

# ART FOR CHANGE

11 NOVEMBER – 20 JANUARY 2007

The exhibition *Art for Change* celebrates Loraine Leeson as an artist whose work has influenced and supported social change for over 30 years. Leeson's practice is underpinned by a collaborative process which has involved health workers, trade unions, tenants associations, action groups, young people, schools and institutions, as well as other artists and professionals. It has been realised through a series of organisations with her former partner Peter Dunn and more recently cSPACE, which she founded in 2002. Consistently responding to the political conditions of the time, processes of conflict resolution have helped her navigate through cultural, disciplinary and institutional divides. The work has also developed alongside the technology available, reflecting her key position in the first generation of artists to make creative use of digital imaging and the Internet. In this exhibition Leeson and Dunn's use of photo-montage for the East London Health Project and Docklands Community Poster Project can be seen evolving through digital montage in *The Art of Change*, towards Leeson's current use of the Internet as a place for creative interventions.

*Art for Change* is based on an exhibition by the New Society of Visual Arts, Berlin 2005

[ space ]

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Free Admission  
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# **BETHNAL GREEN HOSPITAL CAMPAIGN**

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**1977 – 78**

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The seventies in Britain saw the first wave of cutbacks in the National Health Service, carried out initially by the Tories, then continued through the 1974 Labour government. As part of this policy, many small hospitals were closed. Bethnal Green Hospital served East Londoners as a community hospital valued for its continuity of care and accessibility. It was still working to capacity in 1977 when, following orders for closure, its staff chose to 'occupy' the hospital while a campaign was mounted to safeguard its future.

Peter Dunn and Loraine Leeson were approached by the hospital's campaign committee to produce a video making the case for its retention. Their Emergency video production was followed by a series of campaigning posters and later an exhibition for use in the hospital foyer to place the specific campaign within its wider social and political context. It was through this work that these artists first explored the use of photomontage as an artistic and political tool, which was to become their hallmark. The work was also exhibited at the Serpentine Gallery in *Art for Whom?* curated by art critic Richard Cork, promoting the idea that art could be used as an effective means of supporting social change.

# **EAST LONDON HEALTH PROJECT**

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**1978 – 81**

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In 1978 the East London Trades Councils wanted to disseminate information about health issues to the local population in light of the cuts being made to the National Health Service. Having seen the work that Peter Dunn and Loraine Leeson had created for the campaign to save Bethnal Green Hospital, they felt that the arts could be effective in supporting their work. A steering group comprising members of local branches of health workers unions and campaigns was instigated to collaborate with the artists on a series of 'visual pamphlets'. These were in a poster format, but with more information than would be used in fly posting, and distributed through health workers' unions for display in doctors' surgeries and other health venues.

Eight different posters were produced over a two-year period. They were widely distributed within the health sector, and also exhibited in *Issue – Social Strategies by Women Artists*, curated by Lucy Lippard in 1980 for the ICA.

# DOCKLANDS COMMUNITY POSTER PROJECT

## 1981 – 91

During the 60's and 70's increasing containerisation resulted in much of the land surrounding the London docks falling into disuse. When in 1979 a Conservative government under Margaret Thatcher came into power, they recognising the value of the 'biggest piece of real estate in Europe'. A new act of parliament was brought in, designating the area from St Katherine's Dock east of Tower Bridge downriver to the Royal Docks as an urban development corporation. This effectively removed local control from an area crossing five London boroughs, with the powers to transfer it into private ownership. However, this land, which became known as the London Docklands, not only incorporated docks and warehouses, but was also home and workplace to 56,000 people. Historically, the communities of East London had always been poor but politically active. They were not against development, but just wanted it also to meet their own needs. A struggle ensued...

As a result of the work they had done around health issues, Peter Dunn and Loraine Leeson were approached by Tower Hamlets Trades Council to produce a poster alerting local people to what was to come. Following a period of consultation with tenants and action groups, however, it soon became clear that this would not be enough. Posters were indeed wanted, but 'large ones' to match the scale of the proposals - also design work to help with individual campaigns, documentation of the area before it changed and a record of each battle as it was fought. In addition, there was a need for easily accessible information that examined key issues such as housing and specific development sites in more depth.

In response to this, the artists founded the Docklands Community Poster Project - a community co-op involving representatives of each Docklands area. This met regularly to report on local developments, agree issues to be represented and the message that artworks should convey. Production fell into four main categories. Photo-murals were produced as large billboard-size images offering an overview of the situation to local residents. Graphic designers Sandra Buchanan, and later Dini Lallah, were employed to support local campaigns. Documentation was made of events as they happened, while a series of exhibitions examined the issues in more depth.

The project lasted throughout the eighties. Eight photo-mural sites were built which displayed changing photo-montage images dealing with the political situation and then with more specific issues such as housing and the Canary Wharf development. Many events were organised in collaboration with the Joint Docklands Action Group, Docklands Forum and other community based organisations. The most notable of these was perhaps the *Peoples Armadas* to parliament where on three occasions thousands of people took to the river to present the People's Charter for Docklands to politicians in an event that was both serious protest and community festival. Finally *the People's Roadshow*, containing exhibitions, documentation and photo-mural replicas, toured this country and beyond with local experts taking the lessons learned by the Docklands communities further afield. An arts project that began as a request for a poster eventually became the cultural arm of an extraordinary campaigning community over a period of ten years.

# THE ART OF CHANGE

## 1981 – 91

The visual arts organisation The Art of Change, developed out of the Docklands Community Poster Project. Work was created for the public domain, though this time focusing more specifically on the impact that changes in the urban environment were having upon quality of life and cultural identity. Its projects included work with young people, initiatives around issues of sustainability, and public artworks based on community consultation. Digital technologies increasingly underpinned the work as they became available through the 90s, firstly through digital imaging, then via exploration of the developing Internet. The projects *West Meets East*, *Between Family Lines* and *Awakenings* were all produced during this period.

### *West Meets East*, 1992

Collaboration with art teacher Ros Thunder and pupils of Central Foundation School for Girls, Bow, which explored the young people's experience of living in two cultures. Half size version of a 16 ft x 12 ft vinyl photo-mural from photographic and textile artwork

### *Between Family Lines*, 1993

Collaboration with Karen Merkel and Women Against Fundamentalism. Originally a four-projector tape slide production made with women from five cultures who had suffered under fundamentalism or orthodoxy. Used by Women Against Fundamentalism for their educational work and distributed by Concorde Educational

### *Awakenings*, after Stanley Spencer's *Resurrection* 1995- 6

Collaboration with Peter Dunn. A project with pupils from George Green's school, Isle of Dogs. The young people explored works in the Tate's collection, deconstructing historic, cultural, class and gender references, then 'changed places' with Spencer to re-make the work about themselves and their lives.

Digital montage commissioned by the Tate Gallery and exhibited as 13 ft x 7 ft cibachrome print at its Millbank site in 1995/6.

## cSPACE

## 2002 – ONGOING

Loraine Leeson founded cSPACE as a vehicle for the continuation of large-scale projects, following the dissolution of The Art of Change in 2002. Its base at the University of East London's Docklands campus, allows her to bring the research and learning resources of higher education to bear on community collaborations around issues of East London regeneration. Projects such as Cascade build on this, while others including VOLCO, develop opportunities for social and creative interaction via the Internet. Loraine works with teams of artists and designers, sometimes accompanied by students, to produce participatory projects that help bring the ideas and aspirations of local communities and young people into the public domain.

### *Cascade*, 2002 – ongoing

Involving multi-collaborations where three levels of education, local institutions and arts and media professionals are brought together to support young people *Cascade* develops ideas around issues of regeneration that will affect their lives.

### *VOLCO*, 2002 – ongoing

An evolving Virtual Online Co-Operative environment. *VOLCO* is a planet in cyberspace being constructed by children and young people communicating via the Internet and linking them across geographic and cultural divides.