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**Colour Matching the Chameleon: Identity in the Information Age.**

By Peter Dunn of The Art of Change.

*In a world of uncontrolled, confusing change, people tend to regroup around primary identities: religious, ethnic, territorial, national.. In a world of global flows of wealth, power, and images, the search for identity, collective or individual, ascribed or constructed, becomes a fundamental source of social meaning.. Identity is becoming the main, and sometimes only, source of meaning in a historical period characterised by widespread destructuring of organisations, delimitation of institutions, fading away of major social movements, and ephemeral cultural expressions. Meanwhile global networks of instrumental exchanges selectively switch on and off individuals, groups, religions, and even countries, according to their relevance in fulfilling the goals processed in the network, in a relentless flow of strategic decisions.*

Manuel Castells, *"The Information Age: Economy, Society and Culture, Volume 1, The Rise of the Network Society, P3*, Blackwell 1996.

The construction of identities uses building materials from history, geography, biology, productive and reproductive institutions, the apparatus of power and religious revelations, from collective memory and personal fantasies. We rearrange these building materials according to social influences and cultural projects rooted in the social structures and time/space co-ordinates we occupy. The crucial issue is how these identities are constructed, by whom and for what purpose.

Castells distinguishes 3 main areas of collective identity building:

**1. Legitimising identity** - by dominant institutions or power bases to extend and rationalise their domain vis a vis social actors (e.g. Nationalism)

**2. Resistance Identity** - grounded in opposition to the rationalisations of domination - in positions/conditions that are perceived as marginal, devalued or stigmatised by the dominant legitimising means. Identity built on principles

defined as a polarisation from, but in relation to, the dominant forms of legitimisation.

**3. Project identity** - often grows out of resistance identity, building a new identity that redefines a position (e.g. 'I'm black and I'm proud', 'glad to be gay') and by doing so, seeks to transform the whole structure of society or an institution

In relation to our own practice, firstly as the Docklands Poster Project back in the 80s - as part of a campaign - we were primarily involved in Resistance Identity, though at times beginning to move towards Project Identity by constructing alternatives. As *The Art of Change* however, our emphasis has shifted to the transition from Resistance Identity to Project Identity, to try where possible to create new models.

Issues of personal identity may be complex enough, but any social practice is about negotiating spaces for the interface of a range of identities; personal, group, and variegated supra- groupings. In order to understand the complex relationships that might emerge from this it is necessary to have a sense of the bigger picture, especially at this moment when these identities are undergoing rapid transformations due to many factors, local and global.

In most industrial societies Project Identity was constructed from, or in relation to, civil society (and its Legitimising Identity) - e.g. Socialism was founded on the Resistance Identity of the labour movement, on roles and functions inscribed within the capitalist structure. In the transition to the globalised network society, the construction of subjects at the heart of social change takes a different route. Subjects are constructed less and less around roles defined in relation to contemporary 'civil societies' (using the fiction of the nation state as its Legitimising Identity) *because the societies and roles defined by them are themselves in the process of dis-articulation and disintegration.*

What we seem to be witnessing during this transition is a prolongation of Resistance Identities. Meanwhile the mainstream Legitimising Identities are being redefined, deconstructed and continuously transformed as a result of globalisation. If Resistance Identity does not have a global dimension, then it will become stranded and tossed in the turbulent eddies of globalisation as it rushes

by. With the possible exception of a small elite of geopoliticians and transnational economists, many people across the globe resent the loss of control over their lives, their jobs, economies, governments, countries, environment, and ultimately over the fate of the planet. It is essential therefore that the local is linked to the global. The old adage - 'Think global, act local' - still holds true, but with the addition of - 'and communicate globally'.

We have so far painted a somewhat gloomy picture of the effects of technology and globalisation upon identity. However, history shows that resistance does eventually confront domination, empowerment acts against powerlessness, and alternative projects challenge the legitimation of dominion. People around the planet increasingly see the new global order as global disorder; even the powerful find themselves powerless.

Anyone who knows anything about our work at The Art of Change, or our previous incarnation as the Docklands Poster Project, will know that we don't have a rosy view of a future dominated by the increasing globalisation of capital. However it might be useful to look at some of the positive effects of technology and globalisation for a moment. For the first time (at least since industrialisation), culture - as the symbolic processing of meaning and communication - is integral to the creation of a new social and economic infrastructure. To quote Castells again, " There is a specially close linkage between culture and the productive forces in the informational mode of development... (and) modes of development shape the entire realm of social behaviour.. it follows that we should expect the emergence of historically new forms of social interaction, social control and social change<sup>1</sup>". In short, culture will be the main arena where the forces which shape our culture will interact in conflict or collaboration. And we - as shapers of cultural forms - like it or not, will be implicated.

There are opportunities as society moves out of the fetters of industrialisation. It should no longer be necessary to occupy the narrow boxes of time and space organised and encultured around industrial production processes; to work from 9-5, to travel en-mass into large overcrowded conurbations on overloaded transport systems, where these tightly packed physical spaces leave enormous ecological footprints which are ultimately unsustainable.

Artists in the post-industrial culture can leave behind the constraints of Modernism - industrialisation's cultural child - dispense with the narrow boxes of style and hierarchies which squeezed out diversity, downgraded crafts and skills, pictorial narrative forms, anything non-western or related to popular culture (unless reprocessed and repackaged in a very particular way). We can of course retain what we perceive to be the useful things that emerged from Modernism. To some extent this is already happening: our culture is being revitalised by not only by the forms, but the processes and concepts of other cultures. We are witnessing a beginning in the growth of diversity, new fusions of the craft based, hand made, and emerging technologies. A crossover between older technologies, including the photographic, with new digital forms. This may well create a huge increase in post-gallery art. We do not mean galleries as spaces will disappear, although what goes in them will diversify quite considerably. The dominance of an institutionalised system with its focus on the gallery as marketplace will however be shaken. Those historically specific modes of art transaction, meritocracy, and economy, will become even more specialised and less significant to the mainstream of culture. Post-gallery work is already beginning to create new relationships between the local and the global, and - along with a new wave of cultural theorists - are beginning to recognise that new forms of communication will radically shape the development of our culture.

Issues of audience, identity, engagement - the interface between public and private - are not fixed and cannot be addressed by simple formulas. They are problematised, complex and changing - particularly with the effects of globalisation, new communications technology to name just two factors. It is vital for us at The Art of Change to regard each project afresh while constantly re-assessing our experience and over-arching principles, through both theory and practice. As we have said, a critical practice is not simply about a critique of what is, the point is to construct new models, to begin to create stepping stones in the pathway to a different future. Or, as a very famous and now somewhat discredited old philosopher once said, it's not enough to describe the world, the point is to change it!

## **Strands of Practice**

I will outline a number of projects as an example how this approach may become manifest in practice, not so much as a description of the projects themselves but more to give a sense of how the specificity of practice may shape strands of exploration within a continuum of change.

The first strand began a shift from a Resistance to Project Identity approach, from billboards to cyberspace. The project, ***Changing Places*** (1995-6), became a nexus point in this shift. It came out of a series of billboard projects, displayed in East London during a period that was particularly fraught with racial tension, laying the ground for exploring identities in a critical but not a didactic or Resistance approach which characterised a lot of anti-racist work at that time. It was a collaboration between ourselves, a secondary school on the Isle of Dogs in London's Docklands, and the Tate Gallery. We had worked with this school before. It is in a tough area with a high proportion of minority cultures who, at the time, were under a sustained attack from the British National Party. The Tate approached us to do some work based on their collection, involving young people from 'our community'. We decided quite early that, if we were going to make this project work, we would have to get the young people - some of whom had never been to a gallery in their lives - to 'change places' with the artists whose work they were looking at; to find a way to make it their own.

Our initial thoughts about working with the Tate gallery collection revolved around the fact that it is Euro-centric through its historic focus on British Art and its more recent Modernist collection. While Modernism in its various forms borrowed heavily from the aesthetics of the cultural 'other' - Cubism being a classic example - the critical emphasis on Formalism maintained a 'correct distance'<sup>2</sup> from the social, economic or political context of that other which is not allowed to contaminate the purity of the (artistic) field. Our main concern was how the young people we were working with - with backgrounds rooted in diverse cultures, many non-western - might relate to the work in the Tate in a way that was meaningful and empowering. With them we explored issues of 'place', Britishness, the cultural meanings of death and regeneration. We push-pulled the pictorial conventions of the Western Tradition, both during the process of *Changing Places* and in the resulting image *Awakenings* which used digital imaging technology.

This project offered the possibility of bringing together a number of elements central to our practice. The first was the use of the creative process as a vehicle to allow people to move from present circumstances to future possibilities - to use the Tate Gallery's collection not so much as works of art to be appreciated but as a rich source of material to feed the imaginations of participants. By putting themselves in the shoes of the creators, the collection became the material through which to 'dream', to visualise and concretise possible futures. Much of our work starts with a process that can involve people in a variety of ways - a drawing together of issues and experiences that is wider than the knowledge of any one individual and roots the work firmly in the communities from which it stems. For us it is important that this process culminates in the production of an artwork - the visual power of the product is an important part of the empowering process - for participants see *and have confirmed* that they have contributed something they can feel proud of. Digital imaging is an ideal medium for this. It enables us to combine a range of disparate material, whether 2-D or 3-D, either by direct scanning or photographs. We can work with whatever scale and media are appropriate for the situation and, most importantly, draw on particular skills and interests in a range of participants.

Students visited the gallery and initially chose a work that they had a gut response to. After identifying elements that signified social and historical position, including race, culture and gender, the images were copied using traditional media but a single significant item was changed to reflect their own identity. They started this process individually then divided into small groups to work on a larger scale using a variety of media, this time keeping only the *formal structure* of the work and re-casting all of the iconography in terms of themselves, their cultures and their environment. This allowed the students to situate themselves more clearly in relation to the historical and social framework within which the paintings were made.

### **Awakenings**

Stanley Spencer's monumental 18' x 9' *Resurrection, Cookham* was chosen for the final phase. There were a number of reasons for this. From the beginning we had wanted to make a large-scale work involving the whole group in a way that would allow each individual a clearly identified role. Physically and compositionally Spencer's *Resurrection* contains a 'jig saw' of discrete elements, and the numbers of people represented meant that all those involved in the project - pupils, teachers, artists, and Tate personnel - could be included. Secondly, the artistic tradition of 'The Resurrection', as a 'moment of rebirth' set in some unspecified future, is frequently

used to explore contemporary values, both as critique and an embodiment of aspiration. It is of course also a celebration. *Awakenings* was chosen as the title for the final work, not only to remove it from a purely Christian interpretation but to root it in the personal experience of the young people involved, who were poised at the beginning of their new life as adults<sup>3</sup>.

Spencer's work revolves around a celebration of *place* - Cookham - and the *local narratives* of that place<sup>4</sup>. Much of our work explores how local narratives provide specificity to broader and more general themes and issues that affect our lives. Brecht has said that all the great issues of human experience are enacted upon local stages. This idea tied in perfectly with the initial aims of our project and reflected very much the distinctive sense of place that the Isle of Dogs seems to generate for those living there. There were also interesting correspondences between Spencer's 'place' and ours. Both are joined by the Thames, a river of time from the early part of the Century to its latter period, and from West to East. Spencer's Cookham, to the West of London, is an island created by irrigation and navigation channels during the agrarian revolution; an island of rural English village life threatened by encroaching industrialisation and the changes following in the wake of the First World War. The Isle of Dogs, in East London, became an island through industrialisation and the building of the docks. Its urban communities are threatened by a post-industrial climate of unemployment combined with the physical and social dislocation of a major redevelopment.

Spencer's work also celebrates the pictorial values developed during the early Italian Renaissance but also incorporates 'precious gifts' from Africa. The centre section of the painting depicts African figures rising out of baked earth, in what looks like a boat, bearing mysterious objects. Spencer's brother in law, also featured in the painting close by, was an Anthropologist and mounted one of the first exhibitions of African Art in Britain. We interpreted this as important cultural influences from 'afar'. We asked pupils about such influences in their own lives - some knowledge or wisdom passed through their families bringing information and insight from elsewhere, whether from the past or another place - if there were objects associated with this. For this group, these influences were not African but Bengali, Chinese, Irish and Greek. For all those involved, *Awakenings* became a celebration of another fusion: a remaking of 'Englishness' that is not a muddy multiculturalism but the variegated richness of cultural difference.

Students were taken through a process of imaginatively rethinking different aspects of the painting in their own terms. For example we asked what their families or relatives might do with their body if they died. How might they commemorate their life? What images would *they* choose to be remembered by? If they awoke from the dead, what would be the first thing they would do? Where would they like to come back to, where would they feel most 'at home'? They each took a section to re-make as their 'own space' as well as contributing to shared parts of the work. Clay was chosen as the medium for re-making the 'tombs' and commemorative plaques, while batik was used for some of the foliage, textures and 'soft' materials. Photographs were taken in a temporary photographic studio set up in the school. Participants were asked to take up a pose in keeping with the 'space' they had created for themselves and what they imagined they would be doing there. We used synchronised flash and a medium format camera with a Polaroid back so they could check if the pose was right before taking the final shot to film. They took this themselves using a squeeze-ball trigger. The final work was compiled on computer. Image construction was complex both on a technical and compositional level. The basic structure of Spencer's composition is retained but pushed and pulled so that the different colours and icons, the photographic imagery, proportions, tones and textures still maintain the overall balance of the composition. The work represented a fusion of elements of high art and popular culture, new technology and more traditional representations of space and volume that are part of the western tradition, together with the forms and signifiers of other traditions. The young people, through practice, deconstructed and reconstructed many diverse identity signifiers, not only in relation to what they were producing but in the works they had engaged with. *Awakenings* was displayed as a 13ft x 7ft Cibachrome print at the Tate Gallery, together with examples of work in progress and some of Spencer's working drawings, from 9th May 95 - February 96. It has since been purchased by the London Borough of Tower Hamlets to hang in the Town Hall, near the entrance to the Isle of Dogs.

The approach developed in this project evolved through a series of other works, the most recent being *Momentos* (1999), commissioned by the Art Gallery of Ontario to create a website project for teenagers in four high schools in Toronto. The project took as its point of departure a major exhibition of the paintings of Cornelius Krieghoff, a 19<sup>th</sup> Century artist who was instrumental in creating the visual signifiers of Canadian Identity at that time. Forged as it was from mainly European immigration, many of these signifiers still remain powerful in the cultural psyche of Nationhood

today, despite the many culturally diverse communities of non-European origin that form the population today. Kieghoff was also a key figure in the formation of Native American (mis)representations. The work which explored current Canadian identities, resulted in a set of virtual postcards which can be used to send messages across the globe. The project was also designed to create transferable materials for Ontario's new National Curriculum. While both these projects were commissioned by galleries, those between were not, resulting in billboards, websites and three-dimensional works in public environments. One strand of this approach is being developed and broadened out for the creation of content for the National Grid for Learning in Britain under the title of *Unlocking the Grid* - unlocking the potential of ICT using the arts and a cross curricular approach.

Another strand has developed out of the *Wymering Public Arts Project*, Portsmouth: a series of seven related artworks using the focus of Agenda 21 — which came out of the Rio Earth Summit - to create an environment that projects the history, identity, desires and aspirations of the people of Wymering. This project has been described in detail elsewhere<sup>5</sup>, suffice it to say that the model of involvement developed in working with a community to create a physical and cultural space for themselves has led to our thinking about a new approach to exploring the use of public space within the context of a network society — the *Global Town Square* .

The ancient Roman *Forum* was a place of debate, of interaction; a crucible of citizenship . It was also a beautiful physical space. The *Global Town Square* takes this concept into the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, combining the physical and the virtual, the local and the global. The development of this initiative involves co-ordinated programme of work that will build on the success of the *Futuretown*<sup>6</sup> initiative nation-wide and draw upon the government's new proposals about the introduction of citizenship into the school curriculum. The programme will create a significant arts/creativity focus delivered through ICT and, crucially, extend participation to a broader age range and a wider spread of communities. In short, *Futuretown* will be expanded to encompass a life-long learning dimension, will be linked to the HEFCE *Widening Participation* schemes, and create pathways to developing distance learning programmes. Participating groups would be involved in research and prototype development, glimpsing possible futures for

themselves and creating a vision for the development of public spaces, physical and virtual, for their town. A holistic approach, combining both material and virtual design with global links, extends the space, its use, and its aesthetic potential. Local identity becomes the key to locating the space within the global 'space of flows' and for users feel at home using it.

Over the last decade public spaces have been increasingly invaded by new technology. Most of this has developed piecemeal, driven by developments in public display systems. These tend to be additive to, or replacement of, existing systems: continuous information flow for transport terminals and commercial advertising are the most common examples. They proliferate as public space accessories justified by functional or commercial expediency. By their very nature such systems are designed to be competitive, to outshine other visual elements within the spaces they occupy. This is creating an insidious form of visual pollution in our public spaces: LED poisoning.

Much of this technology is still in its infancy and is often regarded as too 'fragile' for outdoor use. Consequently when it is used in public contexts it is not designed *into* the space but simply placed into the space as an 'off the shelf' piece of technology, often clad in ugly steel armouring as a functional security measure.

This problem does not reside in the technology itself but in its application. New forms of public communication, interactivity, and exciting new aesthetic possibilities could be combined with imagination and flair. The technology can be designed into spaces as part of either refurbishment or new build. A range of technologies can be incorporated, from simple pressure pads or infra-red beams built into walls, floors, decorative elements, to more sophisticated activation devices using peripherals. Convergence of technologies such as mobile phones, personal audio systems, palm top computing, with home entertainment and commercial systems means that these technologies will become increasingly interchangeable and capable of transmutation into many forms. Screens and

display systems are also becoming more flexible and variable in scale, shape etc., through new plasma, LED and laser technology. We are reaching a point where 'the screen' as the usual glass rectangle will just be one of many forms that image display and transmission will take.

We believe it is important for artists, designers, architects, technologists and planners, and community organisations, to explore the concept of the 'Global Town Square' as both a practical means and the metaphor for the future development of public space across the physical/virtual divide. The Global Town Square can provide public place for, and a democratic space within, the development of new technologies. And this within a context of sustainable development, using renewable energy systems. The first of these initiatives is beginning in Gravesend in the early summer of 2000.

*The potential integration of images, text, and sounds in the same system, interacting from multiple points, in chosen time (real or delayed) along a global network, in conditions of open and affordable access, does fundamentally change the character of communication. And communication decisively shapes culture. As Postman writes<sup>7</sup>, "our metaphors create the content of our culture. Because culture is mediated and enacted through communication, cultures themselves - that is our historically produced systems of beliefs and codes - become fundamentally transformed, and will do more so over time, by the new technological system...Its global reach, its integration of all communication media, and its potential interactivity is changing and will change forever our culture<sup>8</sup>."*

' Peter Dunn, March 1999.

The practice described was developed by Peter Dunn & Loraine Lesson, artists and co-directors of The Art of Change.

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<sup>1</sup> Castells, Manuel, 'The Information Age: Economy Society and Culture, Volume 1: The Rise of the Network Society', Blackwell 1996, p18.

<sup>2</sup> See 'Incorrect Distance' written for Ten 8 magazine and text of Digital Dreams conference, by Peter Dunn, available on The Art of Change website: [www. Artofchange.com](http://www.Artofchange.com).

<sup>3</sup> Indeed the Resurrection was regarded by Spencer as his 'primavera' both artistically and as a celebration of his new life as a married (and sexually active) man. His new wife appears prominently several times in the painting.

<sup>4</sup> Most paintings of this period (1920's -30's) whether they be a 'Resurrection' or some other significant historic/spiritual theme were depicted in specific recognisable places in or around the village of Cookham. Spencer believed there was a kind of parallel spiritual Cookham that could not be corrupted by the ordinary passages of time. It was for him the *embodiment* of place.

<sup>5</sup> Mailout Magazine (UK) , P14-15 'Flavours of the Month', April 2000; Public Art Journal, (UK), P4-11 'Afterlife', April 2000; Landscape Design Magazine, P22-24 'Wymering Public Art Project' , March; The Wymering Public Art Project, Portsmouth City Council, 1999); AN Magazine (UK), P8 'Currents' , Dec 99.

<sup>6</sup> Futuretown is a nation-wide scheme to raise awareness among young people of the importance of our towns and cities. In Gravesend, the annual Futuretown project has developed over several years and is now an established event in the school's curriculum. This year over 750 students from twelve schools, junior and secondary participated in Futuretown, to create a vision of Gravesend into the Millennium. Of fifty towns who participated nationally, a Gravesend school was chosen for inclusion in the Urban Task Force Report "Towards an Urban Renaissance" and presented with a special award by the Deputy Prime Minister John Prescott.

<sup>7</sup> Postman (1985: 15)

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<sup>8</sup> Castells, *ibid*, 1997: p328

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