

# Community engagement

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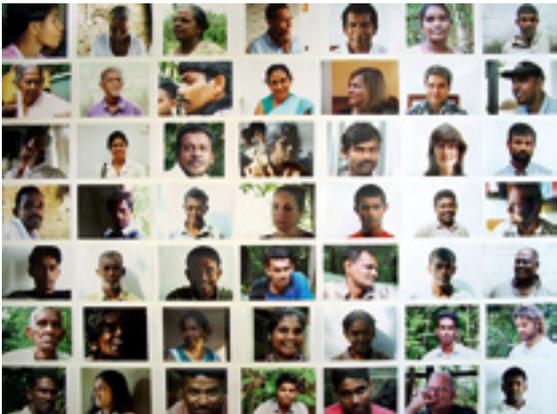
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Cover image:  
**Guyan Porter**, *Sri Lanka Portraits*, 2007.

This a-n Collection offers a focused examination of the type of site-specific art which regards people as its locale. Edited by and with an introductory essay by Catherine Wilson that indicates the diversity of projects originating through community-based work, the collection provides a valuable critical context for such practice (and through which it too might be better represented and understood). Each of the specially-commissioned project profiles further expresses the variety of practice – including through the originality of writing styles.

**Charlotte Frost**  
a-n Collections Coordinator

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A term that pervades contemporary art discourse is 'context'. Artists and arts practitioners negotiate their way in a professional and interdisciplinary domain of knowledge that is intensely cognisant of the consequences of geographic, cultural, political and social loci on both representations and methodologies of engagement with individuals, communities and societies. Context not only provides the frame of reference that informs artistic collaboration or intervention, but may equally be the very subject of investigation and concern. Despite being beleaguered in the past by ideas of the artist as an alternative remedy of social problems, the multi-faceted area of collaborative practice that is 'engaged with communities' is being identified as a cogent territory for renegotiation. Comprising six new commissioned articles, this a-n Collection reviews a selection of diverse artist-led and commissioned projects, all characterised by forms of collaboration with communities or social groups and undertaken by UK-based and international artists over the past ten years. Four of the projects have occurred since 2006.

In contrast to simplistic clichés that have historically been attached to community-based practices, it is a realm of complexity, as well as inspiring creative and collaborative possibilities for the artist. The concept of 'community' can be laden with misapprehensions, and an understanding of how social groups manifest themselves and change entails an awareness of the influence of wider historical, political, cultural and economic factors. Artists actively participating in the representation of specific social groups or communities need to be aware of the ethnographic pitfalls and be prepared to question the role they are performing in their relationships with others. As well, the abandoning of autonomy and the interplay of other agendas in collaborative practices confers another level of negotiation. But, as discussion of the space of practice increasingly acknowledges the significance of the 'littoral', spaces of the 'in between' and places of intersection and meeting, addressing the myriad realities in which people live, offers vital possibilities for socially engaged artists.

Historically, the precedents of community-based art practices can be traced to the political climate of the 1960s and 1970s, in which it became associated with concerns of social equality. "All community artists shared a dislike of cultural hierarchies, believed in co-authorship of work, and in the creative potential of all sectors of society. Some went further and believed that community arts provided a powerful medium for social and political change."<sup>1</sup> Questions were raised of 'who is art for?' and 'where should it be made and displayed?' Thus, "individualism, self-expression and 'art about art' began to be replaced by collaboration, social relevance, process and context."<sup>2</sup> Participatory and socially-engaged strategies emphasised process over product, and resulted in disparate outcomes including street theatre, murals and 'happenings'. Community-based art practices are associated with the domain of 'public art'. But, as Suzanne Lacy articulated in the early 1990s, it is necessary to distinguish between sculpture and installations sited in public places, and visual art employing a diverse range of media to communicate and interact with social groups about issues relevant to their lives. Suzanne Lacy defined the term 'new genre public art' to claim that "what exists in the space between the words 'public' and 'art' is an unknown relationship between artist and audience, a relationship that may itself be the artwork."<sup>3</sup>

When this relationship is worked out within the context of a specified community, preconceptions of such an entity can arise. Myths exist about the 'community' characterised by fused subjectivities, mutual understanding and social closeness. This "privileges unity over difference, immediacy over mediation, sympathy over recognition of limits of one's understanding of others from their point of view."<sup>4</sup> Rather than resolution in wholeness, a community or social group is better approached as a context in which subjectivities, exposed to internal and external forces, continually reconstitute and evolve. In 'Risking Radio Nights', Rachel Lois Clapham addresses an Artangel Interaction project in which British artist David Blandy explored the diversity of west London's radio culture. Blandy's collaboration with young people from the Avenues Youth Project in Queens Park, London, in the making of a documentary film, *Radio Nights* (2005), was informed by thinking about the concept of 'community' beyond ghettoisation, as a relation or network, rather than 'social, physical demographic or geographic location.'

For Rachel Grant, a multi-media artist based in Stoke-on-Trent, an Action Research Commission awarded by Longhouse enabled her to extensively reflect on the relationship she has with her own neighbourhood. Charlie Levine examines Grant's relationship to community



Guyan Porter, *Sri Lanka Portraits*, 2007.



Vyacheslav Akhunov, *Pilgrimage in Kingdom U: Cleaner*, still from video performance, 2007. Photo: Julia Sorokina

1. Morgan, S, 'Looking back over 25 years', in Dickson, M, *Art with People*, AN Publications (a-n The artists Information Company), 1995, p18.
2. Harding, D, 'Another History', in Dickson, M, *Art with People*, AN Publications (a-n The artists Information Company), 1995, p28.
3. Kwon, M, *One Place after Another: Site Specific Art and Locational Identity*, The MIT Press, 2004, p105.
4. *ibid*, p149.



David Blandy, *Radio Nights*, film still, 2005. Commissioned and produced by: Artangel Interaction

and her project that took a critical perspective on some civic approaches to ‘community regeneration’.

Equally it is necessary to rethink ideas of the community as solely situated in the ‘local’, in fixed opposition to the ‘global.’ Narratives of twentieth-century modernity have served to marginalise the local by promoting homogenisation and universalism as the path to progress. This ideology has tended to position the local as static, fixed and traditional in contrast to the space of rapid change, scientific innovation, universal ideas and denial of difference equated with the advance of the modern age.

“The suspicion of Enlightenment narratives for their denial of difference makes for a suspicion of all metanarratives, which suppress or overlook differences, allows for localised consciousness and points to the local as the site for working out ‘alternative public spheres’...”<sup>5</sup>

However, the decentring of global capitalism and the trans-nationalisation of production over the past three to four decades has generated powerful forces of unity and fragmentation on a global scale. This has contributed to catalysing some of the phenomena we live with today, such as increasing global movements of peoples (and cultures), weakening of boundaries between societies, the exacerbation of inequalities within societies and the interpenetration of the global and the local.

“In a fundamental sense, global capitalism represents an unprecedented penetration of local society globally by the economy and culture of capital; so that the local understood in a ‘traditional’ sense may be less relevant...”<sup>6</sup>

In addition, networks of association, employment, even struggle, within a localised social group may entail trans-national associations. These forms of linkages across geographic and social territories are not formulaic or consistent. “Globalisation... can move back and forth, it comes in many kinds, it is segmented and it is notoriously uneven; different worlds, different globalisations.”<sup>7</sup>

For the socially-engaged artist, the ‘community’ or social group is not an independent universe but a shifting site of invention and negotiation, of interface between individual subjectivities and realms of meaning. While the framework of the encounter between artist and community as well as other collaborative parties such as commissioning organisations and institutions, is not bound by prescriptive methodologies, it is important to address recent directions in thinking. To understand a given context as one of ‘inter-territoriality’, rather than internal coherence, opens practice to challenge normative conformities, question the process of naming, undo the structures of categorisation and take a dialectical approach to the wider political, cultural and economic forces that define received ‘truths’. Miwon Kwon suggests “addressing the uneven conditions of adjacencies and distances between one thing, one person, one place, one thought, one fragment next to another, rather than invoking equivalences via one thing after another.”<sup>8</sup>

The inspiring artist-led practice of Mauricio Dias and Walter Riedweg, based in Rio de Janeiro, which centres on collaborative projects with social groups often on the edges of mainstream society, is critically concerned with inter-territoriality and the questioning of constructed social and cultural dichotomies that define received notions of the world. The article, ‘Dias and Riedweg: Border Zones and Poetic Encounters’, addresses their idea of the ‘poetic encounter’, and some of the creative processes and social implications of three of their projects that focus on border zones and spaces of the ‘in between’.

The space of the ‘in between’, as a zone of potential, accords with the ideas of ‘dialogical aesthetics’ and ‘littoral art practice’ as articulated by Grant Kester.<sup>9</sup> Kester elucidates the dialogical relationship between artist, participants and audience as one where each position is open to challenge and subject to an ongoing process of negotiation. His concept of littoral art describes interdisciplinary interfaces operating between different discourses, institutions, public spaces and bodies of knowledge. The central meaning of a littoral artwork is replaced by multiple registers of meaning, and it produces multiple levels of information at a given time and space, while the continuous process of dialogical feedback between artist/s, participants and viewers has the potential to result in new, even unanticipated forms of collaborative knowledge.<sup>10</sup>

5. Dirlik, A, ‘The Global in the Local’, in Wilson, R, Dissanayake, W, *Global/Local: Cultural Production and the Transnational Imaginary*, Duke University Press, 1996, p28.

6. *ibid*

7. Hannerz, U, *Transnational Connections: Culture, People, Places*, Routledge, London and New York, 1996, pp26-27.

8. Kwon, M, *One Place after Another: Site Specific Art and Locational Identity*, The MIT Press, 2004, p166.

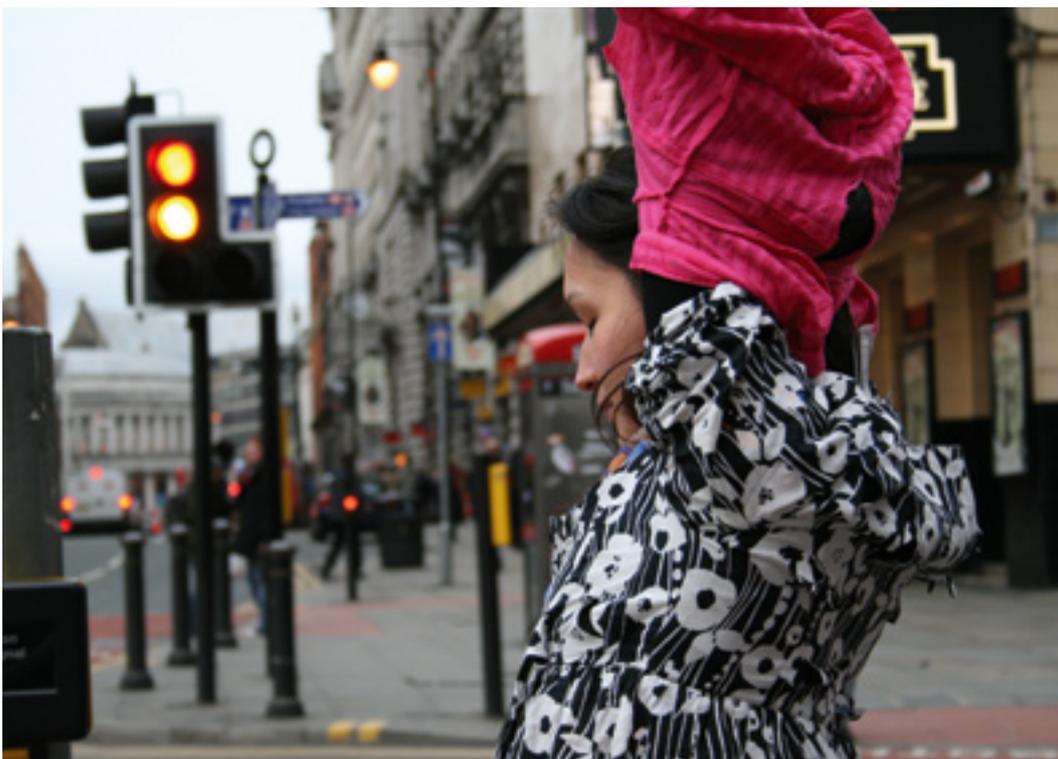
9. The paper, ‘Dialogical Aesthetics: A Critical Framework for Littoral Art’, by Grant Kester can be accessed at [www.variant.randomstate.org](http://www.variant.randomstate.org). It was first presented at the conference, *Critical Sites: Issues in Critical Art Practice and Pedagogy*, held at the Institute of Art, Design and Technology, Dublin, 1998.

10. Kester, G, ‘Dialogical Aesthetics: A Critical Framework for Littoral Art’, 1998, [www.variant.randomstate.org](http://www.variant.randomstate.org), pp3-4.

Whether the dialogue with a social group is via an artist-led project, organised residency, specific commission or cultural exchange, this understanding of the collaborative posits the destabilisation of identities of all parties, as a productive, rather than negative state. Kathy Rae Huffman, Coordinating Curator of the 'Central Asian Project', writes about this collaborative artistic exchange between England, Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, and the unique journey of the participating artists and all involved. Organised by Cornerhouse, SPACE (London) and AsiaArt+ (Almaty, Kazakhstan), the project aimed to acknowledge and reflect upon prejudices and preconceptions about other cultures, creating a space where misinterpretations and individual worldviews entered into a process of negotiation in different, and often unfamiliar, community and cultural contexts.

The complexity of working not only in a different cultural context, but also one affected by natural disaster, is highlighted by Kai-Oi Jay Yung in her article which centres on Guyan Porter's residency at the Chandrasevana Creation Centre, Sri Lanka, in 2006. In the aftermath of the tsunami that devastated coastal communities from Sumatra to Somalia, the Chandrasevana Centre was set up by the Hikkaduwa Area Relief Fund (HARF) as an arts resource to provide creative avenues of dialogue with, and support for, individuals in regional communities of southern Sri Lanka. It is one example of how for the artist in any collaboration, autonomy is abandoned and his/her capacity to catalyse the potential in a given context is a measure of a willingness to embrace listening, intersubjective vulnerability and promote an atmosphere of trust. Mauricio Dias and Walter Riedweg explain: "We try to create spaces where fragility, doubt and failure have place and will not be simply put aside. These delicate fields enable us and the participants to create new codes of comprehension and expression... Even when individual goals differ, the tension of the creative practice slowly involves the group towards a new comprehension of artistic expression and of the context."<sup>11</sup> This framework of dialogical encounter contrasts and avoids a presumed role of artist as ethnographer, even anthropologist, in a community context. As Hal Foster advises, critical reflexivity of the artist is required when participating in the representations of others, so that a project does not stray "...from a decentring of the artist as cultural authority to a remaking of the other in neo-primitivist guise."<sup>12</sup>

In comparison to the radical impetus of the 1960s, the field of interface in community-based art projects today increasingly involves commissioning institutions and organisations. Do bureaucratic frameworks stifle the organic quality of collective processes and scope of human interactions that are fundamental to this way of working? Are community-based projects



**Almagul Menlibayeva**, *Apple Blossom* (with Naomi Kashiwagi performing), production still, 2007. Photo: Almagul Menlibayeva

11. Interview with Mauricio Dias and Walter Riedweg, June 2008.

12. Foster, H, *The Return of the Real: The Avant-garde at the End of the Century*, The MIT Press, 1996, p197.



**Dias and Riedweg**, *Devotionalia*, video installation from 'based upon TRUE STORIES' exhibition, 23 January–30 March 2003, Witte de With, Center for Contemporary Art, 1997. Photo: Bob Goedewaagen

**Dias and Riedweg**, *Sugar Seekers*. Commissioned by: Liverpool Biennial International 04 in partnership with FACT Collaboration Programme and Tate Liverpool. Courtesy: Artes Mundi



**Gayle Chong Kwan**, *Core*, London Bridge Underground Station, 2006. Commissioned by: Platform for Art

commissioned by organisations/institutions afflicted by the ticking of boxes? In 1992, UK-based FACT, the Foundation for Art & Creative Technology, established their Collaboration Programme with the aim of enabling artists and community groups to develop projects that prioritised the role of participants as producers, rather than consumers of the moving image and new media. Laura Sillars, FACT's Head of Programme, emphasises the uniqueness of each context and project, and the creative dynamic of building informal relationships in a process of dialogue between artists, communities, funders, producers, etc. With regard to FACT's wider agenda around social and stakeholder outcomes, Laura clarified: "We don't have a tick box that we use to define how our projects will pan out. For example, we worked with young people and BBC Radio 3's Free Thinking Festival in 2006. The young people were from a group set outside the limits of regular society... two of the young people ended up going back into education after that project. That wasn't one of the social outcomes we had planned. We wanted them to feel they had a less defined, freer space in which to have conversations, but the fact that it had this wider impact obviously benefited them and us. FACT doesn't have massive meta-agendas, but obviously we work closely with the organisations that do and are entrusted with developing those huge agendas."<sup>13</sup>

Institutions and organisations, with their agendas, are a part of social and political realities. As evidenced by some of the articles in this collection, commissioned community-based projects can engender contexts of meaningful dialogue, and such contexts can provide artists with a critical space to develop ideas and working processes in a flexible responsive environment that encourages the creative and dialogic dynamic. Charles Danby explores a residency that Gayle Chong Kwan undertook at the invitation of Platform for Art in 2006, which subsequently evolved into a collaborative process with people who live and work locally to Southwark Underground Station in London. As Danby reveals, the initial dialogue between commissioning organisation and artist began as a mutually recognised point of "trust and opportunity" that paved the way for "lines of communication and sites of operation to emerge as a consequence of a working process", rather than pre-conceived outcomes. However, as in any collaborative undertaking, the artist must foster a critical awareness of multiple agendas, in order to avoid becoming complicit in a process that may simply affirm the status quo.

Expectations by the individuals and/or communities who have consented to participate, as well as the wider public, is also a complex interface. While many of the socially inclusive aims advocated in the name of community-based art practices in the mid-twentieth century now constitute mainstream political and cultural agendas in the UK, a misunderstanding can still persist of the artist as surrogate social worker. As Emma Safe points out, "the reputation of the artist as magical panacea to ease all social difficulties is a myth likely only to worsen community dissatisfaction when the artist-hero can't live up to expectation. Simply depositing highly regarded artists into community contexts in the hope that they will somehow revitalise the community is to misunderstand the idea of community collaboration."<sup>14</sup> Moving beyond the idea of artist as social reformer does not imply a reduction of the socially-engaged art project to one of purely aesthetic and symbolic outcomes. Artists are critical catalysts of dialogue and, as Kester emphasises, the interface of that dialogue includes the discursive field of public policies and debates, corporate ideologies, images and narratives perpetuated by the mass media that contribute to political and cultural meanings.<sup>15</sup> The possibilities of artists engendering profound challenges to constructed cultural and social dichotomies, and influencing wider actions and thinking, is as infinite as the creative process itself. Nevertheless, taking responsibility for the process, but understanding that social outcomes rely on nodes of interaction in the wider public realm that the artist does not control, correlates with a sample of contemporary artists' experience.

To abandon the objective of the modernist artwork that explains everything and accept the provisional nature of both the scenario of a community collaboration and its membership, as well as the path the process may take, can lead to the real potential of a dialogic work. The value of such a collaborative experience, for both artists and individuals in a 'community', lies in the embracing of the incompleteness of the collective process. Only then can the unique dynamics of a given context create conditions for exploring and evoking the complexity of humanity, and opportunities to listen to, and engage with, diverse worldviews. In an era marked by increasingly complex interfaces between individuals and communities on every level, social, political, economic and cultural, engaging with multifarious social contexts places

13. Email interview with Laura Sillars, FACT's Head of Programme, July 2008.

14. Safe, E, 'The Rise of the Young Community Artist (YCA)', *a-n Magazine*, January 2001.

15. Kester, G, 'Dialogical Aesthetics: A Critical Framework for Littoral Art', 1998, [www.variant.randomstate.org](http://www.variant.randomstate.org), p4.



art practice in the zones where some of that negotiation is taking place. Artists have the capacity to place themselves within the heart of a vital form of practice that fosters critical awareness and the cross-fertilisation of ideas and knowledge. Likewise, at a time when sustainability is a very real issue for artists and their practices, opening the field of engagement to wider contexts and discourses is to generate momentum toward wider networks of interconnection and exchange around ideas, concerns and ways of thinking and doing.

This essay and collection of six commissioned articles attempts to take a fresh look at the current terrain for collaborative art practices that prioritise strategies of exchange and dialogue with the complex social realities of our contemporary world, and local, as well as global, consciousness. It does not describe the entire field of creative and dialogic possibilities for such engagement, nor does it cover every aspect of the many debates about community-based art practices. However, the current social and political climate fraught in many instances by reactive closure and misinformation around political, cultural and social identities, provides an impetus and relevance to opening the discourse to further debate.

**Catherine Wilson**, BFA (Hons), Dip World Art, is a writer and artist based in London. She has written about contemporary visual art, world art and culture for publications in Europe and the Asia Pacific region, including *a-n Magazine*, *The Oxford Times*, *Artlink*, *Art & Australia* and *Art Asia Pacific*. In 2006, she responded to an invitation to work with a group of artists in Senegal, West Africa, which developed into an artist-led collaborative and community-based project in Dakar.

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**Gayle Chong Kwan**, *Hollow Earth*,  
Southwark Underground Station, 2006.  
Commissioned by: Platform for Art

## **Gayle Chong Kwan: Underground Exchanges** **a-n.co.uk September 2008**

The art practice of UK-based artist Gayle Chong Kwan explores histories and memory, often in relation to the senses, as well as rituals of exchange and trade. Following the public exhibition of Kwan's photographic work, *Cockaigne* (2004), in the vicinity of Southwark Underground Station, London, in 2006 she was invited to develop a community-based residency in the surrounding area by Platform for Art. Charles Danby explores how the artist developed avenues of exchange centred on relationships with food.

## **Risking Radio Nights** **a-n.co.uk September 2008**

In collaboration with Artangel, British artist David Blandy embarked on a community-based project, as part of its Interaction Programme, which explored West London's late night pirate radio culture. Rachel Lois Clapham addresses Blandy's interest in the project, and his collaboration with young people from the Avenues Youth Project in Queens Park, London, in the making of the documentary film, *Radio Nights* (2005).

## **Guyan Porter Residency 2006:** **Chandrasevana Creation Centre, Sri Lanka** **a-n.co.uk September 2008**

In 2006, British artist Guyan Porter began a two-month residency at the Chandrasevana Creation Centre, Sri Lanka, founded by the Hikkaduwa Area Relief Fund (HARF) following the tsunami which devastated the south of Sri Lanka. Kai-Oi Jay Yung investigates the challenges and complexity of the artist's engagement with a community and region facing multiple crises, and asks questions about the transformational value of art in such a context.

## **Central Asian Project** **a-n.co.uk September 2008**

Kathy Rae Huffman was Co-ordinating Curator of the Central Asian Project, a collaborative artistic exchange between England, Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, organised by Cornerhouse (Manchester), SPACE (London) and AsiaArt+ (Almaty, Kazakhstan) which occurred from 2006-2008. Her article explores the journey of the project and its participants from the first curatorial meeting to the international residencies that facilitated exchanges across cultures and communities.

## **Rachel Grant: Stoke-on-Trent** **a-n.co.uk September 2008**

Rachel Grant is a multi-media artist based in Stoke-on-Trent, who employs a personal, autobiographic approach to issues of identity and heritage. In 2006, Grant was awarded an Action Research Commission from Longhouse, an organisation that facilitates ways of bringing artists, communities and environments together. Charlie Levine addresses the relationship between the artist and her neighbourhood that informed the context of her project, and discusses issues of socially engaged art practice in relation to civic ambitions of 'community regeneration.'

## **Dias and Riedweg: Border Zones and Poetic Encounters** **a-n.co.uk September 2008**

The interdisciplinary art practice of Mauricio Dias and Walter Riedweg, who are based in Rio de Janeiro, centres on collaborative projects with communities and social groups often on the edges of mainstream society. They have worked with children living on the streets of Rio de Janeiro, international political refugees in Switzerland and prospective immigrants in Liverpool. Catherine Wilson addresses three of their projects since 1994, and some of the creative and social outcomes of their 'poetic fields of encounter.'

## **Social Space** **www.a-n.co.uk/future\_forecast August 2005**

Becky Shaw explores the practices of artists working in social space, highlighting a field of diverse philosophies, networks, strategies and engagement with the social realm.

## **The Rise of the Young Community Artist (YCA)** **a-n Magazine January 2001**

Emma Safe examines the role of contemporary community arts in Britain in relation to objectives of urban regeneration and social inclusion.

## Research references

### **www.fact.co.uk**

The UK-based Foundation for Art and Creative Technology, dedicated to the commissioning and presentation of film, video and new media art forms, works with UK and international artists. Its Collaboration Programme provides a framework for artists and community groups to work together, to develop "strategies that engage participants as producers rather than consumers", and supports artists' professional development in making new work and establishing "new contexts for presentation and critical reception."

### **www.longhouse.uk.com**

An organisation based in the West Midlands, Longhouse is dedicated to collaboration with artists who are interested in working in the public realm through engagement with a particular place or community. It provides an annual programme of commissioning opportunities for research, professional development and debate for artists based in the region.

### **www.littoral.org.uk**

A non-profit arts trust promoting new creative partnerships, critical art practices and cultural strategies in response to issues about social, environmental and economic change, Littoral supports conferences, exhibitions, projects, publications and research to propose creative solutions to real-life problems.

### **www.ixia-info.com**

ixia is a UK-based public art think-tank working with artists, policy makers and implementers in the public and private sector to provide guidance on the role of art in the public realm, aiming to identify and challenge restrictive practices. It supports research, new writing and training.

### **www.communityarts.net**

Community Arts Network is a programme of Art in the Public Interest (API), a US-based non-profit organisation. Its website is a platform for community arts news, documentation, theoretical writing, communications, research and educational information.

### **www.artfactories.net**

French organisation ART Factories is an international resource platform that aims to promote thinking, research and action in support of artistic practices that build relationships between community work, contemporary art and social change.

### **www.r-a-i-n.net**

Rain Artists Initiatives Network was set up by artists for artists to encourage cross-cultural dialogue and stimulate international artist initiatives between Africa, Asia, Latin America and Europe. The relationship between art and society is a key concern. Its website includes a directory of artists' initiatives and associations in countries such as Mexico, India, Brazil, Mali and Indonesia.

### **www.elephanttrust.org.uk**

The Elephant Trust offers modest grants in support of artists and small organisations aiming to realise unusual, imaginative and innovative work/projects "To bear in mind at all times an original, inquisitive, open-minded, generous and unshockable approach to art in all its forms with a bias towards the visual arts."