

**Some Are More Equal Than Others: Hierarchies of value
inside the art gallery**

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Some Are More Equal Than Others Hierarchies of value inside the art gallery

Judith Stewart

'Who has access to art? Who makes art?'
Suzanne Lacey, 2007¹.

The last 25 years have seen dramatic changes in gallery education and participatory practices. We have more, bigger, shinier arts buildings. Much effort has been invested in seeking to widen the audience demographic, with more education staff and artists employed to work (in the new bigger, shinier buildings, or as outreach workers) with poor people, minority ethnic groups and the disadvantaged. On the public stage, we have seen Jeremy Deller, a 'participatory' artist, occupying the prestigious British Pavilion at the 2013 Venice Biennale. So is all well in and beyond the art gallery? Does art belong to the people now, and what is the status of the artist?

First, a bit of history. The 1980s saw two significant developments that influenced arts policy and practice. Firstly, the end of consensus on the state's regulatory or controlling role, with the (re) introduction of market forces into utilities, industries and local government. Secondly, from a different ideological position, the Greater London Council (GLC) initiative in funding arts groups targeting 'excluded' community groups including the unemployed, women, Black Minority Ethnic (BME) and gay groups, and youth subcultures, demanding that museums and galleries justify their value in terms of '...concrete and measurable economic and social impacts'². By 1989, cutbacks resulted in local government arts funding exceeding that of central government, introducing a further policy-making dynamic, as local authorities tended to be interested in social rather than aesthetic impacts, and further eroded the 'arm's length' principle which once informed arts funding.

The advent of New Labour (1997) brought unprecedented public arts spending, much of it targeted at developing new audiences. Publicly funded art was expected 'to tackle not only the symptoms of social exclusion but also its causes'³. Gallery education departments expanded their staffing and activities accordingly. Before 2000, smaller galleries were unlikely to have a separate education post. Both in Hastings, where I worked, and nearby Eastbourne's Towner Art Gallery, for example, the curator was also responsible for gallery education programmes. Yet by 2007 the Towner employed two specialist outreach and education officers, and today has an education team plus a core Artist Educators Group to deliver the programme.

Prior to the late 1990s, exhibition programmes were typically devised by curators, with education programmes expected to respond to these. Now it became commonplace for the whole gallery programme to be developed through a team approach, with artists employed to work within particular local contexts, with designated (ethnic, social, gender) groups. Such programmes varied widely in terms of allocated time, and in what was expected of the artist. As galleries closed for National Lottery-funded refurbishments, their artistic programmes moved into local communities, often commissioning high profile artists to develop these projects. More artists would be doing art, and doing so interactively with a broader demographic, thereby redressing social and economic exclusion. As young people might say, 'What's not to like?'

Jumping forward a few years, we saw economic collapse, a Tory-led coalition, and the 'widening audiences' agenda giving way to different targets: 'When times are tough and money is tight, our focus must be on culture's economic impact⁴'.

So what happened in relation to Suzanne Lacy's two questions? In this article, I will focus mainly on the second of her questions, preceded by a brief look at her first question.

Who has access to art?

'In recent years... those working in the public arts sector have found themselves being bullied and hectored by local, regional and government funding bodies whose cultural commissars send out a stream of new, and often conflicting, directives on access, education, outreach, diversity, multiculturalism, social inclusion, community initiatives, audience monitoring and so on and so on' ⁵.

Out of context, the above editorial might be dismissed as reactionary quibbling about the practical organisation of a worthwhile arts initiative. Even good ideas are sometimes poorly executed. Few would dispute that the 'widening participation' agenda added value to some communities and individuals. As a curator, I personally witnessed this, and other readers will have similar anecdotal evidence. The five symposia of *Interrupt: Artists in Socially-Engaged Practice* (2003) organised by Vivienne Reiss and David Butler for Arts Council England and partner organisations⁶, showcased many lively gallery education and access programmes which touched individual lives. Yet concerns were raised at the time, and subsequently, by many of us who are sympathetic to social justice and economic equality. As I wrote in a 2003 discussion paper for *Interrupt*,⁷ good practice examples from this event were drawn mainly from large, well-resourced metropolitan organisations, and did not reflect programmes outside the 'metropolitan elite'.

Hastings, where I worked, was not the only public arts organisation where staffing was limited to one-person organising exhibitions and education, with a very limited budget (in my case, a combined core annual budget of £2,500). Secondly, whilst *Interrupt* raised many interesting issues, some of which are considered later in this article, it did not effectively question the purpose of participatory practices and the ways they sought to paper over cracks in the socio-economic fabric whose origins lay in economic and political inequalities. To what extent did participation in community arts projects translate into excluded groups becoming regular visitors to art galleries? And are we seriously claiming that the substantial funding made a significant, quantifiable impact on social problems?



Who makes art?

I now want to explore the second of Lacy's questions in relation to changes in arts policy. The emphasis on 'taking art to new audiences and new places'⁸, embodied in the Arts Council's *Year of the Artist* programme, seemed to herald recognition of participatory practices and the possibility of developing these further. More grants were available to artists whose work involved participation or collaboration, with Arts Council funding criteria congruent with government demands for social value. One artist spoke of '... feeling very optimistic and very positive about this notion of artists being in the world and going into different situations with a non-art context... I was also very excited about the way that artists were being encouraged to take themselves seriously professionally'⁹.

Concerns, however, were raised over the dangers of directly linking public arts funding with expected social or economic benefits. Such concerns were voiced by practitioners in *Art Monthly* and *AN*, and academics including Eleanore Belfiore and Josie Appleton. In 2006, *Artforum*¹⁰ featured an exchange between Claire Bishop and Grant Kester over the relative priority given to social/economic objectives over aesthetics. Similarly, contributors to *Art For All*¹¹ raised questions over artistic freedom, the 'disappearance'

of the art in favour of participation (regardless of the quality of the experience), and the increasing instrumentalisation of art practice.

Some research suggests that when working under the auspices of education, galleries often placed little value on artists' practice beyond its ability to fulfil social objectives. The hierarchical values underpinning the gallery system, this research suggests, inevitably reflect wider political and class values¹². It is therefore necessary to extend Lacy's second question, to read '...and who controls the distribution of art?'

Who controls the distribution of art?

'You're not the real thing. You're not the teacher, you're not the artist, you're this kind of other thing, which doesn't really have any status'.¹³

As an invited core participant at *Interrupt*, I saw a strong consensus that artists working outside of the gallery - in education or collaborative or participatory mode - did not feel curators or critics took them seriously *as artists*. Despite the long tradition of artists working in this way, and the plethora of off-site programmes, cultural institutions struggled to find ways to present these projects as art practice. This is not surprising given the ephemeral nature of practices that are often characterised by an emphasis on process and uncertainty, rather than the production of clearly authored (and marketable) aesthetic outcomes. As *Interrupt* participants observed, galleries, curators and critics operate hierarchical value systems. Artists who make objects for galleries work with the curatorial team, headlining gallery publicity to attract attention from art cognoscenti, whilst artists with a participatory practice are placed in education departments. The latter's value to galleries comes from their ability to demonstrate the gallery's inclusiveness - and bring in additional funding.

Reflecting on her 2004 commission for the Turner Contemporary exhibition, *Margate Mementos*, Sonia Boyce drew attention to the 'ambassador' role required of artists working with education departments. Like many galleries created as part of regeneration programmes, Turner Contemporary suffered from considerable local hostility. Boyce spoke of feeling as if she '...was having to defend and represent the institution' and of how artists' social skills had become part of the selection criteria¹⁴. As the freelance curator of *Margate Mementos*, I experienced this directly as, along with Boyce and Erika Tan (the other commissioned artist) we fielded hostile questions about the gallery in the course of enlisting willing participants. Tan also commented on how this atmosphere affected her ability to publicise her project because Turner Contemporary feared failure¹⁵.

Artists given gallery exhibitions are not required to fulfil such an ambassadorial role. Their interaction with the public tends to be in the authorial (and authoritative) context of the 'artist's talk'. Interpretation of the work also lies outside of their remit, with responsibility for this being delegated to the education artist, who is '...often working with people who are very sceptical about art anyway...they're not people who'll go [to galleries] voluntarily. So they're not necessarily a particularly friendly audience.¹⁶' Whilst interpreting the work of other artists was accepted as part their

role, what depressed many participatory artists¹⁷ was what they perceived as the lack of interest in their practice shown by gallery staff, even when their involvement included a commission to make new work. When one artist attended the preview of her commission opening alongside another, more well known, artist's work, she arrived to discover her work was inaccessible:

*'I felt a bit like a poor relation...the artist who does this outreach stuff, and they'd given me this opportunity to make some work and show it in the gallery, but they hadn't turned the lights on, and it wasn't part of the opening and it was all roped off upstairs! ...the curator ...was there, and I saw him and talked to him and he didn't mention my work to me. There was no acknowledgement made.'*¹⁸

Reconciling the needs of their practice, engaging with an art discourse and sustaining the work financially, remains a problem for participatory artists. They seek a dialogue with arts organisations, but because of the nature of their practice and its positioning within education departments, they often experience invisibility and marginalisation. One artist, for example, described how she felt people reacted to her:

*'...she gets commissions, she's working with all the major institutions, but she is an "education artist"... how do you break into the mainstream? Why are you always treated as a second-class artist?... If people introduce me to a curator or something, and they say "What do you do? Are you a painter, sculptor, installation...?" and I go, "I work with people", immediately...they are not interested.'*¹⁹

Artists have spoken of how arts professionals and non-arts participants alike often assumed that they worked in an educational context because they had failed as 'proper' (gallery exhibiting) artists²⁰. This may seem strange when Nicolas Bourriaud's 'Relational Aesthetics' and the work of artists such as Rikrit Tiravanija and Superflex had become regular topics of discussion in the art press. However it could also be argued, that it was the reputations of artists that attracted art press attention, not the practice itself. Such 'known' artists do not tend to position themselves under the umbrella of gallery education.²¹

Within galleries too, there is a perception that education programmes produce less serious and critically important art than exhibition programmes. When interviewed for a head of education post, one curator was asked how she would cope with the drop in status this role would bring. Another artist recalled being warned that working in the education department of a national gallery might damage his status as artist²².²²



Who are galleries for?

Colchester's firstsite gallery is interesting in this respect. Planned in an era of economic growth, the vision for the gallery as 'Colchester's sitting-room' went hand-in-hand with the then Director's commitment to embrace different types of contemporary art and audiences, create a gallery of international standing, *and* support artists living and working in the region. At the centre of the building, flowing into one another, were the galleries, learning studios and a large artists' project space²³. Aware of the criticisms surrounding gallery education, firstsite proposed new ways of working with artists.

Learning and Curatorial Programmes, and the artists with whom they worked were to be equals. An Associate Artist Scheme was introduced, employing six artists with established, participatory practices on fixed-term 0.6 contracts within the Learning Team. By giving the artists a research brief, freedom to develop their own audiences and a level of financial security, it was hoped that the stigma attached to working within an educational context would be removed. All members of the Learning Team were engaged in developing an aspect of research relevant to their own practice and to firstsite. In the context of this article, it is the research that is of most interest.

My (2011-13) role in supporting this research allowed me to reflect upon changes in the gallery landscape since the *Interrupt* symposia. The Associate Artist Scheme gave the artists economic stability, opportunities to collaborate with other artists, and critical support. But given how far we have apparently come in the way we value and deliver gallery education since *Interrupt*, the research concerns of firstsite Associate Artists and Learning Team were surprising. Without exception, these entailed questions of status, language, value, hierarchy, and belonging: the same issues that occupied the 2003 *Interrupt* symposia. All the artists were frustrated by what they saw as lack of interest in their work from the curatorial team. Despite working in the gallery for over two years, interactions with the Senior Curator were, they felt, virtually non-existent and the low value placed on the Associate Artist Scheme was, they felt, illustrated by the absence of the Director and curatorial team from the 2013 symposium held to present the research outcomes²⁴.

It may be that the firstsite example is atypical, but the seminars held as part of Associate Artist Lawrence Bradby's research, which involved a range of artists and professionals from other organisations, suggests otherwise. Planning these seminars triggered another realisation: the hierarchical value systems that privilege exhibiting artists above participatory artists do so because they place a higher value on certain types of audience. Returning to the firstsite example, its new building rapidly became a magnet for young people who in winter sat around the indoor open spaces, and in summer congregated under the entrance canopy. For many of the Learning Team, this became the incarnation of 'Colchester's sitting-room' but some in the organisation saw them as a threat to the corporate clientele on whom firstsite is financially dependent. The artists made several, successful, attempts to engage the young people but outside of the Learning Team, this was not universally appreciated. Bradby has suggested that the Curatorial Team see these 'invaders' as a 'threat' to the exhibition. The young people are now no longer to be seen in or near the building.

This brings us back to the question: '*who controls the distribution of art?*' If we reverse the argument that it is the *practice* that has a designated audience, and focus instead on the idea that the *curator* determines how, where and by whom the work is seen, this explains why very similar practices can be simultaneously internationally renowned and belittled as 'community art'. But there is yet another element that has been added to these questions of value that was barely present in the public sector twenty-five years ago. firstsite, as the government demands, is attempting to raise private sector funding to ensure its survival. This led not only to the cleansing of 'undesirable'

audiences who might deter business, but to the hiring of spaces intended for art purposes to raise income. Art events must now make way for weddings, corporate conferences and yoga classes. The 'Educational Turn' has moved on: this is the age of the 'Corporate Turn'.

Where ideologies conflict, hard-pressed artists, gallery administrators, and curators are, to misquote the White Queen, trying to reconcile six or more contradictory principles before breakfast²⁵. Perhaps the time is overdue for a root and branch overhaul of the system...

¹ In a seminar at Robert Gordon University in 2007, Suzanne Lacy identified two key questions that continue to dominate her art practice: Who has access to art? and Who makes art?

² . Belfiore, E., (2004) 'Auditing Culture: The Subsidised Cultural Sector In The New Public Management'. *The International Journal of Cultural Policy*, Vol 10(2), p183-202.

³ Department for Culture Media and Sport (DCMS), (1999) *Anti-Social Behaviour. Report to the Social Exclusion Unit*, Annexe E. London: DCMS

⁴ Former Culture Secretary, Maria Miller speaking at the British Museum in 2013: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/entertainment-arts-22267625>

⁵ *Art Monthly* (Editorial) No. 277, June 2004.

⁶ The symposia addressed different aspects of socially engaged practice: Artist as Educator, Artist as Engineer, Artist as Researcher, Artist as Activist and Artist as Collaborator. The partner organisations were Ikon Gallery and University of Central England; Goldsmiths College and Baltic Centre for Contemporary Art; University of Plymouth; Manchester Metropolitan University and the Baltic. For further information see <http://www.interrupt.org.uk>

⁷ Stewart, J., (2003) *The View From Here, Or What is to Be Done?* <http://www.interrupt.org.uk/resources-details.php?article=64>

⁸ Arts Council England, (1999) *Year of the Artist*. London: Arts Council

⁹ Stewart, J., (2007) *Objects of Exchange: The Role of the Artwork and the Artist in the Context of Social Inclusion* PhD Thesis, Manchester Metropolitan University: 176

¹⁰ Bishop, C., (2006) 'The Social Turn: Collaboration and its Discontents'. [online] *Artforum*, February 2006. www.artforum.com/archive [Accessed 6 November 2006]. The article prompted a response from Grant Kester in which he suggests, mistakenly in my opinion, that Bishop's criticisms arise from a '...discomfort with activist art that is typical of post-cold war intellectuals embarrassed by work that evokes leftist ideals.' (See letter to *Artforum*, May 2006. 22)

¹¹ Wallinger, M., & Warnock, M., (2000) (Eds) *Art For All: Their Policies and Our Culture*. London: Peer.

¹² Stewart, J., (2007) op. cit.

¹³ Stewart, J., Ibid., p.162

¹⁴ Malik-Okon, R., (2007) 'Margate Mementos'. In: D. Butler, & V. Reiss. (Eds) *The Art of Negotiation*. p.101

¹⁵ Malik-Okon, R., (2007) Ibid., p.107

¹⁶ Stewart, J. (2007) op. cit., p.143

¹⁷ Stewart, J. (2007) Ibid

¹⁸ Stewart, J. (2007) Ibid., p.155

¹⁹ Stewart, J. (2007) Ibid., p.153

²⁰ Stewart, J. (2007) Ibid., p.151

²¹ In a discussion at De La Warr Pavilion in 2006, Deller spoke of deliberately distancing himself from the umbrella of gallery education to avoid being taken less seriously.

²² Stewart, J., (2007) Ibid., p153

²³ The designated Artists' Project Space, intended for artist residencies and a key part of firstsite's proposed Artists' Support Programme, was commandeered for the opening exhibition and has remained a gallery ever since.

²⁴ firstsite Learning & Associate Artist Team, *Associative Enquiries*, 2013, firstsite Colchester

²⁵ Carroll, L., (1895) *Through the Looking Glass*. London: Macmillan, p.61

Images

1 & 2. *Congregation: an intervention* by Lawrence Bradby and Willow Mitchell at firstsite. Photo: Lawrence Bradby

3. *Superbroom: an intervention* by Lawrence Bradby and Willow Mitchell at firstsite. Photo: Lawrence Bradby