

Collected Reports

2002 - 2008

- Artist in residence: The Bulls Head Inn
- Artist placement: The Times Newspaper call centre
- Artist in residence: Lloyds Pharmacy
- Artist placement: An energy company
- Fellowship: Allensmore Plant Nursery

Artist in residence: The Bulls Head Inn

Here I spent my time exploring a subservient role within the structure of a family run business and looked at the possibilities of navigating a path upwards within it as an outsider.

In response to the hectic and pressured environment, I opened up the notion of pot washing as a physical stress-release mechanism.

This led me to develop a body of work that used washing up bubbles and the various bits of food left in the sink, moulded into a series of low-relief figurative sculptures, based on the other members of staff.

My sculptural representations of staff were briefly exhibited to Terry, the kitchen porter, before being washed down the drain. Terry commented that my ability to 'wash my work away' was a courageous act of faith in my ideas.

The ephemeral nature of this work challenged the notion of permanent artwork whilst simultaneously adhering to cleanliness and hygiene policies.

After many attempts to gain a more respected position of power within the family structure I realised that it was not impossible but that now it was not a goal I wished to achieve. I concluded my investigations by deciding to take what I had already gained from the residency and by not getting entangled in the heated family politics.

Artist placement: The Times Newspaper call centre

The call centre's agenda was to sell subscriptions to The Times Newspaper to people who read other newspapers. My aim in this placement was to survey the characteristics, interests and language used by the various members of the public I spoke to. This was also an opportunity to map the political leanings and ideas of class associated with various newspaper titles and the socio-economic values they enforced.

My survey took the form of a complex sculpture chart built on my desk using coloured elastic bands, drawing pins, bulldog clips and post-it notes.

During calls I found that I automatically stereotyped people very quickly on their accent, their address and what newspaper they read. Quite often my assumptions were proven completely wrong and so I was constantly re-arranging the materials of my sculpture chart as each call progressed and I learnt more about the caller.

The sculpture was featured in a series of exhibition previews throughout my third week in this placement. At the end of each night the rest of the team would gather around my desk to see the sculptures progress and discuss issues around stereotyping and the advantages of keeping an open mind during a sales pitch. On the Friday night I initiated a seminar at Cosies Wine Bar on the sculptures relationship within the wider context of data protection and experimental telesales techniques with my guest speaker Tim, Head of Training and Development.

In the fourth week with pressure from the management team on me to focus less on my sculpture chart and more on selling subscriptions, I started to really engage with the people I spoke with but found a certain amount of resistance.

Whilst debating and attempting to persuade them that The Times is a great newspaper, I developed and strengthened a position from which to fight off neo-liberal and right-wing attacks whilst defending the Murdoch Enterprise, all of the time keeping hidden my own agenda and opinions.

Artist in residence: Lloyds Pharmacy

Here I looked at the role of the Pharmacy Assistant and the demand for sensitivity and restraint when dealing with customers' personal health problems, especially in a relatively small community. The human desire and need to keep reactions and emotions hidden became the central theme of my time there.

Towards the end of the residency I realised two performances in the street. I explored, through the use of body language and spoken word, the idea of a cloaking device; ways of hiding the truth underneath a layer of fiction.

The first performance took place whilst on my way to the bank with a carrier bag containing £2000 in cash. I met a group of four young heroin addicts I knew personally from my school days. My fears bubbled up but were quickly hidden as I put into practice my cloaking device idea. I strode past and acknowledged them in the usual manner.

The group was convinced by my performance so much so that they did not know it was taking place and that intrinsically, they were participating in my socially-engaged artwork.

The second performance took place a week later in an alleyway, on my way from the pharmacy to a GP surgery, when I met the same group of addicts and I was carrying a large bag of methadone. Here I had an audience of one, an old lady slowly pushing a shopping trolley laden with bags. I was so aware of her watchful eye that my performance was not so convincing and, as I walked towards the group and barked a short greeting, their suspicions turned from squinted stares to questions about my activities, where I was heading and what the bag contained. Attempts to hide the truth had failed; my cloak was down.

Whilst keeping an eye on my bag of methadone and the old lady, I mumbled my way through their questions and hurried past, increasing my pace as I realised I had lost my confidence.

The group saw through the fabricated image I was presenting and I was in danger of revealing important truths about my artistic methodology.

I see the group as both collaborators and as my first hand audience, although they are oblivious to this at present. I hope that sometime in the future they become aware of and understand their involvement in my practice.

Artists Placement: An energy company

With this well-known energy company, I established a placement in their door-to-door sales team after several rounds of negotiation and form filling. Whilst talking to a variety of people on doorsteps, in the street and in their homes I developed a malleable performance persona, moulding it and adapting it for each customer, appropriating their vocal tones, their body language and their opinions.

This appropriation was directed back towards customers whilst interacting with them. Drawing on psychological research and theory presented by the sales team trainer, this is what I now term 'live mirror performance'.

This technique often resulted in a more meaningful engagement with the people who were at once both my material and my audience. But occasionally it resulted in a tense situation where they became aware of my appropriating tactics and withdrew or became aggressive, as they perceived me to be insincere.

After working with other members of the team, I began to enact a critical investigation into the moral and ethical issues raised by their precarious performance techniques. Some of these techniques played on an implied social consensus on our national pride and our loyalty to our birth nation. For example, during a price war between my British owned company and our French competitors, one team member said to a customer:

"Your neighbours here won't even buy French apples, yet you're paying them for your electricity?"

Of course he had no idea if the neighbours bought French apples or even if they were British; it was his clever and convincing performance that pushed his audience into a tight corner.

After documenting this unethical behaviour through photographs, sound recordings and a collection of paperwork, I tested the water by skimming over the subject with my manager. This was not well received and I realised that by exhibiting my findings to management I was showing them nothing new and therefore could affect no real change at this level. The problems here were deeply rooted.

I felt my role, as an artist, would be more productive if I carried out smaller acts of rebellion, by speaking the truth about the company to customers and by not making any sales.

Fellowship: Allensmore Plant Nursery

This fellowship provided me with the opportunity to map the network of social relations between workers. It was through various performative actions that I used this mapping to place myself in a more powerful position within the social hierarchy of jovial banter and of tea making duties.

My mapping of relations between Cathy, the most respected and feared member of staff known for her sharp sarcastic wit and bullying nature and Sharon, a less confident younger member, led me to an action that raised my social ranking and worker status. By observing previous tensions between them I built upon an existing issue by making jokes about Sharon's nose to Cathy in Sharon's presence, thus gaining recognition from Cathy for my ability to mock mercilessly. This performance action was a collage of other staff members' jokes, body language and tone of voice that I had assimilated over time.

After a few of these strategic performances, I was able to spend less time making tea and more time developing a language around how to present a variety of plants to an audience.

With guidance from a stacking and presentation expert, I created my own sculptural display using multi-layered plant stacking systems, which were to be viewed by a large audience when the nursery opened its doors to the public.

This fellowship was also an opportunity for me to explore the level of spending satisfaction that could be gained from receiving an artist's fee of £5.00 per hour. This satisfaction was then expressed through a series of interventions within the local economic sphere.

One intervention comprised of the purchasing of a sausage roll, a cream cake and a can of coke from the nearby family run bakery. The assistant reminded me that with my three choices I was participating in their lunchtime discount scheme called 'meal deal' and that I would save 45p.

I was satisfied to be supporting a local business whilst still securing a great value 'meal deal' that was both tasty and nourishing and made minimal impact on the remainder of my fee. I went back to with renewed energy to complete my plant display and eagerly await a reaction from the forthcoming crowds.

Collected Reports is the culmination of several years' artistic yet very hands-on and practical explorations in a variety of social and economic arenas.

Thanks to all the patient and supportive staff and colleagues who have helped me in developing my practice and have acted as a sounding board for ideas over the years.

I'd also like to thank the companies and organisations who provided residencies and placements and for their generous financial assistance that made the works possible.

Sam Curtis

www.scurtis.co.uk

© Sam Curtis 2014