Reconnecting with art in the public realm: A summary

For a detailed evidential and illustrated expansion of each paragraph, please see the attached document (chapter and page number provided in brackets).

Introduction *(page 4)*

Having spent 2013 working on UNEARTHED, a large commemorative sculpture in Stoke-on-Trent that involved thousands of people in it's conception, I have developed a focused interest in the role of art in the public realm. Having witnessed extreme satisfaction and dissatisfaction in the project I began to question how artists can do more to make art relevant to all by asking 'What can public art provide people that they can't get elsewhere?' and 'How can artists deliver this?' As my home town and area of specific interest for me, I chose Stoke-on-Trent as a case study for this research.

Work by previous movements *(page 7 chapter 1)*

As part of the initial stages of the research I looked at The Situationists International, The Sociological Art Collective and the art theory by Alain De Botton- 'Art as Therapy'. I found that what motivates all three is the desire to make art more applicable to the lives of all, not just the elite or art educated. The reasons for this include encouraging people to be more present in the public realm, to think more critically about the current social sphere and create opportunities for people to connect with their deeper selves and each other. In the case of The Situationists and The Sociological Art Collective, their movements ceased within 10-20 years when some members abandoned the practice as too ideological and others to broaden the movement into political action. Often in opposition to consumer culture, both advocated the use of art to reclaim the public realm for other, more nourishing activities. To allow people to connect with art, these three theories/movements involve the public in the art itself, bring art to the public realm and use explanation in plain terms to demystify the intentions of artists. This is all to reassure people that art can be a relevant facet of everyday life, not an exclusive language spoken only by the privileged. With this in mind, I focused on Stoke-on-Trent and how this message can be best delivered to it's people.

Questioning the Community *(page 13 chapter 2.1)*

I questioned a group of 40 volunteers at an Appetite 'Supper Club' about how they like to use Stoke-on-Trent. On the whole, the participants did not like to spend unnecessary time in city or town centres,

sometimes due to parking charges and others because they thought there is little else to do other than shop. Most of the participants do not use Stoke-on-Trent's town and city centres to socialise or wander and when asked about their feelings on other potential activities in these spaces (the example I used was skateboarding) an overwhelming majority were in favour. When asked where their favourite places were in Stoke-on-Trent, most people said parks and green spaces- arguably the opposite of it's urban centres. These initial results indicate that the urban community spaces in Stoke-on-Trent are not currently living up to their potential, and are largely perceived as unpleasant, unfriendly and unwelcoming places to be.

Questioning the Urban designer *(page 19 chapter 2.2)*

To find out more about the impact of Stoke-on-Trent's unique linear polycentricity and its effect on the community, I spoke to Mick Downs of Burslem based Urban Vision. The most interesting observation he made was how people who live in the North and South sides of the city travel to the centre (Hanley) but usually no further for shopping, socialising and entertainment. This means that the town centres can not achieve the 'critical mass' necessary to sustain vibrant urban spaces. Of course it is natural to gravitate toward the centre of a city as it can provide common ground for all, but the existing (and in many cases extraordinary) town centres provide an opportunity to create and observe networks that reach out to isolated communities. Without changing infrastructure artists can create these fluid network links that at once encourage others to visit lesser frequented areas and make it easier for other artists and social actors to gain and retain audiences.

Questioning the Sociologist *(page 23 chapter 2.3)*

When I spoke to Mark Featherstone, Senior Lecturer of Sociology at Keele University, I intended to find out more about the sociology of post industrial cities, particularly in Stoke-on-Trent. He spoke of a kind of collective depression that can befall a city that has experienced such a great loss (of prestige, influence and industry) in the past 30 years. It was his observation that, despite physical regeneration of such cities, the effect of that loss on the individuals is still present, having been swallowed by its sufferers leading to disengagement and apathy. This experience of systematic occupational redundancy understandably led many people to feel powerless; that investing time and energy in their communities would be pointless, fruitless and ignored. In times of great loss of wealth, vocation and community, people tend to hunxker down and protect themselves and their immediate families. This can lead to feelings of isolation, a narrowing of horizons, dissolving of communities and mistrust of others. Mark observed in his home town, Hull, that the visually impressive regeneration in the city centre had improved things on the surface, but had made the outskirts of the city even worse. Artists can, as mentioned in the previous chapter, encourage more fluid movement, direct focus around the city and also provide people with opportunities to express themselves and their loss.

Questioning the Art Community

I spoke to two groups of people involved in the arts in Stoke-on-Trent in various capacities, from community artists to academics to cultural development officers at the Council. I wanted to learn about their experiences and influences that motivate them to affect culture in the area. On the whole the groups echoed the sentiments expressed by Mick Downs and Mark Featherstone in regards to the effect the geography and loss of industry has had on the community, adding that the rapid decline of the area's stability and identity left it's people in an insecure situation that they were not prepared for. This unfamiliarity with diversification and adaptability has had a noticeable effect on aspirations in the city. The geographical layout makes it difficult for locals and visitors alike to navigate the city and identify appropriate places to gather, a reality which all the participants have focused on with micro-macro community work and further development of way-finding and place-making in the city. Despite (or more likely because of) these problems, artists are drawn to stay in Stoke-on-Trent to nurture it's potential, using Stoke's available resources like it's many green spaces and plain speaking, communicative residents to create work. By far the most frequent method and observation talked about in the groups was the need to 'start where people are', not only geographically but culturally. This way of meeting the audience half way directly tackles the preconception of art being for the elite by involving people in the conception and the creation of artwork- an ideal promoted by The Situationists and Sociological Art Collective in the 1960-70s.

Emerging Ideas

Based on the concordance between the ideas of past movements and the way artists interact with the community in the present day, I devised a preliminary manifesto based on 'diagnosis and prescription' taking these familiar words related to an individual's health, I proposed to look at the city as a living body, to observe it for symptoms of social 'ills' in order to diagnose a problem and prescribe art interventions as a treatment. Based on the research so far, one could conclude that the social ills revolve around geographical displacement and the swallowing of loss, though more action research is necessary to validate the effectiveness of this method.

Focusing more closely on observation, I wondered if there are any existing methods that could be appropriated by artists to evaluate urban spaces and it's inhabitants. I began to look at Permaculture, a relatively new alternative to intensive farming used by horticulturalists to create symbiotic environments that produce crops in a more natural and sustainable way. The method includes a long and detailed period of observation of a plot of land before installing plants animals and structures that help each other grow naturally and interdependently. It is true that the permaculturalist has much more control over the infrastructure and planning of his garden than a public artist over the public realm, but I am interested in the possibility of this technique being used to temporarily tackle empty shops, brownfield sites and for communicating with property developers, council members, city centre partnerships, business owners and the community to propose mutually beneficial solutions.

Inspired by The Situationist's ideas about consumer culture and by the domination of Stoke-on-Trent's urban centres by shops, I decided to look into the methods used by advertisers to draw people into the city centres at present. I discovered that many advertisers target their products towards the part of the self that craves higher self esteem, better self image and respect for and from others. This discovery led me to consider the motives of art in the public realm and how this differs from the experience offered by shopping. I concluded that, though advertisers perpetuate the need for self esteem, they never actually offer real opportunities to fulfil this need. What artists *can* do is create ways to really increase self esteem, by empowering people to take action, by connecting people to each other, by showing people how important and powerful they are and can be. In this way, art in the public realm can beat consumerism at it's own game; by at once exposing the baselessness of the consumer urge and offering genuine need fulfilment. Of course this is already going on in public spaces when artist intervene, but there might be some value in highlighting the intentions of this method to the audience. Also, I would like to explore the validity of the idea that a whole city could suffer from low or high self esteem.

Conclusion *(page 39)*

The history of Stoke-on-Trent, it's geography and it's loss of industry have in part led to present day issues of ill health, high unemployment, low aspirations and low self esteem in it's population. Twin this with the present massive funding cuts, mass demolition and rapid change Stoke-on-Trent's people are struggling to cling to positive images of the city. To alleviate the pressure, allow people to relax, communicate with others and experience positivity, Stoke-on-Trent's urban public realm is falling short; offering little more than the promise of fulfilment through shopping, which will never truly deliver it. There are many possible answers to the questions *'What can public art provide people that they can't get elsewhere?' and 'How can artists deliver this?'* but one answer has shone through this research from the beginning; public art can offer people real experiences of connection with their own ideas, other people and the place they live, it can empower people to express themselves and live consciously and critically and encourage people to find good in themselves and in others. Essentially, it can not only promote better self esteem, it can deliver it. Delivering it needs nothing short of a consensus, that arts should be promoted and allowed maximum exposure in Stoke-on-Trent's town and city centres to provide people with alternatives to the default shopping experience. This consensus needs to be between artists, local authorities, academics, local business people and land owners in order to create a culturally rich atmosphere that will lift the city and it's people. The artist's responsibility in this agreement is to reach out to those communities on the edges in order to create a sturdy and inclusive network. Encouragingly, I can already see huge steps being made towards these ends across the city, and it is this research project that has focused my attention and increased my own personal network to include these social actors and potential collaborators.