

SOCIALLY ENGAGED ART:

THE CONSCIENCE OF

URBAN DEVELOPEMENT

SOPHIE HOPE

I strap a small device onto two fingers of my right hand. It is a 'Galvanic Skin Response sensor' that measures my emotions and is connected to a Global Positioning System so that I can measure my physiological reactions to the environment I am walking through. The peaks and troughs, on a resulting map record my arousal levels, feelings of excitement and indifference. The couple I am walking with live in the nearby Millennium Village. We are walking around East Greenwich, an area of London that has changed dramatically over the past 50 years and is due to morph again over the next twenty-five years into "A new 1.4 million square metre master-planned community" [1].

The Millennium Dome, now branded 'the O2', is being developed into an entertainment, music, sport and leisure attraction by the American company, Anschutz Entertainment Group. Just beyond the Dome, the old hospital in East Greenwich is being converted into housing by English Partnerships. It is a strange environment, a combination of desolate wasteland, manicured park lawns and regimented lines of perfectly pruned trees. I used to bus or walk through this dormant prime real estate on my way to the station everyday when I lived near here. Large white domed structures hide behind high blue fences where I used to imagine secret tests and inventions were taking place. Now, well-established trees and shrubs have grown through the old concrete of these abandoned car

parks. As we walk around we discuss the changes in the area: the Beckham Football Academy; the active industrial buildings and factories; the first communications cable to be laid across the Atlantic and the progression of technologies since. Is this just like any other walk on a summer's afternoon? What is the significance of us mapping this walk? Who will use the data we are producing?

The experience I am describing was part of the Greenwich Emotion Map, a project by Christian Nold and one element of his ongoing Bio Mapping project. The final printed map includes the emotion data as well as images of the places visited by people on their walk, annotated with descriptions of their experiences. Christian was commissioned by Independent Photography (an arts organisation based in East Greenwich) as part of their programme Peninsula [2]. While Peninsula did not receive funding directly from the regeneration funds in the area, it was seen as a valuable asset to its development, as a member of the Greenwich Peninsula Partnership points out: "The role of projects like Peninsula is to take the fear away from these changes by getting people involved in what's going on locally ... People don't like coming to meetings, it's a way of breaking down those barriers and giving people a voice... Independent Photography are like the conscience of the area, (a constant reminder that) it's not just about maximising profits – it's a really good way of ensuring that that conscience is always there...". I will use the Greenwich Emotion Map as an example of a publicly funded art project in order to sketch a wider context in which much art takes place in the UK today and explore the possible meaning of criticality for an art practice that is approved, supported and funded to aid social change.

Socially engaged art practices are influenced by histories of activist, community, performance and conceptual art, all of which have challenged (to varying degrees of success) the notion of an institution of art based on individual production that remains at a critical distance from daily life. There are legacies of artists opening up their work to involve participants throughout the 20th Century. Artists have used people in the making of their own work, for example, when communities in Pasadena and Los Angeles built walls of ice for Allan Kaprow's *Fluids* happening (1967) or when 30 workers were hired by Santiago Serra who arranged them in a line according to their skin colour (2002). Artists have also tried to hand over authorship such as Yoko Ono in her instruction pieces (1961–2) or through the work of Tim Rollins and K.O.S. (1980's–now). Many projects that are considered 'socially engaged' today embody a variety of types of participation and complex networks of ownership (the same project may be at times participant-led and at others artist led). Indeed, this is carried over into cultural policy in the UK, which could be seen to be reliant on the somewhat contradictory notion of art as being something for everyone as long as it is judged as the produce of individual artistic genius.

Increasingly in the UK, people working in diverse aspects of contemporary urban society, from property developers to park wardens are turning to the arts for new ideas, regeneration, problem solving and community bridge building. The employment of artists in these (traditionally non-art) fields, where there are other issues and agendas at stake, is becoming the norm. Alongside the high profile, large-scale capital projects that emerged from the Lottery Act of 1993, there has been a spate of commissioned, community-based arts projects promoted as the road to urban renewal. These projects derive from New Labour cultural policy that has understood art and culture as central to making society better. According to a recent report by Ixia [3], approximately 61% of Local Authorities in England have public art policies linked to the local planning

system and increasingly other public sector and commercial organisations are commissioning public art, such as the commercial developers Land Securities. The evaluation of PROJECT [4] investigated the role of art in regeneration finding that: *"Public art was seen 'by some developers as bringing in to a scheme elements which give distinctiveness, character and identity, because these are indices of value and quality, and therefore add commercial value'. For others, public art was seen as a way of improving a development's chance of receiving planning permission and as a means of engaging local communities within the process of developing a regeneration project"* [5]. While the links between art and social inclusion remain, *"Social inclusion and the arts work together. DCMS aims to extend access to high quality arts. To achieve this, issues of social inclusion are at the heart of much that DCMS does"* [6], the recent McMaster report highlighted a shift in policy towards 'excellence' and 'judgement' of art over 'instrumentality' and 'monitoring'. The focus is back on the art rather than using art as a tool for social change: *"The driver must be not the achievement of simplistic targets, but an appreciation of the profound value of art and culture"*. Having said that, McMaster also asks that: *"Artists, practitioners and cultural organisations need to explore ways of communicating more effectively with their audience"* [7].

Despite this slight shift away from the instrumentalisation of culture, short-term arts programmes in deprived neighbourhoods continue to be endowed with the potential to reduce crime rates, build private/public sector partnerships, improve community relations and create new resources. These projects are based on the notion of the artist as an external agent, able to enter into a context with fresh eyes, offering ideas and solutions. When commissioned as part of regeneration schemes, a socially engaged art project can also become a lucrative marketing device to promote an area to potential businesses and buyers. Art is assumed to provide a positive transformation from bad to good, unbearable to bearable, socially excluded to included. This simplistic stance brushes over the complex, problematic relationships embedded in urban change in the

quest to create a glossy picture of participation and collaboration. Certain artists are now engaged in a serious and rigorous critique that reflexively approaches the role that cultural work has in creating the illusion of 'social inclusion' while actually increasing the division in wealth and poverty.

One of the loudest criticisms of this current situation (that shares some of the suggestions put forward by McMaster) lambastes the instrumentalisation of culture and calls for the reclamation and recognition of artistic autonomy. In their recent essay, *Championing Artistic Autonomy*, (2006) The Manifesto Club, for example, argue for artistic autonomy from "physical, political and financial restraints" (in order for the artist to) "realise a creative vision" [8]. The Manifesto Club was set up to "challenge growing policy regulations, instrumentalism and market-based thinking, all of which contribute to a culture of restraint". My question is, how does this fight for autonomy relate to an art practice that disputes the status of singular authorship of the artist and seeks to go one step further than challenging this 'culture of restraint' by coming up with alternatives to effect change? Rather than react to the current climate in a way that reclaims artistic autonomy, I would argue there is a need to urgently review the politics of social engagement through art by re-examining the critical potential of a socially engaged art within this funded system of regeneration.

STRATEGIES OF CRITIQUE

In the next section of this essay I locate the critical aspects of the Greenwich Emotion Map along four co-ordinates of criticality. These four analyses are based on my interpretations of three descriptions of public art by Suzanne Lacy, Mark Hutchinson and Declan McGonagle (each of whom break down their descriptions into four positions, stages or dimensions) [9].

They are: **anthropology**, **reciprocity**, **co-production** and **(f) utility**. Rather than insist that one mode of working is better than any other, I conclude by insisting on a combined approach as demonstrated in the Greenwich Emotion Map.

ANTHROPOLOGY

This approach, takes as its model the anthropologist or 'participant observer'. By entering a community to investigate it, the artist collects readings, recordings and evidence and turns this into their own artwork which does not filter back into the community. The work is about a certain community rather than made with or for a certain community. This approach can be seen in *State Britain* by Mark Wallinger (2006), for example, where the work directly references Brian Haw's Parliament Square protest but did not involve him. This particular approach does not involve a critique of the anthropologist's (artist's) own position. The focus of attention is elsewhere, on the subject matter itself (for example, the issue of freedom of expression and civil liberties in the case of *State Britain*).

This approach prioritises a notion of artistic autonomy but does not focus on the artists own implicated role in both effecting and being effected by the community she/he enters. This way of working acknowledges the power relations between the professional, paid artist and unpaid subject and does not try to hide this fact. Indeed, this rejection and distancing from the everyday could be seen as a repost to the commonly adopted phrase

in current social and cultural plans and policies: the use of art. By extracting the issues away from the place they came from, the work is presented as having no direct use-value for those communities who supplied the source material. This is not necessarily a negative aspect and may indeed be a more honest approach than one that attempts co-production. We can see an element of anthropology in the Greenwich Emotion Map as Nold, coming from outside of that community, adopts the role of facilitator, providing the tools to gather information about a group of people that he then collates, designs and presents as an alternative map of the area. While the map is authored by Nold (his name appears on the front of the map), the numerous participants are acknowledged inside and indeed, the contents of the map is reliant upon them.

RECIPROCITY

This stage builds on the anthropological approach in that an artist demonstrates some kind of responsibility towards the community they are working with/on whilst retaining authorial control. Martha Rosler points out how some people prefer to let communities or participants author and lead projects (removing the artist-as-author from the centre of things) while others present any interaction or community liaison as a fictionalised representation (re-establishing authorial control). Rosler finds it hard to agree with either of these stances, preferring a more complex dynamic between people [10]. This could also be the case with the Greenwich Emotion Map. Nold incorporates other people's stories whilst mapping their emotions and creates a collective narrative of the area. During this stage, the artist becomes more self-critical of her/his own position but this ability or permission to be critical often remains limited information for the amusement of the artists only. This has been termed by Lefebvre as 'critical knowledge' [11] and refers to the idea that those with 'critical knowledge' are those who are 'in on the act'. Are the participants of Emotion Map

critically engaged with the tools and conceptual aims of the project or are they just using those tools without that bigger picture in mind?

'Critical Knowledge' that remains with the artist can sometimes be cringe-worthy to watch, for example in the film *Czech Dream* (2004), a series of posters advertised the opening of a new cheap hypermarket on the outskirts of Prague where, during the grand opening, the film makers Vít Klusák and Filip Remunda documented the disappointed faces of expectant shoppers as they ran towards its fake façade. In this instance, the film-makers have the upper hand and in the making of an interesting film, patronise the jubilant Czech shoppers looking for a bargain. The critical engagement remains the privilege of the filmmakers and viewers of the film afterwards. It is hard to say who of those people who turned up to the staged opening had the 'critical knowledge' to reflect on how the project drew attention to the reactions to rapidly advancing capitalism in Eastern Europe, and how many were sucked into the prank and turned up to the opening of a new hypermarket they saw advertised to do their weekly shop. Maybe the 'critical knowledge' comes later, once you have calmed down and got over your embarrassment, shock or rage that comes with being fooled.

In a reciprocal arrangement, however, artists and participants are able to recognise (and exploit) the needs and expectations of each other. An artist may use people for the making of their own work while a participant may use the project for their own personal or financial gain. According to Nold, the Greenwich Emotion Map asks: "*How will our perceptions of our community and environment change when we become aware of our own and each others intimate body states?*". One of the participants in the project expressed how as an older person she had not had much contact with technology and that the project made her aware of how this technology in the hands of the wrong people has different connotations. She talked about how easy it is for the powers that be, to know who you are, where you are and how you feel. This reflects Nold's intentions for the project in finding a new way of using this technology,

reclaiming it and devising alternative ways of mapping an area. According to another participant, however, the technology became redundant after their direct involvement in the initial mapping exercise and did not provide any 'conclusions or directions'.

This leads us to deduce that participation in an art project does not automatically result in the politicisation and activation of the participant and could even lead to further de-politicisation if conceived as a mirage of social inclusion rather than the real thing. Walter Benjamin in his essay, 'The Author as Producer' of 1934 describes how production "*is able first to induce other producers to produce, and second to put an improved apparatus at their disposal. And this apparatus is better the more consumers it is able to turn into producers, – that is, readers or spectators into collaborators*" [12]. This statement would perhaps ring true to many practising artists today as something that inspires them to develop projects, create platforms and facilitate collective production. It could also refer to New Labour policies of social inclusion and the rising trend of corporate social responsibility through which much socially engaged art is funded to build bridges with local communities. This top-down process of empowerment, however, has been heavily criticised by the communities of 'consumers' themselves, as being patronising and vacuous. Through the veil of social inclusion (often delivered through community consultation and socially engaged or public art) 'participants' experience the realities of regeneration such as increased control, privatisation of public space and rising house prices. Recognising the reciprocal nature of engaged art opens up the possibility of understanding the work in different terms that leave the artists intentions and integrity intact and unchallenged (if this is what the artist wants to achieve), while others take from it what they want.

Moving on from recognising reciprocity, co-production involves participants becoming co-producers or co-authors, which further challenges the artist as sole author. In opening up the work to others for their input there is sometimes also a focus on an analysis and negotiation with the systems and structures that support the artistic process. This can be seen to some extent in the Battle of Orgreave (2001) for example, initiated by Jeremy Deller and filmed by Mike Figgis which was built on contributions and performances of those at the original battle on 18 June 1984 and re-enactors. The re-enactment and subsequent film screened on Channel 4 was a reminder of that day told predominantly by people who had lived it and for whom the repercussions are still being felt. A tactic used in the Greenwich Emotion Map, was to engage those involved directly in regeneration decision-making processes as participants in the work itself. The Greenwich Emotion Map and other Peninsula projects, for example, have involved both local residents, politicians and developers in joint workshops. This way it is possible to question the values placed on art with a wider community of people allowing these values to be disrupted and challenged not just by artists but also by those involved in its production.

Working in the context of a comparatively prosperous publicly funded cultural sector (in relation to other countries), has meant the critical aspect of socially engaged art practice has had to shift a gear from direct action (to activate and empower individuals) to question the very nature and meaning of a socially inclusive agenda being applied to art. Rather than becoming the vehicle through which urban developers can market their social responsibility, do such projects as Emotion Map have the potential to demand a more thorough, democratic involvement of different people in the inevitable development of the 'master-planned community'? This marks a shift in the focus of the critique to a questioning of the means of production, thereby unravelling the reason why the money is there

for the socially engaged art project in the first instance. The critique now involves a probing of the motivations of corporations and governments to empower and make producers of us all and questions the artists' role and position in carrying out these objectives.

The Greenwich Emotion Map does this by inviting people to question the nature of surveillance technologies by surveying and mapping their own movements through public spaces. It provides an alternative, multi-authored set of identities to the branded, slick and marketable identity of 'The Greenwich Peninsula' dreamt up by remote developers.

Equally, it could be seen to be paving the way for clever market research techniques to help companies decide which areas are 'emotionally productive' and therefore ideal advertising locations. To some participants the Greenwich Emotion Map is enticing people to take an active role in the changes in their area, to others it provides a diversion and illusion of participation. How does Emotion Map's usefulness to the developers of the Greenwich Peninsula balance with a collectively produced critique of the development of the Peninsula and how is that critique taken on board (or ignored) by the developers?

(F) UTILITY

This fourth approach incorporates elements of anthropology, reciprocity and co-production whilst becoming open for interpretation, redirection and transformation. The work takes off in all directions, each of which is equally significant. As we have seen, the Greenwich Emotion Map is schizophrenic in showing at times a useful community friendly face and at others a ruthless but all-important streak of irony (importantly – this latter aspect is developed by the 'participants' as well as the artist). By proposing models for activism, this fourth stage is analogous with Benjamin's apparatus for turning consumers into producers. The resulting Ordnance Survey-style Greenwich Emotion Map has the potential to become

an apparatus/tool for those involved to consider the implications of such a device. The official style of the map invites serious interaction while yielding surprising findings that you would not usually associate with a formal navigational tool. The map also demonstrates how map-readers can become the cartographers of their own environments. The participants became 'producers' in a process they would usually be the unwitting consumers of. The Greenwich Emotion Map attempts to incorporate a complex unearthing of social relations that make up the meaning and transformation of a place.

How is the map, the walk and the technology of the Greenwich Emotion Map used, adopted and manipulated? There have been discussions locally about this technology being used to map the content of local meetings in order to adopt a visual mode of communicating key issues or concerns to other groups and decision-makers. The Senior Regeneration Manager at English Partnerships and one of the participants of Emotion Map project, thought the emotion topography was interesting and could see how this could translate back to a developer and to architects: *"You could be mindful of this when designing... (it might) take a bit of a leap for some developers and planners in order to justify it as a meaningful consultation exercise ... I came away thinking – that was a serious study in human behaviour "*.

Returning to Walter Benjamin, the Greenwich Emotion Map has the potential to be understood as an 'improved apparatus' [13], or a tool for turning consumers into producers that has introduced a shared, 'bottom-up' notion of production that acts as an alternative to more dominant processes of change and regeneration happening in the area. The future use of the technology and the maps will determine to what extent the users turn themselves into producers. There is often value placed on the useful and useless aspects of art depending on the context in which it is produced or presented. For example, in an art context, one might claim the useless aspect is of utmost importance, adding to the ambivalence and ambiguity of the work. When at a meeting with a group

of planners one might stress the function of the work and its ability to add economic and cultural value to an area. Both aspects are important in that they hide the useless element to those who like to see only the functional side and the useful aspect of the project to those who deem such claims to be unworthy of art. In the case of the Greenwich Emotion Map, 'uselessness' in terms of not providing a clear outcome or conclusion, is not necessarily a negative aspect.

As in the anthropological approach, it was the artist's intention to provide possibilities and questions rather than solutions and conclusions. Pointlessness and uselessness could be a valuable strategy of resistance in a society that demands productivity, outcomes and quantifiable results.

It could be argued that an art that ignores or hides its useful side is unable to be political and that an art that purely promotes its functionality loses out on being able to be critical. Do we then need to acknowledge and revel in both the useful and useless acts in order to claim the political and critical aspects of art? It is the element of 'surprising functionality' that is significant here, that is, being useful in an unexpected way, rather than providing a useful service or carrying out a set of instructions. How can the Greenwich Emotion Map be useful in an unexpected way?

Emotion Map is not an obvious consultation exercise; on the one hand it evolves into a useful study and on the other it remains abstract and useful only for those taking part. For Emotion Map then, it is both the potential 'readability' and 'unreadability' that is important. The use-value remains the primary ownership of those taking part (the map-writers and readers) and the project resists co-option (due to its illegibility as an obvious piece of consultation) by those who wish to use it as a box-ticking tokenistic consultation exercise.

Political action lies in the possibility of finding something pragmatic in what appears to be absurd and to discover the absurd in the everyday. The critical potential of projects such as Emotion Map lies in the different (conflicting) directions experiences take and the ability for the people involved to respond and adapt to these influences and triggers.

By acknowledging that at times work will be artist-led and at others by participants, new opportunities to represent, reciprocate and co-produce emerge. This combined model of a critical socially engaged art that is funded to 'do a job' owes it to all involved that these triggers are unexpected. By acknowledging and exploring these different uses, approaches and values, funding can be used to expose some of these contradictions in the process of regeneration. Furthermore, the Emotion Map demonstrates how such projects could reflect the conscience of regeneration and urban development back onto those who have outsourced it in the first place.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Sophie Hope is a PhD researcher, investigating the relationships between art and society through research, writing, teaching and listening.