AUTHOR(S):

TITLE:

YEAR:

Publisher citation:

OpenAIR citation:

Publisher copyright statement:

This is the _____ version of proceedings originally published by _____
and presented at _____
(ISBN _____; eISBN _____; ISSN _____).

Practising Equality

Script

Hi, I'm Chris Fremantle. I'm going to share a piece of work that Professor Paul Harris and I have been developing over the past year, supported by Professor Anne Douglas. As you know Paul is the Head of Gray's School of Art as well as being the Chair of Moving Targets. He's got a background in film and media theory and practice. I am a researcher and producer working in public art and have been working with Gray's School of Art as a research associate with On The Edge Research for the past 12 years. My interests lie in participatory social and ecological art practices. Paul's lie with co-creativity as a challenge to our understanding of media.

This exercise started from a hunch that it would be useful to break out of the somewhat enclosed discourses in the respective fields of media and art to see if there were useful experiences and even lessons by assuming that participation and co-creation was taking place across art, design, architecture and media.

There are reasons from an institutional perspective to think that this is interesting – the Robert Gordon University encompasses both Gray's School of Art and Scott Sutherland School of Architecture and Built Environment and has an emerging University wide focus on Creative Industries. Nationally Creative Scotland is in partnership with the Paul Hamlyn Foundation to deliver the ArtWorks Scotland, a national professional development initiative for artists working in participatory settings. Its one of 5 parallel projects across the UK. And of course Moving Targets is a major initiative focused on Knowledge Exchange around new media audiences.

But what we are looking to do is to bring the distinctive perspective of the practitioner, building on the culture of practice-led research, to explore similarities and differences across art, design and media engaged in participation and co-creativity. We are going to suggest that there are a few key similarities, **but that there are also a couple of points where some specific experiences that need to be shared to inform future practice.**

Let me give you an example of the sort of practices we have been taking as exemplary.

The Center for Urban Pedagogy (CUP) in New York City is a not for profit organisation set up by a group comprising architects, planners, public policy people, graphic designers and artists. CUP has evolved some key long term pieces of work including 'Making Policy Public' and I'd like to focus of a minute on Vendor Power, one part of this programme.

So in New York, if you are selling watches and handbags from a table on the street, you need a license, to be on a legal street, and to be on a legal spot. A legal spot is ten feet from a crossing and twenty feet from the door to a building. Your table has to be eighteen inches from the curb. It can't be more than eight feet long, three feet wide and two feet high. You can store stuff under it, but not next to it. If you follow all these rules then the police can only move you on if there is an emergency or a major event.

All this information and more is contained in one poster made through the Vendor Power project. To create work like this CUP pairs policy advocates with graphic designers to produce a series of fold out posters. CUP chooses project participants through a jury process and facilitates their collaboration. In this case the policy advocates were The Street Vendor Project, which is a 700 member organisation working to protect the rights and promote vendor-

friendly reform.

All CUP's programmes, and Making Policy Public in particular, demonstrate the potential for a design practice to contribute to social justice and equality not merely as producers of communications materials.

So in conventional design terms the clients of the Vendor Power project are the street vendors. A core group of organisers within the formal Association are participants in the process and the whole community are recipients of the product. The design process is clearly focused on opening up access to information for that client group. The design for the Vendor Power poster demonstrates simple graphics and text using the five common languages of members of Association. The text explains the most commonly violated laws. The poster is easily and simply duplicated and disseminated.

As such Vendor Power is a good example of a design process, but it is in the difference in the relationship between CUP, the designers, and The Street Vendor Project, that it demonstrates co-creativity and participation. The whole process is instigated by CUP. It engages with a range of organisations and associations that are advocating in policy contexts and engaged with the

everyday life of the city. It's design hitched to the needs of grassroots interest groups in the City that makes this distinctive. It's obviously political in seeking to challenge bureaucratic power. Its focused by an interest in **why** things are the way they are not just how to communicate certain information to certain people.

We might categorise the work of CUP within a broad cluster of co-creative and participatory practice which could be called "Rights to the city." In that category we could include alongside CUP artists such as Martha Rosler and architecture practices such as MUF.

So if we step back from the detail for a minute, Greenbaum and Loi, who edited a special edition of the Journal Co-Design highlight a series of key characteristics: equalising power relations; situation-based actions; mutual learning; relevant and adaptable tools and techniques, alternative visions about technology, as well as democratic practices. We can see how these relate to CUP's projects.

We find similar characteristics in other literature we looked at including Charles Leadbeater's We-Think and Clay Shirky's Here Comes Everybody.

Leadbeater highlights a set of characteristics:

1. the need for a core around which a community can form;

2. circumstances where experimentation is easy and feedback quick;

3. decision-making is straightforward and transparent;

4. it's easy to attract a large and diverse community.

5. tools are easy to use and user-friendly;

6. contributors connect with each other;

7. structures are self-governing and flexible;

He acknowledges that these are important characteristics for participatory and co-creative work, but not necessarily relevant to a range of other circumstances such as medical operations, running nuclear reactors, railways or steel mills.

It is therefore clear that a politics of social justice and equality underpin co-creative and participatory design practices whether focused on policy and the city, as in the case of CUP, or on the development of Web 2.0, as described by Leadbeater and Shirky.

For our second example we'll turn to Suzanne Lacy, the feminist, artist and writer internationally acknowledged for her socially engaged art practice

working with for example African-American and Hispanic youth in Oakland, California.

Suzanne's work might be characterised as bearing witness, whether that's to the stigmatisation of young people or the unwillingness to talk about violence against women.

Suzanne has been a Visiting Professor at Gray's School of Art where she has completed a practice-led PhD. As part of that process between 2006 and 2008 she worked with a group of mostly Scottish artists and curators to reflect on her ten year programme of projects in Oakland, California a decade before. The Oakland projects were structured around extended workshops with young people and focused on media literacy. They resulted in large scale public performance art works intended to enable the participants to present and represent themselves and their issues. Each performance involved over 100 participants, and had an audience of many hundreds.

Lacy describes the workshop process as follows,

'In *Roof is on Fire* we met every week with a team of 40 kids. They felt

that they were the leaders. Out of that 40, there were ten who met and

decided the questions.'

This appears to contradict the principles of equality in particular that we have

established as underpinning co-creative and participatory activity. But it is

here that the media literature and in particular Shirky sheds light.   He

recounts numerous examples of the relatively small numbers of people

actually involved in the co-creative process. So the number of people

involved in authoring content for Wikipedia is a fraction of the number

registered as users, i.e. the numbers that *could* contribute in relation to the

number that *do* contribute. He makes a compelling argument that we need to

understand that participation in co-creative activity conforms to the 'power law

distribution,' i.e. that a few people make a significant contribution and a lot of

people make a much more limited contribution. One of the examples he uses

is a Flickr photostream of the Mermaid's Parade in Coney Island, New York.

He notes that one person uploads 250 photographs, the next most frequent

uploader only contributes 90 images, the next most frequent 40 images and

beyond that there are many individuals contributing one, two or a few images.

Participation is wide, but a few people make the largest contribution.

This analysis is very useful, offering a rationale for the everyday experience. Those involved in socially engaged art and design will recognise this dynamic.

Lacy goes on to describe the process of moving from workshop to performance,

> At the rehearsal, the adults took over. I turned into a militant general in the middle of a performance – 'Be there, do that ..'. The kids came up to us afterwards and said, 'Wait a minute. This is not cool. You need to include us all the way.' We explained to them that it was difficult to do so when you are representing the vision, the voice and the experience in the work and when you don't have art experience. There was a complex negotiation that went on around that point between the rehearsal and the performance. I'm not saying that either side had a complete autonomy, but it was a negotiation. It explains to you how the aims of the work and the expectations of the people entering the work are a much more open field than one might see from looking at the end result.

Again this seems to challenge the principles of equality and social justice.

We want to suggest that when we talk about equality there are two possible

metaphorical ways of understanding that in the creative process. On the one

had we can assume that equality means democracy, or we can understand

equality to mean that process of negotiation to which Lacy is referring.

Another dimension of literature we have drawn on is the critical and

theoretical writing on socially engaged or participatory art by Grant Kester

and Claire Bishop.

Kester in particular argues that the artists such as Lacy engaged in

participatory and co-creative processes have a distinct aesthetic which he

characterises as *dialogic.* So he says,

> We might speak, then, of a meaningful loss of intentionality in dialogical
>
> practice as the artist opens out to the effect of site, context and the
>
> collaborative Other. Here the mindful surrender of agency and
>
> intentionality is not marked as a failure or abandonment (of the
>
> prerogatives of authorship or the specificity of 'art'), but as a process
>
> that is active, generative, and creative.

So in conclusion we want to make a couple of points.

Firstly art practices have things to learn from the media literature of Web 2.0 around understanding the characteristics that support co-creativity and patterns of participation. These are not characterised by a democratic metaphor or reality, but rather one in which a few people do a lot of work and a much larger number may be participants (rather than audience, a different category again).

Secondly, and we haven't had time to fully develop this point, but art practices have increasingly developed around a rubric "the context is half the work." Neither Leadbeater nor Shirky acknowledges context as anything more than where something is happening (e.g. Coney Island in the earlier example), whereas Kester makes a compelling case that context can be generative and transform the underlying logic of formal processes.

Finally and perhaps crucially, Kester in particular has argued that there is an aesthetic to participatory and co-creative practices, not merely to the artwork that might result. So in Kester's view Lacy's process of development through

workshops is only one of many examples he cites where the artists create

with others (whether we call them inhabitants or communities) a process