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ART: PROCESS: CHANGE

LORAINE LEESON



Art : Process : Change

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Loraine Leeson is Senior Lecturer at Middlesex University, UK, and was Senior Research Fellow at the University of Westminster, UK.

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Art : Process : Change Inside a Socially Situated Practice Loraine Leeson

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Loraine Leeson



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Foreword

This important and timely book by Loraine Leeson covers a crucial period in the development of contemporary art practices. It seems like a long time since the English art world mantra was "art and politics don't mix" and that painting on canvas was the ruling hegemony. This was one of the first accusations against many artists such as myself who are slightly older than Loraine Leeson and Peter Dunn (Dunn is a long time collaborator who then and subsequently made his important contributions to the field), with Leeson going on to create innumerable key projects, which are sometimes miscategorised as "political" art. Of course there is no such animal-all art is economic, ideological and political in different proportions. This notion was part of a major struggle by artists such as Leeson during the radical rethinking of art and its practices in the seventies, although currently it is no longer necessary to eliminate overt or covert relations between art and politics. Art forms such as Abstract Expressionism, which claimed universal and timeless validity when I was a student, turn out to be neither timeless nor universal, but of a place and a time-the Jackson Pollock I saw at the Tate Gallery as a thirteen year old is not the Jackson Pollock we are seeing now.

From Hogarth to Dickens and Cruikshank, to the short WW2 propaganda film *Target For Tonight* and documentary *Night Train*, and even The Beatles song *Eleanor Rigby*, the documentary can be seen as a classic of English art, and a key element in Leeson's projects. Between the radicalism of the late sixties, particularly the important events of 1968 when I was part of the occupations in Hornsey and the London School of Economics, and the current situation with globalisation and the death of the avantgarde (and possibly of the great white male), there has been a complete revolution. The integration of politics/action and culture at this time has been seen in such slogans as "Beneath the paving stones, the beach", or "If there is no dancing at the revolution I'm not coming", or, from a different feminist perspective, "If I'm still expected to make the coffee it's not a revolution", and, of course, the classic "If u r not part of the solution u must b part of the problem".

I was first challenged with the assertion that there was no history of this kind of activity in art at my 1970 exhibition *Garbage Strike* at Sigi Krauss Gallery in Covent Garden. In my search for a historical trajectory I cited Wordsworth, a poet who I encountered through my education in my Cumbrian village, as well as other poets and writers of that time. The general perception of Wordsworth as a poet of landscape is very much mistaken however. In *The Country and the City*, Raymond Williams quotes: "although people know me as a poet, for every hour I spend writing poetry I spend twelve hours considering the economic and political condition of men".

In fact Wordsworth was criticised for his choice of subject matter, which was considered unsuitable for poetry since the convention had been to write about the Greek gods and mythologies. He however democratised both subject and language, and Leeson is following in this radical tradition. Shelley, too, in his poem *Queen Mab* criticised the judiciary, the monarchy and the structure of British politics. Despite this, *Queen Mab* was subsequently in the pockets of 20,000 Chartists in the great rallies of these forbears of the unions several years after Shelley's death. Similarly Emily Brontë in *Wuthering Heights* embraced notions on exclusion with race as an invisible presence, touching on exclusion, migration, gender and sexuality, while Mary Shelley's Frankenstein's monster reflected the anxiety and frustration of Victorian women—the "monster" being women. A number of intensely political thrusts have arguably been deliberately hidden by the British and other establishments, not necessarily in visual art but in English literature, the hegemonic art form in Britain, but have come through to serve as pointers to those of us who find the impulse to conflate art with politics.

Political issues coincided with new media in the late sixties/early seventies with the growing women's movement after Friedan¹ et al. Dagenham women's strike in 1968, and then the women's strike at Brannans in my home village in the North of England, which I made the subject of an exhibition at the ICA in 1972, were serious signals at a period in a London art world that was dominated by the twin solipsisms of abstract paintings and cool disengaged conceptual art and theory as practice. Of my own work, several people said it really wasn't art.

As Leeson describes however, the seventies developed into a time when the art/politics conflation began to gain some momentum among artists. While I exhibited *Strike* in 1972, followed by *Work*, *Wages and Prices* in 1974, Margaret Harrison, Kay Hunt and Mary Kelly created the *Women and Work* exhibition in 1975 at the South London Gallery, and following my *Material* show in New York in 1978, a new group formed Group Material. To see the work of Dunn and Leeson engaging with the trades union movement certainly helped to reduce my sense of isolation at that time. I also recognised how ways forward in this area were being interestingly and diversely developed in directions I could never have imagined at the beginning of the seventies when I thought *Strike* was my farewell to the art world.

Alongside the advance of feminism and these new art forms in the UK was the attempt to develop a public art that would reach outside the gallery and attempt a public conversation. This was reflected in the US, where a number of artists were displaying posters outside the gallery system. The labor unions in New York, for example, published and posted images of my Feldman show about Northern Ireland around New York, and when Jenny Holzer came to the UK in the mid seventies she fly posted ephemera around London. The US feminists were reluctant to move outside the gallery system, but rather introduced radical subjects within it. Their fight for part of the existing "pie" is exemplified by the way the Guerilla girls aimed to be shown in the New York Met. In the UK, feminists were attempting to set up their own alternative and parallel systems, such as the Women's Postal Art Group. Leeson was a major contributor to the notion that art should move outside the gallery, arguably completely, and negotiating this tricky area was one of Leeson's strengths; in fact, her early recognition of the problem was possibly crucial to her achievements. The activist arts group Not An Alternative recognised the importance of this stance when they wrote:

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Institutional liberation isn't about making institutions better, more inclusive, more participatory. It's about establishing politicised base camps from which ever more coordinated, elaborate, and effective campaigns against the capitalist state in all its racist, exploitative, extractivist, and colonising dimensions can be carried out. This takeover will not happen overnight.²

The collaborations with communities and the introduction of interdisciplinary practices show how far Leeson's practice has developed in this way. Her work is realised through direct engagement with communities, as in her most recent project, in which the notion of energy joins forces with community to address one of the world's most crucial issues. There are parallels to be drawn here with my early *Strike* project and also current work about nuclear power and Sellafield, since neither practice features artists "parachuted" into a community, but rather engaging directly with an issue, a location, and a group of people who are personally involved and directed.

Leeson's work in the public domain has taken us a long way from the inelegantly phrased "turd in the plaza" critique of disengaged public art practices of fifty years ago. In this book Leeson explicates this in a way I could not have imagined in 1969 and has brought to her observations on methodology a rigorous knowledge and practice that pictures the art of politics and the politics of art in an important and comprehensive manner. Her contribution to bringing communities and important contemporary issues together to engage with change still reflects her early ambition to "change the world", but has achieved a whole new perspective on what is possible.

Conrad Atkinson Emeritus Professor University of California Cumbria 2016

Notes

- 1. Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* (1963) is widely credited with sparking the beginning of second-wave feminism in the United States.
- 2. Not an Alternative, "Institutional Liberation" in e-flux online, No. 77, Nov 2016.

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Not an Alternative, "Institutional Liberation" in *e-flux* online (No. 77, Nov 2016) www.e-flux.com/journal/77/76215/institutional-liberation Raymond Williams, *The Country and the City* (Chatto and Windus: London, 1973).

Acknowledgements

It was the artist Ailbhe Murphy who first suggested I consider completing my PhD at the Interface Institute at the University of Ulster in 2007, a suggestion for which I will be eternally grateful. This was a significant step on the way to producing the book that I had been wanting to write for a very long time, and enabled me to develop my ideas in an environment that was rigorous, stimulating and supportive. Eternal thanks therefore to my supervisors Declan McGonagle and Kerstin Mey, who offered intellectual stimulus from their deep knowledge of the issues at hand, which never failed to be both challenging and empathetic. Kerstin Mey has continued as a mentor in this capacity and played a pivotal role in enabling me to see this project through to realisation, not least in her help with the final revision.

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Others have also given of their time to help me think through different aspects of the book, particularly Alberto Duman, my teaching "buddy" at Middlesex University, and Jean Lowe, one of the original members of the Joint Docklands Action Group. My sons Liam and Louis may not realise how much they have helped. They were teenagers when I started the process and, without the patient understanding shown to their mother who monopolised the family's computer and regularly failed to cook dinner, none of this would have been achieved. I am grateful for every instance they have listened to the television using headphones so as not to disturb me. As young men they remain equally supportive, also inspirational in the way each is realising their own creativity.

The book would not exist without the art practice, and so the greatest thanks goes to all those people with whom I have had the benefit of working over the last forty years—the artists, activists, teachers, architects, cultural workers, youth leaders, designers, programmers, scientists, engineers, academics, seniors, young people and children who have contributed to the work that forms its subject. Without them there would have been no one from whom to gain the knowledge that I am now privileged to pass on. Particular among these is Peter Dunn, with whom I shared half my creative life. That partnership made possible all the early work, which was also so personally transformational. I am especially grateful for our ongoing dialogue, his insightful understanding of critical theory coupled with practical ingenuity, and his unfailing ability to think outside the frame. His generosity in providing additions and amendments to the text as well as agreeing to the reproduction of images of our joint work is also much appreciated.

Conrad Atkinson and Margaret Harrison have been role models of political astuteness and integrity my whole working life. Their friendship and support has been a constant source of encouragement as well as a creative touchstone. I am most grateful to Conrad Atkinson for his Foreword to this volume, in which he reminds me of the place of my own practice within the UK's long history of cultural politics.

Thanks to John Nassari, who photographed the launch of *The Young Person's Guide to the Royal Docks*, and also to John Cockram, Graham Downes and Anne-Marie Pereira de Mello who appear in that photo. All were key players in that project. Rhiannon Lyons has kindly given permission to reproduce the character template that she created as a child for *VOLCO*, as have collaborators and participants from the *Active Energy* project, who have given photo permissions and so much more. These include engineers Toby Borland and Stephen Dodds, Minnie Hill of Northside Seniors and, last but not least, members of the Geezers Club—Ray Gipson, John Bevan, Dennis Banks, John Day, Brian Godfrey, Tony Basra and Rick Ayliffe, who appear in the photos in this book. I am equally indebted to the rest of the Geezers, particularly Ted Lewis who came up with the idea of developing tidal power, and for their energy and enthusiasm that has made this current project such a delight to work on.

Finally, my appreciation goes to the editors at Routledge, who have enabled me to turn the dream of this book into a reality.

Introduction

I simply wanted to change the world. That is not as outrageous as it sounds. Adulthood started for me in the early seventies when many in my generation rebelled against the conventional lives achieved by our parents and grandparents who had survived two world wars. Brought up in greater security, we challenged the establishment with an optimism underpinned by Marxist thought and eastern spirituality. With this new information we sought alternatives to individualism, the Cold War, capitalism, nuclear arms and radioactive waste, supported feminism and collectivism and recognised that, if enough people intent on making a more equitable and peaceful society joined together, the world would indeed change. Despite the enormous societal changes that have intervened, many decades on these principles are still not far from my core values.

Although immersion in art pre-dated my political awareness, the latter brought with it some recognition of the role of culture in society, reinforced by the radical practices of other artists together with the writings of critical thinkers such as Raymond Williams, who so influenced the Left in my formative years. Of particular significance was the working collaboration and personal relationship I developed with artist Peter Dunn from the early seventies. With each other's support and insight we were able to try out a practical re-thinking of how an art that was directly contributing to social change could be realised.

For the subsequent forty years, initially with Peter and then with others, I have been using my skills as an artist to explore ways of supporting communities engaged knowingly or implicitly in transforming society, resulting in the projects outlined in the first part of this book. While the work has been frequently described and its wider political context addressed, little has yet been written concerning the processes involved in its development and realisation, nor the means through which broad intention became enacted through the hands-on practicalities of production. I am therefore specifically focusing here on how methodologies of organisation and social interactions have addressed the work's wider cultural and social agenda, together with the roles of aesthetics and functionality in process, product and outcomes. The present climate of increased activism and a growing interest in socially engaged practice would seem to make this an appropriate moment to bring this information into the public domain so that hands-on experience can contribute to current debates around these issues. These pages therefore constitute a process of excavation into those regularly occurring procedures that have woven their way through the practice, starting from what is known through the process of active involvement, but infrequently articulated. The intuitive enactment of art that is realised through interaction