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Curating art and ‘doing’ geography: creative research methods in practice.

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In this presentation I want to think about different strategies for researching the cultural geographies of visual art, and related to this, different methods for doing cultural geography. To do this I’m going to consider my involvement in the development of ‘*Bordering*’, a programme of site responsive artwork that I have initiated as part of my phd and in which I assume something of a curatorial as well as collaborative role. By discussing some of the issues emerging from my practical work to date, I hope to demonstrate how this particular mode of action research, offers an interesting and productive route through the multiple geographies of visual art production and consumption, as well as providing an opportunity to expand the registers through which academic research is produced and consumed via the co-creation of three new public art works. Although today I’m going to concentrate on the former of these ideas, as the art projects themselves are still in the very early stages of development.

I will begin by introducing *Bordering* in more detail in terms of location and curatorial theme. I will then look at the how this project is set up within the wider context of my phd research. Here I discuss the significance of taking a very ‘hands on’ approach to engaging with art in terms of recent disciplinary interest in questions of performance and embodied practices, which is beginning to redefine how geographers approach research, and also recent cultural geographical engagement with the visual arts, which is itself indicative of this broader trend. I then move on to consider how ideas from this literature are being mobilised within the context of *Bordering*. Here I’m going to talk about some of the themes emerging from my curatorial work to date concerning the spatial politics of art production and also the shifting uncertain nature of the process per se, through which my position within the research is continually reforming. Hopefully some of these themes will tie in with ideas from today’s other papers and make for an interesting discussion later on.

***Bordering*: An introduction to the project**

Bordering refers to a collaborative research project involving myself and six artists which creatively explores the relationships between identity and place along the Anglo-Welsh border. The rural market town of Oswestry, situated in north west Shropshire, three miles to the east of the border, forms the setting and point of departure for the research. The project will culminate in the realisation of three new site-responsive artworks within and around this locality during October of this year, accompanied by an exhibition documenting the development of the work at Qube Arts Centre in Oswestry, which also forms the project hub.

Each artwork will draw upon different aspects of the town and its rural hinterland, with a view to opening up multiple articulations of ‘the border’ as a line of separation, a site of exchange, a liminal space or a threshold state. Through live performance, audio and visual representations

and critical imaginings the project aims to generate an alternative borderland topography grounded in the many different narratives and socio-spatial practices associated with this place.

In setting the project up in this way, *Bordering* builds upon a rich history of art that takes it's initiative from national boundaries. Much of this work has been generated with reference to heavily controlled, highly politicised, or strongly contested border regions with a view to critically commentating upon, or intervening in, the contradictory politics of mobility associated with the border (where the border is both gateway and barrier). The most famous example being work developed around the US-Mexico border through the Border Art Workshop and more recently the Insite biennial. But in the present context I am particularly interested in how artists might work with this seemingly fossilised borderland, which could be construed as both politically and aesthetically banal, and what kind of border politics or poetics might emerge through their engagements with lived complexities of this area.

From this brief description it becomes apparent that *Bordering* is interested in opening up different research strategies for exploring and expressing the multi-layered, multi-sensory relationship between identity and place, strategies will hopefully broaden the range of what can be communicated by academic research and to whom. So here, the artwork generated will be valued as a mode of argument in its own right. As such the project will build upon recent geographical work that recognises the power of visual (as well as other creative) arts to communicate the fleeting, sensuous, practices through which the social world comes into being far better than conventional academic reports, and related to this research that questions the limits of traditional social scientific methodologies and research accounts. Of particular note in this respect is the work of Nigel Thrift, who through his writings on performance and performativity critiques what he considers to be the narrow range of qualitative methods that cultural geographers use to conduct empirical research and the narrow range of sensate life they register. Here he points to methods from the performing arts – such as dance and contact improvisation in order to engage with the embodiments of social practice. Whilst these suggestions represent something of the extreme end of the scale, there are now lots of different examples of geographers explore alternative ways of conducting research including a number of fine art collaborations, such as Visualising geography, BioGeoGraphy and Chat Moss, which explore different ways of working and suggest new narratives for research and teaching.

In a similar vein I hope that *Bordering* pushes towards a redefinition of practice in cultural geography and not only with regard to the expression and interrogation of geographical ideas through aesthetics. That is to say the negotiation of curatorial and collaborative roles, necessary for the realisation of the work also forms an integral element of this research. So here I'm using my curatorial and collaborative involvement, as a researchable process through which to engage on a very practical level with the geographies of art production in a number of contexts and at a range of scales.

Through this approach the project contributes towards a growing body of work that explores art as an effect produced through practices and performances, rather than as something purely representational. Here we have research that considers the conduct *visual* art, such as David Crouch and Mark Toogood's research on Peter Lanyon's abstract expressionism which they describe as informed by a very physical engagement with in the Cornish landscape, a tactile

knowledge, if you like, transposed into abstract painting. There is also work that has engaged specifically with art as spatial practice, an interesting example here is David Pinders account of his participation in Janet Cardiff's *The Missing Voice*, an audio walk which takes place through east London and which gains meaning through embodied enaction. Within this account David draws upon his own performance of this work to address a series of questions relating to subjectivity and the city and the aestheticization of urban space. However whilst much of this work considers how art is performatively produced by either artist or audience, my role within *Bordering* provides the opportunity to consider wider practices, encounters and geographies, through which art comes into being.

I'd now like to think a bit more about this idea with reference my curatorial work to date.

To begin with, it is worth highlighting is that the responsibilities of the contemporary art curator encompass a wide range of activities beyond the traditional idea of curating as a museum based practice involving the acquisition, classification and care of objects. Crucial in this respect has been the emergence of new art forms since the mid 60s which have opened up a completely new range of possibilities for the creation, exhibition and consumption of art. Today's art curators are negotiators, facilitators and mediators, and are often involved in the production of the art, working closely with the artist as commissioner, as is the case in this project. Further to this, changes in public funding (leading to a growing emphasis on accountability, value for money, audience numbers, education, access and outreach) have yet further extended the curator's practical responsibilities, which Teresa Gleadow identifies as 'sponsorship and funding; development and production; marketing and publicity; advocacy and interpretation; outreach and audience, as well as issues of art and display'.

These are all activities that I'm working through within the project but rather than detailing each step here, I'd like to put forward some thoughts emerging from two of the principle activities that I've undertaken so far concerning the selection of artists for commission and crucially raising money for the project.

The first thing I'd like to highlight is how these activities have brought into focus the spatial politics of art production. At the broadest level, this can be understood in terms of centre and periphery, where most of the UK's high profile arts practice is urban-based, or more specifically London centric and whilst the last ten years has witnessed a decentralisation of publicly funded arts institutions and public art projects, particularly since UK lottery money has been distributed through the arts council, the commercial art world very much still centred in London, no regional art market as such. This has led me to question the type of artist might be drawn to work on a project in a remote rural area that seems so distanced from specialized world of art, and which will receive relatively little exposure beyond the immediate vicinity. So on the one hand I felt that the project may not appeal to artists in the early stages of their careers, or those practitioners wishing to either raise their profile or gain national exposure for their work, but on the other hand, the very status of this area as somewhere 'off the cultural beaten track' (particularly in terms of recognised artistic endeavour), seemed an attractive quality especially for those wishing to engage more intimately with local communities and audiences. As a recent report into arts and rural England comments, rural arts events 'reach a greater proportion of the local population

[than urban arts events] and can have a greater local impact as a result'.¹ Further to this, art undertaken in rural areas can attract audiences not so much interested in art but supporting local projects – a characteristic which may appeal to those looking to engage with a wider public. This issue of marginality, also made me query commissioning artists from outside the border area to work on locally driven projects, and how this would be received by locally based artists, particularly given the 'sense of invisibility' that artists working in rural areas frequently express. In turn, this led me to think about the role of local cultural infrastructure (arts networks, organisations, galleries and other arts facilities) in supporting and generating visual arts activity and also the difficulty that marginal areas experience in retaining creative talent, particularly given the lack of support available to build early careers.

However, whilst these issues of centre and periphery certainly influenced which artists I chose to approach for the project, I think this was more at a sub level, present as I worked through my principle selection criteria, and in this respect I was looking for firstly, artists who work sensitively and engagingly with questions of place and identity, secondly, artists who would be open to the possibility of developing collaborative work and thirdly artists from both sides of the border.

Here it is appropriate point to introduce the artists that I selected to work with:

Firstly there is Ruth Jones, a visual artist based in South Wales, whose work I came to through Land2, a practice-led research network of artists and academics with an interest in landscape and place-oriented arts practice. I was particularly drawn to the conceptual significance of the liminal within Ruth's art, as she describes, 'through installation and film work I create physical or psychological spaces in which the possibility of an experience of liminality can occur for the viewer' This idea of creating a 'border space/experience' within an artwork seemed to really resonate with the concept for the project. In addition to this I was also very interested Ruth's recent body of work that explores the relationship between humans, animals and the land, which she attributes from her move from Belfast to Pembrokeshire in 2003 and which seems pertinent to the rural, agricultural context of this project.

The second collaboration involves visual artist Steffan Caddick, whose work encompasses new media as well as elements of performance, and movement artist Simon Whitehead, who has developed an extensive body of work from the pedestrian. Steffan and Simon have worked together on a number of previous projects including *Mapping 001*, *Via* and *Cwdro/Wander* - themes which have obvious appeal to a geographer and particularly when thinking about a borderland politics of mobility to which I earlier referred. I'm really interested both Steffan and Simon's work as spatial practice, realised through certain manoeuvres or strategies and encounters. Here, places (often rural landscapes) are explored through movement in ways that draw out the relationship between embodied encounter and memory. Just to give you a couple of examples, Steffan's piece – *A to B* which uses on the concept of psychogeographies to examine local, unrecorded shortcuts and alternative routes fleetingly present in the daily routine of people living close to the A70, the only road that runs the entire length of Wales and also Simon's

¹ F. Matarasso, The arts and rural England: Policy review stage 2: Summary of contributions to the consultation process (February 2005), available at http://www.artscouncil.org.uk/documents/publications/artsandruralengland_phpMk1oSQ.pdf

current project at Yorkshire Sculpture park 'Walks to Illuminate' which invites couples (be these friends, partners, neighbours or strangers) to walk in the park together at night wearing shoes that glow. The idea being that walking in the dark may reshape and reinvent their experience of this landscape (and possibly of each other). I also think this piece is a really effective way understanding how bodies generate space/place and vice versa.

The third project will be developed by TEA – a group of visual artists who aspire to a 'Critical Spatial Practice' that explores and represents places in ways that challenge the familiar or taken for granted and who frequently take an inter-disciplinary and collaborative approach. Within their work hidden narratives, past, present, fact and fiction are juxtaposed with visual records and lived and performed experience of the built environment to generate new visualisations of place realised through live event, installation, CD or publication. Through this approach, TEA look to articulate the 'immaterial architecture of place' (to borrow a phrase from Doreen Massey) unmapped networks of meaning and associations between people and their environments, which reveal the dynamic multilayered character of place. It is interesting to think about the multiple borders which borders are figured into this relationship, but also how this approach offers the viewer/participant the chance to find alternative meanings or experiences within familiar landscapes. I am also very interested as to how TEA operate as a collaborative, so I am keen to develop a working relationship with TEA (and indeed Ruth, Stefan and Simon) that is truly engaged.

To return to the issue of locational politics, the UK Arts Councils are very aware of this imbalance between centre and periphery or metropolis and region, which they are trying to redress through various policies/initiatives (Own Art), and in this respect my project is advantageously located in terms of winning public funding. Following on from this, I have been fortunate enough to receive support from the Arts Council England, in this case Arts Council West Midlands. As a slight aside I also approached Arts Council Wales for support, given the transborder nature of the project, but as a smaller funding body it was made clear that Arts Council Wales would only support projects developed totally within Wales. I mention this as it puts a different light on the porosity of the actual border.

Public funding inevitably impacts upon how art projects are developed, as they must be seen to fulfil the criteria set out by the Arts Council, and here the social agenda of the Labour government, which is played out through the cultural sector, is evidenced in the need to justify arts in terms of their social impact. So when making a funding application, again questions of locality come to the fore, where the social, cultural, and economic characteristics of an area should be strategically drawn upon in order to maximise the chances of receiving financial support. So in the context of Bordering, whilst I was keen that the project should not be defined wholly by its rurality, it has been beneficial to think about how this characteristic can be utilised for maximum (financial) effect within my funding applications. Here it has been useful to refer to ACE's recent policy review papers concerning the arts and rural England which look towards the wider benefits of arts in rural areas in terms of education, community development, social cohesion, and economic growth, as well as indicating some more specific strategies for arts development in rural localities such as the use of new media and building two-way artistic dialogue between rural and urban areas. This report also identifies market towns as places of particular neglect in

terms of art and culture, and in this respect it has been useful to flag up Oswestry as market town.

However the geographies of art production extend beyond this particular set of locational politics, and can be thought about in terms of more intimate spaces, such the studio and the body, or in contrast to this the boundless space of the web. The can also be thought about in terms of how the artists themselves view context as impetus, inspiration or even hindrance in the process of making art (Claire Doherty 2004)². Hopefully I will have the opportunity to think more about these geographies as the collaborative element of the project evolves together with the more creative as opposed to practical or organizational side of curating.

This brings me on to my final point for discussion here concerning my shifting sense of identity within the project, and related to this, the general sense of uncertainty that characterizes the curatorial and collaborative processes. You've probably noticed that within today's presentation I have described my position in the development of *Bordering* as following 'something of a curatorial, something of a collaborative role', which, to return to an earlier point, I think reflects the fact that the practice of contemporary curating remains very fluid and open to considerable interpretation, where curators may or may not be regarded as content providers as well as context providers. But it also indicative how my identity within the project is interpreted and re-interpreted by the artists involved. For example, at the initial project meeting it became clear that many of artists understood my role in the project as essentially that of geographer (whatever that might encompass), rather than as curator or project co-ordinator. In many ways this was quite exciting, as it opened the doors for input into the projects themselves which is something I was really hoping for, but also implicit within this identification was the notion that being a curator is not really what a geographer does. This led me to spend some time thinking about people's ideas and expectations of what a geographer might be or do – my instant reaction was to go out and by key thinkers on space and place – to try and fulfil a certain set of expectations. But this obviously works both ways and I think working through these unspoken assumptions about what artists and geographers do is a really intriguing part of the project. Following on from this, the sense of ambiguity around my position within the project means that I 'perform my role' in subtly different ways through various encounters and contexts. I think this ambiguity has also been played out through the uncertainty I've felt in taking the project forward, particularly in terms of how much curatorial control I should assume. This manifests itself in this ongoing deliberation I have between being open and flexible enough to allow the project to develop incrementally whilst also providing a certain level of structure within which to contain the project at a manageable level, but it is worth noting here that at the shifting, dialogical nature of the curatorial process is one of the most challenging and rewarding aspects of this role.

Related to this and as way of conclusion, I'd like to highlight that this practice-based route through the geographies *of* art and the geographies *in* art, really does lend itself exploring the uncontrolled side of research, highlighting the dynamic, lively nature of the research process, in which identities of all involved continually reconstituted through various encounters and performances and I'm looking forward seeing how some of the ideas, that I've only really touch upon in this paper, play out as the individuals art projects are developed.

² Claire Doherty (2004) *Contemporary Art: From Studio to Situation*, London, Black Dog Publishing, p. 7.