-Heap is as an applied artist who has successfully run her own jewellery design business which sold to galleries and shops all over the UK, Ireland and the USA. She has just completed a Masters in Jewellery Design at London Metropolitan University and will be continuing her studies with an MPhil in Social and Cultural Anthropology at UCL. Laura is constantly seeking new ways to engage new audiences as a jeweller, curator and through her research, with a focus on participation and interdisciplinary practices.

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