

Futurology – The Black Country 2024 The New Art Gallery, Walsall 30 July – 12 September 2004

For those of you who haven't had the pleasure 'Creative Partnerships is a government-funded national initiative, established to develop schoolchildren's potential, ambition, creativity and imagination' by bringing them into contact with 'creative practitioners'. What better way to do this than to get five artists to go into schools, work with the students and produce work for The New Art Gallery Walsall. This sounds like the wet dream of the DCMS and the zombie nightmare of everyone else, but fortunately the project was curated by Andy Hewitt and Mel Jordan creators of Public Text and involved artists who have a healthy distrust of political structures.

With The Landowners Nick Crowe and Ian Rawlinson unpick the concept of the stakeholder economy by giving real capital in the form of land to twenty-four twelve year-olds, an echo of the government idea to give all children at birth a trust fund. The pre-industrial concepts of land as wealth and the holding of land as a prerequisite for citizenship are considered to be redundant in an age of ephemeral power structures based on the flow of information and imaginary finance. But consider the flow of capital around real estate, the desire to own property, and the continuing political clout of large landowners and their role in redevelopment and shaping the landscape. The children can do what they wish with the land they own, even sell their shares, but they cannot appear on the land registry until they are eighteen so as such they do not truly own the land. Currently the land is used to grow Christmas trees, this is a particularly elegant use of the land as it highlights the changing nature of the economics of both the area and the country as a whole as we switch from a manufacturing base to a service/supply economy. Even (or especially) in the post-industrial wasteland that is the Black Country land is still power, the annual waste of resources that is our major religious festival needs its fuel from somewhere.

Becky Shaw's Civics: The Science of Citizenship follows three 16 year-olds re-zoning the 'Failing' school where they have just finished their GCSEs, a process that it is hoped will lead to a revitalisation of the school and which echo's the Black Country Consortium's plans for regional

regeneration. Shaw's performance also employs the three teenagers as gallery technicians for her presentation on the way in which education and work interact, and is an eloquent exploration of the roles of Charles, Edward and John all of whom would have had a bright enough future in the industrial powerhouse that was the west midlands.

All of the artists in Futurology have viewed the project as a partnership with the young people with whom they have worked, in some cases simply presenting and editing their ideas in an intelligent and crucially non-exploitative manner. For work of this type this engagement is the vital factor, if an artist is to act socially then it must be a true partnership with a genuine two way process and risk on the part of the participants. It is a marked contrast to the vast majority of public or community art where political and economic factors ensure that these risks are minimized and as a result the end products are patronising and bland. Of course the artists have the final say here, as they should they also have the most at stake, but they come across as being editors with a light touch. Some proof of this view and of the ownership/identification of the pupils with the work produced is that Barby Asante's Comfort Zone was full of teenagers on their lunch break.

It is difficult to tell whether the future presented here is bleak or bright, maybe it is neither, the concept of constant progress is a comfortable myth but a myth nonetheless. More of the same but in different forms; tedious factory jobs are replaced by equally tedious ones in the service industry. Governing elites will continue to decide what is in our best interests hiding behind the jargon of public consultation and social inclusiveness. Any hope lies in the critique of government policies of top down regional development and a socio-economic climate that equates people's worth with their spending power.

So is Creative Partnerships a success? It is hard to avoid being cynical about this. It would require a greater analysis than is possible here to decide if the overall strategy of the initiative will lead to the outcomes wanted, or even if these outcomes are desirable. Indeed anyone looking at the literature produced by Creative Partnerships will

find them self so lost in government duckspeak it is difficult to find out whether there are any sensible concrete aims to be found. As art and social comment this exhibition works, but as a way of 'develop[ing] schoolchildren's potential, ambition, creativity and imagination'? Surely that is the job of education, full stop, and it is somewhat concerning that the government thinks that artists are needed to be brought in to do this job.

Jonathan Trayner.

Links:

www.artatwalsall.org.uk
www.creative-partnerships.com
www.jordan-hewitt.demon.co.uk/futurology
www.trayner.org