

## **MAKING IT BIG**

**A review of the Festival Makers Symposium at Central St. Martins' College of Arts and Design on 16 November by Corinne Julius**

Craft makers are often through necessity, wrapped up in their own little world, working on small scale objects for commercial sale. This symposium the brainchild of **Margaret Benton** of **The Making** and **Simon Fraser** of **Central St Martin's** was all about opening minds to the opportunities of making it big; increasing scale, ambition and opportunity. It showed makers how they can use their creativity and making skills to work on art for public spaces from conventional 'public' art to street art and festivals. Making it Big was a carefully crafted combination of practical advice on how to develop personal practice and how to engage with the wider community. All the speakers gave enthusiastic sightlines and avenues as to where and how makers might develop their work.

**HELEN MARRAIGE** co-founder of creative producers **ARTICHOKE** energised the proceedings with her Can Do approach. For Helen, a veteran of invading public spaces with unlikely and mind altering projects, the key is to believe that nothing is impossible and then communicate that to the powers that would normally strive to block things. Her work is rarely about an object more about an all embracing experience. She succeeds because she has a "deadly combination of charm and bullying. I am implacable and I can't see why they (the authorities) can't understand. We take people into a different world but we have to make them believe it is desirable and believable. It's not illegal just a bit odd," she proclaimed. "You must want to communicate the expertise, craft and innovation." Like the designer Thomas Hetherwick she has the power to persuade people that they want to do the seemingly impossible.

That confidence and charisma isn't open to everyone, but by preparing and looking at possibilities, seeing potential difficulties as opportunities, a lot can be achieved. Helen recommended approaching everything very professionally, having thought through all the issues more seriously than those who want to say no. It is she maintained possible "to create a situation where the authorities end up keener on the project than you are." Her mantra is to create a "why wouldn't we?" mentality.

The key to "mucking about in the public realm" as she calls it is to organise events that bring communities, who believe that they have nothing in common, together in a celebratory experience, that makes them look at their surroundings in a new and different way. The most cogent example was her free access project 'The Sultan's Elephant', presented by Royal de Luxe, that saw a 7 metre high princess and a 12 metre high animated elephant and entourage take over the streets of London enchanting over a million people.

**SAM WILKINSON** Public Art Consultant and co-director of **InSite Arts** has a long track record of commissioning art for public spaces in everything from car parks to shopping centres. She is keen to encourage funding organisations mostly from the private sector to involve artists from the very start of a project

and in getting the maker/artist embedded in the team. Her involvement covers a very long time span from when she might first see an artist's work to a point where they might be considered for a project, through to its completion. She strives to put artists at their ease making interview panels for projects as informal as possible. She encouraged the audience to send her images of their work.

Sam stressed the importance of quality research, both on her own part and that of the artist. "The artist has to get under the skin of a place." Many ideas come from the artist's investigations (both academic and through the community), of the history of an area; that research can become fundamental in the creation of an artwork that can give identity and social cohesion to a place or building. The installation can often have a crucial role for the developer in establishing the marketability of a commercial development. This in part develops through the consultation process between the artist and the community and it is important that both the developer and the artist appreciate this.

A successful artist working in the public realm must be able and willing to share their ideas and inspirations with individuals and organisations that have little or no idea about artists or artistic activity. This implies a confidence in the artist's own practice and professional skills and the ability to communicate. It also requires engagement in a shared approach to generating ideas, which is often the reverse of their usual creative practice. With a site-specific piece the artist has to address practical considerations including lack of maintenance budgets, as well as health and safety issues.

Sam explained that the art consultant's role is to create a climate where the potential of the artist can be realised without offering too prescriptive a brief. The complexity lies in raising people's aspirations, trying to give an indication of the type of work that artists may generate without specifying outcomes to the client and allowing for the unexpected and the remarkable.

Sam gave an number of examples including Jaqueline Poncelet's stainless steel and glass marbles walls "only here, only now" at High Cross Leicester 2008 and Patricia McKinnon Day 'Marking Time' installation at St Catherine's Alms House Exeter. She also talked about major projects around the Cabot Circus development such as Timorous Beasties sandblasted wall, Susannah Heron's bas relief in glass and bronze and Vong Phaophanit and Claire Oboussier's 'All the World's is Two's' neon installation in the car park. Sam put forward Neville Gabie's community involvement as perhaps the most extreme example. Gabie worked on-site in Bristol during his time as artist in residence for Hanson and Land Securities, cooking and making music with 4,500 construction workers from 62 different nations.

Practitioner **David Rhys Jones Maker** gave a cogent practical talk about how he developed his career after training at CSM, re-inventing himself several times. His pieces are concerned with location and journeys. They document the mix of cultures and architecture in the contemporary urban environment in

ceramics, metal and on paper. 80% of his work currently uses ceramics on differing scales. "I continually learn about new techniques and materials to give me new options," he explained. He advised makers to push the boundaries to take themselves out of their comfort zones, in order to advance their practice and their markets. Having started with small scale commercial work, he has developed a substantial body of public art pieces. He generously shared his tips and useful sources of information, gleaned from hard experience, (see his tips box). He stressed the need for artist/makers to research possible commissions, ideas, materials and techniques, to work on costings (including comparisons with other artists), to hone their communication and interview skills but above all to believe in themselves and their vision.

**Claire Cattrell curator of the Embankment Galleries** at Somerset House and formerly co-founder of Scarlet Projects specialises in creating events where the makers/designers are present, in person not just through their work. "Exhibitions are space and time-based experiences and as such can create their own visceral energy," she said. To do this, her shows such as the Village Fetes for the V&A, Super Design Market and even Pick Me Up at Somerset House include makers/designers making and being on hand to demonstrate and talk about their work with the public.

She is keen to stage such events in places where they attract the non-traditional museum going audience. For example The Travelling Apothecary for the Wellcome Trust took designers with their ideas on the subject to interact with the public in the courtyard of the British Library, initially infuriating and subsequently winning over the Library's visitors. In Somerset House for SHOWstudio: Fashion Revolution she built a photo studio for Nick Knight where, through a 2 way mirror, the public could see the whole process of a Vogue Cover photo shoot or portraits of Celebs shot for ID magazine. Her work concentrates on "letting you into the designer's mind"

**The Making** in the personas of **Simon Taylor, Education & Community Outreach Manager**, and **Jenny Bethell, Business and Events Manager**, aided by **Lucy Fergus, Maker** gave practical advice on running public workshops and commissions. Simon Taylor originally a ceramicist is now firmly committed to learning through making, not only in schools and institutions but 'without walls' in non-traditional venues. The Making's philosophy is that learning is self-reflexive rather than imparted and that it is collaborative. He stressed the importance of informal intergenerational learning which should set appropriate challenges at different levels. He highlighted ways of encouraging boys to get involved in 'dads & lads' sessions.

Holding events in non-threatening places like shopping malls was particularly successful at attracting new audiences and those who might be intimidated by a more institutional setting. So too was 'piggy-backing' established outdoor events. In all cases Sam stressed that the themes and activities should be discussed in advance with project partners and host organizations, particularly schools in order to ensure that expectations are carefully managed, and that

the offer is appropriate for those attending. Controlling numbers is crucial for a beneficial outcome.

Artists have a lot to offer in schools. Primary Schools have more flexibility within the timetable for ad-hoc projects and experiences but Secondary Schools often programme annual 'arts weeks' or have funding for more ambitious projects. Simon stressed that Artists need to be aware of requirements on health & safety, CRB clearance, evaluation and must ensure the quality of what they deliver. The return is not only in paid work, but in the development of the artist's own practice and the opportunities to engage in informal mentoring, networking and establishing new contacts; all essential in the current economy.

Jenny Bethell, a glass maker and accountant, gave detailed advice on what artists need to think about when taking on a commission to run a workshop. This included the nature of the contract, workshop preparation, risk assessment, materials, pre-planning for supplies, travel arrangements and invoicing. Makers need to be totally professional in their organisation, manner and delivery to ensure that they will be asked to run future workshops

Lucy Fergus, who makes bespoke eco-conscious products and installations from industrial rubber cut-offs has conducted a number of public projects from the Elephant Parade to workshops at Great Ormond Street Children's Hospital and the Royal Artillery Museum. She explained the importance of preparedness, the need "to expect anything and everything" including the very different abilities and attentions spans of participants. Lucy explained how important it was to have thought through ways of coping with the unexpected in advance. She advised using volunteers and stewards, as drop-in workshops can get chaotic. She counseled makers to develop a way of documenting projects without photographing the participants.

Lucy urged a similarly pre-emptive approach to Public Art Installations as they involve health and safety risks. Makers should make the most of any help offered and get good insurance. Interruptions are commonplace in public spaces and can be frustrating and/or dangerous so Lucy always has an assistant or friend on hand to answer queries about the project whilst she continues installing it. Lucy recommended spending time scouting out potential projects and completing the proposal forms. She stressed the importance of always taking good photographs of a project because they serve as an invaluable marketing tool." Above all she urged makers to be "shameless self promoters".

**Andy Hazell film maker, creator of automata and public artist** would be the first to admit that he is. He urged artist/makers to believe in themselves and to sell those selves. He gave a breathtaking, invigorating, inspirational and exhausting tour of his projects and how he approaches them; - with vigour, enthusiasm and con brio. Andy works mainly to commission and will turn his hand to anything in almost any medium. It invariably has a humorous twist and he said "a note of cynicism. People either love it or hate it." Public Art is often a matter of "compromise and is often the lowest common

denominator.” He does lots of drawings, yet sadly he said committees “invariably pick the one I hate, but you can’t be precious.” Because the work is public everyone feels they can interfere, so Andy recommended only ever installing a work on a Sunday when there is less likelihood of council members being out and about to see and meddle with it.

Inspiration comes from many sources and Andy considers himself self-taught. He is willing to try anything in terms of ideas, materials and processes and experiments constantly. Most things he maintained can be learnt from a book or through friendly advice from practitioners. “I always say yes to things because things lead onto something else. I have a career because Sue Golden was in a friend’s office having bought a diver’s watch with a big metal strap that was too long. I shortened it for her with 2 paper clips, being grateful she said she would put a picture in her magazine, the magazine was Elle Decoration.” Andy proclaimed that he never says he can’t do something or use a particular material, even if it means busking it or completing a project up against a deadline. He urged those present to adapt the same approach. He extolled flexibility and like Helen Marriage a ‘Can Do’ ethos.

Andy recommended “the learn as you go” approach, in part because getting things made out is expensive and the margin on Public Art isn’t great. He advised working backwards from the finished ideal and always thinking around a problem. “There are so many constraints, it can’t rust, it can’t be spiky, someone will try to trash it, people will hate it, the press will crucify you, but if you can do it with an evangelical zeal it is rewarding. People love to see things made because they never sit besides their dad in the shed anymore.” He urged artist/makers to exploit that. He applies for work every week and is energetic in branding and promoting himself through good photography, post cards and even stamps on his envelopes.

**Keith Kahn director/designer** started as a fine artist, but went on to make costumes for the Notting Hill Carnival and today has held the highest cultural posts including Director for Design for the Commonwealth Games for the opening and closing ceremonies. He was part of the creative team that produced the Millennium Dome’s opening ceremony and was Chief Executive of Rich Mix. From 2006-9 Keith was Head of Culture for 2012 Olympic Games responsible for the Cultural Olympiad. Keith is living proof of how an artist can use their skills and creativity to expand their horizon to make it big.

Much of his career has been involved with helping others have a say in art and design, empowering them to make their contribution in practical and policy terms. As an artist he has got into the system and unpicked it making it work for him and others. He stressed the importance of collaboration “you simply can’t work in isolation,” he said. That collaboration includes an engagement with financial and marketing systems, not just educational systems. He set up his own organisation to do what he wanted and recommends it to others, but stressed the need to wise up on business plans. He like other members of the panel is constantly involved in bids and applying for funding. The making it big life means a lot of hard work in what many

artist/makers consider non-creative areas but the panel thought it more than repaid that investment.