Private musings: public projections

Jane Watt looks at artists and commissioners who are redefining what it means to work in the 'public region', in the second of the six-part series 'Navigating Places'.

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The opportunity for an artist to undertake a residency can often be seen as a time-out period that offers a new environment (both physically and socially) for the artist to respond to and work within, a different routine, and (sometimes) an income for the duration of the residency. Artists who undertake residencies in two different art organisations – Grizedale Arts in the Lake District and Art and Architecture at Kielder in Northumberland – find themselves in remote forest environments, but within supportive organisations who are there to help them explore and realise new publicly-sited works and practices.

Whilst Grizedale has shifted its commissioning programme towards process-based temporary works which are created within the residency scheme[1], the Art and Architecture residencies at Kielder compliment its permanent, bigger budget commissioning programme. Peter Sharpe, curator at Kielder explains the different emphases and results that his two commissioning programmes have: "James Turrell's *Skyspace*, and Nick Coombe and Shona Kitchen's *Minotaur* have life expectancies of forty to fifty years during which time many hundreds of thousands of visitors will see them.... [However] the creation of permanent commissions doesn't necessarily produce much awareness of the creative process in the local visiting population of Kielder. The residency programme allows practitioners to develop relationships with the community during their stay, helping to mediate the development and thought processes behind their ongoing work."

In this way, residencies can be seen not only as a chance for the artist to research an issue, process or environment in more detail, but also for him or her to enter into an exchange with a new, or different, audience. Whilst some artists thrive on a sense of being parachuted into a situation – an outsider looking in – others desire to use the residency in order to gain 'insider' knowledge and become part of that environment over an extended period of time.

The pioneer, and perhaps most well-known example of a 'resident artist' is the American artist Mierle Laderman Ukeles and her ongoing self-initiated residency at New York City's Department of Sanitation, which commenced in 1977. Here she began her work by meeting each one of its 8,500 employees, shaking their hand and saying "Thank you for keeping New York City alive" as part of *Touch Sanitation Performance: Handshake Ritual*, 1978-80[2]. Since then, artists on both sides of the Atlantic have used the structure of a residency to delve deeper into an organisation, social group, or environment. Artists can become researchers, archivists or spokesmen for a whole range of individuals and issues. Between 1994 and 96 Alison Marchant documented histories from an east London housing estate for the sound, pictorial and text archive work *Living Room*. More recently Jennie Savage worked over a six-month period to collect private reminiscences about the city of Cardiff from over seventy Cardiff Central Library users. Savage gave these personal memories a more public voice in *Anecdotal Cardiff*, 2003, a live public sound work and website. Field research of this kind can result in a prolonged period of time where the artist and artwork attempt to examine and draw attention to sometimes overlooked details of private worlds which are then exhibited in a new, and more public, context.

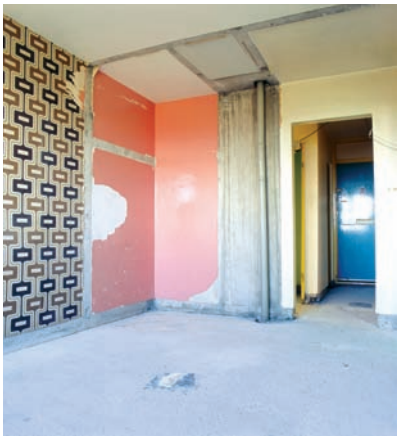
These types of interactions, where private exchanges develop into public outcomes, echo the sociologist Richard Sennett's description of the development of the notion of 'public domain'. He notes that our present understanding of this idea originates from the eighteenth

Below (left & right): Zoe Walker and Neil Bromwich, *Art and Architecture at Kielder residency workshop*, June 2003. Kielder and Byrness First School's workshop with the artists. Photo: Mark Pinder

Facing page: Gary Perkins, *cctv camera and artificial mechanised flower*, 2002.

century definitions of 'public' and 'private', where "'public' meant open to the scrutiny of anyone, whereas 'private' meant a sheltered region of life defined by one's family and friends". He continues "'public' thus came to mean a life passed outside the family and close friends; in the public region, diverse, complex social groups were to be brought into ineluctable contact".[3]

One such 'public region' where artists live, work and come into contact with new groups and environments, is the Sheil Park housing estate in north Liverpool. This was the site for the 'Up in the Air', 2000-01, residency project jointly initiated and managed by artists – Neville Gabie, Leo Fitzmaurice, Becky Shaw and Kelly Large – who promoted an openness of possibilities and lack of bureaucracy. The project developed with the crucial support of the tenants, Year of the Artist (YOTA) funding[4] and support-in-kind (in terms of accommodation and use of the building) from the Liverpool Housing Action Trust (LHAT). Implicit in this partnership was a mutual respect and trust in the site, process and project as a whole by the residents, LHAT, organisers, and selected artists. The success of



This page:
Neville Gabie,
installation as part of
'Further Up in the Air.'

Right (top & bottom): Jennie Savage, *Anecdotal Cardiff*, work in progress, noticeboard placed at the central library, 2003. Photo: Jennie Savage. The noticeboard showed transcriptions from previous interviews and invited people to come and take part in the project.

'Up in the Air' led Gabie and Fitzmaurice to develop the residency programme into a larger scale phase two known as 'Further Up in the Air', 2002-03.

The format of the residencies allowed time and space in which the artists and members of the Sheil Park community could, if appropriate, exchange and interact. As Fitzmaurice points out "residents could approach the artists and art in different ways. The art and artists were more accessible to [the residents] who already knew the space". This kind of relationship requires artists who are sensitive to this type of engagement and Fitzmaurice goes on to describe the resultant artists' processes and works as having "quiet, poetic meaning – [the artists are] teasing out meaning from the situation rather than imposing meaning on it".

Some artists engaged in a direct exchange with the residents. Liverpool-based artist Paul Rooney, "teased out meaning" from interactions with four residents from Linosa Close – the tower block base for 'Further Up in the Air'. Rooney produced several video works over the course of his residency. *Linosa Girls*, 2002, recorded reminiscences by two of the residents, Marie and Lily, about their experiences of performing in Liverpudlian variety clubs. Later on another resident, Elsie, gave Rooney a poem which she had written as a celebration of her new home and expression of mixed emotions about her old flat in Linosa Close. This was put together with a melody that Lily had written. The resultant three-monitor installation, *Flat 23*, 2002, included a performance of a song which Rooney compiled from material gathered from conversations he had with another resident, Doreen. In this work she described objects which had been in the now empty flat and her recollection became a memorial to a life and time past. These private testaments provided a powerful public voice to social urban housing issues – not in the conventional soundbite or discursive theories of urban planners but as resonant evidence of personal experiences and lives.

Other artists chose to respond directly to the physical site of the flats within the tower block. Catherine Bertola and Tom Woolford both responded more formally to the flats which they chose to work within using the spaces and traces of previous occupants as triggers for site-specific work. Woolford stripped one of the bathrooms back to its concrete frame to create *Liverpool Cell*, 2002, a sparse functional environment devoid of all evidence of its inhabitants. Bertola obsessively un-picked a gaudy textured wallpapered room to create the beautifully organic leaf pattern installation *If walls could talk...*, 2002. These types of very physical "interrogation of the space", as Bertola describes them, were refreshing to the artists involved and allowed more physical risk-taking in the final works as the building would eventually be demolished. Even though the artists could literally do anything, they still had to work within an environment, albeit one on the edge of being decommissioned, which was still home to many people.

Gabie and Fitzmaurice began from a position of openness and faith in the resident artists but the process of establishing trust between the residents and LHAT was a more gradual, though nonetheless positive, process. This was encouraged through the inclusion of the residents in the selection process, artist meetings, collaboration with some of the artists and later in the public open days. As Dany Louise cited in the article 'Road Map' (a-n Magazine, June 2003), LHAT's own commitment to public art initiatives has grown beyond this particular residency programme as they have now developed a Percent for Art policy. Gabie and Fitzmaurice have shown in the success of 'Up in the Air' and 'Further up in the Air' that public art residencies can produce stimulating and challenging art interventions whilst provoking genuine ownership and interactions rather than those prompted by tick-box funding criteria.

In terms of legacies for the artists themselves, an example of one of the outcomes is Fitzmaurice's own realisation of a more interconnected practice, meaning "more of an understanding between people, art, money and issues in the big wide world". This type of placing of the artist as informed and creative practitioner has been gathering momentum since the crumbling of High Modernist notions of the artist as individual creative genius. It shows that today, there is still a continuation of what critic Anna Harding described as "the attempts by artists to shift art out of the gallery and onto the streets in the 1960s were not simply about changing the locations of where art could be viewed but were about changing art itself, broadening its influence 'born of democratic urges' and attesting, not that art was good for society, but that art was part of society and its systems."[5]

"public art residencies can produce stimulating & challenging art interventions"

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A new publication *Further: up in the air* will be launched on 11 and 12 September 2003 at Hales Gallery, London and then on 17 September 2003 at Cornerhouse, Manchester. Linosa Close will be open for guided tours on 20 and 21 September and 27 and 28 September 2003. You can see Jennie Savage's work at www.anecdotalcity.com

For a chance to win one of five copies of *Further: up in the air*, see Subscriber Prizes on page 51.

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1 See Time and Space section in www.a-n.co.uk for a profile of Grizedale.

2 For an interview with Ukeles and more detail about her work see Tom Finkelpearl, Dialogues in Public Art, Cambridge, Massachusetts and London, MIT Press, 2000, pp294-323.

3 Richard Sennett, The Fall of Public Man, London, Faber and Faber, 1993, pp16-17.

4 YOTA supported and validated a wide range of artist-initiated residencies across the country and, in the case of 'Up in the Air', it provided a firm financial base from which to initiate the later, more ambitious stages which grew from the first round of residencies. YOTA also publicised artist-initiated projects where artists set up their own residential projects with host institutions, rather than waiting to be selected, or invited to take part in a scheme which had been set up by an external body or organisation.

5 Anna Harding, 'From Monologue to Conversation', Art & design: Curating, vol.12, nos. 1-2, Jan – Feb 1997, 1997, p14.