

ARTISTS MAKE CHANGE

Discussion Event #4

Identifying Needs in your Community & Making Change

Facilitated by Jhinuk Sarkar (Turf Projects)

Discussion Report

Tuesday 16th June 2020

In response to the 5 video case study presentations, we are holding a series of group discussions to explore the themes of the presentations in more detail. Identifying Needs in your Community & Making Change was a discussion facilitated by Jhinuk Sarkar, an illustrator and educator who is Head of Community and Accessibility at Turf Projects, and facilitates a community group who are an arts collective called MOSS.

Outset - The aims and intended areas to cover were:

- whether effective change can be made through embedded community practice
- the contexts and situations for artists seeking to make change within their own communities
- strategies and solutions for artists and practices seeking change
- the challenges facing artists & arts organisers working in this way

Thoughts emanating -

In this session, we used breakout rooms & a shared Menti board to discuss topics & questions raised by the video Case Study by **Sophia Niazi**. Not all of this discussion was recorded, so what follows are the key areas brought back into the main discussion with the group.

- How can artists' skills in envisioning alternative futures be taken more seriously by decision makers?
- How can we work in ways that are more embedded in communities?
- At this time of social distancing, how do we connect with those who are vulnerable, isolated and do not have access to the internet?
- How do we get to the heart of the issues, rather than providing distractions?
- How do we persuade communities in recognised areas of deprivation that art is going to help them, when they are skint and that was even before Covid-19?
- There are SO many barriers to working with artists, and right now it feels like an extra struggle because of the current political and health climate.

Breakout Rooms

Feedback from breakout room groups included questions & observations around:

- Building & maintaining trust with communities and how hard it is when you are parachuted in as an artist for a few months then are gone. Or similarly where you build a relationship with the community and you just cannot be around anymore (like under Covid 19 Lockdown).
- Are we as artists doing a lot of the work that should be done by services that are cut by austerity?
 - Artists filling in gaps in mental health provision, crisis-management etc - when real professional help in those areas is necessary.
 - Outsourcing community activities to artists, it may lead to a reduction in diversity of participation - as the majority of artists are white (and middle class).
- Artists are often expected to be instant experts in lots of fields other than the arts when working in community contexts
- Working in communities where there are really high levels of poverty it can be hard to justify the value of art - how to justify having the public money and what you are doing with it?
- It's not always about change, it's sometimes about continuity.
 - Small changes, shifts and working out from a community what is missing rather than going in thinking that 'something needs change' when we don't necessarily know that community or understand that community's needs.

- Adding on to the existing. Trying to embellish that and make it work better.
 - Consultation is key - find out what is wanted by asking - don't assume
- Physical / personal connections with communities is crucial - but in Lockdown, artists have been regularly asked to come up with instant innovative ways of accessing communities and carrying on community activities as a matter of course.
 - how can people engage when large amounts of community are deprived of equipment or internet access?
 - Also if you are working for people with a more sensory medium where screens are not a thing and that technology maybe won't work.
 - Difficulties in potentially quickly losing long-term built trust, through lack of engagement / communication / connections . Is there a way of measuring the impact of months of "withdrawn" community arts work following Lockdown?
 - Safe-guarding - there's no testing around these new models of working - and more harm than good can be done without proper training.
 - Who will look after the mental health of the artists?

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- When working in different local areas as an artist, is what we need to do 'community development' rather than art?
 - How are we thinking about the different types of resources and access? What do communities have access to (or not)?
 - What are the barriers for different people in different communities in taking part in art projects / activities ? (eg childcare provision, regularity of sessions , other types of barriers)
 - How to get to a point where your organisation has built a relationship with a community - or do people get tied up with one particular person in an organisation? What happens if that person leaves the organisation? What happens to the relationship? Is that tie lost?
 - Parachuting-in of artists is a problem - especially when funding is short term.
 - Focus on social interaction and the 'social' aspects of socially engaged practice? (eg hosting drop-ins for people in communities with no strings attached, the regularity of knowing when it is good to pop in)
 - How to effectively include the community - how to create effective contributions and engagement so the work isn't done to a community, but is instead done with/together.
 - It's useful to seek out case studies - to find out what works and what the challenges are, before you start your community project.
 - Communities can sometimes become 'commodities ' with a value to funders and stakeholders and artists - the activity can become an exchange of things rather than embedded activity - the community is 'used' sometimes for the wrong reasons.

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- Artists work / role should be taken more seriously by policy makers - but as an individual, there is maybe an advantage to being underestimated as it means you can slip into and work in the 'cracks ' - taking up the 'fertile ground' - growing activity, making provocations , subverting things .
 - Often working in communities you are suddenly expected to be an expert in legalities , consultation with people, environmental design and all sorts of facets that might come into play - that we are not necessarily expert at. More pressure to play these roles , when funding cuts mean actual roles have disappeared.
 - How do groups brought together through a project perceive themselves as a group (especially after the artist or initiator leaves)? How can the group become self-sufficient, so that when you leave, the skills and desire and commitment remain so the work can be carried on?

What resources are needed for effective community work?

- More accessible resources that I can use with my community groups to have open discussions about what is going on with Coronavirus and what is going on with Black Lives Matter.
- Community access to A Library of Things
- Hack Spaces
- A positive of lockdown might be that when community activity resumes , it will be with old methods (door knocking, one-to-one conversations and connections , small group actions) - less pressure to reach the whole community - less pressure to measure impact.
- Artists' mentors for community projects - someone to check in with who knows the work, or knows the community - to act as a support structure. People who have run similar projects who can offer advice. This would help relieve stress and anxiety, particularly at the start of a project.
 - An advisor, able to see and suggest different perspectives.
 - This works well when the advisor is part of the community - a link.
- Peer to Peer support amongst practitioners - Action learning sets or Self Care groups .
 - eg - Mad Artist Mutual Aid (The Vacuum Cleaner) - a resource-sharing WhatsApp group - which offers peer support - and a space to safely ask questions and get answers .
- There are lots of organisations that deal with arts health and wellbeing, but don't seem to be for the artists but more for the organisations . Artists' roles are changing - working more with communities than ever before - new ground for artists - and if untrained can lead to lots of mental health problems (especially when artists are working in isolation). Artists working in communities are an experiment.
- A useful resource would be in finding a way to streamline the available resources and advice for artists so that you can pinpoint what is right for you in the particular community context you're working in. All the links to advice are great - but how do you find the right ones?

Closing thoughts:

Our conversation today is just the tip of the iceberg - there are so many different facets, including the current situation we're in (Covid-19 lockdown period), new spaces we have never had to challenge before, but also how to learn from it and take ourselves out of it and think about what we can do to move forward.

With the example today from sharing all these resources with each other - there is so much being built up and changing over time - it can be overwhelming to keep track, so something about always consulting together as artists but not without communities. Because the community is always part of us.

We have had challenges around austerity, Coronavirus, gaps in resources, even self care as artists - all of these needing to be on the agenda - it's exhausting. It's important at this time to also remember to be kind to ourselves.