CREATIVE FRICTION: DISRUPTING THE BOUNDARIES OF 'ART' AND 'COMMUNITY ART'

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Abstract: *Beginning with a discussion of the Market Value project — a two-year engagement by independent arts company TRAX with the Preston Market community in Melbourne's northern suburbs — this paper argues for a disruption of the boundaries between 'art' and 'community art'. The construction of these two fields of practice in opposition to one another gives rise to a series of further oppositions, between innate creativity and expertise, between participation and the artist-as-author, between outcome and process. This dichotomous writing of 'art' and 'community art' is enormously problematic, not least because it misrepresents both. This paper suggests that taking 'art' and 'community art' out of their oppositional standoff, and putting them into a conversation with one another, opens up a dialectical space of creative friction. This space in turn creates the possibility for more authentic, critical negotiations within community-engaged arts practice, and for a more rewarding discourse with which to discuss it.*

Keywords*: Art, community art, CCD, discourse, creativity*

This paper has emerged out of my involvement in the Market Value project, a long-running engagement by the arts company TRAX with the diverse, amorphous community of locals, customers and traders at the Preston Market in Melbourne's northern suburbs. TRAX itself is an independent group of arts practitioners, led by Tara Prowse and Brian Cohen. It has an extensive history of community-based and collaborative arts practice across genres, including theatre making, film, installation and story-telling. Its engagement with the Preston Market began in mid 2007, when it started developing relationships with traders, patrons, local community organisations and market management. A space provided by the market management — located between fruit and veg and fish stalls, and underneath a bingo hall — functioned as the studio, office and workshop space for the two years that TRAX was in residency. In a context of insecurity and uncertainty created by the threat of impending redevelopment of the Market, TRAX engaged in a multi-faceted practice which included running multimedia workshops with young people connected to the Market and the surrounding area, and the production of a theatre show and a multimedia sound and video installation, both of which were staged in the Market itself. The project also included the production of a documentary film and a book, which are being released together in the next month or so.

My own involvement in Market Value began when I was engaged by TRAX to produce a Cultural Impact Statement for the project, and develop a social research component to sit alongside, and feed into, the creative aspects of the project. In conversation with a local Community Reference Group, the CIS aimed to provide a critical overview of the existing social and culture environment of the Market, the strengths and stresses of the community, and the potential impacts of Market Value as an engaged multi-arts project.[1]

In response to the conspicuous lack of public consultation around the proposed redevelopment of the Market site, TRAX set out to function as a 'creative community consultation' which could give expression to some of the many and varied voices which were otherwise being silenced. Art, narrative and story-telling were posited as counter-points to the dominance of administrative, bureaucratic language within discussions about the future of the Market. Through approaching the Market as a site of social and cultural importance, the project sought to challenge the primacy of economic criteria of value.

The creative culmination of TRAX's engagement with the Preston Market community was the staging, in November 2008, of the theatre show and multimedia installation. Over a two week period, the Market closed for business in the afternoon, only to reopen in the evening as a theatre and performance space. Audience members gathered at a temporary box office set up near the tobacconists stall in a causeway of the Market. There, they were met by a man carrying a mobile projector, projecting the image of a young girl across the walls, ceiling and shutters of closed stalls. A recording of the girl's voice played overhead as the audience was led into the multimedia sound and video show set up in the deli section. Videos played on large screens hung from the roof, or on small television sets nestled between stalls, surrounded by salamis, wheels of cheese, and tubs of olives. Audio played through headsets hanging beside the television sets, and people were invited to lift them to their ears and listen as they wandered through the installation — moving through a space which was familiar to many of them, but nonetheless temporarily transformed. The pieces in the installation included film and audio recordings of community members telling their stories and talking about their relationship to the Market, as well as animations, short films created about and in the Market, and a video take on the 'exquisite corpse' game, where people create a story by adding one line each, each person only knowing the sentence immediately preceding theirs. The videos were filmed and edited by artists from TRAX, who also designed and created the installation itself.

From the multimedia installation, the audience was led to the centre of the Market, where seats were arranged around an open space at the intersection of two main causeways, which now formed a stage, and within which the action took place. The play centred on the relationships between a few central characters, all of them associated with the Market in some way, whose lives are disrupted when one of them returns to the Market after an absence of many years. The story was fictional, but made direct reference to the impending redevelopment of the site, with a pair of unsavoury property developers in a leading role. The script was written by professional writers working with TRAX, with the story lines and the writing process emerging out of the engagement and exchange with the Market community. One of the central parts was played by a trader from the Market, Zorro, whose record stall also became part of the set each night. The others were played by professional actors, although many of them were locals.

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[1] Victoria Stead, 'Engaging with Change: Culture, Community and the Arts', Melbourne, TRAX Arts, 2008, available at: http://trax.org/category/projects/market-value/market-research/

2.

Thinking about this project, what interests me is that it doesn't sit entirely comfortably within the rhetoric of community arts and community cultural development. On the one hand, to be sure, it looks like community art — there are trained artists working collaboratively with people from a local community, producing creative outcomes which draw on the stories of that local community (plus, it's an ethnically and linguistically diverse community, experiencing social and economic strain, which ticks a few of the 'community art' boxes) — but at the same time Market Value, and TRAX's model of engagement more generally, diverge from the community arts model of best practice in ways which, I would suggest, point to limitations in the community arts / CCD discourse.

Without wanting to get bogged down in a lengthy discussion of definitions and CCD theory, it is important here to run quickly through some of the principal features of the community arts discourse.

- CCD starts, in the first instance, from the belief that art and creativity can provide a vehicle for achieving social goals, and the emancipatory spirit of those social ideals is reflected in the principles that guide the practice of community art, of collaboration, consensus, democratic participation, equality.
- Both the practice and rhetoric of community cultural development are oriented towards communities as the key social units, and most community arts and CCD funding processes will ask applicants to explicitly identify the target communities with whom they are intending to work. Communities, so identified, can take the form of geographic areas, but also groups constituted by a common language, ethnicity, background, shared experience, religion or other characteristic or identity. That is, 'community' can be interpreted quite broadly, but there must be an identifiable community.
- The benefits of CCD/community art activities tend to be measured in terms of social, rather than aesthetic or cultural criteria (eg. engagement of marginalised or disadvantaged groups, increase in school retention rates, increase in participants' reported sense of confidence).
- Closely connected to that is an emphasis on process rather than output.
- Another of the key features of the CCD discourse is its emphasis on innate creativity. The role of 'professional artists', or 'artworkers', is to facilitate the creative expression of participants, and to build their creative skills, but the emphasis is very much on ownership of the process being in the hands of the community itself.

The Market Value project diverged from the standard community arts model in a number of ways. In the first instance, TRAX explicitly set out to produce engaging and high quality artistic outcomes. That is, the criteria against which it assessed itself were aesthetic and cultural, as well as social. What was valued was the process *and* the output. It also approached the notion of 'community' with a high degree of scepticism. On the one hand, Market Value sought to affirm the Preston Market as a site of community, as the centre of a web of social and cultural, as well as economic, exchange. On the other hand, the artists involved in the project were wary of claiming that they were working with a community as an entire, cohesive entity, recognising firstly that they were building relationships and collaborating with a relatively small percentage of a large group of people associated with the Market, and secondly that that larger group was far from socially cohesive and, in fact, its members did not necessarily see themselves as a community.

The role of the artists involved in Market Value went far beyond being facilitators of the participants' own creative expression. TRAX sought to engage the innate creativity of the people it was working with in the Market (for example, drawing on the existing theatricality of

traders, particularly the performativity involved in spruiking), but it also involved professional, trained artists as producers of the creative work. The artistic outcomes which were produced were very much the result of the encounter between these two groups. The stories of people from the Market — often shared informally — provided the material out of which the multimedia work and play developed, many of them featured in the short films, and one of the leading roles in the theatre show was acted by a trader, but the film-makers and script writers were also working as autonomous creators. Brian, one of the founders of TRAX and the director of the theatre component of Market Value, described TRAX's approach in the following way:

> *Traders as faux professional artists carrying the responsibility to be the creators of the artistic work was never really the intention. The extent of the market community's directorship/authorship is reflected in the content of the outcomes…Using artists with skills to deliver professional outcomes does not always demean the participants' voice or role in the process, and I'd disagree that the end product is somehow less authentic if the community member did not have a certain set of technical skills to deliver the message.*

> *There is this trend riding along the economic accessibility and democratization of new media storytelling that participants will exit a creative engagement project as autonomous media generators. Whilst I think it's great that those skills are shared & digital stories are uploaded to YouTube, it's unrealistic and misguided to consider this as the key benchmark for a successful engagement. The point of a creative endeavour like Market Value was not to create a temporary infrastructure to teach traders/patrons how to make a film or be an actor.*[2]

While engaging and involving the creativity of community members, TRAX also made use of the 'expert' creativity and abilities of trained artists, without asking them to surrender their own artistic autonomy or sense of ownership over the work. In other words, it kept open a space for the artist-as-author. In doing so, it raised interesting questions about authorship but also allowed for a more critical, genuinely collaborative negotiation between artists and participants.

3.

What was happening in Market Value — and what I suggest actually happens in most community-engaged arts practices — was a dynamic, ongoing negotiation of a whole series of tensions and competing imperatives. Reflecting on the project and its points of incongruity with the CCD discourse, we can identify some of these tensions: between innate and expert creativity, between participation and the artist-as-author, between process and product, between ethics and aesthetics, and between the social and the cultural. What happens in CCD discourse is that these couplets are presented as oppositions, with one half of each of them becoming reified. What gets missed out — and what the experience of the Market Value project points to — is that community-engaged arts practices actually involve a constant process of balancing, shifting and negotiation in the messy spaces between these poles. Rather than see these as oppositional dichotomies, we would be better thinking of them as dialectics, which are in a state of tension but nevertheless inseparable. The notion of 'creative friction' is intended to offer a way of thinking positively of the relationship between these imperatives, of recognising that the experience of their contradictory pulls is actually fundamental to the artistic process, and that the dialectical space can be creative and generative.

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[2] Personal correspondence, 24 July 2009.

I want to go one step further and suggest that these dialectics — posited as oppositions within CCD discourse — can be mapped onto another distinction, which is also presented as an opposition, namely the distinction between art and community art. And so, you end up with models of two contrary fields of practice. One the one hand, community art is posited as a selfless, collaborative space, in which creativity is understood as innately human, where the creative process is participatory and democratic, is valued over the artistic product, rejects the primacy of the autonomous artist, and is propelled forward by the imperatives of ethics and the social good. On the other hand art (which now becomes mainstream art, or high art), is envisaged as the pursuit of the aesthetic above all else, the realm of the completely autonomous artist-as-author, individualist, where artistic ability is expertise, and the creative process is valued only to the extent that it produces distinct artistic objects.

This setting up of community art in fierce opposition to 'regular' art is enormously problematic, not least because in doing so it misrepresents both. As if high art does not emerge out of social spaces, as if the artist can be separated from the context in which they live and work, or as if non-CCD art does not have social value and importance, or contribute to the creation of rich, vibrant, strong societies. Indeed, one of the things that came out the Market Value project was that people don't have to be directly engaged as participants in a creative process in order for that process to be socially beneficial. Many people at the Preston Market did not participate in the creative development of the show or the multimedia installation, but did value the experience of attending the show as an audience member, and seeing stories about their lives and their place being publicly celebrated. In this context we might also ask what it is we mean by creativity, and whether those people should in fact be considered to have been part of the creative process simply by virtue of their being part of the rich web of social and cultural exchange out of which the artistic work emerged. Disrupting the boundaries between art and community art prompts us, ultimately, to rethink how we measure the value of all artistic practice.

Of course, in thinking about the relationship of art to community art, the question of social class inevitably emerges. And in the typology of oppositional categories, high art is to the elite what community art is to the masses. I absolutely recognise art's capacity for elitism, and I think that one of the great strengths of community art practice has been its challenge to the inaccessibility of the orthodox art world for many people. Nevertheless, the danger of drawing too sharp a distinction between art and community art is that you actually reinforce that sense of class divide and mutual inaccessibility, and it's when that happens that community art starts to run the risk of being condescending, and of being coopted into government agendas of social policy.

4.

A final point — which there is no scope to go into here, but which might be useful regardless, and suggestive of further avenues for research — is that some relatively recent developments in contemporary art and art theory might offer a way into doing what I'm suggesting needs to be done, namely the disruption of the boundaries of art and community art. I'm thinking particularly of what Claire Bishop refers to as the 'social turn'[3][3] in contemporary art, and works such as those that Nicolas Bourriaud describes with the term 'relational aesthetics'[4][4]. This emerging body of artistic practice, which is often strongly collaborative, socially-engaged and interested in questions of ethics and emancipatory impulses, is being described variously with terms such as social practice, post-autonomy, hybrid arts, and participatory practice. For Bishop, these works represent the new avant-

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[3][3] Claire Bishop, 'The Social Turn: Collaboration and its Discontents', *Artforum*, vol. 44, 6, 2006, pp.178-183.
[4][4] Nicolas Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics*, Dijon, Les Presse Du Reel, 1998.

garde. What they offer in this context is a clear example of how the CCD discourse around art and community art can really fail to accurately represent the reality of artistic practice. The work which Bishop, Bourriaud and others are doing in thinking and writing about this social turn would have a lot to say to projects like Market Value, and this might offer one way of bringing art and community art into a more fruitful conversation with one another.

References:

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Biography*: As a writer and social researcher, Victoria has worked with various community-engaged arts initiatives. In 2008-2009, she was part of the Market Value project, a 'creative community consultation' run by Trax Arts in Melbourne's Preston Market. Currently, she works as a researcher and evaluator with Polyglot Theatre Company. She is one half of Agents of Proximity, an arts collective which works with ideas of social practice and hybridity. Victoria also works at RMIT University, where she is a member of the Globalism Research Centre. She is currently completing a PhD on globalization and land conflicts in the Pacific.*

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