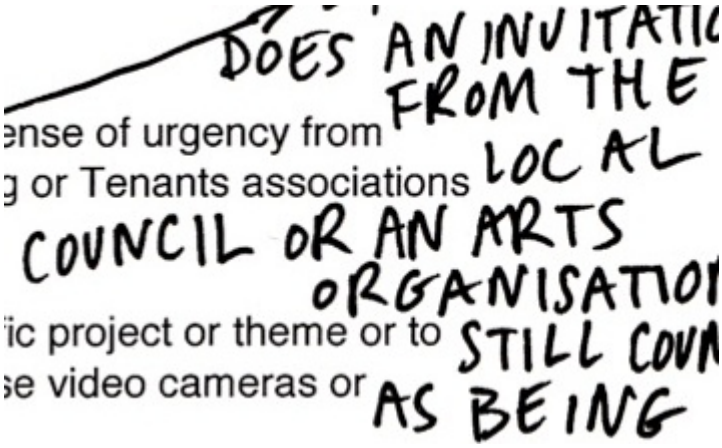
Drawing Lines across History: Reactivation and Annotation

Ed Webb-Ingall



Close up of Oliver Plender annotations on Ed Webb-Ingall Looking Backwards in the Present Document, 2016.

The instigation of artistic projects in neighbourhoods and for community groups, motivated by the potential for social change through increased access to modes of self expression, was what came to define the Community Arts movement in the 1970s. This is not simply something that happened in the past to look back at nostalgically, instead it continues to provide strategies and a language that can be reactivated, built on and learnt from in the present. I am interested in reactivating the ways in which Community Arts projects were originally developed in order to more fully understand and critique them and to ask: what can we learn about the current moment when we attempt this process of reactivation? The methods developed in the 1970s to initiate and evaluate Community Arts projects continue to provide a means to facilitate new Community Arts projects. These past processes, and the materials that emerged as a result of them (videos, pamphlets, newsletters, articles), create a critical and productive utopian impulse; they provide multiple models of resistance, offering a means to understand how individuals might engage in collective acts of representation, providing a framework to explore the role and definition of the word community in new contexts.

Writing on the re-appropriation of archival materials, art historian Paolo Magagnoli suggests that such works provide 'a resource and strategy central to struggles of all subaltern cultural and social groups… and show possibilities which are still valid in the present' [1]. The development of contemporary Community Arts projects, triggered by the reactivation of materials and processes produced and developed the 1970s, allows me to draw lines across history. This process of reactivation creates what American artist Sharon Hayes, describes as 'transhistoric relations': using historical materials to speak from or through particular historical moments. These materials help 'to uncover, in the present moment, a given historic genealogy that was wilfully obscured or erased, or to unspool a historic trajectory so that another present or future moment might have been, or might be possible'[2]. Film theorist and historian Thomas Waugh suggests a similar approach to the reactivation of political films 'whose original political context and thus 'use-value' have lapsed, but which may find new uses and engage new aesthetics in new contexts'[3]. I have been developing a number of projects that draw on the history of community video, which makes up part of the wider Community Arts movement. As Waugh proposes, this has involved recovering community videos from the 1970s in order to produce and facilitate new community video projects through meetings, screenings and workshops[4]. Screenings of the original videos to relevant community groups, based on interest, identity or locality, combined with the reactivation of the techniques and approaches carried out in the production of them has triggered the creation of new video projects. The collective experience of making and screening these videos has established a shared language to understand, reflect on and critique the history, processes and aims of community video making.

As a result of these processes of historical research and reactivation I have produced a list or set of instructions that set out to explain how one might initiate and facilitate a Community Arts project. For this edition of the journal I have invited a number of socially engaged practitioners to annotate and amend the list. The list is not a suggestion of best practice or an attempt to erase or smooth over the inherent complications and different approaches to facilitating Community Arts projects but more of a provocation. I see it as a work in progress, like the archival materials and historical processes I borrow from, to be constantly (re)negotiated, annotated and amended by those who use it. The list is a trigger and an invitation to share ideas and demystify processes and practices, the start of a conversation, with the suggestion that it can only 'work' when in a process of modification. The versions of the list produced subsequently operate as evidence of the conversations and exchanges that have taken place since its inception; the annotated form suggests a dialogue rather than a fixed position, something which is constantly in motion.

Below is the original list, followed by three annotated versions. Please feel free to annotate the list and suggest amendments and send it back

Full sized image can be found here.

LOOKING BACKWARDS IN THE PRESENT, A LIST, A PROVOCATION
OR
SOMETHINGS I HAVE LEARNT ABOUT THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE FACILITATOR AND THE PARTICIPANT IN A COMMUNITY ARTS PROJECT

1. There are roughly three kinds of community arts project:
   - Those initiated, made by and for the participants – usually with a sense of urgency from within. For example Squatters making tapes to protect their housing or Tenants associations making films about the state of their home to show to the council.
   - Those initiated by outsiders invited in to work with them on a specific project or theme or to share a skill of some sort. For example young people learning to use video cameras or artists helping organize a community festival.
   - When artists with no prior relationship invite themselves into a community with the assumption that the chosen community would in some way benefit from their expertise or knowledge.

2. In order for those projects described as the 'outsider invited in' to be 'effective' there must be some slippage between how the roles of insider and outsider are defined – the participants/insiders need to develop a sense of being not simply just the subject but also the author *and* the facilitator/outsider needs to develop a relationship or a stake in the aims of the participants

3. The relative success of a project is based on the depth of the relationships formed – by this I mean knowing the participants and them knowing the artist.

4. Measures of success must be shared, along with intentions, at the start of a project, these may well change as a project develops and any changes to either of these must be made clear and communicated to the group.

5. Outcomes - if the measure of success or the intention is the creation of a tangible object – video, text, performance, sculpture – the authorship and ownership of this object must also be agreed upon at the start of the project.

6. Both facilitators and participants should propose outcomes and there should be room for these to change and develop as a project progresses.

7. Measures of success should be according to the needs of individuals involved and based on a value system agreed by all participants. For example learning to use a video camera, having a conversation and a cup of tea and being asked ones opinion and listened to on camera might be equally 'valuable' depending on the needs of the individual.

8. Multiple spaces and moments for feedback should be built into any project and the forms which feedback takes should be varied and sensitive to the specific needs of the participants.

9. A shared language must be developed between all participants and facilitators.

10. Time is key - the relationship between the length of time spent on a project and its efficacy are inextricably linked.

Anna Colin, Curator and Co-Founder/Director Open School East

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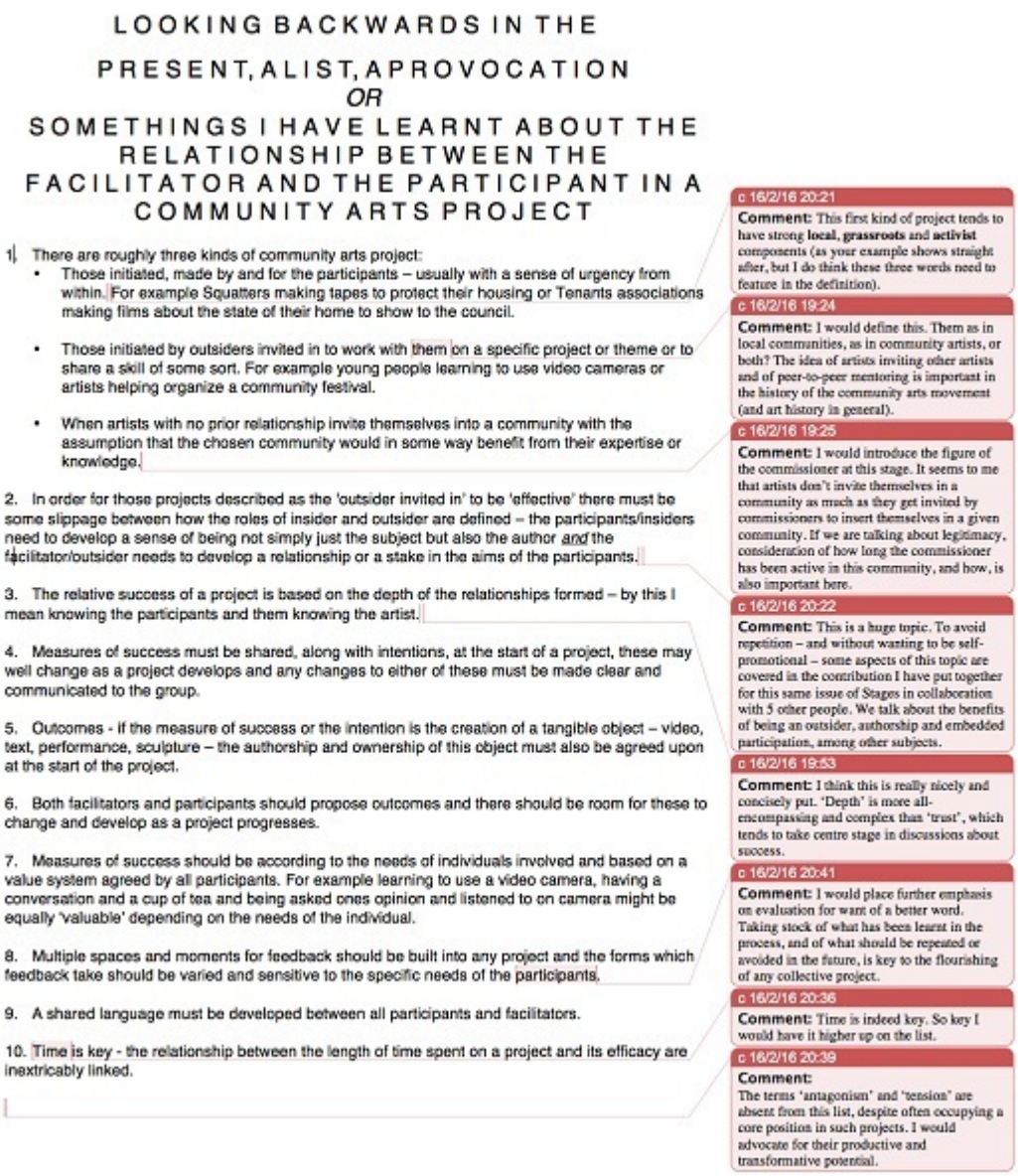

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c 16/2/16 20:21
Comment: This first kind of project tends to have strong **local, grassroots** and **activist** components (as your example shows straight after, but I do think these three words need to feature in the definition).

c 16/2/16 19:24
Comment: I would define this. Them as in local communities, as in community artists, or both? The idea of artists inviting other artists and of peer-to-peer mentoring is important in the history of the community arts movement (and art history in general).

c 16/2/16 19:25
Comment: I would introduce the figure of the commissioner at this stage. It seems to me that artists don't invite themselves in a community as much as they get invited by commissioners to insert themselves in a given community. If we are talking about legitimacy, consideration of how long the commissioner has been active in this community, and how, is also important here.

c 16/2/16 20:22
Comment: This is a huge topic. To avoid repetition – and without wanting to be self-promotional – some aspects of this topic are covered in the contribution I have put together for this same issue of Stages in collaboration with 5 other people. We talk about the benefits of being an outsider, authorship and embedded participation, among other subjects.

c 16/2/16 19:53
Comment: I think this is really nicely and concisely put. 'Depth' is more all-encompassing and complex than 'trust', which tends to take centre stage in discussions about success.

c 16/2/16 20:41
Comment: I would place further emphasis on evaluation for want of a better word. Taking stock of what has been learnt in the process, and of what should be repeated or avoided in the future, is key to the flourishing of any collective project.

c 16/2/16 20:36
Comment: Time is indeed key. So key I would have it higher up on the list.

c 16/2/16 20:39
Comment:
The terms 'antagonism' and 'tension' are absent from this list, despite often occupying a core position in such projects. I would advocate for their productive and transformative potential.

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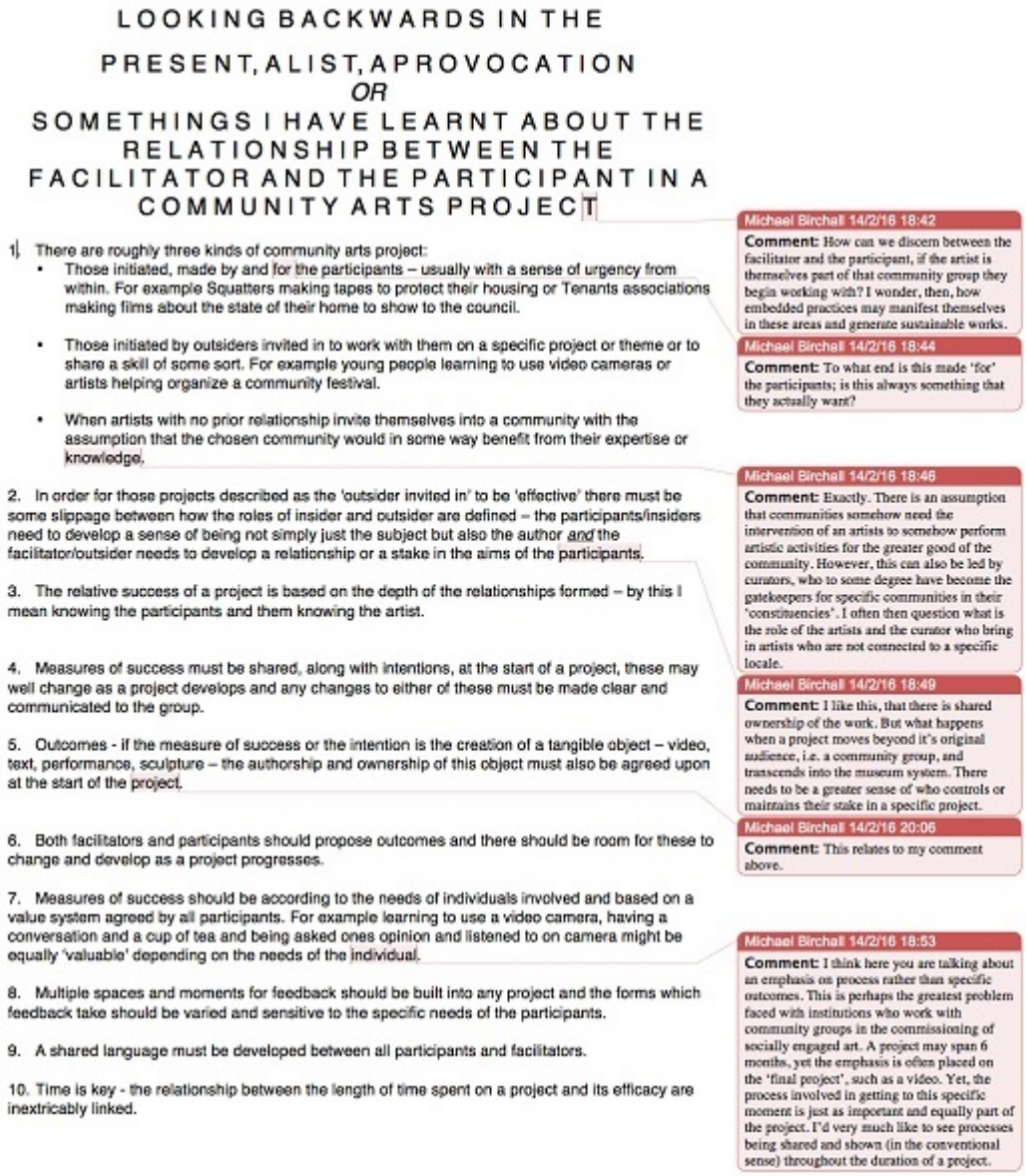
Michael Birchall, Curator of Public Practice Tate Liverpool

Full sized image can be found here.



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Michael Birchall 14/2/16 18:42
Comment: How can we discern between the facilitator and the participant, if the artist is themselves part of that community group they begin working with? I wonder, then, how embedded practices may manifest themselves in these areas and generate sustainable works.

Michael Birchall 14/2/16 18:44
Comment: To what end is this made 'for' the participants; is this always something that they actually want?

Michael Birchall 14/2/16 18:46
Comment: Exactly. There is an assumption that communities somehow need the intervention of an artists to somehow perform artistic activities for the greater good of the community. However, this can also be led by curators, who to some degree have become the gatekeepers for specific communities in their 'constituencies'. I often then question what is the role of the artists and the curator who bring in artists who are not connected to a specific locale.

Michael Birchall 14/2/16 18:49
Comment: I like this, that there is shared ownership of the work. But what happens when a project moves beyond it's original audience, i.e. a community group, and transcends into the museum system. There needs to be a greater sense of who controls or maintains their stake in a specific project.

Michael Birchall 14/2/16 20:06
Comment: This relates to my comment above.

Michael Birchall 14/2/16 18:53
Comment: I think here you are talking about an emphasis on process rather than specific outcomes. This is perhaps the greatest problem faced with institutions who work with community groups in the commissioning of socially engaged art. A project may span 6 months, yet the emphasis is often placed on the 'final project', such as a video. Yet, the process involved in getting to this specific moment is just as important and equally part of the project. I'd very much like to see processes being shared and shown (in the conventional sense) throughout the duration of a project.

Anna Colin Biography

Anna Colin is an independent curator based in London. She co-founded and co-directs Open School East, a space for collaborative learning in East London, which brings together a free study programme for artists and a multifaceted programme of events and activities programmed by and open to a broad range of voices. Anna also works as associate curator at Lafayette Anticipation: Fondation Galeries Lafayette in Paris, and is co-curator, with Lydia Yee, of the touring exhibition British Art Show 8 (2015-16).

Olivia Plender Biography

In my work as an artist, I often set up situations in which I expect something from the audience. I collaborate, make workshops, performances, installations, videos, comics, magazines, lectures and sometimes curate exhibitions. I endeavour to understand how people form group identities. I began by looking at the margins, at fringe social movements, non-conformist religion and communalism in all its many forms. Subsequently I moved onto mainstream phenomena such as nationalism and consumer culture. Later I began to scrutinise the education system and it's relation to the work ethic and ideas of

value. I am interested in who has the right to speak in public, how the 'rational' is defined, which voices are taken seriously and inversely I listen to those voices that are not. My work often focuses on the ideological framework around the narration of history; what we think we know about the past inevitably shapes what we believe is possible in the future. Currently I am running a series of workshops at Open School East, London, and embarking on research into the East London Federation of Suffragettes. In collaboration with local women's organisations, I am hoping to find out what relevance that history has today.

Michael Birchall Biography

Michael Birchall is Curator of Public Practice at Tate Liverpool, and Senior Lecturer in Exhibition Studies at Liverpool John Moores Univeristy. His PhD research has focused on socially engaged art since the 1990s, and the curatorial role in this process as a producer in Europe and North America. He has held curatorial appointments at The Western Front, Vancouver, Canada, The Banff Centre, Banff, Canada, and Künstlerhaus Stuttgart, Germany; and was previously a lecturer in Curating at Zurich University of the Arts. His writing has appeared in Frieze, Frieze d/e, thisistomorrow, Modern Painters and C-Magazine as well as various catalogues and journals.

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[1] Magagnoli, Paolo. *Documents of Utopia: The Politics of Experimental Documentary*. New York: Wallflower, 2015. p.9

[2] Hayes, Sharon. "Temporal Relations." Not Now! Now! Chronopolitics, Art & Research. Ed. Renate Lorenz. Berlin: Sternberg, 2014 p.71

[3] Waugh, Thomas. *Show Us Life: Toward a History and Aesthetics of the Committed Documentary*. Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow, 1984.

[4] The majority of which have been in collaboration with Louise Shelley at The Showroom. As part of the Communal Knowledge programme I have been working with four local groups under the name *People Make Videos* to address the history of community video practices in London from the 1970s. For more information please see: http://www.theshowroom.org/projects/ed-webb-ingall-recording-programs-for-repeated-playback-uk-community-video-from-the-1970s-now

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Ed Webb-Ingall

Ed Webb-Ingall is a filmmaker and writer with an interest in exploring histories, practices and forms of collectivity and collaboration. His current research examines the ways in which video technology operated within social contexts and how concepts of mobility and access intersect with political platforms of community-based activism and forms of representation. He is currently a mentor at Open School East, London and is carrying out a two-year residency at The Showroom, London. Recent projects include co-editing *The Sketchbooks of Derek Jarman*, published by Thames and Hudson and *We Have Rather Been Invaded*, a collaborative film project that looks at the legacy of Section 28, commissioned by Studio Voltaire, London. He is also a TECHNE PhD candidate at Royal Holloway University, England, where his research focuses on the history and practice of community video in the UK between 1968 and 1981.