

Experiments in Integrated Programming

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When artists make art that involves people either as collaborators, facilitators or active subjects, they pose complex questions, not least of which is the issue of authorship. For art institutions, such ways of working often require a rethinking of the status of the art work itself, as what is produced is often contingent and does not always lend itself easily to traditional exhibition formats. Developing new models for the production and presentation of such work, however, is an opportunity for galleries and museums to embrace the ways in which contemporary artists are increasingly operating beyond the studio and gallery, and in doing so extend their reach and influence.

Traditionally, the work of museums and galleries is departmentalised into institutional functions, creating divisions of labour and expertise. Education, Learning and Public Programmes are often seen as secondary to, and servicing Exhibitions, and this hierarchy has created disparities in the way that curators work together and also with artists across programme strands. Drawing on three recent projects – the *Park Nights* series, *Dis-assembly* and *Hearing Voices, Seeing Things* – this paper examines the concept of integrated programming and the strategy for working with artists in a range of contexts to produce new work as developed by the Serpentine Gallery in London.

Recent curatorial discussions have focused on ‘new institutionalism’. A term borrowed from the social sciences, it proposes a transformation of the art institution from within. Characterised by open-endedness and dialogue, and leading to events-based and process-based work, it utilises some of the strategies inherent in the ways in which many contemporary artists make work. Since the 1990s many artists and curators have embraced the idea of creating flexible platforms for presenting work, extending the institution and its functions and absorbing aspects of institutional critique as proposed in the 1970s. The ‘new institution’ places equal emphasis on all programmes and creates spaces and modes of display that reflect this, including archives, reading rooms, residency schemes, talks and events as well as exhibitions. Writer and curator Alex Farquharson has noted:

‘New Institutionalism’, and much recent art, side steps the problem of the white cube altogether. If white-walled rooms are the site for exhibitions one week, a recording studio or political workshop the next, then it is no longer the container that defines the contents as art, but the contents that determine the identity of the container.’¹

The implications for the gallery as a platform for experimentation and a laboratory for learning have been embraced by curators and artists alike, and education and learning are at the heart of this process of reinvention. What new institutionalism demands is an integrated approach to programming and the integration of programming teams so that education, exhibitions, performance, public programmes are conceived as part of a programme of activity rather than the more traditional and territorial departmentalisation of these areas of work. This interdisciplinary approach engages a wide framework of timescales and the flexibility to work across strands of programming.

Whilst there has been a number of recent examples of curators and artists adopting the pedagogical frameworks of public programming and education, the impact and potential of these projects – specifically in relation to the function of education and learning within the institution – are only beginning to be realised. These seemingly ‘pedagogic’ projects raise complicated questions for curators, critics and educationalists. Questions of how this work should be evaluated and what it means when the mechanisms of programming are applied to the production of new institutional spaces are critical, and are questions that need to be addressed by those of us that work in the cracks across the gaps, in and beyond the confines of the institution.

Lectures and conferences presented as projects by artists or curators focus on the production of knowledge and foreground criticality and discourse. For example, in *Beautiful City* for the 2007 Munster Sculpture Project, Maria Pask programmed a series of talks about belief and faith by a wide range of speakers, including religious and spiritual figures as well as teachers and gurus. The talks took place in a temporary canvas city and the ambience was reminiscent of a festival or village fête. Similarly, [Thomas Hirschhorn](#)’s *24hr Foucault* – a multi-platform event that took place over twenty-four hours at the Palais de Tokyo, Paris, in 2004 – saw those who attended acting as both audience and witnesses to the event. The Serpentine Gallery’s *Park Nights* series, initiated in 2002 and now also including the Marathon events introduced by the curator Hans Ulrich Obrist in 2005, provides a discursive space that explores the intensive temporality associated with events rather than exhibitions. Specialist audiences come together for the events, creating a momentary critical mass that amplifies the intensity as well as the reach of the Serpentine’s programme. The positioning of these strands of the programme is critical: when part of an integrated programme of activity, the emphasis can oscillate between events, talks, screenings and exhibitions as appropriate, allowing the institution to reinvent itself through these different strands and across audiences.

Anton Vidolke’s *Night School at the Museum* held at the New Museum, New York, in 2007–8, was presented as a curatorial project: although it mirrored the work and function of education and learning departments within galleries, it was given the same status as an exhibition. On the museum’s website, for example, it was marketed as a major strand of curatorial activity: ‘*Night School* is an artists’ project by Anton Vidolke in the form of a temporary School. A year-long programme of monthly seminars and workshops, *Night School* draws upon a group of local and international artists, writers and theorists to conceptualise and conduct the programme.’²

This was true also of the unrealised *Manifesta 6* (the itinerant European biennial exhibition) which proposed again a temporary art school as the framework for an exhibition. The curators wrote:

In its customary introversion, the arts community does not let well enough alone, but often extends itself just enough to instrumentalise the world around it

as props for its own production. A prime example of this tokenism is the growing range of art projects based on a form of seemingly benevolent social science research. The research results (or works of art) are, more often than not, neither up to scratch academically nor do they imbue the information with any new artistic significance. They are forms of either pop information, inaccessible specialist data or, sadly, sensationalism. In contrast, a genuine form of awareness and constructive involvement necessitates commitment, erudition, confrontation and a recoiling from the superficiality of political correctness.³

Curatorial claims for these projects suggest a desire to distance itself from the work of education and learning departments whilst still wanting to create an environment, even an 'aesthetic', of academic engagement, but the overall aim is often to produce a spectacular event rather than an educational experience. The experience for the participant is inherently different in each context: while a participant in an educational programme could expect to be involved in a pedagogical experience, the participant in, or audience of, curatorial projects witness them, not as a site of learning but rather as a spectacle. How might curators and educationalists develop curatorial strategies of convergence and collaboration? As these curatorial events create a specific mode of learning and knowledge production, their visibility within institutions is beginning to map out a new set of possibilities for a collapse of terrain and recognition of expertise. The combination of curatorial expertise in terms of staging performance or spectacle and the expertise of educationalists in terms of knowledge production and pedagogical process might lead to genuinely new functions for the institution.⁴

Projects that extend beyond the gallery have long been the terrain both of artists and of galleries. They are an opportunity to approach production in a way that can achieve a genuinely engaged but complex renegotiation of the operation of the gallery or museum. By undertaking local projects it is possible to think about a renegotiation of the role of the gallery and museum as a site of production that operates beyond the demands of the market and in relation to wider socio-political concerns. The question of how and where the resulting work then resides, and the challenge of reading a work that simultaneously embraces and negates the notion of authorship, is crucial. These situations and interventions result in a collapse between politics and aesthetics and produce work both in the world and as social intervention.

Dis-assembly was a project that culminated in 2006 with exhibitions at North Westminster Community School (NWCS) and the Serpentine Gallery. Artists Faisal Abdu'Allah, [Christian Boltanski](#), [Runa Islam](#) and architect Yona Friedman were commissioned to make new artwork out of a period of research at the school. Established in the 1960s as a flagship comprehensive that aimed to offer a progressive integrated curriculum in a creative and dynamic learning environment, the school was facing closure. For both the students and artists involved, the reality of the school's imminent replacement by two new city academies gave the project a special urgency.

The classroom can be seen as a mirror of society, with nearly every aspect of the adult world replicated and amplified in the closed and confined space of the school, a space that is both physical and temporal. This site is an extraordinary place for artists to have the opportunity to make art, and for the students and staff the transformative potential of art becomes a reality.

Dis-assembly celebrated the history and achievements of the school with a series of ambitious residencies. Artists were invited to visit the school and propose a way in which they could work with and alongside the students and staff to produce artwork. Like many inner-city schools,

NWCS had students from diverse national backgrounds (there were seventy-three different first languages). The head teacher Janet Morrison described the school as ‘benefiting from a high percentage of refugee students, leading to an incredibly politicised and socially aware culture within the school’. Each artist had a different kind of engagement with the school. Some worked as facilitators, focusing on the students and their creativity, or acted as collaborators, producing work that could not have been made without the students’ participation. Others made work using the school’s situation as core material. Each invested the enormous amount of time that is essential when developing models of working that can resist being formulaic and prescriptive.

Faisal Abdu’Allah worked closely with the students as a collaborator and facilitator. As an artist in residence in 2005–6, he attended school for two days a week, establishing a close working relationship with the staff and students. The photographic work that he produced is a testament to the time he invested in building relationships with the students. His project empowered the students to articulate their situation in relation to the school’s closure and wider political issues. Thinking and talking about making images inevitably raised issues of identity and politics, and these discussions were as important to the project as the resulting images.

In 1992 Christian Boltanski had posed as the school’s photographer, photographing the entire intake of students that year and exhibiting the resulting 144 photographs in the school and, across the road, in the Lisson Gallery. The photographs were sold to students at cost price whereas through the Lisson they were sold as artworks. For Boltanski the work will only be completed by a second phase, which he has begun for *Dis-assembly* in collaboration with Abdu’Allah. Each of the original 144 students is being traced and rephotographed. Although incomplete at the time, the new series was shown opposite the original series in the Serpentine Gallery exhibition. When completed, the project will stand as a memorial to the school community over the years.

By contrast, Runa Islam used interviews with students to make a 16mm film (fig.1). Working with writers Georgia Fitch and Laurence Coriat to develop a script in a series of workshops, she spent two weeks on site shooting a film with the students as the actors. The film drew upon the specificities of NWCS and through its assembling and layering of the students’ experiences of growing up within an inner city school evoked aspects of the contemporary cultural life.



Fig. 1

Runa Islam

Conditional Probability 2006

Four part 16mm film installation. Variable duration: Part 1: 20 mins 25 secs, Part 2: 22 mins 40 secs, Year Portrait: 6 mins 43 secs, Screen Tests: 30 mins 32 secs

Courtesy White Cube

© The artist

Photograph: Declan O'Neill

Together, the three strands of *Dis-assembly* allowed artists, students and staff to articulate their experiences and realities through a series of artworks. For everyone, the project offered a way of testing the possibility of producing art in and through a period of programmed engagement

with the world. And the relationships established here formed the basis of a second long-term project called *Edgware Road*, which involves a series of artists' residencies at a new research centre in the Edgware Road, London, due to end in 2010.

Hearing Voices, Seeing Things was a series of artists' residencies that resulted in an exhibition and event at the Serpentine Gallery in 2006. The project began as a series of conversations, firstly with Jacqueline Ede, Lead Occupational Therapist for Arts and Rehab, North-East London Mental Health Trust (NELMHT). Her desire for an engagement with the Gallery was matched by that of the Serpentine to create opportunities for artists to challenge conventional ideas about the places where art can be seen and by whom. Following a year of visits to the Gallery which established the basis for a more sustained residency, it became clear that a project could happen and that there was a commitment and desire on the part of NELMHT to make a residency possible.

Artists **Bob and Roberta Smith** and Jessica Voorsanger were invited by the Serpentine to be artists-in-residence at NELMHT. Together they founded The Leytonstone Centre of Contemporary Art (LCCA), which, in fact, was a garden shed. Bob and Jessica decided to invite more artists to participate and the LCCA Outreach Group (LOG) was formed.

Meetings and conversations were at the heart of the project and work was produced through these exchanges. The immediacy and intimacy, as well as conviviality of these sites of production, informed the resulting work which asked secondary audiences (those who were not directly involved) to question and challenge their preconceptions about mental health and the stigmas associated with it. The normality and everyday nature of mental well-being resonated through the work, while the humility and humour that pervaded the project allowed experiences to be articulated with clarity. This is where the artists played a crucial role – not as therapists but as artists equipped with a vocabulary and language that could articulate the most fragile of realities.⁵

For some individuals the barriers to communication were difficult to negotiate. Memory dictates the way we define ourselves and how we negotiate the world. Working with people experiencing memory loss in the Petersfield Dementia Centre in Hampshire, Bob and Roberta Smith created signposts reminding us of who we are, where we are and what we need to remember to do in *Reminder*. Those that the artists Victor Mount worked with – the Hearing Voices group – experience a polyphony of voices. For the artist, the challenge here was that of translating and making work from the experience of not hearing voices yet being part of this group.

Two of the groups involved young people. Brookside School is an adolescent unit which provides a safe and therapeutic environment for young people. Karen Densham worked as artist-in-residence there, inviting the young people to create and then destroy ceramics. This legitimisation of a violent and destructive act was important for this particular group because they are so rarely trusted to destroy something. Young carers worked with artist Andy Lawson in their free time to create work that looked at their world outside of their everyday responsibilities. The images they created revealed beauty in the tiny details of their everyday environment.

The therapeutic role of art is an unavoidable and challenging subject for artists working in a Mental Health Trust. When art meets mental health everything is possible and impossible at once. The rupture of everyday normality and the juxtaposition of two environments led to volatile and exciting possibilities. The question of who or what is 'normal' and what mental health might mean became key concerns. The artists were tasked with being artists rather than therapists, and the therapists provided clinical and therapeutic support. On a fundamental level, the project involved

a meeting of people and was seen as a opportunity for everyone involved. The artists, the health professionals and individual participants discovered what can be achieved by working together. The legacy of the project is an ongoing arts programme that is now established as part of the work of the Trust.

Whilst it is relatively easy to commission artists and to create projects where extraordinary learning can be produced, it is perhaps harder to find the time and institutional space to look critically at what is produced and discuss the value of the work. This is necessarily a slow process within institutions where typically there is little time and space for reflection. In my view the solution lies somewhere between the academy and the gallery, and we should continue to develop strategies to ensure that we can oscillate and operate with stealth across both and smuggle knowledge between the two.

Notes

1. Alex Farquharson, 'Bureaux de change', *Frieze*, no.101, September 2006.
2. Text from the New Museum website, www.newmuseum.org, accessed February 2008.
3. Mai Abu ElDahab, 'On How to Fall With Grace – or Fall Flat on Your Face', Notes for an Art School, *Manifesta 6*.
4. At the same time, the new convergence of the academy and the gallery may be helpful here. See, for example, *Academy* and *Summit*, initiatives of the Department of Visual Cultures at Goldsmiths, London, in collaboration with Kunstverein Hamburg and the Van Abbemuseum in Eindhoven and, for *Summit*, the Witte de Witte in Rotterdam. The Städelschule in Frankfurt and its relationship to Portikus is also an interesting solution.
5. Ironically, in an early conversation Bob told us that the 'real' Roberta Smith was an art therapist.

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