

Katie Smith asks: are social media-led artists' projects a challenge to the traditional model of participation in the arts?

An article published in a-n magazine (May 2012)

Participation in the arts presents itself as a complex and abstract concept blurring the boundaries between production and consumption, artist audience. It challenges the notion that art should shock, disrupt and disturb the viewer's understanding of the world by providing a feedback loop for ideas and views and a channel for co-creation. Its attributes are seen to benefit society and civil life through the wealth of social outcomes that it can deliver.

A participatory project will typically bring together a specific group of people to engage in a creative process in a non-art space such as a prison, healthcare setting, pupil referral unit or traveller site for example. Funding is often a complex arrangement with substantial levels derived from non-art sources and participatory artists can find themselves with the multifarious task of balancing the artistic integrity of a creative process with the attainment of desirable outcomes as justification for funding.

Having worked as a participatory artist for over ten years it is my observation that often the most transformational effects of creative participation happen on the periphery; they embody the unexpected, immeasurable and often intangible subjective experiences of the participants involved. They can't be planned for or easily captured on a funder's evaluation form and disappear into the ether when a project has finished.

Reflecting on these 'invisible' effects led me to question what would happen if the traditional framework for participation is removed. Can the formulaic trinity of funder, target population and located space be traded for uncertainty and serendipity in a virtual world? I decided to migrate to the web to find out; one blog post and a tweeted request for help later, I had crowd-sourced introductions to three artist-initiated projects worth investigating.

Each of the three projects developed from an invitation made via social media; Lucy Phillips chose Facebook as a democratic space to make hers. She explains, "I wasn't approaching an audience that were into photography or art; I was approaching a random selection of individuals who knew me". This random selection of individuals ranged from school friends to professional contacts and were scattered across the globe. Each participant received a matchbox-sized pinhole camera with the instruction to photograph "what cannot be seen". Once this mission was completed, the cameras were returned to Phillips to be processed. The resulting images, held within a Flickr gallery, make compelling viewing, revealing intimate and often deeply hidden parts of the participants' lives.

David Gillett's rationale for using Flickr for his project 52 by 52 goes beyond using the platform as a gallery space. He saw the potential of using a pre-existing framework to encourage the growth of an autonomous community. He commented "it's a neutral ground in a sense; you've come into it and they've come into it rather than them coming to you". This ideology has certainly paid dividends as the project has attracted a thriving community of participants who eagerly respond to weekly challenges set by accomplished photographers, such as Martin Parr, not only by posting images but through mutual critique and support.

Whereas Phillips' and Gillett's participants' role is to create the 'material' of their projects, Kirsty Hall's were the conduit between the on- and off-line elements of her project 365 Jars. On (almost) every day in 2011, Hall created and released an 'art jar' into the wild with the intention of it being found and kept by a member of her audience. Her blog was used as the hub of her project, not only documenting each jar's creation and release but its subsequent discovery and relocation. This interactivity added another dimension to the project, built momentum and created a sense of shared experience as Hall explains, "it's that moment of discovery and I like that it brings different voices to the blog, then it's not just my blog with my voice and my experiences of the jars".

Each of the three projects were initiated for different reasons; Phillips was intrigued to see if she could ignite her passion for art and photography in others, Gillett wanted to develop his creativity beyond the visual realm and Hall wanted to commit to daily practice and actively engage with her audience. Their motivations were not financial and each artist offset the 'costs' of their project with the benefits they provided to their practice and the authentic relationships that they built.

What Cannot Be Seen, 52 by 52 and 365 Jars all have characteristics of the 'gift economy'. Beyond the creative content of each project, the 'gifts' that pass between artist and participants take the form of information, critique and support and these are the resources invested into each community to enable it to thrive. It seems that artists who develop social media-led projects in this way are well placed to present a formidable challenge to the traditional model of participation in the arts.