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PLACE WORK KNOWLEDGE

The Enigma that is Platform-7: CWL Creative Voucher, The Silent Cacophony case study

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The Enigma that is Platform-7:
CWL Creative Voucher, The Silent Cacophony case study

"If you have a gun with one bullet, you can shoot one person once. If you… [perform] in front of an audience of 10,000, you can affect every single person."

One of the artists involved in this project gave us this word picture, one that resonated with the reflection on war and loss, memory and the power of performance to create an affective connection that can be part of a generative process that characterises Platform-7's approach. It served as a clear reminder of a theme that we stress throughout that 'impact' might be understood in a variety of ways and forms.

1.0 Approach

The focus of this project is not to evaluate the success or impact of the event/events that Platform-7 (P7) curate; rather it seeks to discover the ways of working, and future directions that P7 may take. We want to understand process and outcomes in a broader context. In this sense we are not interested in the audience, we bracket it out. Instead we look at the process and the impact on the artists and artistic practice. This marks out this piece of work, and makes it innovative in the perspective and approach from the normative concern with evaluation of outputs in the form of audience reaction. We offer a complementary perspective. Accordingly our concern is with practice and process. P7 is an unorthodox organisation and accordingly we have taken a more anthropological perspective and suspended normative assumptions about what should, or we might expect to, happen: we follow what does happen, and the accounts of the (artistic) participants.

1.1 Platform-7

Platform-7 has worked on a number of themes, Silent Cacophony (SC) the focus of this report is remembrance; another, the Tights project which we also touch on here, has been recycling. Before looking in detail at SC we offer some insights into the 'tights project' that is

characteristic of P7 activity in that it is driven by a core concept and set of ideas, then artists are encouraged to 'run with' the ideas, to test their imaginations and those of the audiences. As we'll see one of the challenges is to capture the learning and reflection of those in and working on the project itself, and to select and capitalise particular aspects of it. In part because they are emergent, and in part that their impact or insight is not always immediately apparent. P7 often presents itself as something that hopes not to exist; not in a sense of willed redundancy, but in the sense that it privileges the performance and audience experience and removes the barriers to interaction and questioning: it seeks transparency, and aspires not 'get in the way of' the art.

One of the challenging things about P7 practice is that it is (analytically) a mingling of performance art practices and advertising practices. Which is another way of saying it is about communication. This is not an art that seeks to ironise advertising, or reproduce advertising as art; rather it can be seen as 'reverse advertising'. Advertising usually works through the development of a mono-dimensional and idealised image of the product, which the consumer is led/sold to desire and buy. The tactic is to close down, focus and to segment. The emotional engagement is shallow and passing, but generated to produce desire for the purchase.

Platform-7's practice is opposite; it is not reductive, but instead exploratory and expansive, one that is resistant to the stamp of a single meaning. It is rooted in an emotional engagement that is brought to the project by the audience; and thus rather than being divided and segmented as audiences they are united by their diversity of their own responses to the practice.

One very strong element of P7's practice is the triggering of memories and emotions, and community, and thus the production of ready empathy for others that have not been previously met, but have a shared experience. It is this production of connection that is critical, and very powerful. Another dimension of P7's practice is material culture, or things; memories and experiences are associated with objects and places, often banal, that we can all recognise in our lives and hence they are powerful conductors of memory and emotion. In the tights project, the tights as an intimate owned/donated object that can serve as hooks for stories. Later the artwork of the 'tights ball' (constructed out of the donated tights) is a powerful symbol of waste, and our connection with that; but it is also a striking art object solid and large compared to the light and ephemeral tights: one that can be placed in, and moved around, public spaces and used to provoke more yet more debate. Likewise the making of clothes out of (donated) tights is a potent re-use/re-imagination demonstration.

A novel logic of practice is one thing, but the application of it, and the management, or direction, of events is a particular and unique skill that requires a particular insight: this is what P7 excels at. It appears that the artists are also encouraged to be mini-case studies themselves in projects. What binds them to the project is what binds the audience as well – a shared sense of storytelling, and sharing emotions. Like audiences, the performers have a variety of reasons and perspectives. But, this does not seem to undermine the project at all; it perhaps makes it stronger.

What Platform-7 offer are new dimensions of experiences and stories, a way to communicate things that may have been lost, or never before experienced. The power is usually through the articulation of an affective linkage with things and/or places. This is – crucially – not an imposed story, the sort of common practice of advertising or branding. On the contrary, this is a connection that hails from the object/place/people. The result is not a unitary 'brand consciousness' but an emotional attachment that works for people in different ways. It is powerful because it draws on a personal memory or feeling and articulates that to the event. We might contrast this with 'expressed demand' of economics and product supply. Significantly, the emotional connection that P7 specialise in is precisely what might be regarded as the 'holy grail' of current marketing and advertising. Accordingly, it is important to note that evaluation that might be appropriate to product sales may not be appropriate to the depth of engagement; they may be measured or understood as two separate discourses. This challenge lies at the heart of evaluating the 'impact' or character of transactions between human beings.

The challenge P7 faces is to consider how these insights and practices, and the information produced, can be used (beyond the event): put simply is there a market/demand for it, if so where? The strongest element is the approach/ methodology; and the articulation of emotions and experiences though an experience 'unlocking' them. This produces a far more 'authentic' range of perspectives and insights about things and places. The exploratory art practice is critical in opening up these different perspectives (although not limiting of them: an invitation to think and feel). This is after all what advertising seeks to do, but arguably, has pursued it in a 'lazy' way by telling consumers what to think.

It is for this reason that one area that Platform-7's work might be seen as useful is in the generation of alternative visions, for planning, redevelopment, for new uses; for political or ethical campaigning (again, which often uses the old advertising model, rather than the 'reverse' model implied here). We reflect upon these challenges later in this report after the SC study.

Whilst the information produced in a project such as 'tights' is intrinsically interesting, in particular cases it could be 'mined' more, it is not clear how it might be sold on to a new use. It could be useful if it was commissioned, to find out about x: a topic. However, that would create a number of ethical issues relating to the art practice, and the practitioners and publics. How would the public/artists feel about the 'affective product' of their art being re-purposed, especially for commercial gain, or for products /causes that they might not agree with?

Thus, the methodology of the tights project gives some understanding of the challenge of managing and developing innovative and emergent projects: the types of knowledge and insight, and emotion and affect, which P7 activities may produce. In the tradition of action research we fed back these insights to P7 so that they could be incorporated in their next iteration: SC. The creativity generated in P7 actions is very apparent, the affective impact on participants and publics are also very clear. The on-going challenge is what to "do" with this

affect, emotion and reflection: how to mobilise these ideas and forge a sustainable model for P7, and create capacity to exploit aspects of this innovation. We offer a further reflection on these questions through our analysis of another P7 project, Silent Cacophony, which offers a different insight into P7 activities.

2.0 Silent Cacophony

In this section we examine the SC project in some detail, focusing on the participants, the artists, and their reflections on the event.

2.1 Character

Silent Cacophony (SC) offers an opportunity to reflect upon the 2-minutes silence practiced in the UK as a mark of remembrance of the end of the First World War, and latterly the dead of all armed conflict. The normative commemoration is linked to the symbolic red poppy, and formal state events of memorial at 11am on 11 November. The 2-minutes silence is a pause for reflection. This moment has become institutionalised over time, and also with distance from the events and death of protagonists it has become less universally practiced. There is much debate about the symbols, the red poppy and its adoption by the state and linking with national triumphalism, and the formal, state -dominated nature of the event; such is the nature of invented traditions and culture: they are mutable and change. These issues will become increasingly salient in the coming year (2014) with the year of reflection on the centenary anniversary of the outbreak of WW1.

SC represents a novel intervention onto sensitive political and cultural territory. On one hand it offers an informal, civil society, based response to the 2-minutes of silence. On the other, it offers a reflection on the process of reflecting, a particular theme of P7s work. The videos of P7s 2012 events (No Man's Land) are stark in their contraposition of the (apparent) public non-observance of the silence, and the (contradictory) silent vigil observed by the artists on the normally vibrant busker spots on the London Underground system. Another layer of meaning was that the stations proximate to locations bombed during WW2. Finally, there is the word play on silent and cacophony, which resonates with inner turmoil and terror of war.

P7s 2013 event SC took this theme further and explored a variety of other sites in London, again subject to bombing, for a reflection. Artists were given a free rein as to how they structured their intervention: but a critical element of it was that it was time and space specific. Artistically, this chimes with the trend to temporary site-specific work and its essential impermanence and reconfiguration of audience as participant. So, SC has high art concepts; as well as engagement with political and social practices; as well as not just being site specific but engaging in those specificities.

As Platform 7 reported at the end of the event, "Silent Cacophony was a hugely successful project and everyone was really pleased with the outcome. We ended up with 31 London events, 4 around England and 4 internationally, and approximately 135 actively participated

in making the event on the day. The gallery is being built now on the P7 website with a number of events showing plus the blog is around five pages long and continuing to grow."

2.2 Audience and participants

As suggested above part of the temporary site-specific movement in art has been to seek to transcend the audience-artist dialectic, to question the mono-directional and unitary-meaning in art. Some artists see their role as provocateurs, in the sense that they seek to generate a 'different way of seeing' or understanding. Others simply want to have a more engaged or democratic dialogue.

As noted above, to an extent the audience was in part fortuitous and part planned (social media had communicated locations, events took place in the public realm and thus was open to chance encounter). From the perspective of our study we were interested in what sort of challenge this presented to artists, as well as P7, and how it was resolved.

Moreover, as noted below, the challenge of doing something in the public realm requires engagement with public and private agencies that govern such spaces: this was a logistical barrier. Finally, the viability was not dependant on a 'paying' audience; in this sense the paymasters were grant giving, or donations (monetary of time). This involved some finance for artistic participation, for organisational time and publicity. Of course, behind all of this is the role of grant application and raising finance without which the event would not happen. Capping it all, there needed to be a vision, initiator, and management of the whole process.

Accordingly, what we explored was the 'hidden iceberg' of activity that sustains any cultural performance. In this sense we take our lead from academic work on cultural production systems that have sought to examine and understand the process of cultural production above and beyond either the artefact or performance, and in so doing explore the range of value and values produced.

3.0 Analytic themes

Our interviews with artists generated a wide range of responses; we found that the majority of comments could be grouped around three main themes.

3.1 Artistic practices

In a simple sense participation in SC is like a small commission for an artist. Of course, employing an artist is generally different to employing a plumber; for the most part the artist is expected to produce the unexpected, to be creative. What is different about commissioned work, from 'freely occurring' work is that some form of direction or limitation is imposed externally. The task of the artist is to interpret, and re-articulate, his or her own ideas and experience to 'speak to' a new context. Artists told us of their appreciation of P7's curatorial role and methods.

The comments of some of the artists interviewed captured this:

“the projects tend to be very thought-provoking and open-ended, and that this allows considerable freedom to develop in alignment with my own experience and practice”

“ the difference between P7s project and others is the excitement of being challenged, and being able to sink my teeth into something.”

“ it had the effect of drawing things out of people that they wouldn’t necessarily talk about “

This explains why SC presents challenges and opportunities beyond simply being hired (however, for some artists, especially in early career, this was the most important). Artists actively sought out, or relished in the opportunity to engage with the SC project for a number of reasons associated with boundaries. Primarily they were given a concept and asked to consider how it might be applied in a fixed time, and at an appropriate place. The creative challenge was to interpret the brief, so that it worked in the time and place. In this sense artists were given a lot of choice, which was unusual, and a welcome challenge: in short it was a spur to creativity, they were being 'pushed' outside of a comfort zone. Experienced artists liked this in particular.

One artist commented,

“ this project has the potential to take you to new grounds (a different new level) with my [practice] as well. Therefore, there is a strong personal motivation for development.”

The particular challenge and risk that SC presented was the public and 'boundless' nature of the intervention: anything could happen, and anybody could react; this is unique challenge of performance art. For some artists this was really challenging, or indeed frightening.

However, it was clear from the majority of responses that SC added a new layer of import for participants, namely the fact that others were engaged in related activities at the same time, and the same purpose. Other performances were not seen by most, but the idea of a collective action, and the notion of a 'community' doing this was powerful for artists. It is something that many said they seldom gained from their practice, which generally was a lonely and isolated activity (see below).

3.2 Place/Time-based

As noted above, there is an artistic tradition of time based arts, time-space, and temporary site-specific work. This project, in once sense was a perfect set up. The timing of Remembrance Day is quite particular, and well known by public and performers. The context was known but open to re-interpretation; and the 'stage', the place, was the source of narrative and intervention. But, moreover, as it was taking place in that specific space there

was further resonance, revealing the often forgotten palimpsest of pasts in place. This concentration generated for some a very intense reaction or resonance. Such interventions, for some, were powerfully affecting and affective. Both members of audience and performers reported to be more deeply touched than they expected; for those with a family connection, or direct of experience of war this was doubly so.

It is perhaps a surprise that such a qualitatively different affect is produced. In part, this can be surprise; in a formal theatre setting one is prepared and insulated from the spill over into 'reality' by the fourth wall. In situated performances people may be taken unawares; and performers surprised by the resonance of their actions in a particular context at a special time. The opportunity for new and very affective communication rooted in time and site-specific practices are clearly an interesting one for all forms of communication and public discourse.

Many of the artists who participated were,

"impressed by the scale of the event",

this was expressed in part as,

"being part of something bigger…that they are all becoming a part of one thing".

Others mentioned that,

"you often deal one to one with one institution or theatre. So it's quite intriguing that there is a whole network."

For some this impacted directly on their own practice,

"knowing that you are part of a bigger intervention / a collection makes it feel different…as an artist on the day you draw a lot of courage from that… the collectivistic process makes you feel that you can be (if you want to be) more adventurous or more ambitious on the day of the event…I take courage from others who are involved in this with me".

Artists were interested in how so many artists had the same 'prompt' from P7, but reacted to it is so many diverse ways,

"they had the same words, but they will make something individual out of it."

Moreover, the actual practice of community was important in challenging the isolation often felt by artists*,*

"a 'wash-up' event and via these events or other collective processes artists from different disciplines find new collaborative projects to work on together",

and,

"…they will not be able to assess their collective impact until they all meet each other".

Finally, artists appreciated the logistical preparation and permissions that P7 had established; many not really appreciating, until that time, what was involved. As one artist noted;

"…my eyes have been opened with respect to the amount of bureaucracy and coordination involved";

and, another, saying,

"you don't usually get an opportunity to perform in a public space".

3.3 Curatorial

What was striking from observing the event, and speaking to participants, is the role of curating: functionally speaking, this is what P7 does. Clearly, the immediately engagement and interaction is with the performers. However, the set up, the brief, and the social co-ordination, as well as the logistical and communications support lies with P7, and on the shoulders of John its' principal. There is a challenging issue, one common to many micro creative enterprises, can the founder be 'separated' from the company. In other words is the principal the greatest asset, or can the organisation/ company be 'spun off'.

John, or any person, taking on a producer/direct role is critical. This is a common role found in the creative industries, the person who must create the brief, convince others of its value, select and encourage participation from the right persons, manage them, as well as make sure that it happens within a logistical and legal framework: moreover, to more or less become invisible for the performance.

P7 is an efficient and effective machine to produce such events, and John is clearly adept at managing it. Like every successful person on such a role it requires a unique quality with personal relationship management, and some charisma and reputation. John's style is very much toward an open agenda to stretch artists by giving them autonomy. He works on setting the parameters. Participants, from their point or view sometimes saw this as chaotic and unfocused; but most appreciated the freedom and rose to the challenge, realising that John was creating an opportunity. This in itself is a much-discussed topic in the literature, and in practice, of how to 'manage creativity': its a delicate balance and its interactive (not all artists are the same), between too much, and too little, control.

One artist commented,

"sometimes it's about one ego, which can be very controlling. In comparison, P7 is not like that. It's not run by one ego. It's very different."

The way in which John uses his skills as an enabler is particularly valued,

"he gives you some stimulus to go away and use. It's a creative producer type of role.";

for others it is,

"*the way John works in that as an artist I feel very supported, yet free to carry out your own artistic practice in the way I want.";*

finally that his practice works,

"in terms of giving courage and making me believe in the process."

The whole set of events was held together by the powerful central concept, and webpage, and its success in articulating a variety of artistic responses. As noted above, the collective power of the network of artists was felt to be important. The webpages were critical in this respect 'representing' the network to its participants; something they only saw in material form at the final post-event party. Nevertheless there appeared to develop a sort of viral element to knowledge about SC and word of mouth was very important in recruiting artists initially.

The fact that John made the network transparent, that people know what others were doing, and created a social event was registered as significant by most participants, and a spur to wanting to work with P7 again, and/or with others engaged in SC.

In this sense P7, through SC and in common with other P7 projects, created a temporary hub that enabled a significant amount of knowledge exchange of practice and experience; networks that are commonly weak amongst artists working alone, or even competing for funds. This raises an interesting question, again common to all such organisations, that of sustainability. Put simply how to carry the knowledge over from one temporary project to another, and to avoid starting from point zero every time. Arguably P7 have resolved this problem in their practice through and number of strategies: first, P7 has an extensive online archive of all of its previous activities; this is an unusual and valuable resource; second, the use of web presence and social media, and conventional media in John's practice; third, John's personality and personal networks. These three packages of resources are as important to P7 success as the activities that they promote and curate, again, often this work is more or less invisible when set against the 'performance' and 'affect' that characterises P7 work. It is an asset that it would be easy to undervalue.

4.0 Insights

4.1 Summary points

SC was a very ambitious project, large scale, and needed complex logistical support and planning, and had little room for error in delivery. In this sense, it was a typical project based event. P7 clearly have the capacity to deliver such activities, whilst at the same time enabling artists to produce challenging work, and focusing a project on a very sensitive and important subject. The study that we have done, that focused not on the audience, but on the producers, offered a variety of insights. An obvious one concerns the work, and the challenges, that underpin such an enterprise and the particular skills needed to manage them.

The unorthodox perspective, to look at process, was in part dictated by P7 practice, namely that SC explored the boundaries of production and consumption, or audience and performer. The objective seemed to be one of producing affective reactions and a stimulus to reflection and insight. This action was amplified by the unexpected nature of performance for the public, by the site and time specific resonances of the work. This allowed us to consider 'impact' in a wider sense. Interestingly for the performers/artists there was much evidence of their practice being challenged, which might be expected as normal in artistic management; however, a further element was the collective nature of the action, which was a 'virtual' connectivity (a choreography), which impacted on, and stimulated artists greatly.

Finally, this project explored examples of the boundaries of art and politics, the formal and informal, the state and civil society. It offered challenges to normative interaction; also, it offered some potential lessons to the economic sphere where such relationship - producer / consumer - are in flux.

4.2 Learning

Clearly, this process is important if looked at more widely and also across projects if P7 is to maintain its dynamic. It also has to address the challenge of over reliance on short term and risky resource to fund projects (publicly funded commissions). P7 has developed considerable expertise in managing this, one might want to examine the trade off of time and effort and this sort of funding; and, related, the ways in which such sequential and short projects require investment in overarching organisational resources. Aside from the problem of scaling up activities, the balance of short projects and long-term organisation is the most common problem that micro-enterprises face. Many do not even achieve it, but others such as P7 find it increasingly hard to resource. The challenges described here are common, and especially acute in creative businesses organised on a project format. Clearly at present, the reliance on short term funding offers few alternative options. At the margins a proportion of the longer-term costs will need to be 'folded back' into each project.

It offers innovative artistic practice that is escaping from institutional norms, commodification and pre-interpretation. It offers in civil society realms new modalities of interaction that challenge normative politics, or individualised responses: a more collective response. It offers something very close to the cutting edge of business practice as well: the nexus of pro-sumption. So, we can track this modality of practice across the social, cultural

and economic realms. Hence, we can gain insight into practices and processes that extend beyond the scope of this event.

The P7 idea then is not to be didactic, but to generate reflection, and learning. For example, can SC change the way we think about remembrance? Can it offer insights into communication between 'producers and consumers'? In what ways does 'art' and 'artists' have a role? These are bigger questions but they are suggested by this work.

In the broader sense it is clear that SC/P7 are pioneering a model of a more interpretative and open discussion of topics; this is a means of carrying out a public debate, it is also a means for artists to reflect on practice. For artists, SC offered an unlooked for, but clearly needed, sense of community and common purpose. The role of such 'hubs' be they temporary or fixed, real or virtual seems to serve an important function in an otherwise fragmented art practice world.

This study has stressed that there is much more to look at in 'impact' terms that 'bums on seats'. As has been indicated much of what results as cultural performance is hidden and unnoticed; but it is a vital resource. We highlighted the logistical and social media knowledge that is necessary to sustain such activities. We have seen in the case of P7, it is not juts supporting, but can be the animating source of artistic activity. Moreover, we have pointed to the fact that impacts can be interactive and across networks of producers and consumers. In a sense activities such as P7 are testing new territories here.

4.3 Beyond

In this final section we are attempting to stimulate and challenge P7 with what we see, on the basis of our study, as a number of key challenges that may be faced. Hence, we pose provocative questions in the desire to generate constructive and long term responses.

There are a number issues that arise as a consequence of the affective impact of P7 and similar organisation's work; that is to create a resource and support facility for people who are distressed by what the reflection on difficult topics can raise. This is a social problem, but its point of event is at performance, or following it. Artists and funders might wish for profound impact, but sometimes it can be painful; this has to be recognised. Generally, as noted above, impact and outcomes are generally conceived of in instrumental ways in terms of attendance, or receipts. P7 achieves this type of result, but far more important is the depth of 'affect'. The question is how to assess or value such 'impact': in a technical or symbolic sense to get this issue on the 'balance sheet'. In one sense what this report has sought to do is to highlight this particular 'added value' that P7 activities deliver for artists, their practice and their careers, as well as for the public. In short, we have tried to make visible what might otherwise be peripheral or invisible.

This then leads us to a bigger question of funding regimes (for the arts). As we have noted not only are these short term, complex and time consuming to win, and because they are competitive they are risky in terms of long term prospects, as well as requiring and

increasing diversion of resources into obtaining commissions and grants. As pressures have been put on arts funders they have increasingly required a narrow impact result, one that mimics a variant of the business world.

Ironically, the private sector is increasingly coming to value the sorts of non-quantifiable impacts that arts practitioners are so good at delivering, moreover, many private practitioners across the economy look to the creative sector to provide the vital affective connection that will attract and retain their customers. Thus, it would seem that having identified the contribution of P7, one might conceive of it being successful in engaging private sector clients where funding could be greater, and contracts not so difficult to obtain. Clearly, it will require further research to target a particular niche that P7s skill-set could match. However, it is one direction worth considering.

This brings us to the remaining question: is what P7 does sustainable as a business model that is economically viable? On one hand, we can see that money is raised, and events happen. This happens in a sequential manner. It has some sustainability. Does it have a long life? This question is in part related to the boarder funding environment and structure of 'art donor agencies'. Accordingly, there are clearly potential challenges due to the risks of funding availability, and the reliance on one individual. This is not an uncommon problem to face for small enterprises; it marks a potential threshold to graduation to a different scale and/or scope of operation: this is a scenario that might be reviewed at this point. On funding the picture is two sided. On one hand P7 are experienced grant writers, and have success on the whole. However, on the other hand, the constraints of getting funding undermine and constrain the artistic vision; plus the overheads of grant writing are getting larger. The challenge, that P7 are clearly up to, is to continue to keep ahead of the funding environment. A potential difficulty is if the energy that has to be expended in getting funding erodes that of practice.

On the other hand, it is one option to not apply for public/quasi- public funding and self - fund activities. One way to explore this option would be to find part of P7 that can be sold as a service. One extreme would be to become a logistics/event organiser for hire. A more interesting direction might perhaps be to sell the 'P7 method': many consultancies USP as their 'method'. If the method could be codified and explored as applicable to revenue generating areas, this could be an option. An ideal case scenario might be that P7 could sell some of its knowledge that would create a bulwark against the short term funding environment. However, as noted above, it is unclear precisely which knowledge, and in what form, would be tradable in the case of P7 to achieve this. This is clearly a topic to hold under review.

A more positive direction would be to consider how P7 be made more robust in the face of the funding environment? Clearly, longer term project funding would give some stability. But funding aside (or related), further exploration of the clarification of objectives. This could be interpreted as soul searching, but perhaps better as a way of thinking of longer term strategy. Thus far P7 has been in an exploratory mode, each project a new adventure,

sometimes opportunities only realised mid-way. One future possibility is to identify and focus on these opportunities at an earlier stage in the idea of 'selling them on'.

***John (Platform 7) and Andy (City University) agreed that this report be an honest and critical analysis of the intervention. Andy offered the report to John for correction of fact; but the opinions are of Andy (and Kate and Aysegul). We all agreed that this was likely to produce a more productive exchange of ideas and challenges; we are thankful for John being so open and exposing himself to this: that is what he wanted out of the process, and what we were happy to offer.*