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The Unlikeliness of Us

Abstract This perspective piece discusses two projects developed within the BA Fine Art undergraduate course program at Central Saint Martins (University of Arts London). These teaching projects came about through experimental collaborations created to explore the potential of art as a practice for personal resilience and well-being, and also a material methodology for developing new networks. In this article, I will discuss art as a method for connecting communities in place, which, in these instances, comprise recent graduates, elders, and art students. I also focus on the often underestimated value of art as a tool for connecting with others through socially engaged and participatory practices. I consider some of the opportunities art practice offers to enable the development of new communities in place through the process of pairing those who, under the usual circumstances of their lives, would not expect to meet, and the productive interrogation of place and difference these pairings offer.

1 This is a term developed by Anna Hart and Tilly Fowler. For more information, see "Neighbour-ing," *AIR Studio*, accessed February 15, 2018, http://www.airstudio.org/projects/neighbouring/.

2 "Who We Are," Age UK, accessed February 15, 2018, http://www.ageuk.org.uk/about-us/who-we-are-/.

3 Editorial note: while the body text conforms to U.S. English, all project titles and institution names adopt British English where appropriate.

4 Stephen Willats, "Inside the Night: Contexts for Freedom," in *Networks: Documents of Contemporary Art*, ed. Lars Bang Larsen (Cambridge, MA: Whitechapel Gallery/MIT Press, 2014), 195–98.

5 Ibid., 195.

6 "About Us," *The Knowledge Quarter*, accessed February 15, 2018, https://www.knowledgequarter.london/.

7 "Content and Structure," *Central Saint Martins*, accessed February 15, 2018, http://www.arts.ac.uk/csm/courses/undergraduate/ba-fine-art/.

"Neighbour-ing"[1] and Networks

In an East London street at the edge of the city, in June of 2015, a conversation began between neighbors — myself, Anne Eggebert, XD Pathway Leader, BA Fine Art (Central Saint Martins, UAL) and Jane Chambers, then Network and Provider Services Manager for Age UK[2] Islington, the UK's largest charity supporting those in later life.[3] As we chatted over the metaphorical garden fence — a disappearing mode of local communication — we discussed Age UK's recent initiative linking their recently retired users with young, long-term unemployed people to provide the latter with skills support. As the conversation unfolded, it occurred to us that there may be potential to link CSM art students at Kings Cross with local Age UK Islington users.

As Stephen Willats proposed in his 1982 essay "Inside the Night,"[4] a network of self-selecting/self-organizing participants has the potential to transform the formal fabric of society and subsequently operate as a parallel counterculture through a process of agreement on perceptual and physical transformations.

> "Here agreement is an active creative action between participants, a layering onto existing realities of new or different values and beliefs, so that perception and behaviour within the network are now changed. In this sense, 'reality' is constructed by the psychology of individuals in association with the groupings or networks of relationships towards which they are drawn or in which they find themselves."[5]

In this way, self-organizing networks arise through a rethinking of existing networks or bringing together two or more pre-existing networks to construct a new set of relationships.

The potential for both of us was intriguing. Recently, a number of research, higher education, science, art, culture, and media organizations located in and around Kings Cross, London joined together to form the "Knowledge Quarter"[6] — a knowledge cluster fostering exchange and collaboration among its members and partners, visitors, students, researchers, and local community members. We asked ourselves, "Who might have access to this, and what relationships and networks might the college offer as a point of exchange with the wider communities in the Kings Cross area?" And, for those of us in the XD Pathway at CSM,[7] other questions were, "What can art do? Where can it be? And how might it intervene in and affect the everyday?"

Students and staff in the XD Pathway explore the implications of working across different platforms and placing art in particular situations and communities, thus throwing into question the rights and examining the responsibilities of the artist in relation to the audience and the environment. For our students, the studio is a laboratory where ideas for interventions in the practice of everyday life can be generated. We ask students to engage in a shared experience of making — firstly by collaborating with their peers within the networks that the studio offers, and then through connecting to partner organizations, groups, and individuals, to create both formal and informal networks in wider communities local to the college.

How do we begin to teach and learn the processes of social art practice? Artists working in this area necessarily begin with a material practice — experimentation in the studio, generating an object, artifact, event — but even the dematerialized takes practice. The notion of the audience follows, prompting questions on how we engage with or encounter other people and the work, how we bring participants in as active audience members, and, further, into our modes of production. What are the methodologies that we can deploy here?

Context may be important. The artist can interrogate and deploy a location and what it affords as material form or frame — the situation functioning as both