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Hide and seek: playing with visibility

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Published version

SHAW, Becky and BUTLER, Rose (2016). Hide and seek: playing with visibility. In: Putting Space into Action, University of Huddersfield, 30/9/2016. (Unpublished)

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Differences between participation, the participatory and notions of public engagement.

Putting Space into Action

Intro

Recently we've been thinking about visibility:

- The politics of what gets made public and what doesn't,
- About how hard it is to understand the mechanisms through which practice gets made visible,
- About the framing of art in public space- where it begins and ends
- The framing and production of 'participants'
- and about how difficult it is to see what is in front of us and what are the strategies we can employ to enable us to see: making something hidden 'visible' is characterised as an act of resistance, but is it?,is it resistant enough? What happens if we play with hiddenness instead of visibility?

Discourse about visibility of course has a long history. Performative and participatory practices often traditionally eschew the visual, but its noticeable how metaphors and practices of visibility remain central to debate about participatory and or public realm art practices. Examples of the value placed on the visual are articulated in many places: institutions seek visible evidence that a community has engaged. People need to have 'been seen' to be engaged, and often this is in the form of their bodies been seen in images.

Histories detailing the significance of community art (like Owen Kelly's 'Storming the Citadel' explore the role of art in generating engagement, politicizing and using visual tactics to make marginalized people more visible (or, the equally well used metaphor, to allow their voices to be heard. Recently Stephen Wright (2008) has suggested that contemporary participatory work does the opposite of making visible – making participants invisible *again*. Writing more about the process of artists collaborating with non-art specialists, I've speculated whether the process of collaborating, especially its conflicts, allows us to see each other for the first time- to understand how different we are to each other.

Context

We were invited by The Cultural Institute to work with the FNFNM at Kings college- to explore what utopia might mean to nursing and midwifery doctoral students. These collaborative projects were the 'side-show' to the larger 'blockbuster' art projects in the year long UTOPIA 2016 festival. This is, of course, a familiar cultural democratic exercise in engaging publics and making the student visible- alongside the 'main event'. This project does not begin with a public space, but it does begin with a kind of 'public'- at a University, and in a healthcare context.

We work as practitioners, so we are going to talk through practice, and how making produces insight, questions and problems - rather than talk about the 'end effect' of the work. If we talk about the work 'first' there is always the tendency to validate and explain it after with the theories of others. If we talk about theories of

public and visibility first then the work just functions as illustration. How might you articulate how action itself- in this case, a type of playing, functions as a means of testing and understanding and seeing?

We began by inviting PhD students at FNFNM to meet with us to talk about utopia. We met at the Florence Nightingale museum, surrounded by a photographic frieze of historic images of nurses. I took photos of their eyes and hands only, a simple bit of visual process that revealed changes in focus -near and the far, inside and outside of their context and the frame. They never meet our eye.

The group consists of nurses and a midwife, but also healthcare managers, genetic counsellors, clinicians and an ex-occupational therapist. We began by questioning whether utopia meant anything to us at all. The spatial 'dimensions' of utopia, as a 'no-place', bore a surprisingly useful parallel to the edge-less space of research where new researchers must invent an entire new working structure. Research design generates a new timetable and dictates new spaces. The group knows how to perform competently and authoritatively in the demanding spaces and public life of busy wards and health centres, but they felt less sure about the visible performance required to be a doctoral researcher.

Even if research focuses directly on the familiar daily context, the researcher must be a double agent- moving between being inside and outside at the same time. The movement between roles comes with its own difficulties: a change of identity, a loss or search for new belonging, and patients who change into subjects.

Spatial analysis
The ideal of medical research is to move findings from 'benchside to bedside' quickly. This generates concrete images of two distinct, material spaces, but it offers nothing that explains the space or movement in between. Movement, however, figures a lot in our conversations. One person describes movement on the ward between beds and curtains. He describes needing to make ten steps in one direction to achieve a task, being given eight new ones on the way, but solving six other tasks through the encounters on the way too.

We talk about seeing, observing, witnessing and experiencing, and what these feel like in research and healthcare practice. Witnessing veers from the profound significance of witnessing struggle in crisis situations and after treatment routes are exhausted- and the significance of written records to manage legal redress. The role of seeing, witnessing and experiencing has a very different tenor in the relationship between patient and carer, in researcher and subject, and in artist, participant and audience.

Given the conversation on place and time, we take the conversation to a specific place, the Simulated Learning and Teaching Centre at St Thomas'. The SAiL Centre is another utopian space- it looks like the space of practice but it is wholly a theatre for teaching.

The group are invited to materially analyse the space, so they photograph textures and surfaces, look up and down, inside and outside storage and look from patient and staff perspectives. The group disrupt the space, moving the model 'patients' into new scenarios, looking into normally hidden spaces, and exploring what it is they love and hate about the way healthcare works. Two nurses unpick ingrained emergency training by systematically reordering the contents of the crash trolley on the floor. Rose and I edge nervously round the 'hallowed' space but the research students take liberties, stand on chairs and laugh. They know exactly where everything is and how to put it back.

Playing hide and seek with kids you notice the difference in how it feels to seek and how it feels to hide. In hiding you become scared to breath, and you notice things about your environment you haven't seen before. In seeking you are unexpectedly vulnerable as the hiders hear you and sometimes see you, but you can't see them. Not one of your movements is missed. Walter Benjamin writes about this experience in a small text,

describing the child 'enclosed in the world of matter' and how 'behind a door, he is himself door'. Benjamin's description of how environment and person become indistinct felt significant and rich, and it seemed right to use hide and seek to explore the SAiL centre space.

So, in one evening we play hide and seek:

We play and we film the process as observers, then the seekers wear go pros, then the seekers have to catch the hiders with cameras, and then the hiders are mic'd up- the friction between the body and the environment materials. Its rough footage, and then Rose looks for the film

TO DO: TIDY AND STRUCTURE BELOW

Initially doubting the feasibility of hiding in a transparent, clinical space, the research students became experts, using subterfuge, distraction and bluff.

So the benjamin text with the hide and seek – whilst the hider is hiding there is the space of indeterminacy before the state of transformation.
The simulation centre is a space of transformation an in-between space neither real or not real.
The indeterminate space, is this a space of imagination, of research, of metaphor, irony, humour – slippery states, fluid spaces.

But we are changing the function of the space- but through action, not through representation. Action/play is a mode of looking- we are examining and unpicking the space – its materiality and its social construct- not separable.

Using 'action'/acts of seeing to see social and institutional space/and its construction- afresh- and reproduces it? As a social space.

Healthcare spaces- public or private?

Healthcare- absolute privacy needed but also needs to be welcoming. Protection from personal intrusion at the same time as being invasive.

Education space- but also performance/observed.

The blinds- etiquette- contentious. Power

Equipping participants with 'agency' techniques to see- the context to see.

Using photography as viewing tool- thinking about looking, how they see and interpret it. The video- simply documentation and audio. Close microphones- muffled noise- right into the participant- nearly in their body- the friction between them and the materials.

The way it was filmed was already broken down-

The way its filmed: usually I am structuring the image- looking for a representation. The camera is not set up in places where we think they will hide- we don't set the camera up here- sometimes the camera has to swing round looking for them

Conclusion

In exploring the qualities of visibility in roles for our Kings students, the work also openly problematizes their visible presence as participants in *our* art process too. The work then, offers the means to see the social mechanism by which things and people become visible.

Emma Hedditch/Caroline Meunier's essay 'Becoming Public', and my own essay on collaborators/artists becoming visible to each other- so visibility is something problematic attached to performance, but also something positive as it is a necessary part of community.

it is an order of the visible and the sayable, which determines that some activities are visible and that some are not, that some speech is heard as discourse while others are heard as noise
Jacques Ranciere 1995

'What determines which bodies and aggregates of bodies are visible or invisible in the perceptible order of things? What assigns them their coefficient of visibility is what Jacques Rancière broadly refers to as the 'police'. Not the police in the crassest sense, understood as the bludgeon-wielding wardens of the law; but the police in the broadest sense – in other words, the often invisible set of institutions that ensure the prescription and regulation of the existent arrangement of what is not legitimate, but literally perceptible'.

For practices whose self-understanding stems from the visual arts tradition – not to mention for the normative institutions governing it – the problem cannot just be overlooked: if it is not visible, art eludes all control, prescription and regulation – in short, all 'police'. In a Foucauldian perspective, one might argue that the key issue in policing art is the question of visibility.

What happens when artists use their reflexive competence to inform symbolic activities and configurations without laying claim to it as art? If they do it in collaboration with scientists – as is the case of the Critical Art Ensemble, for instance – they may enhance the visibility of the police lines around the production of scientific knowledge, revealing science to itself as a capital-intense culture of experts – bringing together technocrats, academics and investors – all of whom belong to a sort of *epistemic community*, sharing a common intellectual and above all axiological and ideological background.