

# 'We were trying to make sense...'

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within that confident crowd of artists and others. She seemed to be holding opposing views to the speaker but I wasn't able to hear them. She left. As artists we have to be careful not to use art to tame individuals opinions.

There are a number of tools that can be used in the process of silencing. The camera lens is just one of them, but it can become a very powerful one. What is edited out? What is left outside of the frame? Are people told what to say, becoming mere actors in somebody else's film? There is a moment in Karen Mirza and Brad Butler film *The Exception and the Rule*, where one of their collaborators describes to the viewer in the cinema what the viewer can't see, but what the actor is facing. Although the context of their work differs thematically from the problematic of the socially engaged art practices, part of the film was shot in Karachi in Pakistan and it puts into question the objectivity of the cinematic frame. This instance of the actor describing the scene reminds me of the ethical decision making in capturing images and in editing the complex collected material.

Emaan Mahmud is currently in the process of making her way through the legal complexities governing the streets of Khadda Market. Her relationship to the Khadda Market had changed as she is no longer just an everyday customer. Her privileged class status is simultaneously at her advantage and an obstacle, as she struggles to identify the right way to operate, questioning her class-bounded beliefs. Writing about her work I also had to face my western beliefs, as we seemed to articulate our practices in a significantly different way, gaps of silence appeared in our communication, allowing us time to rethink our positions.

## From 'heroin' to heroines

by David Roberts

### Collaborate

Collaboration is a bloody nightmare. It is terrifying, assembling a room full of people, preparing notes and activities, clutching lofty ambitions only to be met with stilted conversation and awkward glances. But crikey, that moment when it works is wonderful. Just look at these three plump sentences:

*A nice balance  
of people playing ping pong  
in crummy weather.*

*A wasteland before  
enthusiastic neighbours  
end up drifting in.*

*Life isn't that bad,  
council tenants are all sorts  
of decent people.*

They are the fruits of collaboration. I thought I'd start with their words, Gillian, Ruth-Marie and Steve's. What better way to demonstrate equality? This is about collaboration after all and citing is a generous act. The three plump sentences are haikus, poems of 5-7-5 syllables, assembled and rearranged by me from the words of residents of a soon-to-be demolished estate in East London. They are part of a larger collection of poems that I delivered through the letterboxes of the last standing block of the Haggerston Estate, nestled amongst the lurid flotsam of mini-cab business cards and takeaway menus. Their destination was personal, poems returned to their authors. So why do these words bring me back to that terror? To explain, I shall cite some others.

Architects Maros Krivy and Tahl Kaminer warn, 'the promises of equality implicit in every participatory act are recurrently compromised by inequality between those who stage the participatory process and those who are invited to participate'.<sup>1</sup> In making those poems, I sought to break from a one-way, distanced relationship between researcher and subject, but recording, rearranging and returning residents' words is not true collaboration. Collaboration is the action of working *with* someone to produce some-

thing. That preposition is key. I never fully surrendered my authorial control in the process by editing, mediating and presenting the pieces *to* residents not *with* them. There was hypocrisy in this act, for I did not pay heed to my own ambitions of equality. But self-flagellation is an essential component of collaborative endeavor, to *collaborate* is to stitch self-reflexivity and revision into research in order to rethink your own procedures. Practice is as much about getting it wrong as it is right.

Whether described as relational, dialogical, participatory or socially engaged, the issue of collaboration has come to the fore in urbanism.<sup>2</sup> Just Space Network see it as a productive force to engage local communities and challenge 'urban policy [that] is increasingly driven by market forces, by the power of real estate and financial interests to influence governments and local authorities. This trend extends market forces into fields previously sheltered from them – social housing, recreational provision, elder care etc – and increases inequalities of income and wealth...'.<sup>3</sup> But theorists in art and architecture are united by concerns that participatory practices with conceptual origins in radical projects of the 1960s have become instrumentalised.<sup>4</sup> So if we are to heed the advice of Just Space Network alongside Krivy and Kaminer above, inequality may be left unchallenged without collaboration but may be exacerbated by that very process. It is easy to feel paralysed into inaction. As I said, a bloody nightmare. But I need only remind myself of my motivations to realise why I strive to make it work.

### Haggerston

Gillian, Ruth-Marie and Steve are residents of the Haggerston Estate which rose a great hope for the slum dweller in the 1930s by the London Council Council, borrowing the red brick neo-Georgian style of vicarages and schools and claiming it for the respectable working classes, but it will fall in three months time following three decades of shelved refurbishment plans and chronic neglect having unjustly acquired the label 'heroin capital of Europe'. This narrative of estates from utopian promise to social sinks ossifies an image of tenants as dependents, scroungers, the underclass, and presents demolition as the only resolution. There is a void of self-representation, a significant group of people defined only by others, presenting the possibility for such labels to take hold. The pursuit of public housing is also at a critical juncture. Hours after this estate falls, legislation will come into effect that independent

analyses estimate will make 60% of local authority areas unaffordable with up to a quarter of a million people facing eviction or forced relocation.<sup>5</sup>

I am part of the collaborative art platform Fugitive Images, established in 2009 by two residents of the Haggerston Estate – Andrea Zimmerman and Lasse Johansson – out of a desire to capture the peculiar moment of the place where they live and work immediately prior to it being demolished. I joined the practice during my PhD in Architectural Design as a neighbour to the estate but not an inhabitant of it. My practice aims to enable residents to symbolically reclaim and rework representations of estate tenants. I use this moment of imminent departure in Haggerston as point of possibility to build understanding in an attempt to amplify residents' critical voice.

So back to those three plump sentences. They were the first piece of work I made with residents. The haikus aim to redress this historic lack of voice in Haggerston, allowing residents to hear themselves above the dominant cacophony of representation by others. Each stanza is assembled from their words offering brief glimpses into individual anecdotal histories to build their own chronology of estate. I hope the economy of words kindles recognition and estrangement and encourages residents to reconsider their own words. The poems compete with each other and complete each other, connecting multiple subjective threads together to form an intersubjective community of individuals. This notion of 'one in many' is how I see our practice.

Our work neither wishes to present a unified voice nor build community, neither stifle dissenting voices nor smooth out these contradictions in aesthetic outcome. I believe we have a duty to put collaborative work at the service of those whose lives we seek to improve, for people to grasp the energy and necessity of critical debate. I use participatory practices to take the ideals of public housing back to the sites - plans, manifestos and spaces - and subjects - architects, politicians and residents - from and for which they were conceived. Collaboration through mutual dialogue can only emerge from messy processes of negotiation and our work is the evolution of long-term practice and engagement within Haggerston.

Over the past two years since those poems I have set up workshops on the estate to create a common space for groups of residents to exchange ideas and knowledge in discussions, tracing the passing of their estate and the utopian promises of public housing. The discussions try to make sense of why the belief

in the bricks and principles of public housing has gradually been abandoned. The way debates on the transformation of public housing are currently framed leave many unaware or unable to contribute. These collaborative workshops enable tenants to participate in these debates and determine its research agenda. Together with Andrea, Lasse and different groups of residents we have scrutinised parliamentary procedure, drawn participatory plans, curated communal film screenings, made a site-specific photo-installation, performed a site-specific play, and filmed an artists' documentary/fiction feature film. I wish to explain the first and last of these projects in greater detail which I believe practice collaboration more meaningfully.

### Am I Here

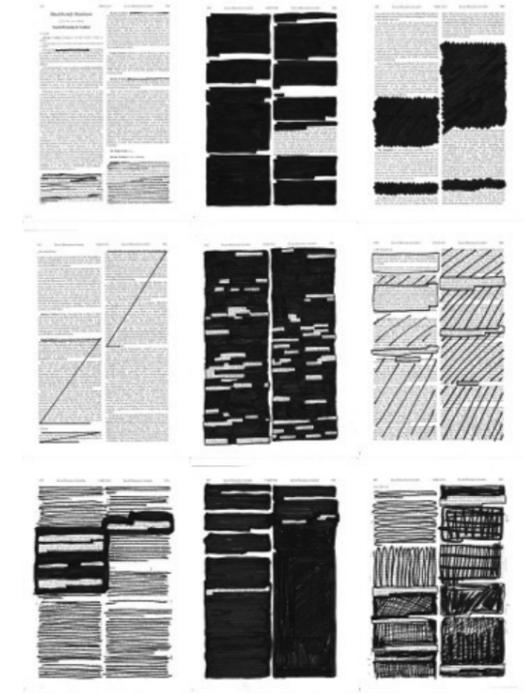
*Am I Here* was a small-scale collaboration inspired by the frustration and impotence residents expressed over the course of discussions at decisions made out of their control. From my archival research I appreciated this was no new trend. Ever since the social reformer Charles Booth in 1900 labelled the residents of Haggerston as 'vicious, semi-criminals', there appears to be a continuum through which the inhabitants of this small patch of land have been defined entirely by their crumbling built environment, misrepresented as a homogenised body, and important decisions made on their behalf by distant others. If the residents could not harness power in the estate, I wanted to bring the estate to power.

Hansard is the edited verbatim report of proceedings of the House of Commons and on 5 May 2011 it featured a backbench debate dedicated to social housing in London. I gave residents a black marker pen took them through proposed changes to public housing legislation and asked each to read eight pages of Hansard, to leave in words they believe represented their everyday lives on the estate and black out everything else. By co-opting residents to act as co-investigators I handed over the processes of textual analysis and editing entirely to them, opening up the political text as a site for scrutiny.

I returned after a week to collect the pages from each resident. Each adopted a different style to their redacting, from delicate diagonal slashes to disorderly dense effacing. *Am I Here* enables residents to symbolically reclaim language that has previous defined social housing tenants. They interpret and inject self-expression and self-representation in the words used to define their futures. It is the opposite of MPs expenses, where all the important infor-



The Haggerston Estate. Source: London Metropolitan Archives.



Am I Here. Redacted copies of a parliamentary debate on the future of social housing. Source: Author.



Estate workshops. Steve reads from LCC architect specifications on a top-floor balcony. Source: Andrea Luka Zimmerman.



Scene from Estate. A clash of virtue between Pamela and Clarissa atop the skeleton of City Mills development due to replace the estate. Source: Briony Campbell.

mation was redacted from their bills, receipts and invoices, here it is revealed. I sent the redacted report back to the 20 MPs that took part in the debate. They will see the words from their speeches transformed. Every shroud, strike through and slash of text conveys the stark difference between the beliefs and opinions of politicians defining policy and residents' actual experiences.

### Estate

*Estate* is our biggest collaboration to date, a documentary/fiction film that emerged from a collective hunger to challenge tabloid stereotypes as well as conventional narrative techniques. We wished for residents to participate both in the process and content of the film, designing costumes, scenes and sets collaboratively.

Over the course of the summer, we held workshops inspired by two films we screened in a flat on the estate. The first was Edgar Anstey's *Housing Problems* made in 1936, the year the Estate was built. It was part of the nascent documentary film movement which sought to contribute to social reform. Anstey says, 'We narrowed ourselves down to a very very simple technique, which was open. At the time nobody had done it. We gave slum dwellers a chance to make their own film'.<sup>6</sup> The second was Peter Watkins' *La Commune*, a historical re-enactment in the style of a documentary. Watkins says, 'When we first met, most of the cast admitted that they knew little or nothing about the subject. It was very important that the people become directly involved in our research, thereby gaining an experiential process...'.<sup>7</sup>

The workshops are inspired by the only fragments of intent that remain of the Haggerston Estate. When trying to locate original plans and descriptions, the only available records were administrative letters from LCC naming the blocks - Pamela, Lowther, Harlowe, Lovelace, Samuel - characters from the novels of 18th century author Samuel Richardson. Richardson wrote three epistolary novels, novels written entirely in letters. He thought that by imitating the flourishing art of letter writing, giving the illusion of reality to fictitious characters and events, he could exert a new power over his readers, to reform them socially and spiritually. The decision by the LCC to borrow these names implies a belief in self-improvement in their paternalistic architecture as strongly held as Richardson's, his virtue made concrete.

We took these letters and characters as a starting point, a way into bigger debates on the promise

of public housing. We took participants through a journey of three eras of crisis in London, dressed in 18th century costume. Each workshop began with a letter addressed to each participant, in the voice of one of six people who have influenced their lives - the author and editor, architect and critic, reporter and politician. Over the estate's lifespan, each has written a different vision for the future of these residents. The letters provoke participants to question; who are they here, who are they defined by, and who are they meant to become? They opened up a space for collective discussion during which I surrendered my authorial control.

The film *Estate* incorporates some of the scenes we developed through these workshops. It allows the contested history and compassionate stories that make up Haggerston's flats to be creatively reinterpreted, interweaving intimate portraits and fictional reenactments. The portraits show the vulnerability and resilience of residents, and the reenactments allow the aspirations of residents to intermingle with aspirations of its designers. Residents reinhabit the history of Haggerston to cast aside the false label of 'heroin capital of Europe' and reawaken the virtue of Richardson's heroines, questioning the vision of its designers, unpicking utopias and imagining promises fulfilled.

Haggerston's dying hours present an opportunity to rewrite the script, to free public housing from the restrictive storyline within which it is imprisoned. Each of our collaborative projects compulsively tells and retells the story of the Haggerston Estate tying together the historical, political, architectural and emotional threads that bind it, holding contradictory individual perspectives collectively without resolution. So how to conclude? It feels wrong to untie the messy reality of ethical considerations, discussions with residents and processes of collaborative practice into neat strands of thought. Perhaps that's the key to collaboration. Critic Hal Foster describes the unresolved relationship between artistic autonomy and social embeddedness as a 'tension that should persist'.<sup>8</sup> I hope this messy reality and tension is also present in our work, leaving an invisible trail in Haggerston, a carefully nurtured openness that allows residents to conceive their estate at this juncture with fresh possibility.

## 'We Were Trying to Make Sense...' Artist and non-artist participation and collaboration: Conclusion

by Sophie Hoyle

Many of the difficulties of collaborative artworks are essentially the difficulties of interpersonal communication and relationality. This includes socio-cultural and linguistic difference on a number of scales from the local (such as dialect) to the international (such as linguistic), crossing differences of nationality, regionality, class, ethnicity and religion. How do artists, who here in this context mostly originate from the global West, interact with artists from the global East in a post-colonial context? How do communications shift when they are physical and direct, or whether they are technologically mediated by email or video-calls? It may be fair to presume that in the global West, a high proportion of artists have received some kind of formal art education, or have spent time working in or around the art world. From these experiences they accrue a certain 'social capital' or 'cultural capital' (after Bourdieu, 1977) where people learn to act and speak in a way to communicate with specific people about specific subjects; this is an informal means of specialisation, to be able to talk about art in the art environment or the art world 'habitus' (Bourdieu, 1977). Working dynamics can be highly interrelated with the social aspect of the art world, where working practices are influenced by the people you know, meet and the contacts you form. Following this idea, how can we regain access to the non-art world and a different 'habitus'? Is there a certain universality or commonality to human experience that connects people cross-culturally? In terms of practical access to non-artist groups, collaboration often occurs through an initial mediator, a concrete example of the layers of mediation that occur in these projects. Artists inevitably also have large part of their lives not situated in the arts, and negotiate between the two. So why do we still use the 'artist' and 'non-artist' binary? We are inevitably limited by the terms available through which we define

ourselves. We may be different kinds of artist within this category, such as 'participatory' or 'dialogical' artist, but these are still problematic. The use of such terms may depend on how far we choose to inhabit and embody the idea of oneself as an 'artist', what this means for different people and how they enact it.

How collaborative works are chosen to be presented is key, as this forms the narrative of the artist to non-artist dynamic. Some may choose to explicitly state their collaboration with non-artists, others don't. It may not even be necessary to present it as a finished work at all. However specific the initial intention of the work is, if placed in a certain art context, such as works developed outside of art-world sites that are then placed into commercial gallery spaces, it's interpretation changes in multiple ways that are often out of the artists' control. In art contexts where the non-artists aren't involved, you may need to speak 'on their behalf', where they become the 'other' which supports your project. This is a problem of the politics of representation, which may occur in collaborative projects generally, but may be more problematic when it is a 'specialist' describing working with a 'non-specialist'. Outside of this context, the interpersonal relationship may be one of friend or neighbor (as in Magda Fabianczyk's Walkway Press), so re-framing them as 'the non-artist' in an art context may in turn indirectly feed into their ongoing interpersonal relationship, adversely or otherwise. There is the extra ethical dimension of a non-artist being shown to an audience as a subject, in terms of the power of the gaze, power relations of a gallery audience and art-consumer who are often white and middle-class (Arts Council, 2011), to the subjects who are often from minority groups. Accessibility needs to be considered not only in terms of physical site but also in the content of the work, and 'is impossible if ambiguity and obscurity, however provocative aesthetically and intellectually, bar comprehension' (Felshin, 1994). Some people view artistic practice as being reduced and oversimplified when catering for a general audience both in form and distribution, making them less legitimate or less credible works. Involving 'non-artists' in an authorial position may alter the production process, taking more time to complete the work because of discussions and consultations, and be seen as a less efficient working method. It is assumed that professional artists are specialists in their field, and have more knowledge and experience, and therefore have