

No One Asks for Masterpieces

Random reflections on 25 years as a community artist

Language is a slippery thing. As a writer, it is the tool of my trade yet it still manages to elude me and change its very nature while I am distracted by something else.

Words are the building blocks of understanding – the bridges which connect one experience or idea to another. They are the wiring which make meaning, the sparks which ignite revolutions. For these reasons, some words should not be heard together in the same sentence. Some words negate each other. ‘Folk-rock’ is a good example; ‘factory-farming’ is a better one. The current ill-suited coupling which makes me shout most frequently at TVs and radios however is ‘gated-community’. In my simplistic world, if you have *gates*, unless we are talking about prisoners, you are not a *community*.

Now, I don’t feed this in to a piece about arts practice because I want you to know what an angry person I am, generally I am not, but I do want to introduce early on how mutable the notion of ‘community’ is. Broadly speaking, my work has retained the same core values for a quarter of a century, yet the world has changed around me – I have felt myself to be ahead of the national curve of understanding, behind it and riding its crest at different times.

I began my relationship with the slippery world of community arts back in the mid-1980s. It is a term and a genre which has reinvented and redefined itself on an ongoing and incremental basis to adapt to a changing world. I sometimes feel that its relevance is tidal; just when it seems to be losing purchase in the culture and the broader arts ecology, it performs a nifty sidestep and morphs into something new, something vital and useful. Maybe it is the ‘Dr Who’ of arts practice – or maybe all disciplines regenerate all the time, that’s why they survive.

The tone of community arts before I joined the current was often overtly political, it engaged local people with campaigns for better housing and services, it lobbied for change. It was often unashamedly engaged with issues of class and gender. By the middle of the 1980s however ‘communities’ as they had been seen in the previous decades were more ephemeral, more insubstantial than they had ever been. Perhaps this is where the roots of what is now termed the ‘thin community’, i.e. a group of people who do not share a cultural history, a culture of food, a scheme of worship. In 2009 communities are ‘thinner’ than ever, and it is our role as artists to find ways to tackle the changing circumstances around us.

Good practice in community arts in the 1980s seemed to go hand in hand with running summer schemes for children, kite-making and t-shirt printing. This probably happened because

community artists are always interested in the choices that the people they are making that art with want to make. It suffered as a poor relation to the mainstream and was often, I suspect, a synonym for 'bad art'. Over the years though, the ways of looking at and identifying communities evolved, geographical communities morphed into 'communities of interest', participation became a watch-word for a generation of artists and the process rolled on. Arts Council England now attempts to balance excellence and *participation* across activity and regularly funded organisations are judged on how they engage with the locality in which they work – community arts practice has itself become mainstream, grown-up, self-aware and self-reflective.

As we approach the close of the first decade of the 21st century I think I know what community arts is for, but I might be wrong, or I might be right for only a short period of time. Community arts is a fight back in a world where people shore up the fractured nature of their lives with essentially 'anti-social' activity. Teenagers are isolated in bedrooms with PC's, gaming with other people or socially networking with other people, true, but not always being 'social' with them. Adults are in front of their Wii Fit in yoga positions instead of being in a yoga class. I am not a Luddite, I am not against technology, but I am aware that for every good reason a person has for 'staying in alone' they need to be given a good reason to 'go out and be amongst people'. Community arts are, for me, the social arts. All cultures in all ages in all parts of the world replicate the social model of living together, playing together, eating together. We don't do these things alone, so why should we make art alone?

Good participatory arts projects combat isolation, increase social cohesion and minimise suspicion between sectors of the community. It's not rocket science – every village hall or community centre amateur theatre group does the same thing; they just happen to think that all they are doing is making plays. Community arts by stealth, without fanfare, without analysis – perhaps the best sort? I came to be a professional in the arts industry by testing my skills and boundaries in the safety and support of a youth theatre. It was a space where young people could take risks, test ideas, make friends, be social – no one ever called it a space for community arts practice, but that's what it was.

As a professional practitioner I am, by default and by nature, robust and consultative. The basis of my approach to any project is inclusive and democratic. I don't believe I am a genius with special talents, more like an artisan, a craftsman with a set of skills. I feel something like the fine art furniture maker who sees no contradiction in being given constraints on their practice. If my

writing needs to fit a certain age group, be of a certain length, on a certain subject, so be it. I am a social being, someone who likes to play, someone who likes to test my ideas against those of others, who likes to absorb the energy and enthusiasm of others. The world of community arts is a natural home for artists like me: we are hard-wired to be collaborative makers of art. It's not what we do while we wait for 'proper work' or 'real commissions' to come along – it's just what we do.

Reflections on Creative Communities

Creative Communities has thrown up many of the same discussions about levels of participation and ownership, about engagement and quality of arts work versus art process. The overall aim has never been to use the arts in a curative way in a broken society, it has been to make good art – with people. Over the course of the year the artists working on the project have met a number of times and some well recognised tropes have emerged:

"I got to the hall and they didn't even know I was coming..."

"We set up our stall under a gazebo as part of the fair and the wind was blowing the work everywhere..."

"They gave me a place to work in which I had to spend a day clearing before we could use it..."

Even twenty five years on, community artists seem to face challenges that studio or venue-based artists rarely do. It is perhaps the price we pay for engagement, but we put up with these indignities for a reason, and the reason is simple. Engagement brings benefits; benefits in terms of making bespoke work, exceeding peoples' aspirations, shedding light on the everyday, the local, the vernacular.

Some of the artists working on the Creative Communities programme have raised thoughts on who they are, what they do and why they do it. Their views will resonate with other artists across the UK.

"We need to find a way of breaking down the bad impression a lot of older people have about young people."

"...getting to know a community is not about finding out what goes on there but who lives there and what they do – there are always amazing people. Communities that have a sense of cohesion and purpose are those where those amazing people are engaged in community projects/work."

"One very positive result of community projects (a number of people have said this to me) is that it makes you aware of what is there in a place and to value it more."

Beth Wood, Theatre Artist

Beth's ambition for her practice to have a social value with restorative or curative characteristics goes to the heart of what makes community arts such an ill-defined term and practice. There are many commissioning agencies (local authorities, schools, youth projects) which frankly care little about the quality of the art. The art is the spoon which delivers the medicine a particular community might need – which is for people to gather and experience something together. Speaking as an artist, I of course assert that good art does this better than bad, but still there is a school of thought in this country that any art (good, bad or indifferent) can be a useful delivery mechanism for social change and development. I could garner a sense of community within an estate by claiming that I was going to bulldoze a motorway through the middle of it, but our role as artists is surely to balance the competing needs in the favour of making art which means something, art which lasts, art which does not tie itself to the tracks of the oncoming train of 'social benefit'.

"It is not for reasons of hierarchical snobbery I think of myself as an artist working in the community rather than as a community artist – the definition is pedantic perhaps, but precise – 'community artist' sounds too much like a career choice. On a good day I feel that titles can be fluid – 'artist', 'printer', 'printmaker', 'teacher', 'lecturer' – and selected for whichever project is in hand; on a bad day I feel like an Art and Design whore."

"There are both the 'what on earth am I doing here' moments and the moments of some achievement – standing outside a rain-swept youth centre with no-one, not even the caretaker turning up and seeing a room full of people of widely varying backgrounds and ages engaged in a common experience."

“I have found the notion of ‘community arts’ often low on artists’ own hierarchies of working states; beneath, for example, lecturer, artist-in-residence, researcher – but I do not see anything fundamentally more important in working with post-graduate students than working with say, primary school children. Quality of experience is paramount in either case – one is no more difficult to do well than the other.”

Andrew Morrison, Printmaker

A very clear articulation on the specificity of language in this arena is shown by Andrew’s desire to think of himself as an “artist working in the community rather than as a community artist”. It is a subtle distinction but one with merit. Most artists will also recognize something in themselves as he describes how he feels differently about his work from one day to the next. When they work with an artist, most communities display that healthy view of the practitioner which falls closer to respect than reverence; we all want esteem, but not deference. If a group seems overawed about working with ‘a playwright’ I am happy to describe myself as an artisan with a set of simple skills; if they treat me like their *word-whore* a large part of me wants to say: “Do you know who I am – do you realize I am a playwright!?”.

It is clear from Beth’s and Andrew’s reflections that there are recurrent themes in the approach to the work and the way that it is viewed by the wider world. But it is not a form which is standing still, as our ‘processual understanding’ of what community arts is continues to remain fluid and responsive.

Creative Communities and Me

As community artists, no one year’s work ever mirrors another, and we will be offered projects which are always a blend of a number of questions:

How creative a project is it?

Is it something I can do standing on my head or will it stretch me?

How far from home is it?

What rate of pay is on offer?

We are forever balancing the sublime with the mundane, the practical with the ephemeral and ineffable.

When offered to take part in Creative Communities, I was explicitly told to ‘not write them a community play’. The nature of the initiative was to stretch the artists and the community. I have ended up collaborating with a musician (something I have never done before) to create songs (something I have never done before) and develop a narrative which makes sense through those songs (something I have never done before). The project has had a faith in the art and an ambition for the art which is rare. The outcomes were never drawn out from the start; they only emerged through creative consultation, by artists responding to people and places and by people responding to artists.

There have been challenges. I have worked with two choirs over the course of the project and trying to communicate to them that I am a writer at their disposal who they might never call upon to write, was always going to be a tough ask. So I have ended up writing, but certainly not within what I perceive as my comfort zone. Yet even this has been a voyage for the two choirs, one which did not exist until the start of the project and one which had never performed a new song, let alone a new narrative song-cycle. They have been on a journey throughout, as have I. They have both probably felt nervous and exposed at some points, as have I. It is the appetite to make something worthwhile which has sustained us, the desire to make what was always the point of the project – good art.

My work with Creative Communities is still ongoing for the moment, but I already know that the work I have done has been informed, in fact outright created, by those participating in it. They are taking part in a process which aims to do no less than explore and articulate their sense of themselves and their place in the world – it seems like a pompous aspiration, but it is a real one. It is one which makes me nervous, but one which I think they have every chance of achieving. It is what community arts does better than anything else when all the right ingredients are in place.

Last musings

During a recent conversation with Gavin Stride, he pointed out that Peter Maxwell-Davis had worked with a community choir in Farnham to make a piece of work which went on to be widely respected and performed. This got under my skin and made me think. Over my time of making art with people I have been asked to judge my project by many criteria:

How many people did you work with?
What proportion of them were young, old, disabled, of which ethnicities?
Which would be defined as 'hard to reach'?
How many products did the project create?
What was the level of engagement, of ownership?
Did people enjoy it?
What is the legacy?

No one, no commissioning agency, no local authority, no officer at Arts Council England has ever asked me:

Did you create a masterpiece?

No one asks for masterpieces.

The two cannot be mutually exclusive. So I have set myself a challenge, myself and the Elmbridge Choir. At my last session with them I said:

"This is my challenge to you and my promise to you. I will endeavour to craft, from submissions from across the borough, something beautiful and exquisite and delightful and current and local and charming and beguiling. Together we will aim to make a masterpiece – I want it to be unlike anything you have so far created and I want audiences to leave not being able to quite articulate what they have just seen."

It has taken me twenty five years to notice that no one expects a community arts project to create a masterpiece, and now that I have realized, I have decided to make one. We may fail, but we'll fail having engaged robustly in the attempt, we'll fail nobly and with our aspiration intact. Community arts projects are often designed albeit covertly to solve a social problem, to heal a fracture or to do 'some nice things with some nice people'. I have been, at times, a passenger and a driver on that journey and now I am taking an exit off the road and hoping to take one community with me towards a challenge which no one has set us.

The way language mutates and develops around us continues to fascinate and frustrate me, but it also offers opportunities. By the early part of next year the Elmbridge Choir will have

staged their 'event' and I will have been the community artist who will have created it with them. If we do not create a masterpiece by traditional standards, can it be judged to be a 'masterpiece of engagement' or a 'masterpiece on a local scale'? Or am I being as slippery as people who talk of 'factory-farms' and 'gated-communities'? Wherever community arts goes over the next 25 years, I'll no doubt still be along for the ride, sometimes behind the curve, sometimes ahead of it, sometimes riding a crest. In many ways that's not a 'choice' thing because it's how I am made as a writer. It's what I do.

*By Richard Conlon*¹



¹ Richard Conlon is a professional playwright, workshop leader and director.