

# Martin Vincent on a show about how to change things

Futurology – The Black Country 2024

The New Art Gallery, Walsall

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I'm not really sure if this is an art exhibition. Andy Hewitt and Mel Jordan set out to examine social, economic and political conditions in the former industrial heartland known as the Black Country, taking into account the government agenda for art and 'creativity' as instruments of economic regeneration. This starts in schools, where artists are brought in to develop creative learning, with the aim of producing citizens who are better able to adapt to changing economic conditions. Hewitt and Jordan worked closely with the government agency Creative Partnerships, though they hoped to maintain a critical position. To this end they selected artists who they thought would be able to balance potential conflicts of interest and sent them into schools in the region.

Hence, Dave Beech worked with pupils attending Tividale High School in Sandwell. He asked them what they wanted to change in their locality, and to think about how they could make that happen. They came up with a mainly predictable list of facilities: theme park, rehearsal space, crazy golf, plus a few more imaginative science-fiction based projects (a hovering library) and worthy plans to get rid of big supermarkets and big roads in favour of smaller ones. These are plotted on a large map drawn on the gallery wall.

The claim made for this work is that the process empowers the young people, that saying what you want is the vital first step in making things happen. Barby Asante's project has a similar rationale. She took a video camera along to a school and asked the kids to take her anywhere they wanted, to show her somewhere that was important in their lives, to 'take ownership' of her.

The resulting short films are the most compelling material in the exhibition. If you don't spend much time around teenagers you miss that pleasure in realising simple aspirations – here's the house where I live, I like it, here's the road I cross, here's the youth club – and the directness in identifying problems and proposing solutions.

In this respect Asante has made very good work. But the video is hard to watch here, because it is on a monitor in a garden shed, with some cushions on the floor. As an ersatz kids' den it

is pretty unconvincing. For a start it is in an art gallery.

Which brings us to my initial problem. As the organisers disarmingly admit, translating this kind of work to a gallery context can be the hardest part. We take it on trust that what happened between Beech and the children was a valuable experience, but the map on the wall is as prosaic as a school project. (And I have seen this artist work the trick of turning base material into art which is both critical and delightful.)

Nick Crowe and Ian Rawlinson's *The Landowners* sounds most like good old-fashioned conceptual art. The artists bought some land and gave it to the kids. Twenty-four shares in a Christmas tree plantation in Herefordshire are now owned by Wolverhampton school children, and there are two dozen Christmas trees in the gallery to prove it. This work shows the cold reality of what stake-holding is really about, and its imposition of landowner status on the participants underlines this. Again, though, the gallery presentation is less powerful than the idea.

'Futurology' is framed as a research project, but its gallery manifestation as five discrete works credited to artists (the names of the children are harder to find) militates against this reading. While the artists have, for the most part, engaged with the kids' world, they haven't sufficiently initiated the kids into the art world. Simon Poulter demonstrates the clearest awareness of this, sensibly leaving his interaction with the children undescribed. Instead he has made an animated video using their drawings, *Glitch Space* (boy lost in), an entertaining if uncomplex allegory of encounters with cultural institutions. Becky Shaw addresses the concern by telling us about her project in person, thereby bringing us closest to the participants, since they come along to change the slides in her lecture, which wanders discursively some distance from its title, *Civics: the Science of Citizenship*.

The research brief is widely drawn, allowing potential problems to be legitimate outcomes. A central question for visitors is why art needs to end up in a gallery at all. Because of the gap between the primary experience of the participants and

what we see, it is hard to judge those other issues about instrumentality, government policy and social change. The success of 'Futurology' depends on the belief that what took place in the schools was art, so that what happens in the gallery doesn't have to be.

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