Signs of the City: Young People's Photographic Imaginary of the European Metropolis

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London Conference Report

The *Signs of the City* conference took place at the Goethe Institute, in Kensington, London on the 4th October 2008. This one day event organised by CUCR in partnership with urban dialogues bought together students, educationalists, artists, practitioners and academics working in the area of cultural education, media and pedagogy, visual arts, urban studies, languages and European studies to explore a cross-disciplinary perspective on participatory arts practice with a particular focus on young people's urban culture. The conference, together with an exhibition at Watermans arts centre in West London marked the end of the eighteen month long London *Signs of the City* project. It was part of a month long series of conferences and exhibitions in four participating cities: Berlin, London, Sofia and Barcelona.

After introductions by Karl Pfeiffer (Goethe Institute London) and Uta Staiger (urban dialogues) Michael Keith (CUCR) opened up the conference with a keynote address which set the scene for the day. Michael's paper discussed how cities are changing so rapidly in a global process of re-invention that the city can become a stranger to itself. In this context photography offers the possibility of mediating the relationship between urban practices of visioning and re-invention and the ways in which we inhabit cities at the level of everyday routine praxis. Multi- media participatory arts projects such as *Signs of the City* use this possibility of photography to investigate the ways young people inhabit and imagine their place in cities today. This in turn tells us about young peoples sense of, place, of neighbourhood and their 'right to the city. Michael discussed how the project works to disrupt the deceptively simple stories of young people, identity and contemporary urbanism circulating today. At its best the project displays the sort of *Relational Aesthetics* identified with Bourriaud, a theorist who, in foregrounding the interplay of urbanism, curation and aesthetics has opened up arts practice in the last decade.

The first panel of the day on *Young People, Cities and Citizenship* included a paper by Ben Gidley from CUCR entitled *Young citizens: local inflections of the global*. This paper, based on a series of research projects conducted at CUCR, some of which used visual and media-based methods, explored emerging forms of multiculture among young people in urban South London. Ben discussed how these forms are shaped by global cultural corporate culture while at the same time being intensely local, rooted in neighbourhoods - they are simultaneously hybrid and creole. Graham Jeffrey from the School of Media, Languages and Music at the University of the West of Scotland's paper offered some reflections on his extensive work on the discourses of learning and inclusion in informal performing arts projects with young people. Graham set out many of the strengths of participatory arts, the ways that they are profoundly social and often validating to young people and placing their voices in a wider social context. Graham's paper was followed by a presentation by Mónica Segura Márquez, a Berlin-based artist who ran several workshops in Berlin as part of the *Signs of the City* Project. Monica presented a short film which illustrated some of the central motifs in her work which aims to offer a process whereby young people learn to see the city through fresh eyes, discover aspects of the city that they pass over in their daily routines.

After lunch the discussion turned to visualising contemporary urbanism. In a session chaired by Rudolf Netzelmann (from Zukunftsbau/urban dialogues, Berlin), Gillian Rose, a leading theorist in visual methodologies, gave a paper entitled Photographs of/as Urban Identity which questioned some of the assumptions about photograph's creators that are often employed by social scientists. Fiona Fieber, from Space media in Hackney, London, reflected on her experience as Head of Collaborations at Space media which was founded in May 1968. Fiona reflected on the organisation's development and its current place in the in the changing cultural landscape of collaborative and participatory arts, and the spatial changes to

Hackney as an Olympic borough. Alison Rooke from CUCR discussed the challenges presented by Evaluating the Signs of the City project, reflecting on the ways in which the process of engagement is as significant as the images produced and the projects legacy, the Citipix web platform. She then discussed the photographs produced in the project and the ways in which the images are understood as semiotics, art and sociological statements.

The final session focused on participative arts practice. The session was chaired by Britt Hatzius an artists and member of CUCR. The first paper was by Aida Sanchez from the University of Barcelona entitled *The Politics of Collaboration in Signs of the City - the challenge is the asset*. It examined some of the relational and organisational aspects of collaborative arts project such as *Signs of the City*. This paper placed the project in the broader context of cultural policies aimed at the creation of concensus and symbolic identification with notions of 'citizenship' or 'community'. Aida examined some of the negotiations, debates and tensions that characterise collaborative projects. Rather than see these as flaws, she discussed the ways that these are at the core of such projects and therefore need to be part of the way such projects are represented and evaluated. Douglas Nicholson, one of the artists who ran one of the *Signs of the City* workshops in Hackney, London gave a paper *Participatory Photographic Methods*. He discussed the diverse settings he has carried out such work in and the ways that photography can be used in areas as varied as health, heritage and community development. Melissa Bliss, also a London artist, presented her work which uses mobile devices in youth arts projects such as *Signs of the City, BBC Blast* and *FreqOut* .

Considered together the mix of panellists, their different disciplinary approaches together, with engaging questions from the floor led to a stimulating day where artists, academics and educationalists together considered some of the dilemmas and opportunities raised by participative and collaborative arts practice and the social and political contexts in which this kind of work takes place. These discussions included the extent to which projects are participative or collaborative and the balance of power in deciding where participation

begins and ends. Also, the requirements of funders and the social contexts in which such practices are currently being commissioned and the ways in which participatory photography connects matters of aesthetics, lived experience and social processes.

The conference was a welcome opportunity to come together to discuss the ethical, political, pedagogical and aesthetic dimensions of socially engaged photographic practice across a variety of sites.

To conclude, engaging projects such as *Signs of the City* speak to our understanding of young peoples conditions of inhabiting the contemporary metropolis in language mediated by the visual practises and performances of the photographic. In Berlin, Barcelona, London and Sofia artists worked with young people through the medium of the photograph and in many ways curated both their neighbourhoods and representations of the city at large. The signs of the city they produced are more complex than those found in simplistic geographical tropes of the city as a playground, a site of danger or governmentality. In this way the project provided powerful axes through which the research project intervened in urban form, identity and space mediated by very different experiments in photographic practice. Conventional tropes of the four cities were reconfigured by these alternative curations; the hidden disclosed, the visible reconfigured.

Signs of the City: Photographic Workshop

Campbell works

Campbell Works is the collaboration between artists Neil Taylor and Harriet Murray. Since 1997 Taylor and Murray's practice has extended to include curating an exhibition program at their artist run gallery and project space in East London, initiating new participatory art projects and creating collaborations with artists, scientists, local authorities, and other organization. They encompass an eclectic attitude to cross-disciplinary approaches, placing value on the experience, process and risk taking involved in collaborative projects. For Signs of the City they ran a workshop at the Wilhelm-Von-Turk-Schule (School) for children with varying degrees of hearing and speaking impairment in Potsdam near Berlin in April 2008. (www.campbellworks.org)

The project kicked off at the Arts and Education Lab (AEL) in autumn 2007 at the House of Cultures of the World (HKW) in Berlin. It was an exciting three days with a packed programme of presentations, open debate, speed dating and intellectual duelling. The emphasis was for all participating artists, technicians, directors and facilitators to meet and get to know each other through developing key issues involved within the project. Many hours were spent discussing different aspects of the project from ethical and international legal issues to the projects technical implementation. We collectively explored the function of the public website (www.citipix.net) and its usability for the young photographers. The question hanging was how, in a relatively short period of time, could you maximise the creative output of a group of individuals that you have never met before, while at the same time ensuring that the experience be meaningful and not just an exercise in speed teaching and photo extraction.

We were given the opportunity to determine our own framework for delivery and through the A&E lab we developed the embryo of an idea. By exploring the inherent core values within the project that lay beyond the pictorial surface of the website, we asked what was the inner heart of the project that excited us? Assuming that one of the aims of *Signs of the City* was to take a snapshot of city life seen through the eyes of Europe's youth, then, as many different representatives should be included as possible. The range of participating countries was as good as the finance would allow and the groups seemed fairly diverse in their catchments. But none included young people with a recognised disability.

We discussed the possibility with the initiators of the project Urban Dialogues of including deaf participants, intrigued by the idea of working with a group that may potentially have a very different relationship or unique experience with the city environment. Following on from research undertaken for a previous Campbell Works project titled *MindMine*, (2006), we wanted to explore how perceptions can vary for the hearing impaired, and which if any of the other senses are enhanced to take on the role of the missing sensory input. Hearing is part of our communication system along with sight, so, do deaf people see the world differently? And what in the urban landscape attracts their attention? Do they see details and notice more incidental moments that get missed through the audio clutter of our cities?

Our methodology

Our approach was to try and explore the possibility of communicating largely through pictures and actions. With the projects focus on photography we were interested in creating an approach that would allow the participants a rewind from digital technologies back to the birth of photography, the aim being to inform their thinking by creating a dialogue between the photographer and the instrument of image capture. In order to retain mobility we developed a portable darkroom that can be transported and erected almost anywhere, and used to develop large format black and white images in the 'field'.

The Workshop

The 15 students were very quick on the uptake and eager to engage in the project. Using fundamental analogue principles, they constructed large format pinhole cameras from found cardboard boxes. With a digital camera in one hand and their pinhole camera in the other they set out to explore their surroundings. As they began returning to the darkroom 'base camp' they learnt how to develop and fix their images. In the glowing red darkness of the developing tent, the pinhole negatives were transformed into positive composite images. The students began overlaying cut paper stencils onto their negatives, immediately creating new signage and narratives. We were also able to create a wonderful juxtaposition of technologies by attaching a GPS device to the cardboard cameras to log and map the 'globally positioned situations' of the pinhole exposures.

Examining their results they assessed the pros and cons of 150 years of technological advancement as they struggled with long exposure times and cardboard camera shake. It quickly became apparent that their focus was largely on portraiture, photographing each other within familiar surroundings. We realised that for them, and perhaps all teenagers, the most immediate and interesting subjects are friends. There was also an element of hesitation. To walk around the city or stand in a public space next to a strange cardboard box and not feel self-conscious is hard. You have to be very keen or oblivious not to be mildly embarrassed, and for a group of young people who do not generally want to draw attention to themselves there were issues for some, about the spectacle of an often extremely long exposure and being seen carrying the cardboard cameras.

The participating photographers were as mixed in their creative interests and skills as any group of 15 teenagers. But, the emotional perceptions and speed at which the students gathered information from their surroundings seemed significantly faster than those of us who rely on our ears, and their ability to assimilate learning was impressive. Many of our projects involve the creation of disorientating environments, and during these workshops the students' reliance on their visual communication systems was severely hampered when they worked within the darkroom tent. This loss of communication systems, both verbal and visual, strangely created an atmosphere of calm, a kind of 'lost at sea' feeling for all involved. As artists we were working within a communicative environment that was alien to us, and now, the participants were experiencing it too. By removing the ability to communicate through conventional channels, they were forced to learn from each other's actions and encouraged to take risks even if it meant making mistakes. By dissolving the conversational communication systems, including signing, the framework allowed for the creation of new imagery within an experimental platform, where practical activity became the form of communication. The imagery the photographers produced is beautiful, compelling and ethereal, and their upload selection will remain as a legacy to the project, and easily speak for itself, but we hope a deeper legacy is left in the students ability to question, learn from and act on their actions and imaginations, as they did during the five days we had the pleasure to be with them.