Keeping to the Path

Maintaining 'Core Purpose' in Participatory Art Under Conditions of Contemporary Patronage

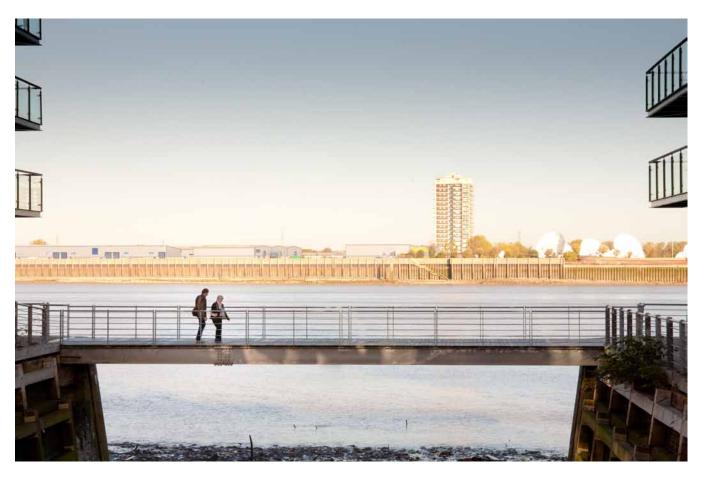**Simon Pope**
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Jes Fernie: We are both interested in the idea proposed by this edition of the engage Journal that the Olympic Games might throw galleries and artists off their 'core purpose'. The implication is that there is pressure to deviate from a self-determined programme or trajectory, and sell out in some way to a global, instrumentalised machine.

Simon Pope: My initial thoughts are that the idea of 'core purpose' sits well beside the mission statement in business, or a government's policy objectives. This alludes to the purpose that art and artists might be expected to have when operating within this context, where culture is used to vindicate corporate strategy or enforce government social and economic policy (Yúdice, 2004), and where there is a shift towards art-as-service (Kester, 2004). For some critics this presents contemporary art and artists with a dilemma, particularly those who work within 'participatory', 'relational', 'dialogic', 'socially engaged' or 'new genre public art', where practice focuses on the engagement, interaction or participation of audience-as-community (Bishop, 2004).

For Martha Rosler, working with 'community' (ie. the 'poor, excluded, and non-elite, non-creative class') aligns artists with 'instrumental needs of states and governments' (Rosler, 2011) while also guaranteeing an artist's exclusion from the art-world proper. For Bishop, there is no dilemma at all, as artists should remain sceptical of the very idea of community and refuse to buy into the idea of state-sanctioned, ameliorative function of art, preferring to be 'perverse, indirect' (Bishop, 2009) or even antagonistic; Suzanne Lacy (1995) also sees no tension in this situation, defining a 'continuum of artists' positions', eschewing the criteria by which an artwork or artist is evaluated within other art-worlds to ultimately unlock an artist's engagement with the world as an activist. The purpose of the artist within this theoretical framework would be to work as an activist under what Rosler calls 'patronage conditions', or to

invert, negate or 'produce situations of conflict and unease' (Bishop, 2009).

JF: In 2009 you were invited by Film & Video Umbrella to respond to a call for submissions by the Olympic Delivery Authority (ODA) for their 'Inside Out' commission. The ODA's aim was to find a vehicle to engage with people living in the boroughs surrounding the Park and to commission a work that responded in some way to the physical transformation brought about by the largest regeneration scheme taking place in Europe at the time. The resulting 80-minute film, *Memory Marathon*, documents a participatory event which involved you talking – individually – to more than 100 local residents about their memories from past Olympic games, as you walked through the streets of London. Starting out just after dawn from Thamesmead, you ended up at the entrance to the Olympic Park twelve hours later. How does

Memory Marathon fit within the opposing positions as defined by Bishop, Kester et al?

SP: *Memory Marathon* was never considered as a vehicle for any form of activism, although some of those people brought into the project as participants had or have that relationship to either the history of political struggle associated with the Olympics, or to the opposition to regeneration projects coupled with, or preceding it. I recognise that the main constraint on *Memory Marathon* derived from its relationship to the intricate web of patronage that probably typifies many contemporary art commissions. In some respects, this is not so different to the situation Martha Rosler (2011) writes about when prior to the 19th Century, 'artists working under patronage conditions had produced according to command, which left them to express their personal dimension primarily through the formal elements of the chosen themes.'

The initial ODA call for submissions emphasised that the work was to be made, 'in response to the physical transformation of this part of London and to the wider regeneration and legacy aims of the area.' This could presume an unproblematic relationship between art and economic regeneration that would be easy fodder for both Rosler and Bishop. Sharon Zukin's *Loft Living,* extensively cited by Rosler, lays bare the relationship between artist, real estate development and what has been termed 'the creative class' (Florida, 2004). The ODA also stipulated that the commission should be awarded to an artist who lived in the area, which of course meant that I was already implicated within the complex interactions of long-term local residents, the housing economy and the wider 'creative class'. In developing the project in collaboration with Film & Video Umbrella, we thought that it was important to acknowledge the artist's place in the messy interaction between social, economic and cultural policy. We wanted to remain accountable for this work in the face of the inevitable accusations of 'flag-waving' which would be levelled at the project from dissenters at both the local political level and within the art world.

We were interested in the way that my interactions with participants in the project would both reflect existing social relations and establish new ones and how the artist, (and entire production) might be implicated in this. This led to us thinking of the production itself as being analogous to the way that the grinding gears of urban regeneration, (and associated cultural projects) are felt by those caught up in it on the ground, so to speak. We adopted some 'off the shelf' methods for recruitment that exploited the machinery of 'outreach' and 'participation', such as the call for a specialist engagement team; and we purposefully used a very agile, mobile camera crew/production team which moved quickly and precisely through the city on the day of the event.

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JF: The 2012 Olympic Games will include the largest art commissioning programme that any Olympic Games programme has realised to date. The range of the commissioning programme is impressive, from permanent commissions by artists Monica Bonvicini, Carsten Nicolai, Keith Wilson and DJ Simpson, to smaller scale engagement projects by Nina Pope, Karen Guthrie, and Lucy Harrison. It's interesting to note that none of these projects reference the Olympic Games or sport in general (with the exception of Bonvicini's work *RUN* which is a wry reference to the Velvet Underground song Run Run Run, as well as the context in which is it situated). This approach is reflected outside of the Park with the public commissions that are part of the 2012 programme: Fiona Banner and David Kohn Architects' *A Room for London*; Olafur Eliasson's commission for Serpentine Gallery; Pae White's project for Art on the Underground; Tino Seghal's project for the Turbine Hall at Tate Modern and Rachel Whiteread's commission for the façade of Whitechapel Gallery.

The visual arts sector seems to be focusing on London as a city, the internationalism of visual arts activity here, through the practice of some key artists. The subject of the Olympic Games has been quite explicitly deflected, as artists have seized the opportunity to continue the trajectory of their practice. This inevitably makes for a more critical and dynamic programme.

The Inside Out commissions appear to tie the artist more tightly into the context of the Games. Yet it is crucial that projects of this kind are explicitly positioned and seen as part of an artist's long-term practice, and that key questions or propositions are not compromised by an external agency. From my position as a member of the selection panel for the second round of these commissions, it seemed quite remarkable that the ODA arts team managed to place artistic practice at the centre of the discussion, leaving the potential clamour of external agencies and forced agendas firmly to one side.

Your ongoing interest in walking as a tool to explore the artist / participant relationship is the driving force behind *Memory Marathon*, isn't it?

SP: Yes, it was crucial for me to retain the focus of my practice, which, broadly speaking, is an interest the social modalities of walking. Every piece of work I make develops from my previous work, in the sense that Mieke Bal (2010) understands the artist's *oeuvre* as a 'theoretical object' – an evolving body of work, rather than a series of

separate 'cases'. The question of 'purpose' might therefore relate to how an artist's practice develops according to their interests or way of working.

Although both Bishop (2009) and Maharaj (2009) rail against the idea of a transferable 'model' or method in art practice, there are instances (especially under the increasingly widespread influence of academic research) where an artist is expected to articulate an 'aim' for themself, or to have a well-defined methodology which may be consistently deployed across projects. The artist's purpose in this instance could be understood as the questions they ask and how they go about asking them.

This intrinsic purpose – the questions and the ways I go about asking them – the aims and methods, if you like – were defined long before I started work on *Memory Marathon.* In the research project *Walking Together* (2005-9), I investigated the various modes of sociality within the 'walking work' of Richard Long, Vito Acconci, and Sophie Calle among others. I'd become increasingly interested in the relationships between these artists and other people in a number of their artworks. I wanted to study this artist-participant relationship within my work as well, the various configurations of subjects and people which enable an actual or metaphorical 'being together'.

In *Memory Marathon,* the artist and participant are 'side-by-side', suggesting a mutuality – sharing a route or a view together. Unlike other work I have made, such as *Negotiating Picu Cuturruñau* (2008) or *A Common Third* (2010) in which the route was negotiated as I walked, I had planned the route for *Memory Marathon* in advance. This meant that, as the artist, I was in the privileged position of determining the route and orchestrating the encounters. However, once I began walking alongside each participant, the pace at which we moved, and what was said, was the result of an intense, ad-hoc negotiation between the two of us. This was contingent on my need to elicit specific descriptions and to find our way toward the next participant, as well as the participant's own expectation of what they deemed an adequate response to my questions. This movement and conversation was, all the while, shaped by our relationship to passers-by, the camera crew, and with the street itself.

As Anderson (2004) points-out, walking shoulder-to-shoulder elicits a trust and a consequent opening-up of dialogue when used as a research method. *Memory Marathon,* sets up a walking-and-talking framework that enables the participant to speak, using their own words, on their own terms, within this otherwise pressurised and deterministic procedure.

JF: There are parallels here with the work of Hamish Fulton, although he follows a more prescribed method that you may take issue with.

SP: In Fulton's *Slowalk* (2011), participants walk in silence, several meters apart, along a narrow

path, contained either side by water; their direction is imposed by the artist, as is their pace; participants become compliant subjects within a formal arrangement. I expand on these themes in the paper 'Enforced silences and the troubles they bring' (2009). I discuss Marina Abramović's seminal work *The Great Wall Walk* (1988-2008) in which she walks to meet her then-partner Ulay. They begin their walk from either end of the Great Wall of China with the intention of marrying when they meet. When they finally convene they are no longer partners and decide to leave each other.

In Stephen Willats' recent work *Pairs Of People* (2011) we see various couples, framed by the camera, walking toward us; their side-by-side arrangement is emphasised to represent the simplest social unit, (akin to Georg Simmel's notion of the Dyad). In another of Willats' works,

such as *Walking Together For The First Time* (1994), we see this Dyad multiply to form more complex social groupings.

I'm interested in the way that the arrangement of people in *Memory Marathon* relates to the insistent, machine-like process that we imposed on participants during the event which orchestrated and processed human relations. It was very apparent to me, throughout the day, that we were exerting pressure on all involved, in ways that had parallels with both sporting events and (more importantly for me) the forces of 'urban regeneration' that the Olympics had unleashed. Both artist and participant had to make do and improvise in order to negotiate their way towards some mutually agreed outcome from their time together. Expectations had to be managed and criteria for 'success' determined 'on the fly'.

JF: As you mention above, a long-held criticism of socially engaged projects is that participants run the risk of becoming pawns for artists or commissioners to realise a particular ideology. I'm thinking of Tania Bruguera's five-year project *Immigrant Movement International* in which the artist's aim is to directly impact on the economic and social situations of excluded minority groups in Queens, New York, by living with members of the 'community'. The project has been greeted with intrigue and much scepticism and would be a fascinating point for discussion between Bishop and Kester. How did you establish an equal footing with the participants of *Memory Marathon,*

starting with the process that you and FVU instigated in order to find the interviewees?

SP: Closely related to issues of regeneration are those of the 'communities' which are most effected by social and economic upheavals wrought by large-scale regeneration schemes and global events such as the Olympics. The commissioners stated that the project should 'encourage local engagement with the regeneration process, focusing on local communities/users near the Olympic Park site' who were defined as 'stakeholders'.

Mindful of the often facile interpretation of 'community', we considered carefully the process of engagement implemented in the project. In addition to acknowledging the inevitable prejudices, biases and vested interests of the artist, production company and commissioners in the 'engagement' process, we decided to adopt methods of engagement common to many other projects of this kind. For example, a call was issued for an 'engagement team' that would lead the recruitment of a 'broad range of local residents in several stages of the project's development' and which would acknowledge Rosler's community of 'poor, non-creative class'. We focused on identifying core, connected people from various cultural and language groups, and issued a word-of-mouth call to those known to the artist and production company. This model is similar to that of Lacy (1995) and had been developed in one of my earlier projects, *Charade* (2005-7).

We were interested in how these two approaches to identifying participants could be deployed within the same project. In a sense, we wanted to acknowledge the various types of engagement that are made possible though a project of this kind and admit to this being a powerful, meaningful experience for some and trivial, mundane or puzzling to others. The different kinds of attachment participants have to the artwork were apparent during the process of identifying volunteer-participants, and throughout the months leading up to filming. Interestingly, there is less evidence of these differences in the film itself, but this question remains of interest to me.

JF: Bishop takes the view that socially engaged artistic practice might contribute to a more 'creative and participatory social fabric' but it also often results in bad art (the Turkish artists' collective Oda Projesi is her *bête noir*: 'their aesthetic judgement has been overtaken by ethical criteria'). Two years on, what is your view of *Memory Marathon* as a stand-alone work of art?

SP: I would argue strongly for those 'perverse, indirect' art practices that Bishop promotes. To dismiss them solely on ethical grounds severs artists from an important history of theory and practice within their field. As an artist who also works in an academic context, in art schools, I recognise the importance of maintaining an openness to art practice in all its guises.

At the time of the commission it was important for me to exemplify some of the 'social modalities' of walking which I had identified as unexplored or underplayed in contemporary art. The film records a process of meeting, walking and talking which I had become interested in. However, more generally, I think that it's successful as an analogy for those processes of regeneration which were (and are still) under way in East London.

The film is edited to emphasise the continual, forward motion of the production team as they track the artist and participants – a momentum built over weeks of 'outreach' and engagement exercises and which resulted in an overwhelming sense of expectation for those involved. There is a scene in particular, in the darkness of Hackney Marshes, where one of my fellow walkers is seen standing alone, waiting for the artists and 'artwork' to arrive. As the camera and lighting rig approaches her, the sense of nervous expectation is palpable; the participant freezes in anticipation. As soon as the previous walker arrives with me and hands over the microphone, the walking and talking continues. There's an immediate sense that this artwork has shifted from a spectacular, overwhelming, theatrical event to something shaped equally by participant and artist. The focus is on the participant's voice, on their walking alongside me. As an artist, I am listening, learning from the engagement, yet all the while aware of the demands of the production, of the route we must take, of how this works as artwork in its context and so on.

Two years on, I think the film is still a successful record of a delicate and complex set of negotiations that went on between an artist and a large number of participants within a unique and challenging context. What is not made explicit, and which always lay outside of the scope of this work, are the complex negotiations throughout the commissioning process – between government, various corporate bodies, the ODA, the head of arts commissioning, their selection panels, the artist and so on. As an artist interested in processes of negotiation, I could imagine working with these relationships, but given the contentious context for the commissioning of this work and the relatively precarious status of the works themselves within the wider Olympics project, I am not surprised that these processes remained inaccessible to the artists' commissions. In a sense, *Memory*

Marathon managed to address, as best it could, through allusion and metaphor, the processes that were always going to remain outside of the commission's 'brief'.

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Images

Simon Pope, *Memory Marathon*, 2011 © the artist