

Conceptual seminars

Claire Doherty, Director, Situations; Alex Fleetwood, Founder, Hide&Seek; Kate McGrath, Fuel Theatre

How participation is shaping the arts – a panel discussion

Claire Doherty is the founder director of Situations, an art commissioning and publishing organisation based in Bristol – the producers of Nowhereisland, one of the art projects of the Cultural Olympiad in the South West. Over the past ten years, Situations has been responsible for artworks which open up new and surprising encounters in the public realm and is currently pioneering a new programme of work in Oslo, Norway, along with new works for Bristol by writer Tony White and artist Anna Barriball. Claire has written and lectured extensively on contemporary art commissioning and her books include *Contemporary Art: From Studio to Situation*; *Situation*; *Locating the Producers: Durational Approaches to Public Art* and the forthcoming *Out There: The new public art producers*. She advised the Olympic Park Public Realm Advisory Committee and in 2009, was awarded a Paul Hamlyn Breakthrough Award as an outstanding cultural entrepreneur. www.situations.org.uk / @SituationsUK / www.nowhereisland.org / @nowhere_island

Alex Fleetwood (@ammonite) founded Hide&Seek in 2007 and has had a hand in all its projects since then. As well as Hide&Seek, he has produced projects such as *The Eternity Man*, a film opera for Channel 4 / ABC Australia. The film reached a global audience of half a million people and recently won the Rose d'Or, one of the most prestigious awards in television. Alex sits on the London advisory panel for Artists Taking the Lead, the main commissioning programme for the 2012 Cultural Olympiad, and recently won the British Council UK Young Performing Arts Entrepreneur of the Year Award.

Kate McGrath @fueltheatre co-founded Fuel in 2004 with Louise Blackwell to produce fresh work for adventurous people by inspiring artists. Fuel is a producing organisation working in partnership with some of the most exciting artists in the UK to develop, create and present new work for all. Fuel produces new live performance with artists who are pioneering and collaborative, brave and subtle, unique and communicative, working to reach and have meaningful impact on large and diverse audiences across the UK and internationally, and operating an innovative working model with creative and organisational collaboration at its heart. Kate was awarded a Stage One Producer's Bursary in 2005 and the Theatre Fellowship on the Clore Leadership Programme in 2008. Kate was a 2009 British Council UK Performing Arts Entrepreneur and was nominated as one of the top 50 'Women to Watch'. Prior to co-founding Fuel she worked as a Producer at Battersea Arts Centre from 2002-2004, and at the Scotsman from 2001-2002. Kate is a trustee of the JMK Trust.

This session looked at the impact and implications of the trend of co-creation and participatory productions. It looked at how it is affecting the development of audiences and artists, performers and writers.

Each panellist started by providing an overview of their work.

Claire Doherty

Situations is primarily a commissioning organisation, producing work in the public realm usually with visual artists, though we also work with writers, musicians and performers. Our work extends across several areas – regeneration and we sometimes work with developers on permanent installations but this afternoon I'm going to talk about our temporary art projects.

This includes such things as Jeppe Heins' *'Mirror Labyrinth'* and *'Nowhere Island'* by Alex Hartley's, one of the Artists Taking the Lead projects for the Cultural Olympiad.

We've produced long term public art programmes such as in Weston-super-Mare and on the other hand *One Day Sculpture* was a series of 20 commissioned works in New Zealand, all of which only lasted a day. So there is a big difference in the way we arrive in different places and the duration of what we do.

One of the challenges we have as Situations is that every time we start a project we start from scratch. This usually means finding a new audience each time we go somewhere new. So we need to devise tactics that can be rolled out that are pertinent to that project and evolve with the artist rather than being tacked on at the end.

I'm going to talk about *Nowhere Island* as we tested different ways of working – with a range of results – some successful and some not.

We come from a range of organisations, but I'm sure many of us are familiar of working with artists for whom public engagement is a threat to artistic integrity and the idea of co-creation is worrying and they have to be brought to the ideas that we are familiar with for the first time.

Alex Hartley is primarily a studio based artist. He proposed this wonderful impossible idea which is that he wanted to bring an arctic island to travel round the South West coast during the Olympics. He discovered this island on a Cape Farewell expedition in 2004 and the idea was 'what if this island travelled south as the only country to bring itself to the Olympics?' We've made it happen.

Alex normally works in photography and installation and was not used to the idea of gathering a constituency of interest around him. This island would be arriving with its embassy at Weymouth in time for the sailing events. His vision originally, I think, was about just watching it go by from a cliff top but we thought it had the potential to capture the imagination of a wide variety of audiences in the south west and

nationally and internationally. This could include ideas around citizenship and a new nation, climate change and the environment.

So we developed a two-year programme built on the idea that this island became a new nation as it passed through international waters and you can become a



citizen of that island. We asked – what does it mean to sign up? It's about active engagement. The answers that the audience provide are folded back into the project.

It also offered up the opportunity to attract new audiences that wouldn't normally touch a visual arts project.

We did this through a year long programme of resident thinkers – Tim Smit founder of the Eden Project, Vidal Sassoon, John Tusa, comedian Natalie Haynes, Peter Tatchel and Yoko Ono for example. Some of these contributions were very strident with calls to action, others were cerebral and academic, and others such as Kerry Smith showed us how to think about the way that we might have a series of missions.



This all happened for a year before the island arrived. It was one of the ways we built up anticipation around the event and a sense of ownership for the project. People were also signing up as citizens and we began to see that people were interested in contributing to what the idea of a new nation might be. We therefore created the world's first online constitution. The 'constitutional propositions' are no longer than 140 characters. It varied from the island supporting the fight for freedom of West Papua to the Wurzels which became the music gods of the island. These can be ordered through different themes so you can look up all the ones based on nationhood or immigration for example. It's also in a constant state of flux so you can rank the ones you think are best.

We found that this was a way in which young people could become involved in the project. The online 'embassy' provided all sorts of ways that people could find out about the project. One of the other fascinating things was the way that we worked

with partners across the region including schools which taught Nowhere Island as part of the curriculum.

[Claire then played an animation made at a school as part of this project:
<http://vimeo.com/35656821> or <http://nowhereisland.org/#!/embassy/school-info/>]

This was all before the island arrived.

One of the things I would like to continue to discuss here is the importance of building anticipation through none-arts networks and contacts. The resident thinker element brought in people to this project through other ideas. That barrier to being involved in an art project was reduced through environmentalism for example. Sometimes they've become involved in an arts project without knowing that it was a project by 'the artist Alex Hartley'.

The other key idea is the way that the contributions have been folded back into the project; it was co-created. Digital and social media have helped us immensely.

The final point I would make is that Situations is a small team that scales up to produce these sorts of projects. We took £50,000 out of the project for staffing over three years but according to our analysis, the real cost was £320,000 if you include elements like volunteering. So when we report this back to Arts Council England we will say that if you are really interested in relationship marketing that is the level of resourcing we are talking about.

Alex Fleetwood

Hide&Seek is dedicated to developing new sorts of play. It was founded in 2007, after I had been involved in various arts projects called site specific, immersive, interactive and all those sorts of words. It struck me though that they were actually games inspired by video games culture.

So I was really interested in producing games in a cultural context, especially producing games in public spaces, inviting people to play together in the real world. The Hide&Seek festival created a little scene which enabled us to build on various contacts over time and eventually people would pay us to do some of this and so the Hide&Seek studio was born.

In terms of the theme of today I will talk about recent projects in which for us marketing and content are indivisible from one another and art and participation subordinate to games. And of course games are creative forms of expression that don't exist unless they are being played so they are to some degree co-created.

The first project I will be talking about in more detail in my keynote. It was created in conjunction with Edinburgh's Hogmanay Festival called 'New Year Games' which took place on 1st January in public spaces and iconic buildings around Edinburgh. The brief was to do with games what Edinburgh does with fireworks, alcohol and

music on New Year's Eve; to create a convivial public atmosphere to enable people to engage with the fabric of the city and each other. There was also a desire to collaborate with Scottish artists so we worked with indie bands, choreographers, theatre makers and other artists and performers to encourage them to develop their work into new playful contexts and then to give it the biggest possible stage.

On the day, we aimed to convert as many passers-by as possible to become players. There are a lot of people who stay in Edinburgh for several days with not much to do. Our job was to attract and convert and keep them.

The second project was called '*Hinterland*'. It was launched at the Forest Fringe in Edinburgh last August. It was about talking to strangers, a collaboration with the poet Ross Sutherland. The invitation to talk to strangers comes with a specific requirement to find a stranger who speaks in a different language from yours so that you can understand the instructions in the book which are in different languages. Once you've successfully completed this you have to phone in your results using a standard mobile phone. Then after a while, you get a poem back which is based on the encounters you've had.

Something that's interesting from a marketing perspective are the digital platforms which are used. It's quite complex – there's a fair amount of interactivity happening but you never see a screen and you never participate in anything that is traditionally digital. There are several off the peg services which enable you to convert voice calls into data which you can then use on your website or software. This meant we could convert the phone calls into poems.

This has a couple of benefits – firstly an aesthetic one – it's good to have strange interactive experiences in which you are not being confronted with the technology that is being utilised to produce them. Secondly, it lowers the barrier of entry – you don't have to have a complex piece of technology in your hand or rely on infrastructure fitted into a building. Many of the games we run require lots of people too but this one doesn't.

Here we separated out the complex interactivity from the experience. It didn't require anything too complicated – just a phone that can send and receive phone calls. That is a conscious decision on our part to put it in the hands of as many people as possible.

The third project is happening this month, called '*99 Tiny Games*'. It's part of the Showtime Festival which is part of the Cultural Olympiad. We prototyped it at the Southbank Centre last summer. A tiny game is found on a circular piece of vinyl. It's designed to be discovered by passers by and has rules which you should play on the spot.

My favourite one from last year was 'People Pooh Sticks' which asked people on the balcony of the Southbank Centre to choose passers by as they went past a spot and

to see which one reaches the next spot first. That was it. It relied on peoples' sense of fun and fairness. It was gratifying to sit at a distance watching people play it.

It solves the distribution of engagement problem because the whole thing is at one with the marketing. It is designed to inspire particular types of experience and is related to the environment. It's worded quite carefully encouraging people to read through to the end. This year we will be reproducing *99 Tiny Games* around the thirty three boroughs of London – the first game we have produced for seven million players.

Finally, a project that is currently live in Paris at La Gaîté Lyrique which is an extraordinary building and organisation devoted to looking at how culture is now and then finding ways to shape that intuition into shows in their public space. It has some extraordinary innovations such as a video game space where no matter what exhibition is on they curate a set of games playable at the same time.

We were part of *Joue le Jeu* which has devoted itself to everything being entirely playable throughout. Our game aimed to make the building 'sentient' because it has had an interesting history. It was built as an opera house, then was unoccupied during most of the 20th Century, it had a brief fling with a cartoon mogul when it was turned into a sort of 90s theme park. Then it was taken over by the city and converted into what it is now.

Because the building was designed to enable digital work to be presented within it it meant that we could network several elements together.

In each game the player interacts with one of the Building's senses: Listening (in which you make a sound the Building wants to hear), Smelling (in which you negotiate the contours of the Building's nose so that it can take in your scent), Feeling (in which you touch the Building rhythmically) and Seeing (in which you help the Building see into places where its security cameras do not point). After forming an impression of you through your actions in these games, the Building will tell you what type of person it thinks you are.

Some people have reported being slightly disturbed about the Building being rather prescient about them.

As the institution is so open to new practices we were able to start the game on the poster for the exhibition – it had a phone number which you could ring – and it gave you information about the building's moods and invited you to leave a sound for it. It then told you that as a result of the sound it recommended that you came along.

It's about designing across the seams. We're constantly thinking about how we pass people between platforms and places, online and physically. So it's about making those seams invisible and easy to cross.

Kate McGrath

Our mission at Fuel is to produce fresh work for adventurous people by inspiring artists. Fresh work means we want all the projects to be new and surprising, adventurous means that we want our audiences to be transformed and go on an adventure with us and inspiring artists speaks for itself except that we also want to inspire them too.

We've produced about 60 projects in eight years and when we choose the artists we work with, we want people with a unique perspective on the world and who are able to share that perspective with audiences. We want the moments when they meet to be transformative, for the audiences to feel or be thinking slightly differently about the world when they leave. We're interested in work in which the audience is engaged as a participant in the experience.

We ask ourselves:

- What will it feel like to experience this as an audience member?
- Who do we think might enjoy or connect with that experience?
- What ideas are being explored and who might be interested in a piece that explores those themes?
- What methods can we use to find them and what language might appeal to them?

Persuading people to try something new is key, so we try to remove barriers that might prevent this from happening. Sometimes this is about price, so we make some projects that are completely free. Sometimes it is about location so we think very carefully about where it takes place. We're committed to touring and extending the life of shows as much as we can, taking it to people rather than insisting they come to us. Last year we toured to 50 towns and cities in the UK and internationally.

The more we tour, the more we build relationships with venues and audiences around the country and the more rewarding it is. We took a show to The Ark in Stockton in 2009 and four people came. We trusted the programmer, who was new and trying to develop an audience. After persuading him very gently to let us return, the next year we went again and 40 people came and then last year 80 people came. We are going to keep going there and building the audience.

Sometimes the venue can be a barrier. So we take the work outside of these contexts. *'Uninvited guests: love letters straight from your heart'* was originally made and performed in arts centres. Before the show, audience members are invited to choose a piece of music and write a dedication to someone they love and to submit those to the company in advance. When you arrive it's a bit like a party. There are only forty people there and two performers and they welcome you into the room with flowers and party poppers and invite you to sit at these tables. After a while, we thought we would like to reach a different audience and believed it would appeal to

different age groups and people who don't normally attend the theatre. So, we took it to an old peoples' day centre. The artists led a workshop there with memories of music and of loved ones, during which they chose their music and wrote dedications and we came back a week later and performed that show to that audience. They loved it. We also took it to a village hall where the local audience decided to decorate the hall and have a meal afterwards. It was a very special night so we have continued to take it to village halls and community centres. It is co-authored with the audience and although we first did it in 2007, the artists keep doing it because it changes every time.



We applied a similar principle to a much larger show called *Electric Hotel* an outdoor dance piece which we took to festivals in 2010 and 2011. It took place in six shipping containers, erected in each location as a four storey building, with a glass front so that you can see the dancers and listen on headphones to the music and sound from inside. It would have been much easier to have

done it in one place, but we were determined for it to find different sorts of audiences by taking it to public spaces where they are. It looks amazing when it pops up.

In Norwich it was met with delight and concern by some people who thought it might be permanent. In Bournemouth, it nestled between similar looking buildings merging with the architecture. In London it stood out against the skyline behind King's Cross and at The Big Show Festival it was visible for miles.

In Stockton, again it was our most fascinating audience. It was in a car park next to a municipal swimming pool and it was free. Stockton feels quite depressed these days and very few people signed up in advance and we were terrified that no-one would come. But as we built the hotel, slowly people stopped to look asking questions and telling friends about it. Then when it was performed, 500 people came which was our full capacity. There were babies in buggies, boys with skateboards and they all stayed to watch this strange piece of David Lynch inspired dance theatre.

We currently have funding from the City Bridge Trust to make our work accessible to deaf and blind people. Earlier this year, we offered a touch tour of the set of *Going Dark* which is a production about an astronomer going blind. The audience were given the chance to understand the night sky with a touch tour of the planets before the show starts.

In 2011 we commissioned theatre artists to produce podcasts to listen to at a particular time and in a particular place. These were hosted by *The Guardian* and

Time Out and had 60,000 downloads. This year, it is in collaboration with scientists, called Body Pods.

We believe that the relationship between a live artist and a audience in a space has the potential to be uniquely transformative, but often it's not because the liveness isn't fully exploited. So we try to pay attention to that 'live-ness'. The audience is completely immersed in an environment for the duration of the piece.

When it comes to audience feedback, the artists don't always agree. We always give out cards and it's surprising how often they come back in the post. We have to help the artists to navigate and make use of them. We also make work for children and we simple ways of enabling their feedback.

Last year, we did a performance at Brighton Theatre Royal about the history of Brighton and Hove Albion. The audience was extremely participative with chanting – ending with people singing 'seagulls, seagulls'. It was an extraordinary experience.

Finally, why do we want to develop audiences and encourage participation? We worked with the Belarus Free Theatre recently, we asked Vladimir Sherman, the Director, how they had managed to keep producing work in the face of so much oppressions and he answered simply *'theatre changes people and people change the world'*. The potential is so rich and it's up to encourage artists to explore this to an audience if we want to achieve our aim of inspiring and surprising people and getting them to look at the world slightly differently.

Discussion

Sean O'Neill, The Fitzwilliam Museum: *The Nowhere Island concept I like very much. It reminds me of utopian projects in the past like Marcel Duchamp. It could keep going, why stop?*

CD: It's an interesting concept because it's virtual – not based in a venue or place as such. One of the key decisions we had to make was whether the citizenship would end. We decided, for resource reasons, that it will end and the island will be 'distributed' amongst the citizens. So one of the things we can do is talk about dystopia and utopia – can utopia exist? It's partly about deciding it has a finite existence. But the question also is what we can do with those relationships.

Joe Spurgeon, Bristol Old Vic: *I suspect that a lot of arts organisations don't do enough to encourage participation because it's hard and costs a lot. Do you have any advice about how arts organisations can do it easily?*

AF: It is hard, but it doesn't necessarily cost a lot of money unless you are talking about peoples' time. Speaking personally, arts buildings seem to be encoded with particular approaches to culture, so they are set up to present culture in a particular way using certain technologies. This can prevent it from presenting things in different

ways. Interesting that a lot of what we have been talking about today are projects happening outside of buildings. There is a demand for new sorts of cultural buildings that can facilitate this.

KM: The participation might be in the show itself but in other projects you might have to think harder about the audience experience is and how they are agents in it as well as receivers and that needs to happen at an early stage when the programming is happening.

CD: It's interesting that from a visual art point of view they have been able to understand that engagement happens over a longer period of time because an exhibition will extend over several weeks or months perhaps. Having said that, the average amount of time spent in front of artwork is very short so we need to work on the depth of engagement. It's a tricky one because not everyone wants to interact, some people just want to watch, receive, listen.

Sarah Briggs, Tate (chair of session): *Yes, it's potentially intimidating for some audiences. One of the questions I had is how you start attracting an audience. Where do you begin?*

CD: We start with the art. It will link with a place or set of people. Invariably, we'll have a development phase in which we work with ambassadors and build it up gradually from the ground up. It's about going after the energy.

Matthew Lawton, National Theatre Wales: *there are a lot of brands from outside the sector are interested in what we are doing here. Do any of the panels have experience of being approached in this way or partnering?*

AF: Hide&Seek is not a publicly funded organisation so we actually make our money by working with those brands. Very rarely do those worlds overlap. This has a lot to do with the development teams in cultural organisations. The companies developing technology for example, work over a long period of time and are flexible about the way they develop whereas cultural projects are often quite specific, come in at short notice and have to deliver particular thing. Matching those two is sometimes difficult. There could be more partnership but the differences need to be worked through.

CD: We have worked with local authorities a great deal. Often there are issues around risk. They can get quite scared of things like the way we are presenting the work in our promotional material. On the other hand in Oslo, there is a seven year programme which is not a sculpture trail and they are open to where the relationship will take us.

KM: We are regularly funded so we don't have to approach other companies or bodies for finance but obviously we do work with partners a lot. There is often difficulty over short time scales. There is frequently an aspiration about

immersiveness, but sometimes the practical implications can be a bit scary. This can happen in the commercial world too.

AF: Sometimes I find more freedom in the commercial world because their attention span is a lot shorter. The big cultural institutions can spend a great deal of time agonising over things. There are some commercial partners who would be interested but they want to work alongside you – some of them will love the crazy projects that arts organisations come up with.

Tim Wood, *The Place*: *You talked about events being free of charge and that being a barrier, but does payment fundamentally change that experience or can it become incidental?*

AF: There are different challenges for paying or non-paying audiences I think

KF: It becomes easier to see when it has gone wrong and sometimes it can be quite scary as we tour. We're doing a project at the moment where we rely quite heavily on our partners to provide an audience and sometimes they struggle and sometimes they're great at bringing in audiences. The Brighton and Hove Albion project had a ticket price and it was packed.

CD: In the visual arts now there is an expectation that they are free, public art is just that – and it wouldn't normally work with people having to pay.

AF: There is a lot of research which has been done on what is free or not free in the games world. Many start off as free or have a basic level which is free and then becomes paid for as the layers build on top of that.