

## **“Road Map” – Dany Louise**

(published in Artists Newsletter, June 2003)

Nearly all cities of the world parade the effects of our unequal societies, where the divide between rich and poor is startlingly visible, not only on the streets, but in levels of health, educational attainment, aspirations and the ability of individuals to realise their own potential.

At last, the public agenda is more willing to engage creatively with these urban issues, but what are the opportunities for art and artists to respond? Which type of structures are required to facilitate their role in the remediation of the worst effects of our “urban ecology” and what are the conditions where creative interventions can play a significant role? These were just some of the questions explored at the Urban Ecologies seminar organised by the Liverpool Biennial of Art, that took place at the brand new multimedia FACT centre Foundation for Arts and Creative Technologies on 27<sup>th</sup> March.

Six speakers from Europe and America exchanged their views and experiences of contemporary art working in urban situations and “the resultant contribution to a sense of community and citizenship”. They were well chosen, with the emphasis remaining on Fine Art discourse rather than the more obvious institutionalised regeneration structures, and the unfolding pattern of talks was an accumulative revelation of international urban complexities.

All came from diverse backgrounds and organisations, and work in particular contexts, from the poverty of the Balkans Arizona Road, presented by Azra Aksamija, to the well funded liberal western consciousness of The Hague’s Stroom Centre.

These two presentations demonstrated an unequal Europe at its starkest. The Arizona Road is a place that exists in a kind of free-market anarchy that enables 13,000 people to earn a living but where basic needs are not being met, (it has four public WCs for a population of 13,000). The most formalised network is that of organised crime with women as the overtly oppressed and exploited commodity. Aksamija has managed to obtain a government document that maps the “nightclubs” that are the locus of this activity, and the sheer number and comprehensive geographical coverage is chilling. The Arizona

Road is a dystopic account of humanity that is all resourcefulness, desperation and rotteness.

After four years, the 'authorities' have begun the process of regulating – and therefore regularising - the market with what Aksamija calls a “Master Plan” involving resettlement, which she opposes. However it is through this type of structure, capable of strategic planning and deployment of significant resources, and, one hopes, the ability to implement creative solutions, that the underlying structural deficiencies of the area will be addressed, and the quality of life of those who live there genuinely improved.

As an arts professional, however, it is very clear that The Arizona Road is desperate for the presence and operation of liberal, well funded and responsive arts interventions, of a kind that citizens of The Hague are able to take for granted in the high quality public art programme of the Stroom Centre.

Set up in 1990 by the City of The Hague as an independent foundation in order “to carry out the city’s non-museum policy relating to the (contemporary) visual arts” it has been a pioneer in the field of public art in The Netherlands. While being state funded it is able to define its own progressive policies, and both Director Lily van Ginneken and Public Art Co-ordinator Jan Wijle confess that money has never been a central issue in terms of the centre’s operation. A “percent for art” policy exists for all new government buildings, and financial support for artists is “deeply embedded in government consciousness”. It is hard to imagine a Local Authority (or ACE for that matter) establishing a similar centre in this country, without expecting very particular returns on its investment – but one can always live in hope. The socio-economic climate in Holland has long made art practise easier there, with government recognition of professional artist status enabling a minimum financial income. Van Ginneken and Wilje still speak the language of art subsidy with an enviable unselfconsciousness we’ve long lost in the UK.

Out of this wonderful Dutch liberal consciousness has come a series of large scale visible collaborative art projects sited in and around the public realm in the Hague. While the projects are diverse, the common theme is that of transforming perceptions of those who engage with it. “Celestial Vault” 1996 by James Turrell frames and focuses a swathe of sky, while their first project, “Frogbell” 1993, required 3000 participants. A limited edition bicycle bell was manufactured to sound like a frog croaking and members of the public

exchanged their own ordinary bell for the new one. In this way 3000 frogbells were distributed around the city, with the public engaged in a fresh way.

It is a rare example of high quality art for the sake of high quality art, something that becomes increasingly more difficult in the UK as funding for the arts becomes inextricably linked to, and judged by, its delivery of the public agenda. Making this link explicit has created many more opportunities for artists to receive paid work through local authorities, regeneration agencies and arts organisations.

Informal educational, outreach and participatory projects are hugely important, and there is now an accepted quid pro quo. Artists, institutions and organisations must take on this worthwhile agenda, even if in many cases it has not been seen as core business, but in return they are able to safeguard jobs, animate the local arts economy and reach out to a new generation of arts consumers. Few arts managers seriously complain about this now, and it has provided steady income and careers for many artists and administrators. Even the Liverpool Biennial will in future have to engage more with the public agenda in order to obtain public money, explained Director Lewis Biggs, since it is to lose a major source of private funding.

One project that has successfully balanced its artistic aims with community involvement is “Up in the Air”, a series of residencies in tower blocks in North Liverpool, co-curated for three years by artists Leo Fitzmaurice and Neville Gabie. An independent artist-led project, initially funded through Year of the Artist, they were able to maintain their freedom and integrity, selecting artists purely on the basis of their practice and their potential for interesting work within the residency context. The resulting art is not only varied, but dense in its symbolism and content. Much of it is about changing articles and spaces from the familiar to the unfamiliar, constructing and deconstructing often using the fabric of the flats as the component materials. The whole experience has been embraced by the tower block residents, who helped select artists and enabled a cross-pollination of ideas.

The success of this project lies not only in its professional achievements, but in its influence on the host organisation. The Liverpool Housing Action Trust was inspired to develop its first Art Strategy in 2000, committing to “a half-percent for art” policy, which realises a budget in the region of £750,000 for art-based projects. According to Chief

Executive David Green, the actual figure that will be spent on the arts will be much higher since the initial investment will be used to bring in further funding.

But what is the position of artists who see themselves as social commentators; their work in opposition to received notions of the public good? As Chair Jonathan Harris, Director of the MA Visual Art, University of Liverpool noted, particular ideas and ideologies underpin the notion of “public art” in the public realm, and these can both “depend upon or exist in tension with notions of democracy”.

These questions constituted an underlying theme throughout the day, and were responded to most significantly by two artists, Christoph Schaefer of the “Park Fiction” group, based in Hamburg, Germany, and Kyong Park the founder/director of International Center for Urban Ecology. Both create work that is in opposition to the millennial status quo that suggests that economic development is always good and global corporate capitalism should be encouraged.

Christoph Schaefer primarily sees his artistic identity as that of community activist and urban guerilla. Structural authority is dangerous, fundamentally unequal and must be proactively undermined and resisted. Against a background of an increasingly right wing administration in Hamburg, co-operation with the authorities is to be avoided until it is strategically of clear benefit to the community, and even then only grudgingly granted. His tale is that of the victor, integrity intact, having championed the cause against encroaching gentrification of the waterfront in the St Pauli district of Hamburg – in whose pubs and clubs The Beatles cut their teeth in the early sixties. After seven years of persistent self organisation - perhaps of the type advocated by Aksmija for the Arizona Road - instead of the planned triumphalist urban towers of capitalism, work has begun on a community designed park on the waterfront. The residents will have their park and their life can continue unchanged, while both the disadvantages and benefits of economic development will have to await their day in this small district.

Kyong Park’s video piece “Detroit: Making It Better For You (A Fiction),” tells the story of a corporate conspiracy to destroy and burn the city during the last 50 years, and would have been an excellent addition to the “Shopping” exhibition recently at Tate Liverpool. It provides a scathingly biting critique of the effect of rampant deregulated American capitalism, exacerbated by the void left by the American abandonment of the social

contract. In Detroit this has left an inner city with minimal amenities peopled mainly by poor blacks and 56,000 abandoned houses and vacant lots, while the suburbs have grown to house 4 million people, industry, business, the best schools and general white privilege. “Detroit is the place where the secret revolution of corporations is being realised”, Park says, with the implication that if left unchecked this will inevitably happen in other places.

Although the conditions that allow for such polarisation tend to be unique to America, it is a reminder that inequality is structural and an inescapable aspect of urban living. Collectively, these presentations demonstrate that the arts are flexible enough to both actively draw our attention to specific areas of concern and the organizational climate is now open to new ways of addressing long standing and complex problems. Artists with a strong vision and the ability to work collaboratively with other professionals and non-arts organizations are in a strong position to make significant local contributions with positive results for all.

