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Changing Minds: Challenging Stereotypes between Art and Homelessness

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Abstract: This article provides an analysis of a socially engaged arts project that took place over a nine-month period between two quite different groups of people: art students who facilitated the project and homeless men who participated. Four art students volunteered to work on a socially engaged arts project and access a drop-in group which supports people who are homeless. I consider that the arts-based methods used within socially engaged practice changes the student's perceptions of homelessness. Analogue photography along with collaborative arts projects become a methodology for dialogical and creative engagement. The research is reflexive, with the art students, and a couple of the homeless men, being interviewed at the end of the project. From these reflections we gain an insight into how the creative methods change the students' stereotypical perceptions of homelessness. The surprising effect of agency that comes about through objects such as tables and cameras, the processes, artwork, and an exhibition has the power to change the relationship between the homeless men and art students. The research recognizes the relationship between volunteering and empathy and wanting to change homeless people's lives for the better.

Keywords: Homelessness, Marginalized Communities, Agency, Challenging Stereotypes, Socially-engaged Practice, Experiential Learning, Pedagogy, Analogue Photography, Volunteering, Changing Minds, Motivation

Introduction

Joseph Beuys once said, “each man is an artist” (Michaud, Krauss 1988, 36). Creativity and artistic ability knows no boundaries, it is innately human and knows no age, class, background, or education. In this study, a charity that supports homeless people and a local arts center gain arts funding to run a collaborative arts project that explores homeless lives. They subsequently invite art students to develop and work on a socially engaged project with a homeless group that attend a drop-in center that is run by the charity. This article explores the perceptions around homelessness and the relationships between two different groups of people: art students and homeless men. Stereotypes and clichés that surround homeless people are explored from the art students' perspective and their engagement and facilitation of a socially engaged arts project. I consider that the arts-based methods and activities that are written about in the article explore an experiential pedagogical effect that changes the perceptions of homelessness. The stereotypical view of homeless people portrays them as “passive, lazy, disaffiliated and disempowered” (Boydell, Goering, and Morrell-Bellai 2000, 26). In this article the focus is on the art students as facilitators of the project because of their transition and how some of their views, misconceptions, and understanding of homelessness changes from their collaboration with the homeless men. Misconceptions that surround the stereotyping of homeless people can be influenced by the media. In Jon Dean's article “Drawing what Homelessness Looks Like,” university students' are requested to draw their perceptions of homelessness. Students draw stereotypical images of homeless men as bearded and disheveled. In the study Dean found that the student's drawings did not depict varied homeless narratives and were often influenced by what the students saw in the media (Dean 2015).

The context for this research is focused on the stereotypes of homelessness. The men are referred to as the “homeless men” throughout the article because the men who participate in the project identify themselves as “homeless.” Although some of them are housed they still identify with this label. The men use their exhibition as a tool to reclaim agency of the label “homeless” to

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change people's preconceptions of the homeless community. The artist Allan Kaprow as cited in "Mapping the Terrain" states that "every prejudice, every misunderstanding that we perceive out in the real world is inside of us and has to be challenged" (Lacy 1995, 310). In this article I consider the gradual changes that take place in the students understanding of homeless people. This transition is partially due to the homeless men's engagement in the project through their creative approach and how the students are taken aback by the homeless men's artistic ability. I gain an insight into how this art focused experience gives agency to the homeless men and students. Friere emphasizes the stereotypical constraints that exist in our society;

The oppressed receive the euphemistic title of "welfare recipients." They are treated as individual cases, as marginal persons who deviate from the general configuration of a "good, organized, and just" society. The oppressed are regarded as the pathology of the healthy society, which must therefore adjust these "incompetent and lazy folk to its own patterns by changing their mentality. (2002, 74)

Over the past forty years art based on social interactions have been identified under many headings: "relational aesthetics," "participatory," "dialogic," and "public art" (Helguera 2011, 3). Nicolas Bourriaud's theory of relational aesthetics considers the concept of the artist as a social facilitator where the work is created within a social context. He considers the importance of human relationships in the representation of the work. This may involve social exchanges and interactivity with the audience (Bourriaud 2002).

Socially engaged art is a person-focused art form in which creating and artmaking brings people together and can give participants a voice. It can also be done for the purpose of making the public aware of a social, political, or environmental issue. Claire Bishop, in her article "The Social Turn" (2006) critically evaluates and questions the aesthetics and quality of socially engaged practices in relation to contemporary art practice. Bishop perceives artists who are more focused on collaboration and less on the aesthetic quality of the artwork as "Christian good soul" artist's (2006, 7). The term "social turn" is helpful in this article as there is an evolving change in the students understanding of homelessness. The students are also in some respects on a mission to motivate the men to do something different with their lives. In this article I am interested in how the arts student's viewpoint shifts considerably during this collaborative experience.

It has become more common for qualitative researchers to use socially engaged arts as a gateway to look at social issues. Hickey-Moody uses socially engaged arts practice "as a cultural pedagogy or process...that changes culture" to research children from interfaith communities to explore their multiculturalism (2017, 6). I use Grant Kester's "dialogical aesthetic" as a framework to contextualize the relational experiences between the art students and homeless men. Kester's quote fits well with what emerged during this research, "the process of dialogical interaction requires a reciprocal openness...to accept the transformative effects of difference on that of both the artists and his or her collaborators"(Kester 2005, 173). The dialogical relationship that takes place between the art students and the homeless men opens up at the start of the workshops with the students and men sitting together, getting to know one another, and becoming personable. The process of creating art allows thoughts to emerge and viewpoints to change, giving both the men and students self-confidence; "to anchor discourse not in some fixed representational order but in a process of open-ended dialogical interaction that is itself 'the work of art'" (Kester 2005, 88).

In the article, the primary focus is on the interactions that take place around the use of analogue photography, because of how the men were inspired by the act of photographing with the cameras and seeing the physical results. The process involved in analogue photography allows times for verbal and physical interaction between the men and students. The camera's lens, eye and machine-like qualities, the developing processes involved, allow me to use these as metaphorical and theoretical connections to contextualize the relationships and changes that evolved between the students and homeless men. The men, with the help of the art students, also

develop a series of connected project's that use video as a lens to examine issues such as welfare reform and the bedroom tax² and to address questions such as "what is community?"

As the project organizer and researcher, I was monitoring what was taking place through observation, listening, and note-taking. During the progression of the project, I became interested in how the relationship changed between the art students and homeless men and arranged to gather some reflective research at the end of the project. I discussed my thoughts and gained prior verbal consent from all four students and the six homeless men to fill out questionnaires at the end of the project on their experiences and thoughts around homelessness and the impact of the arts project. The photographs the homeless men took along with the student's documentation of the project, and the artwork that was created, acted as a trigger to remind myself of what happened. Denzin and Lincoln see the qualitative interpreter as writing field notes, documenting, interpreting, and re-writing as an initial attempt to make sense out of what they have seen. This article is a culmination of similar methods including observations, memories, inner feelings, and experiences. Judith Okley, an anthropologist discusses the importance of using embodied memories for the production of text when returning from the field. Okley notes the relevance of personal observations, experiences and feelings in sifting out and making sense of what has gone on; "the writer recognizes themes and sorts out what seemed incomprehensible" (Okley 2007).

Project Processes: Setting-up and Risks

The four students selected to facilitate the project all had an interest in socially engaged arts practice with three of the students feeling that working with the homeless community and the voluntary organizations that support them would be beneficial to their arts research proposals. Three of the students had never experienced working on socially engaged art projects with marginalized groups so were learning through experience. The project was originally meant to run for six weeks. As a group we decided that we needed to give the men more time to develop their skills and artworks. The project consequently ran for nine months. The data collection method for the research comprised of reflective questionnaires' and reflective interviews with four art students and only two of the homeless men taking part in the interviews at the end. I devised two reflective questionnaires' as a pretext to informal interviews, one for the four art students and one for the two homeless men that agreed to be interviewed and tailored questions that related directly to their personal experiences.

The questions for the art students largely focused on exploring on how they felt about their experiences at specific points in the project. I was interested in the student's interaction and relationship with the homeless men in different situations. The questions for the homeless men focused more on being an artist and their changing views on what art could be. I was especially interested in what they felt they gained from the experience in relation to pedagogy and well-being and what were their feelings when the project came to an end.

The questions for the art students included:

- How they felt meeting the homeless men and women for the first time in their social space?
- How did their views on homelessness change from the start of the project?
- Did they think the company or the art was more important to the men?
- What were the benefits of using analogue photography?
- Why did they think that having an exhibition was so important to the men and why did they volunteer?

² The bedroom tax was a tax introduced in the UK in 2012 where tenants living in public housing lost housing benefit if they had rooms that were deemed as "spare."

For the homeless men, the questions I asked were:

- What do you think is the importance of art or photography to you if any?
- What did you think about art before the project started and what did you think about art after the project finished?
- What most of all made you feel good or enjoy about the project? Having an exhibition and showing your work, what did this mean to you?
- Was there anything that you felt was different, better, more interesting or that you gained from using a film camera?
- Did the project help you personally in any way?
- What did you not like about the project? What do you think that the project did not capture?

Due to the low response rate with questionnaire completion, I encouraged the students and homeless men to review and reflect on the questions for an interview at the end of the project. I mentioned in advance that I would bring documentation of the project in the form of photographs for reflection. I expanded on the questions in the questionnaire and took handwritten notes as well as recordings. To anonymize the students in the article they are referred to as: Student One, Student Two, Student Three, and Student Four. There were three women and one man volunteering on the project. Six homeless men attend the workshops regularly they have all been referenced in the article. The homeless men are anonymized as participant A, B, C, D, E, and F. All references to where the project took place have been removed. For health and safety reasons and for the welfare of the homeless men, a support worker from the charity accompanied us throughout the project. The support worker was included in all the activities to allow them to gain insight into the value of social practice. Over the course of the project three support workers attended with all of them being open to trying something different and joining in, commenting on the benefit of being a part of the experience. The students were given some training by the charity about working with homeless people at the start of the project, on how to be supportive and health and safety awareness.

The Homeless Drop-in Group: A New Territory

On the first day of the arts project at the drop-in center the art students were introduced to the homeless men and women by a charity worker. The students started off by speaking to the homeless men and women about the project as well as doing some drawing activities with those men and women who wanted to join in. The center where the drop-in took place had a busy schedule of activities; many of the people using the space were there to play pool and chat. This was the homeless people's territory and although we had been invited in, we were in effect invading their social space. Some quotes from the students experience on their first day were as follows, "Knowing the people we would be working with were homeless, I guess I also had a preconceived notion that they wouldn't really be interested in doing 'art' as they most likely had other priorities or concerns." (Student One 2014). Student One's immediate perceptions illustrate a prejudged viewpoint of what homeless people's priorities were in relation to art-based activities. Student Two (2014) said, "On the first day it felt like we had interrupted their day and were forcing ourselves on them; there were a few folk who made it quite clear that they were not interested."

A couple of the art students found it difficult to find common ground, as it was a territory that they were not accustomed to and it was clear they felt out of their comfort zone. As Kester writes, "dialogical practices require a common discursive matrix (linguistic, textual, physical,) through which participants can share insights, and forge a provisional sense of collectivity" (2005, 84). For the art students, the act of observing and listening from a distance, considering how to connect to see what others were doing around them was also part of their learning.

Student Three (2014) stated “I feel better when I am just thrown into something, meeting and talking to them step by step, figuring it out for yourself.”

The homeless men and women were busy playing pool, chatting to their friends at the tables, and by and large, did not want to be interrupted whereas the students interestingly were out of place lacking confidence. For the students to develop the socially engaged project they needed time to both understand and explore the homeless people’s interests. The students returned weekly to work on the arts project with the homeless women and men to draw portraits along with mapping out ideas for projects that explored issues to do with homelessness. As the drop-in was so busy and it was difficult to concentrate a decision was made to offer the homeless men and women the option of setting up a smaller arts group that would meet on an alternative day to their other social activities, in order to be more focused. Six men from the drop-in group decided that they would like to be involved in the project and meet up with the students one afternoon a week. The homeless men and the students met at a community hall and started the day by having coffee and sandwiches at the tables and would then proceed to discuss their ideas for arts projects. While sitting at the tables mind mapping their arts projects; the homeless men inadvertently educated the students about what it is to be homeless, explaining that they were “victims of circumstance” and how they were the “hidden homeless” (Participant A 2014).

The tables where the students and men sat and chatted were a relational platform for common space, non-territorial dialogical connection points. I coined the phrase table-talk as part of the process as a way of connecting the students and the men, “a connected knowledge is grounded in our capacity to identify with other people” as part of Kester’s dialogical aesthetic (2013, 114). Table-talk is important as it creates a level playing field which encourages open discussion and intersubjective exchange. Sitting at the tables encouraged conversation as it forces social etiquettes wherein you are generally expected to talk. One of the men even saw the importance of table-talk as an experience and subsequently created a silkscreen print in relation to it. Student One (2014) observed, “I realized my preconceived judgements of ‘homeless’ people couldn’t have been further from the truth. Yes, they had experienced some pretty rough times, yes, they were battling their own individual demons, and yes, they were all a little crazy, but doesn’t this apply to us all in some way or another?” Through this dialogical interconnection, Student One’s initial prejudgment toward the homeless men changes to a better understanding of homelessness and an empathetic connection. There is a gradual realization of common ground as Student One (2014), speaking about arts practice; goes on to say, “Speaking breaks down barriers, preconceived ideas, getting them to see things in a new light.”

Student One’s thoughts were about the men’s creative thinking and how they could possibly influence the men’s approach to their artwork. The students want to improve the quality of the men’s lives by achieving and having an interest through making artwork. Motivation and improving the men’s lives for the better was a common theme that runs throughout the research. The students are sincere but somewhat naïve about their privileged position in terms of “othering” and preconceived views. These thoughts were not apparent at the time of the project and it was only when the students reflected on their experiences at the end did these views come to light. Student One (2014) said

I was pleasantly surprised at how open minded, creative and intelligent they were. Listening to their stories of living on the streets, finding out where they would go for shelter, where they would go to feel normal, needing to sit outside an electrical shop to watch the TV, all of these stories were bursting with potential to make some really potent artwork.

There was a slight sense of the voyeur when using the homeless men’s experiences as an opportunity to create “potent artwork” but this may have been more about the students being inspired by difference and learning from this experience. Becoming aware that the homeless men can have interesting and creative approaches was new to these students. Student One (2013)

observed “Part of my interest in the project was to explore our cultural and social expectations regarding relationships and also in regard to having a ‘sense of self’ amongst one another.” So, here we can gather from this quote why Student One was interested in the homeless men’s stories and wanted to make artwork around individual identity within homeless culture.



Figure 1: Table-talk Screen Print
Source: Participant B 2013

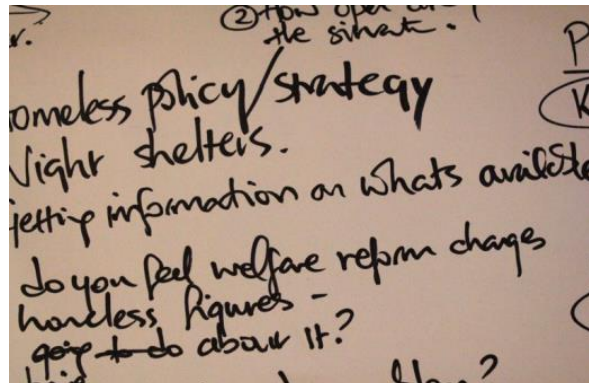


Figure 2: Mapping Homelessness
Source: Student Three 2013

Analogue Photography as a Methodology

The students suggested to the participants the possibility of doing analogue photography and accessing the local arts center’s dark room facilities. We brought second-hand analogue cameras as they were inexpensive and replaceable and it did not matter if they went missing. The idea being that the men could keep the camera’s after the project had finished. The homeless men were also streetwise and knew how to be safe while carrying a camera that might draw attention to themselves. The cameras were large and once around your neck, they created a presence, you are the director, the decision maker, and creator of what to photograph; “photography offers an immediate presence to the world—a co-presence; but this presence is not only of a political order...it is also a metaphysical order” (Barthes 1993, 84). Cameras are powerful sensitive machines; they capture life situations, the real, the imagined, the private, and the neglected. The camera is in affect a machine with dials and settings and lenses, shutter speeds, it clicks, and moves on, images of mood, time, place, feelings, can be captured when the light passes through and holds that information on light sensitive film.

There was an intimate and physically involved dialogical connection between the men and the students, discussing shots, as they walked and talked and clicked their cameras between venues. The homeless men would get the students to look through their viewfinders to check the light reading, the focus, the shot, and how to wind on. The camera and the photographer were a unit as a mechanistic assemblage; one part would not work without the other with the post-homeless men being photographer and the students being both photographer and metaphorically camera. Cameras as Deleuzian machines hanging around their necks inadvertently became part of the body’s mechanism; their eyes, arms, and hands mechanically attached to the camera. The cameras as machines had agency, they gave power and freedom to the men to express themselves acting as a bridge between the homeless men and art students. Many terms used in the photographic process are analogies of the post-homeless men’s lives; out of focus, winding on, and dark room. They did not have a lot of photographs, so photographs were precious to them especially of their children, families, and partners. Family relationships had broken down and some had children who had been taken into the care of the state.



Figure 3: Reflections
Source: Participant A 2013

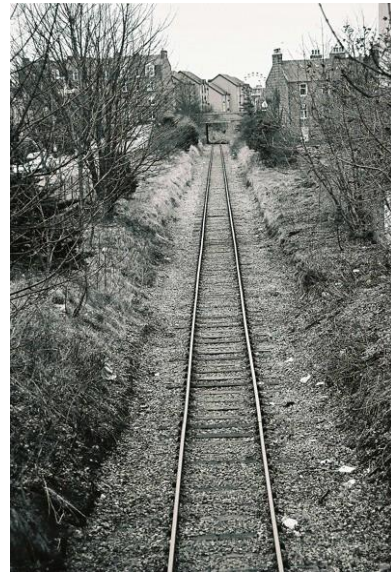


Figure 4: Train Track
Source: Participant A 2013



Figure 5: Out in the Field
Source: Participant A 2013



Figure 6: Artist Shadows
Source: Participant A 2013



Figure 7: Graveyard Stripes
Source: Participant A 2013



Figure 8: Cash Converter
Source: Participant A 2013

As Barthes wrote: “every photograph is a certificate of presence” (1993, 87). The photographs the homeless men took were an ontology of their lives, capturing their inner memories, present and past existences. Participant A (2014) said, “My photos, were taken to start off with to cover the subject of homelessness and community and by going out and taking photos relevant to that subject I came across other things that just spoke to me and said, take my picture, I am worth showing to others.” He took photographs of places such as high street shop fronts i.e. Cash Converters, Samaritans signs, a graveyard, and railway tracks. Participant A was always exploring ideas with his camera, there was a noticeable change in him throughout the project and he began to spend more time discussing his ideas with the art students than with his friends.

There was a sense of him re-aligning himself with the art students by turning in a new direction and away from the other homeless men (Hickey-Moody 2009). The men took photographs that captured biographical elements of their lives which were revealed once they were fully explained. Participant B took moody, tonal black and white revealing photographs of his home, which showed a chaotic and un-kept room.



Figure 9: Cameras made you Feel Important
Source: Participant A 2013



Figure 10: Cameras as part of Bodies
Source: Student Two 2013



Figure 11: Cameras as part of Bodies
Source: Student Two 2013

He explained the story behind the photographs he took during a discussion, “I am a bit of a hoarder” (Participant B 2014) but further explanation revealed how his neighbor had been thrown out of his home for drug dealing and he had helped out by taking his belongings into his home; as Participant B (2014) puts it they “Put his tip over my tip.” As part of photo-elicitation and visual methods, it is always important for the photographer or creator of artwork to explain their narrative or meaning behind the image rather than being interpreted by the researcher. Participant B’s explanation is essential as there may have been misrepresentation of his photographs in making assumptions about homeless people’s lifestyle as chaotic and unkempt.

Participant B (2014) spoke about how the art students would say things about his artwork like, “This is really good.” He felt they were saying this out of kindness however the students felt genuine admiration and interest in their work. The response by Student Two (2014) is interesting, “I don’t always think it’s good to work with people who have arts knowledge, it’s good to work with normal people who aren’t always interested in fine art as they have good ideas and the old guys would give us ideas without even realizing.” Although there seemed to be a sense of using the men to influence their work, one needed to be careful in terms of what was said by the students as this could have been more about having a different artistic approach or interpretation. The students overall were inspired by what they saw as it was unexpected. This was a new phenomenon for the art students, to work with people who are not artists, “To be around creative people who don’t think in the same way, it helps you to learn” (Student One 2014). This was an example of pedagogical learning taking place where the students were inadvertently learning

from the men who had different experiences, where they needed to adapt and think in a different way. There was a two-way flow of creative approaches and shared skills that shows “creative agency allows the process of exchange to be an integral part of the creative practice” (Kester and Krenn, Skype interview, 2013).



Figure 12: Stored Stuff in Home
Source: Participant B 2013



Figure 13: Home
Source: Participant B 2013

Grant Kester writes “unpredictability is an essential part of community-based practice e.g. the unanticipated new insights that emerge from collaborative interactions or dialogical encounters (2004, 163). There were challenges in the project with one homeless man in particular. Participant C who joined the project later than the others who was younger and louder, and in many ways was treated as an outsider by the other participants. Although Participant C collaborated, and was keen to be involved in making artwork, occasionally he would turn up having taken drugs. There was a support worker who was used to working with the men and they worked alongside Participant C with the author and students, there was never any danger. Participant C was also made aware that he should avoid attending the workshops having taken drugs. However, Participant C was still welcomed to the project as being problematic should not be a reason not to engage with or reject anyone from creative experiences. The relational, empathetic, and collaborative aspect is one of the contexts for socially engaged arts practice. In this project there was always an element of risk versus trust and the challenges of inclusion versus exclusion. It was interesting to observe and hear a couple of the student’s reactions as they were interested in the homeless men’s experiences and were keen to influence the men. Because one of the men was taking drugs and acting differently in front of them, it made them and a couple of the homeless participants uncomfortable, “Participant C being out of his head made you feel a bit uncomfortable and it drove others a bit mad, he could say inappropriate things and turn up late” (Student Three 2014).

In many ways’ Participant C was the homeless stereotype, being unreliable and an outsider, on occasions arriving high and being late. He was stopping the flow and being inconvenient and this sense of difference, discomfort, and “otherness” made it difficult for a couple of the students to accept. A few of the men also found it difficult when he turned up having taken drugs as they were in recovery. Participant B (2014) reflected at the end, “That if he could do it, why could they not do it?” One could understand the resistance from the other participants in relation to his drug taking. Ethically this created some difficult decision making on whether to send him away or not as there were questions from the rest of the group on whether he should attend. It was felt that if he was sent away, he could be more of a danger to himself and he would continue taking drugs anyway. Student Four (2014) stated, “He was turned away from the other groups and this was the only place he enjoyed coming to, being with other people and having a go and wanted an activity and a group that he would regularly see, someone to listen to.”

Exhibition

The participants kept enquiring when they were going to have their exhibition in a gallery space. They were invested in receiving recognition. After receiving genuine positive affirmation, they and the students were confident about exhibiting their work. We built an exhibition space in the student union at the university and called it a gallery. Their artworks were an amalgamation of photographs and the other artwork they had created around homelessness; video's and screen prints, were "objects of their consideration, and, as such, objects of their action and cognition" (Friere 2002, 83). The homeless men had made films, taken photographs, and made artwork that was specifically created to make the public aware of homelessness, poverty, and housing. The men came up with title for the exhibition—"Changing Minds."

Participant A (2014) wrote the publicity text for the exhibition with the agreement of the group of men,

The meaning behind the title for the exhibition 'Changing Minds' is a chance to see homelessness in a different light, showing people that we are not all drug dependent, dole dodging, talentless, or skill-less. We hope to change their minds to see that the reasons people become homeless are many and varied and we are part of the same human race as all others.

This quote illustrates how Participant A critically perceives the way homeless people are seen by society in much the same stereotypical way as "passive, lazy, disaffiliated and disempowered" (Boydell, Goering, and Morrell-Bellai 2000, 26).

The exhibition was a platform for them to change perceptions of homelessness. The opening brought different groups associated with the men together, some of their families, friends, service providers, and artists. The men spoke to their relatives and service providers about their photographs, videos, and artwork. This interconnection created agency and allowed for alternate interpretations. This is what the students said about the exhibition, Student Three (2014) said "The exhibition was a sense of achievement and motivation and completion. A sense of achievement gives them a sense of hope." It was interesting to hear what the students had to say in terms of motivation, hope, achievement and their perception around the participants. One could summarize that seeing an exhibition by a marginalized group acted as a gateway for the public to challenge their own stereotypical viewpoints. Here the public could view artwork and discuss homelessness, a subject matter that people are often somewhat frightened of, as the phenomenon of being homeless is that it is circumstantial, and we are never that far away from it.

When asked about what he thought was one of the successes of the exhibition, Participant D says, "Some people may find it easier to empathize with artwork than with actual people." (2014). It is surprising to think that artwork could be seen to replace a person by acting as an advocate or lens to look at and understand a social issue instead of having a direct conversation with homeless people. The art critic Hal Foster writes about representation in a chapter "The Artist as Ethnographer" and how alterity is generally on the outside of dominant culture. I would consider that some contemporary art being shown in galleries is about viewing the "other." Could this possibly be because it is the "other" that sometimes draws people in, to look at art? Artists that use the "other" to inspire their gallery shows are artists such as Santiago Sierra's performance works and Phil Collin's video performance "They Shoot Horses." Gallery audiences can view the "other" and outsider cultures in a safe gallery environment out of harm's way. Foster also writes about "the 'other' being fashioned in artistic guise," this concept is important as there is an issue with turning the marginalized or "other" into something palatable or cool to gaze at in a gallery (Marcus and Myers 1995, 306). The homeless men had epistemic privilege, they are insiders with the knowledge and understanding of homelessness and they are best placed to inform the public. This was one of the reasons why their exhibition of their artwork was such a success.

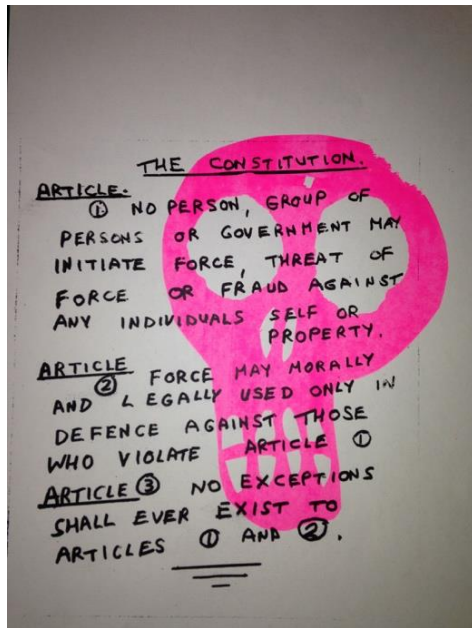


Figure 14: Neothink Constitution Screen Print
Source: Participant E 2013

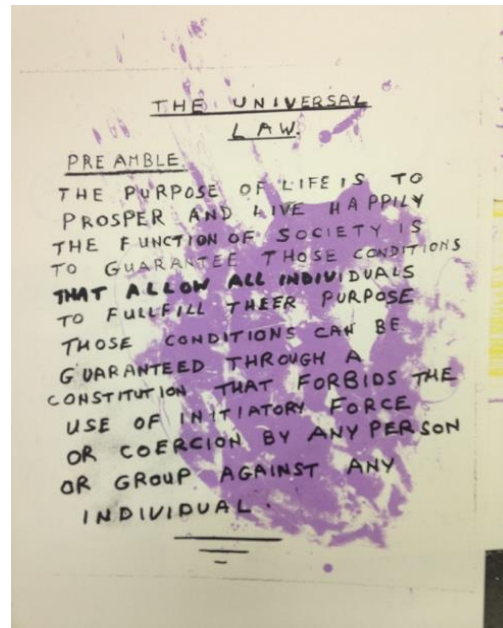


Figure 15: Universal Law Screen Print
Source: Participant E 2013

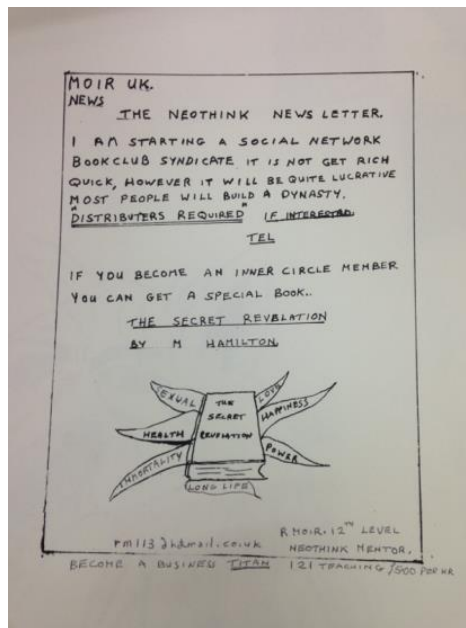


Figure 16: Neothink Newsletter Screen Print 2
Source: Participant E 2013

Limitations

The reflective interviews took place after the project had finished, which made it difficult for me to make contact and interview the homeless men. With hindsight it would have been better to conduct the interviews before the end of the project. As I only interviewed two homeless men at the end of the project, I had a limited knowledge of what the men felt about the facilitators (art students) and being a participant. The men did not expand on the questions they were asked. The art students should have had a more in-depth training into working with the homeless people from the charity. It was difficult to know without training how to work with people who had mental health issues or were taking drugs at the time.



Figure 17: Mapping Locality
Source: Student One 2013

Findings

The core findings in this socially engaged arts project were; the agency of objects, the shift in student viewpoints toward the homeless men: for example, the growth of empathy and friendship toward the participants. The students found that the homeless men were committed and motivated to creating artwork and acknowledge that the men have original artistic ideas. One of the most significant findings from the project was during a reflective interview with Participant B who spoke about how the participants used their time in the arts workshops' to distract them from everyday triggers such as drugs and alcohol. In effect the collaborative arts methods used in socially engaged arts practice provided the participants with a safer environment, a nurtured sense of agency, the power to be an individual and the confidence to create and visualize their concepts. The benefits of using analogue photography as a research methodology; this was because of how the processes facilitates dialogue in different locations and how photographs allow one to view people's perceptions of their world.

Discussion

The students critically acknowledge how their previous thoughts on homeless people changed. The homeless men spoke about how they are misrepresented and use their exhibition to highlight some of the misconceptions that exist. Giroux in his analysis of Friere's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* states "pedagogy is a political and moral practice that provides the knowledge, skills, and social relations that enable students to explore the possibilities of what it means to be critical citizens while expanding and deepening their participation" (2011, 155). Friere's concept around pedagogy is applied through the collaboration and discourse between the students and participants and helps in breaking down uncomfortable barriers. The students become critical of their initial preconceived viewpoints around the homeless men.

Student One (2014) said "I feel the men participating in the project initially had low self-esteem. Their intelligence and ideas were there but were lying dormant. By teaching them the correct skills, giving them encouragement and showing enthusiasm towards their suggestions and ideas, they slowly realized the potential they held." It was interesting to see the student's certainty and critical take on what they felt took place, and how they see their input in helping to discover the men's ability. I believe that the dialogue, encouragement, and the agency from learning new skills did help release aspects of the men's creativity. For example, the men's artwork including their photographs and screen prints had a personal creative approach. One man photographed the backs of buildings that the public would not usually notice, another created prints around Neothink, a secret society. Participant A's photographs created a sense of darkness and isolation; railway lines going nowhere, shadows, and silent graveyards. These were things that people would not normally look at, do, or create.

They were willing to try things and had an open view as to what art could be. Hickey-Moody and Harrison write about “affective pedagogy” (2018, 3) in relation to socially engaged arts practice where bodies come together and amalgamate with other affects or experiences and change those bodies. I conclude that a similar amalgamation of affects and experiences took place here through discourse and collaborating on the processes that allows the artwork to be created. The pedagogical change for the art students and the homeless men comes about through the interconnection of actants that are focused around creative processes; for example, learning to use the analogue camera, processing the film and photographs in the dark room, and learning to use the chemicals that allowed the photographs to appear on the paper. These experiences flow together and allow a space for connection where conversations about homelessness took place. The connected knowledge that accumulated was the pedagogy. The students and men redefined the self and changed their views and knowledge as a result of this experience.



Figure 18: Art-walk Installation Process
Source: Student Two 2013

Agency within Objects

Both the men and the students were affected by agency from this experience. The men gained agency by using their exhibition as a gateway to show their personal talent but also to make a statement about how homeless people could be creative and talented individuals and should not be typecast as “lazy, disaffiliated and disempowered” (Boydell, Goering, and Morrell-Bellai 2000, 26). The students gained agency from learning through their experience and critical reflection in understanding homeless people’s lives; they also grew personally from this experience. During the research I became interested in the surreal concept of the agency of objects. In this article I referred to the talking-tables as empowering objects that literally have a life of their own in encouraging dialogue once they are sat at. I was surprised by the effect of the agency of objects when they were used by the men and the students in helping to connect and develop the project, and how the processes involved in using the cameras, and creating the artwork and photographs were important elements within the dialogical connection. These participatory objects—tables, cameras—acted as actants to create agency for both the men and the students, and had the power to effectively help change the relationship once they were utilized. Bennett refers to “thing power” and says “objects, have efficacy, can do things, have sufficient coherence to make a difference, produce effects, and perhaps even alter the course of events” (2010, VIII). Once these objects came into close contact with the homeless men and art students and are used or touched, they have the power to change the engagement, relationships, dialogue, and effect outcomes such as the men’s photographs, artworks, and

exhibition. “Gell perceives that art objects are created as a form of instrumental or emotional action; attachment and attunement and that art objects are made to influence the thoughts and actions of others” (Tilley et al. 2006, 76). Gell’s quote helps to explain why viewers may be more comfortable accessing the realities of homelessness through visual artwork in a gallery exhibition, where it may act as a lens, rather than engaging with the homeless community in a face to face conversation.

The artworks that the men created had agency. An example of this was when the students saw the artwork that the men had created were surprised by it. Student Three (2014) said, “It was good work, that they would be proud to exhibit.” This gave the men a sense of being valued to be seen as individuals. The art student’s viewpoint on the homeless men changed as a result of this. The men recognized the importance of showing their artworks in the exhibition where they thought that people might be surprised by them. Gell considers that “material objects embody complex intentionality’s and mediate social agency” and that “art is a system of social action, it is about doing things” (Tilley et al. 2006, 76). This ran true when the men started to take photographs with the analogue cameras. Gell also argues that the creation and the making of art, the process, and the materiality is part of the agency. One would conclude from this that the arts methods and communal interaction that are commonly used in socially engaged arts practice can possibly help in creating social agency.

During reflexive interviews with the art students at the end I found that their perceptions had changed from a concern from parents about working with dangerous people to having an open view around homelessness. Student Two (2014) observed “I had in mind what it might be like, I had in mind the worst. Most of them were really nice and I didn’t expect them to be nice people.” Overall the student’s stereotypical viewpoint on the homeless men changed from underestimating the men’s intelligence and artistic ability to being non-judgmental. They also recognized the men as individuals rather than necessarily being homeless. Being homeless was not such an important factor any longer. Student Three (2013) speaks about how their thoughts around homelessness have shifted, “My opinion has changed a lot; I learnt a lot about why people are not just on the streets because of drink and drugs; everyone has their own stories not just lumped together; I want to know why they are homeless and not jump to conclusions.”

Grant Kester states that “dialogical works can challenge dominant representations of a given community and create a more complex understanding of and empathy for that community” (2005, 7). Over the nine months of the project the students’ relationship and representation with the homeless men completely changed. Student One (2014) elaborated in conversations, “As I got to know each individual, they became friends rather than people I was teaching or helping.”

Analogue Photography

I see analogue photography as a methodology because the camera was used as an analysis machine, the men were inadvertently photographing signs, objects, places, their homes, portraits, and images that were associated with their lives. I found that analogue photography as an activity was of greater value than table-talk as it brought the two groups closer together; it was not a case of the students speaking to the men across a table. This was a physical creative symbiotic activity where both groups had to interact. For the homeless men the physical action of going out on the streets, bending down, focusing to get the right shot produced a confidence in becoming photographers. Using analogue cameras meant that the men had to problem solve, slow down, and learn to use the settings. They also had to learn to develop film and process the negatives in the dark room on to photographic paper. So, all of these technical skills took time to learn which resulted in collaboration, whereas in using a digital camera they could have used an autofocus setting and downloaded and printed their photographs digitally. This could have possibly resulted in not having the same type of close collaboration and dialogue between the two different groups. There were so many more processes involved in analogue photography that take time and focus.

The students were asked what they thought was good about using analogue over digital. Student Two (2013) responded “There is more of a connection, more thought into what they were taking and more final than digital.” Student One said “The complete process was part of the art; the picture was only one aspect” (2014). The students gained knowledge of the men’s lives by walking with them while taking photographs, observing and listening to what they had to say about places where they once visited or lived. Photography gave the men power over what they captured allowing them to create their own narrative and representation.

Volunteering

I felt that there was a relationship between volunteering and empathy with most of the students volunteering for the project because they wanted to improve and enhance the homeless men’s lives and, in many ways, to motivate the men and prove people wrong. This was partly due to how they thought the men were perceived by society. Student Four (2014) said “I wanted to make a difference by working with people who weren’t expected to be creative, people with a drug habit wouldn’t be interested in art.” Student Three (2014) observed “I wanted to help the homeless people to become more motivated to do something for themselves rather than go to church every week, every day.” Finally, Student One said “I wanted the experience of working with difficult people and perhaps changing people’s minds about vulnerable groups” (2014). Claire Bishop’s term “the social turn” fits well with this research as the students wanted to help the homeless men see things in a new way, to make interesting artwork and do something different with their lives (Bishop, 2012, 7). Bishop argues that artists who involve themselves in social practice can be compared to missionaries and in some ways, there is a link here as the students wanted to help out.



Figure 19: Pray Homeless screen print
Source: Participant F 2013

Conclusion

The stereotypical typecasting of homeless people that was held by the students at the start of the project changed substantially and for the students there was a “social turn.” The creation of “good” art by the homeless men gave them agency and helped change the art student’s perceptions of their artistic ability and commitment. The collaborative activities and processes used in the project helped in changing the student’s views of the men. These same activities and processes gave the men new skills and confidence. The time spent by the men in workshops with the students helped distract them from drugs and alcohol. Grant Kester sees socially engaged arts practice as having

impact on “social, cultural, and political” understanding and here we can see how using collaborative arts methods creates a dialogical connection point and friendship between two very different groups (2013, 151). The art students who volunteered wanted to do good; they were empathetic active participants who wanted to help the homeless men be motivated to do better for themselves. It would be interesting to compare the empathetic and sociological differences between students working on a social project mandatorily and voluntarily.

Reflecting on this research has enabled me to become aware of the effect of the agency of objects such as how cameras can be part of the creative process. These objects act as part of the stimulus when the participants are shown how to use them; leading to collaboration, creative thinking and artwork. I believe that the agency of objects and artwork assisted in changing the mood, connectiveness, attunement, and two-way flow between the two very different groups of people. It was interesting to see how the homeless men gained agency by taking advantage and using their art exhibition to change people’s views of homelessness. The students acknowledged that they were surprised by the participants’ creativity. It would be interesting to further investigate as to why art students may underestimate the creativity of people who are marginalized.

I would summarize that the art students gained as much as the homeless men from this experience. It was interesting to observe how they developed personally. One also needs to remain aware of the vast difference between the facilitator of art projects and the participants they are working with. Artists, students, researchers, and academics should always consider the power that they have when working with marginalized groups. They need to ensure that they are free of preconditioned thoughts to avoid “othering” in creative practices. Facilitators can create an empathetic environment that allows participants to gain a sense of agency and belonging that brings fruition to any socially engaged practice. Facilitating inclusive creative discourse during these uncertain times is to take a stand against dissonance, at a time when there is an increase in extremism. The end of the project was difficult as it was hard to know when to stop at the end of nine months. Both the men and the students had become friendly and close to one another and it was a case of the students graduating and moving away from the city. The men held on to their cameras. The project could not be sustained in its current form without funding however the charity was later successful in gaining further funding to run a social arts project three months later.

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