

showing: expectations

Proposal for a Collaborative Arts Project at ESA/Patrick Studios, Leeds

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Project Outline

This project is situated around the idea of *expectations*, and involves working collaboratively with Leeds-based community groups to critically explore their own and others expectations in relation to the visual arts.

Seeking to generate further awareness of the lived relationship between the wider community, the institution and the art gallery, our concept is to invite six local community groups to self-critically question differing *expectations* from within an art gallery environment. Galleries can often be perceived of as being insular environments, while community outreach initiatives often emphasise cultural aspects when they could link with local practices that are also political. Higher educational widening participation policies offer an example of this. Many such initiatives are commendable and are supported by genuinely motivated staff, and yet conflicts exist between the nominally related aims of ‘promoting social inclusion and improving the country’s economic competitiveness’.¹ For example, the introduction of tuition and top-up fees seems to contradict notions of educational inclusion, generating further divisive class based, social and economic exclusions. It is on this basis that the invited community groups, (currently listed on institutional databases as being under-represented in the higher education sector), have been asked if they would like to participate in the *showing: expectations* project. In this sense, participants are being offered an opportunity to engage actively with strategic initiatives in which they are implicated rather than being treated as the targeted objects of a particular political ideology.

showing: expectations seeks to challenge limited representations of under-represented community groups. It does not aim to establish a consensus of opinion, nor to affirm differences, but to provide opportunities for discussing differing approaches towards the visual arts. It involves elements of risk and trust together with the potential for mutually beneficial educational processes to occur – rethinking knowledge and power relations in the context of visual representations and gallery structures. Participants from each community group, (self-selected through open invitation), would be asked to engage in a visual debate by thinking about what meaningful object/artwork they may possess, (have produced or might produce), that could be exhibited as part of a collaborative exhibition consisting of work submitted by other community groups in conjunction with their own. This open and unknown process would address preconceived hierarchical notions around the production and presentation of art, while also helping to develop a deeper understanding of the politics involved in examining our own and each other’s social conditions.

Critical Context

By engaging with the territories of widening participation policies the project would be reinforcing their prescriptive formulae while simultaneously unsettling their functions. This would (in turn) enable the development of the social dimensions of such initiatives, through a process that involves the reconfiguration of an institutional directive *as a mode of critical art practice*. It is in this context that *showing: expectations* would encourage levels of interaction and debate between the (usually disparate) individuals and sub-groups involved. This is because, rather than maintaining existing institutional divisions between the community groups, we would invite twelve contributors per week, (two from each group), to come together and form an alternative group (as either artists or curators). Through this process a multiplicity of opportunities for collaboration would be generated: between individuals, community groups, educational institutions, the gallery and its audiences.

‘The project would be a worthwhile way for peoples voices to be heard in a wider context’
Rob Gibson, Manager, St Anne’s Resource Centre

There would be a rolling structure to the *showing: expectations* exhibitions programme, whereby each group would (in turn) leave their chosen objects/artworks in the gallery space for a differing group to curate and present the following week. This would prompt a shifting of power relations: as curators, participants would need to carefully consider the responsibilities associated with presenting the work of others, and as artists they would need to relinquish power when invited to step-back and allow others to curate their own objects/artworks. The critical focus is upon expectations... What are individual expectations regarding the making and showing of art and how might they differ? How might these expectations have formed? What are our expectations regarding the roles of the artist and the curator? What might we expect to encounter in the art gallery? Patrick Studios would, through hosting *showing: expectations*, become a shifting and diverse space... a site of potentiality and a space for communications between community groups. At times it would be a hive of activity (akin to a studio environment or a meeting space) and at

¹ Steve Egan, Acting Chief Executive, Higher Education Funding Council for England, March 2006/13, *Strategic Plan 2006-11* (online), accessed 23 October 2006 available from the World Wide Web <http://www.hefce.ac.uk/pubs/hefce/2006/06_13/>

other times it would become a shared learning environment, a space for critical questioning and debate. In the context of this proposed exhibition, we could say that you might only expect the unexpected. We would not seek to impose any constraints on the participants (other than observing practical and health & safety restrictions) with regards to what might be *done* in the space, the selection of objects/artworks, nor their curatorial arrangement. The role that we would undertake to fulfill would be that of the supportive helper, working with others and responding to needs as required.

Collaborative art projects that extend beyond the boundaries of traditional practices have been executed by contemporary artists such as Per Huttner and Jeremy Deller. Huttner for example, in his show *I am a Curator*, (2003), questioned the limits of interpretation presented by an artwork. In allowing the audience to curate the exhibition, he explored ways of democratising the curatorial process. Deller's work investigates how individuals and communities relate to each other according to their belief systems. Of particular interest is his work *Folk Archive*, which brings together *amateur* and *professional* makers, thereby shifting public preconceptions of the artist.²

Curatorial Concept

Subject to gallery availability, *showing: expectations* would be programmed to take place over seven consecutive weeks. The curatorial concept is based on a six-week process involving all of the invited groups. Each week, a particular group would leave their objects/artworks in the gallery space. A second group would then curate the work, and at the end of that week the second group would leave their own work in the gallery for a third group to curate (and so on). This is an accumulative process that would be repeated for each week of the six-week period resulting in a continually altering exhibitions programme. At the culmination of the six-week exhibition period the gallery space would situate all of the objects/artworks that had been submitted throughout the process by each of the groups, and in a final week-long event there would be a celebration of the outcomes of the project, bringing all of the participating community groups together to engage in further interchanges, interactions, discussions and conversations. A structured series of seminars and talks would be organised in conjunction with the exhibitions programme.

We believe that Tim Brennan's concept of the Nu-Curator, is most appropriate and relevant to the artistic, critical and curatorial concept of *showing: expectations*:

Nu-Curators work with individuals from various walks of life to construct spatial debates which lay bare the conditions of possibility for future human agency. A sustained activity of this nature has broad implications. It might suggest a relationship to the vicinity, based not on the limited and naturalised notions of 'community arts', but rather on new forms of co-operation. This vernacular approach roots an initiative within its immediate surroundings without losing sight of foreign relations. The combination is discursive, existing as a sculptural performance in which social processes become the very substance of work. (...)Nu-Curators are involved in building new-systems of cultural production in which critical events emerge beyond the existing terms of art. This construction is one in which everyone is considered experientially well versed, regardless of age, background or culture ('everyone' is not 'an artist' but everyone does have experience).³

Documentation

We would work closely with the all of those involved to explore and document their expectations, (prior to, during and following the project's conclusion), and to record how these might alter as the project progresses. All aspects of the developmental process (including group meetings, activities and discussions) would be documented using audio, visual and digital means and a printed booklet would be produced to accompany the exhibition (A5 single-colour, 40 printed pages). A dedicated internet site <<http://www.showingexpectations.co.uk>> is currently under construction, providing the project with a virtual host. This website would be updated on a daily basis (throughout the seven-week period) so that archival material together with the changing states of the exhibition could be published on the World Wide Web presenting a detailed online dossier of the project, its working processes and (as yet unknown) outcomes.

The project has received funding support from The Scarman Trust/*Community Champions Fund* and the EKT Seedcorn Fund/University of Leeds. A further application has been made to the Leeds Philosophical & Literary Society.

² Jeremy Deller, Alan Kane, and Bruce Haines, eds., *Folk Archive: Contemporary Popular Art from the UK*, (London: Bookworks, 2005).

³ Tim Brennan is Programme Leader, MA Curating at the University of Sunderland. Available from the World Wide Web (online), accessed 4 March 2007 <<http://curationism.mysite.wanadoo-members.co.uk/>>

Collaborating Organisations

We have initiated contact with the following community groups who have shown a keen interest and agreed, (in principle), to participate in this project:

Workers' Educational Association for Yorkshire and Humber

Providing adult learning and cross-cultural education.

Contact: Mary Lewis, Regional Education Manager

< <http://www.wea.org.uk> >

Travellers in Leeds

An organisation working with and for the education of travellers and Roma people in Leeds, that has set up, for example, a Family Learning Group of women travellers.

Contact: Peter Saunders, Service Manager

< <http://www.travellersinleeds.co.uk> >

South Leeds Health for All

A community health development organisation working in partnership with South Leeds Primary Care Trust, Leeds City Council, voluntary organisations and local community groups, that organises a number of community based learning projects serving black and minority ethnic groups.

Contact: Pat McGeever, Manager

< <http://www.slhfa.org.uk> >

St. Anne's Community Services

St Anne's aims to deliver excellent support, care and housing services which promote independence, opportunity and inclusion, working with a number of homeless and socially excluded people in Leeds.

Contact: Isobel Worswick, Deputy Manager

< <http://www.st-annes.org.uk> >

Multiple Choice

Multiple Choice is a community day programme aimed at assisting individuals resolve issues regarding their drug use.

< <http://www.multiplechoice.org.uk/index.html> >

St. George's Crypt

Works with asylum seekers and refugees as part of the Crypt's services, aiming to improve employability through a mentoring programme, as well as offering health screenings, English classes and drop-in facilities.

Contact: Tony Beswick, General Manager

< <http://www.stgeorgescrypt.org.uk> >