Reflecting on working with marginalised communities; some thoughts…

On Sharing

If we 'harvest' histories from within a community, do we automatically have the right to share them with a wider audience? Should we acknowledge and respect that communities are the custodians of their histories and by holding onto them they may be seeking to preserve their culture, customs, and traditions? Do we value stories, memories, and experiences less if we cannot share them with the wider world; is the act of sharing a necessary and expected outcome of participatory arts activity? Whose benefit is it for and who benefits from it? Do we use it to validate/justify our work?

On Trauma Informed Practice

Should participatory artists be trauma informed? When we work with marginalised communities do we need to know how to understand the barriers to participation, such as suspicion, distrust and hostility, as potential responses to past or ongoing trauma? What needs to happen for dedicated time to be built into projects to support the psychological needs of participants; is it acceptable that artists are often expected to provide this support through their unpaid emotional labour? Are commissioners/funders neglecting their duty of care to both the artists that they contract and the communities that they work with if these issues are not considered and mitigated for?

On Power

How could funding and commissioning mechanisms be more responsive when working with marginalised communities? Often a project will look great on paper, but when in the field, it's not unusual for artists to find themselves responding to the perceived needs, rather than actual needs of the community. How could funders/commissioners embrace working in the unknown and build projects that encourage social change through uncovering new insights and fresh perspectives? If the need of a community is decided by someone sitting on the periphery of it and the outcomes of a project decided before work starts, who is holding the power and how is it operating?

On Partnership Working

And finally, are project partners who have an existing working relationship with marginalised communities put in a vulnerable position when they make introductions on our behalf? If trust in the project breaks down, does that create a rupture in our partner's relationship with the community it serves? How do we ensure that we repair any harm caused before we leave the community?

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