

City (Re)Searches
Experiences of Publicness

CULTURAL AGENCY

A REPORT ON A DELIBERATION

BELFAST, NORTHERN IRELAND

21ST FEBRUARY 2013

THE WHO OF CULTURAL AGENCY

One set of ideas:

This is a context of inequality and an unequal society. This is a context of emergency. These are difficult and turbulent times. People are under pressure. However when people are under pressure opportunities arise for people to become agents. People are becoming agents of change because they disagree with something.

To act collectively is radical. The best way to act is collectively. Significant change needs collective forms. However, the radical aspect is being undermined. Public assembly is highly controlled. There is a contraction of opportunities for collective action. Institutions present barriers to change – but they can be a support for change.

The status quo is that people do not have cultural agency. There is an assumption that we are talking about specialists, artists and community artists, but there are others who are cultural agents. However, agency at the moment is quite institutionalized. People too are

economically disenfranchised. But things are happening at the margins.

Redistributing cultural agency is about providing a safe, supportive platform, giving people a voice, creating safe spaces, and giving people the tools to access culture. But, is access to culture the same as change? Cultural agency if redistributed is change.

A second set of ideas:

We need to define culture. It is equated with religious groupings and cultural identity. Then the arts do not equal culture. Arts too get defined as high arts, museums and the like.

Young people have a culture. Lived life gives representation and reveals culture. There is a youth culture, seen through social media.

Culture brings people together without any barriers. The notion of exchange is important.

A third set of ideas:

A cultural agency as an epicenter is needed. We need to think of it more as a swap shop, as an open space for distribution and dissemination.

Cultural agency is the necessary ability to facilitate the individual into a communal aspect.

The ownership of space empowers.

However there is a fear that cultural agency becomes an arm of government and therefore of governance. Northern Ireland is an audited culture.

A fourth set of ideas:

These are interesting times. In an inherently conservative society cultural agents get defined as

institutions but there is a subversive strand. Local authorities have a conservative definition of culture but again there is a very good subversive culture.

There are dozens of local festivals in a divided city. Identity issues mean that festivals are not grassroots but rather political. The challenge is to participate in the bigger picture.

Where is the agency for those who are not involved in these events?

There is a need to take risks. There spaces even if temporary and mobile. There are important examples of collaboration.

A fifth set of ideas:

The Andy Warhol exhibition in Belfast offers an example of formal art world production and distribution. What forms of production and distribution exist for culture outside the art world machine?

There is a distinction between modes of cultural participation that are passive, manufactured, and consumer-orientated forms of exchange and those that are organic homegrown, collective and human forms of exchange. Can new forms of culture and new art forms emerge from the latter?

THE PURPOSE OF CULTURAL AGENCY

One set of ideas:

Need to determine what culture is. Culture is about having space to reflect, to reflect where we were. It allows people to explore their own situation. It provides space to people to reflect on their conditions. It gives people a chance to signify.

Culture is about relationships. It is a tool to facilitate and enrich relationships. It facilitates the working out of relationships, whether conflictual or otherwise.

However, are people being programmed to block certain types of culture? There are few shared spaces. Cultural expression can be segregating. There is a need to give people security so that they are not threatened by social change. There is a need to value all communities.

Culture can work in either direction. It can facilitate change or oppose change. Values are crucial. What values do we share? Values can include inclusion, change, sameness, and creativity, to make a better society, of agency being the individual or the collective?

Alliances with social agents, social justice groups, or social providers can be important.

A second set of ideas:

Artists are being proactive and working not just in the art world but elsewhere. People locally are gaining the confidence to be proactive. Artists can be enablers.

When people come together, deep in culture, arts can be shared. This can be seen in social change.

No one can live without culture. Culture is in identity. It can give you harmony. People can feel their culture under threat.

A third set of ideas:

Culture is presenting and representing ourselves. It is an ambivalent term and a term of distinction. It can invoke and provoke.

There are blurred lines between communities. We have lost the idea of communal in the word community.

How can we cross class barriers?
How can we reanimate the public space again?

A fourth set of ideas:

Culture can influence social change. This influence can go both ways. Culture can empower individuals. How do we measure social change? Sometimes the impact of culture is evident in what doesn't happen.

Funding is a means of control. Can you be really independent? People play it safe.

Individuals from the field of culture played a key role in the peace process.

If you make a community you make culture. When people lack a culture there is insecurity around identity and that gets whittled down.

A fifth set of ideas:

The relationship between inequality, sectarianism and culture as identity is complex. Is there a need for cultural decommissioning where culture gets defined rigidly along the lines of fixed cultural identities with no room for cultural drift?

If we want to be collective there is a value in re-shaping culture and sharing joined up thinking. Community arts work takes root where there are relationships and time spent working together.

THE FUTURE OF CULTURAL AGENCY

One set of ideas:

In asking what should be valued we need to ask a series of questions. Who has the right to value? Is there anything that should not be valued? Are there shared values? What of censorship?

The excluded need to be prioritized. Community bridging rather than community building needs to be prioritized. Culture can create shared space and facilitate community life.

A second set of ideas:

Cultural identity is changing and some in charge do not see this.

There is a need for communication across identities and this does happen.

It does work if you create the space. Then people do it for themselves.

A third set of ideas:

Funding led, hierarchical, tick box systems need to be dismantled from within. 'Sharpen your sword'.

We need a system that articulates our values in a way that local government understands.

'Why is art seen as a luxury?'

There is a deficit of understanding from those who evaluate and fund.

There should be an artist in every shopping center, factory, library, chip shop etc.

A fourth set of ideas:

High art cannot exist without all those cultural endeavors. All forms of cultural endeavor should be supported. How do we get to a point

where there is recognition that culture is broad?

Look at the distribution of funding to see where value is placed. Sleight of hand can be seen in terms of funding being seen to reach certain areas.

The challenge is that what is not happening is often the measure of success.

East Belfast provides a vivid example. There is no arts infrastructure there and a very different sense of identity. There is an atmosphere of suppression. There is a political interest in keeping east Belfast without resources.

A fifth set of ideas:

Is consumer culture a cover-up for someone else's script? Derry UK Capital of Culture provides an example of cultural tourism building on established cultural references rather than connecting to contemporary cultural frictions and trying to give them some form.

What form of exchange is operating in the conflict tourism cultural tours? How do communities benefit economically by providing the sites for photographic consumption? Does the cycle of investment operate as an economy external to the 'host' community?

PRODUCERS

Blue Drum (IE) is a community arts organisation that nurtures community-led arts practice.
www.bluedrum.ie

Community Arts Partnership (NI) is committed to championing community arts that can transform our society.
www.commartspartner.org

Kaunas Biennial (LT) is a global event for contemporary art, where textile art is a means for interdisciplinary practices.
www.biennial.lt

DELIBERATION

This *Deliberation Conversation* took place in Belfast, Northern Ireland on February 20 and 21, 2013. The City (Re)Searchers are:
f marquespenteado (BR), F. Woods(IE), J. van Heeswijk(NL), J. Mulloy(IE), M.J. Jacob(USA), N. Crowley(IE), N. O'Baoill(IE), S. Bosch(NI), and Vagabond Reviews (IE).

