

**City (Re)Searches**  
Experiences of Publicness

## **CULTURAL AGENCY**

### **A REPORT ON A DELIBERATION**

### **BELFAST, NORTHERN IRELAND**

**22<sup>nd</sup> FEBRUARY 2013**

### **THE WHO OF CULTURAL AGENCY**

#### ***One set of ideas:***

The creative industry has created an elite with fifteen years of peace money. Money seems to go to a middle class. The resources go to those who know how to write the grants applications.

The arts are a way to engage all people. Culture has that ability to be a space of exchange. It is a non-threatening way for people to engage, a way to bring people together and build relationships.

West Belfast wants to embrace the arts. There is a hunger in those areas even if there are things there, there is culture there. It is about creating opportunities for other aspects of culture so arts don't get isolated and community restricted.

Participatory art can change the inequality situation in society. We need to politicize the notion of art and make collaborations with activist groups. However this can narrow participation and lose the more conservative members of the organization or community.

#### ***A second set of ideas:***

There is a disconnect and barriers for working class people to come to the center. There is a battle to convince policy makers that culture is a human

right. This is particularly at issue due to the relationships between culture and identity.

We need to question the distribution of resources. It is not just the institutions that are cultural agents; communities, individuals and artists are cultural agents.

Community arts offer a sense of access. The cathedral choir offers interesting learning. People can come from anywhere but it is a good thing to take them out to where the people are. Both are important.

Community is an enabler. Confidence is key. People come to art programmes not necessarily because they are interested in issues. Apathy is a strong force, particularly with young men. There is a struggle to engage young people.

Money is thrown at one-off events, supposedly to support arts and cultural practice. However, there is a disconnect with the city. Long-term resources are needed that allow an articulation of projects and manifestations in public space at a local level.

#### ***A third set of ideas:***

Visual art if defined in terms of culture, high art. This is removed from communities. There is no common understanding of what culture means.

With cultural agency it is important to look at what is already there, rather than offering 'culture'. Maybe there are some cultural agencies already under way. It is important to enhance existing activity and give it a public form. Things that can be done and shared publicly reinforce what people are already doing. This opposes bringing culture to finding and supporting it.

There is a challenge to work with people to help them achieve agency online. There are issues of distribution when it comes to the Internet. It can be difficult to understand culture when it is not

visible. How do we locate that private activity? We need to find those people who offer self-made things on line.

There is a consumer driven agenda. The atomized individual dominates. Is collective agency being eroded?

Culture can be elitist. Culture is linked to class. Agency is about feeling confident enough to set your own boundaries, own and perform your own talents. Community arts are nurturing people's own sense of cultural production.

We need to make culture financially accessible. It is necessary to make 'high' culture accessible. It is necessary to make space for different subjectivities to be expressed. We need to multiply the platforms and empower people to create their own platforms.

We need shared spaces that meet different needs. Shared spaces offer opportunities to see, experience and be open to new experiences.

#### ***A fourth set of ideas:***

We need to widen the sources for policy makers come from to include people from marginalized communities.

The institutions should have processes of rotation and transparent mechanisms. They should train people on how to access their powers of distribution.

#### ***A fifth set of ideas:***

Artists are pioneers in developing an art colony that offers a new way of living in the culture and where the rural informs the urban. Culture needs to be tended. Rural contexts have greater experience and talents in tending which can be shared with the urban. This includes finding ways of nourishing what is intangible in culture from the bottom up.

It needs to be acknowledged that top-down is discredited from the experience

of the denizens of culture. Culture now needs to accredit 'artizens'.

## **THE PURPOSE OF CULTURAL AGENCY**

### ***One set of ideas:***

The job of the cultural agent is to see things could be different and to give power back to the community.

Culture can be about giving agency to people to see commonalities with others. But it has been used to demarcate by religion, sector or other dividing lines.

We need to question the use of art. Art can be a tool for change rather than self-expression. There is a need to get art out of the theoretical into personal and purposeful art.

Artists fear they won't get funding if they voice political opinions. Art then reflects back the community and is not critical, inspirational or provoking to think differently. A lot of culture here is political and we should not be afraid to say what we think. We have a negative peace where we keep the lid on everything without challenging and transforming it.

### ***A second set of ideas:***

A lot of art in the community is about social change. Art has the capacity to effect change. But, arts and culture can reinforce the status quo. A key question becomes who is the agent?

The process of getting funding is getting more complex. The technocratic organization of resources means opportunities are not being backed up and it is hard to see a legacy from initiatives. The traditional cultural things can be a weed that refuses to let flowers bloom.

Surviving is not enough. Things can be too easily undone. We put so much in –

resources, time and energy. Yet it is so easily reversed.

***A third set of ideas:***

Art can be used to name inequalities. Art avoids that in Belfast. Art is perceived as a non-threatening phenomenon.

We need to be clear what values we are driven by. Values include access, inclusion, change (political), neutrality (seeing both sides), empathy, participation, self-determination and culture as an agent.

Culture is essential to change. It is a fourth element along with social, political and economic.

Things are in flux. There is a reworking going on. It is a conflictual situation. We can enact certain choices and ideas that are not necessarily consensual.

There are cultural agents who don't want change.

***A fourth set of ideas:***

The criteria of funders are set on pre-branding identity. This reinforces division. It is patronizing.

Culture should communicate the changes that are actually happening. It should acknowledge the need to talk about politics. There is a cultural war happening and we are all caught up between the sides.

***A fifth set of ideas:***

We need to do more re-connecting. Working together still needs to value. We have to imagine what those values might look like and how they become a strategy and a common agenda. 'Hot-desking' practitioners in a region so that they can share knowledge, skills and talents were given as one example.

Cultural projects often get projected into someone else's systems that appropriate it for something else. We need to take the fact of unique once-off creation and not simple 're-production'.

## THE FUTURE OF CULTURAL AGENCY

***One set of ideas:***

Art creates safe spaces where transformative change can happen. The transformation process is a life-long process. Art is transformative. Life itself is transformative. Art also has a humanizing empathetic aspect. It enables people to live, feel, and express in ways that other avenues do not allow for.

Art needs to be in education so it is part of everyone's mode of communication.

***A second set of ideas:***

All art forms should be supported – or should they? Should all forms of culture and creativity be valued because they are interlinked and interdependent? The old social order survives and clings on. A stratum of society protects their interests. Times change but structures and supports have not changed.

There is recognition that swathes of people are disconnected from culture, huge swathes of young people in particular. Initiatives fail to encourage the autonomy of young people. Alienation begins in the schools. You have to do into the schools.

The best thing art can offer is cohesion, a fellowship. Invest in culture, but you need to be serious and to respect the effort, resources and time required.

The institutions do not support innovation. We need resources to incubate and innovate.

***A third set of ideas:***

Should culture be made visible or just supported? When you shine a light on something, does it stop happening? Some can find it empowering to become visible.

However, is visibility only bringing cultural identity forward? Is it only about presentation and not production?

Invisibility can be a choice. It can be a response to coercion. What are the shared values of these invisible practices? Production needs to be supported without becoming visible. Otherwise all platforms are for presentation.

We need to reclaim the right to make together. Not only about new organizational form. On every level we need to co-produce together. We need ways to co-produce without institutionalizing.

Do we bypass the institutions or engage with them? Let's not invent new ones, better to use existing ones and change them from within. Institutions will defend their own agendas. Some institutions are open to new systems.

We need to rethink cultural relationships, forms of visibility, and the apparatus within which culture is produced and delivered.

#### **A fourth set of ideas:**

There is a need to reinvent protest around emigration, education, unemployment, anger, and dark matter. The process is the story.

#### **A fifth set of ideas:**

We need to take into account that the denizens of culture are often unable to act competently in the domain of the community.

The living pool of local culture is a resource bank that requires knowledge, skills and talents to create an exchange with people today.

## 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).

