

Makings, mediators and materialities: a geographical framework for socially engaged art

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Introduction

This paper is aimed at people who are interested in the type of encounters and relations in socially engaged art. It comes from an AHRC Cultural Engagement Fellowship entitled 'Methodologies of Socially Engaged Art'. During this, I became 'researcher in residence' at Peckham Platform, a contemporary community art gallery in Peckham, South London. The AHRC Cultural Engagement Scheme awards funding to recently completed PhD graduates to carry out collaborative projects to connect their research to wider cultural and civic contexts. This project with Peckham Platform has focused on the contribution that research in Cultural Geography can make to better understand the work within and around socially engaged art practice. Equally, it aims to advance geographical understanding of this form of art practice by expanding the lens of enquiry beyond the work, towards the broader network it is situated in. This paper presents a geographical framework that offers a way in which to locate important encounters and relations that occur in this broader network. This approach, I suggest, provides a richer understanding of the work that goes into and exists around galleries such as Peckham Platform. This builds on and develops work from my PhD thesis which was entitled 'Participatory art and the cultural geographies of encounter'. This traced three participatory art projects in Peckham, Bow and Finsbury Park, and investigated the type of encounters and relations they created within super-diverse urban landscapes. Using this approach, I engaged with pertinent geographical issues such as meaningful encounter, urban diversity and cultural labour.

I see socially engaged art as a particularly interesting topic for my discipline, not least because it is a cultural practice that purposefully experiments with spatial relations by staging them within an aesthetic framework. This, I believe, can lead to creative engagements with the relationship between people and place. Further, socially engaged art is often put to work within pertinent geographical matters such as place-making, political activism and community connectivity. Finally, and akin to Geography's keen

interest in interdisciplinarity, socially engaged art is understood to “sit between disciplines”; between art practice and disciplines like Geography, Sociology and Anthropology.¹ In light of this, I see socially engaged art as a cultural practice that should be taken seriously within geographical research.

In my work, I do not just focus on the relations within the aesthetic form of socially engaged artworks, such as between the artist and service user group. I am equally interested in addressing the broader networks that these artworks are situated within, and how these affect the type of work produced. These broader networks can feature actors such as gallery technicians, gallery assistants, interns, youth-workers and art institutions. However, it can also feature objects and things. I am interested in how these play a forceful role in the type of relations that occur through the artwork. Investigating these actors and relations within *and around* socially engaged artworks means we are able to get a deeper understanding of how they are produced, and how they connect out to their locale. This is something that my PhD thesis engaged with extensively. This paper builds on this, presenting a specific framework or ‘tool kit’ to investigate this broader network of relations.

Researcher in Residence

The methodological and empirical approach of my PhD thesis involved following the case studies as closely as possible in order to identify the hidden infrastructures around the artworks. The ‘Methodologies of Socially Engaged Art’ project continued this embedded approach to my research by becoming a ‘researcher in residence’. Crucially, this involved me having a desk space in Peckham Platform’s office. Working within this environment gave a behind-the-scenes insight into a ‘social arts’ gallery and the meaningful, everyday relationships they have fostered with their location in Peckham. More practically, as a geographer working within a different professional environment, it has provided access to an integral advice network, something which acted as a sounding-board for the various questions and queries that emerged through the process of the research residency. It has been the everyday discussions in the gallery office that have been a particularly novel and useful source of information. The insight this gave me also reinforced my belief that we need to take into consideration the broader network of relations that artworks sit within.

Paper structure

Following this introduction, the paper is split into three parts. The first section provides some context to my framework. The second section presents the geographical framework, identifying how this can be used to trace and unpick the relations that emerge in and around socially engaged art. This is presented through three ‘types’ of relations – makings, mediators and materialities. The third section concludes the paper, and suggests how the framework could be a useful tool for Peckham Platform and similar institutions. The conclusion ends with a discussion on interdisciplinary research between geography and art.

Makings, mediators and materialities: A geographical framework

I take a specific approach to researching socially engaged art. Rather than focus wholly on the type of encounters and relations that emerge in the form of the work, I am interested in the broader network of relationalities that artworks are situated within. These not only play important roles in how the artworks are made, but they also impact the type of relations that emerge during the work. In this light, attending just to the collaborative encounters within socially engaged art is to limit the understanding of the range of encounters and relations generated by the work. The idea of investigating this broader network or ‘art world’ is not new. In the 1970’s, Sociologist Howard Becker argued that art emerges from the collective effort of a network of human actors, rather than just the artist.² An example of some of these efforts, Becker suggests, include “conceiving the idea for the work, making the necessary physical artefacts, creating a conventional language of expression, training artistic personnel and audiences to use the conventional language to create and experience, and providing the necessary mixture of those ingredients for a particular work or performance”.³ Indeed, artists throughout history have relied on the practical, supportive work of others in the production of their work - think of Andy Warhol’s factory assistants and Henry Moore’s sculpture assistants. Inspired by this, my work looks beyond the artwork, towards the broader network of relations it is situated with. Doing so, I believe, provides a deeper insight into the geographies of socially engaged art.

The framework below engages with this multitude of relations that connect to artworks, offering a particular way to unpick and trace these. What I want to suggest, before this is presented, is that these relations do not occur in an ordered, linear way. The production

and reception of art can be commonly thought of as an over-simplified, structured process, whereby funding for cultural production is often trickled down from national government, the Arts Council, private donors or multinational businesses, into local schemes or art institutions. These then commission and facilitate exhibitions and projects, which are subsequently experienced by audiences. This, I would argue, lends itself to a distinctively hierarchical understanding of cultural production, one that places central agency with funders. It also necessitates thinking that cultural projects emerge as neat, standardised products following the input of funding. In order to develop a more specific and nuanced understanding of the relations created by socially engaged art, an alternative way of thinking is needed.

This, I suggest, starts with the understanding that each artwork is necessarily unique – that no project is the same due to the specific convergence of relations through which it emerges. Even if the same project was repeated a year later, it would prompt different encounters and connect to a different set of relations. Thus, to understand how each project is made and engaged with it is necessary to carefully trace the network of relations it connects out to. The relations, as I have argued, need to go beyond those within the work, towards a broader network of social sites. A geographical approach to socially engaged art is to attend to these wider encounters and relation. In doing so, I suggest that the impact of the work (how it is made, who it is made with, and how it connects to other social sites) cannot be confined the just the work. Under the themes makings, mediators and materialities, the indicative methodology that follows offers a particular framework to help engage with these wider relations. Importantly, this is not an exhaustive framework. I am not suggesting this is how to understand everything about this type of artwork. Rather, it is one particular approach that I have developed to help make sense of the work that goes on in and around socially engaged artwork.

Makings

Through my research it came to light that there were two different types of making in socially engaged art. There are ‘collaborators’, usually the artist and service user group; and there are what I would describe as ‘co-producers’ – makers connected to the artwork, but not included in the aesthetic form of the work. When thinking about the making process in socially engaged art, it is often limited to the collaborative relationship between the artist and service user group. The artist gets paired with a certain group,

chosen by them or by the commissioning institute, and sets out to produce the work. This collaborative working process is acknowledged as part of the artwork's aesthetic form. However, this collaborative relationship is not the only space where production occurs. It is set within a broader network of co-producers, some of which play a central role in the creation of the artwork. Socially engaged art acknowledges certain co-productive labour (typically a service user group), but in doing so, hides others.

To exemplify this thinking, I turn to an artwork at Peckham Platform by Sarah Cole called *Tribe* (2013). *Tribe* was an installation collaboratively produced through six workshops with Sarah Cole and the Young Women's Group (YWG hereafter), a creative youth group based in the London Borough of Southwark. The workshops included creative activities such as drawing and dancing, and playful activities such as skipping and word games. The installation included real grass turf lining the gallery floor, a large Perspex sign saying 'Buckingham Palace', a full playable drum kit, camouflage beanbags, Onesies hanging from the ceiling⁴, fold-out camping chairs, a cuckoo clock, a film of a sparrowhawk killing and eating a pigeon in a garden, a film of one of the Young Women's Group in a Onesie and plastic animal mask drumming on a large cardboard box, a film of the YWG in Onesies and animals mask playing near Peckham Square, a vinyl record player, and small metal music boxes secured to the wall. Although Cole and the YWG were integral to *Tribe*, and linking to the discussion above, there are a number of other actors that played a crucial part in its production. Take for example Alex, Peckham Platform's gallery engineer at the time. Alex and Cole developed a collaborative rapport during the installation of the exhibition, and this had an impact on how *Tribe* was made. Bringing a specific set of skills including woodworking, Alex built the Buckingham Palace sign that adorned the entrance to the exhibition. Alex also built a wooden plinth for the DVD player and put together a pulley system to hang the Onesies from the ceiling. Further, he also held an important connection to the local timber yard, meaning they could get the wood needed for the artwork at a good price. These relations between Alex, Cole and the timber yard, as well as Alex's distinctive skill-set, were integral to how *Tribe* was produced.

Two short films featured in the *Tribe* installation featuring the YWG. The concept behind these came from Cole and the YWG, but they were edited and produced by an external film-maker. There was an illustrated booklet that described the process of the

project, and was given to visitors of the installation. The graphic-design direction was by Cole, inspired by her time with the YWG, but they were drawn by an illustrator. These instances of production were integral to how *Tribe* existed as an artwork, but they were not understood as part of the collaborative labour in the form of the work. This is by far a criticism of the work. Rather, it is instead to identify that important encounters and relations created by such projects get overlooked.

The difference between this “hidden or dissolved...notion of technical back up” in art creation, and the collaborative labour present in socially engaged artworks, is according to Art Theorist John Roberts, “fundamentally a question of cultural form”, where collaboration becomes “a *self-conscious* process of production”.⁵ ‘Collaboration’ in socially engaged art refers to the co-production of non-artist others that is acknowledged in the artwork’s aesthetic form. Arguably, the way in which *Tribe* materialised as an installation could be traced back to hundreds of different decisions and types of production – for example the company that made the Onesies and the drums, or the company that grew and laid the grass. My point is not that co-producers are being treated unjustly, rather that within the logic of ‘collaboration’ in socially engaged art lies a division of labour whereby *selected* co-production is acknowledged and subsequently included as part of the art form. As Roberts suggests: “the socially produced character of art is made explicit *in* the form of the work”.⁶ However, where he implies that co-production is made visible in collaborative work, a more nuanced suggestion would be that it includes the acknowledgement that it has been made with *selected* others.

Mediators

Within socially engaged art there are actors that do not directly produce the art, but do play an important role in how meaning and understanding of the artwork is mediated. The thinking behind this is inspired by work on ‘cultural intermediaries’ from Sociology and Cultural Studies, which describes the way symbolic value is created “by framing how others...engage with goods, affecting and effecting others’ orientations towards those goods as legitimate”.⁷ Sociologist Nathalie Heinich has applied this to contemporary art, drawing attention to a range of mediating processes.⁸ Heinich explains that the field of art contains “a number of heterogeneous beings: humans and objects, words and numbers, walls and institutions: that is, a whole set of ‘mediations’”. These mediations, she suggests, “enable an artwork to be perceived and appropriated by others”.⁹

Described here are the negotiating processes between the produced artwork, and its experience and understanding as art by audiences. Importantly, this is not an ordered, linear process, where art is made; its meaning is mediated through other actors; then experienced by the audience. Rather, mediation is a process that unfolds throughout the life of the artwork, and is specific to its shifting spatio-temporal context. In this regard, mediation can potentially occur at any point.

For example, curators hold an important mediating role by guiding and influencing particular themes, trends and strategies through the projects and exhibitions they commission. Peckham Platform's Executive Director, Emily Druiff, epitomises this. Although not directly involved in its production, by deciding to work with certain artists, and framing their work in the context of Peckham Platform, she influences how the work is experienced and understood, and the relations this consequently creates. Gallery invigilators are also examples of key mediators. During my research of Cole's *Tribe*, I observed the central role Peckham Platform's gallery invigilators played in relaying information and understanding of the installation to the public. This was particularly important for an exhibition like *Tribe* which seemed to blur the line between art and real-life. The invigilators helped frame the installation as art, which subsequently impacted the relations that occurred through the public's engagement.

A third example of mediation is the gallery space itself. This can be understood as an important framing mechanism for artworks and the relations that emerge around them. Art Historian Carol Duncan has suggested that the gallery frames objects as art and in doing so create "a new kind of ritual attention" by visitors.¹⁰ Through this framing and construction of a "ritual space", the gallery is "marked off and culturally designated as reserved for a special quality and attention", one that encourages specific contemplation, experience and behaviour.¹¹ In this form of mediation, the architectural structures of the gallery physically frame their contents as art space, subsequently encouraging particular types of (ritual) relations with visitors and participants.

Materialities

This final section of the methodological framework suggests that the materiality of socially engaged art needs to be identified as a crucial actor in the formation of relations. Approaching socially engaged art in this way challenges what Political Theorist Jane

Bennett has described (via Jacques Rancière) as a “partition of the sensible” in understandings of objects and things in the idea of ‘the social’.¹² This regime, Bennet suggests, splits “the world into dull matter (it, things) and vibrant life (us, beings)”.¹³ Instead, we need to think of objects as being active in the production of relations, rather than just a backdrop for these to occur on. Indeed, I would argue that the potential for this type of art to create meaningful relations partly lies in the ability of objects to acquire distinctive relational capacities. Thus, it is important to locate the connections between socially engaged art, its constitutive materiality, and the emergence of particular relations.

This position ties into a broader discussion within art theory regarding the specificity of relations generated by participatory art¹⁴; a debate that questions “who...is involved with these relations, and to what ends are these relations developed”.¹⁵ By thinking of objects and things as being active in the relations of participatory art (in its broadest sense), is to question the parameters of what constitutes ‘the social’ within this art. Through my own empirical research, there have been a number of times where I have seen objects directly influence the type of relations produced during an artwork. During Barby Asante’s *The South London Black Music Archive* at Peckham Platform, I observed an excited sociality emerge amongst visitors that hinged around vinyl records. These objects - round pieces of acetate with contours etched in - held collective musical heritage and memories that become the source of discussion amongst visitors to the exhibition. These connections went beyond the immediacy of the relations in the gallery, and stretched out to the community of Peckham, South London more broadly, and a music-orientated history at the intersections of social, cultural, economic and political identities. During the workshops of *Tribe*, Cole bought Onesies and plastic animal masks for the YWG to play around in. When wearing them, their individual and group behaviour changed. They became more playful and acted younger. These new relations consequently impacted how *Tribe* formed as an installation, with the masks and Onesies featuring to varying degrees. The drum kit that featured in the *Tribe* installation also took on a forceful role in the type of relations that formed during the exhibition period of the project. The drum kit could be played by visitors. This resulted in the constant patter of drums during the exhibition. This sound filled the public square outside the gallery, and actively pulled inquisitive people into the space. The drum kit also created fleeting, collaborative encounters with strangers. On a number of occasions I observed visitors singing or

rapping over someone playing the drums. In these regards, the drum can be understood have produced specific encounters and relations.

Geographers Bruce Braun and Sarah Whatmore suggest that instead of seeing ‘things’ as “passive objects or effects of human actions”, they should be acknowledged as “active parties in the making of social collectivities and...associations”.¹⁶ Echoing this position, it is important to see these featured objects as playing an active and forceful role in the emergence of social relations, rather than a fuzzy backdrop providing a stage for these to happen. This approach can extend beyond the examples provided here. It enables us to identify the potential vibrancy of the plethora of material things that converge on socially engaged artworks. It is crucial to pay close attention to these material worlds, as they can offer deeper insight into how relations emerge through the work, as well as why these relations may matter to people participating.

Conclusion: Recommendations and interdisciplinarity

To conclude this paper I want to use the framework to demonstrate some indicative recommendations for Peckham Platform. These will be structured following the three types of relations. Although these are tailored towards Peckham Platform, the essence could be transferred to other similar cultural institutions. Following these recommendations, the paper ends with a short note about the advantages of working across disciplines.

Makings: This section of the framework suggested an acknowledgement of ‘co-producers’, as well as collaborative makers. In this light, Peckham Platform should look beyond the collaborative relations within the artwork’s they commission. This could locate meaningful connections to their projects that would otherwise be missed. Think of the engineer during *Tribe*, Alex, and his connection to the timber yard near the gallery. This element of co-production linked *Tribe* and Peckham Platform to the local economy of Peckham. This demonstrates how the gallery is embedded in its locale, and how it actively participates in its local economy.

Mediators: This strand identified the role of intermediaries in the experience and understanding of art. Consequently, I suggest Peckham Platform should think creatively

about the role of gallery invigilators. As the point of contact between gallery, exhibition and public, their mediating role could be a source of vital information to understand visitors' reception and participation with artworks. During the period of an exhibition or event, invigilators develop a unique insight into the type and quality of public engagement. This knowledge should be taken into serious consideration when analysing and evaluating projects. Done effectively, this knowledge could help bolster future funding applications and impact assessments.

Materialities: This part of the framework called for the role of objects to be seen as active and forceful in socially engaged art, rather than a backdrop for human interaction. Encounters with objects are important sites of meaning and therefore the relations they instigate should be taken into account. This offers an alternative lens into the impact of artworks. Think of the vinyl records during *The South London Black Music Archive*. They stimulated a collective sociality in the artwork which connected out to broader social collectives within Peckham and beyond. Thinking of objects as 'participating' in encounters can aid in the evaluation of artwork.. Identifying that the sociality in *The South London Black Music Archive* centered on the materiality of the vinyl could help in describing the specific type of relations it created.

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While this paper has been situated within an interdisciplinary realm, is not an art theoretical account. It is instead the presentation of a geographical methodology to help uncover some of the different types of encounters and relations produced by socially engaged art. While interdisciplinarity is an important aspect of contemporary academic endeavors, this should not lead to the disappearance of disciplinary boundaries altogether. Interdisciplinarity is exciting and productive because of the convergence of different expertise, and for this, disciplinary boundaries need to exist. As a geographer researching art practice and offering a particular conceptual insight into socially engaged art, this does not make me an art theoretician or historian. Working across disciplines does mean approaching their boundaries as porous, but this should not be without acknowledging and valuing the specialised training and skill required in its emergence and maintenance as a discipline. It is about respecting the differences between Geography and Art Theory, rather than attempting to merge one into the other.¹⁷ This is a relational

position, applying to art theorists working outside their discipline, just as much as geographers working with art theory. For example, Art Theorist Grant Kester has supported the use of social science methods in the evaluation of art, but as a form of art criticism. Thus, I do not approach socially engaged art as a geographer 'doing' art theory, just as Kester does not suggest art theorists should become social scientists. Rather, I have researched socially engaged art as a geographer invigorated by the potential this holds for developing geographical knowledge. Of course, and in the context of this paper, it is also to offer an alternative insight into socially engaged art, but it does so from within Geography. It is this acknowledgement of disciplinary boundaries that has led to the framework in this paper. That is, my training and experience in Geography has enabled me to approach socially engaged art in a distinctive way. Without these disciplinary boundaries to cross, the insight from this paper would arguably not have emerged. Finally, just as art offers a site of interest to geographers, geography offers something back. Geography is equipped, conceptually and methodologically, with a specific set of tools to trace and unpick the broader network of relationalities of art. This requires stepping back from the art itself and identifying it as another cultural practice, made from and set within a distinct set of spatial relations. By maintaining these disciplinary boundaries, and facilitating cross-disciplinary dialogue, new and alternative ways of thinking about art and geography will continue to emerge.

¹ P. Helguera, *Education for Socially Engaged Art: A Materials and Techniques Handbook* (New York: Jorge Pinto Books, 2011), p. 2.

² H. Becker, *Art Worlds* (University of California Press: London, 1982); also see N. Fox, 'Creativity, anti-humanism and the 'new sociology of art', *Journal of Sociology*, 51 (2013), 522-536, p. 523

³ H. S. Becker, 'Art as Collective Action', *American Sociological Review*, 39 (1974), 767-776, p. 768.

⁴ Onesies are an all-in-one form of tracksuit, with a hood.

⁵ J. Roberts, 'Collaboration as a problem of art's cultural form', *Third Text*, 18 (2004), 557-564, p. 557

⁶ Roberts, 'Collaboration as a problem', p.554

⁷ Cultural intermediaries people 2012, p. 554

⁸ N. Heinich, 'Mapping intermediaries in contemporary art according to pragmatic sociology', *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, 15 (2012), 695-702

⁹ Heinich, 'Mapping intermediaries', p.697

¹⁰ C. Duncan, *Civilizing Rituals: inside public art museums* (Routledge: London and New York, 1996), p.16

¹¹ Duncan, *Civilizing Rituals*, p.10

¹² J. Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: a political ecology of things* (Duke University Press: Durham, NC, 2010)

¹³ Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, p. vii

¹⁴ For example: C. Bishop, 'Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics', *October*, Fall (2005); G.

Kester, *Conversation Pieces: Community and Communication in Modern Art* (University of California

Press: London, 2004); G. Kester, *The One and the Many: Contemporary Collaborative Art in a Global Context* (Duke University Press: Durham, NC, 2011)

¹⁵ H. Hawkins, S. A. Marston, M. Ingram & E. Straughan, 'The Art of Socioecological Transformation', 105(2), p.3

¹⁶ B. Braun & S. J. Whatmore, 'The Stuff of Politics: An Introduction', in B. Braun & S. J. Whatmore (eds) *Political Matter: Technoscience, Democracy, and Public Life* (University of Minnesota Press, 2010), pp. xiii-xiv

¹⁷ For a sustained engagement with this topic see H. Hawkins, 'Creative geographic methods: knowing, representing, intervening. On composing place and page', *Cultural Geographies*, 22(2015), 247-268