

2Up 2Down/Homebaked and the Symbolic Media Narrative

This article is an expanded and updated version of a post by the same title on the author's blog on Social Practice (suebellyank.com) first published 17 February 2013.

At a conference in December of 2012 about socially engaged art, Dutch artist Jeanne van Heeswijk seemed uncomfortable when presenting *2Up 2Down/Homebaked*, her ongoing work with residents of the Liverpool suburb Anfield, despite having done so dozens of times before. In a way, she was faced with an impossible task – to explain the complicated breadth of the multi-year project in which she was engaged. After all, her presentation (bolstered, in my case, by subsequent internet searches) was probably the only way that most of us there would experience the work, as an arbitrary and mediated snapshot. Despite her passion and her ability to tell a compelling story with nuance and detail, any description flattens such work, which is an ever-shifting series of tenuous relationships. Its coalescence through encapsulating narratives is the false echo of an effort that one person alone (even one deeply embedded) can never truly convey. Such work breathes.

In that sense, this kind of multi-phasic, long-term participatory project creates its own biological systems, complex interacting parts that sometimes interlock harmoniously and more often exist in constant tension. For many of us, however, even those involved in the project itself, this reality is reproduced through a mediated narrative of anecdotes, images, symbols and practised expression – whether that narrative is crafted by the artist herself, the organisation that funds and supports her, academics and critics like myself, or the actual media.

Because such narratives exist in a particular point in time, they reflect larger political and societal themes and concerns (influenced to a greater or lesser extent by the specific agendas of the writer and institution). This is true of writing or criticism about any artwork, but unlike work that remains fixed in an object form and whose meaning evolves with the shifting of time, socially engaged work also evolves independent of its interpretation. It throws another interdependent variable into the mix, and with it a mess of complicated resulting equations. In a mathematical analogy, you might say that object-based artwork is to socially engaged art practice what algebra is to calculus.

Yet the expression of art criticism and journalism largely remains a fixed format, and the subject/participant/artists in such work have little choice but to become defined by the symbolic narratives and images selected by the media to represent the project to a wider public. Subjects have several options when faced with an evolving project's mediatisation:

- They choose to ignore the symbolic narrative, which finds shape in spite of them.
- They embrace the symbolic narrative, shape it, and use it actively to tell an accessible version of the project's story at that particular point in time.
- They actively subvert and leverage the media platform of the work in order to critique or undermine misconceptions and highlight larger issues in which they are engaging.

In the life of any long-term socially engaged project, most artists whom I have encountered are quite savvy, even from the beginning, in acknowledging their need to shape this media narrative. The ubiquity of social media self-branding has exacerbated this necessity in nearly all arenas of life, but many are still caught off-guard by how content reads in their initial media experiences. They must quickly gain further expertise in how to manipulate the perceptions of their evolving projects most effectively. Such mediatisation is the currency on which such projects thrive in a larger arena – it is a key factor in continued fundraising (especially after a project's newness has worn off), in motivating participation from individuals or partner organisations, and in leveraging influence to affect change beyond the art world. Media can influence policy, or even more resonantly, a cultural shift.

The newspaper and magazine articles that I later found, in the local *Liverpool Echo*¹, the national *Observer*², and the international edition of *The New York Times*³, were even more frozen in time than van

Heeswijk's passionate talk, especially because many of them were reviews of the just-opened Liverpool Biennial, with which the international art exhibition Homebaked was associated. The reviews of the Biennial itself were mixed, but nearly all were glowing about the work in Anfield, and every single one mentioned van Heeswijk and her project out of the many works presented in the exhibition platform, albeit in very different ways.

Taking just these three articles as a case study and combining them, we gain a summary overview of the project that reads something like this:

The neighbourhood of Anfield, poor but attractive due to its proximity to the football stadium, fell victim to its closure in 1998. Many residents moved out or sold their houses, but because of the financial crisis and changes in leadership, the area never got rebuilt or even fully demolished. The remaining residents now live amidst the abandoned and blighted remains of a neighbourhood in permanent limbo, the cornerstone of which was the former Mitchell's Bakery. Commissioned by the Liverpool Biennial to create a project 'with lasting impact'⁴, artist Jeanne van Heeswijk began working with a group of teens (a common pattern in such projects, perhaps because teens are such powerful forces for advocacy in a community, effectively motivating participation in both young and old and refusing to be ignored) to take over the bakery as a meeting space and create a community-owned Land Trust. The plan gained partners and additional neighbourhood participants and has slowly progressed, coalescing into an 'alternative to the existing situation', as van Heeswijk puts it. 'I'm talking about small-scale developments with more manageable footprints which are easier for the community to understand what will happen.'⁵ The newspaper articles are aspirational, painting Anfield as a victim of runaway greed and governmental overreach that was given a 'glimmer of hope'⁶ by the *Homebaked* project. The residents caught in the middle become symbols for the precarity of our times, casualties in a housing war. Van Heeswijk is oft-quoted as saying, 'Housing is the battlefield of our time, and the house its monument.'

Each article, however, offers a very different perspective on this narrative. The title of the *Liverpool Echo* article betrays a focus on van Heeswijk ('Liverpool Biennial artist Jeanne van Heeswijk mixes art, regeneration and bread in Anfield') and is brimming with quotes from participants focusing on the artist as benevolent 'teacher'. The residents of Anfield are presented as having been saved by their newly found creative and entrepreneurial skills resulting from their participation in the art/design/bakery project after years of 'broken promises'. What exactly these promises are seems assumed, just as it is never explained why Anfield is plagued by 'empty terraced homes and vacant ground surrounding Anfield stadium'. However, this emphasis sets up Anfield residents as forgotten, hopeless and in need of saving.

The artist is well-quoted, seemingly allowed to tell the story from her perspective, but the only other participant represented is Lynn Tolman, an Anfield resident. She talks about how the project 'saved her life' and how she has been invited to become part of an artist collective in Salford. '[They] want to turn me into an artist. I've never have had the confidence or skills if it hadn't been for this. It really turned my life around.' This is juxtaposed by a description of an 'enthused' and grinning van Heeswijk, who speaks about the project's training plans, how to get more people involved etc.⁷ Thus the entire symbolic story pivots on the relationship between these two representative figures – the saved resident and her evangelical saviour, the artist. This account drastically oversimplifies a significantly more complicated reality, and in fact undercuts the carefully considered methodologies of Freirean popular education underpinning the project – not to mention the European historical context of cooperative organising and 'right to the city' movements.

The *Observer* takes a very different approach. A relatively lengthy article headlined 'Liverpool Biennial – review', it barely focuses on the art in the Biennial, but rather uses the examples of two projects – Heeswijk's *Homebaked* and Fritz Haeg and James Corner's *Everton Peoples' Park: Foraging Spiral and Basecamp* – to frame a scathing indictment of housing-market renewal (HMR), an economic housing regeneration scheme described as 'an invention of the Blair government at the besotted peak of its love of

the magic of the markets'. The article engages in a much more sweeping political and economic analysis of the changing urban landscape of Liverpool, and it is not until after nearly a dozen heart-wrenchingly descriptive paragraphs about the wholesale destruction of the fabric of urban community in the city that the art projects are even mentioned. *Homebaked* (not referred to by name in the two paragraphs devoted to it, but rather described as how 'Dutch artist Jeanne van Heeswijk has used her Biennial funding') is reduced to the reopening of a closed bakery, and a series of bus tours 'that take you around the devastated zones'. The project, along with Haeg and Corner's edible garden project, are characterised as a 'glimmer of hope' in collectively standing up to a wrong-headed government in order to fight the blighting of their historic neighbourhoods.⁸

Though the article's (narrowly focused) attention to the city context is admirable, lumping these projects in together is quite reductive and misleading – not only are they very different projects with varying methodologies and timeframes that are given remarkably short shrift in the article, they also have very different purposes. Though van Heeswijk's project in Anfield reacts specifically to the context of HMR, Haeg and Corner's project is much more concerned with Everton Park and a deep dive into its intertwined natural and social histories. Both are actively engaged in catalysing a community-designed reimagination of their respective sites, but whereas van Heeswijk's project focuses on the creation of a community-owned land trust, the resident-generated output of Haeg's series of projects is being wrapped into a more traditional long-term masterplan for the park led by Corner. The fact that this article is couched as a review of the Liverpool Biennial as a whole is odd, since these are the only two projects mentioned, and the other venues, background and thrust of the exhibition itself are ignored. The author has clearly used this platform as an excuse to critique HMR, with little real analysis of how arts-funded projects can take on this kind of sweeping urban reform.

The *New York Times* ran an article in both its New York edition and in its international sister, the *International Herald Tribune*, with yet another take on Heeswijk's project – a much more positive and nostalgic one. Its focus is evident in the headline ('A Corner Bakery and a Town's Rebirth'), and it begins with an idealised history of the eighty-five year old Mitchell's Bakery in Anfield, and how it 'sold bread, cakes, and pies to local people and the soccer fans flocking across the road to Anfield Stadium'. As in the *Liverpool Echo* article, Tolman is again the spokesperson for residents, but van Heeswijk's voice is not evident at all. Rather, programme director Laurie Peake of the Liverpool Biennial represents the initiating entities, articulately focusing on the involvement of the local people and their empowerment through the project, as well as the artist's interest in combining housing with social enterprise. She, like the article, emphasises the bakery as 'the heart of the project.'⁹

Perhaps Peake's involvement and direction made some difference in shaping the media narrative (along with the reporter's own critical research), or perhaps the benefit of a few more months of additional project activity helped add depth, since this article does a much more thorough job of telling the project's story than the previous two. It is even possible that the author was able to attend a Home Tour (they were running in November) and benefitted from the in-person experience by learning far more than the two journalists who wrote their articles in September. The article touches on HMR and the story of the bakery's closing, but then goes more deeply into the programmatic accomplishments and process of *Homebaked*, from design studios for youth and residents, the formation of a community land trust, skills-based classes on design and construction, and a food cooperative's activities. Finally, it ends with a description of the community's drive to raise funds for a new oven and promote awareness of the project through the ongoing Anfield home tours. The article treats the project as an entity, a living and breathing work-i-progress that is self-generating, rather than the brainchild of an artist or a small cultural effort stemming from the Biennial to right a vast wrong. It is described as a catalytic group effort, and the author's refusal to limit the description of art in this context (but rather taking the project on its own terms) helps flesh out a clearer picture.

Despite the more detailed summary of the project's activities in *The New York Times*, the article certainly romanticises the bakery as the heart of community, elevating it through carefully crafted metaphor of as a place of warmth, comfort, home and baking in the communal space. As Tolman puts it in the *Liverpool Echo* article: 'People that live around here get treated like they're worthless and that they don't deserve to drink coffee and eat good bread.'¹⁰ *Homebaked* is a great story. Catchphrases and imagery abound ('we will rise' and 'brick by brick, loaf by loaf, we build ourselves'), eliciting domestic nostalgia, strategies of cooking and food as social lubricant and cooperative effort. The issue it addresses is very timely, and the people involved are creative, articulate and empowered by the artist. In fact, this accessible story is part of the aesthetic work of the artist and her collaborators, and part of the reason why work like this can leverage unique access to resources and networks within and beyond the art world in order to effect change. For example, *Homebaked* was added to the title of the project, *2Up 2Down*, with both monikers now interchangeable, and a new logo of a slice of bread adorning the blog and shop windows.

The story became so popular, so resonant in the media – had 'such legs' as they say – that the Anfield Home Tours that were part of the Liverpool Biennial around the time these three articles were published exploded. These 'heritage' tours, conducted by and with Anfield residents, were laborious and intense. They were also meaningful, poetic and symbolically powerful, but arguably drew time and effort away from what was considered the actual work – getting the bakery up and running and lobbying for it (and the houses around it) to be sold to the communal land trust. Van Heeswijk lamented this at the time. She worried over how cute the branding was, how immediately accessible the references and the narratives were. She fretted about the pressing work at hand, and the very real possibility that everything the community had been working towards could still be demolished. She thought the tidy media characterisations of *Homebaked* would overshadow the messy chaos and systemic imbalances that the project had to navigate every day.

She remains uncomfortable with the popularity of the Anfield Home Tours in the media, as well as the way in which articles like these framed the project. However, in hindsight, she recognises the vast difference that a public platform can make in congealing the political autonomy of an organised group. As she wrote in a recent email:

[L]ooking back at the tours, they did politicise the people involved. Because of telling their stories publicly and getting the response, it strengthened them to speak up and act out their concern about their future more widely. After this, they started a Kickstarter campaign to get money for the oven – but also started to talk directly to local politicians campaigning for the bakery and the land trust.¹¹

This recalls a quote from Austrian philosopher and critic Ivan Illich, who once said 'neither revolution nor reformation can ultimately change a society, rather you must tell ... an alternative story'.¹² This story is not that of an artistic saviour, as told in the *Liverpool Echo* review, nor that of little guys facing up to the big, mean government as characterised by the *Observer* article. Nor is it attributable to a nostalgic memory of community like the bakery, as in *The New York Times* article. Rather, the public platform of the home tours, bolstered by these media narratives, allowed for the authentic stories of those involved to enter directly into the political landscape. As the international artist collective Ultra-red, who also work with communities on complicated issues of housing and services, said of their recent project *School of Echoes*: 'the first step in such a project has been radically altering our notion of who the protagonists of art and cultural action are, and how this changes the landscape of contemporary activism'.¹³ How each socially engaged project engages and deploys media can fundamentally shift its perception and political agency – both internally and externally.

Addressing his own attempt to encapsulate these practices into an exhibition format at Creative Time in New York, 2012, Nato Thompson begins his essay in the catalogue *Living as Form: Socially-engaged Art from 1991–2011* by describing poetic projects that gain a lot of media traction, their concise and reverberating explications that move us. Are these projects geared for the media?, he asks: 'Each project

flourished among news outlets as these artists created a new spin around old stories.¹⁴ This is characteristic of the media society in which we live, where the political, poetic and functional merge, where life, virtuality and art are intertwined, and, most of all, where politics and media feed off one another.

Becoming media savvy is a necessity for nearly everyone today, and it is very difficult to give up control of the symbolic media narrative in favour of the actual on-the-ground work, because it seems that one may determine the other. Writer, activist and artist Dont Rhine, a member of Ultra-red, underscored the porosity of these borders: 'People will describe their world the way the media describes it. But then as the conversations continue, the story changes.' It becomes more grounded, more realistic. It opens new possibilities. This observation makes clear the necessity of media understanding, literacy and manipulation in these projects, because the media narrative determines the way in which people see themselves. A symbolic counterattack on prevailing narratives, carefully calibrated through self-branding and actualisation, can shift understanding and pave the way for progress, as surely as baking bread or laying down brick. Rhine also said of socially engaged work, 'It's not just changing our perception of our world, it's changing the world we perceive.'¹⁵ In fact, it must do both: change perception and the world, because one naturally follows the other.

Archive

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Liverpool Biennial artist Jeanne van Heeswijk mixes art, regeneration and bread in Anfield, Liverpool Echo, 2012.

A Corner Bakery and a Town's Rebirth, New York Times, 2012

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15 Dont Rhine, lecture and workshop with Leonardo Vilchis at UCLA's Hammer Museum for UCLA Art

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