

Notes: on 'community' for South London Art Gallery: Conference on Public Art .

What does 'community' mean? It is a problematic, contested term, especially when applied to art. All common sense and intellectual rigor seems to go out of the window, a screen comes down, a distancing takes place: it is not about 'us' but about 'them'. Communities are 'other'; what other people belong to - the working class, the disadvantaged. We hear about 'the black community', the 'Asian community' ; an implied homogeneity, a less complex, less sophisticated set of relations. Frequently this is tinged with nostalgia - simpler way of life lost to the more sophisticated - a reworking of the 'noble savage' principle. Along with this, is an assumption that kind of ignorant tribalism exists in 'communities', who 'get Bolshi' when presented with things they doesn't understand, like pushing a new road through their habitat or being presented with contemporary art.

This is of course patronising at best. But it is a view that 'we' ourselves (the liberal 'art caste') would not subscribe to. It is those others, those guilty others. Guilt breeds denial.

It is important if one is to understand anything about 'community' to *implicate ourselves*. To recognise that we all belong to communities, and to recognise what communities we belong to. And, given the nature of our society, that these are in competition with other communities for resources. It is the guilt surrounding this competition that breeds denial.

Raymond Williams' definition of 'Community' is useful here:

"The process of communication is the process of community: the sharing of common meanings and thence common activities and purposes; the reception and comparison of new meanings, leading to the tensions and achievements of growth and change".¹

This concept of community is not sited in neighbourhoods, although 'place' can be a focus for it. It is a dynamic of interlocking and overlapping spheres of discourse. A tension between inclusion and exclusion. Between the *sustaining elements* which nurture and consolidate meanings, norms and values; and the *transformative elements* which generate aims and goals - direct its *becoming*.

The process of implicating ourselves is to 1) recognise what communities we actually belong to, 2) those we want to belong to or ally ourselves with, 3) identify other communities who may be open to dialogue and exchange - to network.

¹ Raymond Williams, *Culture and Society*; Pelican.

This means making choices and being clear about them. You cannot please everyone. If you are an artist working in the public domain, it goes without saying that anything that you do which is in any way challenging is going to generate hostility from some quarters. One community's celebration can be another's provocation.