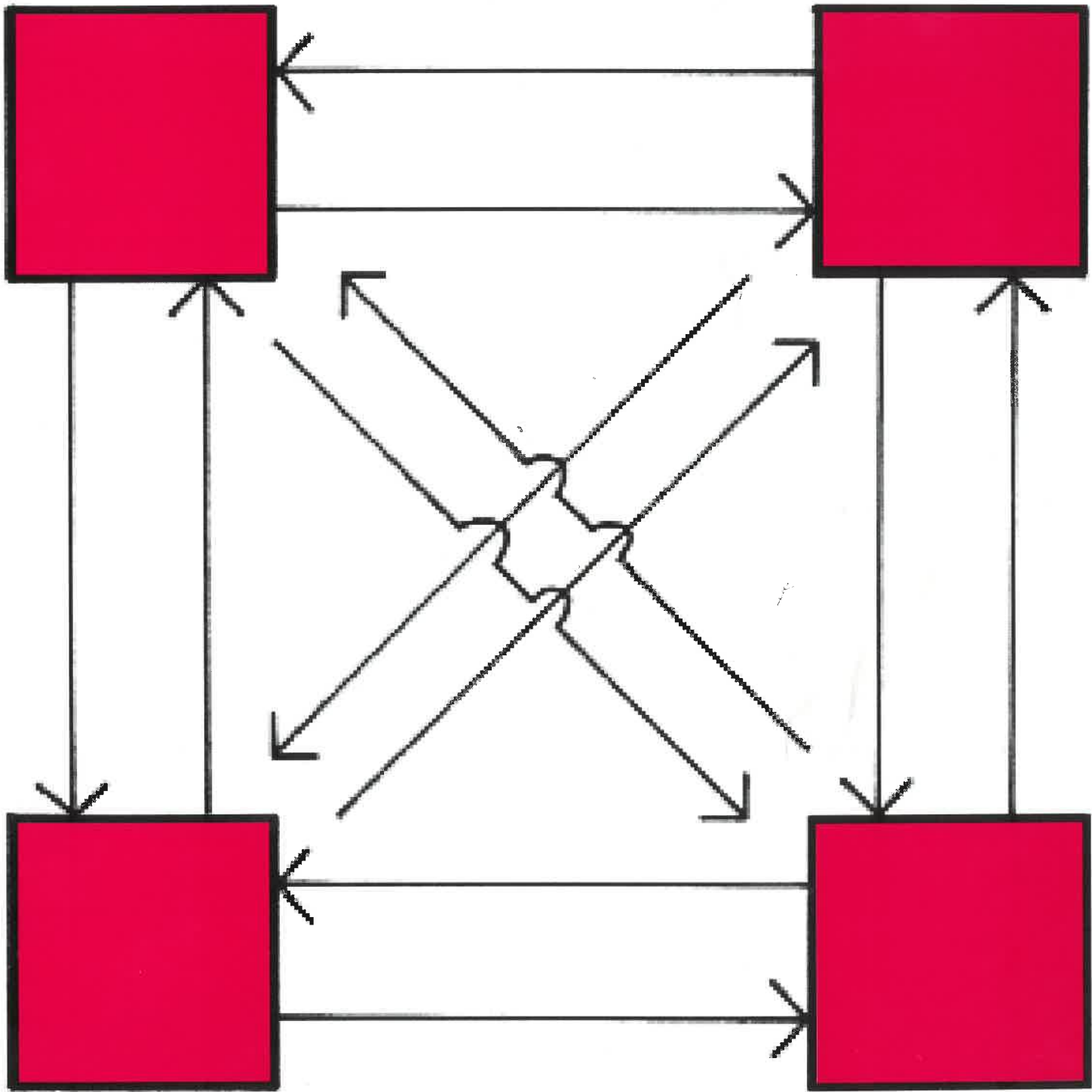


CONTROL



TWENTY ONE

- Draft Of A Memento -

On 5 October 2017 our nine-month residency with the Women of Windmill Hill had officially come to an end, culminating in a group show at Open Eye Gallery, Liverpool.¹ One of seven Socially Engaged Commissions supported by the gallery, our project, entitled, *As & When*, reflected a way of thinking about practice that foregrounds process-based work over the singularity of aesthetics outcomes, specifically in a formal gallery setting. In June 2018 we began working with the community again, this time in a more informal capacity, without the pressures to produce a tangible outcome. Walking the area, meeting locals and extending our remit to the neighbouring estate, Castlefields. On 23 November 2018 our latest work, *Know Thy Neighbour* was presented at the Tate, Liverpool. A one-day intervention, which brought residents from both estates into the space as artists and speakers. For the duration of the event we (Gary and Robert), exhibited our new fieldwork, using the space as a large, work-in-progress sketchbook.

Working on behalf of an organisation, or within a formal setting, is not without its perils. While we had autonomy to work as we wished (as long as it included 'some' photography) a commission also acts as a 'semi-visible frame that defines funding, timescale, agenda and expectations' (Hope 2017: 204). These frames can, over time, be ignored, taken for granted, pushed against or tested. In this short text, we first reflect on the value of *As & When* as a way to think about collaborative Community

Art for public consumption, but also as a space to examine the frame in which we all worked.

We then turn to the next phase of our work with the residents of Windmill Hill and Castlefields, entitled, *Know Thy Neighbour*. Signalling, in our opinion, the possible transformative capacity of art practices to shape a 'community of artists' and 'visual activists', we argue that each iteration of the project builds upon the next, creating mini worlds of intersubjective encounters.

Intersubjective encounters are spaces where people and ideas meet. In the context of commissioned Community Art and more recently coined, Socially Engaged Practice, these encounters can be multiple and varied, depending on the reach of the work. Ideas can echo out from the core of the activity and ripple across a number of audiences, places and people, potentially feeding back into the core element in a cycle of positive exchange. *As & When* and *Know Thy Neighbour* fit this model.

'Draft of a Memento' links directly to the structure around the idea of producing a Community of Artists. We are undergoing a number of processes and experiments in an attempt to develop this idea into a successful formula – the Draft. Ultimately, the intention is to bring a better wellbeing and future for individuals involved while producing artworks – a Memento.



¹ Open Eye Gallery, Liverpool, is a photography gallery established over 40 years ago

As & When, Install view at the Open Eye Gallery, 2017. Self-adhesive prints, framed publications, vinyl graphic strip. Photo: Rob Battersby



Original site of Windmill Hill Medical Centre, R&D Phase 2.
Photo: Robert Parkinson

The title of the project *As and When* reflected the fluctuating nature of social and cultural provision, specifically for those in marginal and peripheral spaces. Windmill Hill was one such space. Part of a post-war new town development, Windmill Hill is located in Runcorn and Halton, on the outskirts of Liverpool. As with all residential areas it has its positives and negatives: surrounded by green space that is inhabited with an abundance of wildlife, Windmill Hill is highlighted by social and cultural inequality.

On the 31 March 2017 the 2,400 residents lost their GP service after the NHS failed to find a new provider to take over the practice. One of the most deprived wards in the UK and the most deprived in the borough of Halton, residents of the estate are 20% more likely to have cancer than in neighbouring wards. Life expectancy for men is 71 years (Halton average = 77), for women it is 77 years (Halton average = 81) (Bratchford et al, 2018). In addition, half of all children (0-15) are classed as being in poverty, the average house price (£61,000) is less than half the price of those in the neighbouring postcode (£126,500) with the lowest level of home ownership in Halton and by contrast, the highest proportion of residents claiming to have no qualifications.

Focusing on health and wellbeing we, the artists, explored visual communication and collaborative working as a process rather than a means to an end. In doing so, we wanted to use art practices as a tool to facilitate and develop wellbeing in the broadest sense. By doing so, we were not preoccupied with aesthetics, but how art practice, including photography, writing, film, in addition to social activities such as going for walks or simply having a group conversation with the women's group, could foster and/or probe a multitude of social issues. The work that was produced represents a number of discourses that, overtly or otherwise, came to the fore in many of our exercises.

Women of Windmill Hill was initiated by lifelong resident, Irene. A community advocate and social worker, Irene passionately believes in the power of community. With her support, we organised photo walks, disposable camera projects, writing exercises, curatorial workshops and archive work where we used these as tools to enable discussion on issues that may not have been otherwise obvious or communicated in an everyday context.

Art is not always accompanied by any clear intent or indeed ambition to bring about change. There is a distinction to be had between art practice that engages with politics, and the overall aims of political activism. This project was not political to begin with, but the participants and context shaped the tone of the work. Focusing on a loose term such as 'barriers' within their immediate environment, the women honed their skills with disposable and digital camera workshops alongside imagery we had produced whilst researching the area. The outcomes of these workshops made up the content for their exhibitions, first at the Brindley Centre, Runcorn and then at Open eye Gallery, Liverpool.

Working in this way, the project fostered and created social benefits and a sense of belonging. The women felt more invigorated, mobile and active as well as developing better visual literacy and communication skills, a sense of worth and value, recognition and a greater sense of social and political agency.² The results of these elements materialised into a self-initiated group being formed between the participants after the first phase completed. The group are called 'The Snappers' and they meet weekly for photographic trips and excursions around the area demonstrating the potential framework for a 'Community of Artists'.

Knowing that exhibitions are temporary, we co-created an accompanying text, dedicated to process. *As & When: Documenting Socially Engaged Practice* (2017) mapped each phase and failure, idea and installation. It presented a narrative of engagement and participation that sought to render the often semi-visible frame of a gallery commission more evident; the book was both part of, and response to, the project. Exhibited in the final show alongside the women's photographs, it helped to better situate the journey, detailing the process as practice and further marking our work as distinct to the other projects. Ultimately, as the commission holders, we are often still in control of the work/ideas because we legitimise its presence and appearance, specifically in formal gallery settings. When the images come down, we are still the 'artists' and the *Women of Windmill Hill*, we feared, would be seen as

² For more on social and health benefits of the *As and When* project, see Bratchford et al, *Socially engaged photography and wellbeing: reflections on a case study in the northwest of England*, published in the *Journal of London Primary Care* Volume 10. Issue 4, 2018.

accessories. The cover of the book was designed to hold a 6x4 photograph. After the exhibition, we asked the women to pick their favourite image and printed them off. The interchangeable front cover ensured their imagery and ideas were at the heart of each output, reaffirming that they were artists while balancing the authorship between people involved.

Know Thy Neighbour was an intervention that marked the launch of the second and expanded phase of our project. To stimulate conversations and build resilience locally, between two neighbouring but isolated estates (Windmill Hill and Castlefields), but also between different communities of practice and locality. Working to build intersubjective encounters and promote polyvocality, we set up a temporary, one day exhibition and intervention at the Tate, Liverpool. The event pointed towards future collaborations and spaces of exploration which had already been discussed and agreed upon with the residents.

Our initial research and development images were installed as a backdrop for the activity and brought a number of questions to light around the removal of the G.P. Surgery, the new housing development, and accessibility on the estate. Along with the images, we exhibited a video piece that introduced a new geographical area we were intending to explore in the neighbouring estate of Castlefields, accompanied by an audio piece from local resident, Peter. A live, multi medium pop up studio was installed so that The Snappers could practice new skills and techniques, building upon their existing landscape photography practice, whilst engaging with passing gallery goers and invoking new conversations. The exhibition and photography workshops were complemented by a live, classical piano accompaniment, again performed by Peter, acting as a subtle first collaboration between the two estates. The core of the day was an 'in conversation' with Irene. Addressing gallery goers who were invited to take a seat, as well as those passing through, Irene spoke of her life experiences working with residents of the estate, welfare cuts, ill-health, social exclusion, period poverty and land privatisation.

Examples from the day's work include portraits of each other taken by The Snappers and us. In the images, Margaret and Irene, as well as the photographer, Jackie, are the co-founders of the 'The Snappers'. Building on our original workshops, the group started the photography club from a desire to meet more residents and maintain an active, social and healthily lifestyle. They have organised field trips, gallery visits, and hosted exhibitions in public spaces including the town hall and library; they are bid writing and now also producing an annual calendar, which is distributed to each house on the estate.

Community Art and Socially Engaged Practice has, at times, been criticised for its need to evidence 'deliver-

able' outcomes, losing sight of its original ethos. Writing in 1973, Harold Baldry, the then chair of the Community Arts Working Panel for the Arts Council UK, noted that:

The primary concern [of community artists] is their impact on a community and their relationship with it: by assisting those with whom they make contact to become more aware of their situation and of their own creative powers, and by providing them with facilities they need to make use of their abilities, they hope to widen and deepen the sensibilities of the community in which they work and so to enrich its existence.

Arts Council of Britain 1974: 3 cited in Jeffers et al, 2017:14

As the practice became professionalised, some have argued that the ethos of Community Art projects described by Baldry in the 1970s fell foul of '[the] grant addicted middle class' and 'top down' funding agendas that enabled artists to sell their services for a fee. During the New Labour years (1997-2010) the tenet of Community Arts was revived through a political and cultural shift that foregrounded participatory democracy and social inclusion agendas (See Hope 2017: 203-204 in Jeffers et al. 2017).

In supporting those to become 'more aware' of their 'situation and of their own creative powers, and by providing them with facilities they need to make use of their abilities' we hope to create a culture of practice to continue indefinitely after the artists have left. It would be remiss to think that we will work with them forever (though we might!), but our aim is to build a culture of visual literacy and practice to maintain their dialogue with varied communities and



Irene's public lecture, Tate, Liverpool, 2018.
Photo: Gary Bratchford

GARY BRATCHFORD AND ROBERT PARKINSON