

**Rethinking Practice: Discussions on Contemporary Art Practice in the SW and Beyond. Produced by Visual Arts South West.**

**3 December 2015, Ocean Studios, Plymouth**

**Summary of session 'If a Tree Falls in a Forest: Art Outside Urban Centres'**

The session comprised of 3 creative practitioners (two artists and an architect) talking about their practice both inside and outside urban centres. All three are currently based fairly rurally (Dorset, Hampshire & Somerset) and have developed projects across a number of years that have been collaborative, remote and urban.

Anna Best kicked off the session by describing aspects of her practice, and mentioned she had been described as “making social art”. Though I’m disinterested in definitions, it’s true to say that her practice has never been an entirely singular pursuit and so when she moved to rural Dorset she found it a challenge to find collaborative partners. Though she spoke of the invisibility of being remote, the change in circumstance has also been rewarding, and she has fostered new endeavours such as Copse Barn Camps – creative camps bringing together artists, curators and writers for discussion and making. Whilst describing a project she carried out in South London she remarked that the model had been referenced as “like Grizedale, but in Peckham”. Interesting to note that the rural model was being transferred to the urban context, and not the other way around. Anna articulated her practice as a process of continually adapting to changing circumstances rather than a fixed position striving to derive positives from each change.

Jennie Savage presented ‘Experiments on the Periphery’ – 3 very different modes of practice all created from the same place – a small village in the New Forest.

‘Fracture Mob’ was a project developed through an online internet radio station, where through a coordinated online appeal, Jennie invited people to converge in a number of locations across the globe and to ‘Get Lost’ by following instructions in her ‘Guide to Getting Lost’. With groups converging in locations from Kiev to Tunis, Athens to Lisbon and lots in between she created a project where she herself was working remotely and not engaging – merely the puppeteer of unexpectedly uniting experiences.

The second project ‘Social Sculpture’, a collaboration with artist Kieran Reed involved building a cabin in the garden of ArtSway, and inviting artists to come and stay in it for a series of short residencies. Here, she wanted to bring

artists (and therefore dialogue) to her, and this very particular context. It's curious to note that Jennie didn't talk about the work made as a result of these residencies; but was positive about the kind of exchanges it produced. The third 'experiment' was a project entirely about and embedded in her local community. Taking the starting point as the recently abandoned village carnival, she invited members of the community to share their photographs and memories of the once cherished event. The project elicited an encouraging response, with a strong attendance at the village launch and whilst this was satisfying, the dialogue, like the carnival was soon abandoned.

Juliet Bidgood, an architect living in Somerset, and founding member of artist/architecture collaboration MUF talked about how her practice as an architect had been influenced by her work with an artist through MUF and also what it is like to practice in a rural location. She reflected on the change in how artists operate by considering the St.Ives artists, and the reality of possibility for artists today. Several projects she referenced attempted to disrupt space; for example bringing sheep to graze in Shoreditch. She noted that this way of working had begun to inform a different architectural enquiry; instead of being purely focussed on buildings, architects were beginning to consider environments, perceptions and behaviours. When she moved to the SW, she found herself without a community of interest and so embarked on a period of study, considering ideas around social geography, how digital technology and car use is changing the way we navigate rural areas. She described how through her involvement in a UNESCO project she began supporting the development of networks, akin to artists networks. She concluded her talk by showing an image of architects Le Corbusier and Minnette de Silva in Bridgwater, Somerset in 1947 for the CIAM (International Architecture Conference) and pondering how we might rethink that conference 70 years later in Bridgwater, reflecting on all of the radical changes happening there in the area at the moment and creating a sense of ownership in that change.

The discussion that followed picked up on several points, but the lasting thought for me is that change is only created through engagement; we must engage fully to create new centres.