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ARTICLE

NODE "ART AND RESEARCH II"

TrainWreck

or

The failures of infrastructure: reflections on a Creative People and Places project**Anthony Schrag**

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Submission date: August 2017

Accepted date: April 2018

Published in: June 2018

Recommended citation

Schrag, Anthony. 2018. "TrainWreck or the failures of infrastructure: reflections on a creative people and place project". In Ana Rodríguez and Pau Alsina (coords.). "Art and Research II". *Artnodes*. No. 21: 177-186. UOC [Accessed: dd/mm/yy] <http://dx.doi.org/10.7238/a.v0i21.3129>



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Abstract

This reflective text considers the 'failures of infrastructure' from the perspective of a researcher involved in a participatory art project funded by Creative People and Places. It uses a single project to act as a microcosm of the practice in general, and encourage the field as a whole to take stock of *how* artists' research is expected to occur. It has very consciously not discussed the methods or methodologies of the 'what' or 'why' of the artistic research undertaken, but rather focuses on the human element of *doing* artistic research, exploring this from a personal perspective. It has done so to give credence to the notions put forward by Howard S. Becker as long ago as 1984 regarding the interconnectedness of artistic processes to other elements of human existence, and the extent to which infrastructure affects artistic (or artistic research) production. Artists/artist-researchers cannot therefore operate as isolated islands, but rather must consider all the elements around them that impact their work: this includes an understanding of the 'personal'. It is relevant to – and explores the intersection of – the fields of cultural policy (i.e., government/organisations), cultural management (arts organisations/institutions) and cultural production (i.e., artists/communities), as it concerns the infrastructure that links those fields together.

Keywords

participatory arts, Creative People and Places, socially engaged, infrastructure, cultural policy, failure, personal reflection and development

El descarrilamiento

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Fallos de infraestructura: reflexiones alrededor de un proyecto de Creative People and Places

Resumen

Este texto reflexivo valora los «fallos de infraestructura» desde la perspectiva de un investigador implicado en un proyecto artístico participativo y financiado por la iniciativa Creative People and Places. Se utiliza un único proyecto para que actúe como microcosmos de toda la práctica en general e incite a todo el campo a evaluar cómo se espera que tenga lugar la investigación de artistas. De forma muy consciente, se ha optado por no abordar los métodos o metodologías del «qué» y el «por qué» de la investigación artística emprendida, sino que el artículo se centra en el elemento humano de la investigación artística y lo explora desde una perspectiva personal. Se ha hecho así para avalar las nociones expuestas por Howard S. Becker ya en 1984 sobre la interconectividad de los procesos artísticos con otros elementos de la existencia humana y para ver hasta qué punto la infraestructura afecta a la producción artística (o a la investigación artística).

De este modo, los artistas / investigadores artísticos no pueden actuar como islas independientes, sino que deben tener en cuenta todos los elementos que les rodean y que repercuten en su obra. En este sentido, se incluye una comprensión de lo «personal». El texto resulta relevante para los campos de la política cultural (gobierno/organizaciones), la gestión cultural (organizaciones/instituciones artísticas) y la producción cultural (artistas/comunidades). A la vez, estudia las intersecciones entre estos campos, puesto que concierne a la infraestructura que vincula todos esos campos.

Palabras clave

artes participativas, Creative People and Places, compromiso social, infraestructura, política cultural, fallo, reflexión y desarrollo personal

Introduction: a note on form and process

The following is a reflective consideration of a 6-month artist's research residency that emerged out of a Creative People and Places commission in England.

As a reflective piece, it does not follow the traditional academic form but rather presents 5 interlinked themes regarding infrastructure within participatory practices – and the *failures* thereof – to highlight the effects of such deficient infrastructures on aesthetic form. Indeed, this concern with 'process' and 'output' provides a meta-narrative to the text as it asks: how does a process affect outcomes and transmission? The work herein therefore follows a different *form* in order to provide unique affective insights into the processes of being a participatory practitioner in the UK today; insights not available within traditional academic forms. As with all artistic research, I do provide contextual academic literature to ground my findings, but its current, semi-informal shape is essential to the transmission of the content. In this way, it passes along key insights that are not considered when commissioning participatory arts projects, namely how the personal affects production. It does so to give credence to the notions put forward by Howard S. Becker as long ago as 1984 regarding the interconnectedness of artistic processes to other elements of human existence, and the extent to which infrastructure affects artistic (or artistic research) production. Artists/artist-researchers cannot therefore operate as isolated islands, but rather must consider all the elements around them that impact their work, including understanding of the 'personal.' In other words, as the text explores the schism between practice and policy, so its form also shifts between the two to give such knowledge appropriate grounding.

The findings of this artistic research are useful for other creative practitioners and organisations working on social and/or research projects, and have relevance especially to the fields of cultural policy, cultural management and cultural production. It also includes a brief analysis of 'institutional intent' as well as the ethical ramifications of such work in general.¹

This paper begins with a contextualisation of the project, including the background of the Creative People and Places project, and then moves on to explore 5 themes: Location, Hosting, Practicalities, Duty of Care and Legacy, before making some conclusions about the experience.

Project Contextualisation

Art projects that occur in the public realm cannot be explained by a simple, linear narrative: some people will be highly involved; others

only tangentially. A participant will, for instance, experience a project differently than a researcher; a funder does not take the same route as an artist. I cannot therefore speak for the entirety of 'my' project, as I do not have insight into *every* element, and so despite being the commissioned artist on a community project, I will not be able to speak about 'my' project; only my experience of it. This is a useful starting point to consider, as it begs the question: if a community is not involved with the inception, planning and development of a project, is it really a community project? The habit of parachuting external cultural projects into communities is obviously a concern for those working on socially engaged artworks and was first raised by Su Braden in 1978 in her seminar "Artists and People". Even after 4 decades, this problem has shown no sign of a solution, and the longevity of the debate provides some clues to the managerial knots that exist between external cultural managers and communities. Indeed, it is a problem that the Creative People and Places (CPP) programme – of which my project was a part – had hoped to address.

The CPP is an Arts Council England (ACE) initiative which emerged from governmental policy in the 2010s. It aimed to redress the perceived lack of high-quality art outside of the UK's main central hubs (London, Edinburgh, Manchester, etc.) and work to ensure cultural opportunities within regional community settings. It grew out of national cultural policy designed by the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) in 2004, and the funding for CPP programmes is filtered from central government, to the ACE, then to commissioned organisations, then to community partners, then to artists/researchers and finally (and indirectly) to the community/participating individuals. The structure of funding, however, is a problematically top-down process, and this relates to Braden's concern that 'top-tier' cultural managers do not understand those at the 'bottom tier' who experience the parachuted-in project. This structure provides few opportunities for policy makers to know exactly what is occurring 'on the ground' and how policy machinations affect the daily lives of local citizens. This gap in knowledge between managers and those that experience the works provides the context of this paper, which explores the gaps in infrastructures that occur at the coal face of cultural project delivery in CPP projects.

Before I dive into the specifics of my project, I should re-iterate that the aim of this paper is not to directly criticise organisations or individuals. Therefore, to protect the anonymity of the CPP partner that organised the project I undertook (and who are still operating), I will refer to them as *The Institution*. The Institution are a small company of less than 5 full-time employees who were selected by CPP to deliver a series of socially engaged projects with local, national and international artists within England over the next three years. As their grant was over £2 million, from a legal standpoint

1. For a discussion of the issues see, for example, Bishop (2012), Belfiore (2002) or Hewitt (2011).

they were required to partner with another, larger organisation to manage their funds and so developed a partnership with a national heritage institution. The director of The Institution has been involved with large-scale public art projects in art biennales before, and so they are not novices at this type of participatory artwork. Due to this level of organisational management and experience, I was therefore initially very excited to work with them. Before the project began, we discussed its general framework and agreed that I would be sited in the community, responding to the social contexts and developing research responses and explorations that would build to a final community event.

Location

As CPP projects are essentially about geographically re-siting cultural projects away from the 'centres' and into different areas, the concept of 'location' is important to consider in regards to sites of 'cultural production' and sites of 'cultural management' and the problems that arise when those places are not the same. The Institution had commissioned 12 projects, all within communities in the north of England. Again, due to concerns of anonymity, I will need to be vague, but can tell the reader that my specific project was to be based in a small suburb near a large northern city. This suburb is a socio-economically complex area, with its fair share of social problems, including drug and alcohol addiction, extensive petty crime and most notably – racial segregation. The nearby city itself has much higher than average black/minority/immigrant populations, but the remitted area for the project is almost entirely white. Whilst traditionally a staunchly Labour area, the past 30 years have seen a rise in support for far-right parties, including the English Defence League (EDL) and the British Nationalist Party (BNP). Poverty is also a major issue within the suburb.

The Institution, however, did not have an office or a location within the community. Their offices were an hour away, in another city. They were, in other words, not on-site, neither physically nor ideologically. Nor did they have any pre-existing relationships with this town. The location of my project (I later discovered) had been chosen because The Institution had made a general call-out in 2015, asking any local community wishing to host an artist-in-residence to get in touch. A person from this suburb was apparently the only one to express an interest. She was employed by the local Community Volunteer Service (CVS), and she felt the project would make an excellent contribution to the community, despite not having worked with artists before, nor having been involved with projects like these in the past. The Institution and the CVS met up and came to an agreement, and it was suggested the artist be based in the local Community Centre, and use it as his/her working site. It was explained to me when I started the project that this was a win-win situation: the Community Centre

could host the artist, thus 'activating' the site with art and providing a context for the research. The Institution also felt this agreement ideologically backed up the concepts behind the CPP policies. In this regard, however, The Institution – having no prior relationship to the site, nor a location from which to develop relationships – could have been said to have outsourced the project to the Community Centre.

Clarke, Briggs et al. (2016) discuss the notion of "parachuting in" an artist to a location where the artist or organisation is unfamiliar with the context: it is a "term used for work where researchers do not take the time to acquaint themselves with the lie of the land before seeking to offer alternatives" (Clarke, Briggs et al. 2016, 528). Braden (1978) similarly critiqued organisations that temporarily 'parachuted in' an artist into a context without local, nuanced knowledge and discussed the possibility (or lack thereof) of developing sustainable, meaningful art projects from this approach. Thinkers such as Francois Materasso (2009) and Grant Kester (2004) have also said similar things. Meanwhile, Clarke, Briggs et al (2016) suggest it is part of an organisation's "responsibility and duty" to both the community and the aims of a project that they "took time and built in practical ways to reflect and discuss emergent ideas and uncertainties and became flexible because we cared about how this work would be potentially meaningful for those involved" (Clarke, Briggs et al. 2016, 528).

I do not think, however, that it is always *necessarily* bad to have brief, temporary relationships with a community: the 'parachuted-in' artist-researcher *can* create meaningful responses to a context by being an external voice, a critical outsider. The caveat to this way of working, however, would be that the organisation who employs the artist-researcher should be the one that is embedded into the community; they hold the community relationships; they are the (semi) permanent partner who is invested in the future of the community. The researcher in this context is temporary, whereas the organisation remains and sustains the relationship with the community.

In this project, however, The Institution had no previous relationships with the area. By not *locating* themselves within the same geographical context, The Institution could have been said to be "parachuting in" and it is hard to imagine how the project could begin to offer a valid and meaningful contribution without taking the time to get to know the location or gain direct knowledge of/with the community. This, I felt, was the first 'failure' of infrastructure: without the infrastructure of grounded, location-specific knowledge from The Institution, I was unsure how I could even begin to *socially engage*. One could infer from this that the Community Centre could then be the organisation that is invested in the community and with whom the artist-researcher could work in partnership. This begged the question as to whether a 'non-art' organisation such as a Community Centre could properly function as an ersatz-host to an artist-researcher? Before I could explore how to answer this question, however, there was the matter of where I might sleep.

Hosting

The current residency model of artist placements within socially engaged art contexts emerged out of the Social Inclusion policies of New Labour (Schrag 2016), and grew out of the context-specific approaches of the Artist Placement Group (APG) of the 60s, 70s and 80s (Mellor and Schrag 2016). Problematically, the “radical implications” of the APG’s “artist placement” approach were “suppressed” and “diminished” as the concept was instrumentalised and transformed into the “artist-in-residence” paradigm that is so prevalent in the UK today (Schrag, 2016).

Considering this, I was cautious to explore how the residency was being framed, and as the contract stipulated 70 days of work (plus a materials budget) to be spread over the year, and as the project was advertised as a residency wherein the artist was to be embedded into the community, I proposed a schedule of residencies which started with small, week-long placements that slowly increased to an intensive residency over the summer.

On arriving at the suburb on the first placement in January, however, I was informed I would not have a specific place to be in residence, but that I would be staying with an acquaintance of a friend of one of The Institution’s employees living in the area until a more permanent situation could be arranged.

Viv (not her real name) lived in a perfectly suitable house, and I stayed with her for several of the week-long visits. She was good host, but the situation was not conducive to any long-term arrangement: I could barely turn around in the small room she had available. She was being remunerated for hosting me, but it was fundamentally her house and I was uncomfortable in taking up her already cramped space. I also felt I was imposing on the kindness of a random stranger, and it was conducive to neither my comfort nor my ability to work.

After quite a few pressuring emails and discussions with The Institution and weeks of relying on Viv’s good nature, The Institution let me know that they had found me a place to live: a wholly unfurnished 2-bedroom terraced house. On moving in, I was given 1 plate, 1 bowl, 1 cup, 1 glass, 1 chair, 1 desk, 1 set of cutlery and a mattress on the floor. I was also informed I had to pay for the £450 damage deposit myself due to the legal restrictions that disbarred The Institution from renting properties. It felt impractical and ill-considered, but it was at least functional and, since it had taken so long to get to this point, I felt it best to keep quiet about any concerns. I agreed to the deal, and would often return from a day trying to speak to people to this empty house and call my husband, hearing my voice echo off the bare walls, the other empty rooms, the bare cupboards and the mattress pushed up against the wall like a dead body.

Famously, Virginia Woolf (1929) wrote that artists only needed a room of one’s own and a small stipend in order to produce good art. Ms Woolf was a genius of her time, but I think this is a dated, flawed approach. Virginia did not mention that she also needed an

agent, a publishing company, paper mills to produce the paper, inks with which to print her words, paper binders, a distributor, etc., to produce her excellent books. Artists don’t exist in isolation: they need infrastructure. Howard S. Becker’s *Art Worlds* illustrates this perfectly: the *artworld* is a “network of people whose cooperative activity [is] organised via their joint knowledge of conventional means of doing things” (Becker 1984). While Becker was speaking of specific zones of production and traditional gallery-based contexts, the point remains: artists cannot exist in isolation. We need more than a room of one’s own. I would argue his point is *especially* true of work within socially engaged contexts because we don’t make beautiful modernist objects to put in galleries, but rather explore complex social relations and situations to develop context-specific sites of interaction and dialogue. The interactions between things and people *is* the research. Looking at the Creative People and Places programme and its concerns, how a socially engaged artist-researcher is expected to function within infrastructurally “cold spots” of culture (Gilmore 2013) then becomes troublingly problematic: how can he/she be expected to operate without appropriate support networks? The precarious nature of artists, in general, means that we will often work in less-than-desirable contexts. This is even more precarious within ‘artistic research’ contexts due to the lack of support or understanding, and doubly more insecure in contexts of socially engaged artworks with their assumptions of vocation and social work (Schrag 2016).

What I am trying to reflect upon is how the surrounding experiences of any artist’s work – be it research or ‘traditional’ – are deeply tied to the contexts around them, and if a project has not considered even the practicalities of where an artist might sleep/live while on a residency – how they might be hosted within a community that is not theirs – how can he/she be expected to operate appropriately? This reflects the second infrastructural failure of the project.

Practicalities

To explore the third lack, I offer the following image (image 1).

The context of socially engaged practitioners exists without the traditions of gallery structures (Bourriaud 1998) and requires that an artist working in such a manner must have understanding of the “lived environment” (Lefebvre 1991). As such, socially engaged artists do not necessarily require the traditional structures of the traditional studio, but instead respond to the context. As Hersey and Bobick suggest: “postmodern practices have redefined where art can be made” (Hersey and Bobick 2016). However, I present this image not to critique the space provided, but rather to raise a discussion about how infrastructures affect the art that can be made. As such, it is useful to give some background on the Community Centre.

Due to funding cuts by successive governments, the Community Centre is now entirely run by volunteers from the Community Volunteer



Image 1. Room provided by the Community Centre as a studio

Service (CVS), and the Centre covers the majority of its operating costs via room rentals (to the Knitting Group, the Martial Arts Club, etc.). In the partnership with CVS, The Institution agreed to rent a space from the Community Centre, thereby contributing funds, while also providing me with a place to work. It seemed, on the surface, like a good exchange: the Community Centre would get money; I would get a place to work and access to the ‘community’.

On arrival at the Community Centre in January 2016, they welcomed me, made me a cup of tea and we introduced ourselves. After a couple hours of good chat, I explained that I should get to work, and wondered where I could get settled. They pointed to small side room, saying I could use this space, but that it was needed in 2 hours because the Dance Group were coming. After that, I could move into the room across the hall for 30 min, as it was free then, but after that I needed to move into the side office for 3 hours, and then to the gym for another 2 hours after that, etc. I asked if there was any permanent space where I could work and they explained there wasn't, as room rentals were the priority.

When asked about access to the building, I was told I could not have a key, as only managers could have keys, and so I could enter the building only when a manager was on site, which did not include

weekends, evenings or several mornings a week. As an artist and researcher who works within the social realm, I am used to working in odd contexts – as above: *understanding of the ‘lived environment’* (Lefebvre 1991). I reasoned with myself that limitations are often opportunities to think differently, and so I set about attempting to respond to the context.

After 2 months of trying to fit into this routine, I realised the impossibility of thinking and making within this constant moving: no sooner had I settled into a space, I would be required to move. Nothing was getting done. I needed somewhere stable and fixed, as well as access to the building on my own terms: ‘working with people’ does not fit into office hours, but happens at all the odd times in which people are being ‘a community’ – including weekends and evenings. The Community Centre then proposed a more permanent location: the Tinkerbell Room in the image above.

It is not actually a room but a thoroughfare between two other rooms; people randomly walk through the space every 20 min. I cannot lock it and so cannot leave my computer unattended; nor was I allowed to change the layout of room in any way, as it was still used on some evenings for Social Work interviews and as a place for counselling and discussion. There are no windows, no plugs, no any direct working space, other than the small desk I found in a rubbish dump. But at least it was a fixed space, and I decided to try to make it work.

The room highlighted the third infrastructural failure: how could the host (the Community Centre) be expected to attend to the needs and requirements of something of which they have never had any experience? They do not know the needs of a regular, traditional, object-producing artist, let alone someone who is doing something as amorphous as ‘artistic research within social contexts’. In other words, the lack of infrastructure from the Community Centre cannot be faulted, as it is neither within their remit nor their expertise, but it highlighted how aesthetic processes are affected by the processes that surround them, and begs the question as to what the responsibility of organisations are to artists. In regard to cultural policy, Gilmore reminds us that “cultural strategies for the arts relate to, or ignore, the specificities of places, the situated cultural practices and implicit knowledge of localities, their internal logics, histories and structures” (Gilmore 2013). What occurs when commissioning institutions also ‘ignore’ the specialities of place, or the specialities of sited work, such as socially engaged art practices?

Duty of Care

Over time, the Tinkerbell Room became too difficult to work in, and so The Institution and I called a meeting to look for a solution, inviting all the local partners. In this meeting, a member of the local council offered me a barge to use as my studio. I explained I would be

interested in that, but I had never had worked from a barge before, and was worried I did not have the appropriate skills to keep it safe/running/afloat. The local council member expressed concern at this, and said insurance papers would need to be signed that would ensure the boat's – and my own – safety. The Institution, however, interjected, and declared it a great solution and assured me that they would ultimately be responsible, and I was not to worry about that: I should just focus on the work. The barge was therefore promptly brought down the Canal the following week, and parked in the only lockable location, outside the town's only pub.



Image 2. The barge provided by The Institution as a studio

Interestingly, the pub is truly a community hub – much more so than the Community Centre. It seems to be the community's beating, social heart and was recently declared a Community Asset, protecting it from the very real possibility of closure by the franchise owners.

It is also a fascinating place inhabited by fascinating people: the quiet, shy cleaner who pokes her head out at 7 a.m. to empty out her dirty mop bucket on the cobbles; Jimmie arrives at 8:55 a.m. each morning, waiting for the pub to open as if he were going to work (and why not: he's retired!) and stays there all day, drinking; Trevor pops by throughout the day for pints between his various manual jobs. Indeed, the whole community seems to end up at the pub: school kids come over after school to get house keys from their parents; locals crowd in from about 5 p.m. onwards until late at night; many tiny children fall asleep on the benches by the pool table as their parents finish their endless pints, their drunken laughter rippling off the quiet, still and dark waters of the canal. I have a good view of all of this, working from the barge directly opposite. At first, they were hesitant about me and understandably so: I was a stranger suddenly placed in the vulnerable heart of a social group. But, over the weeks, they warmed to me as I invited them onto the boat, showed them around, led workshops for their kids and begin to engage with them and their context.

Problematically, however, because the boat was opposite the pub, and pubs usually involve drinking and jovial craic, I would often arrive in the morning to discover the boat had been un-moored and was drifting somewhere along the canal. Almost every morning, I would have to walk along the canal to find it, somehow get to it, then pull it in and re-moor it, ritualistically re-tying the ropes, re-aligning it, and examining it for damage. One morning, the entire mooring mechanism – a solid block of buried concrete – had been methodically dug up and chucked into the shallow, muddy water. Obviously, these daily events impacted my working process and my comfort about leaving anything of value on the boat. However, whilst problematic – like the Tinkerbell Room, and the hollow shell of the house in which I lived – it had taken so long to get to this point, so I persevered despite all the delays and distractions each morning's re-moorings cost me.

Early one morning, the project manager was visiting, and I saw some youth on the Tow Path. I had done a workshop with some of them the day before and so waved at them, at which point they began to throw stones at me: small rocks flying at my head and making a noise as they plopped into the water. I called out, in a friendly voice, joking to defuse the situation: "Oi! There's no need to get violent!" They laughed, and one of the boys yelled back: "Your mother was violent last night when I fucked her, because my dick was so big". He was 9 years old. They returned to throwing rocks, bigger ones now, and one just missed my face as I ducked to avoid it. When I turned back, one of them pointed and called me "Fag-Boy Cunt! You fucking Homo! I'm going to tell everyone you touched me! Pedo!" They all began chanting this and continued to hurl rocks and homophobic abuse at me until they passed under a bridge, out of sight. The project manager, at the other end of the barge, looked back at me, shrugged and laughed, saying: "Well, this is all part of the fun, isn't it?" She was being ironic, I realise, but it did not seem fun to me.

In some ways I understood what she meant: this was the reality of rough working-class towns and I could not necessarily apply my middle-class ideals to such a context. Thankfully, I have thick skin and have worked in contexts as complex as this before, and so *can* brush off a few rocks and a few words: but what is an organisation's responsibility to a person they have employed to work in such contexts? I had just experienced a hate crime, and the institutional representative suggested I laugh it off. Considering the precarious nature of artists (Hope 2012), and the current discussions of harassment within the arts, I wonder if a woman who had had rape threats screamed at her from a gang of young men would be expected to continue to work in such an environment? Would there be an expectation that she were to go back and work with those very same men? Or if a Muslim had had Islamophobic abuse directed at them, would he/she be expected to continue working on the project?

This is, of course, about pastoral care: what are the responsibilities of an organisation who invites someone to live and work in a difficult

context? In comparison to the societal issues faced by many citizens within these communities, it is perhaps not an important question to explore, but I think it's safe to argue that the emotional state of a researcher might affect the quality of the work carried out within such contexts.

Legacy

On this residency, drugs, poverty and violence were a daily reality of the community which had been normalised, and while not everyone faced these issues, everyone was affected by them. To expect to develop appropriate artistic research in that context is complicated: what did we think it could achieve? Is art ever a suitable replacement for a robust (well-funded) social work strategy? The reality of the situation was, however, that I was being paid a healthy sum to work with mostly unemployed people. And, at the end of the project, I would be paid despite the quality/quantity of research I developed, even if I didn't develop any *artistic outputs* at all.

A recent article in the Observer Magazine (Byrnes 2016) explored the problematics of such artistic production in regards to the gentrification of a Sheffield housing estate, and how a man's desperate graffiti act – the scrawl of his words *I love you, will u marry me* on the side of a pedestrian bridge – had been appropriated by design 'regeneration specialists' Urban Splash to become the tag-line of the area's gentrification in a manner that has been called 'class cleansing' (Hatherly 2011). The graffiti was replicated in neon; used to market re-designed 1960s failed social housing schemes; screen-printed on matching pillows for sale in bespoke furniture shops; splashed on posters; used on replica buildings at the 2006 Venice Architecture Biennale and even appeared on beer labels from a specially set-up micro-brewery. The man himself however – Jason – is homeless, penniless and the woman he wanted to marry is dead from a drug overdose, while Urban Splash is a highly successful organisation.

So, the question of how artists and institutions work within the social context of extreme – or even moderate – socio-economic difficulty is an ethical question, and I think we need to recognise we are all part of the problem (Matarasso 2013). To be sure, things *did* happen on the residency, but I did not produce any suitable research or appropriate artwork, because the infrastructures did not allow it. It begs the question why the project was funded via *art* organisations and problematises the criteria by which we judge the success of such projects. As an artist being commissioned to develop artistic research by an art organisation, funded by the Arts Council, I suggest that the criteria for success must be 'art'. Not social work, and not public engagement. In other words, the art is the primary goal, and any other goals are secondary. And if there is no art, then the project fails. Engagement is part of the process and the methodology of research

for participatory and/or socially engaged practices, but it is not the endpoint. As McLuhan has suggested: the medium of dissemination shapes the message (McLuhan 1964). In this regard, without an infrastructure to create the medium in the first place, there isn't even a message to be shaped.

It made me wonder how institutions exist and sustain themselves and if some institutions were sustaining themselves *for themselves*. The Creative People and Places scheme is concerned about the sustainability of such projects and institutions, and that word – sustainability – is tricky. Whilst having all the positive sentiments of being 'green' and 'developmental', it is fundamentally about how things continue; how they stay the same; how they survive unchallenged. An ecological critique of that word has resonance in this instance too:

When we talk about sustainability, then, what is it that we hope to sustain? We certainly do not sustain nature "in itself." Rather, we sustain nature as we humans prefer it. More precisely, we preserve the resources needed for human consumption, whether that means energy consumption or aesthetic consumption. In one sense, we preserve nature for industry. (Butman 2016)

Thus, the question of how an institution sustains itself is a question of whether an institution sustains itself *for itself*. Is it functioning in order to preserve itself, rather than in service to specific governmental remits of 'place'. To extrapolate this idea: could we imagine that an arts organisation which receives funding to work for the poor might be invested in keeping the poor *poor*, because it is on those terms that they will continue to be funded? Or: could cultural policies of 'place-making' that are aligned with socio-economically problematic communities actually support institutions whose funding is premised on sustaining such socio-economic discrepancies? While these are farfetched meanderings, there are deep issues at stake as to how organisations are actually functioning.

Conclusion

This text has not followed a traditional academic framework and, consequently, neither will it end with a traditional conclusion. Instead, I want to end by conveying the feeling that things are unresolved, inconclusive and incomplete, because that was –and is –the reality of this and such projects in general.

Infrastructure is defined the "the basic systems and services... that [an] organisation uses in order to work effectively" (New Oxford American Dictionary 2015). What, then, did The Institution want to *work effectively*? What was the true intention of the project? Did they actually want me to produce nothing, or was there a flaw in the infrastructure? After all, "Good working infrastructure is transparent to use" (Neumann 1996).

As I said in the introduction, I have consciously not spoken about the work I did, and that – sadly – is because I did not develop any research worth discussing. The engagements were shallow, the processes forced and the outputs hollow. We cannot assume that artistic research ‘just happens’ in the same way that we cannot assume art ‘just happens’ – there are infrastructural concerns that need to be in place before projects even begin to occur. I did not develop any suitable research outcomes or even artistic outputs from this research because of a lack of infrastructure. I can conjecture as to the whys and wherefores, but it is perhaps more salient to consider what François Matarasso has said: “If art matters, the ethical framework within which it is produced, distributed and consumed matters also” (Matarasso, 2009). And: “Another way of answering these questions is to think less of what an artist *is* and more of what they *do*. Perhaps being an artist is not about a person’s nature or status, but a way of acting in the world” (Matarasso, 2009). I would extend this to researchers too, and also to organisations who aim to support both artists and researchers. It is what we do that counts. So I am being as truthful as I can in the hopes that this reportage can encourage more consideration of how organisations *do* artistic research in the future.

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Anthony Schrag is a lecturer in Cultural Management at Queen Margaret University. His practice-based PhD – completed in 2016 – explored the relationship between artists, institutions and the public, looking specifically at a productive nature of conflict within institutionally supported participatory/public art projects.

Schrag is a practising artist and researcher who has worked nationally and internationally, including residencies in Iceland, USA, Canada, Pakistan, Finland, The Netherlands and South Africa, among others. He works in a participatory manner, and central to his practice is a discussion about the place of art in a social context. Lecturing interests include the ethics of artists 'working with people', critical pedagogies and practice-based research.

He has been the recipient of numerous awards including The Hope Scot Trust, Creative Scotland, British Council, the Dewar Arts Award, the 2011 Standpoint Futures: Public residency award, as well as a Henry Moore Artist Fellowship. In 2015, he walked 2638 km from the north of Scotland to the Venice Biennale to explore the place of participatory artworks within the public realm.

The artist Nathalie De Brie once referred to his practice as 'Fearless'. The writer Marjorie Celona once said: 'Anthony, you have a lot of ideas. Not all of them are good.'