



"TO JUSTIFY AN ART AESTHETIC BY PUTTING IT ON A COST-PER-TAX-PAYER IS DEATH TO CREATIVITY..."

Reactivating the archive

The Southwark Education Research Project ran between 1989 and 1995, making a significant impact both nationally and internationally. Emily Druiff, artistic director of Peckham Platform, discusses how its reactivation will extend the concept of its archive into new spaces and contexts

Peckham Platform are delighted to announce the start of a radical education project, commissioning the artists Barbara Steveni and Barby Asante to meaningfully address the erosion of arts in contemporary education through the reactivation of the Southwark Education Research Project.

This project will secure and reactivate a significant educational resource. The original archive will be revived through Steveni's personal collation of materials that include documents, photographs, correspondence, audio, video and artworks from the fifteen 'artist placements' in schools between 1989 to 1995, which engaged over 1,500 children and teachers in 15 schools across the London borough of Southwark. Known as the Southwark Education Research Project (SERP), it made an important impact nationally and internationally, and

provided a model for replication across the country. It is timely to revisit and celebrate SERP's significance, for both the local community in Southwark and more widely for audiences beyond the borough, as we again see shifts in educational policy and the contraction of opportunity for young people to engage in in-school cultural education.

The reactivation of SERP aims to make an impact on multiple levels by inviting a broad spectrum of people in considering its contemporary significance. The project will extend the concept of the archive by taking SERP research into new spaces and contexts. For example, the work that Barby Asante will do with young people at The Charter School will engage a self-selected group as co-researchers and producers to re-imagine the arts curricula. These young people, who now attend the school where the original SERP project took place (fig. 2), will be given equal opportunity to voice their reflections on the archive alongside teachers, artist educators, art students and wider audiences through public exhibitions.

Importantly, the project will reconnect with a number of original SERP members through a series of oral history testimonies.

These reflections will be key to the exhibitions, inspiring wider public debate on the role of arts in education through the co-produced public programme. Visitors to the exhibitions will be invited to record their opinion through vox pops, reasserting the project's original ambitions for art to be central to our lives, not only the curricula.

There will be two public exhibitions in spring 2018 showcasing the reactivated SERP archive and collaboration between artists Barbara Steveni and Barby Asante (peckhamplatform.com/artists/barby-asante). The first of these exhibitions will take place at Flat Time House in Peckham South East London (flattimeho.org.uk) where Latham lived and worked. This venue is of significance as since Latham's passing it has been transformed into an exhibition and research centre dedicated to his life's work and research. The second of these exhibitions will take place at Tate Exchange, Tate Modern, London, where the archive has the opportunity to be reactivated by a wider audience. Alongside which, the exhibition will be contextualised by a selection of works from the Artist Placement Group which are housed at the Tate Archives.

'The history and significance of SERP lies in its capturing a major cultural shift and changing function of art and education'

Historical context

SERP grew out of the pivotal organisation, the Artist Placement Group (APG), established in 1965 by internationally renowned artists, co-founded by Barbara Steveni and John Latham (tate.org.uk/art/art-terms/a/artist-placement-group). The group set up placements within industry (often large corporations such as British Steel and ICI) and later within UK-government departments such as the Departments of Health and Social Security (DHSS), the Department for the Environment, and the Scottish Office. APG has been celebrated through numerous retrospective exhibitions, including at the Whitechapel Gallery (1997) and Raven Row Gallery (2012). In 2006, shortly before the death of John Latham, the APG archive was acquired for the national collection by Tate Britain.

After 1989 APG became known as Organisation and Imagination (O+I) and their practice underwent an important evolution,



from exploring their creativity and reflection in strategic contexts, to central government and public industry, to harnessing their ability to activate the creativity of others — in this case, pupils, teachers and the inspectorate. Through direct interventions in the delivery of frontline public services — education — SERP became their main output between 1989 and 1995, where they made a valuable and critical contribution to methods of co-production with learners and community groups.

The history and significance of SERP lies in its capturing a major cultural shift and changing function of art and education. SERP took place at a time of creativity and pluralisation in London schools, when the region-wide Inner London Education Authority (ILEA) passed responsibilities to the borough-level Local Education Authorities (LEAs). Over a six-year period, SERP engaged 14 Southwark schools, each hosting a placement with the aim of universalising and embedding access to creativity and culture. The wider historical, social and cultural significance of SERP is substantial and far-reaching, providing a model that has been replicated internationally, including through the DCMS and Arts Council England Creative Partnerships Programme.

Learning exhibitions

The SERP public learning exhibitions will be a unique opportunity for audiences to experience and contribute to this radical education project. The materials gathered through this reanimation will be added to the archive and preserved online for future generations. The learning exhibitions will include the following; video testimonies from original SERP members; original SERP

members recounting the importance of SERP and the impact that it had on their work; archival material from SERP & APG; materials from APG and SERP available for wider reflection and historical context; a learning activity titled 'Southwark puzzle!'; an original artwork by Rita Keegan reactivated for visitors to engage with and explore the schools in Southwark; a New Arts Curriculum, made by students from original SERP schools and re-imaged through a public performance and video; a Public Programme, including a co-created series of free talks and events exploring the themes of SERP; a SERP Archive Online; a collection of SERP materials available to the public for the first time; and finally a 'Welcome Point & Visitor Vox Pop' to include contemporary testimonials from exhibition visitors regarding the erosion of arts in contemporary education.

How to get involved

We welcome your contribution to a wider conversation across the arts and education sector, addressing the significant erosion of arts in contemporary education. To take part, join our mailing list on peckhamplatform.com or follow @PeckhamPlatform for exhibition details as they are announced in early 2018. ■

Peckham Platform

Peckham Platform is a creative and educational charity dedicated to supporting and commissioning social arts practice. Located in Peckham, London SE15, and founded in 2010, we will have a new permanent home and a larger gallery space in the redeveloped Peckham Library Square. Our new home will have a greatly expanded artistic programme dedicated to the research, learning and commissioning of social art practice. Whilst our development takes place we will deliver an exciting series of off-site projects across Peckham and South London throughout 2018 and 2019.

1 SERP was negotiated by 'O+I' (Organisation and Imagination), an artist-run collective which grew out of the pivotal organisation 'APG' (Artist Placement Group), conceived by the conceptual artists Barbara Steveni and John Latham in 1966

2 Screenshot of SERP archive video, featuring Southwark children

3 SERP archive quote from David Boalch (1949-2012), head teacher of Pilgrims Way Primary School, Southwark

4 Barby Asante. SLBMA launch, Peckham Platform, 2012

5 Barbara Steveni and Barby Asante viewing the SERP archive in the Barbara's Archive Room, 2017