

Animating Communities

The Works and Afterthoughts

The works

So, Surrey's premise is that art can help us make sense of the world, thereby creating a climate in which we can all engage more actively in society. Art and artists can empower individuals to respond creatively to where they live and engage them in creating happier communities.

'Till the river ceases to flow – Elmbridge (Elmbridge Borough Council)

Playwright Richard Conlon and singer-songwriter Roshi Nasehi are creating an ensemble piece with the Elmbridge Community Choir. The piece is based on the River Thames, which runs parallel to the boundary of the borough and has had an obvious impact on the lives of those who have worked and lived along its banks. This piece combines song, poetry, narration, dialogue, recorded speech and projected visuals. It is inspired by reflections and stories offered by members of the choir, council officers and residents of the borough, through appeals in local arts publications, the local press and writing workshops. Visits to local museums and schools have raised the awareness of the project. Rehearsals of the first pieces have started. The artists will complete the first draft by the end of November and the final work (scores and words) will be handed over to the choir by the end of the year. The ensemble piece, which will belong to the choir, will be premiered in April 2010 and be recorded on CD or as a podcast.

Beneath the Surface – Longmead Estate (Epsom & Ewell Borough Council)

Visual artist Janetka Platun led the creation of an archive of found artifacts charting the recent history of the estate. Objects found by residents and school children on guided walks with metal detectors were curated and put in display boxes, as archaeological finds would be, alongside related stories told in response to the objects by some residents. This work explores ideas around what has value and what has not, through a process of discovery and exploration, creating parallels with the processes involved in making art. The artifacts were exhibited outdoors under a marquee on the site of a demolished pub on 1st October for the community to come and see an archaeological history of their surroundings. The display boxes will tour the Longmead Community Centre, Blenheim School and empty shops around the town. The artist has been recruited by Surrey Arts to lead the Imaginary Pod project in Epsom following her involvement with Creative Communities.

Ash Bestiary – Guildford (Guildford Borough Council)

Printmaker Andrew Morrison has put together an Ash Bestiary, recording the animals found all

around the area on shop signs, statues and public spaces. The bestiary was completed during an Ash Animal Week festival on October half term at the Old Methodist Chapel. Other activities included making print-based kites for flying in the park and a number of 'subversive' local actions related to the bestiary, such as taking out library books about animals on the same day or print and distribute beer mats with the animals from the bestiary. The bestiary will be exhibited in a shop window on the high street at a later stage. One aim of the Ash Animal Week was to support the local vicar in turning the deconsecrated Methodist chapel into a local arts centre where the Creative Communities programme might support a funding application.

Loud & Proud – The Goodwyns, South Dorking (Mole Valley District Council)

Playwright Richard Conlon and signer-songwriter Roshi Nasehi have set up a community choir, who offered their second performance at the opening of Arts Alive in Dorking on 26 September. They sing a mixed repertoire of contemporary songs (jazz, soul, popular, world and folk) and pieces created by the community under the guidance of both artists. The choir will be recording a CD in the autumn. The lead artist is currently mentoring one member of the choir to take over as leader once So, Surrey is completed. The local Arts Development Officer is looking at financial support options for the New Year.

Memory Machine – Addlestone (Runnymede)

Sound artist Simon McCorry created a sound and visual installation which was housed at Chertsey Museum in November. The installation featured sound and footage taken by a group of young people about their life in Addlestone, including interviews with elderly residents about changes that happen in Addlestone and surroundings in the course of living memory. The project benefited from the support of the Addlestone Community Association and the Runnymede Historical Society. The film footage combines interviews with a collage of images of the locality and music.

Sunbury Common (Spelthorne Borough Council)

Puppet maker Polly Beestone held an Arts Week at Kenyngton Manor Primary School, which culminated in a tea party, a procession and puppet performances for children and elderly residents to share stories together. The children created a clock tower/apple tree/postbox installation inspired by the Sunbury Clock Tower and performed some of the elderly residents' recollections with puppets they made during Arts Week. The local Arts Development Officer is currently

compiling feedback and discussing legacy options with some of the community stakeholders. One idea is to create postcards of the puppets and distribute them in the borough.

The Way We Play, The Way We Care – Caterham (Tandridge Leisure)

Theatre artist Beth Wood and filmmaker Mark Levermore are creating a community film on the theme of The Way We Play, The Way We Care. The film involves children and elderly residents, mixing recollections and re-enactment. Filming and creative activities took place during the October half term and should be completed by the New Year. The film will be screened at the next edition of the Caterham Festival in June 2010. The festival, which had its first edition last June, was partly spurred by early talks of Creative Communities at the beginning of 2009.

Toolbox – Haslemere (Waverley Borough Council)

Printmaker Andrew Morrison and users of the High Lane Community Centre have recorded Haslemere through its traders' tools with prints, photographs and stories. They created a handbound book of tools-based prints in a limited edition which was launched at the Haslemere Museum on 3 November with a talk and book-binding workshops. One of the books will be kept at the museum as part of the legacy of this project while the High Lane Community Centre will continue running a print-making group, with the support of the Arts Development Officer. The artist is exploring the idea of travelling to Syria on a tools trail, following the involvement of a Syrian rug maker based in Haslemere.

10 photos – Goldsworth Park East / Lakeview (Woking Borough Council)

Visual artist Janetka Platun has created a collection of photographs taken by residents and expressing their sense of place or belonging within the estate through digital and Polaroid. The photographs are collated into two books: one large publication which includes all the photographs taken and which is now at the community centre; the other publication is a smaller book of selected photographs printed in multiple copies for participants and residents. Both books were launched in October with an indoor projection of the photographs and a community celebration event. The artist is currently looking at a new collaboration with that community.

The artists

Rather than look for ‘community artists’, we sought professional artists with an established arts-based practice outside of community work, who had significant experience in working within a community setting and of facilitating participants’ creativity through workshops and other arts-based activities. Selected artists had both experience of, and interest in, collaborating with other artists from similar or other fields of work, were open to developing their own practice through community engagement and had a demonstrable ability to engage with a wide range of people.

As part of their remit, artists-in-residence were required to map the skills and experience available in their host community and to draw upon them. They were also at liberty to call upon the skills of local or fellow artists to make their project happen. Artistic quality was ensured by the implementation of a strong framework supporting artists to do the best work they could in accordance with the original brief. Artists-in-residence were matched with a community; preferences expressed by artists and communities in terms of type of group and art forms were taken into consideration in the matching process. Residencies lasted for up to 35 days and included consultation through workshops and other arts-based activities, professional development days for artists and meetings.

Andrew Morrison

Andrew studied Illustration at the University of Leicester and then printmaking at Buckingham-Chilterns University. For many years now he has combined days of creating his own prints and books with running workshops, lecturing and working on community arts projects and on artists’ residencies. In 2005 Andrew co-founded *Two Wood Press*, letterpress and relief printers in Gloucestershire – for him an antidote to computer design through hand-made, physical printing. His work has been shown in many exhibitions in this country, as well as venues around the world including Mexico, Spain and the Netherlands, and is held in many collections, including the Tate Gallery.

Janetka Platun

For the past twelve years Janetka has been working as a professional artist making mixed media, photographic and installation art works. In addition to her own practice she works with young people and adults, devising and facilitating original approaches to making art. Recent

projects include *Message in a Bottle* at Brockwell Lido and *Even Better Together* at Gasworks. Janetka enjoys working with new and diverse groups of people and likes getting to know neighborhoods where she works.

Richard Conlon

Richard is a professional playwright, workshop leader and director. He has been creating new work for all sorts of casts for twenty five years. Richard reckons that if he had one useful skill to bring to the Creative Communities project it is his faith in the fact that throughout the process someone was bound come up with a better way of fulfilling the brief than he ever could. He understood his role as a writer who is being asked not to write, but to find new, surprising, delightful and simple ways for a community to express a sense of itself.

Roshi Nasehi

Born in Wales to Iranian parents, Roshi is a singer-songwriter, composer and teacher. She is becoming well known performing her own evocative songs alongside some of the Iranian songs she was brought up listening to. She is regularly invited to play at some of London's most exciting venues, often with her band Pars Radio. They have just released their debut album, *The Sky and The Caspian Sea*. Roshi was Guest Artist with the London Philharmonic Orchestra's Open Ear Ensemble and performed at the spirit level of the Festival Hall in 2007. She also works as a workshop leader for a variety of organisations.

Simon McCorry

Simon is a composer, musician and sound designer. He studied the cello from a young age and read Philosophy at Durham University. During the 1990s, Simon played bass guitar in various bands and gained experience in studio technology. In recent years he has refocused on music technology and collaborated on creating installations with visual artists – including @MASS with Kieran Crowder – and moved into composition and sound design for theatre. He has also created an interactive sound sculpture and worked on sound design and composition for short films.

Polly Beestone

Polly trained in puppetry at the Central School of Speech and Drama. Since graduating, her work has involved creating puppets for theatre and enthusing all kinds of people to create their

own. Polly is passionate about working collaboratively with diverse groups because she enjoys the energy and ideas that fuse together from people's skills and experiences. She often uses a narrative as stimulus for her work and loves the opportunity to find out about peoples' lives and hear their stories. Her work is really varied and has included lots of weird and wonderful things such as negotiating giant eggs around paper mazes, making monsters on top of cars and filming newspaper people eating jelly.

Beth Wood

Beth is Outreach Director at the Harlequin Theatre in Redhill, where she devises and leads an extensive programme of primary and secondary school workshops and directs community projects. She is the Artistic Director of ACT, an integrated company who works out of the Harlequin touring plays to schools. Recent shows include *Jason and Medea*, *The Tempest* and *Cymbeline*. She is an Associate of Four S, programming active learning sessions for Key Stage 3 and GCSE English and Drama. She also works for Longman, writing the drama activities for their Shakespeare texts. Beth has led consultancy work for the Arts Council England and other arts organisations and was for 12 years Artistic Director of Theatre Exchange.

Afterthoughts

We are proud to have created original art works for the communities involved, which are both participatory in their making and artistically strong. Communities were engaged in the conception and the realisation of their art work through artists-in residence leading consultation, workshops and other arts activities open to all who wanted to take part. Community involvement was also encouraged by the early involvement of community leaders, community development workers and wardens, other departments in local authorities such as Youth Services or Museums and Libraries, or local societies. Setting up the projects as open-ended 'residencies' meant that participants and stakeholders had a genuine say in the nature of the activities. Artists taking the lead on delivering those residencies made the work more rooted in their respective locality as the work was a direct response to the immediate surroundings. Trusting artists in leading on the delivery of the work encouraged them to strive towards artistic excellence as well as ensuring true community participation. An open-ended brief is a good tool for participation. While it makes early advocacy challenging, it does provide a real opportunity for true participation from

all involved: participants, arts officers, stakeholders, artists.

Creative Communities confirmed to us that real community engagement requires a lot of time and personal investment to have an impact. Engagement is based on trust between artists, participants, stakeholders and community leaders, and trust takes a long time to build.

Leadership is similarly vital for community work. The programme involved many people, which sometimes created confusion about roles and responsibilities. Roles need to be clearly defined and distributed to avoid slip ups and frustrations. Good, constant communication is therefore essential to the success of community projects.

Given time, we believe that the programme will, further the aims of each of the delivery organisations in developing a more sustainable model for providing participatory arts to communities across the county.

By Céline Gagnon, Creative Communities Co-ordinator¹



¹ Céline Gagnon was Creative Communities Co-ordinator at Farnham Maltings, where her main role was to deliver the programme of nine community-based arts residencies led by professional artists. She also launched unravel, a festival of knitting, talks, workshops and yarns, in February 2009 and led a cultural leadership programme for the Waverley Creative Alliance funded by the Cultural Leadership programme. Previous roles have included being seconded to the Creative Innovation Unit at the Southbank Centre, Cultural Attaché for the Québec Government Office in London and Administrative Secretary and co-founder of the Centre for Québec Studies at the University of Leicester.