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An Artist's Anthropological Approach to Sustainability

Patricia Mackinnon-Day

Abstract

Recent studies of sustainability draw attention to the impact art and culture has on communities. The Earth Charter which originated in 1968 fostered the idea of “a sustainable global society founded on respect for nature, universal human rights, economic justice, and a culture of peace.”

This presentation supports the idea that art can make a difference to society and examines four case studies which explore the infra-ordinary within the immensity of social, political, historical and physical non-art places. The stance adopted is that is as an artist, anthropologist and storyteller, casting light onto a cultural landscape that is so ordinary as to be not noticed at all. Whilst the methodology is slow and undramatic, this meticulous approach is essential, in that it allows the artist to develop a respect for both people and place or as explained by Kuspit: ‘to recover a sense of human purpose in art making, engaging with the realities of life as it is actually lived’ Whereas *All in the Mind* was an investigation into the internal and external conflicts and structures within mental institutions and their impact on individual patients’ lives, *High Riser* questioned central government’s approach to housing asylum seekers in Sighthill flats in Glasgow which depersonalised the individuals involved. *Sojourn* and *Inland Waters* illuminated the social demographics of a working shipyard. *Making Visible the Invisible* explores the role as a lead artist, involved in the planning stages of a urban development project as a creative thinker rather than object maker.

Keywords

site-intervention; infra-ordinary; immensity; social; historical; autoethnography

This article supports the idea that art can make a difference to society and examines four case studies – all in the Mind, High Riser, Sojourn and Inland Waters, and Making Visible the Invisible – which explore the infra-ordinary with the immensity of social, political, historical and physical non-art places. My stance is as an artist, anthropologist and storyteller casting light onto a cultural landscape that is so ordinary as to be not noticed at all. Paul Virilio described ‘infra-ordinary’ as ‘what we do when we do nothing, what we hear when we hear nothing, what happens when nothing happens... (the artist working with) those things which are the opposite of the extraordinary – yet which are not ordinary either – things which are “infra” (Johnstone 2008. 18-19)

Recent studies of sustainability draw attention to the impact art and culture have on communities. The Earth Charter (Unesco 1968) fostered the idea of ‘a sustainable global society founded on respect for nature, universal human rights, economic justice, and a culture of peace’. I continually ask myself the question: “What is my art for? Why am I making art? I don’t claim that it solves major issues in society but the aim is to raise awareness and give voice to forgotten, often marginalised members of our community by creating site-sensitive installations, both in the gallery and in non-conventional spaces wherever they might be: an historic monument, the Almshouse, Exeter; a shipyard, Cammell Laird, Birkenhead; psychiatric hospitals, Chester, mid Wales and Luxembourg; urban development, Stevenson and Cambridge; building sites, Cologne, Liverpool and Dusseldorf; an arboretum, Westonbirt, Gloucestershire; farms, Cheshire; a textile warehouse, Nottingham; Chinese women’s social clubs, Shanghai, Canada, Los Angeles and Liverpool.

Quite early on in my career I decided against making art that follows the pathway from studio to art gallery to buyer. My art practice is sustained on project grants and other forms of funding and is site-specific. Artists working in this field need a particular skill set, such as the ability to write grant applications, negotiate, network, create partnerships and do a lot of research which involves a particular kind of fieldwork within a specific context. As an outsider it is essential to make a connection with people and their histories before developing ideas for artwork. This stranger effect is described by Taussig as not only being in a privileged position but also offering ‘unusual novel insight combined with ignorance’ (Taussig 2016, n.)

All in the Mind

The research aim for All in the Mind was to investigate the internal and external conflicts and structures within mental institutions and their impact on individual patients’ lives. All in the Mind examined people, materials and site in relation to human interaction, language and historical impact.

As with many other projects, I adopt an auto-ethnographic approach to the research as my interest in working in a disused psychiatric hospital followed on from my discovery that a close family member had been incarcerated in just such an institution for several years - he had disappeared without mention or trace. I did not know what I would find but wanted to explore, dig deep into how these invisible communities had once lived (see Figure 1).

Background

The residency took place within two psychiatric hospitals, situated in Cheshire and Mid Wales, which were built in the early 1800s and, like many across the UK, had closed down in the late 1980s due to the new government initiative which involved replacing such outdated establishments with so-called 'care in the community' provision (Audit Commission 1986). At the time of my intervention, 1996-8, a small psychiatric unit was still operating within the grounds - but 80 per cent of the buildings had been disused for ten years. Access to this site was perhaps due to an administrator presuming that, as we were artists, we would be producing something like decorative murals for the occupied parts of the hospital. The estate manager had already granted access to the disused buildings where we found abandoned patients' personal effects, diaries, medical notes and record books. What had been lost or forgotten was resurrected, what once mattered to individuals was brought to the fore as emblems and metaphors of time that had passed within the site.

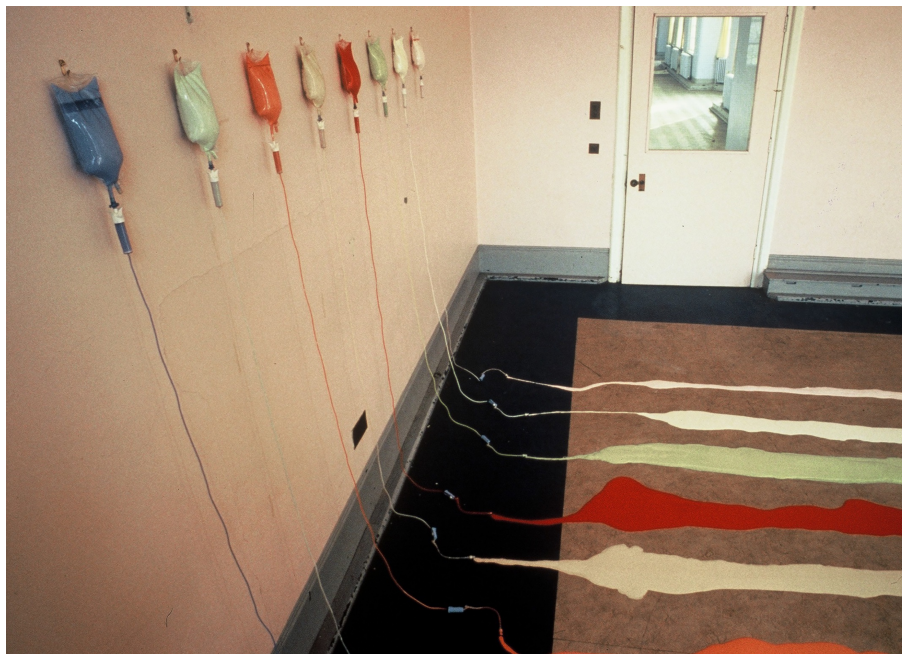


Figure 1. *Straight lines and Margins* (detail) emulsion paint and saline drip bags

All in the Mind was an investigation by three artists - myself, Leo Fitzmaurice and Simon Robertshaw - into personal and institutional displacement, an examination of internal and external conflicts through the collection of minutiae of individual patients' lives. This particular residency helped me to identify the significance of materials collected on site to make art work that exposed issues about people and place. In this instance I was able to produce work that formed a narrative about vulnerable and marginalised individuals who had lived for long periods of time in psychiatric institutions.

Although the Deva hospital in Chester was in a remote location, curators, journalists and representatives of arts organisations made an effort to see the 'non-public' exhibition at the end of the residency. In many respects this project opened up a series of new opportunities to explore issues and make visible histories and stories of those once incarcerated in the old asylums. A publication, *All in the Mind* (1998) was circulated and gained attention from the Royal College of Surgeons who then invited me to talk at their annual conference in order to find out more about the project. I believe that this sort of cross-fertilisation could not have been possible in the same way if the work had been generated from my studio for an art gallery. By reaching out into the outside world beyond artistic

circles, the project took on its own momentum and was a major catalyst for my professional development as an artist in establishing a non-studio-based practice. I do not believe that the stimulus and ideas that the site generated could ever have evolved from an artist studio. It was the start of my journey into fieldwork and years of commissioned work in non-art sites. Yet, I have never lost sight of the value of seeking out opportunities rather than waiting for offers/commissions to come along.

The disused psychiatric hospital, with abandoned personal records, belongings and medical notes, created an ethical dilemma for all the artists involved. It brought to the fore many questions, such as why was such sensitive material left behind, ignoring 1997 data protection laws? The trust was aware that we had access to this material but our intervention created more of a panic reaction aimed at blocking a public exhibition rather than getting back on site and collecting up all the personal data of former patients. The subsequent publication continues to shock and arouse debate today, especially amongst members of the medical profession. The project supports the Connect2Culture principles of the '4th pillar of sustainability' which makes clear that art has a vital role in confronting society with some issues we might want to shut out and ignore and, thus, has a rightful place in public policies on the economy, the environment and social matters. It can achieve 'greater well-being and more dignity for all citizens' (Agenda 21 Culture 2013). Artists are well situated within their practice to search creatively for truth, asking the difficult questions no one wants to ask. The findings on the site allowed a body of work to be produced that dealt with a range of issues pertinent to a community who were and still are invisible. Another marginalised community was to form the basis of my outputs on attitudes towards vulnerable newcomers to an urban setting in Scotland.

High Riser

This project was commissioned in Glasgow by the Gallery of Modern Art. High Riser consisted of four pieces of art that questioned the government's approach to asylum seekers being housed in Sighthill high rise flats in Glasgow and the depersonalisation of the individuals involved (Ratcliffe 2004). When I was working on the High Riser project my research aim was to investigate the refugees' personal histories to dispel the myth of the asylum seeker as a parasite who comes to Britain to exploit its benefit system. Paris Green and Misty Blue (see Figure 2) were deconstructions of the mass-produced, cheap as possible 'starter kits' of goods issued to asylum seekers on arrival in Sighthill. Indelible consisted of 76 MDF panels with the hand-written name and occupation of an individual on each one. The layout mimics the grid structure of the tower block, making reference to the failed architectural grid and modular system designed by Le Corbusier to solve the housing shortage in cities. The laser-printed text was illuminated with UV lighting to emphasise the individuals: teachers, doctors, shopworkers, grocers and so on from Iraq, Afghanistan,



Figure 2. *Misty Blue* - assemblage: asylum seekers kitchen starter pack

Ghana and similar countries. They were often highly-skilled professionals –not beggars or benefit scroungers. Moving Box was a 10-minute video film, taken inside a lift in one of the blocks to create the sense of being in a cell. The door opened to reveal blurry, white walls and muffled voices of people never seen. The door closed to reduce your field of view to a small window with a big cigarette burn on it. No one is ever seen. The repetition of colour and shape aimed to give the viewer an uneasy sense of what it might be like to be trapped in a system that literally boxes you in.

Shortly after this project I discovered that an organisation called Street Level was also working closely with asylum seekers. Whilst our outputs had much in common – creative digital imaging, sound recording and video which gave voice to this community – our approach was very different. Whereas Street Level's artists produced work collaboratively with the refugees, I created my own work in response to my findings from the situation. Both types of engagement generated, in their own different way, a range of outputs and raised public awareness of the issues and problems facing the asylum seekers. This involvement with a small group of new residents contrasted with my residency in a much larger, well-established industrial community in Liverpool.

Sojourn and Inland Waters

My main research aim with *Sojourn and Inland Waters* was to elucidate through artistic expression, using a shipwright's materials and processes, the social demographics of a working shipyard environment. Again, with this project I adopted an auto-ethnographic approach to the research as in all respects *Sojourn* was as much about me and my practice in a very personal way. I had always wanted to work in such an environment—shipyards had a special, personal significance since the days of my childhood in Glasgow. From the top deck of a bus to school along the Govan Road I contemplated the yards, surrounded by high walls, as gigantic, mysterious expanses. Now, many years later, I was given access to this mysterious, male-dominated industrial world.

Although I do work as a voyeur, I also search, collect, discuss and ask questions. I am driven to understand what is happening around me, a process which can be described as 'a listening model of art practice' (Crickmay 2003) and by Annette Messager, with regards to her own practice as: 'a highly ambiguous form of paying attention and tinkering' (Hustvedt 2003) ... wondering, reflecting, collecting, re-arranging, placing, inscribing - using what is there or implied by the space and the artist's relationship to it. The scenario between the artist, the site - its atmosphere, its history, its objects, materials and its viewers, are all inextricably linked (Marchant 2004).

It took three months in the shipyard before I started to form ideas for artwork in response to the site. My methodology was slow and often undramatic, but this meticulous approach was essential in that it allowed me to develop a respect for both people and place or, in the words of Kuspit (1993), 'to recover a sense of human purpose in art making, engaging with the realities of life as it is actually lived'. Rhona Warwick, as curator and commissioner of artists working in public spaces, examines the attributes required for artists out in the field. She believes that artists require a particular sensibility of insight, and an interest in connecting with non-artists to communicate their ideas. It is this commitment to taking a personal journey through a place and the ability to draw from that experience, 'making work that ultimately adds to the story of place' (Warwick 2006). The development of Phosphorescent levels (see Figure 3) evolved after a conversation with a shipwright about how his lengths of tubing in the back of his van were used as a spirit level in the dry dock. Benjamin describes this connection as an 'exchange of experience, the quintessential property of storytelling' (Benjamin 1999).

Unlike previous projects, where I had explored empty silent spaces, the Birkenhead shipyard in Liverpool was full of people, busy and noisy with a permanent workforce of 5,000, although during the course of the residency about 14,000 engineers, shipwrights and tradesmen came and went as specific tasks were completed. Throughout the year-long process of observing, conceiving ideas, formulating responses, experimenting with materials (and, frequently, failing), talking to workers and, finally, producing and showing outcomes - at all times I was in full public view of the community. It was, indeed, most gratifying that a major proportion of them turned out to see the final show. When I started working as artist in residence most of the workforce were expecting me to produce bronze

casts of burly shipwrights. It was during this residency that I learnt the many skills needed to arrive at positive communication based on negotiation, trust, good relationships and a feeling of teamwork amongst the shipyard workers realise my research aims (see Mackinnon-Day 2008).



Figure 3. *Phosphorescent levels-fluorescent light sticks, plastic tubing, rope*

During my first site visit I had politely declined the offer of a white overall (Director's uniform) and requested a blue overall. Wearing a blue overall proved to make acceptance easier as I blended in with the other 5,000 workers. Although my blue custom overall with hood, tapered waist and Patricia, resident artist embroidered on the front, did set me apart slightly I was not identified as a threat or linked to management.

When making site-specific art work all successes and failures are public. I have over the years acquired an aptitude for thinking on my feet, acting and reacting immediately to situations. In the shipyard all of the installations were progressed in view of large numbers of workmen and I actively encouraged contributions in the form of ideas and suggestions for resolving difficult material and construction problems. This sharing of my progress or, at times, lack of progress pulled this community along with me from conception to final outcomes. Therefore, just before the completion of the residency, when the company had gone into receivership, the men were supportive in making sure that I had the materials and support necessary for my final exhibition in the dry dock. At the start of that year the shipyard had been a vibrant working community on a high, having just secured a contract to build the mid-section of a cruise ship, the Costa Classic. By the end of the residency I found myself witnessing the demise of this industrial giant. The director, who had been initially sceptical about contemporary art, made clear in his evaluation statement to the Arts Council how he recognised that a special connection had been formed between myself, as resident artist, the work-force and the site. His report summarised the experience as follows:

The year of the artist proved to be a valuable and invigorating insight into the work of a serious contemporary artist, Patricia MacKinnon-Day, who spent a year in the shipyard working alongside the workforce, studying their habits, skills and work techniques before then creating visual exhibits which served to symbolise the life of the shipyard and its employees. This was no easy task given the immense pressure that existed within the yard to complete ship repair and conversion projects in tight timescales. This resulted in the artist having to work from her own initiative while sourcing her materials, time and assistance to create her artwork. To do this she had to, very slowly but meaningfully, encourage those around her to step into the world of contemporary art, leaving behind preconceived ideas and taking a more lateral view of art. I believe that this was a worthwhile

educational experience for all and which for some will be part of an ongoing experience. The search for hidden meaning and metaphorical comparison is fascinating for those who previously viewed fine art as something excluded from their world. For some the exclusion will continue but for others the journey is merely beginning. It is interesting to note that the work force has demonstrated an interest in Patricia MacKinnon-Day's art work across the social spectrum and not just from the perceived high intellectual levels of senior management. Workers at all levels and from all age groups have taken an interest in Patricia's work and have made contributions towards it. The proof of this is in the large number who came to visit the exhibition in their own time. This clearly demonstrates an interest but what this is to those involved is something that is far too complex to explain or understand. (Dunn 2001)

This situation, where I was the sole artist in control of what was produced, had its benefits and drawbacks, but I was to face a new challenge later when taking on the role of lead artist for a newly created community in Cambridgeshire.

Making Visible the Invisible (2005–9)

I was invited by Commissions East to submit an application as lead artist for a new edge-of-town housing development in Cambridge. The project was called 'Shared Vision: Arbury Park Development'. My role involved producing a Public Art Strategy in collaboration with Commissions East. This lead artist role was also a PROJECT award established by the Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment (CABE) and *Arts & Business*. *The PROJECT award was a national pilot programme to enable artists to engage with property developers, house builders and local planning authorities in areas of growth and regeneration.*

Other artists who achieved the PROJECT award in the UK included Nathan Coley, Jeremy Deller, Marion Coutts, Charles Quick and the Sans Façon group. This was an opportunity to work as a lead artist at the start of a large-scale development of 900 mixed dwellings. My research aims were to engage and involve the new residents in their new home; to create links around and across the edges of this new development; to investigate and reveal traces of history; to create an artistic vision that was both of and belonging to the site; to propose guidelines for any further artwork commissioned for the site. My work was also informed by the less-than-successful models of past urban planning and I referenced my own family experience in the 1960s and 1970s of the transfer of inner city communities in Glasgow to the new flats on the outskirts of Glasgow:

Drumchapel, Easterhouse and Castlemilk. These peripheral townships were constructed with little thought to social infrastructure - they were isolated from the city centre with very few basic amenities ... By 1975, through comprehensive redevelopment and other clearance schemes, 95,000 houses had been demolished, with large swathes of Glasgow cleared of housing, shops, industries and people. (Glasgow Community Health and Wellbeing 2007)

Having seen at first hand people displaced without any regard for the importance of cultural identity in a community or a place, I brought a particular sense of personal responsibility to this urban development in Cambridge.

The writings and observations of contemporary urban commentators also influenced my decision-making process, for example Oliver Bennett and his move to link the contemporary practices of public art with the need, 'to root a new settlement to the soil upon which it stands' (Bennett, Introduction to Mackinnon-Day 2009).

The developers of Orchard Park, through the commissioning of a lead artist at the start of the development, strove to avoid the mistakes of the past: for example, lack of landmarks, proper transport provision and amenities. Therefore, the planning agreement included a Section 106 requirement (a planning law that allows for community benefits) for a travel plan, play facilities and 'a public art strategy': advocates point out that without Section 106, the 'quality of life', factors that are an essential part of a place would not exist. It could be argued that they create value, by making the difference between a collection of dwellings and a fully – realised place that has a symbolic as well as a functional presence. (Bennett, Introduction to Mackinnon-Day 2009) Through research I identified significant histories and existing communities on the peripheral areas of the development – a neighbouring travellers' community, the Chivers jam factories and Unwins' seed merchants. I drew my inspiration from local social, industrial, cultural and oral history and made connections that had been forgotten or become invisible (see Figure 4). After completion of the arts strategy for the

development I was then employed independently by Gallaghers, the main developers, as arts consultant and also to work as part of the design team. This was a completely new and exciting experience. I had been given the opportunity within the main development to infuse some of my research findings into the fabric of the structures. The credit crunch obviously seriously impacted this development, the people and the place. Gallaghers were tied to the Section 106 agreement which brought with it an obligation to ensure all the art projects were realised. This included the commissioning of a community artist who worked directly with house owners as they moved into the development. My link with Cambridge has



Figure 4. *The Glass Library* (detail) glass, acrylic, miscellaneous objects

been followed up by a current project in Darwin Green where I am working with a horticulturist to cultivate a new variety of sweetpea, 'Darwin Green', with the intention that a packet of seeds will be given to each new resident.

The evaluation report produced by PROJECT, funded by Cabe (The Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment) recognised that the artists and the art inspired discussion and brought people together within the Orchard Park community. This is also evidenced by the huge response from residents after Ger-maine Greer's article in the Guardian comparing Orchard Park to 'Beirut' (Greer 2009). The impact of this work can be evidenced by the 76,280 hits, ongoing debates and documentation of events on the current Orchard Park community website run by residents but originally set up as part of the public arts strategy in phase 1. Comments included:

When my wife Wencke and I moved to the UK from Germany in March 2007, we moved straight to Orchard Park, Arbury Park as it was called at the time. There were probably fewer than 50 occupied houses back then, surrounded by patches of wasteland and grass. It was a strange experience, with a feeling of detachment ...The art is an incredibly important part of the process. I freely admit that earlier, I hadn't thought much of the plan to include public art in the development. What use could it possible have? ...I think that the art—in particular, the on-site arts unit, known as the 'Banana'—has been instrumental in breathing the first signs of life into what sometimes felt like an occupied building site. We look forward to the rest of the work being installed, and to Orchard Park acquiring a sense of itself, and of course, to many more years watching a new urban community being forged in front of our eyes. (Bennett, Introduction to Mackinnon-Day 2009)

Conclusion

In conclusion, my artwork lies within the fourth pillar of sustainability. From my interventions and involvement in past or present communities I have learned that art and culture can bring people together, even in the face of adversity. My work in the disused psychiatric hospital brought to the fore questions about what had been suffered and what had been buried in those institutions at the margins

of society. The Arbury Park housing development went through a difficult period at the time of the credit crunch when it was unfinished but, to some extent, the art strategy helped the new residents form a strong sense of community and belonging. During my one-year residency Cammell Laird shipyard went from prosperity into receivership but the artwork managed to rise above this as it celebrated the uniqueness of the working processes, the workmanship and the special relationships within this industrial community. And, finally, High Riser points to the shared humanity of an isolated group of asylum seekers, bringing into public awareness the qualities and skills they could offer as well as their sense of personal frustration.

Perhaps the recent success of Assemble in Liverpool is an indicator of the special significance of place in contemporary art and it is fitting that it is taking place in Glasgow and Liverpool, both cities, ports where industry, immigration public health and housing are parts of its fabric.

Patricia MacKinnon-Day specialises in installation and the research and investigative basis of her practice has generated a series of socially engaged gallery installations and site-specific corporate and public projects both nationally and internationally. She has earned a strong national reputation for work resonant of context, people and place. For example, the exploration of the historical monument in Exeter, *Marking Time*, received an IALD Award of Merit for originality, and aesthetic and technical design achievement. She also won a PROJECT award, *Engaging Artists in the Built Environment*. This was a first-time national initiative by the Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment (CABE) and Arts & Business (A&B) to involve and encourage artists to have a positive impact on the places in which we live. A Reader in Site Intervention Art at Liverpool John Moores University, Patricia is both examiner and supervisor to doctoral students and has in the past been MA Fine Art Programme Leader and worked collaboratively with the school of Education for nine years on the MA artist teacher programme. Contact address: Liverpool John Moores University, Fine Art, Duckinfield Street, Liverpool L2 2ER, United Kingdom. Email: patricia@mackinnon-day.com

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