

Working in Public presentation  
**Ethics and Aesthetics: (plus social change)**

This paper is adapted from a presentation to the *Working in Public* Core Group ([www.workinginpublicseminars.org](http://www.workinginpublicseminars.org)), during the afternoon Studio discussion. This followed the public evening lecture by Grant Kester and the morning seminar, which took the form of a discussion between Grant Kester and Suzanne Lacy. The presentation was my response to the theme of event 'Aesthetics and Ethics of Working in Public' and reflects my research in progress towards my PhD. The format of this paper combines the presentation I gave and aspects of the discussion that followed and reflects some thoughts on the lecture, it is a work in progress.

Within my socially engaged practice I still have a desire to produce work that has a recognisable aesthetic component. Nevertheless when viewing my most recent works people have argued with me that they are not art, and this does not discomfort me, (perhaps largely because I think they are wrong).

Kester suggests 'a redefinition of aesthetic experience as durational rather than immediate' (Kester, 2004:12), nevertheless I suggest, the examples of practice on which he draws in *Conversation Pieces* do have some aspects of traditional aesthetics. Through exploring the comparisons between Suzanne's work and mine, I want to raise questions about aesthetics and begin to consider how ethics could directly impact on practice. I suggest that when the aesthetic outcome remains important, this could provoke a clash with making work, which should also recognise and honour participant contribution.

In his lecture Kester suggested a reversion of modernist theory, which had introduced a disassociation of the object from its context, back to a contextual and community essence of aesthetic.

Significantly for many of us in the lecture this was an 'Aha' moment, when our understanding of aesthetic expanded to include not just durational, but also community as well.

Please see the transcript of Kester's conversation with Lacy on the web site for an expanded explanation.

This paper, as a work in progress, in exploring both of these issues is offered for discussion, to explore, rather than to offer any fixed conclusions.

"The artist relaxes their own point of view and allows other voices"

Alastair Snow (Author's notes, *Hidden Spaces* Sept 2006)

I am not talking about community art practice as it is generally styled in the UK. This practice despite enabling change as a general aim, I understand as completely subsuming the artist's voice or personal aesthetic in service to the 'community' in which he/she is

working.

In my own practice, I aim to find a way to produce artwork that promotes social change, which allows a contemporary art aesthetic and engages people within an ethical basis. Reading the material from *Working in Public* and listening to Lacy's presentations it seems clear to me that Code 33 also shares these aims.

I have recently written an ethical statement, drawn from sociology, anthropology and art practice. This will operate as a framework within which to conduct my research and art practice and allow participants to understand what they will get from participating and to be knowingly involved in and understand their contribution to projects. It will also help me to understand the nature of participant contribution to an art practice.



Image: Code 33 logo

This has arisen out of three related issues: I am engaged in doctoral research, which requires an explicit acknowledgement of an ethical implication; my work is about individual social change, which could imply some responsibility for support; and a personal discomfort in making and documenting site specific art work, which occasionally felt like engagement under false pretences or deception.



Image: Detail from *Insufficiently Prepared Adventure: Escape to the Country 2004*

There is an inherent tension between sociological good practice as described by the British Sociological Association (paragraphs 20 – 25, 2004) and the production of artwork. These areas of tension are: Authorship and ownership of work; Participant contribution and subsequent consultation in the making of artwork with the implication of having to change work; Advising participants of their engagement in the work, specifically that their views and opinions may be

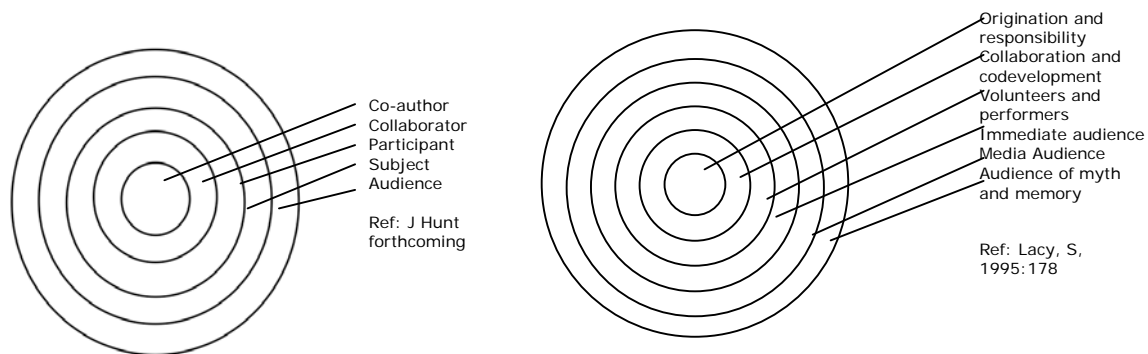
used visually, audibly or quoted in the artwork or research. These tensions will be explored through the discussion of art works that follows.

In the diagrams below I compare Lacy's diagram of audience and my own breakdown of participation in an artwork. Lacy defines audience in terms of an 'evaluative construct' and therefore has more categories. (Lacy 1995:178) Nevertheless there are distinct similarities, which relate to responsibility. She describes the 'audience-centred model' as 'non-hierarchical in intention'

and allowing 'continual movement back and forth' but with the 'more responsibility assumed (so then) the more central the participant's role in the generation of the work.'

Similarly to Lacy I had categorised participation in my projects. These are 'subjects, participants, collaborators or co-artists', which relate directly to the level of my responsibility to them as contributors to an artwork and their ability to influence the project outcomes. I do recognise her inclusion of 'immediate audience' as necessary for my model, because of their possible inclusion in documentation.

Lacy does not however link the level of engagement in a work with a greater role in determining the outcome and documentation of a work. This is a direct implication within my ethical statement.



Bearing in mind an ethical framework for art practice lets look at *Code 33*.

Moira Roth in her narrative commentary on *Code 33* draws out the major goals of the project, which are to instigate change and are stated as 'facilitating meaningful dialogues for both youth and police, and involving local mentoring organizations and Oakland neighbourhood representatives.'

There is an implicit ethical framework in place for the work displayed within the documentation. This is reflected in the facilitated discussions between youth and police prior to the event; using the 'I' statement and allowing the discussions as a neutral zone; the guidelines for exchange on the night; and community mentoring to continue the work beyond the performance. Cameras and microphones clearly present during preparation and during the performance also imply an implicit permission given for public re-presentation.

But what of the rest of T.E.A.M (Teens, Educators, Artists and Media) who developed the event, which for *Code 33* comprised over a dozen artists, although only 3 are credited on the film titles, plus all the others who participated?

Despite the clarity of the major goals, Roth notes some confusion of purpose within one section of the project, the community and neighbourhood representatives, who asked if this wasn't just making a film.

Another possibly unresolved issue is how the work was publicised. In a paradoxical statement Roth quotes a discussion prior to the event: "Shall we call it an 'event' or a 'performance' on the poster?...the official designation for the October 7 performance artwork will be a "public event". (Roth, M 2001, *Evening, August 30*) Is this a satisfactory ethical decision?

Suzanne Lacy: Code 33 brought together a complicated group of 100-150 people as a core group of artists, police, health workers, youth and educators. Code 33 built on activist base and local groups within community. Every project became more extensive to develop support systems and youth development systems. Didn't set out to hold performance, but it was a response that came out of research. The film does reveal the voices, but perhaps not the complexity of issues.

Author's notes from Lacy's Presentation to Working in Public seminar April 2007

*Janey Hunt: Thoughts during discussion on crediting all contributors.*

*In films all the workers have to be credited according to their contracts of work. What about doing this with art documentation.*

*How could this be arranged with varying degrees of input, 'eg Core group' and 'with assistance from...' or everyone in alphabetical order. What about those who don't want to give their names?*

There is an emphasis on a traditional aesthetic, mentioned in Suzanne's presentation last week, where the hand of the artist is obvious. Roth again, 'I'm beginning to see the event in terms of color as well as sounds (cars, music and conversations) and movement (entries and exists, gestures, milling, and dancing). The reds and golds of the sunset. Red, white and black T-shirts and blue uniforms. Stark black-and-white cars and brilliantly painted low-rider cars.'

The film documentation that we have seen in the seminars is also presented in line with contemporary art documentation.

Recognition for the artist has come from a sustained interaction with Oakland over the period of ten years and built upon an already established practice including co-operative work at the Women's Building. However the scale of the event of 1,000 audience members, 250 performers, reporters and camera crews, and its successful execution would also have contributed to the artist's standing.

I should say that none of these comments above are raised as criticism and may be easily answerable, however they are raised in the context of this seminar's enquiry.

So what has happened in my own projects since I wrote my ethical

statement?

I have conducted two projects *Conscience Offsets* and *Eco-renovation: House Receipts* within my research framework to date. Both of these I instigated and conducted without any need for external input, but the audience needed to engage with the work directly to complete it.

### *Conscience Offsets*



Image: Detail from *Conscience Offsets*, 2006

Concurrently with the development of *Conscience Offsets* I was writing my ethical statement. The work did not fit into the draft statement for a number of reasons. I did not advertise it as a work of art, ie there was no title clearly visible and I simply appeared on the street. The work did not have a traditional aesthetic and looked more like market research. There was a poster advertising the whole exhibition of which this was one work, which I very discreetly displayed. The fact that my project was near by another artwork of a more obvious aesthetic may have allowed people to draw the conclusion they we were part of the same art event. No one asked if my piece was an artwork. The documentation of the work is through photographs taken on site and publication of the written contributions, reflecting each site in which the work took place.

I did not clearly state that participants might be photographed, or that the written comments and conversation might be re-presented or published in any way. However I was inviting written comments to be pinned up, readable by anyone who passed by and that would imply an implicit agreement for public re-use. Nevertheless I recognise that this course of action would not fit my ethical framework. In my categories of engagement some of the audience would be classed as subject/participants by contributing comments.

### *Eco-renovation: House Receipts*

As a gallery installation this project was easier to accommodate within my ethical statement. The poster and statement displayed within the gallery clearly advertised participation as part of the work and actively invited contributions to the work, both written, visual and conversation. The



sociological and anthropological approaches when interviewing people in order to trial them as part of my art practice.

Is it possible to balance personal aesthetic standards, allowing participant achievement and balanced within an ethical framework? I'm still working on it.

### **Bibliography**

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As an addendum to the above I also offer the following:

Another approach to an ethical statement eg. Croatian artist Kristina Leko, *What should I do? An ethics for artists in twelve simple rules (2004)*, [www.shiftingground.net/kristinalekopres.htm](http://www.shiftingground.net/kristinalekopres.htm) accessed 18 March 2007

And what impact on documenting art practice would the following proposal that the UK government required photographers to carry ID in order to operate in a public place?

From: roland.buckingham@KCL.AC.UK

**Subject: Gov petition against restrictions on photography**

**Date:** 18 March 2007 13:45:49 GMT

**To:** ART-VISUAL@JISMAIL.AC.UK

**Reply-To:** roland.buckingham@KCL.AC.UK

"There are a number of moves promoting the requirement of 'ID' cards to allow photographers to operate in a public place.

It is a fundamental right of a UK citizen to use a camera in a public place, indeed there is no right to privacy when in a public place.

These moves have developed from paranoia and only promote suspicion towards genuine people following their hobby or profession."

It's not made clear exactly what moves are afoot, but if you would like to sign the on-line Gov petition against such restrictions you can do so at:

<http://petitions.pm.gov.uk/Photography/>