

B+B Meeting Points

Sarah Carrington and Sophie Hope

B+B is the curatorial partnership between Sarah Carrington and Sophie Hope. Founded in 2000, our practice emerged in a critical response to the shift in cultural policy under New Labour who promoted the idea that art should and could have tangible social benefits. Through a practice that encompasses exhibition making, event hosting, evaluations, research and workshops, we have been investigating the underlying neoliberal agenda within contemporary cultural production. Our projects create spaces to question the artists' role in society and the political motivations behind specific projects.

Early on in our practice, we recognised a resistance to a critical discourse on socially engaged art practice in the UK. We would argue that this is a result of the oppressive political agenda from central government that influences perceptions of art. We have always been determined to create more productive dialogues that move beyond understandings of socially engaged art practice as worthy and policy driven. One of the ways we have sought to understand better our own context is through looking outside of the UK to learn from other independent artists and curators about how they are negotiating their own political and social landscapes. Through a series of projects and events over the last few years (*B+B at Home* and *Trading Places*, for example) we have presented the work and strategies of artists from South East and Central Europe to UK audiences. Our new project entitled *Reunion* will bring together artists from the UK and South East Europe through a fictional Union and series of exchanges to generate links between diverse approaches to a socially engaged art practice.

- looking elsewhere

From March to September 2003 we were hosts at the Austrian Cultural Forum in London. Our six-month programme was called *B+B at Home* and followed on from a programme of residencies organised by Anthony Auerbach which included Roman Vasseur's *Office of Anti-Matter* (2001) and visits by Klub Zwei (2001), *Museum in Progress* and *Dezentrale Medien* (2002). In March 2003, we were invited by Anthony Auerbach to programme the gallery space and decided to make ourselves at home there and invite artists and curators from Central Europe to take part in an informal programme of residencies, exhibitions, public interventions and discussions.

In hosting *B+B at Home*, we wanted to test the possibilities of transporting context-specific strategies and processes from one place to



another. How do we communicate a political and social reality dealt with in a project if it is unfamiliar and distant from our own? What would our role be as translators? Ideally, the position of the translator is one of distanced neutrality, serving as a conductor, transmitting knowledge and communication. This ideal is rarely realised however, as there is an abiding imbalance of power between those describing and those described. Through *B+B at Home*, we presented approaches that attempted to break down this distorting power relation and create a space of self-conscious translation in which a critical awareness of positions and perspectives are integral.

- supporting processes and building networks: B+B at Home

At *B+B at Home* we wanted to provide a stopping-off point for ongoing projects and practices. It was important for us to develop our earlier approach to supporting socially-engaged practices through revealing and opening up the structure of the residency whilst continuing to question what it means to transport a context-specific practice from one place to another. In developing the programme, we undertook research trips to Austria, Hungary, Slovenia and the Czech Republic. We also visited cultural centres in London to understand more about the role and function of a diplomatic cultural office.

One of the artists taking part in a *B+B at Home* residency was Tadej Pogacar (also known as the P.A.R.A.S.I.T.E. Museum of Contemporary Art). During his stay, Tadej continued research into 'Constructed Cities', his investigation of socialist town planning and 'Code: Red', his ongoing exploration of the global sex trade. 'Code: Red' exposes and recharges the global patterns of self-organised sex worker's groups by arranging meeting points for discussion, exchange and activism. The project has so far taken place in Venice (2001) in collaboration with Comitato per il Diritti Civilli delle Prostitute, and New York (2002) with Bayswan, an organization providing information on sex workers' rights. Through public actions and interventions, artists, activists and protagonists discuss issues such as the impact of globalization and new technologies on sex work, control of the public body, parallel economies and marginal communities. These discussions have created an informal network for further group actions and interventions in the cities participating.

'Code:Red' also urges us to examine our prejudices, misunderstandings and current systems of control and suppression by providing extra platforms for communication and awareness. The project is reliant on existing networks of sex workers' rights organisations and has to feed back into them in order to progress and develop. Rather than acting as a 'parasite' feeding on the network, the P.A.R.A.S.I.T.E. Museum tries to strengthen existing lines of communication. 'Code:Red' opens up issues of sex-work and migration to diverse publics, encouraging understanding and enabling action.

- focus on strategies for change: Trading Places

B+B at Home generated a broad network of artists and organisations in the UK and Central Europe. Our interest in translating practices had been tested with *B+B at Home* but we felt a need to develop it much further by focusing on a specific issue or way of working. This emerged through *Trading Places*, an exhibition we developed at the Pump House Gallery in Battersea Park that dealt with migration, collaboration, activism and



contemporary art. During an early research trip to Vienna, we were struck by the amount of artists we encountered who described their practice as 'working with refugees' or 'giving voice to migrant communities'. We were keen to understand this further and set it against the growing theoretical and aesthetic explorations of the border, the like of which dominated Documenta 11. We wanted to investigate where these two approaches meet and collide? What are the consequences? Where does the power relation lie in a process of representation of an 'other'?

Trading Places was also developed in response to the significant lack of debate on art and migration in London. Issues of asylum and immigration gain widespread media attention in this country, however there are few opportunities for constructive dialogue on prejudices and representation. *Trading Places* coincided with the expansion of the EU and offered a platform to discuss Britain's relationship to Europe and its borders with projects that investigate, map and report experiences of migration.

We wanted to reflect the contradictions between multifarious approaches and raise issues of responsibility, after-effect and the power relation through the structure of the exhibition. As in *B+B at Home*, we worked with design duo OFFMO to devise a system of display throughout the exhibition. On the ground floor of the gallery we introduced visitors to issues of representation with Lisl Ponger's photograph and Asla Isanovic's powerful film expressing the frustrations of an artist labelled 'Balkan' whose work is constantly aligned with war and conflict. Again, like *B+B at Home*, we moved into the gallery and turned the first floor of the Pump House into our office and archive space. It was crucial that we had a presence in the exhibition in order to generate conversation around works and to introduce audiences to project folders that were presented of collaborative or ongoing projects, such as *Wochenklausur's* intervention into labour laws of migrants living in Graz as well as documentation of 'Code: Red' by Tadej Pogacar.

Moving upstairs again, the second floor displayed *Delivery 2*, a large commissioned work by Phil Collins in which he worked closely with a family from Kosovo living in London. Collins hand-delivers portraits of asylum-seekers in the UK back to relatives in their country of origin, returning with a newly taken picture of each, examining the importance of photography in specific situations, and the common misconceptions surrounding refugees and asylum-seekers. Alongside *Delivery 2*, a series of video works by Ursula Biemann, Esra Ersen and Marko Raat were presented, each conveying differing experiences of migration. The floor above presented *City Views*, an ongoing project by Austrian artist Martin Krenn who

photographs European cities from the perspective of politically active migrants he encounters in each place, as well as a new work by Zeigam Azizov.

On the final weekend of the exhibition, we worked with Susan Kelly (Goldsmiths University) and John Nassari (University of East London) to devise an afternoon workshop that focused on strategies of representation or action. It was crucial that everyone attending was able to bring their own questions and responses to the work and issues presented. We set up small break out groups to take forward specific issues, such as notions of change and the responsibility of art to take on political and social topics. We discussed the different motivations of activists and artists and the 'effectiveness' of different strategies and positions one takes in order to highlight issues, try and change things or merely critique the institutions and individuals who assume they have a right to effect change. There was an emphasis on whether it is better to reject the 'system' entirely to avoid becoming its social conscience or whether the strategy should be to negotiate in order to work towards change through communication.

The afternoon was hardly concluded however and many questions were left hanging in the air. We were determined not to let this be the final space for discussion and looked for opportunities to attach ourselves to debates in the future. The exhibition raised a lot of press interest locally, and was even covered by CNN. The tag-line that 'art helps refugees to communicate' seemed appealing to media keen to appear as liberal. We wanted to take this further and to continue to unravel the notion of the artist as a channel for communication, looking at who the communication satisfies.

We took these questions to a workshop at the European Social Forum in October 2004. It was useful for us to be working outside of an art context and to bring together a network of interested participants from the worlds of activism, art and social practice. We developed the workshop with John Nassari and Margareta Kern and created a scenario for a role-play in which we directly addressed how and why artists are working with migrant communities. The scenario offered was; a commissioning agency is attempting to set up a project in a detention centre for unaccompanied minors and young refugees. The question we asked was whether it should go ahead, and if so, on what terms? We divided the group into detention centre managers, funding bodies, local anti-migrant residents, local migrant-rights groups, asylum seekers and artists. The resulting discussions allowed the participants to address the multiple agendas and politics at play in a project that aims to 'use' art to give voice and the inherent ironies this implies.

- building a long-term support structure: Reunion

B+B at Home set out to translate and support context specific practices from Central Europe in London. *Trading Places* sought to bring together critical socially engaged practices from the UK



and Central and South East Europe. The workshop at the European Social Forum was looking specifically at how and why artists are working with a social focus in the context of UK neo-liberal cultural policy. We are now in the process of pooling our research and interests in continuing a dialogue between UK and Central and South East Europe. Our research coincides with an interest more widely within the UK art world with artists from 'new Europe'. Through our research and conversations with artists and organisations from post-socialist, pre/new-EU Europe, we have heard a lot of resentment and frustration at this geographical determinism of practices. We have also found increasing points of connection between the approaches and political positions of independent organisations based in Central and South East Europe and our own.

In an attempt to overcome geographical stereotyping of practices, and to start first with points of connection and support strategies, we are developing *Reunion*, a long-term action research project. *Reunion* is motivated by our interest in finding a reciprocal model to support and exchange approaches, as well as investigating how a support structure for developing practices could be sustained by multiple partners. It was crucial that we began this process slowly without imposing a structure prematurely. We undertook research trips to the former Yugoslavia (in March 2005) and attended events led by the networking organisations such as the Middle South East Meeting run by <Rotor> in Graz (November 2004). Our research method is based on informal conversations and the exchange of ideas and experiences of working in relation to the politics of place. We want to find out what our common interests might be and how we can develop ways of learning more from each other through practice. We would like to move forward with the project through the establishment of a fictional Union of practitioners from the UK and Central and South East Europe. This Union would create a space to find out what it is that we are fighting for as cultural producers and to look at how and why it might make sense for us to try and gain power as a trans-national group in order to support independent practices for the future.

Throughout this initial phase, it has been important for us to continually question our role in the process. We have been on our trips, but why it is that we are interested in 'the region'? What's our political position? And what do we hope to achieve? We have attempted to define it by proposing *Reunion* as an open research process that investigates how and where there is a space for socialist thought and potential within contemporary art practice in the light of the current neo-liberal system in the UK, and in the increasingly privatised economies of post-socialist countries. Through the establishment of a fictional union of cultural producers and a series of public meetings, residencies and events *Reunion* will ask: What can we learn from one another? Is there the need for a 'new left' politics within socially engaged art practice? How can we articulate our roles and positions from specific contexts and histories?

Based on our work and research into the region since 2002 and conversations with groups and organisations in the former Yugoslavia this year, we have identified a number of key themes or issues to take forward to the second phase of *Reunion*, which will be the development of a series of projects and exchanges. The Union will run alongside this programme as a critical support structure, helping to translate contexts and address issues emerging.

We set out with a primary focus on policy and

were struck by the impact of the work of external agencies such as the Soros Foundation in the former Socialist Europe through the establishment of Contemporary Art Centres in many major cities. Since Soros withdrew this type of funding from the region in 1999, the infrastructure has remained in place in some locations but activities are much reduced. It has on the whole been replaced by a lack of strategic thinking on culture from state departments, and with international agencies taking a local 'regional' focus (for instance Pro Helvetia and the British Council are both directing funds to local 'networking' programmes in the Former Yugoslavia). We have also heard a lot of resentment about cultural 'networks' as a tool to generate 'regional' identity for practice and have discovered energetic and critical responses within practice through groups such as *Drugo More* and *WHW* in Croatia, and *kuda.org* in Serbia.

What is the potential of a socialist art practice in Europe today? How can we reposition and politicise socially engaged practice collectively, beyond the confines of our own social and cultural contexts? Would this enable us to resist (or at least maintain a healthy and productive critical distance from) our inevitable transformation into an ideal neo liberal immaterial workforce? *Reunion* will begin by considering how art is employed in public and social contexts, and how art and culture is perceived in 'bridge-building'. We will work with groups engaged in projects that attempt to engage communities in processes of change, and will create meeting points for sharing strategies and ideologies between contemporary cultural producers in Europe today.

If you would like to find out more about Reunion, contact B+B through their website: www.welcomebb.org.uk

LINKS

Leave to Remain: www.leavetoremain.org

Photoinsight: www.photoinsight.org.uk

PARASITE Museum: www.parasite-pogacar.si

Wochenklausur: <http://wochenklausur.to.or.at>

Austrian Cultural Forum London: www.austria.org.uk/culture

Pump House Gallery: www.wandsworth.gov.uk/gallery/

Bayswan: www.bayswan.org

Comitato per il Diritti Civilli delle Prostitute: www.luccioleonline.org

Martin Krenn: www.martinkrenn.net

Zeigam Azizov: www.iniva.org/archive/person/423

<Rotor>: <http://rotor.mur.at>

WHW: www.miz.hr/whw/

Drugo More: www.drugo-more.hr

<http://kuda.org/>

