

A conversation between Francesco Ventrella (*curator, researcher and art historian*) and Leonor da Silva (*artist and researcher*) about the *Showing: Expectations* project.

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Francesco: Can you smoke cigarettes here?

Leonor: Yeah, of course!

Francesco: Are you sure? Because is a different stink...

Leonor: Do you mean cigarettes, cigarettes [not roll ups]? Yeah, you can.

Francesco: So... Why did you think that this project [*Showing: Expectations*] was best to be organised in an art space?

Leonor: Because we didn't want this project to be a 'community arts project' [in the usual sense of the term]... and that was one of the issues we struggled with. We struggled because as soon as academics and galleries heard the word *community* they wanted to place us into church halls and community centres where they think 'community'... but that was exactly against the point that we were trying to make... you know, because in a way the *widening participation* segregates people...

Francesco: Yeah...

Leonor: One of the reasons for having the project shown in a 'conventional' art space was to challenge this idea and take it further into a gallery environment rather than a community based environment. It was never supposed to be a 'community arts project'.

Francesco: So for you it was important to make people physically move... from the place which the communities are identified by the institutions, towards a place which is instead identified like what? What do you think an art gallery is identified with in their perspective?

Leonor: The concept has several layers... It does challenge notions of curatorial art practices, what is an artwork, and who is entitled to make it... but it also questions the effectiveness of the widening participation, the access to higher education, notions of otherness etc... Hosting the project in a church hall for example, would have been against the concept. It would have reinforced segregation and stereotyping... and we were very aware of this trap. It is interesting the point that you make with regards to identifying people with a place... you know, bringing the communities to the gallery instead of taking the show to the expected out of sight places. From the beginning I knew that certain questions wouldn't have been, or couldn't have been addressed, had we worked

in a church hall or a community centre. This is not a snobbish put-down towards art projects that use these places. Simply, the concept wouldn't have worked. In fact the original idea was to have the project showed at a university [art] gallery. Again, in terms of concept, the idea of applying the widening participation policies within a higher education institution would have been perfect... but the universities didn't want it. We then concluded that a public funded space was just as valid in terms of what we wanted to do with regards to these policies... it wouldn't compromise the concept in any way. The fact that we weren't successful in showing the project at a university gallery was not detrimental to our work, it just reinforced the point that we were trying to make: something needs to change if higher education institutions deliberately refuse to engage with inclusion policies that they claim to fulfil. We were also very clear from the beginning that we didn't want the project to be showed in a commercial gallery. That would have killed the concept and we wouldn't have been able to ask the questions that we wanted to ask... The entire thing would have been pointless. I am not sure what some of the participants thought of the art space as a place... you know, it really varied... some were really proud of having been given access to it, some didn't think of it as an art space at all... they treated it as a place where you pop in for a chat and a cup of tea... some really enjoyed the entire process and engaged with every step of the process...

Francesco: Do you think that as an outcome you got also a contribution from these communities, which might help academics define or redefine and rethink the gallery space?

Leonor: Well we were hoping that it did that... but as you witnessed in the talk at the art space while the project was on, they struggled with that idea... maybe they didn't understand the concept... they also struggled with the idea of seeing the objects placed in the space (or other non-material contributions) as art work... aesthetically pleasing... you know, it's the old debate 'is this art' or whatever... is very boring and a very conventional way of...

Francesco: So... there was a challenge to the hierarchy in terms of what is art and what is not art and... the question is, what do you think, in terms of experience now, and with regards to what people told you, what do you think that the people from these communities told you about the art world, about art that you didn't know when you started?

Leonor: To start off, when I thought of the concept, I didn't think that I was challenging great big academic arguments with what I was trying to do, and I didn't deliberately set out to challenge the hierarchy... and the issue of what is art and what is not art is now redundant as far as I'm concerned. I was more interested in the ethical issues with regards to the widening participation, policies of inclusion, their effectiveness and the possibility of a working relationship between ourselves and the groups. To tell you the truth I was quite surprised with the academic hostility... the problems started earlier on, with a couple of university galleries denying their support... they just didn't want to get involved. The argument was mainly that they were afraid of what people may produce, aesthetically speaking... if you know what I mean... We were really

surprised because that is such an old argument, you think that you go to university to...

Francesco: ...to sort it out.

Leonor: ...to sort it out! But these professors are still stuck with this old rubbish... they were telling us that, no, we should be careful with what people may bring into the gallery. One of the questions put to me by someone paid enough to know better, was 'what would you do if members of one of the community groups decides to submit sunsets only?' Well, I didn't think that was a problem and I quite liked the idea actually... I could visualise the space with ten sunsets... if that's what people wanted to contribute than that was that. But the resistance that the project generated was really interesting... Even the place that agreed in hosting the project was hostile towards it... They had no obligation in accepting the project when we proposed it and we didn't hide anything... I suspect that from the beginning they didn't fully understand it but I think that the combination between the proposal's articulate use of theoretical jargon and the opportunity of box ticking via seeming to engage with six Leeds based communities was just too irresistible! But to address the second part of your question regarding what did I learn about art that I didn't know when I started... well I suppose if you are receptive to the process you always learn... but on the very human level it was a great exchange of experiences. The project had many layers so the daily routine always involved different strands of learning... working with people in the gallery for example was such a wonderful experience... that was another issue repeatedly put to us before the project started: how will we explain to people the process and concept of curating? Well that proved to be really easy. I am not talking about formal curatorial practices... it would have been unfair if we expected people to be up to date with the latest theories... but many sophisticated decisions were made by people with regards to the objects that they chose to curate. Neil Connell, for example, chose a sari to curate. When I asked him how he wanted it to be displayed he immediately suggested that Baljit [Kaur] Sandhu (who brought the sari as a contribution to the exhibition) should wear it to the opening! If that isn't sophisticated decision making...

Francesco: If you consider the widening participation scheme, it works only if they exert a 'violence' upon the community by identifying a community within certain specificities... instead you were not doing this...

Leonor: No.... each person was to choose their own meaningful thing... and when I say 'thing' I mean it didn't have to be an object.... And we were very clear that we weren't going to... this is another thing about the project, we were very clear that we weren't going to run any workshops.

Francesco: Yeah.

Leonor: Because one of the first things that came up was this idea that we were going to run workshops.... or the idea was put to us that we should distribute some cameras so that people could take photographs... can you imagine?

Francesco: Well this is the experiment of British ethnography in the 50's... you know, I will give you the camera and you *beau sauvage*, you show me what you can do.

Leonor: We were very aware and interested in the fact that people have different backgrounds and life experiences and a personal 'object' chosen by each participant as a meaningful contribution to the show was more appropriate... because yes, the problem with the widening participation, as you said, is that people are identified under one name, the Asians, the gay people.... the Black Caribbean.... And that doesn't mean anything does it? What does that mean?

Francesco: Yeah, exactly, I mean collaboration in this sense is also challenging the old idea of identity politics because it is exactly the opposite movement, so is not a general idea of what a community is from above, you know, the people put under one umbrella... but this [the project] is the other way around... so the image that you have is very scattered... and this is also the reason why the art system and the discourse on contemporary art can not fully understand. Do you think... don't you think that contemporary art in this sense is just an obsolete box for collaborative practices? For the issues that collaborative practices are rising in a way... Which I am also asking: is the artist... are artists the only ones capable of working in collaborative practices? What do you think about this?

Leonor: No, I don't think that artists are the only ones...

Francesco: Where do you get the right to do this from?

Leonor: No, I don't think, by no means... but the thing is, what is behind it are the artist's tools... for example in our case, this project could have been done by a social worker... but the social worker wouldn't have been talking aesthetics afterwards. They would have been talking another talk.

Francesco: Yeah, I agree with you completely!

Leonor: A doctor could have run it, but a doctor would have been talking about a different matter afterwards.

Francesco: You were just highlighting the currency of aesthetics ... Considering your art practice and your engagement in collaborative practices as well, do you make a difference between art and... (well this is very personal but let's see if this is telling you something)... between art and aesthetics? Because before you were referring to aesthetics like formal aesthetics... not judged to be aesthetically interesting.

Leonor: Yes, I deliberately used that word because it is miles away from discussing *aesthetics*. In fact it's a contradiction... the formal aesthetics hardly engages with any discussion... It is kind of a one-way conversation... a monologue...

Francesco: But don't you think that collaborative practices, and the way that you have been engaged in this project told you more about aesthetics... the difference between aesthetics and art, which the debate in contemporary art practice today should also acknowledge it... I don't know if it's clear enough...

Leonor: Are you referring to the formal meaning of aesthetics ...the difference between art and aesthetics?

Francesco: Because for me aesthetics is not a discourse about form, or how beautiful or interesting the object is... aesthetics is about the aesthetic exchange, which implies also a consideration of the aesthetic exchange of the everyday object for instance, which happens to us aesthetically because we engage aesthetically with this object... So, what does this say to you as an artist? Because this is not... the aesthetics that I have in mind, is not something that you can master as an artist... you can engage and practice this aesthetics but you don't produce it.

Leonor: Yes, of course.... But I don't see aesthetics as the ultimate and sole goal of every art practice... Simply because you engage and use the discourse when you need to doesn't make you a full time aesthetics aficionado. There aren't just two ways of being if you are an artist, the pro-aesthetics and the anti-aesthetics... don't take me wrong, I have got no time for sloppy art... art needs to be rigorously critical but there is space for being rigorous and critical without full membership of the aesthetics club... Fortunately there is a huge grey area and scope for movement... I think that dealing with political and/or ethical issues within my work means that I don't necessarily have to embrace aesthetics wholly or indulge in its Western arguments full-time... Intuitive intelligence has a part to play in art making and I personally will use it without any fear. It doesn't mean that I am resisting aesthetic discourse or deliberately not engaging. There are also financial considerations and practical curatorial decisions to be made during the creative process which are just as important... but those are hardly ever discussed... well when they are, they have a kind of subjective explanation attached to it, a seal of approval, a polished finished that validates and excuses the nature of the process. Of course you can argue that all of what I just said before is direct or indirectly related to an aesthetic discourse. Meaning can, and often is made to fit with hindsight. That is not necessarily a bad thing... But not every decision made by the artist during the creative process is there to reassure art historians of their worth... and neither should the artist try to master anything... that stinks of formulated work... Mind you, there is a lot of artwork out there in the mainstream that suffers from this condition and is nevertheless successfully embraced by the aesthetics discourse makers. In fact they love it. There are quite a few mainstream artists which keep repeating the same story, over the years, on and on again, you know, the emperor's new clothes, the emperor from behind, the emperor from above, the emperor's bunion.... and they never run out of academic groupies. But in my opinion an artist should move on as soon as he or she thinks that they have mastered something. Being rigorous and critical does not equal mastery. You have got to be looking for new exchanges all the time. This is an interesting problem. While we were involved in *Showing: Expectations* we were asked on

several occasions if we could or would recreate the project elsewhere, as if we suddenly transformed ourselves into a kind of *Showing: Expectations* franchise... you know, with the *Showing: Expectations* clothes line, the perfume and the DVD. Well, of course we could recreate it elsewhere... but what would be the point of that?