

Looking from the other side of the street: youth, participation and the arts in the edgelands of urban Manchester

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You have to keep your head down and learn to live like a ghost

Manchester (UK plc, as it might now be known) was the world’s first industrial city. Referring to the city’s rapid industrialisation in the first half of the 19th century, historian Asa Briggs memorably described Manchester as ‘the shock city of the age’ (Briggs 1958). A bearer of the characteristic values of modernity – ‘liberty, equality and Bentham’ - the city became associated with the oft-repeated motto, ‘What Manchester does today, the world does tomorrow’. Attributed by some to Benjamin Disraeli, 19th century British Prime Minister, the motto has since been reinvented as a strap-line to the regeneration of Manchester as a global brand, printed on t-shirts and badges bought by visitors and natives to the city alike. A city in which Marx and Engels began to map out the *Communist Manifesto* and Engels wrote *The Condition of the Working Class in England*, Manchester is now more associated with its football clubs cum global brands, with the players attached to these clubs becoming recognised the world over. In the post-Thatcher period, Manchester became a corporate venture, with the city council creating partnerships with private capital to support regeneration through business, sport and the creative industries, and urban global redesigns of sport, cultural engagement and leisure have played a key role here. As if to signal civic pride in the regeneration of the city, around the roundabouts of the inner ring road the words ‘This is Manchester’ are displayed, in case those driving by might mistake their location for anywhere else in the world.

This chapter offers an account of an arts and social welfare project in central Manchester which dwells dissensually inside the increasingly corporate, privatised and branded space of the city. The Men’s Room started life as The Blue Room in 2004, working primarily through drama, theatre and photography and youth work with young men engaged in sex work in Manchester’s Gay Village. As The Blue Room evolved, the project engaged visiting artists, visiting social care workers, as well as a small core team of artists and support staff, who undertook arts and drama workshops, outreach work, group work and drop-in sessions. The project was a response to issues facing vulnerable young men which Graeme Urlwin, one of the project’s founders, had first become aware of through his work with Albert Kennedy Trust, an agency named after a young man who fell to his death in 1987 from the roof of Chorlton Street Car Park in the Gay Village. Albert had run away from a local care

home and the site of his death quickly lent credibility to the view that he had become involved in ‘renting’ or selling sex. After a few years of life, the Blue Room expanded: increasing numbers of young men who neither engaged in sex work nor identified themselves as sex workers were engaging in the project and this led to a partner project, the Wednesday Men’s Drama Group, in 2008. Participants on both sides of the project share experiences of being looked after by the State, alcohol and drug use, mental health problems, educational failure and involvement in crime and, generally speaking, the men live outside of normative social and familial frameworks and are often not in secure accommodation. The aim is to engage young men who are not accessing support services in the City and are unlikely to do so and in this regard, the primary nomenclature and self-identification of the Men’s Room is as a creative arts project. The artistic identity of the project is important: young men can take part in creative or social activity without being asked to ‘perform’ problems or seek ‘fixing’ interventions. They choose the extent of their involvement in creative and social activities: they are not asked questions about their lifestyles and do not undergo any formal assessment. Social support is there if requested but the primary aim is to engage individuals as creative and complex persons rather than as in deficit or need. As part of this, the artistry of the project shapes a diverse cultural infrastructure of support: the Men’s Room have worked with a wide range of artists and in collaboration with an ever-increasing network of cultural organisations in the city, including major theatres, live comedy venues, independent cinemas, universities and museums.

The Men’s Room engages with young men who frequent areas historically and contemporaneously associated with the growth and decline of Manchester as an industrial city, and that now offer spectacles of urban regeneration, entrepreneurialism, consumption, hedonism and celebration, as well as poverty and exclusion: Piccadilly Gardens and the Gay Village. Some gravitate there because they are homeless or in temporary accommodation in areas of the city that may not feel like home: these areas of the city centre provide a sense of belonging. Interestingly, many of the participants not involved in sex work frequent the Gay Village, perhaps attracted by the permissiveness associated with the area and the possibility of blending in without having to look or act a certain way. The twenty-year period since Albert Kennedy’s death has seen the transformation of the space occupied by the gay community in the life of the city. Civil society organisations contribute to the ‘cultural offer’ of the City through Pride, the festival which occurs annually in August celebrating lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender communities, as well as contributing to the inclusion of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender perspectives in the development of public services. This transformation has been accompanied by the emergence of the ‘good citizen gay’ who evidences an ‘inclusive’ civic culture above all by participation in the market place. Echoing Giroux’s anxiety that the social spaces of the present materialise modes of ‘public pedagogy’ which produce limited identities and categorisations of self that uncritically serve a neoliberal economic agenda, here, ‘difference’ has become marketable, a feature of consumption (Giroux 2005: 4). It is said that one boy who contacted Lesbian and Gay Youth Manchester after coming out at school complained of being under pressure in the following terms: ‘Every-one wants me to go shopping with them’. Sexual citizenship has been conferred through money (with gay weddings another opportunity to spend it) and through the appearance and practice of pro-social responsibility. This positions the ‘good gays’ against the ‘bad queers’ on ‘the other side of the street.’ As explored below, whilst Gay Pride Manchester received tourism awards, the young men using the Blue Room felt themselves, in their own words, to be regarded as ‘scum’ and ‘shit’.

The Men's Room project is deliberately designed to occupy a space on the borders and edges of the corporate city – working with young people whose lives are rendered outcast and marginalised by the political and economic processes that produce those spaces. In the account of the project offered here, we draw on Rancière's term 'dissensus', and his distinction between 'police/politics', to describe the unsettling ways social space is symbolised and 'practised' by the Men's Room, and draw attention to the way in which this critical art project offers a choreography of social care that mirrors - rather than transforms - the social worlds of its participants. The complex design of the 'interventions' made by the project is crucial to understanding its significance: this design includes a commitment to maintaining a transient presence in a range of formal and informal spaces in the city; to valuing the men as creative and resilient agents rather than as units of deficit, risk or need; to non-intervention where appropriate; and to creating arts events that intervene dissensually in public spaces. In the account that follows, we describe four 'interventions' made by the project that exemplify the affective, democratic and participatory learning processes it stimulates – that is, its characteristics as a 'border pedagogy' to draw again on Giroux, that works to unsettle the commodification of city space and open up possible ways of being and doing otherwise in these spaces. We provide an account of four moments of unsettlement of the symbolic order of space in the city centre: an arts exhibition in the gay village; a conference for educators/social welfare professionals; a performance of a play in a publicly funded theatre; and a series of walking tours. In this, we ask: How can an art and social welfare project be designed in order to support a critical aesthetic and political project? To what extent does operating in an edgeland risk subjecting those who occupy these spaces to further marginalisation or exploitation?

The edgelands of informal care and learning

'Edgelands' are the ignored and neglected, yet familiar, areas of land that cannot be securely described as city or countryside and which offer a kind of wilderness inside and at the edges of cities. These areas constitute 'an incomprehensible swathe we pass through without regarding; untranslated landscape' (Farley and Roberts 2012: 5). In their poetic description of the edgelands of Lancashire, Farley and Roberts imply that edgelands counter the homogeneity of the high street and cultivated spaces of the city and countryside. Their account chimes with the Men's Room's challenge to discourses and practices of social welfare, and the ways in which the latter work in harmony with the development of good citizen-consumers into the normative spaces in the city. On encountering an urban wasteland, Farley and Roberts comment that 'the city, suddenly, has a new scale, an underness and overness, and the eye, having scarcely a moment to readjust from the enclosing streets and buildings, is overwhelmed' (*ibid*: 137). Importantly, they stress that edgelands – including wastelands - are always on the move, offering a diverse ecosystem and untapped resource for wanderers, and are far from the bleak environments depicted in television dramas and by psycho-geographers.

How does the Men's Room exhibit the characteristics of edgelands? To some extent, the project exhibits an edgelands mentality – moving round various sites in the city centre as part of shifting partnerships and networks that support its survival, and also in order to better engage with the young men by reflecting their transitional occupation of space. This occupation of sites generates resilience and helps to sustain the project, but it also means that the project at once occupies *and* eludes or blurs the gaze of police, welfare agencies, other networks of authority. The four moments from the project explored below – exhibit some of the ways this edgeland ethos and practice reveals

the city in a ‘new scale’ with ‘an underness and overness’ that overwhelms the eye. As such, the shifting occupation and eluding of the gaze consistently reverses, inverts, or subverts – as with a distorting mirror at a fair, these gazes are made to go awry in encounters with the project. In turn, new perspectives on social welfare and youth work are generated, and alternative modes of care and learning projected in both the imagination as well as in material space and time.

As noted above, the project maintains a consistent but transient presence in informal and formal spaces in the city – ranging from occupation of a youth services agency to spaces not conventionally associated with youth work. Traversing sites of marginalisation, exclusion and normative cultural space, the Men’s Room is characterised by an improvised use of space, with the project dwelling in a number of sites over the years. The spaces of informal care and learning which the project has materialised have happened in a small barbers shop in the Gay Village, a car park, a large tent in the street, the walls of derelict buildings (used to project animations), a large former warehouse used by the King’s Church (an African Pentecostalist Church), the green room of a major theatre, a University drama department, a live comedy venue as well as a youth services agency. Because these are usually not institutional spaces – or at least, they do not ‘belong’ to the staff of the project and their residence in them is impermanent - they are, paradoxically, spaces where the young men can partially identify and find a sense of belonging. Everyone involved is ‘in’ but not ‘of’ the space and only there temporarily, and this facilitates an equality and a mutual recognition which flies in the face of the assumptions embedded in ‘outreach’ (from ‘us’ who are included to ‘you’ who are not). In the Barber’s shop, the site of the weekly drop-in, there is no reception desk and the only obvious position for worker/client relationship were the barbers chairs which we were asked not to use. There have been discussions about a permanent venue but, to date, staff have preferred not to establish the project in a securely identified ‘place’, instead favouring temporary residence in ‘space’ within the city- centre beat of the young men that has a day-time purpose distinct from this evening-time use (for critical debates about ‘place’ and ‘space’ see de Certeau 1984, 117-8). This uncertain residence in space reflects the shifting patterns of participant engagement with the project: relationships with young men have often lasted for many years, but can be configured by fits and starts, appearances and disappearances, moments of achievement followed by moments of crisis.

The improvisation evident in the project’s use of space is reflected in its approach to participation and engagement at its core. Here, staff exhibit openness to change plan at a moment’s notice and an ability to translate disruption into creative contributions. They do not regularly undertake assessments and work in partnership with a range of agencies, and this adds up to maintaining a presence and offering unconditional forms of inclusion rather than an enforcement of support. There is an explicit contrast to mainstream youth work, therefore, where participation has been commodified to the extent that ‘out of school’ projects can be said to ‘welcome selective inhabitants of the margin in order to better exclude the margin’. In such practices ‘identity’ is provoked and binaries created through a series of discourses which readily polarise:

A discourse of the ‘youth divide’: those who are ‘at risk’ as against those who are ‘on track’;

A discourse of good versus bad young people: young volunteers as against rioting, feral youth;

A discourse of the body and sex: early sexual relationships against delayed pregnancy/marriage;

A discourse of growing autonomy and agency: already adult status against children and young people who need to be protected or who are in need of intervention;

A discourse of scales of expectation and what counts as cultural capital: 5 GCSEs grade A-C as against informal, non-institutional modes of personal development, citizenship and community.

Once such binaries are in place, it is possible for the work of a project like The Men's Room to be constructed as (and indeed, there is a risk that it becomes) a 'police' project, with the discourse and practice of the project focusing on dysfunctional families, sexual abuse and managing risk, in ways which remove the participants in the project from any sense of agency. Paradoxically, inviting young people to speak, in the context of these prevailing languages, can intensify marginality. Above all, what seems hard to challenge and make visible is the very system of classification and legitimisation at work in some practices of youth voice: quasi-governmental committee processes as against direct action; representation as against collective action. As it is these classification structures that afford and deny access to symbolic capital, a form of symbolic violence is performed against all those such as members of The Men's Room who do not access approved forms of participation. This suggests that claims about the access through youth work and other youth participation initiatives to forms of cultural capital should be treated with some ambivalence.

Yet – insofar as they do open up and construct spaces for voice outside the teaching machine – it is possible to think of youth work and informal education as a border pedagogy, a place of skirmishes as well as bridge-building in a system where symbolic violence is practised consistently through the communication codes of 'youth' against those on the other side of the classification (Giroux 2005, 2010). But this still leaves a problem to address: participation can be said to work for those already positioned in the mainstream but not for those whose lives are lived on the edge. Even in the very moment that participation projects engage with people at the edge, by accepting the positionings on offer as 'engaging the disaffected', 'reaching the hard to reach and chaotic', they work for the already mainstream. Rather than continuing to invoke secure forms of identity and processes of identification, perhaps the Men's Room offers a border pedagogy that unsettles the mainstream.

We draw on the term 'police' above very deliberately – taking this from Rancière. Some recourse to his distinctions between police/politics will be helpful for untangling this ambiguous and problematic terrain. In his exploration of the limits of democracy, Rancière offers two dimensions of thinking about the organisation and symbolisation of the social realm: the police and the political. He states that a separation is performed by the categorisation of 'people' or 'demos', which introduces a disjoint between the population and the people it represents (think 'at risk', 'excluded' as well as any other term that attempts to account for a group), creating 'a surplus in relation to every count of the parts of society' (Rancière 2010: 33). For Rancière, politics emerges in this disjoint: 'Politics exists ... in the form of a supplement to every count of the parts of society, a specific figure of the count of the uncounted or of the part of those without part' (ibid: 35). The phrase 'the part of those without part' is key to understanding the political – here, politics becomes present within and is a process of making present, that which is surplus, voided or excepted from any system of order or classification. This surplus is immanent in every sphere of social life (not simply in the zones of the marginal or excluded, but also across the 'mainstream').

As Rancière goes on to explain, conflict arises from opposition between ‘parties’ – people, objects and places that have a proper use, function, identity - and the surplus or void of every classificatory system, the ‘part of those without part’. Here, the ‘police’ does not refer to the police force in the everyday sense, but to the consensual symbolic order created by and protective of this classification and determined to exclude any sensibility or sense of the surplus. As such, the slogan of the police is: ‘Move along! There’s nothing to see here!’ and politics exists ‘in re-figuring space, that is in what is to be done, to be seen and to be named in it. It is the instituting of a dispute over the distribution of the sensible’ (ibid: 37). Rancière’s idea of ‘dissensus’ – describes a working against the consensual symbolic order constituted by the police: ‘the essence of politics consists in disturbing this arrangement by supplementing it with a part of those without part, identified with the whole of community ... Politics, before all else, is an intervention in the visible and the sayable ... *The essence of politics is the manifestation of dissensus as the presence of two worlds in one*’ (ibid: 36-7, italics in original). The partition of the sensible performed by the police divides, separates and excludes in the same moment of providing moments of legislated or permitted participation and places from which to speak: dissensus reveals the breaks in the sensible created by this move and critical art projects reside in the new sensibilities of the common that emerge. As a result of this, for Rancière, critical art ‘is an art that questions its own limits and powers, that refuses to anticipate its own effects ... forms of art that accept their own insufficiency’ (ibid: 149).

In its double move of occupying and traversing informal and formal spaces, and the discourses and practices of youth work and social welfare, the Men’s Room – at best - presences the unsettling, edgy surplus already resident in those cities/sites. With Rancière, Men’s Room staff do not make claims for the efficacy of this dissensual practice – there are no claims of transformed lives (in fact, they explicitly question ‘myths of linear progress’ when reflecting on individual participants’ engagement with the project). There is also a sense in which the project participates in the symbolic order identified as ‘police’ by Rancière - in working with agencies to offer support, access to welfare and housing, to monitor and report to the police any new kinds of risk facing young men who sell sex in the Gay Village. However, as will become evident below, there is a consistent effort to unsettle implicit to the creative and artistic impulse of the project. The project dances – in carefully choreographed ways – the line between police and politics. Here, new modes of informal care and learning are indicated in ghostly ways, as edgelands are uncannily present inside the normative, finding the cracks and edges that bring into being the presence of other worlds and inferring the presence and movement of unseen, non-normative, irregular, unfixed, outcast experiences within the realms of the declared, normative, regulated, fixed and included. This has ripple effects across the networks of partners and participants, helping to maintain a diverse social and cultural infrastructure of care in the city.

This resonates with Willis’s account of ‘ontological design’, where an object (and we might see the project as an object of sorts) is a thing that ‘things’ (she draws on Heidegger here) – it gathers, unites and shares a number of presences in one space and as such it is an active worldmaking (Willis 2006: 88). The project gathers together presences that are concealed under the shiny surfaces of the regenerated city, with no agenda to put these to use, but rather to be attentive to – via artistry and creativity – what accrues through their gathering. In the same way, as Heidegger suggests, ‘the bridge gathers the earth as landscape around the stream’ (ibid: 90), the project gathers young men, artists, social care workers, social and cultural institutions, in a range of informal and formal spaces, to presence a different way of thinking about informal care and learning in youth work and social

welfare – it gathers presences together without definition, and sees what imaginings emerge. Without stalling exclusion or securely sculpting inclusion, artists make use of creative projects to create points of encounter, extend worlds of relationship, express compassion and posit the possibility of a novel practice of youth work and social welfare inside the cycles of waste and emergency of late capitalist society. As part of this, the project resists the future and conditional orientations of welfare interventions, instead favouring the ‘here and how’ presence of a creative process; at the same time. By deliberately materialising a border spaces between institutional space and informal spaces (‘edgelands’), it introduces regular unsettlements of the rhetoric of transformation that supports polarised identities. What becomes present, what is presented, are new kinds of transformation – not of the young men, but in how we attend to and imagine our city – its possibilities, its profound inequities, its histories and its futures.

Looking from the Other Side of the Street

When the young men who arrived at Funky Crop Shop to take out cameras and make beautiful photographs of the streets and gutters, secret places and gardens, litterbins and reflections, the work which became ‘Looking from the Other Side of the Street’ in 2008 was still being designed. Over several evenings people sat in the barber shop and wrote poems and made drawings which would become the basis of silkscreen prints whilst others went out into the streets with the cameras. The images created included depictions of love hearts and the desire for love, the contents of litter bins with the word SHIT beautifully designed above the shimmering: direct and touching images offering a counterpart to the corporate Manchester brand characterised by ‘cool’ and accompanied by a flatness of affect.

The works were curated and displayed professionally by colleagues from The Lowry and the negotiations with NCP about the use of the metal grids which form the outside of their car park were productive. This is where the project started, in a tent, and the tent was erected again every night for a week to host the exhibition. Lads and Blue Room staff were there as exhibition guides.

These edgelands are also heartlands where the eye and heart are overwhelmed momentarily. The corporate space of the NCP Car Park looks across at Paddy’s Goose: iconic scenes of past times in the Gay Village become a temporary dwelling for the exhibition. For some the NCP Car Park on Chorlton Street is corporate, for others it is as iconic as the pub, signalling sexual freedom and hedonism. Both spaces, inside and outside, hold the social memory of gay men’s life in the city and the current realities of the sex trade too. Looking at the work in the exhibition, in these spaces, invokes the looking which precedes purchase by punters. The border pedagogy, with the camera as tool, creates a change of perspective and here, looking and enquiring are dissensually happening in places where police views are more usually aimed at consumption, either sexually, or in terms of numbers of free condoms distributed by health outreach workers promoting protection from HIV and other Sexually Transmitted Infections.

In the Barber’s shop, The Funky Crop Shop, a few doors down on Bloom Street, there is a more friendly space out of which the photographs and images are being created. There is a lot of chatter and some food. Some young men appear for the week and then are not seen again until the exhibition. Another comes week in, week out to dictate the poems as he cannot write. One week the car with food provided by the Church of God of Prophesy arrived a day early and we all eat a wonderful three-course meal. In these temporary dwellings which the project and others present in

the homeless community create, care is present – and relationship - and the normative gaze is unsettled. These are more equal relationships than those which usually characterise the relationship between services and clients and the role of ‘professionals’ is put into question.

A form of post-emotionalism and flatness of affect characterises the ‘marketing of difference’ which global capitalism has embraced. Excitement and amazement, fear and disgust, mark places where this flatness is challenged and so the edges and boundaries (the separating of the sensible) which these emotions point to as they emerge, are places of enquiry. Pleasure can be taken in the naming of unpleasure. During this project there was intense discussion of the helpfulness of identities, chosen or ascribed, particularly of the term ‘sex worker.’ All the participants were negotiating the shame associated with displaying their work in public, and the associated shame of being publicly available for rent. When the exhibition went up, one of the silkscreens – the one covered in love hearts - was very much in demand by a visitor to the exhibition. It might be imagined that here was a punter offering to buy not a sex act but a silkscreen depiction of a heartfelt cry for love and the answer to the question ‘Is it for sale?’ and ‘How much?’ was an ambivalent one.

Such a dynamic raised clearly the issue of taking responsibility in the new construction and redirection of boundaries in the emerging democratic space of street. Naming may be a form of ‘partition of the sensible’ for the purposes of the existing system and yet it may also enable a breaking of silence which involves an acknowledgement of the void, of the pain which is written out even whilst it is being created in the corporate world.

Here, people more usually looked at by CCTV cameras were themselves doing the looking and enquiring into the life of the city. Public performance, exhibition and compassionate witnessing changed the design of the street and changed – momentarily - the meanings of corporate space, making present the need for a wider transformation. From such edgelands it became possible to see momentarily emergence of new kinds of inbetween spaces and unsettlements. This happened – at least in part - through an encounter with the pain of expulsion and social abjection, so K’s photograph of a litterbin with the word SHIT at the centre of it formed a central focus of the exhibition.

‘People look on us like dirt.’

‘People shouldn’t look on us like dirt.’

The use of the language of ‘scum’, ‘shit’, ‘dirt’ and ‘rats’ makes present a process of social abjection which positions participants in a place almost outside and yet not quite totally excluded. It points to the void which ‘police’ accounts strenuously exclude. The display in a curated photography exhibition on the outer fence of a car park, the making beautiful of the SHIT in rubbish bins and in the gutters of the streets of the Gay Village unsettles this singular construction of the city for all who pass through the exhibition and work spaces and makes translation possible in relation to the emergence of a different world. During one of the Blue Room performances, Iranian demonstrators for democracy were marching with the slogan: ‘We are not dust and dirt.....’ the emergence of a different world signalled by the sense of the dust and dirt rising,in Blue Room performance as well as on the streets of Iran.

The ‘Down not Out’ conference

The 'Down not Out' Conference in June 2009 was the culmination of a three year period of working in partnership with the Manchester Homelessness and Dual Diagnosis Teams and was a creativity-led event for professionals and service users from across the City. The Conference posed the question of how the young men are usually seen by service providers, highlighting the following statement on the City Council at the time :

'Due to a frequently chaotic lifestyle ... the majority of clients have substance abuse problems and engage in begging to support this ... as a result they have difficulty sustaining commitments, keeping appointments, lack of confidence in services, difficulties in accessing services due to a history of anti-social behaviour or offending'

This is how clients are usually seen and the power to define their lives, to ask questions and create fixes to problems lies with the professional. No-one talks about 'hard to reach' services, only 'hard to reach' clients. The Conference was facilitated by The Blue Room as an arts and performance event and, during the preparation and performance of this event, the staff worked with project participants from other street homeless communities in the City, including the Big Life Drama Group and the Booth Centre. The processes of classification which afford and deny access to symbolic capital and which enact symbolic violence were the focus for the event. Over and over again the performances of participants returned people from their roles as 'clients' or 'service providers' to a sense of common ground, of shared humanity. One play presented the relationship between a grandfather and his grandson (who had become involved with drugs and the street homeless community) as a counterpoint to scenes of bullying and violence. Another play enabled mental health professionals to give voice to their unease about how they sometimes saw clients being treated. Towards the end of the day the clients took to the stage as the experts and the audience of professionals asked them questions.

The unsettling processes of critical pedagogy required a turning of the tables, a re-negotiation of settled patterns of relating. The unlikely space of The King's Church enabled that to happen. The King's Church is a large building on several floors, once a warehouse, which houses an enormous Pentecostal church. The 'Down not Out' event took over one floor of the building for two days of rehearsal and one day of the event. This space was an edgeland for everyone taking part as for liberal professionals the spaces of African Pentecostalism are 'other' and for the young men and other performers this was a formal space which they had not visited before as clients or service users.

Using methods of critical enquiry and critical dialogue the event created a borderspace where there is often mutual suspicion and incomprehension. One of the methods used to do this was to generate from Blue Room members a series of questions they would like to ask of professionals. The activity of questioning and assessing of course most usually flows in the other direction, in order to define and classify clients and apportion resources, so this turning of the tables was a critical act of unsettling.

The questions young men had for the professionals were:

How much do you get paid?

Why do you do your job?

Why is it so difficult to get help sometimes?

Why don't workers try to change things more?

Why do I have to stay in a hostel - a negative environment with drink and drugs - in order to get to the bottom of the housing ladder?

Why are you wasting my time?

In answering these questions the fact that many of those working with the young men who they encountered in services had personal connections with the experience of homelessness, addiction and mental health difficulties in their own families became visible, as did the relatively low pay of many people working in services, especially at the front-line. Forum-theatre style performances which enabled some answers and further conversation to emerge in the in-between space of the client-professional boundary. These non-approved questions brought the exchange and performance to life. As they took to the stage, the performers challenged and made visible the classification system which awards the right to ask questions and set agendas to one section of society (the experts) and calls on the others (the clients) to form focus groups. Each group, 'clients' and 'service providers', were able to live temporarily on the common ground of the Kings Church as performers and artists. This 'border skirmish' was redirected – temporarily – into a politics arising from the common ground of performance and away from the routinised clashes and divisions that exist between clients, professionals and researchers.

Piccadilly rises in the Royal Exchange Theatre

Piccadilly Gardens . . .

Beautiful on the face of it

All done up...

By day kids in nappies jumping in the fountain

To a soundtrack of drums from all over the world . . .

But by nightfall what was buried underneath wakes up

But by nightfall it's all chuggers, sherms and getting a chew off a dirt.

Them same drummers getting ragged by the TAU

That fountain . . .

Watch out for that fountain cos at night it becomes a whirlpool It pulls you in

Before you know it you're grazing for butts for your bens . . .

Watch out for offers to bill you a zute

You get sick with the ride

Cos it won't just be your face that some geezer thinks is cute.

Spinning and pulling you into its tide

Once you're in it

You're caught in its spin

Its chaos is magnetic

It's a powerful force that won't let you leave (Wallwein 2012, 11-12).

This extract is taken from *Thirsty*, written by playwright Louise Wallwein and Men's Room participants, and performed by four professional actors as part of a 'Northern Soul' event at the Royal Exchange Theatre early in 2012. During the play the audience witness a scam conceived by 'Poodle', the character speaking here. Poodle steals Kev's wallet and then befriends him, taking him to Piccadilly Gardens – an open space in the centre of the city - to drink vodka, and where he and

another character, Norman, try to discover the PIN for the cash-card in Kev's wallet. Here, we also meet 'Monster', a dog with his head stuck in a wall who figures as part of Norman's reality, and 'Pete the Pigeon', who is on an ASBO from Trafalgar Square and 'exiled to this provincial outpost'.¹¹ These latter characters are dramatic devices used to explore the internal dialogues of Poodle and Norman: at one point, Poodle says to Pete the Pigeon, 'if I can crack the PIN I can sort my rent out at the hostel, I can pay the lekky, buy some scran'. Similarly, Monster's interventions show the rising pressures on Norman: 'you'd better suss him quick or Poodle's just going to get him drunk and drag him to the cash point, beat him up'. In the speech above, Poodle introduces Kev to the hidden world of Piccadilly Gardens at the heart of the city, a regular haunt of Men's Room participants and not more than half a mile away from the audience. As Poodle's speech gathers pace it becomes inflected with the dirt, threat and chaos of the Gardens at night: a world of disorder, imminent violence and police surveillance. The play ends with Poodle sitting on the ground, knees to his chest and hood up - an anonymous, pathetic and uncannily familiar figure that closes the audience's temporary access to the complexity and fragility of the characters' survival in a world within worlds.

To refer back to Rancière's notion of dissensus noted above, importantly, the conjuring of a world within worlds in *Thirsty* happened without identifying the young men who collaborated in the writing of the play. The piece was performed by professional actors, not the participants themselves, and this strategy is typical of the careful representational practices of the Men's Room. It was also a response to the necessity of planning for the possible non-attendance of the young men at the performance. As Ben Turner, community projects coordinator at the Royal Exchange comments: 'there might be no group, so we needed a way of the Men's Room being represented that didn't mean they had to perform . . . also, if there is a group, it might be quite a challenge for us as a building'. The intention was to extend an invitation to a group that would not normally frequent the theatre, whilst at the same time not require them to 'perform' within the normative expectations of a community project. Importantly, this strategy of non-identification included the fact that sex work was not depicted in the play, other than through Poodle's comment above that 'it won't just be your face that some geezer thinks is cute'.

In fact, the production week at the Royal Exchange was well attended, with the men turning up early to attend rehearsals, mix with professional actors in the theatre's green room and rehearse their own piece, *Fish is England*, which was performed prior to *Thirsty*. This piece combined the serious with the ridiculous, keeping the audience enjoyably off-kilter and parodying the discourses of authenticity that figure in much participatory arts work. As part of the piece, Men's Room members - staff and participants alike - played a queer chorus of fish in a pet shop, wearing baggy overalls and long stripy socks, commenting on the audience, their own lives and the problems of Pete Street, the protagonist of the play. At the end of the play, Pete is in crisis - he comes to the front of the stage, covers his face with his hands and the audience hears a voiceover of his hopes for the future. The fish then parody this: 'in five years' time I want to be married to a nice Cod'; 'in five years' time I want to be living in a sea of passion'; 'in five years' time I want to be in the wild'. Here, as in *Thirsty*, participants did not 'perform' their experiences for an audience of others. The chorus of fish offered a parodic doubling of the worlds of the participants present, and this embedded a protective aesthetic into the choreography of the performance. Importantly, this also happened as part of the framing of the event. The programme did not identify which was the community performance and which was the 'professional', a decision that communicated a sense of value for both pieces and that fits well with the Royal Exchange's commitment to placing community engagement at the core of its

activities. The theatre has made changes to its spatial practices in order to facilitate this - for example, removing protective barriers from the foyer space and sharing the resources of the theatre with an increasingly diverse range of community groups. Echoing the outcomes of the two 'interventions' above, the 'transformations' materialised here are spatial and relational – the project challenged the exclusive aesthetic hierarchies of a cultural institution, and this was as important as providing an opportunity for creative development for participants.

By way of conclusion – the paradoxes of street pedagogy

A city is community of strangers sharing a common, and for many participants of the Men's Room, there are few spaces you can go and be with people who are like you. A project like this therefore creates a sense of freedom for cultural educators who work at edges and at peripheries to challenge and develop democratic practices. Engaging with participants who do not operate in the so-called normative realm in a way that mirrors and unsettles (rather than promises to intervene or transform) lives and worlds – what is revealed as precarious is the system of classification which order spaces as well as the lives this system includes and excludes. Working creatively through arts practices is essential as these practices work to:

Enable as well as disrupt symbolisation

Allow provisionality – provisional, imagined and improvised identities and relationships can emerge

Give permission to play and therefore to imagine

Encourage ways of being with others

Encourage trying things out with temporary and unconditional commitment

Welcome the surreal

Welcome failure

Work against the flatness of affect, against (though recognising) 'left melancholia'.

We have also identified youth work as a pedagogy involved in border skirmishes with the symbolic violence which is practiced consistently against those at the bottom of the classification ladder. Arguably, by traversing sites of marginalisation, exclusion and normative cultural space, the Men's Room illuminates the 'state of exception' covered up by the appearance of norm and order in liberal democracies (see Agamben 2005). The choreographies of care exhibited by the Men's Room highlight the interdependence of normativity and failure, crisis and emergency that lies beneath the sheen of a regenerated, post-industrial city. It celebrates the creativity of the young men that it encounters, and at the same time reveals the structural inequities, spatial, social and economic, that shape their lives.

Is it reasonable to refuse to participate with 'outsiders' in a debate about urban design and aesthetics, about the regulation of 'aggressive begging' and 'rough sleeping', for example? Given the need to attend to the excluded in order to discover new modes of being and doing in cities (in the light of ongoing issues relating to sustainability, democracy and social care for example), how can we

enable radical forms of democracy and participation? The ‘Down not Out’ conference began to prefigure ways of doing this via a reversal of roles and in its use of space, and this also happened as part of the design of the dissensual interventions described above. Most recently, a participatory research project undertaken by the young men and one of the authors has reversed and extended the mode of outreach practised by the project in order to help the men respond to the questions: ‘How have you survived in the city? What spaces have been important in your survival?’ Outreach activities of the Men’s Room include ‘walking the beat’ - a twice-weekly tour of areas in the Gay Village frequented by young men selling sex, focusing on the reduction of harm, including dispensing condoms and lubricant and passing on safety advice, as well as offering friendly, supportive encounters. It includes regular walks through the Village, Piccadilly Gardens and surrounding area, and occasional meetings outside of sessions. Here, the practice of walking in the spaces of the city centre frequented by the men invites accidental encounters that might lead to valuable moments of practical, social and emotional support. In remapping street spaces by walking, Men’s Room staff mirror the unofficial maps of non-attachment and unbelonging choreographed by the men, combining regular appearances with a lack of fixed abode in a way that effectively extends the choreography of care outside of formal sessions.

The research project, in the style of the Situationists, ‘detoured’ this practice of walking. Here, we invited young men to lead the researcher and an artist on a walking tour of city centre sites that they associated with their survival – to take photographs, and if they wanted, to describe the site.ⁱⁱⁱ These walks revealed the city in a new scale, including neglected nooks and crannies of the city, and gave small, nondescript sites a sense of extraordinary significance. It also extended the supportive street pedagogy of the project by offering opportunities for compassionate witnessing. The walks provided an insight into the emotional valences of everyday city spaces. We were taken to multi-storey car parks, the roofs of buildings, park benches, underneath railway arches, support centres for the homeless, canal towpaths, canal bridges, patches of grass, alleyways, lampposts, a spot next to a wall. These walks into edgelands generated a new attentiveness to the city – culminating in a startling body of images and testimony that we hope will lead to a creative outcome as well as a research report. We heard stories of radical sociality amongst those living on the street, as well as exploitation and threat. We heard stories of hope, desire, escape and adventure, but also terrible isolation and violence. We heard about intense, uncontrollable feelings - too large for the present – being spoken out loud to statues or screamed from the tops of multi-story car parks. We were pleased to discover that it was impossible to go hungry in Manchester, and to hear about the compassion of members of the police and security guards policing corporate spaces – but we also heard about abuses of power. We learnt how to use alcohol to sleep, and what to do when you need to eat, piss, shit, shower when living on the streets. We heard about punters who don’t pay up and we learnt how to lure, intimidate and humiliate gay men who want to pay for sexual encounters. We learnt how to survive by collecting special offer vouchers from city centre bars, how to identify the bakeries in the city centre that were good for shoplifting, what to do when you need an address, and about the importance of free internet provision at the library. We learnt that being homeless can feel like getting a break to sort your head out – and that isolation was sometimes a welcome relief as it meant staying out of trouble.

The walking tours invented a symbolic order for the city that was small-scale at the same time as omnipresent and pulsating with significance – like Heidegger’s bridge, our walks brought the city into being by gathering and sharing presences that had not been seen or heard in this way. The

experience of walking – keeping moving, not settling in one site for long - seemed important, as did placing the young men in charge of the symbolic constitution of the experience. Reflecting the police/politics ambiguity of the Men's Room, we were moved to tears but also felt like voyeurs, slum tourists, local authorities, unwelcome and alien visitors in a city we did not recognise. We learnt that the small, nondescript spaces of the city – a pile of bricks, the third story of a car park, a spot of grass, a wasteland just off the high street – can be experienced as more secure and supportive than the unpredictable and provisional social domain – spaces are familiar, reliable, unchanging, provide somewhere to hide, to invent yourself, to see and hear, to secrete knowledge. But there is always a risk of being moved on from these sites. Spaces are things that promise a temporary solidity but are not homes to settle in permanently - as the arrival of the police, the security guard, the social worker, and an instruction to move on as there is nothing to see here, is ever-imminent.

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ⁱ This chapter arises from participatory observation with the Men's Room from 2004 to 2013, and draws on previous work published by each author (Janet Batsleer (2011) 'Voices from an edge. Unsettling the practices of youth voice and participation: arts-based practice in The Blue Room, Manchester' *Pedagogy, Culture & Society*, 19:3, 419-434; Jenny Hughes (2013) 'Queer choreographies of care: a guided tour of an arts and social welfare initiative in Manchester' *Research in Drama Education: The Journal of Applied Theatre and Performance*, 18:2, 144-154). Thanks are due to Men's Room staff and participants for welcoming us to the project and facilitating our research.

ⁱⁱ Anti-social behavioural order: a civil order made against a person who has committed an act of anti-social behaviour, designed to restrict their behaviour in some way. Trafalgar Square is in London, a site known historically for its population of pigeons.

ⁱⁱⁱ This research project was conceived and carried out by Jenny Hughes and Ali Roy from the Psycho-Social Research Unit at the University of Central Lancashire.