

Who Cares Symposium Q&A Session 1

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SPEAKERS

Nephertiti Oboshie Schandorf, Igor Grubic, Louise Yates, chaired by Dr Sophie Hope

Sophie Hope

Thank you so much for your presentations. Something that I found in common with obviously all coming from different infrastructural situations, and levels of funding support, is probably the question of invitation that you were talking about was really interesting. In relation to Igor's position of voice, as far as I understand it, on doing things in an uninvited way.

Igor Grubic

This is all without permission.

Louise Yates

But that's the invitation. So sometimes we do work where it's interrupting daily life, I was just there. But I think that's in terms of action.

Sophie Hope

You've got to start with something. That action is the invitation for other people to react and respond.

Igor Grubic

And to get in a dialogue, in a discussion. To really make people stop there.

Louise Yates

I think it's a subject you can talk so long for, there's a lot to unpack there. There's a lot on something that feels like a really hot topic at the minute. And globally. Just really hard to kind of pin down in 15 minutes.

Sophie Hope

Igor something that you're mentioning about in the piece The Black Spot as having something to do with almost frustration with so-called passive participation of some people in society. And I'm wondering, if you guys relate to that in relation to your own work - the people you're working with this notion of active / passive participation and there seems to be a drive to encourage some kind of participation or response or reaction, what do you mean by this?

Igor Grubic

You can say I started from my personal experience, it comes from the war trauma. Because when we were rising into socialism, we never thought about who is from which nation, Serb, Croat, Bosnian or Montenegro - there were six nations. And when war suddenly started our feelings became so important, destructive and so aggressive. Since I'm coming from a mixed family, and I was still living in Zagreb, it was a huge trauma for me, because of the experiences which my family had during the war. Certain kinds of threats, my father was dismissed from the job immediately because he was a Serb in Croatia. The neighbours with whom you've had a nice relationship suddenly changed, because in this euphoria they also feared to be close to you because of the others. And so I started to question myself: in which way am I contributing to this reality? And then I decided that I'm going to take art as a weapon, as a non-violent approach of creating in this reality. And that was the first step. I was going to do engagement art. Every kind of art is political because you are taking certain kinds of attitudes by exposing your messages toward others, be it galleries, museums or the public sphere. Anyhow, I wanted to make it even more apparent that this is an engagement message.

Sophie Hope

Can I bring Nephertiti and Louise into that because I'm wondering where politics fits within your practices and how political you can be, as organisations that are open to a wide variety of people on your doorsteps, but that might not share your political views. How do you deal with that on a daily basis or on a conceptual level?

Louise Yates

I think we deal with it on a daily basis. We can't say that we don't do politics cause we do. I agree that all art is political in some way. But if you think about what my job is, what I want to do is engage with people who don't engage within the arts. If I'm coming at that with a political angle, I'm making the job twice as hard, if not ten times as hard. So I have to sometimes be politically neutral. We have these discussions with people, for me that's the start. So where we are in Bransholme at the minute, we do talk about what we see happening and talk about politics, but I have to be very careful when we're working with artists that they're aware of our approach to commissioning. Because people need to spend time, and understand the place and understand the people before they can commit to making work there. Because that's a huge commitment and if it's not the vibe that they're looking for, then I absolutely don't want them to be at work there.

So how we can deal with it is we're talking about it all the time. But again, we have to slow everything down. Because our audiences want to be challenged politically. Yes, sometimes we're working with a Dolly Parton or an Elvis impersonator out there, but we're not saying that that's the level of Broadway. We have put on some very challenging work out there. We're doing a lot of work at the minute on a project called Black Kings Upon Hull, which is exploring the blackening from Yorkshire. So we're not scared of talking about some subjects that desperately need talking about, particularly in my working class areas in the north, so we don't shy away from that. But we've got responsibility. I feel as our organisation has, it's important to deal with that in a responsible way and to get conversations going. So we stick our neck out at times, and challenge people's thinking. But I think we just have to be careful how we do that, because if some people slam the door on us, where do we go then?

Nephertiti Oboshie Schandorf

I suppose the idea of politics in our practice, a big part of that is what happens next. One of the big moments that happened in 2020 because of Covid, is that racism was on the table again all of a sudden. Like It hadn't been happening in this context in this country for at least the last 50 years. I suppose it's also whether that becomes something that's less interesting to be funded or supported, what the real world impacts of that are. So that's the 'what happens next'. Any artist, any practice, any organisation has to consider how they can continue to do the work. Everything becomes political, even if you don't want it to be. Because there's a constant reminder of, I mean you (Louise) refer to it as neutrality, I might refer to it as politeness. This thing where you have to get along in a space and you want to serve a space, otherwise, you would just tear the space down, and there would be nothing left. And then there's the idea of being able to disagree, but being able to proceed while disagreeing with each other. And in an ideal world you wouldn't have to disagree, but that certainly feels like these are, honestly, life or death circumstances for people.

This could be around people not being able to afford to eat, and this can be around children being expelled from school, the impact that that has on their lifetime junctures. And what we don't have to do is step into the state, but also the idea that we still have some type of protection that we can offer, but it's not necessarily our job to do this thing. So basically, it's steeped in politics. And it's also around what can and can't be said out loud. So it's always like that allusion to something or not wanting to end up having your project or your artist or your artwork, or just your organisation to be subsumed in a fight. But it's also going back to what can be kept. What can be said out loud, enough to be held on to what deserves or is considered valuable enough to go into the archives. We have these conversations again, and again, and again. And every time something terrible happens culturally, then it can't ever happen again, it can't be forgotten. That our grandchildren can't ever do something like that, or our grandparents are going through this again. This is the worst thing to happen. So I spoke to mum and she said yes, we lost families due to war, we had all these things happen. And this knowledge doesn't ever seem to get kept or respected. So what shoes you're wearing, what accent you have, where you went to school, where are your friends, where you live, or where you shop, who do you listen to? Everything becomes politicised.

So sometimes it has to be spaces where stuff gets left at the door. And that approach that you have when people come in through the artwork itself is so dense and beautiful. It feels like it's an upside down triangle, going out to try and get as many people as possible because it is our obligation. And I hope that we can continue to develop that system moving forward. Also, I've got a note that says we would never discourage Dolly (Parton).

Louise Yates

Exactly.

Audience question

Thanks for your presentations, it's brilliant to see a variety of practices. And within that they each talk about challenging and changing expectations within audience engagement. And as an extension of

what you've just spoken about, I wonder if you have any comments about how that works internally within an organisation. So Nephertiti, you spoke about pause and Louise you've spoken about the phased approach with artists but actually, that changing mindset and expectation when you're introducing new ways of working, new audiences, and just being experimental and working with the change in our current issues? How do you navigate that internally within your frameworks, your funding and so on?

Louise Yates

I'll talk about funders. People want the shiny thing at the end, they want the outcomes. They're not really that bothered about how you get to it sometimes. I'm not saying all funders do that. But that felt like the culture of funding. There's got to be a social outcome, you've got to get some new job at the end of this that leads to education, or needs to lead to a major change. I don't think people quite grasp that that's sometimes a really long journey. So I think for us it's about time - we've given ourselves lots of time, giving artists time, which costs. So that really impacts our budget and making sure that we have time planned in. Enough time to get to know the place, get to know the people, time to reflect, our time spent indoors as a team. Of course, in reality, we're all running around like crazy and trying to do things as quickly as possible. But I guess that's the dream. That's how I would like to work.

Nephertiti Oboshie Schandorf

It's also that question around changing mentalities and mindsets and doing experiments. But there's also the risk that experiments don't always work. As much as you might want to have some experimenting period of working in the arts, it's really difficult, but it's also not the most difficult either, because we have these protections. And what you're saying about programmes wanting outcomes, we got a funder who we are really fortunate to have. It's not always about the artefacts that come at the end. There is this thing about the process. How do you quantify somebody who has stopped drinking because they became a part of the project? How do we move away from the mentality of saying, we can get you X for 100 quid. So saying, well actually a person's time costs a lot, the staff time costs a lot, an artist should be paid a certain amount. We should just have the processes built in. It's not going into that mentality, once you're within a structure or a system, to then use that language back to the oppressors thing. But just try to get into what that person's value is. And that's a really difficult thing to say, when you are running around trying to make things happen. But experimenting is a process, the more funders that are out there, and the more organisations that are out there that have the space to just really take time, get out there, I think that's how we move forward.

Louise Yates

It's coming back to the things or what you're about? What are you trying to achieve? What is it for us and who are the people who are involved? I think for us, it's always revisiting what we're about and making sure that we're grounded. So just try and stay consistent and get things ticking along at a good pace.

Audience question

My question is about where the limit of the work is and should be. I really liked what you said Louise, about finding a word for a community, that this word has a lot of baggage. And when you look at, for

example, the Arts Council's 10 year strategy and that word, I noticed that it is used in many different ways and used to mean a lot of different things. And I think what's happened is that caring work, healthcare, or language inequalities or barriers to education, and all of those very specialised services performed by people who are really qualified and ready to do that work for decades, that responsibility shifted off into arts organisations that now are expected to have a socially engaged practice. We're going through those issues, but ultimately, are not really structured to do that work and really cover the original people to do that work. So I was wondering, if there is a way of creating a limit on what you think your job is able to do. Particularly if it's about working in partnership with those kinds of organisations?

Louise Yates

When it comes to working with other organisations in terms of people, we want to work with social services. And we support each other as a team with that. Because we have a chat shop, especially for people coming in and talking about all aspects of their lives, they're telling you things. So it comes back to relationships, how you build that relationship with somebody. We've had people walk up, and in the first 10 minutes, tell us about the abuse that they're experiencing. And so we do work a lot with services that make it very clear to them. We're working and we'll seek out those services that we can lean on. But we are like a family, so we won't leave, we won't just hear something and then ignore it. We do see as people are coming on, we're on a journey together. So somebody needs some support, we will seek that out. And it can take up quite a lot of time to do that. We don't fall into the trap of being a social worker. Because I don't think this is in the domain of Back To Ours. But we come from a family point of view. You're in this with us, you are a part of this, and we're all coming out with lots of different issues from people coming from different backgrounds. So there are going to be issues, there's no point in pretending otherwise. We deal with people and all that comes with that.

Nephertiti Oboshie Schandorf

The word community comes up a lot. But it's that idea of compassion, excitement and care - they are very different things. There are just going to be things that we will not be able to do. But also, London is such a temporary space where, it's less and less provision. And there's a constant risk, and rotation, all these things that are happening. So I suppose we can only have small interventions, and hope that our offer is enough to keep people coming back to us. So they can grow through the process with us. Some of that can come through programming. You start off with families, for example, and you are forming relationships with your artists or you form relationships with community groups, but those are the people, especially the community, and the local foundations who are actually doing the work. If you want to have an arm wrestle about a couple of cultural theories, we can't do the absolute most with what we have and affect our projects to be able to disappear a couple of civilizations' worth of damage, it's just not something that's possible. We can make small steps, we can support our artists who may not be able to have as much access to opportunities. We can check in on people, we can push people forward, we can build the connections, we can back those structures in that way. But we're not qualified social workers, we're not qualified psychiatrists. These are real issues that we are negotiating within as arts organisations. And it's not fair to put that on artists either. It's just something we have to be aware of, because we can end up like lobsters. Water temperature can just increase incrementally so slowly,

and it's all just a big mess. So yes, there are limits. Good question about the limits - maybe we'll put that up on our walls and areas and just say there are limits.

Louise Yates

You will be tempted to say there's no limits, but there's limits.

Audience question

This is a question from an artist point of view for Igor. It was interesting that a lot of the images you showed of your artworks, there weren't people in the images engaging with the artwork. When you visited the Muslim people, how did you begin to engage with them and then when you showed the artwork, the carpets on the ground, how did they engage? Do they engage with the public who were coming to see those, or did you work with people using the carpets?

Igor Grubic

It was a long process. I was working for eight months, I visited Modica in Sicily, and spent two, three weeks each time. At the beginning, I was trying to make an investigation on what kind of work I'm going to do there. The curators invited me for this festival to do site-specific work. So I needed to pass through the process first, to get certain kinds of ideas for the work. And in this process, I realised that in this little community, this little town Modica near Ragusa, in this part of Sicily, there is this community of Muslim people who are not gathering so much with the others, but they're circulating in one part of the square. And then I started communicating with them, I got in contact with the Muezzin. And I got into deeper communication with the community and through the interviews with them, I got this idea that I can create a project which can send an important message to this conservative community. I need to say that at the beginning, the organisers were afraid of what kind of reaction would arise from this project. And you could see on the images that some posters have been ripped.

During this festival, there were guided tours, and there were lots of people from the community. I didn't take people's photos because I was guiding the tours, doing talks together with participants from the Muslim community. But the photos were taken later, it was when we were taking the project down at the end of the festival. But anyhow, the feedback from the participants of the Catholic community, but also the Muslim community that it was really important to give them the support. They felt a really big support with this project. So all these little steps count. These little efforts count. In these processes it's much more important that we encourage others, that we give them a certain kind of knowledge that can enable people's voices. Most importantly, we can show them that they can find the power inside themselves. Every one of us can find the power inside of us, but we're always trying to find the power somewhere else. Even to have a focus, a peaceful state of mind and to realise that you have a peaceful centre inside yourself. It's an important element towards a better society.