

Screenings Programme

Will Bradley

Can I Examine Your Purpose?

'What we are testing is if this project is capable of reintroducing the notion that people can engage in the public sphere through culture. This opens us all up to be a public that can produce itself through culture and exchange.' (Kate Gray, Collective)

Collective's One Mile programme began with an idea to explore and engage with the specific neighbourhood of the gallery, the 3.14 square miles around it, but this simple concern is already an extension of the usual ambitions of a contemporary art space. In general, the world of contemporary art is distributed, not thinly spread but clustered and dotted around the gentrified hotspots of wealthy urban capitals, the rural retreats of the very rich, the flagship museums of cities vying for tourists. Success is often measured by the degree to which a particular work or institution has become ultimately deterritorialised, interconnected and visible in a professionalised network that has few points of contact with the wider world. The intent to explore the relationship between the Collective Gallery and its surrounding area entails an idea of openness, a potential for disruption. The project turns the elitism of art discourse into a vulnerability, and the idea of artmaking from the sale of name-brand product to a process of negotiation.

The focus on a geographical range – what an estate agent at least would call an easy walking distance – is also a rethinking of the usual parameters of 'community engagement'. The Collective's city-centre location means that it is surrounded by diverse, fragmented and shifting 'communities' whose memberships overlap only marginally with the gallery's regular audience. So the One Mile programme had to start by exploring and mapping this familiar terrain from a new perspective, and then to proceed by developing new encounters, relationships and strategies, entering negotiations and experimental partnerships, from which genuine collaborations could emerge only after a period of exposure and adjustment.

The approach is quite different to that of the 1970s wave of community art that emphasised the inscription of communal history in public space, an approach that to some extent grew out of the explicit activist consciousness and radical community organisation of the time. Perhaps paradoxically, the Collective's decision to engage with the paradigmatically contemporary, fragmented, privatised and alienated nature of the urban fabric around it led it to adopt strategies that have their roots in an older tradition. The precursors of the One Mile programme are less the street murals and mosaics of the seventies and more the cultural wing of the post-war social democratic settlement that created the Arts Council, along with the Mass Observation movement and organisations like the Workers Educational Association that foreshadowed it.

The Ashington Group, in particular, stand out as an early model for the transformation of paternalist cultural education into genuine empowerment. Formed as a WEA class in the mining community of Ashington, they had studied evolution and decided to move on to art appreciation in October 1934. They engaged a tutor from Durham University and art appreciation soon became art practice, with the group discussing and critiquing their own painting at weekly meetings. The group's principle was to make art from their own experience, and while their success never professionalised them as artists, their abilities gave them a platform from which to represent themselves and their lives, and produced a body of work that is still significant today.

Another, more recent, precursor of the One Mile programme, combining the heritage of the WEA with echoes of the radical workers' movements of 1968 and the then-new artistic freedoms of conceptualism, was the Artists Placement Group. Founded by Barbara Steveni and John Latham in the 1960s, the APG recognised the marginal position of artists in relation to the everyday life and political and economic development of British

society, and proposed to redress the situation by persuading government and industry to employ artists as free agents within their organisations. The artist would be paid a regular salary to act as what the APG called an 'incidental person', with no expectations as to the production of artwork or set outcomes from the project. Instead, the role of the artist was left open, and it was this very unpredictability, the emancipation from economic imperatives or political demands, that served to describe and problematise the restrictions and routines of industrial organisation.

The One Mile programme shares the same ambition to use the ethos of artistic freedom and the pragmatic structures of cultural administration to enable a directed collective imagination and enactment of other possibilities for social life. What makes the One Mile programme different from a practice like that of the APG is that it both opens itself to a more diverse set of encounters and collaborations, and closes their potential outcomes with the production of a particular work or project for exhibition. This gives it a wider, public character, at the expense of the more discursive and long-term relationship the APG aimed at, though the APG experiment proved, as much as anything else, that this kind of relationship was often too radical and too problematic for either its host organisations or its state funders, and that the artists did not have the power to overcome that resistance.

The Collective's One Mile programme attempts to rethink the idea of the gallery as the destination of art or its audience, but also to re-imagine the gallery as a site of production, interconnection and engagement within a particular urban situation. It proposes that art can have a subject other than itself, that artwork can be made collaboratively, and that its specialisms are neither mystical nor private, and it moves the concerns of art from the universal to the specific; from questions of form and content to questions of representation and of relationships.

The projects that have resulted from the One Mile programme are not directed towards any set audience, but they have been produced from an engagement with particular, determined interests

and out of very specific encounters whose direct situation in the locality binds them to certain social realities. So it's perhaps not coincidental that the projects have underlying themes of escape and transformation, of the acquisition of knowledge and consequent empowerment, of the desire for autonomy, the expansion of everyday experience and the marginal presence of hope.

Johanna Billing's film, made in collaboration with a group of Edinburgh musicians, is a good example. We see a group of young people being prepared and quickly trained to take a sailboat out on the Firth of Forth. A soft yet teacherly voice instructs them, not only in the practicalities of handling the boat but in the nature of the environment they are voyaging into, describing the basic and almost mythic elements of wind, water, and waves that will be both friends and antagonists, and which they must both use and submit to on their journey. The theme of the film is the unfamiliarity of the situation for its protagonists, and the transcendent resolution as they both successfully negotiate the technical challenge and are led to a new understanding of their relationship with the forces of nature.

The film opens with footage of one woman preparing for the trip, and closes with her visit to the local library, but a constant, almost rhythmic, succession of cuts means the narrative does not otherwise settle on any one individual. Instead the constant flapping of the sails, the clicking of the capstan and the exhortations of the teacher as the boat sails out into the open sea merge into a meditative mantra and the mood instead develops with the weather and the musical score. A brisk and clear day, accompanied by ambient guitars, darkens almost into storm, then brightens to disclose an actual rainbow as rhythmic strings and accordions join the band. The makeshift crew sails back under the Forth bridge as the vocals begin on the soundtrack for the first time, a male voice singing the words 'this is how we walk on the moon', and the scene is transformed by this into a brief image of fulfilment, desire and reality synchronised via the power of poetic metaphor. The circle is complete when we realise that the soundtrack has been composed and performed by the same group that learned to sail the boat.

Spartacus Chetwynd's film, *The Call of the Wild*, produced with a group of women who are involved with the fashion/textile world in Edinburgh, perhaps more directly expresses the underlying ethos of the One Mile programme – of art as the signifier of a utopian external reality, either as a position from which to direct a critique or as an alternative moral sphere whose very existence constitutes a critique.

The short 16mm film cuts between scenes of a group of women contentedly working at pattern cutting on a course which Spartacus attended while resident in Edinburgh, and their journey to Lewis in the Western Isles that culminates in a distantly glimpsed rite of ecstatic dancing in the island wilderness. Chetwynd studied pattern cutting with the group before proposing the excursion, but the film nonetheless foregrounds the contrast between the decorous world of the Edinburgh studio and the briefly seen escapism of the island adventure, while a soundtrack of something like primal screaming contributes to the sense of released repression. A parallel screening of Jean Rouch's film *Les Maîtres Fous* when the work was presented at Mary King's Close (an underground historical site in the centre of Edinburgh) served to complicate the process, returning the transcendental to its materialist sources and acting as a reminder that the opposition between nature and culture is itself a cultural construction.

Under Assured?, the film made by Kate Gray in collaboration with staff from the Scottish Widows insurance company, exploits the corporate gothic of the company's public identity and the Modernist Gothic of the architecture of its Edinburgh corporate HQ to produce a sci-fi fantasy. The film's surrealism develops directly from the contradictions of its setting, with the fractured interactions of the staff suggesting the paranoid malfunctioning of some vast, sentient machine. The building itself is also fractured, dissolved and reflected in pools of water and polished desktops, while an owl haunts the empty offices. 'Can I examine your purpose?' asks the receptionist of a visitor. A scribbled note on a meeting-room whiteboard reads 'What is this all about?' But meaning and purpose here do not belong to the human characters, they reside with the implacable mechanism that contains them, the modular concrete ceiling of the car park, the stark lines of black venetian blinds, the bundles of fibre-optic cables in the network cabinets, the hard-edged logic of virtual capital. Like all good dystopian fables, the film ends with an escape of sorts, and the play of surfaces is finally broken in a bleakly

emotional awakening.

These three works have in common the acting out of a kind of transcendence, rediscovering the metaphysical ambitions of art by grounding them in material experience and practice. Rather than the unattainable, consolatory images of modernist secular spiritualism, each of these projects holds both a poetic image and a practical proposition, and suggests that the transformation of the self is an inherently social act.

The project that David Sherry developed and realised with members of the group *Move On* is, on the surface, an entirely different idea, but it had something of the same form of a journey into unfamiliar territory, and a similar ambition to learn from the situation without surrendering one's own identity. *Buying Objectives*, aka 'unsuspecting joe public under the guise of a shop assistant/50% off', involved the project's instigators going, informally, unauthorised and unannounced, into the various retail franchises of an Edinburgh shopping centre, posing as staff, and offering unlikely discounts to potential purchasers. Along the way they made video and photographic documentation of their interventions, as well as occasionally interviewing employees (Kieran Brogan, tray collector in the BHS restaurant, makes the predictably heartbreaking revelation that what he likes most about his job is 'getting paid'), but the primary intention of the work was to be a performance for the immediate audience of shoppers.

Not unlike some of the *Mass Observation* projects of the 1930s, an incidental aim was to make an informal sociological survey of the shopping public. But the *Buying Objectives* team went further, setting out to engage their fellow consumers in conversation about the merits and worth of their potential purchases and to influence their decisions. What they discovered was that behaviour in these ostensibly public spaces is tightly focused and prescribed, with any attempt to open a friendly conversation instantly suspect, and the presence and activities of the team a source of constant tension. Chris James's narration of the project in the accompanying publication conveys the continual sense of unease and displacement that accompanied the performance, even as he successfully engages a Sainsbury's customer in a discussion of the extortionate price of Smoothies.

The project that N55 Services realised, a number of intriguing, oddly shaped plastic receptacles placed in the streets of the city and going by the name of *Dispensers*, is a gesture towards the inversion of the kind of controlled retail space

that Sherry and Move On investigated. Aiming to claim a small piece of public space for the purpose of non-monetary exchange, the dispensers are places to place things and to take things from, to swap goods without the mediation of a market. As a hopeful proposition, they point towards an imagined society where the Fabian injunction 'from each according to their abilities; to each according to their needs' might be spontaneously realised through individual action.

Back in the gallery space, the high-speed film works that Mark Neville produced, also in collaboration with Move On, foregrounded both the vulnerability and the momentary completeness of the everyday life of the homeless and radically socially excluded. Moments of violence and of calm are given the same, extended ultra slow-motion treatment, the outcome being above all a sense of attention to situations that society overlooks, a reframing of the unthought backdrop of urban life. It is not that these situations pass entirely unrepresented in the mainstream media continuum, but that they appear as fleeting, incidental, unimportant. Here, the transformation of timescale returns, unexpectedly, a sense of lived experience, of physicality.

The two other projects that One Mile gave rise to addressed the Edinburgh public and their political representatives using more direct and perhaps more traditional methods. The project with Space 44, a women-only drop-in centre and the artist Ellen Munro produced both a banner for a demonstration and a demonstration for the banner. Drawing on a long and vital tradition of lovingly handmade protest statements that unites trades unionism and the women's movement with an arts and crafts rejection of industrial production, they produced a banner surmounted with the simple request 'Stop Violence Against Women'. On the reverse was lettered a perhaps more poignant slogan, and one that consciously connected the primary demand to a wider radical agenda: 'Freedom is not something you are given, but something you have to make'. The banner was raised in a march to the Scottish Parliament that, beautifully, culminated in a tea party. As a consummately non-violent demand for non-violence, its gentleness was deceptive, as it both articulated itself as the contemporary manifestation of deep-seated social unrest and confrontationally

proclaimed a fundamental lack of confidence in the existing political system as a remedy.

The nature of the address to the Edinburgh public was also the subject of the billboard project produced by the artists' group Freee. In a text that could perhaps serve as a manifesto for the One Mile programme, they undertook a pithy ideological analysis of the language used to situate or constitute 'the public', ending with the desire for a description that 'imagines the public producing itself through politicized acts of cultural exchange'. This desire implies, of course, a connection between the public and the production of culture as well as its consumption.

It is this question, of what the public might look like once the administrative averaging, marketing department categorisations and quasi-democratic political reductionism have been bodyswerved, and of how the production of culture might happen outside the hands of corporate capital or its state proxies, that the One Mile programme tentatively asks. The project sketches a return of state-sponsored culture to its social democratic roots, swapping the empty emblems of overblown public sculpture or the disguised distractions and displaced social work of instrumentalised community art for a participatory engagement. It looks towards a practice that turns cultural hierarchies into subjects for intelligent public inquiry, and art, from an alien and mystical pursuit, into a vehicle for the investigation of the mysteries of life and society that can both describe and refute the terms of a deeper alienation.

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