

## Tell Me Where You Live, Francoise Dupre

Transcript of paper delivered as part of an artists' panel at the Artist as Educator symposium, Ikon Gallery and University of Central England, Birmingham. Arts Council of England symposia: interrupt: artists in socially engaged practice, 2003.

### 1 Introduction

Underpinning my practice is my concern with the nature of the creative process and the condition of art production. My current work investigates the hand-made and the everyday and aims to celebrate home craft and the invisible and marginal art of making and creating in the everyday. I make objects, site-specific and context-based installations and temporary events. I work in many different kind of spaces in the studio and the gallery and in non-art spaces. With a wide range of projects in the UK and abroad, I am developing a model of practice that is dialogue-based and investigate ways of making art that come through the process of social interaction and creative collaboration with people and communities.

One project that has been instrumental in the development of my practice is *emplacements*, an on going artist led international context specific project. For the symposium I have chosen to talk about **Tell me where you live**, a project I realised in collaboration with young people, for *emplacements 2002*, St Petersburg. The project consisted of a series of artwork made in two stages and in two locations. First in St Petersburg at the Red Banner Knitwear Factory in August 2002 then at the Woodview Primary School in Birmingham in September 2002. The theme of the project was the city of St Petersburg and engaged with the concepts of place, journey and aim to facilitate cross-cultural experience. In St Petersburg, the project involved Olya Kononikhina education curator at the Centre for Museum Pedagogy and Children's Creativity of the State Russian Museum. In 2001 Olya and I had met and discussed possibilities of working together. For the city 300th anniversary, the Russian State Museum is hosting an international competition/exhibition *St Petersburg in children's art* at the Mikhailovsky Castle. I agreed to find a group of UK children to participate in the competition/exhibition and approached Gill Nicoll, then, education curator of Ikon Gallery with whom I had worked on previous projects. Instead of considering the children art competition/exhibition as a separate project I decided to make it part of my contribution to *emplacements*. With Ikon Gallery education assistant Andrew Tims and Woodview primary School art teacher Jane McGrown, we developed a school residency, a visit to the Vladimir Arkipov exhibition at Ikon gallery and a one day exhibition in Ikon Events Room. This stage of the project was funded by Birmingham City Council's Art Education Award. I must say here that the Birmingham stage of the project was made possible thanks to Ikon Gallery.

For the symposium I'll discuss **Tell me where you live** within the context of emplacements and in relation to my own practice. I am interested in developing a practice that operates inbetween cultural and social zones because it is a position that allows interaction with and between existing and recognised art institutions, and non-art spaces and communities. I do not consider this position as marginal but part of a rich family of socially engaged practices.

As a practising artist my experience of work in sites of learning is huge and diverse. Since the 70s I have contributed and led a wide range of art and education projects, schemes and courses. I have worked with a wide range of people and communities within and outside formal educational frameworks . First this was done simply to make a living then to subsidise my art practice.

For many years, the two aspects of my practice - the studio based and solitary activity of object making and the public based activity of working with people - remained in many ways separate practices which were rarely discussed together. I adopted this strategy because I wanted at the time to project a clearly identifiable practice in response to an art world that is deeply hierarchical. I eventually realise that my strategy was one of complaisance and compromise and that I needed to re-locate my practice and challenge its fixity. Today, the school, the gallery, the factory, the community centre are sites that are equally relevant to my practice. These sites are inhabited by different kinds of communities and what interests me is to create interaction with and between these communities, make art that shows the flow that exists between these locations and prod at the fences and prejudices that still separate them. The fact that I often work with education curators is not surprising. These are people who seem to

understand better what my work is about. They also have a unique and long termed involvement with local communities. I work with young people because it is a group with whom I feel confident and happy to work. Working creatively with young people in or outside school allows me to gain a special insight into a local community, this experience is extremely valuable when making work in response to a place. My work in school is education-based, after all this is the specificity of the site. The activities that I initiate and develop take place within an education framework. However it is a creative partnership which aims to bring to the school a creative experience that does not necessarily fits within pedagogical parameters.

I work on projects which are highly demanding and require a huge amount of commitments because their are long term, collaborative and nomadic and raise many issues: managerial, logistic, funding, sustainability, authorship, labelling.... These kind of conditions are challenging contexts for practitioners, participants, cultural and academic institutions, critics, and funding agencies.

Tell me where you live was realised in collaboration with young people as part of a large art based international project. It was a fragmented project with diverse geographical, cultural and social contexts: St Petersburg, Birmingham, school, textile factory, contemporary art gallery and State Museum. These different contexts and circumstances brought many expected challenges and demands. One issue, particularly relevant to this symposium, has been the nature of the project, its status and identity. Is it an education project? Is it art project? and How did it work within the wider context of *emplacements*? These are questions that I will attempt to answer here. They are important ones because they highlight some of the problematic and complexity of interfacing with institutions and communities. Indeed today, these are challenges that I have made part of my practice and consider means of engagements and dissent. I aim to develop my practice as one that transgresses the fixity of cultural and social boundaries.

## **2 *emplacements***

### **Background**

*emplacements* is an on-going, artist led and cross-cultural collaborative project created in 1997 by Roxane Permar and myself in response to our desire to initiate and realise context-specific events and develop and nurture multi-layered dialogues between artists, places and audiences. The fluidity of the project as a series of temporary events, reflects our concerns with processes rather than with finality.

Our first two events: *disEMplacements* and *relocation* took place in 1999 in London. In 2000 we organised our first event in St Petersburg in the historic site of *New Holland*. Following the success of *New Holland* and the development of strong links between UK and St Petersburg participating artists it was decided to continue working in St Petersburg and discussions around a major public event, to coincide with the city 300th anniversary in 2003, began. In 2001, Gail Pearce joined us to constitute the UK core team. A series of short visits to St Petersburg in 2001 and early 2002 strengthened existing partnerships and allow new ones to be formed. In 2002, *emplacements* returned to the city to realise its second event at the *Red Banner Knitwear Factory*, a working textile factory on Petrograd Island.

I do not have the time here to describe in details the ways in which we have developed *emplacements* project in St Petersburg. We have through the years sought, developed and nourished on going and long term dialogues and partnerships with UK and Russian institutions, individuals, artists and curators. The project structure continues to evolve and is unique because it is adapted to the cultural and economic context of St Petersburg and engages with cultural differences. It has been a long and sometime difficult and frustrating but nevertheless rewarding process.

### **The Red Banner Knitwear Factory**

From the 1st August 2002 and for three weeks, 20 artists from UK, Germany, France and Russia had access to various part of the Red Banner Knitwear Factory and were introduced to the factory stages of production and its archives. A disused floor, in the factory's 19th century building, was made available for the artists to use as studio and meeting place. It became known as the *atelier*.

Artists, individually or collaboratively, developed work in response to their experience of the factory, its history, environment, the people who work there, and its architectural significance, in particular the part of the factory, including its power station, designed by the architect, Erich Mendelsohn. A two day public event gave visitors and workers the opportunity to view work realised during the three weeks. It included installations of sculpture, video, sound, mixed media and photography.

*emplacements* events *New Holland* and *Red Banner Knitwear Factory* have raised issue integral to the city contemporary context of urban regeneration, labour history and current debates around the protection of historical industrial buildings. In St Petersburg the project has received wide television, radio and newspaper coverage in which these issues were highlighted.

Furthermore, at the time of the group's departure, the Director of the factory gave the artists the good news that the factory's future has been secured.

## **My contribution**

At the *Red Banner Knitwear Factory*, alongside the project *Tell me where you live*, I realised two temporary work *petrograd* and *gvozdika*. These works were not planned in advance but were made in direct response to the factory, its history and its people. At the factory I develop the three work concurrently.

*petrograd* was a site specific installation consisting of a series of small textile balls made with offcuts from factory knitwear and placed in one of the windows of the atelier. Participating artists and children of factory workers contributed to the piece. The installation evoked the ways the windows had been insulated with offcuts by the factory workers. I had planned to make 147 balls one for each year of the factory to recall the contribution the workers had made to the factory since its origin in 1855. By using offcuts I wanted to highlight the ways in which workers have been, even in Soviet Russia, discarded at the bottom of the industrial, economic and social ladder I also learnt that the factory offcuts were used and recycled to make rugs and it felt right to use the offcuts as material. The balls were *trapped* between the outside world and the atelier, an empty silent space with large oil stains and dangling electric cables. *petrograd* was a melancholic piece which evoked my sadness in seeing the factory in semi dereliction and under threat of closure. Unfortunately. I did not have the time to make the planned 147 but it did not seem to matter.

The second work was a temporary event *gvozdika* realised on the first public event day, to honour the factory workers who had died during the second world war I placed a bouquet of red carnations on the Factory war memorial located in the factory's garden next to the power station. All were in a great state of neglect. Following advise from Russian friends I chose red carnations because they are traditionally used for memorials and red is the colour of victory and celebration.

At the Red Banner Knitwear Factory, Olya Kononikhina realised in the atelier, a two day project with a group of local children (of factory workers). Her project included discussion about early 20th century Soviet Art and architecture, the Mendelshon building, images of soviet workers and the city of St Petersburg. To set the scene she created with her colleagues from the Russian State Museum, an installation that provided the context for discussion and creative activities. It is within this context and the bigger context of *emplacements* at the Red Banner Knitwear Factory that the project *Tell me where you live* was introduced and its first stage realised. Following Olya's project, a smaller group of older children continued to visit the factory and made with me, for the children of Woodview Primary School in Birmingham, a large collage about the city of St Petersburg. The collage was about their city and included drawings and photographs of their neighbourhood on Petrograd Island. Videos of the local school, parks and shops were also made. Through the process of realisation of the project and dialogues with the children, I was introduced to the factory's neighbourhood and a very different kind of St Petersburg. My understanding and experience of the factory and its locality became very special indeed and informed my other two work *petrograd* and *gvozdika*.

For *emplacements*, access to the factory had been carefully negotiated and remained limited through the duration of the project. It must be said that without Olya Kononikhina and the Russian State Museum it would not have been possible for children to stay and work in the factory. The partnership with Olya was

therefore crucial. On a professional level it was also interesting for us to observe and discuss our ways of working and engaging with young people. For the young people and myself it was also a new creative and cultural experience.

Once the collage was finished some of the children continued to visit the atelier and helped setting up the two day public event, developing further their contribution to *emplacements* project. *Tell me where you live* was shown within the context of the 2 day public event and was considered as an integral part of my contribution to *emplacements*. The fact that the collage had been made with children was raised and discussed. At the beginning of the 3 week project participating artists introduce their practice and discussed their ideas for work for the Red Banner Knitwear Factory. Therefore *emplacements* artists understood the processes involved in my practice and were happy for the collage to be exhibited in the same space as their own work. It must be said that artists who participate in *emplacements* events are chosen because they are sympathetic to *emplacements* philosophy of inclusiveness.

For stage 2 of *Tell me where you live* I worked at Woodview Primary School with class 5. We made a series of art works for the St Petersburg, international children's art exhibition. The children made a large wall installation and a map of St Petersburg in response to a wide range of cultural and visual materials I had brought back from St Petersburg. They included souvenirs, postcards, photographs, slides, maps, phrase book, dictionary, videos, the collage made at the Red Banner knitwear Factory and gifts from the Russian children. With the project the children discovered the city of St Petersburg, its people, language and culture. Before being sent to St Petersburg the work created by class 5 was exhibited for a day in Ikon Gallery Events Room, alongside the Russian collage made at the Red Banner Knitwear Factory, my video documentaries about St Petersburg and *emplacements* and the Russian souvenirs and gifts. The event was further contextualised by a series of talks led by class 5 to visiting pupils and teachers from Woodview Primary School. *emplacements* context was acknowledged in Ikon gallery publicity leaflet and newsletter.

### **3 Challenge and dissent**

For me, making work that engages with a site, its history, people and location can only be done through the process of social interaction and creative collaboration with people and communities. This is why for my work at the Red Banner Knitwear Factory I chose to initiate and develop work with a group of young local people. *Tell me where you live* gave me the opportunity to engage with a locality and a community in a way that I would not have been able to do if I had not developed a dialogue with this group of local children.

In my introduction I stated that the work I create in a school, a factory and a gallery, are, in equal measure, part of my practice and that working simultaneously in these different places is about creating dialogues with and between these communities. However we all know that art projects associated with education and children are given a low status by most contemporary art and academic institutions. This is a situation I am very aware of in relation to *Tell me where you live*. Here, you might say Why should you care? it is true that at the end of the day what is most important is the project and its participants. However this is a position that I cannot take because I do not see my practice as marginal, but consider my work as part of contemporary art practices. Indeed, part of my practice is to develop strategies which deal with the prejudices that effect my practice. Underpinning my practice is my concern with the nature of the creative process and the condition of art production. My practice is a messy, unfixed and transient process and I believe that there are many locations where art making can take place and this include sites of learning. This is why I am happy to locate my practice in school. Indeed the Birmingham stage of *Tell me where you live* was funded, realised and exhibited within an art education context. Unfortunately this is a context that is irrelevant to mainstream contemporary Fine Art practice. However with *Tell me where you live* what made the education context an integral part of my work and relevant to the art world was *emplacements* which is the main and overall context of the project and I made sure this context was acknowledged at all stages of project. This contextualisation prevented *Tell me where you live* from marginalisation. The project flourished and transcended the prejudices attached to education based projects. I believe this was possible because of the nomadic and transient nature of *Tell me where you live*. The project did not belong to one field of activity but evolved in and out and between different cultural and social sites.

This project has been very important for my practice because it has helped to conceptualise and develop strategies that allow my practice to transgress the categories of art production and challenge the existing and fixed institutional structures. The challenge here is not one of confrontation but infiltration and interconnection.

Today, I am developing a decentering practice that aims to break the boundaries between *high* and *low* culture through the development and realisation of long term, nomadic and independent projects. My forthcoming project *de fil en aiguille....* to be launched at the Irish Museum of Modern Art in September 2003 will continue what I began with emplacements that is to create and develop a creative context with interconnected sites of practice. A context where a practice in sites of learning is considered as an integral part of the creative process.

#### **4 Postscript**

Unfortunately the work made at Woodview Primary School was not selected for the exhibition at the Mikhailovsky Castle in St Petersburg. Alternative venues are being considered included the Red Banner Knitwear Factory. I plan to go back to Woodview Primary School to work with the pupils on a project about their School and the city of Birmingham.

*Françoise Dupré*

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