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The spaces in between  
Relationships in participatory arts work

TaPRA 2016

In this paper I want to examine the building of connectivity through the enterprise of making a piece of work together, how it happens, why it might be desirable, and whether it can be supported.

As I have written elsewhere, a project can create an exoskeleton, holding a group of individuals through its purpose and direction, and allowing them to co-create bonds within it. While Claire Bishop cautions against valuing work only because of the social bonds formed<sup>1</sup>, I propose that what manifests between people, and not only within individuals, in terms of growth, supporting experimentation and personal contact, can and does impact the work being made, as well as the experience of making.

I am interested to explore how much the desire to foster connections within a group can be intentional, how much that intention is enacted through structures and practices, and how much through ethos and values. I am at the beginning of this enquiry, and what I propose today is tentative. James Thompson describes 'the shape, feel, sensation and affect' [ ] that 'does not exist within one person or object of the work, but appears in-between those involved'<sup>2</sup> In searching for a metaphor for this space, I'll turn to the natural world. I was very struck to see, this summer, a film of sea otters basking on their backs, helping themselves, from the water, to what they needed; kelp and oysters. The kelp was easily available. The oysters, once found, have to be cracked open, which they do by bashing them on a favourite stone, (each otter keeps its own favourite stone). This was an image of individual creatures floating in a sea that was full of what they needed, some needs easily available and others requiring effort. What I also learned was that the otters hold onto each other at night, so that none are lost if a storm comes, or the tide gets too strong. They link paws and hang on, even when asleep. This becomes my first metaphor, with the sea as the 'in-between' space in which we all float, some nourishment easily got and the rest needing to be cracked open, and, crucially, others to hang onto.

Translating this metaphor to a project, I turn first to the idea of hanging onto each other. The case has been made many times for the team building that co-creating a performance or event can produce. Certainly, when I work on a project, it is of great interest and importance to me that relationships are built in the group. I lean towards the idea that socially engaged practitioners are not more interested in process than product but are deeply fascinated by the process and see the politics and aesthetics of the development stage of a project as intimately connected to the nature and texture of the outcome. The otters help themselves, from a Universe that provides, and only turn to their community in response to potential risk. For humans, it can be a bit more complicated.

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<sup>1</sup> Claire Bishop (2006) The Social Turn: Collaboration and its Discontents ARTFORUM

<sup>2</sup> James Thompson (2015) Towards an aesthetic of care, Research in Drama Education: the journal of applied theatre and performance 20:4, 430-441

Arts organisation People United, in their research into the notion of kindness, a concept and practice that underpins all of their work, propose that ‘the concept of kindness’ (which has its roots in the old English noun *cyne*, meaning kinship, family) ‘arises from a sense of people being connected by force of common humanity.’ I understand this to mean that we humans do not choose to be interconnected, we are already. We are all in the same Ocean. People United propose that kindness is fundamentally pro-social, using Penner et al’s definition of pro-social as ‘an action that helps or benefits another person.’<sup>3</sup> They suggest that art making’s offer; to listen to and take in the stories of others, to expand one’s knowledge of oneself, to imagine new possibilities, to face up to inequities and challenges, to choose what to share and tell, and how to do it, and to develop empathic skills, is an arena where this interconnectivity can be fostered and can flourish. They cite McCarthy et al<sup>4</sup>, ‘A work of art is.... however tenuous, a bridge between one mind and another’.

The Young Foundation, in its 2012 report, *Charm Offensive: Cultivating Civility in 21<sup>st</sup> Britain*, looks at connectivity in everyday life through the lens of what it describes as civility. Civility is ‘the often small, everyday ways in which we treat each other – [it] acts as an important social ‘glue’.’ In response to what their researchers found was a widely held view among respondents, (that we are becoming a less civil society, because of cultural shifts, unemployment, the welfare state, national structures and world-wide movements) they suggest that civility remains highly valued and very much alive. They suggest that

...a more useful framework is to think of civility as akin to tiny bacteria that sustain complex eco-systems, including their own bodies. They are invisible to the outside observer but turn out to be critical for helping organisms survive.<sup>5</sup>

Enlarging the analogy, they suggest that civility can be contagious, spreading its influence and begetting more civility. In an unintended nod to People United’s research they quote Adam Smith, ‘Kindness is the parent of kindness’.<sup>6</sup> Both People United and The Young Foundation identify the pro-social as a fundamental trait within humans, but one that can easily be diminished by difficult, challenging and impoverishing experiences. Both reports look for ways to encourage, bolster and teach, what the Young Foundation call ‘a learned grammar of sociability, that demonstrates respect for others and which entails sacrificing immediate self-interest when appropriate.’<sup>7</sup>

Both of these models make it clear that, while the desire for relationship might be innate, we are not, like the otters, lying around picking up what we need. We need to be more consciously active than that, more interdependent, and we need to be fostering our skills to stay alive.

Why is this so crucial? In her book, *Moral Boundaries* (1994) Joan Tronto argues that caring, in People United’s terms, ‘other-focussed activity’, is central to our lived experience. It

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<sup>3</sup> Penner et al (2005) Pro-social behaviour: multi-level perspectives. Annual Review of Psychology

<sup>4</sup> McCarthy et al (2004) Gifts of the Muse: reframing the debate about the benefits of the arts

<sup>5</sup> <https://youngfoundation.org/publications/charm-offensive-cultivating-civility-in-21st-century-britain/p8>

<sup>6</sup> Ibid, p 10

<sup>7</sup> ibid

should 'be viewed as a species activity that includes everything we do to maintain, continue and repair world, so that we can live in it as well as possible.'<sup>8</sup> She identifies care as a practice rather than a disposition, upon which we were all interdependent.

Madeleine Bunting, reviewing the Young Foundation report in The Guardian newspaper<sup>9</sup> Picks up on the level to which researchers found that 'Much of our day-to-day wellbeing is rooted in the granularity of tiny interactions'. We are not just feeding ourselves, we are fed by reciprocal gestures and transactions.

I want to turn now to the work of creating artworks together with community groups, young people, or any of the other sites of creation represented under the broad banner of Applied practices. I suggest that facilitators, artists, support workers have a dual interest; in the group and in the individual. These are of course inextricably connected. John Berger, writing about GP John Sassa, describes how he became part of the village where he worked through engaging in the renovation of an old tractor. As all those involved, not great talkers, worked together, something changed. Berger writes:

'It is as though the speakers bend over the subject to examine it in precise detail, until, bending over it, their heads touch. Their shared experience becomes a symbol of shared experience. They then came to share a language which was a metaphor for the rest of their common experience.'<sup>10</sup>

The common task created the group. Ken Campbell used to say about the self 'The self isn't in the filing cabinet under S! No, you have to astound the self into being'. So sometimes, often I would say, the task, the purpose the direction of a project can provide a flexible container for the growth of a group. It needs to be 'astounded into being' by the offer of a shared activity, processes where everyone is needed and has a place and a sense of purpose.

At the same time, within the group, each individual has their own needs, desires and ways of being. My own specialism, in intergenerational practice has made me distrustful of almost all generalisations about age. Because I see far more exceptions to general rules than I see adherence to them. A group is not about shared descriptors. In Berger's example it is in the action of moving towards a task that 'their heads touch'. If we return to the idea of 'the in-between', then a movement between the individual and the group becomes clear, an in-between that is inscribed with 'the granularity of tiny interactions'. Playing with the idea that , in a workshop or rehearsal space we are all swimming in the same ocean, I wonder whether there is anything different about this ocean because it is a space dedicated to making art together. I suggest that it's not in any way special. It is just the ocean, the 'force of common humanity', or Bourriaud's 'existing real'. He writes. 'The role of artworks is no longer to form imaginary and utopian realities, but to actually be ways of living and models of action within the existing real.'<sup>11</sup> This suggests to me that we can depend on the

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<sup>8</sup> Joan Tronto (1994) Moral Boundaries p103

<sup>9</sup> Guardian.co.uk , 10/10/2011

<sup>10</sup> John Berger (1967) A Fortunate Man p100

<sup>11</sup> Nicolas Bourriaud (2002) Relational Aesthetics

innate desire of humans to connect in order to build up this in between space, supported by arts processes, but not entirely instigated by them.

Happily, people don't fit concepts, necessarily, and I want to turn to an event which 'astounded' my enquiry 'into being', to paraphrase Ken Campbell. In 2015 I worked on a Community play in the London Borough of Tower Hamlets. Individuals came to the project for all sorts of reasons; interest in local research, in performance, design, hosting events, getting to know new people. In terms of the movement between the individual and the group, the shifting dynamic both within sessions and across the whole project accommodated and supported this movement in a flexible and open way. Nonetheless, one individual presented a challenge to all of the artists and to the rest of the group, as she wanted to join the project, but not the group. She wanted what James Thompson describes as 'Striding out on your own,' which 'as an autonomous rational choice becomes valued to a greater degree than deep awareness of our interdependence.'<sup>12</sup> In the context of a group diverse in age, social and cultural background who were sincerely interested in each other, this choice stood out in sharp distinction, and made me acutely aware of my desire for the group to function as a collective. This, I suggest, is related to the fascination with the detail of the process, and a belief that the quality of the process will affect the quality of the outcome. There is no doubt that this individual's separateness made people feel quite uncertain around them, and they did not get what others were getting; support and confirmation from the others in the group. Berger suggests that unhappiness and frustration are often connected to being unable to see ourselves reflected back and affirmed. He writes

It is a question of failing to find any confirmation of oneself in the outside world. The lack of confirmation leads to a sense of futility. And this sense of futility is the essence of loneliness, for, despite the horrors of history, the existence of other men (sic) always promises the possibility of purpose.<sup>13</sup>

As a team, we ultimately had to accept this person's choice, and work around it. They did not seem to be lonely, so was it our need to have a 'happy family' that was the problem? How much emphasis should we put into creating and fostering exchange and interchange in the context of an arts project? I am going to turn now to two pieces of research in which I have been engaged in order to get more deeply into this question.

In 2012 I followed three linked arts projects in London and was asked to focus on the ways in which different art forms fostered the building of relationships. The projects were using photography, puppetry, dance, singing and instrumental music, and working across generations. I looked at physical constellations; how the art forms invited people to work individually, in pairs, in groups, behind a camera, holding a piece of material steady so that a partner could work on it, as a whole group. I saw witnessed and un-witnessed work, directed and undirected conversation. In one project 12 people learned to manipulate a giant puppet together, while in another the whole group were together, but working

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid Thompson p 435

<sup>13</sup> Ibid Berger 74-75

individually, facing a dance tutor. A group of 10 who sang together barely had any time to talk to one another but expressed a deep feeling of closeness. It was clear that different art forms offered different ways of relating, and that artists and participants had ways of working they felt more comfortable with. But I was interested to see that most of the artist borrowed from other art forms within their workshops. The photographers used drama games, and the dancers used storytelling. The puppeteers analysed and critiqued photographic images. If participants experienced only one mode of being together the chances for connectivity were lessened. As multi-faceted beings we need opportunities to be invited and allowed to show our different facets, thereby increasing the number of opportunities to connect. Artists made particular because these projects had both the intention to create pieces of performance for a public event, and the intention of making as many opportunities as possible for the group to interconnect. They did not leave it to chance.

In my current research project, I am looking at the theme of gratitude, both with participants, and as a lens through which to understand the transactions that take place between people. While there are some challenging aspects to the notion of gratitude and how it is understood, such as the measure of material gain in relation to the level of gratitude, and the use, historically of indebtedness and entitlement as a mode of subjugation, there is something fundamentally engaging about the core knowledge that each person has something to give and also that they need things from others. This is very clearly articulated in the work of Project Phakama, where, across projects internationally, they have devised, a structure in which everyone who is part of a project, artists, facilitators, technicians, participants, articulate what they had to offer and what they want to gain within any particular project. In the two projects on Gratitude I have completed so far, a dance piece on the theme of the possibility of feeling grateful to your own body, and a visual art project where we made fans with concealed and public messages of thanks, this movement of 'give and gain' has been evident at all levels. Every stage of the projects has needed co-operation, patience and collaboration. Within this project we have looked for large and small ways for all involved to share their knowledge and skills and expertise, but also to be able to let others know what they might need. I say this as a retrospective reflection. It would be exhausting to be quite so well intentioned all the time.

Social scientists Emmons & Shelton regard gratitude as a trait, absolutely crucial to the functioning of society, pointing out that it is not gratitude that is moral, but the behaviours that result from it. As Tronto writes about care, 'It is a practice, not a disposition'. Emmons & Shelton quotes Simmel, who points out that gratitude is not just about dyads between a giver and a grateful recipient.

Pro-social sentiments and attitudes are intertwined within a vast, interlocking social network. <sup>14</sup>

In the now extensive research by social psychologists into gratitude, it can be seen that the effect can be, as the Young Foundation say about civility, contagious. We cannot always

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<sup>14</sup> Robert Emmons & Charles Shelton (2001) Gratitude & the Science of Positive Psychology in The Handbook of Positive Psychology Eds Snyder & Lopez

thank the person who has given something to us, or helped us in a non-material way, but we are more likely to be generous to someone else because someone has been generous to us, as we are if we have been thanked. What manifests between people and not only within individuals can and does impact the work being made. If the connection between individuals and the art form or project is the warp, then the relationships between them is the weft; they are interdependent. In a process which is supported and spacious, every aspect, including the growth of relationships matters. I am grateful to my group-averse participant, who jolted me into appreciating how much the weft of relationship matters to me in collaborative arts projects, and into seeing how much it mattered to others in the group. In the ocean we are all, like it or not, floating in, the in between matters.