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***Aesthetics and Ethics* of Working in Public Art**
A summary of the discussion

Motives and hunches

The hunch behind *Working in Public* is that art now exists in the public sphere in unprecedented ways.

Working in Public aims therefore to open up greater uncertainty in what we think art is and to provoke more thoughtful and creative responses to what it might become. In understanding how and why artists currently work in public we may begin to understand the nature of the public sphere itself as it is in the process of being creatively and critically formed.

In developing the programme, we are not interested in creating a normative 'model' of public art practice. It seems more appropriate to attempt to arrive at a sense of quality through a conscious and active process of debating what quality means. Through Working in Public we are building a rigorous understanding what actually happens in practice; what tensions and contradictions arise when artists intervene in the public sphere; what if any, is the impact of the work on the imagination and on our capacity to think and act differently.

What new understanding from Suzanne Lacy's work resulted from this first seminar?

For me the seminar placed in sharp focus the way in which we construct the critical narrative of project experience. Britain supports the arts through the State more than private sources and increasingly in relation to social inclusion agendas. As artists and administrators we have tended to conflate reflective critical thinking with the kind of evaluation that we think a funding body needs to hear or that they request. Instead of giving ourselves permission to adopt a disinterested approach (in the sense that Eagleton uses *trying to feel (a) way imaginatively into the experience of others* (Eagleton, 2003)), we fall into the trap of 'feel good' stories that preferably impact on a large number of people. Is this the only form of discourse open to us in a publicly funded culture for the arts? Is there a way of developing narratives of experience that are critical as well as sensory? What do we need to understand as artists, theorists and administrators in relation to the experience of making art?

Suzanne Lacy offered a different way of approaching this discourse. There were two issues that I found particularly striking. The Oakland projects became a long term commitment to analysing and learning from the conditions of the project – the key actors, organisations, influential factors – social, economic, political and cultural as well as the opportunities for the art to have impact. This analysis was iterative, providing the energy for the participants and artists to grow the work in meaningful ways. This does not mean that all art interventions need to be long term. However, it does imply an in depth knowledge of the circumstances of an art project that takes into account duration, changes that happen over time. There is an art to this discourse.

Secondly and related to this issue, the artists (Suzanne Lacy and Chris Johnson) took a critical stance by mapping the synergies between what they had to offer as artists (an interest in media representation and media literacy respectively) and the circumstances

of Oakland (a literate, articulate youth culture that was negatively manipulated in the media). In other words the simplistic notion of 'doing good through art' is displaced here by a much more sophisticated critique of mutuality and relationship. This critique in turn generates a set of judged responses. In the case of Oaklands these responses include creating a level platform between youth and the adult world, reversing patterns of speaking and listening, embodying a process of learning about 'self' in relation to 'other' through a series of iterative feedback loops.

These two issues place knowledge and judgement differently in relation to contemporary art practice. Knowledge is outwardly focussed. It is not knowledge *of* art and the workings of its world but in depth knowledge of people and their circumstances of living - both individual and organisational. It is not judgement in relation to the expectations of the artworld, but in relation to the way of life, beliefs and expectations of particular social, cultural circumstances; the steering of these towards a different outcome.

I believe that these two issues do not appear within our discourse in Europe. David Harding (Common Work conference, Glasgow 21-22 April) discussed other attributes of successful public art. He argues that conceptual art fares better than material work because concepts live in the imagination alongside the real world. Participation in the development of an artwork creates a sense of shared ownership. Good public art lives on in the reality of everyday life. For example, 'Gratitude', the rose named by the artist Graham Fagen in the *Where the Heart is* project at Royston Road (2000), was planted in private gardens as well as public spaces in the communities of Royston Road in Glasgow. These attributes while taking on the discourse of the everyday do not make a commitment to critical judgement or shared learning to the depth that is manifest in Suzanne's work. They perhaps successfully bridge the artist's authoring of an idea – a concept, with a community.

The research that we have done to this point indicates that many artists are no longer seeking to represent the world (as with *Where the Heart is*, Royston Road) but rather to effect change within it. Suzanne Lacy is one of the pioneers of this different approach to art making. We felt in preparing the series that the changing relationship between the concepts of *aesthetics* and *ethics* marks this shift. In offering these concepts as a theme to frame the discussion, we discovered that for many these terms are also remote from day to day experience. They are more aligned to a particular philosophical discourse to which we are outsiders rather than interlocutors. *Aesthetics,* the dictionary tells us, includes the study of the mind and emotions in relation to beauty as well as the *principles of art. Aesthetics* articulate notions of the beautiful, the ugly, the comic and sublime as they are applied to fine art, the meaning and validity of critical judgement in relation to art. *Ethics* are the principles that guide social behaviour, the rightness or wrongness of both motive and action.

Through his seminal text *Conversation Pieces 2004* Grant Kester has provided us with a keystone for rethinking artists' work in the public sphere. This keystone is a notion of aesthetics in which dialogue and collaboration are symptomatic of approaches to art that actively seek critical connections or relations with society and its processes. Suzanne Lacy's work is one of a number of artists within this new paradigm. Others include Helen Mayer and Newton Harrison, Lorraine Leeson, Stephen Willats and the Artists Placement Group (Barbara Stevini and John Latham). His observations of these art practices indicate to him that the particular artists are no longer working from the values of modernism and the avant garde based on rupture and dislocation. Instead these

artists are seeking out more convivial, discursive approaches that through collaboration (rather than agonistic engagement) might lead to change.

I was particularly struck by the fact that within the seminar Grant did not labour 'the dialogic'. He is aware perhaps that like the discourse of the 'everyday', it has become 'fashionable' as well as contested in a way that polarises the discourse rather than furthering its development. He opened up new lines of thinking that takes his argument to a new more nuanced and current edge. Grant focused on examples of art practice that operate in the interstices of people/community and ecomonic realities of global culture (Superflex and Park Fiction). Both groups of artists are 'edgy' in relation to aesthetics (the one by an absence of conventional 'artistic' content, the other operating within an aesthetics of kitsch). They both attempt to adopt highly ethical positions in relation to contemporary culture and citizenship, but in ways that leave us puzzling. Their closeness to real life is described by Grant as art operating in a way that is 'adjacent' to the everyday, appearing and disappearing within the texture of encounter.

I discuss these in more detail later but wanted here to point to two key insights.

Grant presaged a discussion that is emerging as crucial to our discussion in *Working in Public* i.e. the relationship of economics to artistic practice and its existing formative/normative role. Perhaps more importantly, a critical reviewing of this relationship might present new opportunities for viewing economics as an aspect of creative endeavour rather than simply a pay master.

Grant also invited us to join him in the act of criticism not in the consumption of its product. He established an important principle for the whole programme. Many of us struggle not to be overwhelmed with the weight of theory that is emerging in art and its discourse. Grant encouraged us in gain the confidence to be critical and to think for ourselves. He led by example in ways that I explore later in this text.

Thinking for oneself from an informed position and thinking sensorily are the fundamental principles of *Working in Public* as an endeavour.

Framing the discussion

As indicated, the two key presenters in Seminar 1 were Suzanne Lacy and Grant Kester. Suzanne has worked for over thirty years as an artist in the social realm and Grant as an art historian and theorist who has focused on contemporary artists who choose to work directly within social, political and cultural processes.

Suzanne is developing an in depth analysis of a particular body of work of her own work - the *Oakland Projects* (1990-2000). She is interested in understanding the unique historiography of this work in the US, in particular its dominant influences in feminism, political activism and through individuals such as Allan Kaprow. She is also interested in connecting the work with the exponential development of public art and related thinking in Europe. The seminars aim to contribute to this aspect of her research.

Supporting the programme of work for its duration are 18 core participants who bring to the discussion their experience of working in public as artists and administrators from different organisational bases. They are mainly drawn from Scotland and also include

representation form Ireland, England and Finland. They were selected from open competition.

Art is illusive by nature. Grant suggests that we restlessly seek to define and redefine what it is. In recent history (19^{th} -20^{th} century) art turned in on itself within a dialectic in which avantgarde practices, such as Dada, set out to displace accepted canons of the academy. As these canons changed, they generated further oppositional responses that compete for ascendancy. The emergence of an internalised discourse, in which aesthetics is a dimension of art alone (rather than of human life and also of nature), is now being challenged. Artists are increasingly defining themselves in relation to the world in a convivial way, not as rupture (as was the case in Dada). Many choose to intervene directly in social and cultural spheres, rather than mediated through institutional practices of the museum and gallery. Each artistic paradigm, of rupture or of relationship, operates within a different framework for thinking about aesthetics and its relationship to ethics.

The exploration of these different paradigms in relation to artists' work became a leitmotif of the two days, revealing aspects of the Oakland projects through the subtly different emphases that Suzanne and Grant placed within the discussion.

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The Oakland projects

In introducing the notion of a case study in this first seminar Suzanne laid down some clear markers for understanding her work in Oakland 1990-2000. In this body of work she is unequivocally an artist who works in and with the world, in particular issues of tension and contradiction that arise in social life.

- Her work stems from her interest in activism. In particular she is concerned with how the images of individuals become manipulated in the public sphere e.g. through the media, often negatively to serve political purposes.
- The work is formed through a process of deep, ongoing analysis of the context. In the case of the Oakland projects this analysis was centred on the breakdown of the relationship between young people and the adult world, exacerbated by issues of race.
- Aspects of the work are highly authored and controlled for aesthetic/dramatic effect. The resulting process is also highly participatory.

Suzanne's motivation in becoming involved in Oakland was not to 'do good' in some generalised way. Oakland is a predominantly black community with a long history of activism. For Suzanne as artist the opportunity for new work precisely lay in Oakland's knowledge of itself. Oakland has a significant tradition in radical politics such as the Black Panther movement. Young people are articulate.

She researched over time the field of relationships, media practices as well as relevant academic and policy based literature, gathering other individuals into a thorough grasp of the issues in its particular context of Oakland youth of colour and their relationship to authority. The work was sustained through complex relationships with individuals who worked collaboratively alongside her and who gathered knowledge about the project context.

The discrete performances or tableaux, the most overtly artistic processes, were one aspect of a complex strategy. This strategy set out to create, or give form to,

opportunities for different players to engage critically with their experiences and to move forward in a different way.

This work, with time, effected changes in attitudes and behaviour between young people and the adult world. Her current research is a quest to find convincing ways of analysing the complex, multivalent nature of the work and of understanding the significance of art in this change.

Learning from an artist's practice

On the Edge has often defined its research approach through the words of John Dewey.

> "Activity that is not checked by observation of what follows from it may be temporarily enjoyed. But intellectually it leads nowhere. It does not provide knowledge about the situations in which action occurs nor does it lead to clarification and expansion of ideas."
>
> Dewey, J. (1938)

Our *checking by observation* in the case of Oakland we draw on Suzanne's own narrative alongside comprehensive video documentation of two of the four major Oakland performance pieces. We do not have the direct, visceral experience of being present at the performances or workshops. The danger of an analysis that is based on secondary documentation is that we 'cream-off' those aspects of the work that we can grasp intellectually. We separate form from meaning, emotion from intellect.

Suzanne's presence as narrator mitigates against the dangers to a degree. She herself asks in the course of her own inquiry - How does one describe this work?

Artists and others involved in the process based work increasingly learn through the narratives of artists who make the work and through the spectators, critics and theorists who experience the work. We have to accept this limitation. We have to pay attention to the narratives and how we construct them.

So what might have we observed in this process? The scale and reach of Oakland (ten years, hundreds of participants and networks) is extremely unusual in our context.

The programme grew out of a critique of circumstances. It grew in relation to understanding a series of synergies. Suzanne 's interest and long term involvement in the power of representation led her to recognise in the Afro American youth of Oakland, a contradiction and a challenge. The young people could voice clearly the issues that effected their lives, but they were not being heard. They were consistently portrayed in ways that were negative. Suzanne's colleague at California College of the Arts, Chris Johnson, taught media literacy. She worked with him to develop a new curriculum based on media literacy working with high school teachers and their pupils. They created films with their art students of the process. Chris Johnson notes with irony

> "I think of media literacy that it is like trying to teach a fish about wetness. It is everywhere and it shapes your whole way of being. When those images are negative, you feel abandoned and frustrated, when they tell you constantly that you are less idealistic, less motivated, less intelligent than the generations that went before you, you feel abandoned and frustrated".

Given the opportunity to observe and deconstruct their mediated environment, the young people engaged in critical discussions both with their peers and with adults such as teachers and youth leaders.

The processes and relationships were drawn together into the performances that mark a point in time in an extended and complex process over time. The performances enact conversations and reverse the dynamic of relationships.

In 'Roof is on Fire' Suzanne articulates the work as follows-

> "Everyone who comes is going to have to lean over and crane their necks, so in a way the audience is going to be as interesting as the performers. The audience will perform the act of listening and the teenagers will perform the act of self revelation".
>
> "Listening is a profoundly revolutionary act" (Chris Johnson).

Both Suzanne and Chris have grasped an opportunity to create change in circumstances that were capable of responding to that intervention.

The programme drove a conscious, carefully organised and highly collaborative process of discovering the deep texture of relations and issues that shape the visceral character of a place and its people. She reconfigured the norms of how one sector related to the other – adults to young people, the police and young people, young people to each other based on a critical analysis of the circumstances, nurtured by her interest in representation.

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Grant Kester picked up the discussion by focused on one of Suzanne's three key questions –how does this work operate as art? How does it affect/effect? He did not directly address Oakland at this point. He threw into the mix two new case studies of art in the public sphere that further test a perceived threshold between art /nonart. The selected case studies went against the grain of funding systems or patronage of the arts. They also operated closely to the organisations and processes of the environments in which they occurred, appropriating normal everyday practices rather than overtly artistic strategies.

Grant's case studies included *Park Fiction*, Hamburg 1997 and two projects by the artist's group Superflex, the *Biogas* project 1998 in Africa and *Gauraná Power* 2004 in Brazil. He effectively laid out the complexity and ambiguity of aesthetics and ethics that these projects manifested, leaving us puzzling over their interrelationship.

Park Fiction 1997 was a self organised response to the power of civic planning and gentrification. The area is a red light district on the banks of the Elbe. The community group at the heart of the project were inhabitants of the area. They appropriated the practices of architectural charettes. These normally only involve the professional sector in the decisions making process. *Park Fiction* adopted this more as a convivial and democratic form of public consultation. As a result people in this part of Hamburg decided for themselves, as inhabitants, what they would most like to see in terms of development. A new park was constructed within an aesthetic of kitsch, of 'popular' culture that displaced the proposed development based on norms of rational modernism.

One of the principles at work in these projects, Kester cites, is adjacency. The processes that constitute the projects are intrinsic to social life as found. They are not overtly artistic. They are so 'lifelike' that at times he has to question how, if at all, they can be distinguished from normal everyday practices. Do we take it on faith that this is art?

Superflex' *Biogas* project in Africa appears to be functional in terms of developing a sustainable means of recycling agricultural waste into energy. It appears to be exactly like the work of an NGO. The difference that Superflex themselves lay claim to is economic, not artistic. The *Biogas* system and its apparatus is being sold to individuals who can afford it across Africa and parts of the Far East. Where NGOs are criticised for creating dependency, the *Biogas* project is intentionally developed as an economically viable venture.

Grant's reflection on the work of Superflex led me to their website. The organisation diffuses its activity as art extremely effectively and self consciously through art channels, and also by engaging (occasionally) in art like activities. For example, Grant tells us, last summer Superflex' artists appeared in Africa in khaki shorts and pith helmets - colonial attire that aimed to satirise, through 'performative' or 'theatrical' techniques, European colonialism within sites of post colonial devastation.

This project, like *Park Fiction*, contributes to rethinking the everyday at a political level. It shares this goal with activism and environmentalism. Both projects form new kinds of localised social networks. Their action aims to mediate and complicate the trajectory in global culture towards the management of growth and development from top to down.

What is perhaps challenging in both these projects is the absence of as overt visual aesthetic that would distinguish them as 'art'. There are tactics that are 'real' in the sense of being 'life like'. We do not know enough to judge if the work has impact i.e. is 'real' in terms of bringing about profound change in attitude. Perhaps that is not the goal. The overwhelming impression is improvisational, tactical rather than strategic, a kind of 'transformative ruse'. Like a joke, we suddenly see ourselves. What we see is touched by the absurd.

The ephemeral nature of the work in these two studies and its reliance on an intellectual grasp of the intention, made me think again about we might be seeking in the Oakland 'case study'.

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The Question of Aesthetics

Grant's articulation of the history of aesthetics presented us with a profoundly different and relevant framework for the discussion. Grant acknowledged as inevitable the struggle we were having with the terminology of aesthetics and ethics. As I understand his thesis, earlier (pre modernist) definitions of aesthetics from the greek *aesthetike* place emphasis on the sensory or haptic experience of the world within moments of shared experience. Aesthetics, in this original sense, marked a terrain of social interaction that was outside of religion or politics. It also stood outside of a functional knowing of the world. This earlier notion of aesthetics was rooted in bodily experience, connecting us to an underlying knowing -'being' rather than 'having'. This sensibility

opened up the possibility of an experience of community that was not externally imposed through power, but felt at an individual level.

It is important to acknowledge this history because it shows that aesthetics have been profoundly connected with the issue of ethics, and not limited to art.

Late 19th – 20th century art movements tend to invest aesthetic experience in 'objects' of art. This tendency coincided in Europe with the acquisition of artefacts from all over the world that had lost their connection and meaning to place and cultural practices. Modernism brought about an inversion – the idea that objects were 'freed' to exist purely in terms of their formal qualities. This later notion of aesthetics was transferred to authored artworks that became the embodiment of a moment in time in which aesthetic value is invested predominantly in the 'vehicle' or 'form' as a 'carrier' of the universal, detached from nature or specific culture.

Object centred notions of aesthetics harbour some problematic assumptions. Within practices of the avant garde we are accustomed to thinking that it is the artist who has autonomy, the freedom to enunciate, to shock as a means of breaking habitual ways of perceiving the world. Kester argues that thinking of the artist as in some way 'beyond ethics' is, in itself, an illusion of freedom. Within this illusion the artist inhabits a sequestered space in which his/her voice is rarely challenged. The 'object of art' gathers an unprecedented autonomy, divorced from the social and cultural context of shared experience, in which we actually make meaning. The consequence is to close off any debate on aesthetic and ethical tensions that are in fact ongoing and ever present.

Suzanne pointed out that in her experience the recovery of these older notions of aesthetics were attracting some antagonism, priviledging formalism over newer approaches. She invited Grant to speculate as to why this might be the case in a post modern world.

Grant responded by suggesting that modernist notions had been revived in post structuralism by individuals who come from a tradition of interpreting text. They therefore place emphasis on the artwork as a kind of text to be decoded. Effectively formalism had become recast as signification (i.e. no longer of representation) making it difficult for critical or theoretical practices to deal with non object based processes. If the work was not available as a text, fixed in some way, it could not be 'read'.

This discussion resonates with Suzanne's own question of 'How does one describe the work?". It also resonates with the principle of 'checking by observation' – How do we revisit experience with a view to learning from it?

Suzanne and Grant worked with this history of aesthetic/ethical thought placing different emphasis in their interpretation of the Oakland work.

Oakland projects as experience in time

Suzanne's work is in many aspects a counterpoint to 'text based practices'. She traced its lineage in the work of Allan Kaprow, in his notion of the blurring of art and life and his own realisation of this notion through performance. Suzanne's sense was that Kaprow's performances were precisely created to provoke questions about who got to be the artist and who had access to art. (They were also designed to interrupt everyday experience

that was dominated by contingent and instrumental behaviour introducing experience that was of a different order – for its own sake). This area of work was focused by open ended experimentation of what art might be. Artists like her (the Harrisons, David Antin, Martha Rosler) worked within an intuitive, experimental space.

Feminism, in particular, had enabled her to understand the power of relationships.

Suzanne's practice is in some senses both formal and avant garde. She traced the judgements that she had made in assembling the tableau pieces - *Roof is On Fire 1997, No Blood No Foul, Expectations, Code 33*. They were judgements of light, scale, spatial choreography, freedom of movement and social interaction and of timing. Within these tableaux little was left to chance other than the specific content of the conversations at the heart of the work. Suzanne was deeply concerned with holding the tension of the performance. She understood that breaking the tension was a loss of aesthetic experience for the participants. This happened in *Code 33* when the work was compromised by the interception of a demonstration by *Free Mumia* supporters who were protesting against a a recent Supreme Court denial of Mumia Abu Jamal's death row appeal. On being invited to participate and appropriate the platform of the work, they declined. Their goal was to piggy back on the available media, redirecting attention to their specific issue and away from the performance.

It is also striking that these artistic judgements had a different focus from conventional authored work. At the centre were the voices of young people and the individuals that they encountered, rather than the 'private symbolic world of the artist' (Bourriaud 1999). The work targeted the kinds of stereotypical roles that were played out habitually and uncritically in everyday life.

It is interesting to note that the formal aesthetic structure that constitutes this work perhaps also exposes its deepest contradictions in the very act of creating a moment of visibility. There is fear of appropriation – that the artist is using people in the creation of the work that ultimately places the artist, and not the participants, in a position of power. This becomes particularly sensitive post performance, where the work is represented back into the artworld. A dimension of appropriation is the danger or indignity of speaking for others or imposing on others one's own value systems as apparently happened in the work of Dawn Dedeaux' *Soul Shadows* 1993, an installation work that attempted to expose the lives of young black people in the prison system.

It is worth pausing here to revisit a series of observations that Grant made about the visual. He reflected on our deep seated anxiety in relation to the purely visual or retinal, a fear of images that would lead us astray. On the one hand by keeping the visual within the domain of images, it distinguishes itself. Dedeaux' installation appears to rely on an intense presence of monitors, security cameras, life sized photographs, videos of an impressive, architectural scale. The visual avoids becoming assimilated by another focus. In the case of *Soul Shadows* this was to the project's cost. What was cut out appeared to be the possibility of a deeper, more sensory and complex set of debates that are social, cultural and historical.

There is the criticism of inappropriate spectacle or display – the danger of exploiting the misery of other people's lives by framing through aesthetic, visual, 'seductive' means. This is perhaps particularly problematic when the artist is culturally not of the host society, a white woman working in a community of colour.

There is the criticism of naivety in terms of attempting to solve large and deep rooted social problems as a non expert.

Grant interestingly described Suzanne's performance works as the tip of the iceberg of a mass of relationships. They were essential to the work but of a different order to the meetings and conversations that had led up to them. It was important to take the work as a whole as this addresses the full meaning of aesthetics as a complex ethical, political and cultural discourse. It was helpful for us to understand that in parts of the US, policing as a social practice has gained power in the past 30-40 years. The police are the primary point of contact of individuals with authority. This fact is crucial to understanding attitude to race and class. Suzanne's work created space – a different way of existing in the social, political field of Oakland, produced by individuals that had an opportunity to reconfigure historically constituted values. Participants in the work, police and youth sat down together. Through the careful drawing in of the media the image of policing was also altered.

Suzanne's way of thinking about ethics within the Oakland projects was to place emphasis on critical reflection and analysis of the work, post production. She articulated a number of 'sites of analysis'. They are framed by questions - What has changed? To what extent did individuals transcend their differences? Maybe part of the pressure to rethink analysis was that initially they had been too optimistic and had assumed too much in terms of impact, mostly relying upon anecdotal evidence. So developing a process that would allow her to handle the character of the work in a complex way, to deconstruct the level of impact has become extremely important.

Suzanne's sites include

- **understanding political context /circumstances** –e.g. of race, gender, compassion. Grant defined this as a political analysis that has ethical implications.
- **process by which individuals related to the group across boundaries of difference.** Process therefore includes collaboration, decentring authority, relationship
  Grant observed that the Oakland projects do not dissolve differences magically but they do suggest that common ground is possible, so the focus of process is on negotiation.
- **personal actions**, intentions and commitments
- **public actions** and commitments – representations e.g. through the media, in galleries, responses (Did something happen directly?) and results (What changed?)

Conclusions

I have explored earlier what I could take away with us from these two sessions in Seminar 1.

Grant's framework of the history of aesthetics and its changing relationship with ethics proved invaluable to centring the discussion. He provided us with a set of ideas that opened the discourse, that could not be applied like a blanket but that made us think.

Suzanne's sites of analysis drawn up as the artist at the core of this work acknowledge the importance of the voice of the artist in critical reflection. They acknowledge the inappropriateness of applying a set of criteria from one cultural circumstance to another while striving for a sharp, nuanced unfolding of the complexity of this work over time.

Both have implications for where the energy of knowledge is placed.

The Oaklands projects and analysis indicate that it is not the artist who creates change. He/She creates the circumstances for change to be a possibility. A significant aspect of these circumstances of that is having the space to explore contradictions inherent in the experience of the particular within everyday, effectively to challenge the forces of power and representation in art as part of society. This leads us to our second seminar.

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