

Monika Vykoukal – Working in Public
Aesthetics and Ethics
pARTners Residency, Eva Merz

At the beginning of the New Social Art School book 'Get a Fucking Job'(1) is the quote:

"I don't think one can claim to be 'objective' if one doesn't constantly look at society from the point of view of the lowest positioned. The journalist who tries to balance the view of the rich with the view of the poor has already accepted this unequal division and justified it, and is therefore part of the oppression."

-Jacob Holdt, American Pictures

I am quoting this here, because Holdt's statement seems to suggest the focus of Eva Merz's work and her relationship to the potential participants in her work.

I did not pick this question initially, because I always thought I find it difficult to see 'ethics' and 'aesthetics' as separate (if I manage to hold some definition of those terms to begin with). Also, I will talk about my chosen example again, our artist residency, pARTners which raises a few issues: One, it is still in progress, only 3 months of the total 18 month (encompassing 3 six-month residencies) have passed; two, I am not the artist, but as curator functioning more as an administrator. I am largely talking about somebody else's work (not about ethics and aesthetics in the administration, or hopefully support of this, which is my role, really). Briefly my approach has been to be there if needed (I hope) to help with practical things and to discuss, but not to proscribe anything. I also feel it is the artist who has to establish relationships with collaborators herself and chose who this could be, rather than me. I do have some obvious political positions as an individual, so they have an impact on what values I bring to art and work.

What has happened so far?

The aims of the project as set by the funder, Scottish Arts Council, are:

Partners is a National Lottery-funded initiative giving communities with little experience of the arts new opportunities to engage with professional artists. The partners programme supports artist residencies lasting from 3 months to 2 years. The artist(s) should be based in, and work in collaboration with a local community in Scotland. (2)

December the 1st the 'Partners' residency programme starts within an area of Aberdeen facing regeneration to encourage varied, local communities to participate in the arts. Three artists will each work and live for six months in the area. Eva Merz is the first artist-in-residence. This residency is a Peacock Visual Arts project in partnership with Station House Media Unit (SHMU). SHMU is located in Woodside, one of the areas the residency is based in. It aims to encourage and promote filmmaking, radio, and magazine development in and around some of Aberdeen's most deprived areas.

The areas the residency will focus on, Fersands, Tillydrone, Middlefield and Woodside, are among the most deprived areas of the city. These areas have been involved in several government regeneration programmes over the past 20 years. While there have been improvements, there are still challenges to be met.

November: Eva moves into a council flat in one of the areas, Tillydrone. Council Statistics (Tillydrone Neighbourhood profile):

Tillydrone recorded the second highest rate of drug possession in the central area [of Aberdeen]...and the highest vandalism rate... the highest rate of domestic housebreaking...Second highest percentage of council housing tenants, more than 4 times of city-wide unemployment average, low income, teenage mothers etc.

Red Hearts

Eva got to know the area (walking, taking photographs, meeting people in daily life – shops, hairdressers, etc.) rather than in formal settings (community centres, organised social activity provided by the city's services). While taking photos on her walks, she noticed the proliferation of signs: 'No Ball Games', 'No Exercising Pets' etc. – There are 62 in the neighbourhood, a 'unique' feature in the city. On 14 February she put red vinyl hearts over them (which she took off again in the following days).

This was Eva's first big public outing in her residency. It is obviously different from the dialogical and collaborative focus of others of the talks in the seminar. I'll try suggest some of its meanings. By this individual intervention in public space, placing an object (in this case, as she is keen to emphasize, a message of love), Eva is inviting a reaction. Her work is in response to a visual element that defines the geographic community by the same authority that collates the statistical evidence and supports the residency. I would suggest that by 'crossing out' the council message, she obviously also articulates conflict and disagreement, although quite sweetly.

The work employs the visual language and means of street art: repetition-mapping, readability, illicit and anonymous yet personal take over of public space; can be associated obligingly with the visual language of iconic city branding (I 'heart' New York); is highly noticeable and can be read quickly by the potential viewer as they are on their way through the streets of Tilly. The vinyl hearts are both a classic Valentine's message and a protest of the (still readable) signs. Given the focus on vandalism and graffiti as perceived problems in the area (and the city) by the council, the attitude the hearts manifest is not one of building consensus in line with policy, but one of conflict and questioning of the articulation and definition of the city, the citizens and our problems by those in power.

The signs are reaching out, communicating to the public in the area. They aim to express a position and start a discussion. They not only try to say 'love you', but they also simply say 'I am here'. The media response and individual responses of local people were overwhelmingly positive. The council followed with an equally positive response – it turns out some people at the council are trying to find a way to remove the signs, or to change them into something else as it might be too costly to remove them.

Meeting People

Since moving to Tillydrone in November last year, Eva has been inviting people to her house – friends, neighbours, guests, council employees, staff from Peacock Visual Arts and SHMU. Every visit is documented in a photograph of the guests at the living room table in front of the drawn curtains. Photos of all the 'No Ball Games' signs before and after and the growing collection of visits are put up on the walls of the living room. The visits and meetings are only documented in photographs – capturing them in the same place, Eva establishes a fleeting equality between her visitors as she puts them all in the same position as a guest at her table.

Comments/Questions/Notes

What kind of socially engaged practice does Eva's activity embody?

The artist acts as an individual, as a resident and neighbour - not as social worker. The context of a lot of the interactions is the private space of her flat, informal encounters in the street and in everyday life, not the formal settings for art. This brings some obvious issues around distinctions with it: What is and is not part of the work? What is the distinction between Eva the private individual and Eva Merz, profession: artist? Does the work imply a desire to dissolve such distinction between professional, implicitly detached practice, separate from a private life and particular, personal preoccupations? Yet, the other side of those desires is - are questions on the fusion of work and leisure from the perspective were all becomes work and the artist functions as a service provider. This is a danger, at least from the perspective of the aims of funders that frame the residency in terms of specific social agendas, where the artist could even be seen to be expected to replace lacking social provisions through their individual creativity. Yet, Eva's work is distinctly personal, not agenda driven. It clearly presents her position, and does not claim to produce a representation of the will of the community, or to present people with 'the truth'. It is just as much an investigation of their viewpoint and living conditions, based on the idea of learning together.

Using the means of street art all around the streets of the area, the work is, most probably, not read as art at this point, but as a sudden, anonymous gesture or intervention commenting upon the council signs. Removed from the art context, the gesture might have more of an immediate impact, be more effective as a protest of the signs and a gesture of commitment towards the other people living in the area (3).

On another level, Eva Merz's approach also investigates notions of community. The community of the residency is initially defined geographically and chosen in relation to statistical data on relative 'deprivation' in this area of the city. On the ground – just as in any place – this notion is complicated by the diversity of particular individuals, groups and interests, with tensions, for example, between families with children and drug dealers; or generational conflict (rumour has it this is the historic impulse behind the No Ball Games sign). By getting to know people in the area, the artist's endeavour is one to find out what the community is, and she is doing that as process of dialogue and investigation - her as stranger - rather than through pre-existing definitions by the authorities, or by targeting specific groups (exclusively or for focus on their issue). Rather, she is looking very much at the relationship between herself and the community and – secondarily - the organisations in the area and the council's definition of this context (which she is in open conflict with).

How does this practice relate to the common expectations of such a residency? The funders' aims – and countless policy documents - seem to suggest the participation of people living in this deprived area in some form of art making will help to produce consensus between residents and, somehow, make their individual lives and the area better, at least in their perception. In Eva Merz's residency, however, communication is not at the outset, or primarily, seen as a source for deliberation leading to consensus, but as a way to investigate the situation through listening to the actors on the one hand; as an articulation of dissent, and potentially open conflict on the other. On the ground, this attitude is based on the artist's of

living and working in the city for some years and her experiences in previous projects, in particular 'Get a Fucking Job' an investigation into street begging in Aberdeen, together with Bob Steadman (which resulted in a book of interviews with people involved in various ways with begging, and in particular beggars themselves). Her findings about the lack of sufficient support through social service provision by the City Council to help beggars and address the causes for their situation, and the council's lack of reaction to her work, informed a critical stance with regards to their support of poorer, homeless, or people addicted to illegal drugs in the city and investment in the areas which they live in.

As Eva says: 'One of the first things I noticed when I came to Aberdeen is that there is a big difference between people who have money and people who don't, rich and poor... that's one thing. (...) I want to look at where they are failing and to find out what local people think about the problems, but it's also important to highlight the positive things in the community.'

By approaching the work with people in 'an area of deprivation' from an openly personal manner, Merz's practice also thematizes professional distinctions, and relations between individuals and society, between private lives and the space of politics. In her work, she seeks to impact the issues under investigation beyond their representation as art.

1. Get a fucking job. New Social Art School, Aberdeen 2006. p. 1
2. Scottish Arts Council, <http://www.scottisharts.org.uk/1/professional/partners.aspx>
3. www.communityplanningaberdeen.org.uk/nmsruntime/saveasdialog.asp?IID=1686&slD=387
4. This argument was put forward by Stephen Wright in a talk focusing on the invisibility of certain 'activist' art practices, such as those of Grupo de Arte Callejero and the Yes Men, at the moment and site of its initial manifestation as crucial to the impact of the work at the symposium 'Transformations of Public Space', organised by the Professorship of Art in Public Space at the Stedelijk Museum CS Amsterdamin (February 15. and 16. 2007) - http://www.lkpr.nl/index_en.php?page=symposia



Andy and Monika



Tillydrone House