

International Relations *Catalytic Exchange*

We can all cite examples where art and artistic exchanges have been utilized for some particular (social) benefit. Urban Regeneration may be one of the most common, importing the energies of art to stimulate an otherwise failing or failed area. These opportunities can be very exciting as well as consuming time and effort. In the process of developing and participating in exchange programmes how often do we stop to ask ourselves why? Who, in the end, is the beneficiary? If art is a catalyst, as described above, it will 'remain unchanged'.

If urban regeneration is already the 'old' model and the knowledge economy the 'new' one, what role does artistic exchange have to play? How do we appreciate the political, social and/or economic motivations behind such exchanges? Is art a catalyst or can it be changed itself by the process?

The purpose of the call for papers re-stated above was not to provide a 'how to' toolkit but, in the light of the five sub-topics of the conference, to raise questions about 'why' and 'what for' that problematise the subject of exchange programmes and possibly indicate new ways of addressing them.

If we are in the so-called post-Bologna era, what is the agenda for this era and whose agenda is it? If we accept that the prime motivation behind the Erasmus programme in the last 20 years and the whole Bologna Process was/is the provision of an internationally mobile workforce for the economic benefit of the European Community, is that still (or ever was) a wholly valid goal? Should we not value and defend Higher Education, the Arts and International Relations for intrinsic values other than simply economic ones?

At the Higher Education Funding Council for England (Hefce) annual conference in London, held the week before the ELIA biennial, Sir Alan Langlands, chief executive of Hefce said ... "If we value our students simply for what we can get out of them or what they might earn in the future, they will in turn estimate our value by what they can get out of us," By the same token, if student exchange and mobility is solely predicated upon their future employability in the international market place, they will have every right to ask us to prove its efficacy. Furthermore, if such a relationship between study and employability cannot be proved, we run the risk of support for those activities being removed entirely. Witness the current proposals to remove all public funding for the Humanities subjects in the UK. And this is despite the much-vaunted economic success of the Creative Industries. In the UK at least the value of HE (and the Arts) for its own sake is very much under threat.

Tanya Power's presentation of a series of projects entirely located in Ireland may seem a peculiar choice for a session on International Relations. But a middle-class, educated and culturally aware artist shipped from Cork to a working-class, deprived council housing estate in Limerick may be as 'foreign' an intervention as any international exchange. Though language and customs may be roughly the same, aspirations, opportunities, experiences and expectations may be worlds apart. And to discuss contemporary art practice in the conceptual terms of academia, with 15 yr old youths more likely to end up in prison than University would be as understandable as speaking Finnish. By precisely not being 'international' the projects highlight issues otherwise possibly overlooked.

When we fly a student into an alien environment what do we expect? In the catalytic exchange process who/what changes and who remains unaffected? Do International Relations act as responsible agents for change or do we behave like the City dignitaries who could not even organize a reception at a time convenient for the project participants? Are we too content to have facilitated a project under the auspices of socio-economic European fund without really paying attention to its appropriateness or the consequences?

Where Tanya Power's projects dealt with people hardly likely to leave the home city due to lack of opportunity, Philip Courtney's project stays at home as a deliberate strategy. Originally this was planned to be a demonstration of an exchange practice via a live link with Shanghai. Due to unforeseen circumstances Philip was not able to attend the conference himself but instead made his contribution via Skype. Though not as exotic as a communication with another continent in another time-zone the presentation nevertheless showed the potential for a technological alternative to physical mobility.

There is always the possibility to physically transfer a practice/object/person from one environment to another without any change. Not only by the transferred item acting as unchanged catalyst but by it not affecting the new environment either. By disembodimenting the exchange, removing physical transfer, the focus is left entirely on the process itself. And by focusing on the process there can be a direct impact on the practice - changing how you do something changes what you do. A different form of exchange can produce a different form of art or artist. To reiterate the phrase from the ELIA report of 2004 'mobility is about change not just exchange' but from Philip's presentation it seems that such change, through exchange, can be facilitated without being physically mobile. As he also says, this does not replace mobile exchange but provides an alternative to it and helps to re-map the home territory. It also raises the question of what change do we anticipate from mobile exchange and what implications are there in preparing students for professional practice.

The combined presentations of Richard Polacek of PRACTICS and Anais Lukas of BAAPE (the Office for Professional Foreign Artists) focused on the needs of mobility of professional artists. BAAPE is an office in the Paris/Ile-de-France Region in France and Practics operates at European level with different Infopoints with partners in different countries (see below for web links). These are rare examples of support for practice in 21st century, which inevitably involves an engagement with the world beyond national boundaries. This is the world we supposedly prepare our students for but there is no evidence of what impact initial training has on later mobility. The report due to be published in December (the executive summary previously circulated) contains the only data available on professional artist mobility. PRACTICS and BAAPE are providing a (limited) answer to many of the practical issues raised by the artists surveyed by the Artists Moving and Learning project. What they do not and cannot do is address one of the key issues the artists raise themselves - that initial training did not prepare them to work in an international context. Clearly, many of the recommendations from the 2004 report still need to be implemented.

<http://www.practics.org/>

<http://www.artistes-etrangers.eu/autorisation-de-sejour-et-de-travail/bureau-daccueil-des-artistes-et-professionnels-etrangers-baape.html>

Which in a round-about way brings us back to the questions raised by the Limerick

projects. When we send individuals into an alien environment what do we expect to happen? What responsibility do we take for the socio-economic or geo-political agenda? How do we prepare students for a learning experience that should equip them with the tools for practice after the academy? How different does the next ten or twenty years of student mobility need to be from the last twenty years of Erasmus exchange?

Lots of questions, no answers, but hopefully the start of a discussion.