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Close Encounters: A Community Engagement Project for Town Centre Living

AUTHORS

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ABSTRACT

This proposal is to elaborate on a joint project commissioned by *The Stove Network* for the Scottish town of Dumfries that took place mid-2017. Inspired by socio-spatial theories and testing the role of contemporary art as the complex interplay of dislocations and relocations, *Close Encounters* was a collaborative project where relational practices in art-making meet contingent testing of spatial theories. This was to generate an urban experience that transforms the perhaps defunct regulatory modes of spatial practice into a Deleuzian play that generates multiple entry and exit points about the (over)familiar space. Using both situationist and relational frameworks, we created semi-structured walks that sought to encourage new ways of thinking, feeling and imagining what the town centre is, can or should be. These immersive acts were transformative on a sensory level, introducing reorientations beyond the homogeneous, evolving a potentially more vital one. This was to engage all the senses to remake, reimagine and generate a dynamic town centre.

KEYWORDS

Space, Inclusivity, Dispersion, Relocation, Sensory walking

RÉSUMÉ

Cette proposition vise à élaborer un projet commun commandé par le Stove Network pour la ville écossaise de Dumfries qui a eu lieu au milieu de 2017. Inspiré de théories socio-spatiales et testant le rôle de l'art contemporain en tant qu'interaction complexe des perturbations et des relocalisations, *Close Encounters* était un projet collaboratif dans lequel les pratiques relationnelles dans l'art font face aux tests contingents des théories spatiales. Il s'agissait de générer une expérience urbaine qui transforme les modes de réglementation de la pratique spatiale peut-être disparus en une pièce deleuzienne qui génère des points d'entrée et de sortie multiples sur l'espace (sur)familier. À l'aide de cadres situationnistes et relationnels, nous avons créé des promenades semi-structurées qui cherchent à encourager de nouvelles façons de penser, de ressentir et d'imaginer ce qu'est, peut ou devrait être le centre-ville. Ces actes immersifs ont été transformés au niveau sensoriel, en introduisant des réorientations au-delà de l'homogénéité, évoluant potentiellement de façon plus vitale. Il s'agissait d'engager tous les sens à refaire, réimaginer et générer un centre-ville dynamique.

MOTS CLÉS

Espace, inclusivité, dispersion, relocalisation, marche sensorielle

In mid-2017 Greig Burgoyne, artist, academic and curator, and Andy Zieleniec, academic and writer, collaborated on a project commissioned by *The Stove Network* for the Scottish town of Dumfries. Operating from within its own premises that include a café, performance areas and workshop space, *The Stove Network* seeks through a broad range of events to provide opportunities and responses that raise the town profile and regenerate the town centre as a vibrant, living social space.

It was inspired by the socio-spatial theories of Henri Lefebvre (1991; 2003; 2004), Michel de Certeau (1984), Georg Simmel (1997), Walter Benjamin (1999; Gilloch, 1996), David Harvey (1990; 2008; 2012) who variously consider the production of social space as a relational process. The synthesis and analysis of the role of public art as a means to challenge dominant discourses, understandings, experiences and uses of space, reflects an interactive approach to the social place and space-making (Deutsche, 1998). *Close Encounters* therefore was a collaborative project where relational practices in art-making meet contingent testing of spatial theories in a complex interplay of dislocations and relocations. This involved the active participation of the public as performers in the experimental re-experiencing of familiar locations through immersive and dissociative practices. In doing so, this sought to both link and contest, albeit temporarily the regulated “reality” of a town centre landscape and the possibility of a liberated engagement that reconfigured the urban experience. This utilised key concepts of Deleuze (Buchanan & Lambert, 2005), in order to generate an urban experience that transforms the perhaps defunct regulatory modes of spatial practice into non-hierarchical engagement that generates multiple entry and exit points within the (over)familiar space. Thus by intervening in the conception and perception of participants it was possible to see the town centre as a work of art an “ ‘oeuvre’ [...] that] does not only contain monuments and institutional headquarters, but also spaces appropriated for entertainments, parades, promenades, festivities” (Lefebvre, 2006: 73).

Inspired by situationist and relational practices the aim was to create semi-structured walks that encourage and inspire new ways of thinking, feeling and imagining what the town centre is, can or should be. The street thus “serves as a meeting place (topos), for without it no other designated encounters are possible. [...] The Street is a place to play and learn. The street is disorder... This disorder is alive. It informs. It surprises” (Lefebvre, 1991: 18). Using a range of custom-made materials and situational interventions the aim was to create a disorienting navigation of familiar spaces and unusual ways of experiencing the town centre. This is to subvert conventional ideas of what the world is, creatively challenge and imagine new possibilities.

This was an inclusive process, engaging and giving power to those who inhabit space by encouraging reflexive and participatory methods of being in a familiar space in alternative and immersive activities. The walks were transformative on a sensory level as they introduced reorientations beyond the homogeneous through, paradoxically, an intensified engagement with those generic spaces. The methods were designed to engage all the senses to allow the possibility to remake, reimagine, recreate and reprioritise the dynamism that a town centre could have as a site of inclusiveness, inchoate energy and diversity. Indicative of patch dynamics, *Close Encounters* evolved within the spaces of widespread homogeneity, those undercurrents of difference, and becoming that reconfigured-produced space in contrast to the politics of exclusion and spatial centring that constrain it. As a result, evolve transformative dialogues embracing inclusion and periphery that are the marginal and forgotten or rarely used spaces that we transformed and negotiated, in an attempt to re-value them instead as vibrant possibilities, and inclusive town centre spaces.

This paper will present an overview of the processes involved in conceiving and delivering the project as well as reflecting, using the analysis of the responses of both participants in the activities and the general public who served as an involuntary audience. We will present the project using mapping, photographic documentation and video clips, to elaborate and underline the critical use of urban and spatial theory and art, as both transformative tools

and expansive and expressive fields in generating alternate navigations and re-navigations within urban geography. We will emphasise the need to use inclusive processes that were both enjoyable and fun to be involved in, but which also critically challenged both the spatial practices involved as well as the everyday conceptions associated with spaces which had become permeated with negative experiences. As Lefebvre stated: "To put art at the service of the urban does not mean to prettify urban space with works of art. This parody of the possible is a caricature. Rather, this means that time-spaces become works of art and that former art reconsiders itself as source and model of appropriate topics': of temporal qualities inscribed in spaces" (1996: 173). We will thus both reflect upon and wrestle with the aims of *Reinventing places through art; rethinking art with space* session which views it as a reciprocal and creative process using the experience of the project itself, and a critical and analytical application of social theories, perspective and approaches to space.

We will demonstrate our methodology and practice--based research with a short performance in an appropriate location near/in relation to the conference venue. This will provide conference participants with the chance to experience in how we use and view site and location not as one of stasis and control but as an experience of dispersion, transition and flux in socially-produced urban space.

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