

Gallery of the Future

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After nearly 10 years of working in Docklands with tenants and action groups, we learned a lot about the impact of the global upon the local and the process of those changes - hence our new name The Art of Change.

These days Agenda 21 is a central focus for our work - not just the big green issues of greenhouse gases, global warming etc. but *sustainability* in all its ramifications. It's about cultural diversity as well as biological diversity.

But before I show slides - some general points

Dale Spender in *Nattering on the Net* compares the communications revolution to the invention of the printing press. Manuel Castells, in his book 'The Rise of the Network Society', goes even further - to the creation of the alphabet (700 BC). The shift from spoken tongue to written language, separated the speaker from the 'spoken', enabled conceptual discourse - 'objectified' knowledge - creating the mental and material infrastructure for *cumulative, knowledge based communication*.

This radically transformed social relations, creating a potent triad of *knowledge, power and organisation*

¥ one could communicate and organise over distance, to larger numbers of people.

¥ it facilitated domination of nature and other humans by a literate elite

There was a major problem of access - dependent upon who you were, where you were, and economically - all books for example were hand written and copied; massively expensive to acquire. It took centuries, and the invention of the printing press, for literacy to become widespread.

The creation of the Alphabet also created shift in communication from the gestalt experience (of face to face contact) to a received system dominated by the typographic mind and phonetic alphabet order (described as the Gutenberg Galaxy). While invaluable for rational discourse, this form of communication also created a social hierarchy between literate culture and the audio-visual system of symbols and perceptions, and - it is claimed - a rift between left brain and right brain functions.

To quote Castells directly:

"The price paid was to relegate the world of sounds and images to the backstage of the arts, dealing with the private domain of emotions and with the public world of liturgy... ..Of course audio-visual culture took an historical revenge in the twentieth century, first with film and radio, then with television.....A technological transformation of similar historic dimensions (to that of the invention of the alphabet) is taking place... the formation of a

network that..for the first time in history, integrates into the same system the written, oral, and audio-visual modalities of human communication. The human spirit unites its dimensions in a new interaction between the two sides of the brain, machines, and social contexts. For all the science fiction ideology and commercial hype surrounding the emergence of the so-called Information Superhighway, we can hardly underestimate its significance. The potential integration of text, images, 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 writes¹, '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."

Now the kinds of systems described above are not yet fully in place, they are still in many respects crude, and their development will be uneven both geographically and in pace. (Let's get real, the majority of the worlds population do not even have telephones!) There *is* a problem of access, as there was originally with literacy, but the equivalent of the printing press has already been invented, and networking literacy is rapidly increasing. We're not living in McLuhan's 'Global Village', and it's unlikely that we will. It's more likely that we'll inhabit 'virtual customised cottages', globally produced but locally distributed. But even if Castells 'predictions' are only half true, then our culture will be transformed radically.

Anyone who knows anything about our work at The Art of Change, or our previous incarnation as the Docklands Poster Project, will know that I don't have a rosy view of a future dominated by the increasing globalisation of capital. Not to mention the numerous ecological time bombs ticking away, the unremitting toll of unnecessary deaths daily in what are euphemistically called "the developing nations" (which are the direct result of the economic actions of the G7 countries). Let's be clear our technologies are used as a means of domination and oppression in what has become ironically termed 'the post-colonial period'.

But I'm not here to discuss that today - that negativity. I'm here to discuss how we as people, as artists and those concerned with the future of our culture and society, can act in our own small way - to use our skills, our imagination and technologies - to help construct alternative pathways to the future. When I talk about alternative, however, I'm not talking about the marginal - I mean engaging and helping transform the mainstream. Setting new agendas.

¹ Postman (1985: 15) as quoted by Castells.

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 the post industrial technologies. Yet when we look at the cultures of the past, of the vision, craft and sheer achievement - in Italian Renaissance Churches, of ancient mosques for example - we so often feel like primitives.

Why? Especially when we in the West have been raised on the illusion that we are on the pinnacle of a rapidly evolving civilisation. We've lost a lot along the way. We're primitives. But primitives in a new age.

And rather than look back nostalgically, we can take the lessons that are still available to us and move into the future. *As Giotto was to the development of perspectival representation, so our generation (if we are fortunate) will be to representations of cyber-space and the network society.*

I also believe we'll see a huge rise in post-gallery art. I don't mean galleries as *spaces* will disappear, although what goes in them will I am sure diversify quite considerably, but the dominance of an institutionalised system with its focus on the market. These historically specific modes of transaction, meritocracy, and economy, will I believe become even more specialised and less significant to the mainstream of culture. Galleries like the Tate will of course remain important as a custodian of historically canonised material, but how it disseminates this material will change. *Its current reliance on the canonisation of artists by the art market will also have to change if it wishes to retain any relevance within in a rapidly changing contemporary field.*

Post and extra-gallery work is already beginning to create new relationships between the local and the global, and - along with a new wave of cultural theorists like Castells - are beginning to recognise that new forms of communication will radically shape the development of our culture. And, for the first time (at least since industrialisation) , culture - as the symbolic

processing of meaning and communication - is integral to a 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".

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. But "CULTURE IS MORE OFTEN, NOT WHAT PEOPLE SHARE BUT WHAT THEY CHOOSE TO FIGHT OVER" Eley and Suny "Becoming National'

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This brings us to the thorny issue of identity

Manuel Castells again:

"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, on the other hand, 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...Our societies are increasingly structured around a bipolar opposition between the Net and the Self".

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*

Manuel Castells in "The Power of Identity" distinguishes 3 main areas of ID building:

1. Legitimising identity - by dominant institutions or power bases to extend, rationalise, their domain vis a vis social actors - see theories of

nationalism (for e.g.: why ACE or LAB may argue for arts funding within their perceived territory to be routed through them - project themselves as the legitimate body for handling this)

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. ID built on principles distinguished from and opposed to the dominant, defined as a *polarisation from but in relation to* the dominant forms of legitimisation. (e.g. various groups coming together in an 'umbrella ID' to voice and project their dissatisfaction about their marginalisation or exclusion in ACE or ACE or LAB priorities)

3. Project identity - often grows out of resistance ID - this is about 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 (e.g. campaigning to transform or abolish ACE or LAB).

Another example on a smaller scale - As the Docklands Poster Project back in the 80s - as part of a campaign - we were obviously primarily involved in Resistance Identity, though at times beginning to move into Project Identity in constructing alternatives - the People's Plan for the Royal Docks.

Structuring engagement : what we call a 'New Narrative' Approach

This is an approach derived from debates around photography and new media, an approach based upon non-linearity and customisation. Whether it is a Billboard Project, a CD ROM, an net project or a Public Art Project like Wymering , our approach is - through consultation - to create a framework, a matrix of information related to an overarching concept or theme

This matrix then becomes the vessel for specific inputs from other participants - these may be other professionals, artists, or those who have specialist knowledge or first hand experience of the issues or themes being explored . These participants input in a 'site specific' way - site specific in this sense is not simply physical or geographic but more in the Foucault's sense (as a node or 'position' in spheres of intersecting discourses, of the particular, the social, ideological, of local and global ripples of power). It is this specificity that introduces the lived, complex and changing representations and signifiers which provide 'meaning' and a sense of the 'authentic' for those participating.

Those who interact with this matrix, whether they be directly producing or consuming are nevertheless actively engaged in customising their 'journey' through the matrix, in making their own 'sense' of the narrative which they create or navigate for themselves - either in the making of the work or visiting it after completion.

IN CONCLUSION:

Issues of audience, identity, engagement and evaluation are not fixed, cannot be addressed by simple formulas. They're problematised, complex and changing - particularly with the effects of globalisation, new communications technology just to name just two factors.

It's 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.

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!