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Conversational Mapping: Revaluing the Social Aspects of Art

Caroline Gausden and Helen Smith

Abstract

This submission, part audio, part text continues a dialogue between artist Helen Smith and critical theorist Caroline Gausden delivered at the 2014 Mapping Culture Conference in Coimbra, which compared two distinct geographies through the lens of art as a social practice. It approaches the question of cultural mapping from the perspective of artistic research, considering the value of conversation as a methodology within such research and more broadly as an unacknowledged cultural form. In this respect, Michel de Certeau's writing on the speech act is an important reference between the researchers that leads to the inclusion of audio as well as written materials. The audio fragments open up the original dialogue to the voices of participants and social activists in the two contexts discussed. This hybrid form, making use of hypertext to travel in different directions, acknowledges a particular movement between positions often taken up by the artist within social practice. This movement involves the less visible actions of listening and supporting collaborative creativity. This supportive work is compared to artist Mierle Laderman Ukeles' definition of 'Maintenance Art' (1969). By defining and acknowledging the maintenance that accompanies creative works it is hoped that the essay will develop a spiral argument for mapping as a relational and negotiated form.

Conversational Mapping: Revaluing the Social Aspects of Art

What follows began as an examination of artistic approaches to cultural mapping, conceived as a kind of re-drawing of relationships between people by examining the surface of what is heard for deeper significance that resonates collectively. Starting as a conversation between social arts practice and feminist critical theory, artist Helen Smith and critical theorist Caroline Gausden, both PhD researchers, compare two projects based in [very different community settings](#) to think about what contribution artistic research can make to sustaining community initiatives.

The initial conversation (Feb. 2014) between Smith and Gausden focused on Smith's arts practice within the community-based art centre [Woodend Barn](#), known as 'The Barn' in rural Aberdeenshire. [Lavender \(2012-2014\)](#) is a collaboration between Smith and a group of individuals drawn from different communities within The Barn that, through a context-specific project, enabled an understanding of organizational change through art. From this point, the researchers explore challenges faced by the urban eco initiative, [South Seeds](#) in Govanhill, Glasgow, where Gausden is a founder and former board member.

Through conversation, Smith and Gausden move between their personal and research positions towards an understanding of what conditions are helpful for the production of shared social spaces across different contexts. The conversation picks up on issues of sociability, defined by Smith as operating between motivations of affinity and curiosity. In dialogue both researchers touch on the significance of the act of speaking, referencing Michel de Certeau's pivotal work on the subject in *The Practice of Everyday Life* (de Certeau, 1984). Working out of this theoretical context, this paper is interested in exploring the value of conversational knowledge within academic writing practices. From this perspective, there is also an imperative to open up the conversation to include the voices of participants both from Smith's research context at The Barn in Aberdeenshire and from South Seeds, the Glasgow-based project.



Woodend Barn allotments

Situated in Banchory, the conversion of the Woodend Barn farmstead into an art centre was triggered by a community play of [local histories](#) in 1992. Since that time it has grown in relation to the energy and interests of individuals within the community and, like many other cultural organizations, is currently concerned with its resilience in times of public austerity. The original question for *Lavender (2012-2014)* was: How, through art, can The Barn think about becoming more sustainable?



Volunteers at a South Seeds garden site

South Seeds' work is also centred on the question of sustainability. The organization develops community growing sites within tenement block populations in an area where complex and diverse experiences make it difficult to link communities and individuals to resources and each other. Despite these difficulties, South Seeds recognizes the value of creating conditions for people to collaborate, in order to bring about lasting environmental change. Often South Seeds' staff combine architectural, ecological and horticultural knowledge with the [less visible work](#) of listening to and translating personal stories. The researchers were interested in thinking through this particular, [listening aspect](#) of the project in relation to Smith's social art practice.

In order to approach and revalue this less visible work, this collaboration has evolved into a hybrid form, part text, part audio submission that brings together multiple voices from the two contexts. The audio clips are short fragments from a recorded conversation between Smith, Genevieve Jones, a participant of *Lavender (2012-2014)*, Gausden, Lucy Gillie, the director of South Seeds, and Robin Ashton, a member of staff from South Seeds. All these different perspectives add layers to the first conversation between Gausden and Smith to create a conception of mapping as a relational form of understanding developed through social arts practice.

The conversation has grown from spoken words, text and formal presentation by the researchers before being opened up again to include the voices of participants. It has moved between theory, research and everyday language as well as between audio, visual and textual communication. At the same time as reflecting Smith's artistic practice, this process of moving between has become an exchange that tests Michel de Certeau's (1984) assertion that ordinary moments can be liberating and generative. Liberation comes from choosing to enunciate, to become social and activate the text. de Certeau writes

The act of speaking is not reducible to a knowledge of the language... speaking... effects an appropriation, or re-appropriation of language by its speakers; it establishes a present relative to time and place; and it posits a contract with the other (the interlocutor) in the network of places and relations. These four characteristics of the speech act can be found in many other practices (walking, cooking, etc.). (de Certeau, 1984: 14).

By speaking, he continues, users make

innumerable and infinitesimal transformations of and within the dominant cultural economy in order to adapt it to their own interests and their own rules. (p. 15)

Fragment of initial conversation between Smith and Gausden (Feb. 2014)

HS: *de Certeau refers to the sentence as a metaphor for the infrastructures of society; somebody deciding to speak a sentence, he says, is intervening in life, taking hold of the moment. This resonates with the practices and theories of artists such as [Allan Kaprow](#), [Suzanne Lacy](#) and [Artist Placement Group](#) whose work has informed the development of my practice, especially in relation to understanding organizational change through art.*

CG: *In terms of the social context, I think these things have also informed the conversational methodology we have developed together. In collaboration we have emphasized how meaning is generated through social moments, so that it is not separate from life. This is about emphasizing the value of our specific, situated experiences. There are important precedents for this in critical pedagogy that we have touched on, like beginning with the personal experience of an individual ([Paulo Freire](#), 1934) or generating meaning through the experience of art in Pragmatism ([John Dewey](#), 1968). This valuing of personal experience is also a prominent feature of second wave feminism, which is where in 'Sanitation Workers' for example, [Mierle Laderman Ukeles](#)' art works feature.*



Mierle Laderman Ukeles, *Touch Sanitation*, (1979 - 1980). Courtesy Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, New York.

CG: *If social infrastructures are related to these tiny everyday speech acts, then power becomes something more fluid. We don't simply fit into an existing structure but also alter it through these almost imperceptible acts. When thinking about existing power inequalities, there is a complexity to this as well as some hope. If we are all responsible for the structures we live within, then I suppose there is also a risk involved in speaking?*

HS: *Yes, in as much as it's liberating it's also risky because you're setting up the possibility for a multitude of interactions and consequences. You also need to be open to becoming involved in a process of change. So*

it is interesting to think about why we choose to participate. I also have to consider my context as an artist within visual culture. This is different from a context solely concerned with speech and text. Yet having the right language, being able to express your opinion as speech or text is necessary to be critical. For this reason I'm interested in creating the conditions through art for people to reflect deeply and express their views. This is a process of re-valuing the social qualities of art, including the conversational, in order to make sense of ourselves and our contexts in relation to each other.

Along with speaking, walking and cooking, de Certeau mentions reading as another invisible everyday practice that works as a kind of poaching act, adding layers to a text through memory:

...this mutation makes the text habitable, like a rented apartment. It turns another person's property into a space borrowed for a moment by a transient. Renters make comparable changes in an apartment they furnish with their acts and memories; as do speakers, in language into which they insert both the messages of their native tongue and, through their accent, through their own turn of phrase etc...their own history. (de Certeau, Introduction: xxi)

This article makes use of this metaphor for reading as a kind of poaching to initiate a dialogue not only outside of the academic research context but with de Certeau's text which we apply to our particular contexts. In this way, de Certeau's writing is equally 'furnished' through our speech acts and remembered conversations and, in return, offers insights into the tactics these acts employ.

Vision - Looking forward

This extract gives a partial, conversational view on the projects we have introduced above and also offers an interesting perspective on the function of both memory and contextual knowledge in the process of moving forward. What is interesting is how Lucy Gillie is able to pull out the vision for South Seeds from the discussion, initiated by Genevieve Jones. This is in contrast to an earlier moment when, in a slightly abrasive way, Jones asks directly what the vision is for South Seeds and Gillie is unable, at this point, to offer a response. Instead, she speaks in a kind of organizational way around the five-year plan for South Seeds and when pushed by Jones delegates responsibility for the vision to the 'board' and expresses her role as implementer of a work plan derived from the vision. This is about organizational division, the mind/body split that we speak about, initially, in the research context (extract below), in relation to the organizational development at The Barn.

CG: Ok, when we spoke about The Barn before, you said that if anyone brings an idea to the table, people have to put in the legwork to make it happen. This is connected to the strong volunteer ethos there. I was thinking in terms of the difference between a community organization and an institution. In relation to developments at South Seeds I am interested in an institutional tendency towards a mind/body split; where there are people in an office deciding on the programme and other people, on the ground, carrying out the tasks - cleaning the spaces, engaging and playing host to an essentially passive community. At the moment I don't think of South Seeds as operating that way but I can see, almost as a result of funding success, that it becomes harder to sustain that sort of collaborative ethos.

HS: I think the period I have been associated with The Barn has been a time of working through the split you describe. The process has involved the employment of people to deliver aspirations that came out of a desire to be sociable and creative twenty years ago. As that network grew there was a need for more administration and management. In parallel with this, the question of leadership becomes more complex. How can it go forward in light of changes in scale and resources? During my residency I witnessed founding members of The Barn working more within that institutional model you describe and then turning away from it. Now they're talking with volunteers and staff to work out how to go forward. So there is some conflict around what community leadership can be in reality. That's what they are motivated to understand.

Despite reiterating this mind/body division through her first description, it does not appear as satisfactory to Gillie as a way of working. Later on, when she speaks about staff at South Seeds she is interested in the

work being more than just a job and in resolving the mismatch between staff and community timeframes. Finally, in both conversations, this institutional way of operating, which leaves conceptual development of projects to one group of people in a hierarchy, emerges as not sustainable for a community-led organization. Through *Lavender (2012-2014)* Smith is able to occupy a position in-between these various divisions moving, for example, between material and immaterial labour, listening for different perspectives and setting up the conditions for them to meet so that everyone has access to the project's conceptual development. She describes a key moment in *Lavender (2012-2014)* where she organizes a meal to bring different people from the community together in a social setting.

HS: *...Through the conversations that happened between us over dinner, the subject for the project emerged. The rich stories that people told about the Banchory Lavender gave us more specific ways to talk about sustainability. I think the way this story emerged, during the course of a social event, can be related to what you refer to as a hidden narrative. It emerged as an important topic for the people in the room and created a new energy between all of us.*

What is emphasized in our initial conversation is the social aspect of Smith's work as an artist. Through a kind of barely perceptible [social work](#), she is able to map the relationships between people.

HS: *It is really difficult to write about how you are present in a place. You are just yourself but with an awareness of personal, research and participant positions. There is a real expertise to knowing how and when to move between these interchangeable identities ...I have started to think of what I do as 'art as a social practice.'*

CG: *Social practice makes sense to me as a term. It reminds me of a [poem](#) by artist Monica Ross who refers to the collaborative project *Feministo* as a social practice. It seems to point to all those complex negotiations that are otherwise invisible – the hosting and being guest that you describe in relation to your residency. Also the organizing and personal life experiences that lead to rich metaphors like *Lavender* being developed. I am reminded of Mierle Laderman Ukeles' [Maintenance Manifesto](#) (1969) where she focuses on invisible 'maintenance work' that supports more visible 'development work' in creativity.*

This awareness of the social, apparent in the first conversation, is carried over into the context of South Seeds where Gausden employs insights gained from speaking to Smith to set up similar social gatherings for different groups involved with the project. What becomes apparent is that this foregrounding of the social disrupts the normal power relations in the organization that separate activities into different time frames and spaces allowing some to have more voice and investment than others in [projects](#). Instead through creating the right social conditions for the different perspectives of staff and board to meet, both groups can begin to unpack motivations for action. Consequently, social conditions allow for different groups to feed into the conceptual development or vision of the organization.

Time is also considered as an important component in this aspect of the social. Smith emphasizes ways to "shift your timeframe to hook onto the timeframe of somebody with a different set of motivations" in relation to the concepts of [Open Brief and The Artist as Incidental Person](#) conceived by APG. Robin Ashton's insights of setting up and working in the community gardens in Govanhill seem relevant to this. In conversation, Ashton emphasizes pace, consistency and a kind of cyclical way of working that is in tune with the communities' time frame and motivations. What Ashton describes is a sense of time that is both cyclical and progressive. It moves forward without charging ahead as linear time could be considered to do. Instead, the movement it evokes is similar to a [spiral](#). Whereas Smith sees the dinner as a key moment, Ashton presents a similar case for the gardening sessions as generative spaces where people can 'mill about and chat' with the gardening activities providing a "wee bit of structure" (Ashton). From Smith's perspective, this kind of loose framework is reminiscent of Kaprow's work:

HS: *I don't want to create a set of instructions to replicate. It is a critical framework. In this respect I'm influenced by Allan Kaprow's (2003) art and performance developments from John Cage's non-art and [chance operations](#). It is a [loosely choreographed framework](#) for a happening. A path, you let it run its course and you create the conditions for that to happen. It is an intervention but it contains the possibility of chance operations. As soon as you're working with people, chance occurs. It took me a year to get to that*

point in a particular journey. To get to a similar place, you have to digest the work and reinterpret it for who you are, what the context is and who the participants are.

Returning to the audio extract, in contrast to Gillie's initial abrupt dismissal of vision as not her responsibility, an equally challenging exchange between Jones and herself around how she perceives the role of South Seeds within a transient context in Govanhill does trigger a very clear statement of vision that she is able to own and also speak of as 'our' vision. This is a move towards a collaborative way of working, with South Seeds' direction coming from the staff and board in tune with the community timeframe, which could override the divisions seen in the earlier more direct question (vision and work plan) posed by Jones about the organization.

Symbolically, this different mode of conversation, which produces the insight into South Seeds' purpose, is triggered by an exchange of situated experience. As Ashton notes when thinking about the extent to which South Seeds' work enables encounters with difference, it isn't forced but emerges from [contextual knowledge](#).

The audio extract also exposes the limits to which a conversation can be choreographed and echoes de Certeau's assertion that as well as offering an adaption or re-adaption within a linguistic field, by being in time and space the act of speaking is a kind of bringing to life of words or making real. This process also ties into our discussion on the risk it involves. Furthermore, in speaking de Certeau asserts we enter into a contract with the other. Jones is the other in this context and her contribution is consequently unknowable in advance. It has a double edge to it in that it makes Gillie, Smith, Gausden and possibly Ashton uncomfortable at points but is also useful/generative in relation to thinking about a vision for South Seeds and a change to the organizational structure, with staff and board equally contributing. It is an example of the small shocks or challenges Jones describes as essential for ecological resilience in forests as an analogy for organizational sustainability.

Memory - Looking Back

de Certeau writes on the significance of memory as an everyday tactic (as opposed to strategy, which is aligned in his analysis with having power and a space from which to operate). As a tactic memory is a kind of "invisible knowledge" that derives its "interventionary" force (de Certeau, 1984: 86) precisely from not having a particular space to operate from, instead it has a capacity "to be altered - unmoored, mobile, lacking any fixed position" (p. 86). In this capacity it mediates "spatial transformations", intervening at the right moment it "steals something from the distribution owning the space" (p. 85). He uses the motif of the circle to describe a cycle "in which invisible knowledge escapes visible power" (p. 85).

memory comes from somewhere else, it is outside of itself, it moves things about ... memory is played by circumstances, just as a piano is played by a musician and the music emerges from it when its keys are touched by hands. Memory is a sense of the other. (de Certeau, 1984: 87)

At this point in the audio, a discussion around the South Seeds handbook highlights Jones' past experiences of building alternative places for children to play and be creative. Again there are two modes of conversation. Starting with the organizational mode, our discussions around archives leads Gillie into discussing 'a really boring' piece of work she is doing to produce a health and safety handbook for the organization. As in the first case where Jones rejects the five-year plan explanation, she also instinctively reacts against what she identifies as an organizational way of being. Again, Jones uses her memories to navigate the conversation, pulling in an example from her experience, which shows creativity, risk and excitement – all stifled by the really boring work of health and safety. The illustration through memory is taken off track by Gillie's own experiential knowledge, which, through an unpredictable coincidence, locates her as a child within one of the playgrounds designed by Jones. Through this shared memory the conversational tone is switched, producing a moment of connection between the speakers.

This part of the audio is interesting on two levels. As in the analysis of the first part, it brings de Certeau's writing on memory into play. Memory acts as a kind of invisible element that, through speaking, can enter into a situation and produce a change in power relations. Memory for de Certeau relates to time as opposed to space, intervening at the right moment to change things in an unpredictable way. Memory is also central to Smith's practice at The Barn, with memories of [Lavender production](#) in the area becoming the central motif through which people increase their connections with each other.



Posters: 3 of 12. *Lavender* (2012-2014)

This section of the conversation is interesting in relation to Ukeles' [Maintenance Manifesto](#) (1969) and the different divisions of labour it introduces. In the *Manifesto* Ukeles lays out two distinct categories of action: maintenance work and development. *Development* she says is "the Avant Garde par excellence", it is an adventure playground – creative, exciting, "pure individual creation", zip wires and "flight" (Ukeles, 1969). It is also like Jones' contribution to the discussion, double-edged because its function as "dynamic change" involves it in the "Death Instinct" (ibid). Development, Ukeles states, is "to follow your own path to death – to do your own thing".

Maintenance on the other hand is a sourball. It is about sustaining life. Like the archive it is about [survival](#). Maintenance is boring - "it takes all the fucking time" (Ibid.) – this statement in the *Manifesto* echoes what Gillie has to say about the handbook almost word for word. Without this moment in the conversation where Gillie and Jones meet in remembering the adventure playground, it would be easy enough to divide the two speakers into separate categories and ways of being in the world – creative and free vs. controlled and organizational. However, through memory, Gillie becomes comfortable revealing that she is not only a director, with an organizational plan to follow, but a "child of the seventies" who must also now, after the revolution, take out the rubbish (this is quite a literal part of the job of staff at South Seeds). In this way, the conversation acknowledges both the death drive and the maintenance work, seeing them as inextricably entwined.

These edited extracts from a longer unwieldy conversation are two examples of a pull and push that kept returning in the conversation between the death drive – with its leading personalities that push things forward – and the maintenance drive that follows after, "keeping the dust off pure individual creation" (Ibid.), making things safe so "people know where they stand" before they can move [forward](#). Ashton's position questions the sustainability of an approach that could be seen as a kind of avant garde notion of leadership in which leading personalities move ahead of a particular community in order to drive through change. In response to his reservations, but at a later point, Smith asks the perceptive question: "Is there room for progression in the work you do here?" This question draws from him an alternative version of progression that also involves return and repetition through the growing seasons. Through this description, Ashton builds on the conditions he sets up through the gardening sessions.

PLEASE KEEP THIS AREA TIDY



The living artist enters ... as a wild card. That is her essence, to be unfettered, even in her maintenance work. *Ukeles*

Image of Ukeles spiral sweeping

Created by [Jonathan Baxter and Sarah Gittins](#)

Conclusions

The conversation looks at the value of social moments in the creation of community-driven spaces and the artist's role in creating these moments through a careful consideration of time and space. In amongst this will to create collaboratively owned spaces that defy normal institutional hierarchies, a quiet leadership emerges that sits just on the edge of visibility. Moving between participation and observation, between the guest and host, the artist sets up the conditions for hidden narratives to emerge between participants. For both researchers, there is an emphasis on valuing the specific stories and questions rooted in personal experiences that individuals bring to collaboration. From this awareness, it becomes possible to negotiate a shared cultural identity around these narratives of place.

The careful process of researching and retelling the Lavender story becomes a generative metaphor for the community in Banchory that can continue beyond the presence of the artist. In relation to this, Gausden rethinks the community gardens in Govanhill as possible sites for similarly generative processes. In speaking to Jones, Gillie and Ashton these ideas are tested and brought into relationship with different contexts beyond the research environment. In this spoken conversation, there is a tension between two modes of being. What de Certeau might refer to as a tactical mode of being triggered by memories and contextual knowledge producing lively discussions around visions of different spaces. There is also a strategic level of operating which could be seen in discussions on the health and safety or the archive where speakers think about how to find a space to operate from. Rather than seeing these two modes in opposition to each other, it is interesting to consider them in relation to Ukeles' *Maintenance Manifesto* (1969). The *Manifesto* considers a different kind of invisible power to the one that de Certeau locates in stories and memories. This kind of invisible work is also associated with the circle but it isn't the kind of progressive cycle that Robin identifies; instead, we are presented with a sourball, or direct feedback loop with little room for alteration. Ukeles' role is to raise this hidden maintenance work to the level of consciousness and, in doing so, offer an adaption – a feedback loop with room for alteration and creativity or a spiral.

Through this metaphor, Ashton's work in the gardens sits alongside artistic practice with the spaces he works within reimagined as community stories. In this generative capacity, the community garden sites are seen to be valuable for self-organized sustainable communities. Finally, this approach to South Seeds work via artist research highlights a painstaking care and heightened listening for significance in tiny everyday actions that generates rich situated knowledge. This knowledge enables communities to redraw the map from inside.

Acknowledgements

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