

The Aesthetics of Collaboration

by Peter Dunn , Loraine Leeson

Modernist aesthetics is certainly predicated upon the concept of an individualized vision or oeuvre, but it also subsumes under the Western canon modes of collective production in ancient and medieval cultures, as well as from tribal cultures and contemporary Western consumer culture. In the later stages of modernism-Surrealism, Dada, and Pop art for example and in postmodern practices, this individualized concept has been under attack from many quarters. With the rise of community arts practices in the U.S. and the U.K., the rearticulations of women artists and artists of color, public art, and the increasing use of new technology, group practices and collaborations have increased dramatically. Sometimes these have been driven by ideology, sometimes by sheer necessity. In certain practices the process of collaboration has been paramount, the growth or enabling of individuals or groups being the goal.¹ However, in situations where there are ideas to be communicated more widely, aesthetic power becomes especially important-it is central to the work's ability to speak beyond the confines of any single group. The "beauty" of such images derives from the imaginative interpretation of meanings embodied in the ideas, in the distillation of the desires of a constituency in a form that expresses those ideas effectively. This, we believe, results from a transformation through critique, collaboration, and communication. It involves social and visual processes inextricably linked. In a sense, the work forms a lens that creates a focal point in the energies of transformation. Desire focused is passion, and what is socialized passion but aesthetics?²

Focused desire and structured passion do not, in and of themselves, make for good aesthetics, however.³ And there is an important distinction to be made here between good social aesthetics and good aesthetics in art. The former concerns issues of ethics and democracy; the latter does not have to. This may seem like heresy to some on the left. But the aesthetic in art-the composition of visual elements to create visual power-can be achieved without reference to ethics or democracy; in fact, it can even be used to oppose them.⁴ We can all think of examples of works that are visually and aesthetically powerful or compelling, but which represent an ideology or world view that we disagree with or find distasteful. But we would not normally describe these works as beautiful.⁵ Beauty has a social aura; it may be culturally specific or ideologically conditioned; it certainly finds individualized expression, but also is socially mediated; it is confirmed by consensus. In these terms, then, beauty is a fusion of good social and artistic aesthetics.⁶ This is not to say that the aesthetic in art is value free, transcendent, or universal, but to point out that it is a means of organization that is both technical and creative, with its accumulated wisdoms, traditions, schools, and factions. It has a history and a geography. It began as very culturally specific but, as a result of a broader colonization process, it has become transcultural and assimilative of other cultural elements (including a backwardly acquisitive reinterpretation of history).⁷ Like the English language, it is not the only form of international communication, but it is the dominant one.

Habermas said modernism is dead but dominant.⁸ He was only partially right. It may have shuffled off its mortal coil, but that was really a skin representing a particular historical period. The aesthetic, while defined in a particular modus operandi by modernism, lives on in continuous metamorphosis with the increasing globalization of culture. It may become unrecognizable in its mutations from its origins, but that is no more remarkable than the transformation from medieval English to Californian cyberspeak.⁹ To refuse to speak a language because of its colonial past may be to cut oneself off from the very people to whom one wishes to speak. Yes, it is vital that we nourish and maintain our own "local narratives," but it is not useful to be seduced by the romance of the marginal.¹⁰ It is also vital that we are able to have access to the local narratives of others. We need the common ground.

The Art of Change

The Art of Change is a visual arts organization. More importantly, it is a philosophy in practice of an art of engagement—an art concerned with ideas, issues, processes, and products of transformation, focusing particularly on issues of change in the urban environment and cultural identity. An art of engagement is people centered and critical. By critical we mean that identities should not be prey to superficial stereotypes, that mechanisms and processes are established to allow lived, changing, complex, and problematized identities to emerge. For us, engagement is about empowerment. In that sense it is a political statement as much as an artistic one.

Our work is collaborative for the reasons discussed above but also because we want to ensure that it is as precise and appropriate as possible. That means working with those who have firsthand knowledge of what is needed, whether they be activists, professionals, or those who have relevant personal experience. For us, collaboration is about inspiration and aspiration. In that sense it is a desire for beauty as much as a call for social change.

The projects we are using as examples of our approach are not chosen because they are typical. We have no typical projects. They have been chosen because of differences in context, participants, and processes of engagement. Our approach is not formulaic. On the contrary, we hope the examples will show that the specificity of context requires custom-made processes. The first project involves a group of culturally diverse young people and their relationship with two institutions, state education and "state art."¹¹ The second area of work we will discuss involves an approach to public art, not as isolated artworks, but within a strategy of consultation, collaboration, and ownership. The Projects

Changing Places followed from two previous billboard projects—West Meets East and Celebrating the Difference (figs. 1 and 2)—which explored issues of culture and identity, commonality and difference, and were displayed in East London during a period that was particularly fraught with racial tension.¹² It was a collaboration among ourselves, a secondary school on the Isle of Dogs in London's Docklands, and the Tate Gallery. We had worked with this school before. It is in a tough area with a high proportion of minority residents who, at the time, were under a sustained attack from the neofascist British National Party. The Tate approached us to do a work based on its collection, involving young people from "our community." We decided quite early that, if we were going to make this project work, we would have to get the kids—some of whom had never been to a gallery in their lives—to "change places" with the artists whose work they were looking at, to find a way to make it their own.¹³

Our initial thoughts about working with images from the Tate Gallery revolved around the fact that the collection is Eurocentric through its historic focus on British art and in its more recent modernist collection. While modernism in its various forms borrowed heavily from the aesthetics of the cultural Other—Cubism being a classic example—the critical emphasis on formalism meant that modernism maintained a "correct distance" from the social, economic, or political context of that Other, which allowed it to preserve the purity of the (artistic) field.¹⁴ Our main concern was how the communities we work with—rooted as they are in diverse, often non-Western cultures—might relate to the work in the Tate in a way that was meaningful and empowering. With the young people we explored issues of "place," Britishness, and the cultural meanings of death and regeneration. We pushed and pulled Western pictorial conventions, both during the process of creating Changing Places and in the resulting image Awakenings, for which we brought into play the tools of digital-imaging technology.

This project offered the possibility of bringing together a number of elements central to our practice. The first was the use of the creative process as a vehicle to allow people to move from present circumstances to future possibilities—to use the Tate Gallery's collection not so much as works of art to be passively appreciated but as a rich source of material to feed the imaginations of participants. By putting themselves in the shoes of the creators, the collection became the medium through which the students could dream, visualize, and concretize possible futures. Much of our work starts with a process that can involve people in a variety of ways—a drawing together of issues and experiences that is wider than the knowledge of any

one individual and roots the work firmly in the communities from which it stems. For us it is important that this process culminates in the production of an artwork-the visual power of the product is an important part of the empowering process-for participants to see and have confirmed that they have contributed something concrete that they can feel proud of. Digital imaging is an ideal medium for this. It enables us to combine a range of disparate material, whether 2-D or 3-D, either by direct scanning or with photographs. We can work with whatever scale and media are appropriate for the situation and, most importantly, draw on particular skills and interests in a range of participants.

Students visited the gallery and initially chose a work to which they had had a gut response. After identifying elements in the work that signified social and historical position, including race, culture, and gender, the images were copied, but a single significant item was changed to reflect their own identity. They started this process individually, then divided into small groups to work on a larger scale, this time keeping only the formal structure of the work and recasting all of the iconography in terms of themselves, their cultures, and their environment. This allowed the students to situate themselves more clearly in the historical and social framework within which the paintings were made.

Stanley Spencer's monumental 9-by-18-foot Resurrection, Cookham (fig. 3) was chosen for the final phase. There were a number of reasons for this. From the beginning we had wanted to make a large-scale work involving the whole group in a way that would allow each individual a clearly identified role. Physically and compositionally, Spencer's Resurrection contains a jigsaw puzzle of discrete elements, and the numbers of people represented meant that all those involved in the project-pupils, teachers, artists, and Tate personnel-could be included. Secondly, the artistic tradition of the Resurrection, as a moment of rebirth set in some unspecified future, can be used to explore contemporary values, both as a critique and as an embodiment of aspirations. Awakenings was chosen as the title of the final work (fig. 4), not only to remove it from the Christian symbolism of Spencer's painting, but to root it in the personal experience of the young people involved, who were poised at the beginning of their new lives as adults.¹⁵

Spencer's work revolves around a celebration of place-Cookham-and the local narratives of that place.¹⁶ Much of our work explores how local narratives provide a specificity to broader and more general themes and issues that affect our lives. Bertolt Brecht has said that all the great issues of human experience are enacted upon local stages. This idea tied in perfectly with the initial aims of the project and reflected very much the distinctive sense of place that the Isle of Dogs seems to generate for those living there. There were also interesting correspondences between Spencer's place and ours. Both are joined by the Thames, a river of time from the early part of the century to its latter period, and of movement from west to east. Spencer's Cookham, to the west of London, is an island that was created by irrigation and navigation channels during the agrarian revolution; it is an island of rural English village life threatened by encroaching industrialization and the changes following in the wake of the First World War. The Isle of Dogs, in East London, was created through industrialization and the building of the docks. Its urban communities are threatened by a postindustrial climate of unemployment combined with the physical and social dislocation of a major redevelopment and the racially divisive tactics of British National Party campaigning.¹⁷

Spencer's work celebrates the pictorial values developed during the early Italian Renaissance but also incorporates "precious gifts" from Africa. The center section of the painting depicts African figures rising out of baked earth, in what looks like a boat, bearing mysterious objects. Spencer's brother-in-law, also featured in the painting close by, was an anthropologist and mounted one of the first exhibitions in Britain of African art. We interpreted this as important cultural influences from afar. We asked the students about such influences in their own lives-some knowledge or wisdom passed through their families bringing information and insight from elsewhere, whether from the past or another place- and if there were objects associated with this. For this group, these influences were not African but Bengali, Chinese, Irish, and Greek. For all those involved, Awakenings became a celebration of another fusion: a remaking of "Englishness" that is not a muddy multiculturalism but the variegated richness of cultural

difference.

Students were taken through a process of imaginatively rethinking different aspects of the painting in their own terms. For example, we asked what their families or relatives might do with their bodies if they died. How might their families commemorate their lives? What images would they choose to be remembered by? If they awoke from the dead, what would be the first thing they would do? Where would they like to come back to, where would they feel most at home? They each took a section to remake as their own space and contributed as well to shared parts of this complex work. Clay was chosen as the medium for remaking the "tombs" and commemorative plaques, while batik was used for some of the foliage, textures, and soft materials. Photographs were taken in a temporary photographic studio set up at the school. Participants were asked to take up a pose in keeping with the space they had created for themselves and what they had imagined they would be doing there. We used a synchronized flash setup and a medium-format camera with a Polaroid back so they could check if the pose was right before committing the final shot to film. They each took this picture themselves using a squeeze-ball trigger. The final work was compiled on computer. Image construction was complex on both a technical and a compositional level. Lighting sources had to be consistent and tonal and color balances manipulated to ensure compositional harmony and aerial perspective.

The basic structure of Spencer's composition is retained but pushed and pulled so that the different colors and icons, the photographic imagery, proportions, tones, and textures maintain the overall balance of the composition. The scale of figures presented a particular problem in that Spencer's original used distortion both to express hierarchy-in the tradition of early Christian composition and to distribute the weight of figures as compositional elements. Our figures were photographic and did not look right distorted in the same way. Different kinds of manipulation of individual sizes and foreshortening were required to create a similar all-over effect. For us, the work represented a fusion of elements of high art with popular culture, and new technology with more traditional representations of space and volume that are part of the Western tradition, together with the forms and signifiers of other cultural traditions. The teacher commented: We have learned that "Changing Places" with artists can give pupils a way to learn both about art and through art. They [the pupils] responded by reflecting not on their differences but on their common interests: for instance, the importance of good relationships in their lives. There was a lot of "talking in class." As one pupil remarked, "I've thought mainly about personal things, my family and myself. I think Spencer's painting is about his family and friends... Everyone has got to die; all different cultures, children, old people, all have to die . . . enjoy your life before you die. "8

Awakenings, in the form of a 13-by-7-foot Cibachrome print, was displayed at the Tate Gallery, together with examples of work in progress and some of Spencer's working drawings, from May 1995 to February 1996. The work has since been purchased by the London Borough of Tower Hamlets to hang in the town hall, near the entrance to the Isle of Dogs.

Public Art

We were occupied with two public art strategies during 1995 and 1996 that really focused our thinking. For a long time we have been dissatisfied with the way much public art is commissioned and used. It is exploitative for the majority of artists, tends to use art as a Band-Aid for badly designed public spaces or urban deprivation, and is often an exercise in gilding the ghetto. Regeneration authorities seldom have sufficient funds to truly regenerate materially and economically, so public art is used as a means of creating the right climate for the holy grail of market-led investment, which most people now recognize as a myth of Thatcher-Reaganism.¹⁹ And in most cases, the plonking of artworks-usually designed for gallery contexts-without holistically considering a site results in bad aesthetic solutions and negative public response, seldom producing a beautiful place to be.

The meanings produced by the built environment are crucial to the quality of urban life. They

are the visual signs and resonances of how we live and the value of that life. As such they are as important as economic activity in that they can sustain our spirits, give us pleasure in the present and hope for the future. Of course, negative meanings produced by our environment have the opposite effect. Economic activity without seeing and feeling the benefits is a promise postponed. Similarly, without economic activity, these visual signs and symbols become an insult, simply heightening cynicism and resentment. In short, the cultural and economic must go hand in hand to build confidence and empower the community. Public art, in this century at least, has played a patchy role in this process.²⁰ So we have to add two more crucial factors if we are to avoid the problems outlined above: accountability and involvement.

Public art, within the Western tradition, is mainly assumed to be urban, with the exception of territorial markers or memorials. Its function historically has been to inspire social cohesion and to focus and embody social values, whether these be civic, religious, nationalistic, or militaristic. Those who determined the meanings these works should convey were the commissioners. In the twentieth century this was complicated by the stylistic dominance of modernism and the emergence of the "arm's-length principle" in funding.²¹ Control over meaning was, formally at least, seen as the province of free artistic expression, although the dominance of abstraction rendered such work meaningless in traditional representational terms. Rather, its aspirational meanings were inscribed both in its forward-looking "modernism" and within its culturally elitist contexts: it celebrated the power of the commissioner as one of the progressive elite.²² Gone were attempts to persuade and inspire social cohesion, albeit from the top down; instead, such art became a statement of difference.²³

Recently, public funding agencies have shown concern about public response to such works. There are many reasons for this, including the questioning of modernism from many quarters, both radical and reactionary, but it is mainly because of adverse publicity around public funding of such works. Institutional concern tends to be tokenistic, more concerned with diverting criticism than with a genuine wish to engage. Nevertheless there has been a noticeable shift in climate. Words such as participation, consultation, and ownership, once consigned to the derogatory margins of "social service art," are now the buzz words of public art parlance. This represents at least the beginnings of a move to make works that deal with the aspirational values of the communities and constituencies in which they are placed. Beauty is not perfection, but it is inspirational and aspirational to the process of perfecting.

Challenging Public Art: A Public Art Strategy for the Bethnal Green City Challenge Area (1995) was a two-month consultancy in East London, where we worked with the Community Development Trust and the more official Urban Design Strategy Team. As well as having formal consultation meetings where experts or representatives from community and ethnic organizations, women's groups, business or professional bodies, and arts groups were invited, we also visited many more people informally. In this way sites were identified as strategic, and "gateways" and "corridors" were defined and explored from the perceptions of different sectors of the community. As well as establishing a consensual or a targeted approach to strategic significance, this process was useful in exploring the current feel of a site and how this might differ according to such factors as the gender, age, and cultural background of the people using the space. This is crucial when considering how one might change or retain that feel in order to create a space that people might feel good in. It also helped that we have lived and worked around this area for almost fifteen years. From this experience we created a strategic approach and identified key sites. Over sixty sites were discussed in our report, together with an overall strategy for consultation processes, financing, and infrastructural networks. Visualizations were produced for prioritized sites. We did not consult in detail on individual sites because that would be an essential part of the commissioned artists' brief. It might also raise expectations within the community too soon, producing "consultation fatigue" or disappointment if the site were not subsequently developed. There were, however, suggestions for specific projects, especially those directly resulting from discussions with consultees. The approach was site specific, people centered, and critical, allowing for monocultural approaches where appropriate but reflecting the diversity and cultural richness

of both past and present inhabitants in the development of an overall hybridity.²⁴ The strategy provided a step-by-step guide to enable the Bethnal Green City Challenge Area to create a framework for public art that would engender a feeling of ownership and celebration, and a sense of becoming for the communities living in the area. And for visitors there would be a feast of visual richness, diversity, and potentiality—a fresh experience of the inner city environment. In its expression of potentiality, beauty may evoke transcendence, but that does not make it transcendental.

The Green Chain: Forging the Links of a Public Art Strategy for Lea Valley Park (figs. 5 and 6) was developed for a park that extends over an area of twenty-three miles, following the course of the river Lea from Ware in Hertfordshire down to the Thames in East London. The park is unique in this span from rural habitats through reclaimed gravel quarries to urban green space. We were asked to provide an umbrella concept for the whole park and to focus on two areas, one rural and one urban, to demonstrate how this would work in practice. What was particularly interesting for us was addressing the issue of the extension of public space from the urban context into the countryside. With the establishment of national and regional park authorities and the growth of the tourist industry, the tradition of the sculpture garden has been expanded into the "sculpture park." Public art has added a cultural dimension to the countryside experience. Its audiences are no longer those who live or work in the vicinity but the tourist, the visitor—those in pursuit of leisure. What is the relationship between such work and its publics? Is it to provide visual spice to the rural experience? To mediate between the social and the natural? To humanize and (given our dominant culture) urbanize such environments together with trails and convenience facilities, to make nature more palatable? To commodify it?²⁵ We believe regional and national parks are more important than this. They present an opportunity to perform a vital role both ecologically and socially.

Following a process of consultation similar to that described above for the Challenging Public Art project, the umbrella concept of the green chain emerged as a metaphor because it evokes a single entity, a unity, which is dependent upon each link. It has both industrial and ecological ramifications (like the food chain), in which diversity is the key to the vigor of the whole. It also reflects the physicality of the park—as a "chain" along the river and how people use it: links can be geographic, service or facilities based, historical, or conceptual. The cyclical nature of chain links also has rich overtones—of the seasons, growth and change, renewal/recycling. Underlying the whole is continuous transmutation. The visualizations we produced were examples of an approach exploring the green chain concept in a variety of ways, some artist led with consultation, others as enabling projects. Some utilize high technology and a number use postindustrial or natural materials found in Lea Valley Park.

As a result of producing "virtual" artworks for these public art strategies, we have been commissioned to do several major public art projects. We have just finished Dragons' Gate (fig. 7), a large stainless steel sculpture, over 30 feet in circumference and 26 feet high, incorporating fiber optic lighting, in Limehouse. Two dragons, twisting to form the shape of the river in Docklands, are used to celebrate the first and oldest "Chinatown" that existed in Limehouse. An ancient Chinese symbol of good fortune, dragons also represent power. In cyclical form, biting each other's tails, they embody the power of unity and renewal (providing you treat them with respect). The Year of the Dragon gives birth to a new millennium.

The symbol of the dragon in the shape of the river in Docklands originally came from a meeting of tenants and action groups during the anti-development campaigns of the mid-1980s.²⁶ We collaborated with Anne Thorne Architects to create the sculptural version and with the A Team Arts and Education project to involve young people from the Limehouse Youth Club and two local schools in a parallel project, exploring the theme of dragons in different cultures around the world. These resulted in a series of banners. There are two versions of each, one that will hang outdoors accompanying the sculpture and one to hang indoors in the schools and youth club. This means that local young people have a sense of connection with, and ownership of, the sculpture—as well, some beautiful hangings are provided for their own buildings.

In Portsmouth we have been commissioned to develop a series of eight related artworks creating an environment that projects the history, identity, desires, and aspirations of the community of Wymering. The project will focus around the building of a new community and sports center, which not only will provide valuable social, cultural, and sports facilities for the area but will create an innovative Agenda 21 Model Project collaboration of both regional and national significance. We will be project managing the whole scheme and producing a landmark sculpture within it. Through this work we have created a new focus for the Art of Change around Agenda 21-the agenda for the twenty-first century that came out of the Rio Earth Summit.²⁷ The agenda, as well as tackling ecological questions, takes a holistic view of creating sustainable environments, including issues of social and economic equity, quality of life, culture, and identity.

It is time to move beyond an art practice that is used to put a Band-Aid on problems created by a politics and economics of short-sighted and false binaries: a choice between continued prosperity or ecological sustainability; between individual freedoms (of consumption) in the West or global responsibility; between the needs of producers (to pollute) or those of consumers (of the air, water, and all the other means of sustaining life). If we are to create a sustainable culture into the next millennium we have to move beyond these irrational binaries. There is little doubt that issues of ecology, sustainability, urban crisis, and cultural and racial tension are becoming increasingly urgent as we approach the millennium. By their very nature these questions require an interdisciplinary approach and an international dimension. Similarly there is a crisis not only in the physical fabric of our built environment, but in its visual signifiers. We experience a lack of shared meanings and, perhaps more importantly, the negative social meanings that are generated by much of our urban spaces. At the same time over 90 percent of art school graduates cannot make a living in their field of study.²⁸ Certainly fine art studies do not normally address any of the above issues in a direct way, though these are areas in which many students hold a passionate interest. Those who want to engage these issues, or work in the field of public art, may find themselves having to personally reinvent the wheel. It can be difficult to gain access to training, to other professionals, or to processes of teamwork and consultation. Art school graduates are often deliberately kept uninformed about financial or organizational management. They have to learn all this on the job, making mistakes and leaving any resulting damage in the public domain. There is little or no critical framework in which these mistakes, or indeed, ways forward, can be assessed, analyzed, and more widely debated or disseminated.

To this end we are in the process of establishing the International Institute of Art, Ecologies, Cultures and Change (working title). This would initially be an action research think tank of artists, architects, cultural and media theorists, ecologists, sociologists, technologists, and software programmers. It would use the focus of Agenda 21 to research new definitions and relationships between art and cultures in postcolonial globalism, art and environment in a postindustrial world, and art and society in the age of electronic communications systems. The aim would be to develop new processes, new materials, new uses, and new ways of relating for the approaching millennium. The think tank would begin as an Art of Change project with possible financing from Millennium funding.²⁹ In the long term, however, the institute would become an independent entity, but attached to a university.³⁰ Educationally such an institute would seek to establish new methodologies and structures for learning, utilizing multidisciplinary approaches and the tools of new communications technology, linking communities and constituencies of interest, training centers, and academic institutions. Its objectives are to explore interdisciplinary approaches to change in our environment, culture, and communications; to develop a transnational network of organizations, institutions, groups, and projects working on these or related issues; and to activate and promote creative potential, both in the makers and users of social space whether it be physical, symbolic, or virtual. Central to its goals is an art practice that is sustainable, empowering, and capable of reintroducing "beauty" into our society as we approach the challenges of a new century.

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