

CRITICAL SPACES

The dynamics of change in relation to culture and the culture industries.

AHRC workshop project 1 1 2007 - 31 12 2007 University of Plymouth

Convenor: Dr. **Malcolm Miles** (Reader in Cultural Theory, promoted to Professor 1 9 2007)

REPORT ON COMPLETION OF THE WORKSHOP

This report contains the following sections:

- Short description and note of changes;
- Background - including complexities of the situation and the need for research and dialogue as it emerged in early discussion among the group;
- The method of the workshops and abstracts of core group and invited papers;
- Key points advanced and findings which emerged;
- Specific outcomes and suggested further research questions.

The core group of participants is (session in which paper given *):

Vardan Azatyan (Fine Arts Academy, Yerevan Armenia) (S)

Franco Bianchini (Cultural Policy, de Montfort University, since relocated to Leeds Metropolitan University) (S)

Daniel Brasil (artist, Lisbon and Weimar) (M)

Paul Chatterton (Human Geography, University of Leeds) (M)

Monica Degen (Sociology, Brunel University) (M)

Frank Eckardt (Urban Studies, Bauhaus University, Weimar) (S)

Beatriz Garcia (Arts Policy, University of Liverpool) (M)

Tim Hall (Urban Geography, University of Gloucestershire) (M)

Angela Harutyunyan (curator, Centre for Contemporary Experimental Art, Yerevan, Armenia) (M)

Andy Hewitt and Mel Jordan (artists' group Free Art Collective, Sheffield) (J)

Alex Loftus (Cultural Geography, Royal Holloway College, London) (S)

Malcolm Miles (Cultural Theory, University of Plymouth) (S)

Steven Miles (Sociology, University of Liverpool) (M)

Barbara Penner (Architectural History, Bartlett School of Architecture, University College London) (S)

Hilary Powell and Dan Edelsteyn (film makers, Optimistic Productions) (S)

Laura Sillars (FACT, Liverpool) (S)

(*) M indicates paper in May session, J in July, S in September

Short Description:

The workshop investigated the concept and potential intellectual and material impact of the creative imagination in settings of urban social change. It tested ideas of creativity from viewpoints in the arts and social sciences, taking a range of cases from participants' original research, to question the concept of cultural agency in relation to socio-political and cultural structures and institutions. It interrogated, for instance, the idea that the creative imagination can be applied in the imagining of alternative social formations. FACT, an arts space in Liverpool city centre, acted as a partner cultural organisation. The discussions were topical, when UK government support for the arts is under review following a shortage of clear data for the outcomes of culturally-led urban regeneration. In some cases, the results of culturally-led regeneration were visually attractive while failing to impact structural problems posed, for example, by de-industrialisation and migration. This redirected attention to the nature of creativity and a need for deeper understanding of its dynamics and potential as an engine of change in a democratic society. In addressing such difficulties, in the interests of social harmony and resource efficiency, questions emerged as to the effectiveness of conventional models of art (or less conventional models of cultural work) in urban development, how the creative imagination informs processes of urban change, how the arts offer models of imaginative transformations and how the creative imagination might contribute to new social formations and sustainable development of a creative as well as democratic society. A core group of participants at post-doctoral level, all previously published, and including participants from Germany, India, Switzerland and Armenia, drawn equally from the Arts (including contemporary art practice, cultural theory, and architecture) and social sciences (including urban sociology, urban geography, cultural geography, and cultural policy), looked for new, inter-disciplinary ways to investigate questions raised by recent cultural interventions in urban change.

Background – summarizing early discussions:

Over the past twenty years, the creative arts have been increasingly viewed by government, and to an extent in higher education in creative arts fields, in cultural geography, and in interdisciplinary fields such as cultural policy, as aligned in various ways to a creative and/or cultural sector in the economy. This applies equally in the UK as in the USA. Often, the arts are employed in schemes for urban redevelopment to lend a specific site or urban district a cultural or heritage identity. The strategies used range from commissioning single pieces of public art, or setting up a percent-for-art budget within a capital scheme (normally setting aside 1% of capital costs in a new building or major refurbishment), to designation of a whole district as a cultural quarter or heritage zone. The latter may include multiple commissions for art and craft works, innovative urban design, and support for new or revived cultural venues. In the UK the National Lottery has provided substantial funds for new capital schemes in the arts, cases of which include the New Art Gallery at Walsall in the West Midlands, the Lowry Centre in Salford near Manchester, and the Sage Music Centre in Gateshead. The latter is situated within a broad culturally led redevelopment of the Tyne quayside between Newcastle and Gateshead, other elements of which include the Baltic Art Gallery and several new, riverside hotels and bars. Most recently, Newcastle and Gateshead have sought to produce a carbon-neutral environment, for example by using electric buses to link the quayside with Newcastle city centre. This is interesting in shifting a previous agenda concerned only with urban regeneration to one in which sustainability is a major component, and is evident in the cultural quarter of the quayside. It was brought into prominence by a project 'Climate Change: Cultural Change' coordinated by local arts organisation Helix Arts in the summer of 2006. This is noted here because it shows that urban redevelopment agendas are not static, while culture tends to remain central to them – as when the arts are seen as the means to raise public awareness of a major issue, not just to create place identity.

There are several reasons for the prolonged centrality of culture. They range from an ideological belief in the transformative power of the arts, or their capacity to empower and enliven members of specific urban publics, to a pragmatic faith in the abilities of arts professionals to innovate, communicate and generally provide new scenarios in sites which tend to be post-industrial or marked in some way as declining or deprived; and a cynical view that while structural changes in relation to employment, education, mobility, housing and other key areas of public policy in a welfare state society (or one which retains at least a stated allegiance to such provision) are expensive, the arts are not only cheap but also highly visible. In this context, any notoriety or press or public controversy around individual art works or elements of design is regarded as positive in drawing attention to the development (and away from more fundamental socio-political issues).

The present situation is complex in the following ways:

1. The UK government's cultural policy has partly changed direction in 2005-08;
2. That policy contains contradictions;
3. There is little if any evidence for the efficacy of projects supported over the past two decades.
4. The regular commissioning of reports, strategies, and evaluations of cultural and culturally-led urban initiatives seems not to inform future policy directions.

To extend these points (generally and taking them together): In the 1980s, arts organisations were required increasingly to operate on a business model. The arts became a sector in the economy, characterised by small organisations and a high level of self-employment in fields such as the visual arts and crafts, and by small group work in performative fields.

Organisations were encouraged to develop business plans and to seek funding from both private-sector and public-sector sources. Arts funding bodies such as the Arts Councils (through several reorganisations leading to today's strong regional emphasis) increasingly supported arts organisations in this process, assisting with training programmes, considerably enlarging the arts infra-structure in new or expanded arts organisations, and constructing application processes in ways which foregrounded factors such as audience participation and public benefit (often in community terms) as well as retaining a concern for quality. Quality, however, is notoriously difficult to define in the creative arts. While - to give a simplistic example as trope - bridge design can be judged by factors such as the performance of materials in supporting predicted loads in a variety of conditions, the quality of a piece of public sculpture is likely to be seen in dramatically different ways by different people even within, let alone outwith, the fine arts sector. Leaving that aside, if arts policy and its support for artists and arts organisations prior to the mid 1980s revolved around quality, from then onwards this was allied to the ability of an arts group or arts organisation in receipt of public funding to maintain itself in business terms and to seek private-sector investment as well as demonstrating that an audience exists for the work. The outcome was expansion of the arts bureaucracy and professionalisation of those involved in it, and to a lesser but noticeable extent, of artists. At the same time there was a shift in vocabulary: from arts administration (a term implying public responsibility) to arts management (which does not, and is still current today). Through the mid to late 1980s and in the 1990 (as today) this policy developed into a new cultural expediency. Building on the growth of public art - much of it achieved through the effective communication skills of arts professionals, particularly newly professionalised managers able to read and engage actively with the agendas of non-arts sectors from health and education to urban planning - arts organizations claimed to offer solutions to diverse urban problems, mainly in areas of decline. Among the obvious benefits were the use of

redundant industrial buildings as arts locations, and the spin-off when such sites lent a district a cultural identity. For example, the insertion of Tate Modern in Southwark - one of London's poorest boroughs - was welcomed by the local authority as leveraging private-sector redevelopment of the whole surrounding area. This has occurred, and can be called improvement or gentrification according to the ideological position of the observer. But claims spread to other policy areas, such as employment, crime and social exclusion (the latter a category specifically invented by the Blair administration in 1997, allied to but not the same as the populist notion of a social underclass for whom social norms were meaningless and perceived as a threat). A similar development occurred in the USA, where the National Endowment for the Arts sought to extricate itself from pressures from policy makers, often holding retrogressive views on the arts, by engaging with more or less all policy sectors.

But while communication skills created vast new cultural markets (especially for agents and consultants), and the arts became central to the visual reinvention of many cities - through flagship cultural institutions and cultural quarters - little effort was made to collect or collate evidence for the success of projects claiming public/social benefit. Nor were clear criteria agreed, and in many cases the claims were too vague to be demonstrable through quantitative or qualitative analysis. This became evident following the failure of the Millennium Dome in south-east London in 2000, intended as a flagship, and became urgent through a rift between the Department for Culture, Media and Sport and the Arts Council of England around 2005. The result, is a return to a rhetoric of "innovation" and "excellence" alongside a retention of the notion of social benefit. According to Tessa Jowell, for example, when Secretary of State at DCMS in 2005, the arts are best at what the arts alone can do (or words to that effect, echoing those of, say, art critic Clement Greenberg in the 1960s). This returns evaluation to what can be only and no more than a subjective interpretation of the case in question.

This leads to the final point, that, as emphasised by Bianchini in his contribution to the workshop, while the commissioning of reports, strategies, evaluations and other forms of document (sometimes but not always including a visual record where that is appropriate) is treated as if obligatory, or at least normal, by local authorities and other public bodies now, this huge weight of paper has little impact on future policies. This may be, in some cases, because conditions change; or because local authorities change political colour, or their officers move to new posts; or simply because the papers, having been paid for, remain unread. Such reports are a growth area of contract research for university departments dealing with cultural and/or social policy, but are of as uncertain effect and variable clarity of purpose as are many of the schemes they investigate. Among core members of the workshop there was a feeling that more knowledge is needed on how the creative arts may or not have agency in social change. This question is framed as constructive criticism of the current situation in the UK and its background since around the 1980s. It represents a belief that the creative arts do have specific qualities and relevance but a doubt as to how this is reflected in cultural policy and the experience of culturally led urban redevelopment to date. This question, it was found during the workshop, overlaps with others, such as:

- How social change itself occurs, often in incremental and localised ways;
- How the roles of individuals and groups, or organisations and public bodies, differ in their capacity for agency;
- How the creative arts offer a model of approaching urban conditions differing from that of the conventional methods of, say, urban planning and urban design.

It should be noted, however, that there is considerable local innovation and social engagement within urban planning and urban design - for example in the use of urban design action teams to work with dwellers on specific sites/proposals.

Methods and Abstracts:

The first workshop was restricted to the core group, plus one academic colleague of the convenor acting as facilitator (Katy MacLeod, Art History, University of Plymouth). It took place on 9-11 May, 2007, at Hazelwood House, a retreat centre in a refurbished Victorian country house set in a deep, green and wooded valley in south Devon. The house is regularly used for such work, and offers simple but comfortable single rooms for participants, a large meeting room, a smaller informal room, and dining facilities. Its remote location offers an opportunity to avoid the pressures of university environments, allows walks to punctuate discussion, and imposes no time restrictions. The aim was for the core group to bond, not all having previously met, and for the first set of papers to be given. There was informal discussion at meals taken together. Each paper (of 40 minutes) was followed by a similar period of discussion. All papers were written and based on the presenter's original research. Where practicable, a paper by a social scientist was initially responded to by another core group member from the arts. The process went on after dinner to around 10 pm. The format of a three day event thus encompassed a large amount of work, in an ambience conducive to attentive listening (and no use of powerpoints, etc). Members of the core group found this a good way to work; all regard the process of listening and response as, itself, work towards deeper insights into the material presented, not merely a reception of findings.

Abstracts from first session:

Tim Hall

Reconsidering public art in Birmingham

The paper explored the various roles that public art has played in the city and the ways in which Cultural eographers and others, including critical social scientists and arts critics and advocates have studied and written about it. It highlighted the limitations of existing literatures on public art, discussing in particular their neglect of the study of the audience as a site at which meanings are made. It went on to highlight ways in which the study of public art in the city might be advanced. In doing so, it considers recent examples of research into public art and the city that have challenged existing orthodoxies.

Angela Harutyunyan

Politics of Representation, Armenian Centre for Contemporary Experimental Art

"In the first part of my talk I introduced the word 'curator' (and its constructed Armenian equivalent - 'hamadrogh') as a concept in the context of contemporary Armenian art which participates in the ongoing signification of other imported terms. I traced its origins and implications by contextualizing it within several artistic and curatorial practices in Armenia. I then proceeded to critically outline the history of curating since the mid 90's in the context of the endemic politics of

representation and recognition at the Armenian Center for Contemporary Experimental Art (ACCEA) in Yerevan. I did this by discussing two prevailing modes of curatorial engagement - the artist as curator and the curator as artist, which in the context of ACCEA's (self-)representational strategies, implies a hierarchical relationship between the presented and the represented. As opposed to these dominant trends, I argued that the critical role of the curator today is not to pursue (self-)representation but to offer a critique of such a position. I further presented the position that it is precisely when the curator manages to facilitate dialog between the artists, the artist and the audience, as well as the artist/audience and herself, curating takes on the role of a cultural hermeneutic and intermediation beyond self-representation. This resists the hierarchical elation of artistic representation over and above the act of curatorial reflection. Such an approach she argued, complicates the curator's role as someone who combines the intermediation of relations with the function of evaluation and reflection."

Paul Chatterton

Reclaiming the good city

This paper is about a politics of hope - about ordinary people doing extraordinary things - that we will all have to get involved in changing our world at some point. It is a politics that says that we can all do it, it is feasible and that it is inspiring. It is also a politics of doubt, as the Zapatistas of Mexico say 'preguntando caminamos' (asking, we walk) where the aim of politics is less focused on claiming the state, but rebuilding politics from the bottom up. This leaves us in very unfamiliar territory: an ill-defined enemy, an eschewal of power, a rejection of blueprints, a mistrust of leaders, and few workable examples. This paper outlines several principles for outlining how we might reclaim the good city in this terrain of hope and doubt: a commitment to transformation; solidarity; self management; ethics and responsibilities; finding the good life; dealing with powerlessness; participatory Democracy; spaces for action; reclaiming low energy geographies

Steven Miles

Design and Appropriation of commercial and cultural metropolitan spaces

There is evidence, from Australia and the UK, that some specific groups, or publics, use spaces such as shopping malls and art galleries for purposes other than those for which they are designed. Mainly, this consists of hanging out, either as, say, groups of young people (or young unemployed people with no or minimal consumption capacity) in mall spaces, or as groups of middle class art appreciators in galleries now promoted as much for cafes and bookshops as for art. This suggests a need to reconfigure how we look at the city as a series of planned spaces, often linked to a symbolic economy, that are nonetheless occupied in unplanned ways.

Bestriz Garcia

Evaluating the Capital of Culture

The contesting territories and claims of different groups and organisations taking part in the Capital of Culture 2008 programme in Liverpool, and the mixed reception of the proposed programme in the city and elsewhere, offer an interesting field for evaluation, suggesting a need to tread carefully. Looking at the experience of other cultural evaluation projects, and previous EU nominated Cities or Capitals of Culture, the paper charts the methods currently in development for Liverpool 08. This is very much work in progress and the paper aims mainly to raise issues for inter-disciplinary discussion.

Daniela Brasil

Everyday urban cultures

Strolling through cultural and sensorial relations between bodies and cities, I will argue that urbanism can be done in an everyday basis, through interfering in systems of perceptions and affections that citizens have towards the places they are in. Relying on the fact that cities are both material and immaterial, to improve the quality of urban life is absolutely necessary to put conformities at stake. Creating situations where one can sense and enact lived spaces are far more effective than designing and re-designing physical spaces. Questioning the excessively material approaches that architects and urbanists tend to work with, this paper exalts the spaces of experience, exchange and debate. I am arguing that the insertion of art and creativity in the everyday life through displacements and nomadisms are powerful strategies of contaminations between people, ideas and behaviours. It is exactly in this interplay of changeable frontiers that new attitudes towards radical change and resistance to the spectacularization, banalization and suppression of pleasure in urban experience can emerge. Finally, if cities are moveable bodies, embedded in the daily, lived, ordinary body, as much as the bodies are travelling cities, this research fosters micro-politics that urbanize the body and small gestures that embody cities.

Monica Degen

Experiencing visualities in designed urban environments: learning from Milton Keynes

In many discussions of how cities in the global North are changing, the growing importance of urban design is emphasised. That is, producing visually and spatially coherent urban buildings and spaces seems to be increasingly central to urban change. To date, most attention has focussed on exploring the reasons for this shift. Much less attention has been paid to the experiences of the people inhabiting and using such designed spaces. Although many authors acknowledge, in theory, that such encounters between human subjects and designed urban environments are richly various and unpredictable, few studies have examined this empirically and learnt theoretically from these encounters. Drawing on fieldwork undertaken in the British city of Milton Keynes - the centre of which is a shopping mall, a designed environment par excellence - the paper argues that understanding experiences of contemporary urban change requires a relational and performative understanding of environmental encounters, and it suggests three intertwined implications for rethinking research on urban aesthetics: first, we suggest a multimodal and sensuously embedded understanding of vision; second, a practice-centred understanding of the environment; and third, a need for self-reflexive understanding of the researchers' position in the fieldwork.

Among interim findings was that the case of Liverpool as European Capital of Culture in 2008 - an event which will not be repeated for many years in the UK as sites for Capital of Culture rotate among EU member states - would offer areas of helpful scrutiny, and that the September workshop - again for the core group - should take place there. This was enabled through the contribution of FACT, an arts space and organisation in the centre of Liverpool, involved in the 2008 programme. This was agreed by consensus. A further agreement was to seek to publish papers from the workshop as an edited academic book (see below).

An intermediate workshop took place on 11 July, 2007, at the University of Plymouth. This was scheduled for the day preceding the 8th International Conference of the Utopian Studies Society so that participants - especially those coming from other countries - for the conference, which had a number of cultural strands in parallel sessions, could opt to participate also in this one-day workshop. This resulted in an audience of around 45, mainly from Europe. A series of presentations by invited speakers added to the scope of the workshop, and feedback and discussion from this wider audience was helpful, not least in drawing attention to contrasting cases in other countries. The link between cultural activity and national identity in the ex-East bloc was of particular interest. Reciprocally, members of the core group able to do so were able to stay for the conference. The invited presenters were: Esther Salomon, arts manager and consultant, Newcastle; part-time lecturer in social work, University of Durham; Stefan Kristensen, cultural theorist and researcher, University of Geneva; member of Utopiana, an international arts organization based in Geneva and Yerevan; Friedrich von Borries, an architect in Berlin, working on new visual technologies for experiencing and mapping the city. Additionally, Hewitt and Jordan made a presentation of their work as members of Free Art Collective.

Abstracts from July session:

Esther Salamon

Visions of Utopia (Without a dream you go nowhere)

The 'Visions of Utopia' project was developed in response to decades of C(c)onservative social and economic policies in the U.K.. The 1980's and 1990's in particular were a time of great upheaval, a time when working practices and global communication changed, unemployment increased and individual fulfilment for many was illusive. Government policies emphasised individual self-reliance. Notions of community and the collective were, at best, disregarded or treated with disdain resulting in them becoming fragmented and in crisis. People became increasingly alienated, powerless and agitated, more and more concerned with day-to-day survival. Visions of Utopia (originally called 'Is it time to dream yet?') was developed during the 1990's in Northern England and aimed to challenge the prevailing hegemony by providing the time and space for communities, artists, cultural organisations, universities and others to consider alternative realities and articulate possible futures. It offered an opportunity for everyone to identify and explore visions of better lives and the better worlds they would like to inhabit. It welcomed dystopian as well as utopian visions, and anticipated providing a platform for the cacophony of ideas that would be expressed through art, performance, films, lectures and debates.

Every daring attempt to make a great change in existing conditions, every lofty vision of new possibilities for the human race, has been labelled Utopian. (Emma Goldman)

Friedrich von Borries

New urban spaces and the ambivalent potentials of pervasive technologies

In the recent years, computer games have left the PC and entered via new mobile devices like handhelds and mobile phones the urban space; equipped with location aware technologies like GPS or Augmented Reality Systems they are able to transform urban space into a playground. Here, „Real“ Space and „imganinated“ space not only overlaps, this superimposition creates something new, and a new kind of space emerges. These pervasive technologies creates not only many possibilities for the game industry, which, in cooperation with the telecommunication companies are now developing new games, but also opens up a new perspective for participation in urban planning. The quality of engagement you achieve when you convince people to play is something you could use very effective for urban planning. In the meantime, the same technologies have been used by the military to invent new ways of fighting. In this mode of fighting, the natural environment is replaced by a game like environment, in which the soldier hat to navigate. But what does that mean to urban space? What is the relation between the utopian (new forms of participation) and the dystopian (the war-field as an interactive playground) aspects of pervasive technologies?

Stefan Kristensen

Utopian principles of cultural strategies

"Utopiana" is a cultural initiative which aims at stimulating the sources of visual creativity in contemporary Armenia. It relies on 1. a comprehension of the post-soviet situation as a never ending transition, 2. on a conception of the role of visual arts in front of a totalitarian heritage, and 3. on the conviction that Armenia has yet to understand how to configure its relations with the diaspora. Those aspects of contemporary Armenia are best understood with utopian lenses, be it in order to oppose neo-totalitarian and nationalistic trends in Armenian society, be it in order to understand the dispersed and fragmented reality of the Armenian nation today, and especially to imagine the future structures of the cultural sphere in this sort of country.

Freee art collective

Utopia, Art and the Counter-Public Sphere

Freee is an art collective made up of 3 artists, Dave Beech, Andy Hewitt and Mel Jordan, who work together on art projects that entail and enact cultural strategies for alternatives to the official debased public sphere. Freee occupies the public sphere in ways that resist its colonization by private commercial interests and instrumentalized social relations. In this way, Freee art projects are a practical engagement in utopia. In the political philosophy of utopia, art is either considered to be a promise of happiness, a model of unalienated labour, or, just as often, a luxurious product of a materialistic society, and a distracting irrelevance to the economic and strategic road to utopia. Perry Anderson, for instance, in *The Tracks of Historical Materialism* describes the shift from economics to culture within Western Marxism as a 'glittering compensation for their neglect of the structures and infrastructures of politics and economics' in which aesthetics 'came to be surcharged with all the values that were repressed or denied elsewhere in the atrophy of the living socialist politics'. Speaking as artists who have identified art and culture as their primary site of struggle, the Freee art collective cannot share the political critique of art and culture as a withdrawal from politics proper. It is not that as artists we have an *interest* in the persistence and defence of art – quite the contrary, as artists working in an avantgarde tradition a major part of our practice and our struggle is *against* art. But we do want to argue that the struggle within culture against the cultural hegemony is a struggle that cannot be by-passed on the road to utopia. Our argument is neither that art is somehow already imbued with utopianism, nor that utopia will come to resemble anything that is presently associated with art; we will suggest, rather, that art is one of the key

fields through which utopia can be brought about. Artists contribute to the critique of contemporary society and help shape our visions of a better future. Contemporary art's role within the public sphere, especially that art today which engages directly in the formation of counter-publics, is to prepare a culture fit for a society that is no longer distorted by private commerce interests and the structures of power. Without this kind of cultural transformation, utopia will be empty and hollow.

At the end of the day, as a final keynote for this session open also to all conference participants (with main conference strands beginning at 9.30am the next morning), urban planner **Lalit Kishor Bahti**, working in Auroville - an international city in south India, founded in the early 1970s by adherents of an ashram - gave a keynote paper outlining the values and practices of Auroville.

Abstract

Auroville: A Utopia in the Making

It is about developing a new mind set towards the harmonious co-existence of all. Auroville's quest and experiments for 'Utopia' are aimed at 'Realising Actual Human Unity'.

Auroville, established in 1968, in South India, today, has 2,000 residents representing 42 nationalities. It has UNESCO's endorsement as a unique project of great value to Humanity. Auroville has a pioneering status in wide use of renewable energy, natural resource management, environmental restoration, organic farming, waste management, innovative architecture and low energy and appropriate building technologies, rural & regional integrated development initiatives and also the aspects of self governance, conflict resolution, alternative economy and education.

Agency for a new society was undertaken directly by a group of individuals, whose first task was to recover the green potential of an eroded landscape. Today Auroville has about 1,700 inhabitants. Several young UK and other European architects live there, developing enhanced forms of vernacular architecture. The settlement is managed by a network of working groups, and key decisions are taken by consensus in open assembly. The presentation caused considerable debate among members of the core group present, from a sociological perspective in which agency is regarded as contingent on the conditions in which interventions are made, and a perspective of autonomous creativity derived from European Modernism. From this discussion, the question arose as to what might be reclaimed from the optimism of that Modernist model. This discussion also involved several participants in the utopian studies conference, providing a cross-fertilization of ideas.

The third session took place in Liverpool in September, 2007, in ‘the box’, a small cinema space provided as contribution in kind by FACT. This enabled participation by local contacts, and use of digital projection. A directness of discussion reflected the trust built up among the group’s core members, while a presentation by Sillars on FACT’s work in the city brought a suitable note of real life in a post-industrial environment with a lively cultural scene to the proceedings. This contribution was valuable in enabling theoretical arguments to be tested in concrete situations. This added a third dimension, the first being the material of research within specific fields, and the second inter-disciplinary interrogation of that material in a sympathetic but rigorous atmosphere. Bianchini’s presentation, drawing on considerable experience of contract research in the arts for local government, also provided a realism in relation to the evident growth industry of arts consultancy and evaluation.

Abstracts from September Session:

Franco Bianchini

From experience on contract research in the East Midlands over several years, it is evident that, on one hand, there is an almost ritualistic commissioning of reports, evaluations, strategies and cultural policies by local, regional and national government and funding bodies; and, on the other hand, an almost equally total disregard for the material produced in terms of any information included in future policy directions. The paper gives examples of such material, sketches some of the issues raised in it, and outlines issues facing commissioning bodies and policy makers today, in context of a continued growth of culturally-led urban regeneration, not only in the UK but throughout the EU as well.

Frank Eckardt

The Case of Leipzig’s Art Academy

The Fine Arts Academy in Leipzig was known in the GDR period as a creative centre, often enjoying considerable license in style and content in its work, with an international reputation based on exhibition of the work of its staff. Today, in a unified Germany, it retains its reputation for innovation, now in terms of a market economy. This goes beyond GDR tourism – a kind of nostalgia – as international (Swiss, American, etc) buyers come to the academy to see, and often purchase, the work of graduates from its annual exhibition. This has a particular economic impact in the city region. It is in context of a decline in the economy of manufacturing after 1989, not entirely successful efforts at city marketing in other ways, and general revision of the way the city thinks of itself – in this area continuity is more evident than in some others, despite a shift of political environment.

Optimistic Productions (Hilary Powell and Dan Edelstyn)

Filiming the Olympic Site:

As a practicing artist engaged directly with and operating in the changing sites of the city I value these opportunities for interdisciplinary debate as the optimum means of cross fertilisation and exchange of ideas. Having ‘live’ case studies as part of such discussion is invaluable drawing on the specific to illuminate the larger dynamics of cultural agency. The 15-minute film ‘The Games’ produced with Optimistic Productions was shot in February 2007 and the film stages a surreal alternative Olympics literally amid the East London sites set to become the 2012 London Olympic Park. Our session began with a screening of the film as a means of entry into the many issues surrounding the development of the Olympic site in East London and its cultural, economic, physical social and artistic impacts. It was followed by a visual presentation looking ‘behind the scenes’ of the film shoot in order to fuel a more detailed exploration and discussion of the changing sites the film occupied and the ‘Olympian’ themes it drew on and explored. The session also included an introduction to our new ‘olympian’ project ‘**Olympic Spirits and Foodstuffs Ltd**’ as a means of engaging with the site and its impact now that the blue hoardings surround this east end site. As a spoof company set up to gather and market the last wild harvest (blackberries

etc) of the fringes of the Olympic Park it draws on the history and realities of the physical site raising issues of soil contamination and encroachment on the 'wild' spaces of the city alongside ideas of 'British-ness' and the examination of corporate structure and marketing in relation to large-scale urban regeneration. Both 'The Games' and 'Olympic Spirits and Foodstuffs Ltd' highlight this contested urban space in a thought provoking and humorous way drawing on the history of the Olympic Movement and most particularly the DIY approach and aesthetic of the 1948 London Olympics. Both play with issues of amateurism and national identity whilst engaging directly with the contested east London sites and the multiple voices of local communities - from the famed Manor Garden Allotments to Clays Lane housing estate.

Vardan Azatyan

Dreams, Histories and Technologies of Contemporary Art in Armenia

I am primarily concerned with the dynamics of interrelation of contemporary art and socio-political changes in Armenia during last thirty years. To reveal the dynamics of this interrelation I will focus on the spread and the use of video technologies both in contemporary art and in everyday life, most importantly in the changing urban contexts of Yerevan, the capital of Armenia. Thus, I consider video as a sociological tool for historicizing both contemporary art and the social life of Armenia; video in itself is not of primary interest for me. But why specifically video? Armenian society underwent enormous changes especially during the last 20 years: one of the main directions of the *political* change is a highly short-sighted Westernization of the country, which, of course, accompanies by technological developments, including the spread of video technologies. Let me for a moment outline some ideological specificities of the Westernization of today's Armenia in order to provide some context for my discussion of the uses of video in Armenia. The process of Westernization is accompanied by the rhetoric of the New: New times, New society, New city constructed at the expense of the Soviet past. Thus, Westernization, first, is a process of erasure of the memory of the Soviet history; second it is easy to notice that this is a very avant-gardist stance, ironically, adopted by the official government of the country, and third, as we shall see this erasure in reality replicates many paradigmatic features of the Soviet totalitarianism. In addition to this, and this is rather specific to Armenia, the Westernization is being carried out by the forces traditionally hostile to each other: Russia and extremely rich American-Armenian diaspora elite. So the process of Westernization first, filled the gap that has existed between western Armenians and Eastern (that is, Russian-Soviet) Armenia, second, ironically enough, Westernization created an alliance between Armenian extreme nationalism and the free market economy. The vast project of reconstructing the center of Yerevan can tell us a lot about this alliance.

Malcolm Miles

Re-Reading Benjamin

Walter Benjamin's well known essay *The Author as Producer*, given as a talk to a group of anti-fascist writers (organised by the French Communist Party) in Paris in 1934 proposes in effect that writers become readers. Benjamin takes the case of the Soviet press, where readers contribute editorial material (as today readers send blog material to the papers). But Benjamin writes as if writers are autonomous individuals. The paper asks how his idea might extend, or be revised for, the contingencies of cultural production, reception and mediation, not least by cultural entrepreneurs and intermediaries – those who form an informal consensus as to what counts as the contemporary in art.

Laura Sillars

FACT

The presentation gives an account of FACT's work in relation to the city and its communities and social issues, and the role of such a city-centre multi-use space (gallery, screens, café, meeting place) in cultural revival, economic futures, and the Capital of Culture programme. Examples of projects are reviewed, and the reception of work, often in anecdotal data and feedback, outlined, leading to questions of intention, efficacy, but also softer areas of attraction and sociation in this new cultural site.

Alex Loftus

Changing the environment of the everyday

This paper brought together recent work on critical spatial practices with debates over urban environmental justice. It sought to do so through transforming Antonio Gramsci's conception of hegemony into a socio-*natural* rather than an exclusively social phenomenon. Critical spatial practices, he argued, open up radical possibilities for intervening in "the environment of the everyday". In developing this, he suggested that Gramsci's work could provide a sense in which moral and intellectual norms come to be consolidated in mundane environmental practices within the city – taking a bus, cycling a bike, walking through a park. By intervening in this space, he suggested, a transformed environmental politics might also emerge. Questions around the paper focussed on the relationships between art, the environment, and the city, as well as the degree to which emerging practices challenged or merely replicated the avant-gardism criticised.

Barbara Penner

Toilet Papers

In line with the workshop's focus on "critical spaces," this paper explored the role of public toilets in urban life and in academia. The speaker discussed her various toilet research projects - from studying 19th century public lavatories for ladies (or lack thereof) to 20th century experiments with female urinals. The speaker described the tensions surrounding toilet spaces. On the one hand, they can be seen as spaces of representation where marginalized social groups (the disabled, the trans-gendered) strive for visibility and where cities strive for credibility. On the other, public toilets do not always represent "authorized" discourses about civility and hygiene, or regulatory discourses about the body and sexuality, but can be used in transgressive ways. These moments of resistance remind us that the difference between 'ladies' and 'gents' are not natural, essential, and fixed, but is constructed, performed, and fluid, making possible the imaging of other identities and spatialities.

Key Points and Findings

Among many issues discussed over the three events, and by e mail contact between members at other times, certain themes seemed to recur. This happened from different points of departure, and implies a degree of importance to those themes. They can be summarised as:

- The gap between, on one hand, cultural policy (as it is promoted by national and local government and complied with by arts organisations, especially those in receipt of revenue funding), and, on the other hand, many of the realities of cultural production and reception;
- The absence of significant or sustained empirical evidence for the efficacy of either policy or major projects;
- The divergence of the creative process as seen by artists and the requirements of the much expanded cultural bureaucracy;
- The centrality of the concept of agency, in a sociological sense, in debate on the relation between cultural production/reception and efforts towards a better society (the definition of which is, of course, very open);
- The need to understand in greater depth and detail the process by which changes in social and urban environments occur, often incrementally, in localised forms within the contingencies and constraints of an increasingly global economy;
- A parallel need to understand the processes by which art changes, in a complex contingency involving loose consensus of dealers, curators, critics, collectors, managers and others as to what is 'contemporary', and in relation to traditional and new technologies of art making either retaining individual autonomy or moving to collaborative and group work;
- The centrality to all this of the creative imagination, seen as entailing scope not only to imagine new aesthetic forms or literary narratives, but extending also to alternative social

arrangements and relations of power;

- The difficulty that, while most policy is goal-oriented, most work in the creative arts is not, but happens through improvisation and reflexive practice, in some cases informed by theory but often by what at first seem chance encounters;
- This requires revision of the concept of agency in a non-teleological way, also in relation to areas of recent work such as complexity theory.

Specific Outcomes and Suggested Further Research:

- The group agreed that an edited book will be produced from revised and extended versions of the papers, plus contributions from a small number of invited contributors (mainly those approached who had for practical reasons been unable to join the core group - for examples, Gregory Scholette, artist and critic, New York; and Jane Rendell, architectural theorist, UCL). At the time of preparing this report several aspects of the project are in negotiation, but the following elements are in place: the book's working title (subject to change) is *Rethinking Agency: Culture, Hegemony and Social Development*; the editors are Monica Degen (Sociology, Brunel) and Malcolm Miles (Cultural Theory, Plymouth); the publisher is Autonomedia (New York), a leading-edge publisher of radical cultural books, this book being a proposed volume 5 in the Data-Browser series - conceived and edited by a group of academics at Plymouth of which Miles is a member, three volumes currently published and a fourth in press; the proposed schedule is for revised and invited texts to be ready by around December 2008, with publication six to eight months after that. Full acknowledgement of AHRC (and ESRC, DTI) will be made in the publication.
- Contacts have continued between several members of the core group, including invitations to give seminar papers - in some cases on a reciprocal basis (e.g. Miles at

Royal Holloway and Loftus at Plymouth).

- A new application will be made to AHRC for a two-year network, taking the need to revise agency in a non-teleological way as its point of departure.

Further research is required on the following overlapping topics: This needs to be inter-disciplinary, mainly involving researchers in the arts and the social sciences, and trans-disciplinary in drawing in practitioners (such as artists and film-makers) and cultural intermediaries (such as curators, critics and arts managers or policy makers).

1. The potential revision of cultural policy in regard to the dynamics of creative processes, shifts in those processes through new technologies such as the digital, the social as well as cultural aspects of the creative imagination, and the identification of means with ends;
2. The necessary revision of large areas of cultural and social theory in light of a non-teleological approach; this might draw also on an aspect of Charles Darwin's theory of evolution in *Origin of Species* - where evolution is presented as without design or end (in both senses of the term);
3. The continuous process of change which occurs at the level of everyday life; the relation of cultural work to this, the scope or otherwise for cultural work to contribute to the direction of such change while nor regressing to a nineteenth-century model of an avant-garde; and what is intrinsic to creative work which might shape means appropriate to a society based on the values of, say, freedom, social justice and environmental sustainability.

The core group will propose a network on the second topic. The first is being developed by Bianchini (now Professor of Cultural Policy, Leeds Metropolitan University), and will be the subject-matter of future seminars there. The third topic is being developed by Miles at Plymouth, and again will lead to further open, inter-disciplinary seminars within the research environment there.

Appendix

List of participants, 11 July session

Gary Anderson (Plymouth)
Stefan Aloszko (Plymouth)
Friedrich von Borries (architect, Berlin)
Isabel Botto
Mario Caeiro (Lisbon and Valencia)
Paul Chatterton (Leeds)
Nathaniel Coleman (Harvard)
David Cross (artist, London)
Sue Coulson
Laurence Davis (Dublin)
Aline Ferreira (Tarragona)
Miguel Ramalhete Gomes
Tracey Guiry (arts manager, Devon)
Tim Hall (Gloucestershire)
Andy Hewitt (Free Art Collective)
Valerie Holman (Reading)
Mel Jordan (Free Art Collective)
Corrina Kesler (Michigan)
Lali Kishor-Bhati (Auroville)
Stefan Kristensen (Utopiana)
Runette Kruger
Esther Leslie (Birkbeck)
Katy McLeod (Plymouth)
Ruth Levitas (Bristol)
Malcolm Miles (Plymouth - facilitator)
Steven Miles (Liverpool)
Roberta Mock (Plymouth)
Pedro Moreira (Oporto)
Stankomir Niceja (Belgrade)
Jessica Oleksy (Plymouth)
Marylin Pemberton
Saskia Poldevaart (Amsterdam)
Iolanda Ramos (Oporto)
Beate Rodewald (Amsterdam)
Olga Rodriguez (Oporto)
Esther Salamon (arts manager, Newcastle)
Ayse Senturer (Istanbul)
Akin Sevinc (Istanbul)
Amy Shelton-Brown
Jorge Bastos de Silva (Oporto)
Dan Smith (University of the Arts)
Karen Smith (Plymouth)
Fatima Vieira (Oporto)
Juan Zarandona (Madrid)