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Cultural Measurement on Whose Terms? Critical Friends as an Experiment in Participant-led Evaluation

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Introduction

This chapter explores an alternative approach to evaluating participatory public art projects involving the people that such projects seek to empower. It explains the concept of ‘critical friends’, the Critical Friends project and reflects on the findings of research carried out on two art commissions in North Greenwich, London, in the United Kingdom from 2008 to 2011. In the process of establishing a group of Critical Friends, participants became interviewers, researchers and evaluators, acting as ‘productive parasites’ to a process of socially-engaged, public art. Developed as an alternative approach to evaluation, the group sought to understand the qualitative experiences of other participants and to interrogate the motives, targets and politics of the commissions. Underpinning this inquiry are questions about the commissioning of participatory forms of art. Following an introduction to the context in which the Critical Friends project took place, the chapter goes on to focus on how the group reflected on the repeated or reluctant experiences of participation; their challenges to co-authorship; the uncertain relationship between the commissions and local democracy; and the shared, or not, sense of the absurd in the projects.

About the Peninsula project

The art commissioning organisation Stream is a registered charity based in North Greenwich, UK, since 1983. At the time of the Peninsula project, the organization sought to bring together ‘innovative art practice and local people’, stating that they were ‘committed to creative excellence and meaningful participation’ in all the work they produce (Stream 2009). The three-year programme of public and collaborative art commissions called Peninsula (2008–2011) involved artists from outside the area in which the project was based working with local residents.

Peninsula was funded by the Big Lottery Reaching Communities Scheme. The budget of £5,000 covered the artist's fees and materials, the costs of any outcomes (e.g. events; performances; interventions, including publicity, marketing and documentation), and was to stretch over six months. £5000 was also allocated for the evaluation of the project, which was used to pay Rebecca Maguire and me a fee for convening, organising and facilitating the monthly workshops and the photocopying costs of a Critical Friends magazine that we created.

Peninsula took place in the Peninsula Electoral Ward of Greenwich, which has a growing population due to large-scale housing developments. Previously known as Greenwich Marshes, the area was re-branded as the Greenwich Peninsula by the developers in 2007. It is a place of industry, housing, retail and entertainment, and the site of a new '1.4 million square metre master planned community' (Meridian Delta Ltd 2007), including the Millennium Village, consisting of 10,000 new homes still in the process of being constructed. The new developments on the old industrial land of the Peninsula are flanked to the south by existing residential areas of postwar estates and Victorian terraced housing.

During an early Critical Friends meeting, a representative of the Greenwich Waterfront Regeneration Agency expressed concern that the residents in the new developments on the Peninsula 'become insular and do not integrate physically, culturally or emotionally with the surrounding communities'. He explained how this was a concern that 'troubles all of us dealing with the regeneration in the area, [and is] something we're working hard to ensure does not happen'. The issue of dividing communities as a result of regeneration provided the backdrop to the Peninsula programme. The director of Stream at the time, for example, expressed their concern that the area 'doesn't become a contained, controlled space, that's lost its life blood' due to the redevelopment (Critical Friends 2008). A resident interviewed by a member of Critical Friends concurred in stating how 'the Millennium Village is way out there, not linked to anything, cut off from East Greenwich. Both are the poor relation to Greenwich itself' (CF 4 2008).

Peninsula had four main aims: to investigate the Greenwich Peninsula through local collaboration and participation, to stimulate debate to generate action and change, to develop connections and relationships between people across the Peninsula, and to experiment with different models of creative practice. There were three main strands to the programme: Community Voices, Youth New Media Training (which involved a youth radio programme, Fresh FM) and A Sense of Place (which became Performing Social Space). In a sense, one could say that Peninsula invited artists to administer creative participatory projects to act as counterpoints to the official narratives and public art initiatives delivered by the regeneration bodies.

About the Critical Friends project

Figure 17.1 Front Cover of *Critical Friends* magazine, no. 4 (March 2011), by Critical Friends, Greenwich, London

The Critical Friends project was devised by Rebecca Maguire and me in response to an invitation from Stream to evaluate Peninsula. It was an attempt to have a long-term conversation with a group of those residents, providing a space for their critical eyes and ears and re-distributing acts of critical reflection from evaluators, curators and artists of public art commissions to participants. It was also an attempt at divorcing evaluation from advocacy and reinstating its critical potential to question, intervene and raise issues that might otherwise be ignored, silenced or brushed under the carpet.

The term ‘critical friend’ has its roots in critical pedagogy and is more typically used in the context of education than in arts evaluation. Arthur Costa and Bena Kallick (1993) identify a critical friend as ‘a trusted person who asks provocative questions, provides data to be examined through another lens, and offers critique of a person's work as a friend’. They suggest that a critical friend ‘takes the time to fully understand the context of the work presented and the outcomes that the person or group is working toward’. The critical friend becomes ‘an advocate for the success of that work’ (Costa and Kallick 1993, 50). Critical friends can offer different perspectives where no one perspective is sufficient. Costa and Kallick identify the benefits in schools, for example, of a critical

friend who can offer feedback to students, teachers and administrators so they can reflect and adapt the learning process and how it is assessed.

This position can also be likened to that of the ‘shadow curator’ devised by Nuno Sacramento, and implemented by Deveron Arts in Huntly, Scotland, where the organisation invites external curators to query and critique ‘the assumptions of the institution’, creating a ‘mirror that when held up against a practice, highlights opportunities for critical development’ (Deveron Arts 2014). Similarly, Paulo Freire presented the notion of the ‘rational radical’ whose subjectivity and objectivity joins knowledge and action (1978 [1972], 17). This radical would not be blinded by faith in a particular cause, as ‘the more radical he is, the more fully he enters into reality so that, knowing it better, he can better transform it’ (Freire 1978 [1972], 18–19).

The critical friend, shadow curator or rational radical asks questions of a process, providing feedback and a different perspective on what is being carried out, with the hope of transforming it. In a similar vein, Chantal Mouffe (2006, 3) refers to the possibility of a pluralistic democracy through the shift away from antagonism between ‘friends and enemies’ towards agonism which is based on ‘friendly enemies’. Friendly enemies are adversaries with something in common – a shared symbolic space or set of principles and disagreement about their interpretation; for example, a student’s learning, the ecology of an arts institution or the commissioning of public art.

This approach to evaluation sought to contradict and confuse notions of so-called ‘good practice’ in commissioning and evaluation of art by providing a space for participants to critique the broader value systems underpinning commissioning and funding. Evaluation reports of publicly funded art commissions are typically carried out to demonstrate and justify that the money has been spent well, and all the aims have been met efficiently and within budget. They often read as uncritical advocacy documents, disappointing examples of self-censorship or well-crafted marketing pitches. The Critical Friends project started with the invitation to a group of local residents to devise questions they had of the role of art in their neighbourhood. These questions led

to the aims and objectives of the commissions being the objects of their research, rather than targets to measure against. The questions and methods of evaluation were devised with these past, present or future participants of socially engaged art.

Critical Friends: agency, political power and freedom

By 2008, the year Critical Friends began, the commissioning of participatory, socially engaged art was relatively commonplace, often connected to New Labour government policies of social inclusion, which had been promoted since they came to power in 1997. Participation had become a 'buzz word', often used in positive terms alongside expectations of empowerment. In his book *The Nightmare of Participation*, Markus Miessen pointed out that 'at a time when New Labour had turned everything into inclusion and everyone into a "participant", one started to wonder about the supposed innocence of the term, its real motivations, and the romanticised means of communicating it' (2010, 51). Miessen questions the idea of participation as a consensus-based, 'politically correct means of innocently taking part in societal structures' (2010, 54). Rather, he sees participation as war, and as conflict (Miessen 2010, 53).

Similarly, Barbara Cruikshank in her book *The Will to Empower: Democratic Citizens and Other Subjects* (1999) wrote about 'technologies of citizenship' as participatory and democratic schemes that aim to make individuals politically active and capable of self-governance (that is, turning subjects into citizens). But, she argues, as citizens, we are still made by, and therefore subject to, power. The commissions being investigated by Critical Friends, and perhaps Critical Friends as a scheme itself, could be understood as exercises in such technologies of citizenship. Cruikshank unpicks the history of empowerment and citizenship by questioning the underlying assumption that to empower is to gain agency, political power and freedom. She suggests that citizenship is based on the notion of the state helping people to help themselves and is still a mode of control, rather than emancipation and agency: 'the will to empower contains the twin possibilities of domination and freedom' (Cruikshank 1999, 2). There is a perpetual cycle of attempts (and

industries built on providing this empowerment service, such as the art-commissioning industry) to encourage participation, which aims to turn supposedly apathetic, dependent subjects into thinking, responsible, pro-active, independent, self-sufficient citizens. Participation has become a term used to imply a path to such empowerment.

This will to empower can also be connected to New Labour's policy of social exclusion and inclusion, which provides the backdrop to funding criteria for many art commissions, such those being investigated by Critical Friends. Ruth Levitas (2005) has written a thorough critique of social inclusion and the diminishing role of the state in a neoliberal society that increasingly outsources the management of poverty. She challenges the ideas of Amitai Etzioni who advocates social responsibility as a 'remoralisation of social life' and an increase in unpaid voluntary work through services to communities and families (Levitas 2005, 91). Levitas asks who Etzioni expects to disregard their own individual interests (the bedrock of capitalism) and carry out this unpaid social work on which communities apparently depend (Levitas 2005, 94). She also refers to John Gray (1993, 100) who suggests that welfare provision should be provided by families, neighbourhoods, churches and friends before the state steps in. This is extremely relevant where commissioned art is concerned, because commissions are generally framed to side-step radical redistribution in favour of helping people to help themselves. Through the socially engaged art commission, artists often become the facilitators of this self-provision and act as catalysts for Etzioni's 'remoralisation of social life'.

The Critical Friends initiative sought to create a temporary critical distance from the focus on empowerment and to question the positive spin on participation.

Projects investigated: In a league of our own and now hear this

Two Peninsula projects investigated by Critical Friends were 'In a League of Our Own' by Jayne Murray (Murray, 2008–2009) and 'Now Hear This' by Holy Mountain (Holy Mountain, 2010). In a League of Our Own was developed to respond to the Sense of Place brief, which called for a

participatory project 'which produces a multilayered response to the complexity of the area' and that 'might offer a challenge to the aspiration of creating a singular identity and a unifying sense of place through the process of regeneration' (Stream 2008b). Murray (2008a) proposed an 'egalitarian and open space for participation' based on the format of a non-competitive sporting league which offered 'each community in Greenwich the opportunity to participate and represent themselves through the activity of their choice'.

Murray (2008b) described her four-staged approach of research (meeting people), engagement (creation of the fixtures), dissemination of a book documenting the project, and evaluation of the overall process. Fixtures that materialised during this commission included an event for local birdwatchers at the ecology park; a social evening at Greenwich Millennium Village; and the event *One Minute of Your Time* held at the Greenwich Town Social Club where people were invited to bring memories, photos and stories of the local area. The project culminated in a pub quiz at the Pilot Inn on the Peninsula in June 2009 where local teams came together to answer questions developed by Murray during her meetings with people in the area, with prizes donated by local businesses and organisations.

Now Hear This was part of the Community Voices strand of Peninsula that focused on building 'community relations around common local issues of concern and to encourage involvement in issues around the area's regeneration' (Stream 2008a). In March 2009, they launched the project with a public call-out (by distributing flyers locally), inviting people to phone in 'dispatches' about 'a burning issue connected to the local area and the changes affecting local residents' and encouraging participants to phone in their dispatch from a location relevant to the issue so as to capture the sounds of the environments they were in. The phone-in dispatches were then collated to create a 'menu' of local issues to be used during 'The Local Conversation', a cafe-style event in a local park in September 2009. Visitors to this event used the menus to trigger

discussions, which were recorded and re-edited to make two ten-minute audio pieces launched in April 2010 in East Greenwich.

During the life span of the Peninsula, Critical Friends fluctuated between three and seven members and operated as something between a fan club, ombudsman, detective agency and productive parasite. Maguire and myself were paid facilitators. It evolved as an experiment in collectively deciding who, what and how the art commissions would be researched and evaluated, and shadowed the projects as they developed. The process involved Critical Friends members interviewing commissioned artists, staff of Stream, and a Board member of Stream; recording responses from neighbours; visiting other examples of commissioned art; and observing and participating in the projects themselves. There was also an ongoing process of the group rethinking and questioning the role of Critical Friends as a project itself.

Monthly workshops to create a self-published magazine provided a vehicle for the distribution of the findings of Critical Friends. Through the workshops, the group identified questions to ask of the commissioning process, reflecting on what it means to participate in socially engaged art, and trying out different ways of evaluating public and collaborative art from the perspective of participants. Cutting and pasting around the table together, the group worked out the best way to display the information they were compiling, as well as the kind of information they wanted to find out and the methods for going about it. The magazines aimed to communicate some of that research so that it could feed into the process of commissioning, production, critiquing and participation in public and collaborative art. While there was ongoing, self-reflexive discussion about our roles and responsibilities as Critical Friends, however, there was a reliance on Maguire and myself as paid facilitators for answers and direction.

The framework of the commissions

With Stream being (at the time) a stable presence in the area of North Greenwich, the artists they employed on short-term contracts could be considered as the variables that change as and when

funding and commissions are available. While the projects had fixed objectives and timeframes, the ideas and participants spilled over into one another. A Critical Friend, referring to the In a League of Our Own project, for example, asked, 'What if people want to carry on? The project doesn't just stop! The project can spur people on to carry on meeting and continue the work' (Critical Friends 2009a). She used the analogy of blotting paper to describe the way an artist may initiate a project but, for her, it is 'very difficult to put a value on these things because they're not just for now, they spread over', it is 'not just confined to the project', 'my enthusiasm goes to other people' (Critical Friends 2009d).

This analogy of the blotting paper reflected the way of working used by artists employed by Stream and the organisation itself, who 'try and extend times because you don't want to stop something if it needs more time so somehow we try and manoeuvre it a bit' (CF 2 2009). Due to the nature of the process-based work they commissioned, it was common for timeframes to overrun, and for the artist and Stream staff to work longer hours on projects than those for which they were paid. This appears to be the informal rule, rather than exception, in cases of commissioned art such as Peninsula. There is perhaps an incongruous relationship between a process-based, time-consuming practice illustrated by the blotting paper metaphor and the 'project' framework with a fixed budget attached.

Su Braden's research (commissioned by the Gulbenkian Foundation) highlighted that 'professional' artists were being employed to animate and enliven a community (1978, 123), rather than artists and communities initiating projects and collectively applying for funding together. Earlier, community art in the United Kingdom was connected to grassroots campaigning and artists were active in the communities in which they lived. The parachuting of artists into areas of 'deprivation' to 'animate' communities was beginning to happen as funding became more available. Braden's study found that 'professional' artists who were employed after responding to advertisements were rarely successful. She commented that this was based on their confused

misunderstanding of ‘taking the arts to the people’ and that ‘the causes of deprivation in such an area, apparent as they are, are ignored’.

Thirty years later, a programme such as Peninsula, where artists respond to briefs set by commissioners, with objectives influenced by funders, seems similarly poorly planned. While Braden was critical of this approach, for practitioners such as Murray and Holy Mountain, planning, meeting and organising remain crucial, integral aspects of a process that attempted to work with people to create a shared outcome. Yet, as Critical Friends discovered, there were tensions between opening up the projects to keep the process flexible and semi-devised by the participants; the artist maintaining control of the overall concept and the host organisation ensuring the project was workable and feasible within time and budget constraints.

Leadership of Now Hear This and In a League of Our Own was flexible, with artists, participants and commissioners ‘taking the lead’ at different times. The artists were not arrogantly ‘taking their art to the people’, but neither was there ‘creative equality with members of those communities’ (Braden 1978, 108). This may have been because the artists were contracted and paid to keep the project on track, and to devise some kind of feasible outcome. There was a tension between enabling the voices of the participants and having editorial control as artists. This was even more pertinent when an artist’s invitation to others to participate was met with silence or negative responses. Holy Mountain, for example, described the way they tried to ‘take a measure of people’s feelings and opinions and their relationship to the place where they live’ while balancing the ‘authenticity of those feelings and opinions with the artistic integrity of the project’ (Temple-Morris 2009).

Is my participation different to yours?

One of the aims of Peninsula was to ‘investigate the Greenwich Peninsula through local collaboration and participation’. There were many different types of participation that occurred through the Peninsula projects, from collaboration to spectatorship. A Critical Friend, for example,

referring to her observational role of Fresh FM, asked another Critical Friend who was contributing film work to *In a League of Our Own*: ‘Is my participation different to yours?’ (Critical Friends 2009a). These two members of Critical Friends were what the group came to call ‘serial participants’, in that they had been involved in many of Stream’s commissioned art projects, prompting the response from one: ‘It’s not my fault people keep ringing me up and asking me to participate’ (Critical Friends 2009b).

Critical Friends members identified different modes of participation in the projects, and suggested that being the audience of a project was no less significant than direct participation. The audience did not necessarily feel as though they were co-authors of the work, but that this was not a problem for them as the project was ‘someone else’s baby’. A Critical Friend, for example, stated, ‘I don’t see what I do as art, I’m assisting art’ (in CF 2 2009) and another talked about how the audience’s role was as crucial to the success of a project, just as with a live music performance. It was perhaps significant that there was not a sense of co-authorship from these Critical Friends over the projects and that this was not of concern to them, challenging the imperative to co-author or co-produce and that listening, ‘assisting’ and spectating are valid forms of critical engagement in themselves. While the members of Critical Friends were active interpreters, translators and storytellers in their own right, however, they were not always understood or acknowledged as such in the commissioning process.

A reluctance to participate (an unwillingness to be empowered)

While ‘serial participants’ might often be the first ports of call for commissioned artists trying to find out about the area, one Critical Friend, a storyteller and expert on local history, had received payment from Stream for advice he gave to the commissioned artists. ‘I’ve been both the willing participant and almost a consultant in a sense. I’ve benefited from the projects but I’m a little bit at sea as a local resident as to the overall legacy or purpose of some of the projects’ (Critical Friends 2009b). Critical Friends had expanded notions of participation, sometimes defying the parameters

or expectations placed on participation in an art project, or on Critical Friends as a group itself. Significantly, one Critical Friend felt she had to give up being part of the group because she did not have the 'headspace', saying, 'it needs more time ... to think and reflect and I don't want to do something half-baked which wouldn't be doing it justice'. Engaging in dialogical encounters that might lead to critical reflection is not necessarily a shared aim, or priority, for a participant.

Another Critical Friend suggested that he interview some of his colleagues who live in the area about why they have actively decided not to participate in Stream's projects to find out what their scepticism is about. Another went about interviewing her neighbours to find out what they had heard. One of the neighbours, for example, remarked how 'everyone's kind of in their own little circle, they've got friends, they've got family. This might sound really anti-social but do I really want to meet other people? I've got enough friends'. Another stated how they would not attend any of the events if they saw a poster: 'I'm not a person that would be involved in any community event anyway. I find it hard to believe it will work without pushing people to do it, offering a big incentive' (CF 4 2008). The motivation to make connections, get involved and create a sense of community identity was sometimes met with an unwillingness to be empowered on the terms and conditions proposed: 'To what extent are the projects imposed?' asked one Critical Friend (Critical Friends 2009c).

A failure to create interactions between disparate communities is sometimes blamed on what is understood to be the fragmented nature of an area full of 'lots of disparate people who are unconnected to each other [who] seem unwilling to make connections and move beyond their known environment'. Even the pub quiz, which brought different groups together, was considered problematic in that 'they didn't necessarily interact with one another' (CF 3 2009). There is perhaps a lost opportunity here to refocus the critique away from the behaviour of participants and onto the notions of empowerment that such art projects are intended to address. The 'will to empower' suggests and requires certain, 'correct' forms of participation and interaction in society.

An unwillingness to take part might reveal more about the construct of the art commission than the communities it attempts to engage. An artist's or commissioner's will to empower might be met with a participant's unwillingness to be empowered by those means. The projects may seem too open or too prescriptive, leaving no room for the participants to define their own means of participation. One can take or leave these extra-curricular activities in one's life depending on time, information, resources and interest. The professional, trained artist might be expected to bring a conceptual approach to a culturally barren landscape that did not realise what it was missing. The local populace inadvertently pays through taxes and lottery tickets for a service they never asked for or may never use.

Effecting change

'I thought maybe she was *The Secret Millionaire*' was an interpretation by a resident when they heard about one of the Peninsula artists in the area (in CF 4 2009). *The Secret Millionaire* is a reality television show that originated in the United Kingdom in 2006 in which millionaires go undercover in poor communities and, at the end of the show, reveal that they are going to give that community a large sum of money. This misunderstanding can perhaps be easily made – an unknown visitor enters a community and starts asking strange questions, perhaps offering to help and is recruiting volunteers to get involved in a community project. It might be disappointing to discover it is only a cash-strapped artist who is in town. The artist is not just offering a service to help the community, however, but wants to engage that community critically to rethink the environments they live in. This is not a financial gift but apparently something much more rewarding – an invitation for critical reflection and a proposition for communal action.

There is an assumption that the official channels of participating in local democracy (such as attending Council meetings, writing letters directly to elected Councillors or contacting relevant officers) are insufficient, dysfunctional or redundant. The Peninsula commissions aimed to provide opportunities for alternative modes of engagement in social and political life in Greenwich by

‘stimulating debate to generate action and change’. Critical Friends were questioning what this meant; whether the projects offered valid alternatives or ironic, performative gestures that pointed to the inadequacies of a political process. For example, there was confusion over the extent to which the projects were useful, and to whom. Now Hear This encouraged people to express their views about local issues and, perhaps, inevitably invoked a barrage of criticisms on dog dirt, rubbish and parking issues through its telephone message dispatches. It also stimulated discussion about broader political and social issues during ‘The Local Conversation’, where people explored local issues with each other, salon-style around tables. Referring to this project, one Critical Friend questioned whether the project was ‘about giving people a voice and some political power to bring about changes in their area?’(CF 4 2009).

Another Critical Friend who visited ‘The Local Conversation’ also questioned the ability of an art event to ‘stimulate debate to generate action and change’, relating it to his own experience as a political campaigner, querying what was being done to translate ‘good ideas from “The Local Conversation” into local practical action’. He reflected on his own ‘possibly futile experience’ of ‘knocking on every door in street after street in East Greenwich and asking the residents for their views, in order to inform political policies’. He pointed out that the subsequent “‘appropriate action by the appropriate authorities” may mean either inaction or that, with intense surveillance, what participants are recorded as saying and doing may be used against them by the authorities ... The ancient art of voice giving has often led to harassment, imprisonment or worse, not least of artists’ (CF 1 2009). Encouraging debate is not necessarily a positive in itself and could result in inaction, neutralising potential political action, or even further oppression.

Off the wall

Arts leaders Murray and Holy Mountain, and the Critical Friends members, all observed, listened, collated, edited, translated, critiqued and responded. For Critical Friends, the Peninsula commissions included an element of peculiarity to them. For example, one of Critical Friends

remarked how, 'art doesn't have to be serious: it can be fun; it can be pointless; and can create a certain reaction or emotion from the spectator or participant and that can be very uplifting'. Another described how the projects were 'odd, peculiar, fresh and new; something that's not normal in everyday life that people find it difficult to get a grasp of, but that this is what captures your imagination and leads you to ask more questions'. These intangible aspects of the work distinguished them from other community events not instigated by artists.

The question remains as to what constitutes the artistic element of the work, as the director of Stream, asked: 'Why are projects described in a certain way, e.g. "off the wall" etc. What does that mean?' In response to a statement made by one Critical Friend who said, 'I don't believe all art is political. The best art misbehaves', another remarked that 'if the misbehaviour is something that can be shared amongst the participants, then that's fine'. This was also echoed by a member of staff interviewed by Critical Friends who was interested in how the 'mischief and misbehaviour which we warm to as an artistic process' will interact with the aims of the projects which are 'routed in realism and changing things' (Critical Friends 2009b).

It could be that the unexplainable, peculiar, misbehaving, pointless, uplifting aspects identified by Critical Friends allow access to a form of critical engagement. These forms of critical engagement happen at the point of encounter between people as they start to question what is happening and why as the edges of the commission become apparent and the conditions of participation are put to the test. Critical Friends, as in-depth explorers of a process, experienced being open to each other's subjectivities and a willingness to recognise and reflect on their own relation to these processes. As protagonists, they produced their own aesthetic experiences through this series of encounters. Grant Kester (2004, 128) describes a process where a project is open enough so it, 'transform[s] the consciousness of both the artist and host or her co-participants'.

This is reflected in my own subjective experience of Critical Friends, which challenged my perceptions, understandings and values of participation and engagement in art and evaluation. For

example, as people developed self-directed responses that questioned the contexts they were in, they started to respond and participate in the ‘wrong’ way. These ‘wrong’ ways of participating might result in rejection, renewal or re-interpretation of the artists’ project, or an invitation to become a Critical Friend (by both participating and not participating; appreciating and questioning).

Such experiences may be untraceable, and yet the typical format of evaluation involves presenting evidence and impacts of participation in a reduced form such as bullet points and recommendations, an act that is often unsatisfactory, inadequate and not representative of the experiences. While the projects themselves offer alternative platforms for traditional manifestations of agency to be reconsidered, the core ideas and critical encounters are sometimes simplified in their translation into the very forms of democracy the projects set out to critique. It is assumed that in order to affect ‘real change’, familiar forms of language need to be used in order to be understood and yet even these are found to be inadequate mechanisms for ‘having a say’.

Conclusion

Critical Friends involved ‘amateur’ (unpaid) participants and two paid researchers investigating ‘professional’ (paid) artists and commissioners, reversing the usual direction of critique and, at times, blurring the distinctions between roles. The conflictual or dissenting nature of the conversations among the group about the value of art also followed through to disagreements about what it meant to be critical. At times, Critical Friends challenged Stream’s model of commissioning, such as timeframes and approaches to selection of artists. At other times, the Friends supported Stream’s model and art being carried out by the professionals, as they did not want to be in a position where they considered it their job or responsibility.

Opening up the evaluation process in this way raised more questions than answers. For example, the question of payment was discussed, with the group deciding their contribution should be voluntary, with the members stating that ‘Critical Friends is a gratis, public, community service to the Peninsula: ‘we’re local, we have a commitment to the area and therefore want to contribute’.

The group felt that they could be more critical if they were unpaid: ‘we’re not being bought’, ‘we feel free to express our true opinions, there is no alliance’. For it to continue, however, they felt it would need direction and coordination from a paid ‘artist bureaucrat’, as ‘this allows us to be uncommitted and come and go as we please’ (Critical Friends 2011).

At times, the legitimacy of Critical Friends was also in flux; for example, a Stream board member stated how she felt the group were gathering ‘high quality and helpful information’, but this was coupled with Critical Friends’ uncertainty that Stream would listen to and take on board their comments and feed them back into the commissioning process. The group was disappointed that the magazines they produced were not well-distributed and that the group was not sufficiently promoted, limiting the scope of the project. Despite its intentions, Critical Friends’ findings also risked being reduced to a series of statements of support as evidence of participation, acting as advocates for funding for more ventures, or even as a recruitment drive or public relations service to get more participants involved in the commissions. In this sense, there is a danger the group becomes unpaid consultants as their semi-autonomous relationship to Stream is put to the test. They had to be linked so as to be heard, but distant enough so as to have an independent, self-directed voice.

The commissioning of art during the New Labour years (1997–2010) in the United Kingdom was relatively prevalent, addressing the social inclusion agendas and approaches to culturally-led regeneration of the government that were becoming popular. This meant those delivering this work had to negotiate their own ethics and politics of participation. What was happening in this process was a reconsideration of the role of the artist as complicit exploiter and gentrifier. Josephine Berry Slater and Anthony Iles (2009, 14–15) were concerned that ‘community is killed off only to be “regenerated” in zombie-like form, a living dead state of social (non) reproduction and officially orchestrated sham spectacles of being together’.

There was a grey area in these commissions: they looked like they were channels for effecting change but were perhaps only ever able to be performances of participatory democracy, rather than opening up paths for direct democracy or civil disobedience, for example. They were perhaps marginalised by their framing as art projects: obedient albeit playful performances of participation. Instead of opening up direct paths to local leaders, they offered platforms for participants to negotiate their own agency, following a notion of empowerment based on helping people to help themselves. To some extent, the projects pointed to the absurdity and potential futility of that agency, shedding light on these systems and expectations of participation. Those who took part, however, did not all necessarily share the absurdity of these gestures.

Critical Friends went some way towards collective questioning of the commissioning process and the wider issues of arts funding, local democracy and notions of participation. Towards the end of the Peninsula project, Critical Friends were informing the content of the artists' briefs and negotiating a position on the selection panel of artists. A Critical Friend was going to become a representative on the Board of Stream. Due to funding cuts, however, the organisation has since changed its scope, and the people and projects connected to Critical Friends exist in the ink blotches spreading and mixing with other activities as the Peninsula continues to regenerate.

With the pressure to measure success and impact, opportunities to reconstruct, disband or reshape frameworks (including the approach to commissioning itself) are not often considered as options. While commissioning models such as Peninsula were presented as potentially empowering, it is often a disappointing realisation to learn that, still, despite this creative approach, no one in power is listening, as art is not taken seriously. Instead, a melancholy cacophony of local issues and performances of skewed everyday life offer an ironic performance of empowered citizens.

It is the very impotency of such commissions, however, that might inadvertently allow for emancipatory forms of communication and interaction to occur that disrupt expected norms of participation in society. It is in acts of participation where the edges of the commission come into

focus that such a dialectic position of a ‘rational radical’, ‘critical friend’ or ‘friendly enemy’ might exist. Acts of non-participation or participating in ‘wrong’ or unexpected ways are where radical transformation has the potential to take place. It is these edges of the commission for which Critical Friends tried to make space, so as to reveal the limits and possibilities of participation in the art commissioning industry itself.

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