"Oh gag me"
An inclusive conversation with Suzanne Lacy
Alison Stirling & Anne Elliot

Artists working within Arts in a Social Context have in the recent past been written off as the art scene's social workers and viewed as poor cousins to the gallery artist. Yet it now appears to be having a reassessment in Scotland, influenced by the work of artists such as Suzanne Lacy.

Within new community art in Scotland, Social Inclusion has become part of the vocabulary of funding criteria for arts programmes. Having that vocabulary is necessary, but without the practical skills, or time to build up an understanding of the communities in which these arts processes will take place, the ideas are arrived at *despite* the community and not in collaboration with it.

With a lack of any real definition of its meaning in terms of practical responses, Social Inclusion is open to re-interpretation on many levels, encouraging a formulaic and often meaningless response to a multitude of social and artistic issues. After all, if you don't have the funding, competent organisation, understanding and a strong support structure, not forgetting a welcoming community, you don't have social inclusion.

Artlink Edinburgh has, for the past 15 years been working outwith the mainstream, building on the experience of artists working within social work and healthcare environments. It has over the years improved its methods of working, learning from past mistakes and more accurately targeting its responses in order that they are more relevant to the individual and wider needs of the people we work with.

The core of its work is the belief that the participant is placed at the centre of the arts process. Its aim throughout project design is to build up a working relationship with the individual or group and then establish the exact direction of the artworks in relation to the individual interests or issues.

Many of the issues we, as artists working within Artlink, face are in response to problems faced by individuals who are 'socially excluded' from the mainstream, as a result of long term illness, institutionalisation, lack of available opportunity, lack of money, public ignorance, and lack of support. The artist's role is to find the appropriate ways of working in collaboration with the individual, using the arts process to form ideas, investigate ways of working and achieve a series of responses which reflect the effectiveness of the partnerships formed.

The individual's circumstances can often seem overwhelming, overshadowing and testing the relevance of any arts process. Therefore the demands on the artist are more wide-ranging, extending their expertise and skills within programmes that seek to merge the artistic with the social.

It is a big mistake, however, to say art within this context achieves real social change. At best it gives a voice, draws attention to an issue, and always, always uncovers another set of barriers to respond to. This challenges the role of the artist as collaborator, exploring the nature of the relationship, its strengths and weaknesses, placing more importance on the process than on the product itself.

There is a lack of knowledge about what art in this context can achieve and how it can progress, and with no definitive texts available within Scotland, one has to look overseas to the US to find essays on ways of working which further progress the work of artists in this field.

Mapping The Terrain with its essays on public art has been used for Artlink as a guide in its programme development. The book itself does not offer an insight into work in the field of disability but it does offer a variety of responses to art outwith the gallery context, creating arguments for work which is more responsive to its audiences.

The book's editor and essayist is the artist Suzanne Lacy. She has worked collaboratively since the early 1970s. Her experience includes collaborations with other artists and more broadly conceived 'collaborations' with people in various communities and occupations. In the 1970s, for example, she collaborated with Evalina Newman, an older African American woman in Watts (Los Angeles), engaging others in her housing complex in exhibitions on crime. She also collaborated with Kathleen Chang, an actress in San Francisco, in a performance on Chinese immigration and women. In a series of large urban installations on violence against women, she broadened the collaborative process to include police, politicians, hotline activists and reporters, creating together multi-sited works that address social issues.

Examples of her work include *The Roof is on Fire*, an installation of parked cars on a rooftop garage with the participation of more than 200 teens; and *Youth, Cops, and Videotape*, a video of a workshop that continues to be used in police training. In 1997, she produced *No Blood/No Foul*, an installation of murals, television interviews and a live basketball game between youth and police that was widely covered on television news. This artwork, created with the co-operation of the Oakland Police Department, was not only meant to increase awareness of youth issues, but tolerance of each group for the other.

We were offered the opportunity to interview Suzanne Lacy in her hotel room. Armed with a tape recorder and a series of questions based on the Artlink interpretation of Mapping The Terrain, we sat down ready to begin our interview. The tape recorder didn't work. We managed to get another. The first question was so vague it was met with "tell me some more about the question?" Our response, garbled both on tape and in reality, ended with a "you don't get this question?" Her response, "I get the area that you are talking about, but I don't get what it is you want to know specifically about it." A dysfunctional tape recorder and inappropriate questions set the tone.

Anne Elliot (*shifting anxiously in her seat*): What do you think makes the most change, the process involved in the making of the artwork or the end product?

Suzanne Lacy: Well what kind of change do you mean?

AE (*looks agitated*): Social change?

SL: Located where?

Alison Stirling (*leans forward, perplexed*): Eh, within the audience, if the people who take part in your projects represent the audience.

SL: Let me take your work as an example. You have a person who has a learning disability and you have an artist who interacts with them, and then you have the social system that the person operates within, such as the social service or medical system, and the artist's own set of systems, often less prescriptive, and the culture that these intersecting systems exist within. On top of that you have various forms of cultural contexts, including the art world. They all mix together in various ways. Where do you think change occurs?

AS: The change takes place mostly within the person you work in collaboration with, then with support staff; then with the audiences that may see that person's work. Sometimes the change is more personal, in the artist and participant, based on gaining a mutual understanding of each other, therefore gaining a greater understanding of the issues the individuals face.

SL: What might happen as a result of that change?

AS (*getting worried that the interviewers have rapidly become the interviewees*): People will be more accepted but it takes a long time.

SL: How might that happen?

AS: The more people are visible the more they're accepted, the more positive that visibility the greater the likelihood that they will become more valued members of the community. I suppose I'm being a bit idealistic, but that can lead to greater social change.

SL: When you ask me about change, change where and

Right & opposite:
Artlink Edinburgh
Fusion Projects

to what end, is what I would say. And I think you have the answers from your own practice.

AS: How do you measure change?

SL: I think it's clearly demonstrable that one can change individual behaviour. Change isn't the right word, exactly; rather, you can impact an individual's experience and that experience might cause change. The question is, how do you measure change beyond the individual? In your instance, how would you measure changing the system that deals with people that have learning disabilities?

AS: Most art projects work with people over relatively short periods of time. What we've managed to do is over four years or six years. Over longer time periods you can measure change more accurately, as you start to see both physically and emotionally the differences in people, perhaps this is because for the first time in some of these people's lives there is someone working beside them around what interests them.

SL: Is that as a result of relationships or is that as a result of art?

AS: The art's in the relationship.

SL: Would it be the same without the art?

AS: No, because it's about starting to find out about that person, using the art to do this. For example, one man working with Anne Elliot, started off by making a book, then as a result, decided he needed to make a bookcase for it and as a result of that he got into making sculpture and ended up making work in the Sculpture Studios. So it's about his relationship with the art and how we used the art to form a positive working relationship with him.

SL: So the art is the relationship, and the manifestation of the relationship is the object?

AS: Not always.

SL: There is something in making that's very positive, and the more concrete the making the more positive the benefit might be for certain people.

AS: Sometimes for people who have higher support needs, who have profound learning difficulties, the making means nothing so it's the individual's involvement in the process and how the art works to support the individual within that, that makes the difference. Now that might not be art, but it might be. For example most people have care plans written about them, they are clinical reports on their medical needs. What we have done is bring in a writer to write about the person, their interests, their reactions, describe them in ways in which they become more of a person rather than a list of conditions. I don't know whether that's art or not but we do use artists.

SL: Do you know what I'd say: In this case the art is in the construction of the entirety of the concept. Setting up the situation. As well, perhaps, as the actual writing itself. What intrigues me is less, in this case, the writing, although the skilful expression of craft can lift the mundane to great and admirable heights. But I'm not presented with the writing, so I can't comment on that—I can say that I find the design a brilliant and intriguing piece of conceptual art.

AE: When you are young you are more idealistic, expecting and wanting change to happen. With age do you think that your idealism is the same or changed in what way?

SL: I think it has. As I've gotten older it hasn't destroyed my fervour for change but I've become (particularly in the arts) a little more sceptical of what we can and cannot do. It doesn't mean you do anything different nor with any less intensity or passion, it just means that you might assess change a little more critically. I think the work looks harder to me than it used to; more to do to actually change things.

AS: I remember talking a few years ago to a woman who was much older than me who'd been working in arts and communities for a long time. I said that I felt that there seemed to be a constant re-inventing of the wheel within arts and a social context and that I felt frustrated by this lack of change but she told me that change does take place it just takes a long time.

SL: Look at Artist Placement Group in the 70s, artists John Latham and Barbara Straveni whose goal it was to place artists in industry. And there were a few examples of it but it was more of an idea. A great idea, by the way, and one that characterised a type of artistic inquiry in other parts of the world as well. 30 years later you, for example, are actually placing artists in significant ways in industry. So I'd say that's significant progress. Being younger causes two things, one is frustration and the other is a kind of hyper belief in the effectiveness of what you do, maybe even an artificial belief.

I've been an activist at one point, and later an activist artist. As an activist I think there's a kind of hard edge of cynicism you develop when you're constantly faced with seemingly unyielding social dilemmas. But when you have an art practice you can say something beautiful was made even if great social change did not happen. There's an internal reward built into being an artist activist. To have a practice and to locate my own reward system within the practice is something that I find profoundly satisfying.

AE: At what point do other artists or specialists come in when you're constructing a project and do they fit in with your ideas or do they reinterpret your ideas?

SL: I tend to work very collaboratively which means there's other kinds of professions and concerns represented in my projects from the very beginning.

One of the issues around collaboration is to what degree will you compromise your vision? I don't think compromise is bad, by the way. One chooses where and how one will compromise. The general rule of thumb for my work is if there is a subject matter issue, the authority resides in the people who are representing that experience and I tend not to conflict with that. So if a young person says to me this is my reality I don't say "Oh no, I don't like that, let's do it differently."

But if it's a question of the aesthetics, then I tend not to negotiate as much. I will always ask others with whom I work for their ideas, and we have much discussion about what works aesthetically and what doesn't. But the final decision on how a project looks, its imagery, is mine (along with the other artists with whom I work). It's like being a theatre director. Theatre is very collaborative and negotiated, but there is a final authority and responsibility, and that rests with the director.

I'm aware of the politics of representation, and that the shape can effect the meaning. So it's not a perfect world in my artworks. Imagery I like is shaped by my culture and background. But I also have a great deal of experience in art, and I do retain the decisions as to where I will put my energy and creative passion. So

The Roof Is On Fire
1994 Oakland
Suzanne Lacy
Collaboration with Annice Jacoby
and Chris Johnson

the negotiations around aesthetics are what I'd call 'transparent' in my work—lots of people express lots of ideas, and challenge each other's presumptions, and discuss the meaning of our making together. At a certain point, however, and hopefully after a full and fair hearing, I make decisions about the 'look' of a work.

Now, there is some fear expressed by other artists that this can lead to abuse of power—the manipulation of people to do your images against their interest. I think this is definitely a possibility, and in the situations you are describing decidedly so. This is why it can be dangerous working with children. There are certain times and places where it is easier to persuade people about something that is not in their best interest, like when you work with people with learning disabilities.

AS: I think it is very easy to do that and it is important always to be aware of what can be an unequal power balance. If a collaboration is to be effective then it takes time to form a relationship that works successfully. In the making of any collaborative artwork the individual's interests and/or skills must be the main focal point: It is extremely important that the individual is not lost and is not patronised within the making of the work.

SL: In general, however, I work with such a scale that there is a built-in check. With 500 people in a performance, it's pretty hard for me to persuade all of them to participate in something that they instinctively feel is not in their own best interests. Also, the processes are long and public and open continually to questioning, so that's my self-correcting environmental factor.

I listen and interpret and then negotiate quite a bit compared to most artists, but there can come a point within that negotiation where I say "Oh gag me, I can't do that image, it won't work to get news coverage, it isn't aesthetically sound." With full knowledge of the complexities of that statement, the inherent contradictions and possibilities for power abuse, I still find myself at certain times saying, that won't work. What's interesting about that moment is that that's the point where art and life intersect. It's a point of ethical concern, social debate, and a place where you can engage in the meaning of art, life, politics, whatever, around that issue.

AS: I want to end the interview with a hypothetical situation. Respond to it off the top of your head, with what you would do in the situation, what sort of project would you come up with. There's a group of elderly women...

SL: They live together in a home?

AS: Yes, homes that are like small institutions.

AE: They were in institutions and they knew of each other, but they're now brought together in one house, which is their home.

AS: Some of them have mental health problems on top of their learning disabilities, exacerbated by the fact that they are limited in what they can do, partly financially and partly by the fact they live in a rural community and transport is problematic. So could you think of a project that would some way respond to this?

SL: And what do they want?

AS: They want to make friends basically. They want to be out of the house and they want to be with friends and to make new friends.

SL: And they can't go with their friends?

AS: Well you need to engineer a way of making sure they meet up. Staffing and transport is a real issue.

SL: Have you tried negotiating with the organisation that provides their service?

AS: Sometimes, yes.

SL: What happens?

AS: They are overworked.

SL: I think it's a very rich situation. I guess one of the things you would have to look at is where your initial impetus is? Is it with these particular women or is it to demonstrate the situation of women like these?

AS: You may need to point out the quality of life that they have, but in doing that you must try to create a better quality of life for them.

SL: I could suggest a whole bunch of ideas. I'd much rather talk about this than have an interview. I'd have to qualify any ideas by saying I don't know the women, I don't really know their level of ability and I don't know the politics of what might happen to them by activating this situation in their lives. I don't know whether you're looking for a sustained way out for them or a short term

way out. There is a whole lot of ethical and political issues that I don't understand.

So having said that, the images that come to my mind are images of extravagant tea parties in public places, maybe performative, maybe photographed. Of looking at the systems that leverage their ability to get out and manipulating those systems in the ways that you've done in other instances. Like making an artwork around public transit. Or convening any social service vehicles that must be called to get them from point "a" to point "b" and using these as part of a work. Or projecting on the front of their buildings the passes they need.

Given what you said you wanted to do, which is change their direct lives, obviously, I can't think of an actual image for that as I don't know the circumstances that control their lives. If you were interested in changing the circumstances of people's lives with them as participants, then you have to address their level of political awareness. Is their political awareness such that they're aware that they have a right to do more in life?

AS: Yes.

SL: And they are concerned not only for their own isolation but of other women like them? If that is the case then you enter that other territory which is about changing the system and changing public opinion. You see the distinction I'm making? Then it depends on how activist you want to be. I understand your caution, you'd have to move very carefully, because they're fragile people and in overwhelming social circumstances. You could honour and empower them, in other words give them training as 'artists' and you can define that in any way you want and then you can employ them to visit people in their homes, thereby accomplishing them getting out more.

We agree that the interview has come to an end. Outside on the street Alison lights up a cigarette. The next day at Suzanne Lacy's Glasgow School of Art public talk, Anne Elliot finally managed to learn what it was that Suzanne Lacy actually did. Later on at a student organised discussion, Suzanne Lacy gained a greater understanding of Artlink.

The Turning point Project/
Under Construction
1998 Vancouver
Suzanne Lacy
Collaboration with
Barbara Clausen,
video by Darlene Haber