

Putting (Political) Policy into (Art) Practice

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On 26 September 2007 a collaborative visual arts exhibition, produced and curated by six Leeds-based community groups, opened to public audiences at East Street Arts¹ in Leeds. The project (titled *Showing: Expectations*) had two key concerns. One being to show – as in reveal – peoples' expectations of artists and art practices and the other being to raise issues relating to the political drive to widen participation in the higher education sector. 'Widening participation in higher education is on social policy and academic agendas with targets of fifty percent of 18-30 year olds having access to higher education by 2010'.² But conflicts exist between the Higher Education Funding Council for England's nominally related aims of 'promoting social inclusion and improving the country's economic competitiveness'.³ As Jacques Rancière writes, '[E]quality is not a goal that governments and societies could succeed in reaching. To pose equality as a goal is to hand it over to the pedagogues of progress, who widen endlessly the distance they promise they will abolish. Equality is a presupposition, an initial axiom – or it is nothing'.⁴ For Rancière, equality is a position from which people think and act, it is not an ideology to be pursued and achieved. While the path to accessing contemporary higher educational institutions in England is paved with socially concerned rhetoric and economically targeted policies, such as those designed to widen participation⁵, the gates to these establishments are as inaccessible as ever... for some.

The *Showing: Expectations* project was conceptualised by Leonor da Silva, (an artist and PhD student in fine art practice at the University of Leeds). Leonor had become aware that the University is given financial funding to widen access to education, (some of which is directed towards community groups whose adult members have been identified as being under-represented in the higher education sector). She began to consider what might happen, the positive potential that might be enabled if the

¹ East Street Arts/Patrick Studios, *Contemporary arts organisation in Leeds*, available online <<http://www.esaweb.org.uk>> Accessed 31 October 2008.

² Yvette Taylor, *All round benefits? Student involvement in widening participation programmes*, available online <www.csap.bham.ac.uk/resources/project_reports/findings/ShowFinding.htm?id=Taylor_1> Accessed 13 May 2007.

³ Steve Egan, *Acting Chief Executive, Higher Education Funding Council for England, March 2009/ 13, Strategic Plan 2006-11*, available online <http://www.Hefce.ac.uk/pubs/Hefce/2006/06_13/> Accessed 23 October 2006.

⁴ Jacques Rancière, 'Afterword', *The Philosopher and His Poor*, trans. A. Parker, C. Oster, & J. Drury (Durham NC: Duke University Press, 2002), p. 223.

⁵ *Higher Education Funding Council for England, HEFCE Widening participation*, available online <<http://www.Hefce.ac.uk/widen/>> Accessed 25 July 2008.

institution could be persuaded to offer some of those groups the use of its art gallery, so that they could produce and curate their own art exhibition. Such access would provide community group members with opportunities to actively engage with the institution on their own terms rather than being the passive recipients of, say, an introductory session to the subject of art history. This is the usual institutional approach, whereby each faculty nominates a Widening Participation Officer who is responsible for facilitating events that are designed to promote inclusivity.⁶ But, 'such initiatives are often applied in practice through bureaucratic exercises designed to tick those boxes that comply with prescriptive funding criteria, whereby racial and socio-economic backgrounds are all too easily assumed as a shorthand for someone's identity'.⁷

I was invited to collaborate in the *Showing: Expectations* project around June 2006.⁸ At the time I had recently completed my PhD in fine art practice and was receptive to opportunities that might inform my ongoing research interests. My research was founded on my experiences of working for an economically driven education sector that did not enable teachers and learners to pursue knowledge for its own sake – so they might further develop more positive and meaningful relationships... with themselves, with others and with the world. This is a serious matter, for learning strategies driven by economically targeted aims present a barrier to critical pedagogic processes and their potential to transform, empower and enable. My PhD had explored how creative activities exceed the limits of the audit culture that defines contemporary art education, and I was struck by an awareness of how – in just the same way, humanity also exceeds the rhetorical limits that define educational and cultural access policies. And so I enthusiastically (although cautiously) accepted the invitation to become involved.

My cautious approach was realistic in that I was aware that the collaboration would be large in scale and fraught with practical difficulties throughout. But most important was my acute awareness of the ethical responsibilities associated with the

⁶ Please refer to the email sent by a Widening Participation Officer (working in a higher educational institution), available online

<<http://www.showingexpectations.co.uk/doc27/index.shtml>> Accessed 29 July 2008.

⁷ Cassar, Wilks & da Silva, prior to our securing a venue in which to host the exhibition element of the project we, (myself, Leonor da Silva & Ignaz Cassar who was at that time a part of the collaboration), co-wrote and co-presented a paper at the *Chances and Challenges Practice-Led Research Symposium* 24-26 May 2007, hosted by The Centre for Practice-led Research (CEPRA), University of Leeds in association with KUVA, The Finnish Academy of Fine Arts. Our joint paper, *Showing Expectations: Curating, Authorship and the Practices of Institutional Policies*, can be accessed as a.pdf file, available online

<<http://www.showingexpectations.co.uk/criticalreflections.shtml>> Accessed 21 August, 2008.

⁸ The artist and researcher Ignaz Cassar initially collaborated in the *Showing: Expectations* project and contributed towards its development. Ignaz was working together with Leonor at the time I was invited to collaborate.

project. The integrity of the concept was dependant on our not providing managers of prospective exhibition spaces with any guarantees regarding aesthetic outcomes and also upon the exhibition process being enabled to form itself through a self-critical, non-hierarchical and non-methodological collaborative approach. The intent was not to apply an alternative widening participation strategy but to use the framework of existing initiatives to provide people with opportunities to gain access to the institutional/organisational mainframe on their own terms, if they so wanted. It was clear that it would be difficult to persuade *any* institution or organisation to accept the project (as it involved high levels of trust and risk) but then it was also ripe with the potential for mutually beneficial learning opportunities to occur – a means to rethinking knowledge and power relations through aesthetic processes and practices. It was imperative, as the project was seeking to put widening participation *policy* into art *practice*, that the exhibition must be located in a space that had an obligation to widen access to the arts or higher education. It was also important that the venue should be a mainstream arts environment so that the exhibition would not be defined (by default) as being alternative or amateur. To be alternative or amateur does not infer a level of status that is *different but equal*. Once classified thus, the power to act and to be heard becomes reduced.

The concept for *Showing: Expectations* was to invite six Leeds-based community groups to participate in and curate their own art exhibition. The community groups who accepted our invitation to become involved were; Workers' Educational Association,⁹ St Anne's Resource Centre & Open Learning,¹⁰ Gypsy Roma Traveller Achievement Service Leeds,¹¹ Emmaus – Leeds Community,¹² South Leeds Health for All¹³ and St George's Crypt.¹⁴ We had anticipated that the project would require an adaptable approach and so the contributory and curatorial concept was provided with a skeletal frame rather than a rigid form. This was based around a seven-week process involving people from all of the invited groups. Voluntary participants from each group were asked to contribute something to the exhibition that was meaningful to their lives and also to curate another

⁹ Workers' Educational Association – (*Yorkshire & Humber Region*), available online <<http://www.wea.org.uk/yh/>> Accessed 28 August 2008.

¹⁰ St Anne's Community Services, available online <http://www.st-annes.org.uk/day_centres.html> Accessed 28 August 2008.

¹¹ Gypsy Roma Traveller Achievement Service Leeds, available online <<http://www.grtleeds.co.uk/>> Accessed 28 August 2008.

¹² Emmaus – Leeds Community, available online <<http://www.emmaus.org.uk/>> Accessed 28 August 2008.

¹³ South Leeds Health for All, available online <<http://slhfa.org.uk/>> Accessed 28 August 2008.

¹⁴ St George's Crypt, available online <<http://www.stgeorgescrypt.org.uk/work/index.htm>> Accessed 28 August 2008.

person's contribution.¹⁵ We did not want (or feel able) to be prescriptive about what it could be that people might submit, after all, only they could know what they considered to be meaningful. The idea was, that at the beginning of every week a group consisting of two people from each respective community group would visit the exhibition space and leave behind something that was meaningful to their lives. A second group would then visit the space to curate what the previous group had left, leaving behind their own meaningful contribution when they departed for a third group to curate the following week (and so on). This accumulative process was to be repeated weekly, resulting in a continually altered exhibitions programme. After six-weeks the exhibition space would situate everything that had been submitted throughout by each of the groups, and during the seventh and final week there would be an opening preview event. In conjunction with the exhibition we hoped to organise a series of seminars, conversations and performances.

The proposal for *Showing: Expectations* was first submitted to the University of Leeds Art Gallery¹⁶ who responded by saying that they would be unable to support the project. We then approached Leeds Met Gallery with a revised version of the proposal, but they also felt unable to support the project. Eventually, in May 2007, East Street Arts (ESA – an arts organisation in Leeds) approved our proposal¹⁷ and agreed to the *Showing: Expectations* exhibition being held in their Project Space.

Offering people the opportunity to act autonomously can undoubtedly be risky. Some arts professionals, (encumbered by their attachments to aesthetic conventions), seemed to think the invitation we had extended to the community groups was naïve. In particular, people were skeptical that participants would attain the qualitative levels demanded by arts audiences. For example, we received an email from an academic who expressed concerns by asking, '[A]re you prepared for the possibility that the show might

¹⁵ We had originally asked people to think about what meaningful object/artwork they may possess, (have produced or might produce), that could be exhibited as part of a collaborative exhibition. The terms *artwork* and *object* were initially useful because they provided participants with a point of entry into reflecting upon what they might contribute, but they rapidly became limiting as a means to articulating the contributions that were offered because the participants moved beyond their descriptive boundaries. For example, some people asked if we could film them and others wanted to perform in the Project Space. Neither of these activities could be described as objects/artworks, and using the term 'contributions' seemed more appropriate.

¹⁶ *The University of Leeds Art Gallery* has since been renamed the *Stanley & Audrey Burton Gallery*.

¹⁷ Documentation, (emails, letters and so on), detailing communications between the community groups, funding bodies, educational institutions, arts organisations and ourselves are presented on the project website, available online

<<http://www.showingexpectations.co.uk/documentation/index.shtml>> Accessed 30 July 2008.

be visually uninteresting?’¹⁸ Another academic questioned what would happen if the participants were to submit *ten sunsets*¹⁹ to the project. These comments reduce art practice to being a method for generating object-based outcomes²⁰ within the context of value regimes that contrast amateur with professional status. But we did not worry about what people might submit. This was not neglectful behaviour, we had made a critical and ethical decision to accept that participants would contribute whatever it might be that they themselves chose to contribute to the exhibition. Our role was not to judge, edit or appraise but to be supportive of peoples’ choices, and to focus on providing a welcoming, positive and critically active environment in which people would be trusted and respected.

While the community group key-workers had initially expected us to deliver creative workshops, they became intrigued by the possibilities that might emerge when we said this would not be the case. It was never our intent to teach anything to anyone, although we were aware that the project carried the potential to generate mutually beneficial teaching and learning encounters. But we felt that teacher and student roles (if they occurred at all) would be interchangeable and ambiguous and that any mutual learning opportunities that arose would be a by-product of the process itself.

A question we were often asked was ‘how do you intend to communicate the concept of curating to people?’ Our response was, ‘we don’t’. The participants were wonderfully innovative and came up with curatorial decisions that were as unique as they each are. We all worked together without the need to speak about curatorial concepts. In other words, options were discussed and choices were made at the direction of the participants, and both they and we learnt a great deal through this conversational process. All aspects of the project, each indexical moment of every event, occurrence, act, encounter and exchange was valued. This was not about degrees or levels of value or inclusion but about being respectful and thankful towards all those who participated. Things didn’t go as planned, but then we’d allowed for this in our planning. There were no neat conclusions but there are infinite *loose ends*; personal memories of humour, laughter, struggles, conversations, arguments, friendships... connections between people and profoundly private moments of encounter that will never be made visible or documented. Andrew Warstat wrote about the contributions that were made to the exhibition in his essay, *The Ethics of Surprise*:

¹⁸ Please refer to the documented email on the *Showing: Expectations* website, available online, <<http://showingexpectations.co.uk/doc5/index.shtml>> Accessed 21 August 2008.

¹⁹ *Ten sunsets* in this context, signifies the production of multiple, repetitive, stereotypical, clichéd representations of amateur art practice.

²⁰ Cassar, Wilks and da Silva, op. cit.

By focusing on the stuff generated by lived lives, *Showing: Expectations* engaged the rich bodily excess of people into the aesthetic regime of the gallery space (the gallery is understood, here, to be a space marshalled by competing aesthetic claims and discourses). What was seen in the exhibition space during the course of the show didn't quite make *sense* in terms of beauty or categories of form. Rather, the work was meaningful as fragile, funny, human things, and the objects were surprising and disarming because they were valuable to people (not just artists or curators). To suggest that the objects were in some sense *not interesting* was already to have engaged in a thought process that escaped the ethical demand of the objects.²¹

But a representative of Leeds City Council & Leeds Initiative, speaking at one of the discussion events that we had organised, was not merely disinterested in the *Showing: Expectations* exhibition, she made her judgment known by saying, 'I don't really give a toss about this [the exhibition]. It's 'orrible'.²² This reaction was extreme, but not isolated. It is my personal belief that any innovative arts practice must involve questioning existing orders and as such the creative sector is uniquely positioned to be responsive to being critically challenged. For example, our proposal had not promised or guaranteed any outcomes other than the *unexpected*, and yet, when East Street Arts had accepted it they had not grasped the critical significance of the approach that was being proposed, nor its implications. Rather, they had read the project superficially, thinking it would fit quite nicely within their own (socially engaged) programme of events. I think it is worthwhile to consider the organisation's Mission Statement:

ESA is a contemporary visual arts organisation working across artists' needs that believes a vibrant creative sector is important to a healthy society. We take a holistic approach to working with artists on a professional level to empower them to realise their potential. We do this by providing an appropriate environment,

²¹ Andrew Warstat, *The Ethics of Surprise*, available online <<http://www.showingexpectations.co.uk/criticalreflections/index.shtml>> Accessed 24 August 2008.

²² The full transcript of the discussion event from which this quote is cited, *Critical Art & Pedagogical Practices/ Widening Participation*, is available to download as a .pdf file, available online <<http://www.showingexpectations.co.uk/criticalreflections/index.shtml>> Accessed 26 August 2008.

professional and contextual support whilst maintaining a critical and outward facing programme.²³

East Street Arts agenda is committed to professional arts practice and, strategically, this provides a relatively straightforward, organisational focus. It is the organisation's desire to simultaneously 'maintain a critical and outward facing programme' that presents *the fly in the ointment*. Corporately, organisationally and institutionally funded arts practices are critically restricted by the needs of funding bodies, trustees and patrons. It is positive that East Street Arts seeks to link with critical art practices, but the problem for the *Showing: Expectations* project was that it had not been fully appreciated how a critical approach could fundamentally challenge the organisations own professional values. East Street Arts had expressed a commitment to being critically receptive and our proposal met with that commitment. So where did the tensions arise? In trying to better understand these issues, it has been useful to reflect on some comments that were made at a meeting we attended with the managerial team:

Question: 'How do we deliver the product to audiences?'

Response: 'We want to allow people's voices to emerge, not to edit and reduce them to sound bites. The project provokes an intelligent engagement. It deliberately requires time, effort and active agents. It resists immediate access and quick satisfaction. This is our critical strategy'.

Question: 'Why aren't you working with, for example, property developers? Why people who struggle?'

Response: 'As it states in our proposal, we are engaging specifically with widening participation strategies'.

Response: 'I'll be honest with you. I'm not interested in people, I'm interested in theorising the object'.²⁴

This exchange articulates important points of disjuncture between differing approaches. For some, *Showing: Expectations* was an aesthetic product, to be presented as such for consumption by arts audiences. And yet to me *Showing: Expectations* was a critical process that demanded an ethical approach because it involved humanity with all of its vulnerabilities, frailties and potential for shared commitment, learning and responsibility.

²³ *East Street Arts: Facilitating Visual Artists*, available online <http://www.esaweb.org.uk/page.asp?sectionIdentifier=2005119_59563845> Accessed 25 August 2008.

²⁴ Personal notes made during our meeting with ESA, Thursday 25 October 2007.

It had been expected that we would lead the *Showing: Expectations* project and claim (aesthetic) authorship of its outcomes. But because we did not do this, people were denied the comforting reassurance of being sure that they could determine and know... who the artists and curators were, and where the *art* could be located.

We had invited the artist, educator and academic Tim Brennan²⁵ to participate in a panel discussion event held during the exhibition, and he said that when he had first walked into the Project Space he had not known who was a participant, who was an artist, or who was a key-worker, because roles were not rigidly defined, they were adaptable in relation to context. This was not an equality safely stabilised on paper and defined within the constraints of tick-boxes, this was equality in action... enthusiastic, contradictory, tense, active, uncertain and unstable. As (the artist and researcher) Sarah Pierce has said, '[I]t's about shifting the dynamics. So that notions of power and the institution and the curator and the artist become less predictable'.²⁶

The *Showing: Expectations* project was distanced from professionally isolated aesthetic zones and in close proximity to the frailties and excesses associated with life's struggles. But all people experience difficulties. To struggle is the human condition. A seemingly functional person is one who controls or conceals their difficulties, which is something that most people, (if they have the means), will seek to do. A struggle exposed is perceived to be both a weakness and a threat. This is why comments that were documented during the project are so revealing of people's expectations... not only of artists and art practices, but also of issues relating to class, wealth, poverty and opportunity.

I have explored my specific experiences of working with East Street Arts because they offer primary research material. But I do not want to limit my thinking to these personal micro experiences. What is interesting is how they reference macro concerns. The problems we encountered (though particular) are not unique. A recent review of art teaching by The Group for Learning in Art and Design (GLAD), identified 'the creative industries as an important part of the economy and makes recommendations on how [art] teaching needs to evolve to keep up with industry developments. (...) The review also

²⁵ Tim Brennan, (*Programme Leader - MA Curating: Art, Design, Media & Culture University of Sunderland*), available online <<http://curationism.mysite.wanadoo-members.co.uk/>> Accessed 27 August 2008.

²⁶ Sarah Pierce, *Metropolitan Complex, Paper No. 6*, available online <<http://www.themetropolitancomplex.com/index.php?id=papers>> Accessed 15 September 2008.

recommends stronger business involvement in [art & design] courses'.²⁷ The currency of corporate linguistics is familiar, giving rise to terms such as; the creative industries, cultural citizenship, socially engaged art practice, artist-led consultancies, the knowledge industry and so on. But these key-words signify the current language of the professional arts circuit. They relate to the *art business* and *not* to the business of making art. The former is motivated, brokered and constrained by cultural value regimes and aesthetic economic capital and the latter is activated through meaningful, critical, aesthetic undertakings, and constrained only by the limits of conceptual thinking and material resources. The products of both these fields of activity may be called *art*, but there are significant differences between them.

During the project we held two discussion events. One involved an academic audience and the other was an open conversation with participants and key-workers. I would like to present some comments that were made during these events. The former were made in the academic discussion, and the latter during the open conversation:

(...) we've talked about the *White Cube*, but that, does the work stand up to the same rigours, and bombardments, and rigour, the work that goes into artists' work, and has to jump through so many hoops, through so many kind of barriers and negotiations for years and years of this practice, to actually reach the level that perhaps an artist would show? Now, I, I wonder whether this work is actually therefore being put under the same scrutiny that professional artists' work is put under. And I don't know if that's a good or a bad thing, but I think it's definitely an issue. But, an' I, I don't know how other artists feel, other professional artists here feel about that, whether there is some conflict here between what's actually being presented, and actually, does that undermine our practices?²⁸

And the comments from the open conversation:

I think it's really interesting, I mean what sort of space a gallery space can be... 'an it's often a space of reverence and authority, and, y'know, we all feel slightly awed and humbled... when we come in and abase ourselves in front of these sort of edified works of art, but this sort of, this space, because of the way the

²⁷ Zoë Corbyn, 'Shake-up urged in art teaching', Times Higher Education, (TSL Education: England), 4 September 2008, p. 15.

²⁸ The full transcript of the discussion event from which this quote is cited, *Critical Art & Pedagogical Practices/ Widening Participation*, is available to download as a .pdf file, available online <<http://www.showingexpectations.co.uk/criticalreflections/index.shtml>> Accessed 26 August 2008.

exhibition has been constructed, and the way that it's very open and mutual, seems to be a very shared, a sanctuary type space, where people feel able to make themselves more vulnerable than they would normally, so, it is playful but it's protective as well I think, and sort of sheltered. And it is, I mean I find it very moving what people have contributed. (...) But it seems to be in response to the way the structure of the show allows you to be open, because no one's more important than anyone else here, in the way that this works. An' that 'as enabled gestures and actions that maybe otherwise wouldn't be possible. (...) So in that sense it's a really interesting experiment as to what the *White Cube* of a gallery can be, really. (...) Umm, I mean I think it was interesting to... to become aware of the difficulties that Sue an' Leonor had in actually mounting, well, presenting the exhibition... getting funding for it an' getting institutional support for it, and that is in itself interesting. There is a way that community projects are often felt to be... I mean there's often a, just a little sense of the patronising about them as in, "we know what you, as a deprived community, need" and er, this was a genuinely open project, in the name of 'widening participation'. An' I mean one of the ironies about widening participation is that it's actually around a very narrow set agenda often. So this was a very wide notion of widening participation, which caused problems... 'cos it was a challenge to institutional frameworks, precisely because it was very porous about boundaries and frameworks. (...) It does show expectations and it does raise expectations about showing, and, er, I think alerts us all to the sort of um, the, the, the endless potential for the aesthetic, y'know, that anything can become aesthetically engaging, and that's one of the ways in which our faculties are, are aroused, anyway, it's not, I mean y'know, it's as much to do with us as the object in that sense.²⁹

²⁹ The full transcript of the discussion event from which this quote is cited, *In Conversation With the Participants*, is available to download as a .pdf file, available online <<http://www.showingexpectations.co.uk/criticalreflections/index.shtml>> Accessed 26 August 2008.