Logbook #2
CRITICAL
FRIENDS

Sophie Hope

#2   Critical Friends

CONTENTS

LOGBOOK SERIES

Introduction to the Logbooks

This series of four Logbooks document the projects carried out in the context of my PhD research into cultural democracy and the commissioning of art to effect social change (2006-2010). The Logbooks act as summaries of the projects and accompany a more in depth written thesis. They provide background information, descriptions, documentation and critical reflections of each of the projects and follow a chronological progression. In my practice-based research I explore methods of cultural democracy as collective critical reflection to negotiate and contest the limits and problems of the democratisation of culture exemplified in the artists' commission to effect social change.

By cultural democracy I mean a way of thinking and acting that recognises the cultural expression and critical knowledge of individuals and communities. Through my PhD I argue that this notion of cultural democracy does not sit happily with the more dominant top-down practice of democratising culture, which implies cultural provision based on predefined economic, aesthetic and social values. Cultural democracy disrupts expected forms of participation and communication of culture, drawing attention to the inequalities and inadequacies of the democratisation of culture and the re-enforcing of certain neo-liberal values such as social inclusion, citizenship and urban regeneration. The projects documented in these Logbooks explore the complex relationships between commissioned, funded socially engaged art and the meaning of critical reflection, action and participation that contradicts or reaffirms the parameters of the commission itself as a form of art labour.

Logbook #1 documents 'Het Reservaat', an experiment in collective time travel which was the result of a residency I did with 'Beyond', in Leidsche Rijn, a new town near Utrecht, The Netherlands. Logbook #2 looks at 'Critical Friends', a participant-led critique of commissioning art which evolved from an invitation I had to evaluate a series of public art projects in Greenwich, London. Logbook #3 is accompanied by a DVD of ten short films documenting a series of 'Performative Interviews' I carried out with practitioners and commissioners as a way of going public with stories of compromise, failure and censorship of commissioned socially engaged art. Logbook #4 focuses on the 'FUNding FACTORY', a work-

shop method I tested with a group of students in Austria as a way of critiquing and negotiating the cultural production line and the relationship between critical art practice and wage labour.

Each Logbook takes the form of a step-by-step guide to the projects, beginning with an introduction to the project, the context in which it was carried out and the key starting points. This is followed by a 'making of' section which explains the process of the projects. The subsequent manifestation or findings of the project are then explained through documentation and the booklets conclude with my personal reflections on how the project has informed the relationship between cultural democracy and the commissioning of art to effect social change, highlighting key questions that have emerged. The progression of the projects reflects an iterative process that establishes a development of a methodology for a collective critical practice.

While the projects themselves have been the result of conversations and collaborations with many different partners, funders and individuals, I am the author of the content, design and editing of these Logbooks which have been produced as an integral part of my PhD research. They therefore do not necessarily reflect the opinions or experiences of others involved in what have otherwise been multi-authored projects.

I would like to thank everyone I have worked with on the projects and acknowledge the different roles they have each played to make these projects happen. These Logbooks I hope will prove useful both to those who have been directly involved and other readers who work in the field of commissioning art and those who are concerned with the meaning and possibilities of developing collective, critical practices and manifestations of cultural democracy.

Introduction to 'Critical Friends'

> "Every human being, no matter how 'ignorant' or submerged in the 'culture of silence' he may be, is capable of looking critically at his world in a dialogical encounter with others" (Freire 1972, p.12).

'Critical Friends' began with an invitation I received from Stream, an arts organisation based in North Greenwich, London to evaluate a series of public and collaborative art commissions called 'Peninsula' from 2008-2011, following an evaluation I carried out on the first phase of 'Peninsula' commissions in 2005-2007. In response to this invitation, my colleague Rebecca Maguire and I developed an alternative proposal to establish a group of participants of past and present Stream art projects whom we would work with to devise the questions they wanted to ask of the role of art in the neighbourhood and who would become the participant observers and evaluators of the projects themselves. In this way, the project was an attempt to re-distribute acts of critical reflection from the hands of evaluators, curators and artists of socially engaged art commissions to include that of the participants. 'Critical Friends' aimed to embody the tensions between the democratisation of culture through the commissioning of artists and the possibility of cultural democracy as a more nuanced form of critical reflection through participation. I was interested in considering the validity of what a critical voice with agency as an act of cultural democracy might look like; and if this is something encouraged, listened to, ignored or politely brushed aside through 'participatory art'.

Stream allocated the money reserved for the evaluation of 'Peninsula' (£5,000 of the total budget of approximately £90,000 from the Big Lottery Reaching Communities Scheme) to 'Critical Friends' which went towards paying Rebecca and I to organise and facilitate the workshops and the photocopying of a magazine to document our findings. Since Autumn 2008 Rebecca and I have hosted monthly workshops at Stream and a group of 'Critical Friends' has evolved. The workshops consist of between 3 and 7 local residents recommended to us by Stream who have some prior knowledge of Stream's work, mainly as participants in past projects. While a core group of 'Critical Friends' has been established, other

people come and go from the group depending on other commitments. 'Critical Friends' so far have included Rachel Gibson, Arthur Hayles, Anthony Nicolaou, Bre Stitt, Dave Sharman, Rich Sylvester, Ann Webb and Ellen Willis.

The group has evolved as an experiment in collectively deciding who, what and how art commissions are researched and evaluated and has involved the 'Critical Friends' interviewing commissioned artists, staff of Stream, a Board member of Stream, recording responses from neighbours, visiting other examples of commissioning art and observing and participating in the projects themselves. There has also been an ongoing process of the group constantly rethinking and questioning the role of 'Critical Friends' as a project itself. The group describe their work as "developing creative ways of investigating, critiquing and feeding into the commissioning of public and collaborative art, specifically in relation to Stream's 'Peninsula' art programme" ('Critical Friends' 2009). A self-made photocopied magazine and monthly workshops have been sites for the writings, documentation, performances and presentations created by 'Critical Friends'. Through the workshops we have been identifying questions to ask of the commissioning process, reflecting on what it means to 'participate' and trying out different ways of evaluating public and collaborative art from the perspective of participants. The magazines aim to communicate some of that research so that it can feed into the process of commissioning, producing, critiquing and participating in public and collaborative art.

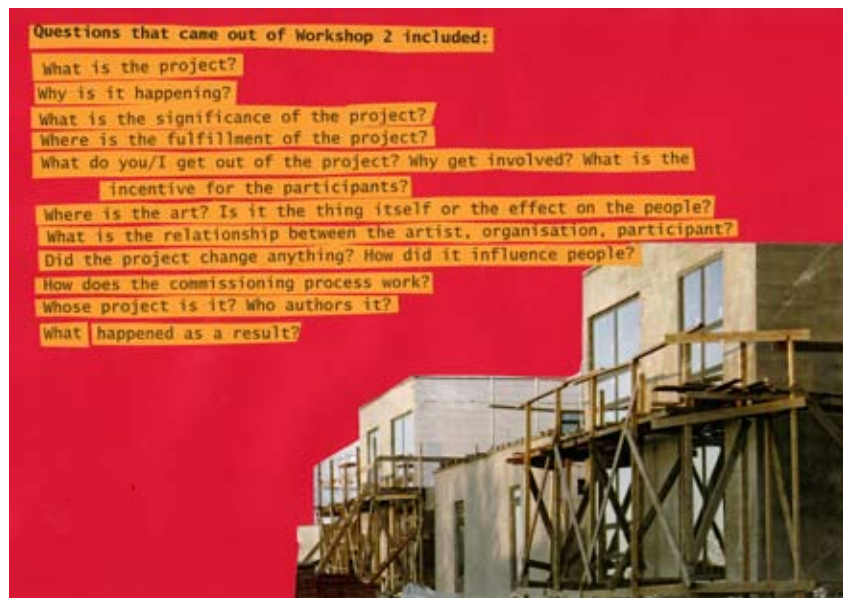Title of introductory 'Critical Friends' magazine.

Context & starting points

"Who has the right to ask whom what questions?; who has the right to answer?; who has the right to see what?; who has the right to say what?; who has the right to speak for whom?" (Anna Deavere Smith quoted in Denzin 2001, p.26).

Following on from 'Het Reservaat', a project I initiated within the context of 'Beyond's' Action Research programme of artists' residencies in the new town of Leidsche Rijn in the Netherlands (Logbook #1), 'Critical Friends' was a project that worked with the participants of socially engaged art projects to critically reflect on the broader context of a programme of commissions by Stream in Greenwich, South East London. It was a chance to further investigate the issues of authorship, collaboration, criticality and the role of commissioned art and artists to effect change in an urban landscape. It was also an experiment in rethinking the process and purpose of evaluating socially engaged art projects by incorporating debate on the direction and impact evaluation has beyond advocacy and marketing. 'Critical Friends' was a chance to collectively reflect on what it means to be critical whilst participating in a process (how do we consider our own relationships, values, investments and expectations we have to a project, organisation or area and how does this inform our approach to meanings of criticality?). If 'Peninsula', as with 'Beyond', follows a model of commissioning that presents a set of aims for artists to interpret and apply in a given area, what is the scope for acts of cultural democracy that may contradict or undermine those aims? In our original proposal Rebecca and I suggested:

"critical deliberations are often confined to discussions among artists and commissioners and ['Critical Friends'] would be an opportunity for other participants to think about how the specific 'Peninsula' projects relate to wider issues of 'community cohesion' and the role of art in areas of regeneration. By going on this journey with a core group of people who are experiencing socially engaged art, this could provide a unique model of evaluation as it encourages participants to develop their own considered insights and evaluations of the projects".

Stream is a registered charity based in North Greenwich since 1983 that commissions artists to produce public and collaborative art in the area. 'Peninsula' is taking place in the Peninsula Electoral Ward of Greenwich (a population of approximately 8,650 according to the 2001 census). Previously known as Greenwich Marshes, the area was re-branded as the Greenwich Peninsula by developers (originally English Partnerships, now Lend Lease and Quintain) with the strapline, "a place where you can". It is a place of industry, housing, retail and entertainment and where a new "1.4 million square metre master-planned community" (Meridian Delta Ltd 2007) consisting of 10,000 new homes is in the process of being developed. The Millennium Dome, branded the 'O2', an entertainment, music, sport and leisure attraction, was recently sold to Trinity College, Cambridge to release funds for Lend Lease and Quintain to continue the residential development. To the south of the Peninsula, on Woolwich Road, East Greenwich District Hospital was demolished in 2006 and the site continues to stand empty in anticipation of redevelopment into 645 new homes (up to 50% of which will be 'affordable') by the developers

A list of questions posed by participants during an early 'Critical Friends' workshop (from the introductory 'Critical Friends' magazine)

First Base and the Homes and Communities Agency. The wasteland is currently wrapped in high blue fencing decorated with commissioned graffiti. The new developments on the old industrial land of the Peninsula are flanked to the south by existing residential areas of post war estates and Victorian streets.

During an early 'Critical Friends' meeting, Andrew Parry (of Greenwich Waterfront Regeneration Agency) expressed concern that the residents in the new developments on the Peninsula "become insular and do not integrate physically, culturally or emotionally with the surrounding communities". He explained how this was a concern that "troubles all of us dealing with the regeneration in the area, something we're working hard to ensure doesn't happen" ('Critical Friends' November 2008). The issue of dividing communities as a result of regeneration (the fear that as one area gets all the attention there is no trickle down effect of economic and social benefits) is the backdrop to the 'Peninsula' programme, as is a more general concern that communities themselves are fragmented and anonymous.

The work of 'Critical Friends' focused specifically on 'Peninsula's' four main aims:

- to investigate the Greenwich Peninsula, through local collab-oration and participation;
- to stimulate debate to generate action and change;
- to develop connections and relationships between people across the Peninsula and
- to experiment with different models of creative practice.

The focus of my study has been on two of the projects the 'Critical Friends' have been researching:

- 'In a League of Our Own' by Jayne Murray, part of the Sense of Place (later called Performing Social Space) strand which focuses on an "innovative approach to investigating notions of society, community and 'the social' in response to the unique and changing environ-ment of the Greenwich Peninsula... we are particularly interested in performative practices which experiment with different modalities

for bringing people together" in a way that might "offer a challenge to the aspiration of creating a singular identity and a unifying sense of place through the process of regeneration" (Sense of Place brief, 2008). 'In a League of Our Own' created a number 'fixtures' to take place between different community groups in the area, such as an event for local birdwatchers at the ecology park, a social evening at Greenwich Millennium Village and 'One Minute of Your Time' at the Greenwich Town Social Club where people were invited to bring memories, photos and stories of the local area. The project culminated in a pub quiz at the Pilot Inn on the Peninsula on 11 June 2009 where local teams came together to answer questions developed by Murray during her meetings with people in the area with prizes donated by local businesses and organisations.

- 'Now Hear This' by Holy Mountain, part of Community Voices, "a community information project to build community relations around common local issues of concern and to encourage involvement in issues around the area's regeneration" (Community Voices brief, 2009). The projects commissioned through this strand aim to build and maintain, "new channels and tools for information locally, increasing skills levels and bridging the digital divide and providing a strong voice for the community, necessary when it comes to negotiating with government and multinational companies such as those developing the Peninsula" (ibid). The production company Holy Mountain (founded by Boz Temple-Morris and Alisdair McGregor) developed 'Now Hear This' which involved a public call out inviting people to phone in 'despatches' about "a burning issue connected to the local area and the changes affecting local residents". The phone-in despatches were then collated to create a 'menu' of local issues to be used during their 'Local Conversation', a café-style event at the East Greenwich Pleasaunce on 21 September 2009. Visitors to this event used the menus to trigger discussions which were recorded and re-edited to make two ten minute audio pieces launched on 22 April 2010 in East Greenwich.

The budgets for 'In a League of Our Own' and 'Now Hear This' were £5,000 each which included the artist's fees (to be spread over six months) and materials, and the costs of any outcomes (e.g. events, performances, interventions, including publicity, marketing and documentation).

The making of 'Critical Friends'

Monthly workshops: The group meet on average once a month at Stream's office where we update ourselves with the 'Peninsula' programme, discuss our findings, revisit the questions, devise the next steps for the research, debate the meaning and purpose of 'Critical Friends' and make the magazines. At the beginning, the 'Critical Friends' were each given a log book to record their thoughts about 'Peninsula' and make notes about their observations. Each of the sessions was audio recorded. These regular meetings have been crucial to sustaining the commitment of the group, acting as a regular point of contact. The budget for 'Critical Friends' has not covered all of the time for Rebecca and I to facilitate these sessions over three years but we felt it was important to have this regular contact with the group and felt this was a priority if the group was to grow and develop its own identity. The group have expressed an

'Critical Friends' from left: Anthony Nicolaou, Rebecca Maguire (facilitator), Ann Webb and Rachel Gibson. (Photo: Sophie Hope)

interest in continuing to meet as 'Critical Friends' and for this to happen we would have to look into further fundraising and rethink the way the group could be sustained and organised and what its relationship to Stream would be.

Interviews: The group have devised questions and interviewed the commissioned artists, staff of Stream, a board member of Stream and their neighbours about the specific projects and broader issues of the commissioning process. These are audio recorded and extracts used in the magazines. Through this process the group felt it was important to interview the artists at the beginning of the commission and again at the end to see how the proposals had shifted and what they had learnt from the process. Bre Stitt , for example, interviewed her neighbours about what they thought of Jayne Murray's project which revealed some interesting interpretations (someone thought Murray might have been the 'secret millionaire'), accessing feedback that would be difficult to capture otherwise, by staff of Stream, the artists or others not living in the area. The process of interviewing other people who were not directly involved in the projects was also a challenge for the 'Critical Friends' as they were put in a position where they were having to explain the project to other

Making a 'Critical Friends' magazine. (Photo: Sophie Hope)

people, and would sometimes slip into the role of advocating the project or recruiting people to take part. Through doing these interviews, the 'Critical Friends' have had to find their own role and position in relation to being advocates, researchers and participants in a process. As a group we have also tried to find ways of revisiting these interviews to remind ourselves of the content and issues they brought up. We have done this, for example by re-reading extracts of the interview transcripts but taking on different roles so as to temporarily inhabit other voices and perspectives.

Participant observations: The 'Critical Friends' have been participating in the projects and observing the situations they are in. This has proved to be a fruitful exercise in understanding the experiences the projects offer and in gaining an insight into how other people are engaged and questioning what is happening. They then feed back their experiences and thoughts about the projects during our monthly meetings and write up their observations, concerns and interpretations of what was happening which inevitably leads to further questions to be addressed to Stream or the artists directly.

Cut and paste magazine: The magazine has been a framework to consolidate and house the research of the 'Critical Friends'. It became apparent during the early stages that the blog we had started was not the ideal space to present and discuss the findings due to the fact that some members of the group did not have access to the internet. While we could have pursued this by training people to use the blog and giving them access to computers at Stream, the group were keen to have a paper version and so we focused our energies on this. The making of the magazine (collaging interview transcripts and notes by the 'Critical Friends' with images from magazines) during the workshops has been a useful way to revisit the material, edit it together and lay it out whilst discussing the findings we had produced. The low-fi immediacy of the cut and paste technique meant we could produce the magazines quickly and present the material in the way the group wanted (each working on specific pages). We made about 100 photocopies of each magazine, of which there have been two editions to date. There has been an issue in terms of how we distribute the final magazines which has mainly been locally through the 'Critical Friends' (leaving them in doctor's wait-

ing rooms, giving them to friends etc.) and posting them to other key stakeholders related to the projects. In hindsight, a more strategic distribution campaign would have been beneficial, both locally and beyond. The group have decided to make the next magazine A5 size rather than A4 Landscape, so as to be more pocket-sized. There is also an issue that because of the home-made style of the magazine, it does not appear to be a serious report-like document and therefore may not be taken seriously by those people we wish it to address, namely funders and people working in local government. We have yet to receive feedback on the magazines from these stakeholders, which would be a useful next step.

Findings

"I am happy to participate and allow the artist to bear the responsibility"
                    – Note taken at a 'Critical Friends' workshop (30th April 2009)

For this section I provide my own summary of some of the reflections of 'Critical Friends'. I have clustered these findings around: the commissioning framework of 'Peninsula'; art's role in effecting social change; meanings of participation and what it means to be a 'Critical Friend'.

1. The commissioning framework of 'Peninsula'

• **A process-based, open ended, collaborative way of working that invites different forms of participation does not necessarily fit comfortably with short-term commissioning contracts.** Ann Webb, a Critical Friend, referring to 'In a League of Our Own', for example, asks, "what if people want to carry on? The project doesn't just stop! The project can spur people on to carry on meeting and continue the work" ('Critical Friends' February 2009). Webb has used the analogy of blotting paper to describe the way an artist may initiate a project but for its participants the experiences bleed into one another.

• **Due to the nature of this process-based work it is common for timescales for commissions to overrun and the artist and Stream staff to work longer hours on projects than they are paid for.** Murray, for example, stretched her contracted time from six to nine months with no extra funding. This appears to be the informal rule rather than exception in cases of commissioned socially engaged art.

• **For some practitioners, planning, meeting and organising are crucial and integral aspects to a practice that attempts to work with people to create a shared outcome.** Such administrative processes open up a process for others to access and this 'organising principle' should not be underestimated.

**2. Art's role in 'effecting social change'**

• **Critical voices enabled by the 'Peninsula' projects risk being neutralised as the commissions replace direct action as a more tolerated,**

fundable, platform-giving form of culture. During a Stream event, for example, I was advised not to show the 'Critical Friends' magazine to Stream's funders who were present, as there was concern this could jeopardise their funding. This perhaps shows the sensitivity of going public with critical accounts that questions socially engaged art commissions rather than providing evaluation reports which merely promote and justify this way of working.

- **The aims of the 'Peninsula' projects stem from a concern that official channels of participating in local democracy (such as attending Full Council meetings, writing letters directly to elected Councillors or contacted relevant officers) are insufficient, dysfunctional or redundant.** Does the programme offer valid alternatives or are they ironic, performative gestures that point to the inadequacies of a political process whilst potentially raising expectations of the participants who are led to believe their voices will be heard? The Director of Stream has talked about the work Stream commissions as having an 'obliqueness of touch' in that the projects do not tackle issues head on but are "trying to do something in a way that might be intriguing, that [makes] people think, 'that sounds interesting, I'll find out a bit more about that'".

- **There is confusion over the extent to which the projects are useful, and to whom.** Referring to 'Now Hear This', 'Critical Friend', Anthony Nicolaou asked,

  "Are they going to create something that is presented as purely art? Or is it going to be a documentary? ... Is it about giving people a voice and some political power to bring about changes in their area? Who are they hoping to aim these dispatches at? ... If it is about bringing about positive changes who are the beneficiaries? Are they individuals within the communities, are they groups? Is it for the whole of the community? And the people that engage in producing these dispatches, what information are they given about the aim of this work?"

'Critical Friend' Dave Sharman also raised the question with regards to 'Now Hear This': "I suppose the weakness from my point of view is
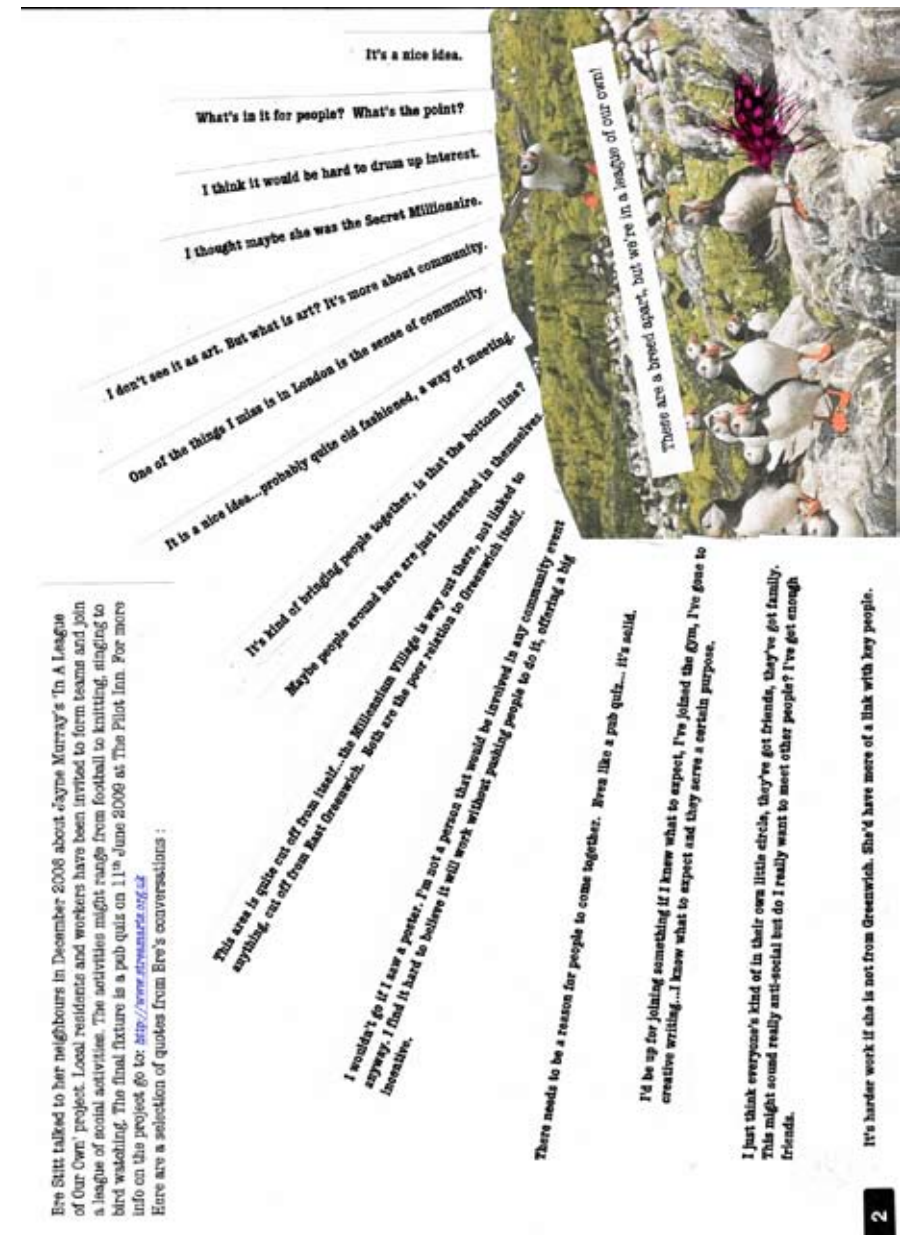
A page from the first 'Critical Friends' magazine, 'Cauliflowers and Computers' (June 2009).

that I don't know what's going to happen with the information we've produced" ('Critical Friends' October 2009).

- **While Stream, artists and participants are interested in creating alternatives to the more obvious channels of local democracy there is a recourse to these traditional modes of 'having a say' in the end.** This seems to come with the realisation that such platforms generated by art commissions fail to be taken seriously by the 'appropriate authorities' and remain performative representations of 'community voices'. The final 'Now Hear This' audio piece by Holy Mountain, for example, while it presented a cacophony of issues, the 'Critical Friends' felt it did not go far enough to 'represent' the complexity of the voices present at the 'Big Conversation' event. The projects to some extent point to the absurdity and potential futility of that agency in terms of participatory democracy, shedding light on these systems and expectations of participation. The absurdity of these gestures, however, is not necessarily shared by all those who take part.

- **It is unclear to what extent the artists, commissioners and participants actually believe in the earnestness of their work or if they partly take them as ironic gestures.** 'Critical Friend' Anthony Nicolaou, for example, recognised that an aim of 'Now Hear This' was to "bring about an awareness of issues that people face" but asked "whether that then leads on to change because somebody with some power says, 'well, this needs to be addressed, let's form a working group', is another matter isn't it?" Gibson suggested "we need a 'Now Do This'. Once you've heard, what do you do?" ('Now Do This' became the title of the second 'Critical Friends' magazine).

3. Meanings of 'participation'

- **The 'Peninsula' projects reflect different types of participation:** Ann Webb, for example, referring to her observational role of another 'Peninsula' project 'Fresh FM' and fellow 'Critical Friend' Rachel Gibson's more hands on role with 'In a League of Our Own', asked Gibson the pertinent question, "Is my participation different to yours?".

- **'Serial participants' play a significant role in Stream's work.** Webb and Gibson are what one could call, 'serial participants' in that they

have been involved in most of Stream's commissioned art projects. Gibson, during a 'Critical Friends' discussion stated: "It's not my fault people keep ringing me up and asking me to participate". Gibson also talked about how Murray came to visit her and how she spent two hours 'giving Jayne ideas'. In response to this, Lilly stated, "that's what it's about, 'collaboration'". The group went on to discuss the meaning of collaboration when one person is paid to develop someone else's ideas that they have given for free.

- **Participating is not necessarily considered more desirable than spectating.** The 'Critical Friends' have identified different modes of participation and have suggested that spectating or being the audience of a project is not any less significant than directly participating and that they do not necessarily feel like they are co-authors of the work (and that this was not a problem for them as the project was 'someone else's baby'). Webb, for example, has stated, "I don't see what I do as art, I'm assisting art". While their participation meant the sum of the whole was greater than just one person's part, Webb acknowledged that she was happy to participate and allow the artist to bear the responsibility.

- **The reluctance to participate (an unwillingness to be empowered) is not a negative attribute.** The work of the 'Critical Friends' has highlighted the need for an expanded notion of participation that at times defies the parameters or expectations placed on participation in an art project. Sylvester, for example, has suggested he interview some of his colleagues who live in the area about why they have actively decided not to participate in Stream's projects to find out what their skepticism is about. An East Greenwich resident remarked how "everyone's kind of in their own little circle, they've got friends, they've got family. This might sound really anti-social but do I really want to meet other people? I've got enough friends" ('Cauliflowers and Computers', June 2009). Another stated how they would not attend any of the 'In a League of Our Own' events if they saw a poster: "I'm not a person that would be involved in any community event anyway. I find it hard to believe it will work without pushing people to do it, offering a big incentive" (ibid). The motivation to make connections, get involved and create a sense of community identity is met with an unwilling-

ness to be empowered on the terms and conditions set by the artist or commissioner. "To what extent are the projects imposed?" asked a Critical Friend ('Critical Friends' April 2009).

- **'Now Hear This' and 'In a League of Our Own' sway between artists, participants and commissioners 'taking the lead' at different times.** The artists, however, are the ones endowed (contracted and paid) with the responsibility to keep the project on track and to devise some kind of feasible outcome. There is a tension between enabling the voices of the participants to come through and having editorial control as artists. Murray and Holy Mountain, for example, observe, listen, collate, edit, translate, critique and respond. While they offer a way for multiple voices to come through, their own critical voices also shape the content, resulting in their own subjective take on a perhaps otherwise collective process.

- **The 'Critical Friends' have referred to the 'Peninsula' commissions as including an element of 'peculiarity' and 'misbehaviour' to them.** For example, Nicolaou remarked how, "art doesn't have to be serious; it can be fun; it can be pointless; and can create a certain reaction or emotion from the spectator or participant and that can be very uplifting" ('Critical Friends' March 2009). Gibson describes how the arts projects are,

  "odd, peculiar, fresh and new; something that's not normal everyday life that people find it difficult to get a grasp of but that this is what captures your imagination and leads you to ask more questions...sometimes when things are confusing and complicated at least it makes it remotely interesting and you've got to try and get your head round it and work out what it is" (ibid).

Webb also remarked how "these projects open people's eyes to something they have never thought of before" ('Critical Friends' February 2009). In response to a statement made by Sylvester: "I don't believe all art is political. The best art misbehaves", a staff member of Stream suggested that while,

A page from the first 'Critical Friends' magazine, 'Cauliflowers and Computers' (June 2009).

"as commissioners [we] sometimes create aims which are slightly idealistic or utopian...but interestingly the artists we seem to be very attracted to working with do come with a healthy dose of that misbehaviour spirit within them and I sense that in Holy Mountain and I wonder how that is going to play out, that relationship between that mischief and misbehaviour which we warm to as an artistic process but which perhaps quite healthily plays with some of the aims that we create which might be routed in realism and changing things" ('Critical Friends' March 2009).

Nicolaou then remarked that "if the misbehaviour is something that can be shared amongst the participants, then that's fine" (ibid). There is a sense that the ingredients used to distinguish the work as art should be shared among those involved (as collaborators and spectators) and not just kept back for the private amusement or benefit of the artists and commissioners.

Objectives of 'Critical Friends' based on an early workshop (from the introductory 'Critical Friends' magazine).

4. What it means to be a 'Critical Friend'

- **Engaging in a dialogical encounter to look critically at the world is not necessarily a shared aim.** Critical responses to a place may manifest themselves in different ways, contradicting the notion of criticality presented by the artist. The critical insights of the participants (or through acts of non-participation, for example) may challenge an artists' preconceptions of their practice. Also, people might be happier without questioning the choices they are making about how they live, work and spend their time or they might want to do it in a way that contests the format offered by the artists.

- **The 'Critical Friends' are not always critical and sometimes slip into advocacy roles for Stream and the commissions:** We are still trying to work out what 'Critical Friends' is. Like any form of participation, those involved have different interpretations of what is going on. We do not necessarily agree on what it means to be critical. 'Critical Friends' seems to be somewhere between a fan club, ombudsman, detective agency and productive parasite. At times the 'Critical Friends' undermine Stream's model of commissioning and at others they support it and think art is better carried out by the professionals as they do not want to be in a position where they consider it their job or responsibility.

    Rebecca Maguire: it's critiquing rather than saying 'we don't like it'...
    Ann Webb: Critical doesn't have to mean 'negative', it can mean questioning.
    Sophie Hope: It can mean questioning but not justifying, I think that's really different.
    Webb: I'm loading my own feeling on to it
    Rachel Gibson: We're appreciating.
    Webb: Absolutely, absolutely.
   *Hope:* But you can appreciate it and question it, as well.
    Webb: Yeh, but that's being blurred with me because I'm so full of admiration for it and I'm getting such a kick out of the things I see people doing.
    ('Critical Friends' July 2009).

- **'Critical Friends' works best when it allows for conflictive experiences, expectations and ideas to come to the fore.** There is an element of surprise (and suspicion) that Stream would commission a group of people to be critical of their actions. As one of the 'Critical Friends' pointed out, "I think that's quite brave of them isn't it, to bring you in, to say 'look, we're doing this, we'd like you to be critical about what we do and then feed that information back to us'" ('Critical Friends' July 2009). While Barbara Smith, a Stream board member, during an interview with the 'Critical Friends' stated how she felt the group were gathering 'high quality and helpful information', this is coupled with the 'Critical Friends'' uncertainty that Stream will listen to and take on board their comments and feed that back into the commissioning process. For Lilly, 'Critical Friends' is about "making sure Stream get as many different perspectives on the 'Peninsula' arts programme as possible" ('Critical Friends' February 2009). The 'Critical Friends' process also risks being reduced to a series of statements of support as evidence of participation, acting as advocacy for more funding for more ventures or even as a recruitment drive more participants to get involved in the commissions. A longer term question might be, to what extent could 'Critical Friends' take on its own life, autonomous of Stream?

Critical reflections & key questions

There are a lot of assumptions that participating in art is generally good for you, but so is going for a drink with your best friend, playing frisby with your kids or eating a pie you've just baked yourself. What, then, makes engaging in an art process, different; how is that difference articulated and does it need to set itself apart from other acts of engagement which may involve an element of critical reflection and enactment? 'Critical Friends' is a method for investigating the nuances and contradictions of participating in art. It tries not to begin with assumptions, but rather question those speculations on art's benefit to society. 'Critical Friends' is
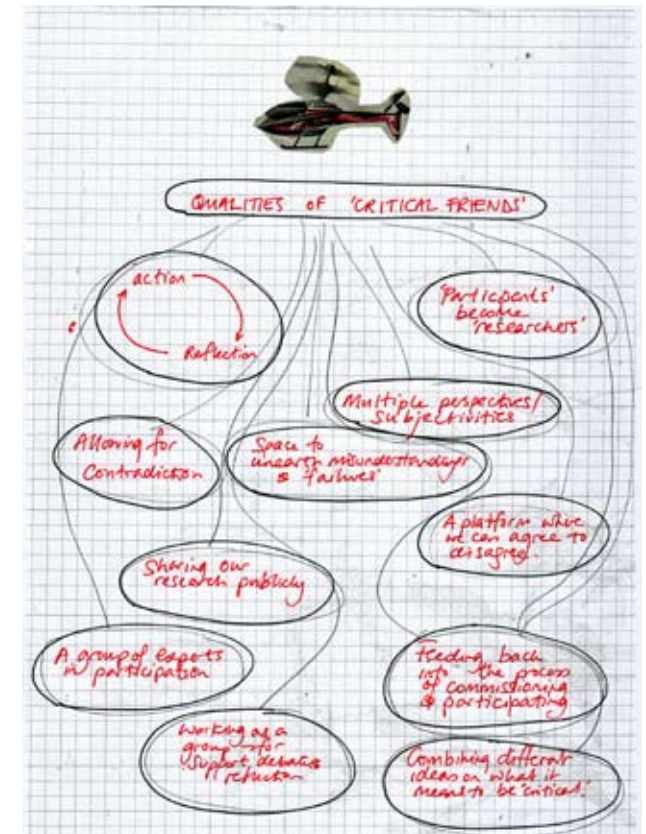
Sketch outlining the qualities of 'Critical Friends'. (Sophie Hope)

a space for 'conflictual consensus' where 'friendly enemies' agree to disagree about their interpretations of commissioning art, participating in art and what it means to be a critical friend (the terms 'conflictual consensus' and 'friendly enemies' come from political theorist Chantel Mouffe, see Meissen 2007).

What if too much participation bankrupts you? If participation is voluntary and unpaid it implies you need free time to do it and therefore excludes those who do not have the time, resources or money to spare. Voluntary participation then becomes a luxury only some people can afford. It is perhaps somewhat of a contradiction that I and many others have built a career in the niche industry of socially engaged art practice – an art practice built on the notion of participation, shared authorship, process-based practices and thinking about art as integral to social change. As this industry has grown, I have sought ways of surviving financially through participation and critical engagement. 'Participation' has become my job, and with it, I have gained a form of power as I move up the ladder and get paid to participate in culture. These power relations between paid cultural workers and volunteer participants need questioning further. The contract for 'Critical Friends' for example, is between Stream and Rebecca Maguire and myself, not between Stream and 'Critical Friends'. Rebecca and I receive fees for facilitating the group. We are not just participants; we are initiators, convenors, 'experts'. The idea of 'Critical Friends' though is that everyone in the group is an expert. We are group of experts in participation. A future reincarnation of 'Critical Friends' could perhaps rethink this distinction and try to redistribute the information, money and networks that come with such a career in socially engaged art commissioning.

An alternative to the reduction of critical encounters into bullet pointed lists that illustrate a pretty picture of empowerment could be the format of 'Critical Friends' itself where unprofessional and unpaid so-called participants are investigating professional, paid artists and commissioners. The process reverses the usual direction of critique and has at times meant the distinctions between professionals and non-professionals are blurred. They have developed a form of critical engagement and started to question what is happening and why as the edges of the commission become apparent and the conditions of participation are put to the test.

Page from 'Critical Friends' magazine: 'Now Do This' (December 2009), reflecting on 'Now Hear This' and the 'Big Conversation'.

Critical engagement in the forms expressed through 'Critical Friends' could lead someone to respond in a way that is not expected. As people develop self-directed responses which question the contexts they are in they may respond and participate in the 'wrong way'. Active, empowered participation with agency can therefore result in a rejection of the artists' project (by both participating and not participating; appreciating and questioning) as the participant displays a renewed confidence in pursuing their own critical cultural production instead of relying on others to provide it for them.

To what extent can the 'Critical Friends' become the commissioners or commissioned artists themselves (and is this a position they desire)? Do they condone, abandon or adapt this commissioning model Stream is using? At the time of writing, for example, the 'Critical Friends' are negotiating a position on the selection panel of artists and we have begun to consider their role in informing the writing of the artists' briefs. Stream are also considering inviting a 'Critical Friend' onto their Board. There is a potential difficulty with this in terms of already stretched budgets and the wider concern that this could strengthen this model of commissioning rather than dramatically reconsider it. It is yet to be seen if 'Critical Friends' has the scope to make slight improvements or radically restructure Stream's approach to commissioning. The group is keen to continue their work and find a way to inform the working methods of Stream and the artists they commission. The extent to which as participants they will be acknowledged as key players in this process is not certain and yet their ability to collectively challenge the frameworks and expectations of artists' commissions as performances of participatory democracy is well worth listening to.

FURTHER READING & LINKS

Stream: http://www.streamarts.org.uk

Holy Mountain: http://www.holymountain.co.uk

Jayne Murray: http://www.jaynemurray.co.uk

'Critical Friends' magazines: 'Cauliflowers and Computers' (June 2009) and 'Now Do This' (December 2009)

Denzin, N., 2001. The reflexive interview and a performative social science. *Qualitative Research*, 1:23. p.23-46.

Freire, P., 1972 (1978 edition). *Pedagogy of the Oppressed.* London: Penguin.

Miessen, M., 2007. *Articulated Power Relations – Markus Miessen in conversation with Chantal Mouffe* [Online] Available from: http://round-table.kein.org/node/545 [Accessed February 2009]