

Rumour. Legend. Tradition. Fact. A critical project report*

Luise Vormittag, 2015

Abstract

Over the last few years 'community', 'participation' and 'heritage' have become keywords in creative commissioning. These terms are generally invoked with an abundance of good intentions, but little critical reflection. In this article the author uses a commission of hers as an example to unpick some of the unquestioned assumptions and interests that tend to underpin these projects. The manifold determinants, including bureaucratic, legislative, financial, political and art-historical factors that shape these types of commissions are conceptualized as a 'forcefield', an area of contradictory values, aims and objectives, that the author has to navigate. The article combines critical analysis, project report and personal reflection. It describes the author's efforts to arrive at a satisfactory subject position and project outcome in relation to the conceptual complexities she encounters.

Introduction

This article is an attempt to map a forcefield. I am keen to unpick some of the impulses and interests that came to bear on a recent commission; to tease apart the enmeshment of ideology, policy and finance that shaped the framework for my project and forged the role I was expected to perform. Every commission is underpinned by unexamined and unstated assumptions and interests that influence its stated aims. The case I am about to discuss is no different. It is actually quite ordinary in its institutional, financial and conceptual formulations. What prompted me to single out this specific project for an inquiry was a particularly resonant convergence of nevertheless very ordinary ingredients.



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Illustration is always relational. In the simplest and most traditional sense it operates in relation to a written text. In a wider sense we can think of illustration as being contingent on and in relation to a multitude of factors. Illustrators live at the chaotic intersection where the social, the political, the commercial and the public's short attention span briefly overlap, before disbanding and reassembling again elsewhere. It does not really suit an illustrator to seek out permanence or autonomy. As my colleague Peter Nencini pointed out to me during a recent conversation: our strengths lie in acting provisionally and being 'in the mix' (Nencini 2015).

This article attempts to capture and scrutinize 'the mix' I found myself in during a particular project. By doing so I am asking two main questions. Firstly I am reflecting on my personal position while doing this work. How do I manage the multifarious relationships and interests that emerge during a complicated commission? How do I position myself in relation to these forces? How do I occupy the role I am expected to perform?

My second set of questions has to do with the very act of writing this piece. Is this a fruitful method for mapping the forcefield? What kind of thinking, writing or doing might be productive when reflecting on this? What kind of thinking can open up new perspectives?

Rather than tackling these two questions directly, this article is a record of my search for answers. How do you map a forcefield? What possibilities does one have when taking on a complicated commission involving multiple organizations, people and opinions? I tried some things, some successfully, others less so. It was actually a bit of a mess at times. But I hope that this attempt to understand my subject position and the possibilities it affords, can contribute to the wider discourse around contemporary illustration practice.

I have decided to mostly withhold specific names of people, places and organizations. I am doing this because I believe that some would feel uneasy about being implicated in a project that I am analyzing with such critical scrutiny and might come to feel I am pointing an accusatory finger. I am

not. On the contrary: by generalizing some of the elements of this commission, I am drawing attention to the fact that to a significant extent they represent general conditions for contemporary creative practice.

So this is not an exposé. I don't feel affronted by anyone's actions or interests. Rather than bemoaning the compromised nature of my position, I am hoping to understand its contradictions and possibilities.

Our Heritage is a 'public art'¹ commission for an NHS trust. The brief was to create permanent artwork for a new community hospital in a medium-sized English town that would replace an old building no longer fit for purpose. The project's stated aim was to embed this new hospital in the local community. In order to achieve this the brief stipulated that I generate at least part of the content for the artwork through a participatory engagement phase. My simultaneous engagement with the local community and the town's heritage, so the logic of the brief, would ensure that the work creates a meaningful link between the new hospital building and its social and geographical environment.

Of course I was thrilled to be awarded this commission. It promised a much higher degree of agency than most commercial illustration jobs and the challenge of producing something meaningful for a public healthcare environment greatly appealed to me. But as I was enthusiastically accepting the offer, I was also aware of the complexities ahead of me. The key words used in the brief were 'heritage', 'community' and 'participation', words that have been largely exhausted through their inflationary use in creative commissioning. I was unsure about how to engage with these concepts in a meaningful way. I also understood I was going to be operating under the auspices of large international construction- and financial conglomerates at the heart of this hospital development and wondered about the relationship of their interests to my project.

The first part of this paper describes my process of trying to understand my position in general terms. I briefly touch on some of the key ideas in the history of public art in order to pinpoint the emergence of the concepts embedded in my commission. I then critically review some of the unexamined assumptions inscribed in those concepts.

In the second part I explore the specific features of my commission. I consider my geographical, institutional and financial context. I recount my actions and explain the decisions I made in light of the considerations discussed earlier.

The conclusion seeks to evaluate the project and reflects on the significance of this article in relation to it.

Image on previous page: collage containing photography by Michael Whelan and my own work, produced for the publication 'Rumour, Legend, Tradition, Fact'. See pp.8-9 for more details.

¹ I am using quotation marks to signal my reservations in regards to this term. These kinds of projects tend to require the creative communication of specific ideas and values that are determined by the property developer. In this way they are much more akin to illustration commissions.

PART 1: IN THE LIBRARY

Historic Context

In her book *On Place After Another* (2002) art historian Miwon Kwon gives an insightful account of the historical lineage of site-specific public art: The impulse to foreground local heritage and community emerged as a counter-movement to the modernist tradition, where large-scale public sculptures by famous artists such as Alexander Calder or Henry Moore rarely had any relationship to the site. Under this older paradigm the modernist aesthetic object radiates meaning and significance, which is gratefully absorbed by the otherwise void site.

In contrast the kind of public art that foregrounds local heritage and community participation, posits meaning as a quality of the site and the people inhabiting it. Ideas of originality, authenticity and identity are attributed to the local community, their culture and legacy. The task of the artist is accordingly transformed: instead of producing a piece reflecting the artist's personal aesthetic concerns, she now sets out to reveal something about the community and the site. The artist takes on the combined role of ethnographer and advocate, whose task is to 'become one' with the community, in order to be able to speak with and for them.

American artist, educator and writer Suzanne Lacy was instrumental in the development of this type of public art. In 1995 she edited *Mapping the Terrain: New Genre Public Art* to draw together three decades of art projects that emphasized community participation. The book celebrates artists who locate their practice at the nexus of activism and aesthetics, working with and championing often marginal community groups, depicting them affirmatively and campaigning for their interests.

Today words such as community, heritage and participation have been absorbed into the vocabulary of mainstream creative commissioning, where they operate as key concepts in communication design, advertising, branding and architecture. Eliciting them will bestow legitimacy,

authenticity and ethical credentials on your project. As with all inflationary processes this one too has caused a decline in value of the original unit. Architect and academic Jeremy Till laments their deployment as a 'veneer of worthiness' (2006) for many a project. When I encountered them in my brief, I found them too smooth to provide me with sufficient traction for a meaningful creative departure.

Terminology

The following brief excursions chart my effort to re-animate this depleted vocabulary. I am drawing on writers from different fields to playfully initiate a dialectic process: Heritage is reassessed as a concern for the present, community as exclusion, and participation as an opportunity for antagonism and strife.

'Community'

In her essay 'The Ideal of Community and the Politics of Difference' feminist scholar Iris Marion Young describes community as an 'understandable dream' (1990:300). This dream is held up as an alternative to the competitive and alienating individualism of contemporary society. Young draws attention to the logical dependency of this oppositional binary (individual / community), where each term is defined by its negative relation to the other. She argues that reversing their evaluation, i.e. appraising the idea of community more highly than that of the individual, may hold some critical force, but ultimately she considers this to be a weak intellectual gesture. When examined more closely both concepts rely on the same basic principle: the idea of a unified whole. Those in support of the primacy of the individual, think of people as self-sufficient and complete in themselves. Similarly those advocating for the ideal of community, see it as a unifying fusion that draws its members into harmonious face-to-face units.

Young points out the problems associated with this conceptual foregrounding of unity. It denies difference

within and between subjects. Psychoanalytic theory makes a convincing case for the subject not being a unity unto herself. Quite the opposite! We are all constantly in the throws of multiple conflicting desires and impulses. If a single subject is such a heterogeneous and contradictory construct, Young argues, it is unlikely she could fuse with others into a harmonious, unified whole.

Young goes further still with her critique of the unreflected desire for community. Communities tend to define themselves via mutual identification of shared attributes, a unity of sameness. Individuals or groups who don't possess those attributes are cast as 'other'. A close identification with a homogenized group can make it harder to relate to the other, who does not possess the shared attributes around which the community has formed. The desire for unity and sameness necessarily creates borders, dichotomies and exclusion and Young highlights that this is precisely the process that underpins racism, ethnic chauvinism and class devaluation.

When creative briefs today call for an engagement with the local community this tends to happen with the vague idea of countering the alienation contemporary Western society has supposedly wrought upon us. The rhetorical elevation of 'the local community' is often used to generate an affective response, a pious glow. Who exactly is included in this community, and if they are actually in need or want of artistic engagement, is less often discussed.

'Participation'

Participation is the leading principle of democracy. Under a democratic regime the population is invited to take part in its own governance and to contribute to the decision-making processes that will shape society. There is a rich and diverse lineage of artists who grapple with this idea in the context of their work. Here questions circle broadly around the idea of activating and including the audience in an attempt to democratize the artworld. Art historian Claire Bishop discusses these practices in great detail in her amusingly titled book *Artificial Hells* (2012).

Environmental planners and architects broached similar questions during the 60ies and 70ies. They sought to involve future users in the design process and give them the opportunity to contribute to the shaping of their environment. The aim was to sweep aside the numerous layers of bureaucracy involved in architectural production and facilitate a more direct and meaningful collaboration between architects and users. This progressive impulse was soon institutionalized. Participatory components have now themselves become part of the bureaucratic process they initially intended to disrupt.

Jeremy Till, alongside other architects and theorists (see for example Blundell, Jones, Petrescu, Till 2005 or Miessen 2011), has suggested a move away from the superficial and placating forms of consensus that participatory requirements in architectural projects often elicit today. One alternative model challenges the desire for consensus and proposes that a process of genuine participation is likely to elicit a certain amount of conflict, difference, antagonism and strife.

This proposition draws on the work of political theorist Chantal Mouffe. She argues that the central task for democratic politics is actually to provide institutions that permit conflict. In these institutions opponents don't become enemies, but adversaries who can co-exist in 'conflictual consensus' (2013). Mouffe's rejection of the desire for consensus mirrors Young's rejection of the desire for unity. Their work suggests that the unreflective manner in which community participation is often evoked in creative commissions can easily lead to superficial and tokenistic gestures.

Community participation also gives rise to another set of issues. The word participation glosses over questions of authorial ownership and remuneration. Who has the final say over the resulting artwork? Whose name is associated with it? Who gets paid?

The unquestioned presumption is that the participating community group will somehow benefit from the exchange, but the exact nature of this pay-off is rarely explicitly

stated. Hardly ever is there any actual financial reward for participants. It is assumed that they will be sufficiently rewarded by the act of participation itself – perhaps, as Miwon Kwon pointedly suggest, by 'seeing themselves affirmatively represented in the work' or 'by experiencing the joys of supposedly unalienated artistic labour' (Kwon 2002:94). It is true, that the artist herself does not always receive meaningful financial reward for her work. She can however extract cultural capital from the project. She is the named author. She can use it to build her career and reputation. She can chose to discuss it in academic journals.

'Heritage'

The specter of heritage is summoned to lend gravitas and value to a broad range of cultural and consumer products. Traditions, inherently good and honorable, are served up to feed our nostalgia for a supposedly simpler, bygone era. For example a brand that builds its identity around the company's heritage gains instant legitimacy by evoking a sense of historical continuance.

Common sense suggests that heritage concerns itself with the past of a culture. A brief moment of reflection reveals that this is not altogether true. The past is of interest only insofar as it can lend legitimacy and value to a present concern. Heritage actually tells us more about our present desires and interests, than about historical facts.

Historian David Lowenthal elaborates on the differences between history and heritage in his book *The Heritage Crusade and the Spoils of History* (2009). He reminds us that it is easy to make the claim that heritage is a form of 'bad' biased, distorted history, concerned with elevating a contemporary project. In this scenario 'real' history is conceived as the 'true' narrative of the past. This idealized version of history is clearly naïve – of course every historical account includes an element of bias.

In Lowenthal's view history does not differ from heritage by its lack of bias, but by its attitude towards it. Bias

is a predicament that historians actively grapple with. Historical discourse, while fallible, generally relies on cross-referencing, comparative scrutiny of an ever-expanding canon and critical peer review. Heritage on the other hand is not testable or reasonable. Lowenthal calls it a 'declaration of faith' (2009:121) that is not open to critical analysis or debate. Heritage 'thrives on ignorance and error' (2009:121). It is built on pride in a fabled past, where 'exclusive myths of origin and continuance' (2009:128) originate to give prestige and purpose to a contemporary endeavor.

Today city branding and tourist industries offer up native culture and local heritage for consumption. In his book *The Expediency of Culture* theorist George Yúdice describes how in the global economy traditional cultures are mobilized as an engine for economic development (2003). Heritage has become a resource, part of the broader cultural economy that is expected to yield economic and financial rewards.

'Community', 'participation' and 'heritage' are rhetorical reversals of what many understand as today's dominant cultural mode: the convergence of neo-liberalism and low-cost commodity production that tends to privilege selfish individualism and planned obsolescence. But, as Iris Marion Young pointed out so succinctly, rhetorical reversals aren't politics as such, especially not if they are hastily drawn up to provide a charming façade for a complicated enmeshment of private capital and public healthcare.

Some readers might wonder why I am seemingly rejecting terms that are basically benign. What am I hoping to achieve? Obviously I did not go on these excursions to arrive at an argument for cultural production that is solipsistic and exclusionary. Neither did I want to short-circuit my project all together by deconstructing these terms; talking myself into a space so disillusioned and censorious, that I would be unable to engage with the commission at all. But I felt uncomfortable unquestioningly accepting the righteousness that these words radiate. I wanted to

reanimate language that had become dull through overuse. I was looking for friction, for nuance, a point of departure. I was also looking for ways to complete the commission and get paid. I suppose I wanted to have it both ways: the successful completion of a commercial commission and the critical, self-reflective distance. There were moments, when I believed I could achieve this unlikely pas-de-deux. But ultimately, unsurprisingly, this particular dance included many undignified lurches, wobbles and limps that gave rise to compromised outcomes. This is the price you pay for staying ‘in the mix’.

The ‘mix’, i.e. the various people and organizations I found myself working with, displayed a range of attitudes towards me: friendly but perhaps not particularly interested, supportive, but not particularly powerful, distant and occasionally hostile, bureaucratic, pragmatic, kind, reluctant, overbearing and warm. Of course everybody was more bound up with their individual concerns and goals in regards to the hospital build than my commission. Unsurprisingly nobody was interested in a complicated dialogue about the politics of rhetorical reversals or the role of bias in the construction of local heritage. Although some parties I was working with genuinely believed in the value of artwork in a healthcare environment, I knew that I was primarily there as a result of a planning obligation and I found myself wondering if I had been tasked to embody the ‘outsourced ethical consciousness’ (Eyal Weizman in Miessen 2011:10) of a large-scale corporate organization. How to proceed?

PART 2: OUT AND ABOUT

Seeking Specificity

The town has a pedestrianized High Street, an attractive, medieval church and a handful of picturesque old cottages. It is located in close proximity to a motorway that enables fast access to two large urban centers. This fortuitous geographical position has turned the place into one of the fastest growing towns in the region. The growth in population demanded a renewed investment in local infrastructure. When the local authorities were unable to generate sufficient funds for the redevelopment of the town center, Sainsbury’s stepped in to finance the project. The new town square offers a Sainsbury’s supermarket, a large Vue cinema and several chain restaurants. There is also a large shopping centre on the outskirts of the town.

While the town has retained some distinctive features, the general trend is towards spatial indifference. Many streets look like they could be anywhere in Britain. It is this very process of increased geographical homogeneity brought about by globalized capital, that sparks the desire for specificity and uniqueness, for local heritage and distinctive traditions evident in my brief.

Ironically the production of specificity by the public artist, the designer, the city brander, is often required at the very moment of its obliteration in the geographical environment. The role of the creative practitioner is to retrieve, reveal and celebrate local specificities, just as larger sociopolitical forces are eradicating them. Artists and designers are asked to celebrate local culture, rather than probe or question the processes of its disappearance.

The hospital project that I now played a supporting role in, had structural processes in operation that mirrored some of the features I had observed in the geographical environment: Private and often international capital was shaping the civic texture of the town. The construction of the new hospital building was funded through a new financial model² that bore a strong resemblance to the private finance initiatives

(PFI) of previous years. In the PFI model a consortium of private investors and developers builds and essentially owns the new facility, which is then leased back to an NHS trust. This model has been widely criticized as catastrophic for the NHS in financial terms, as trusts get locked into 30-60 year contracts, with payments often increasing year on year throughout their term (NHS Support Foundation 2015:3).

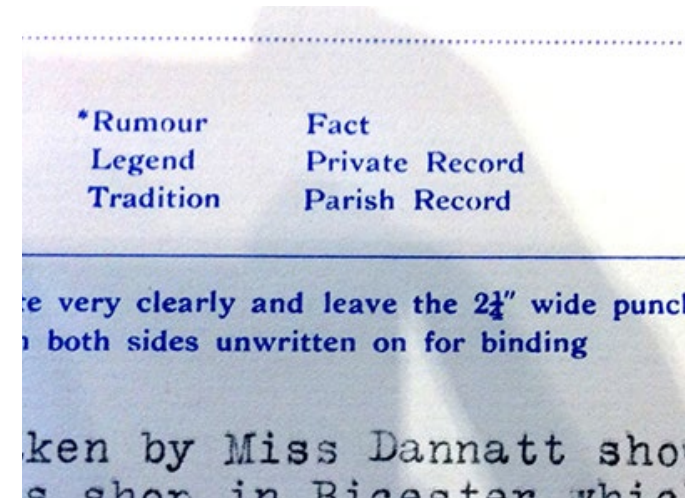
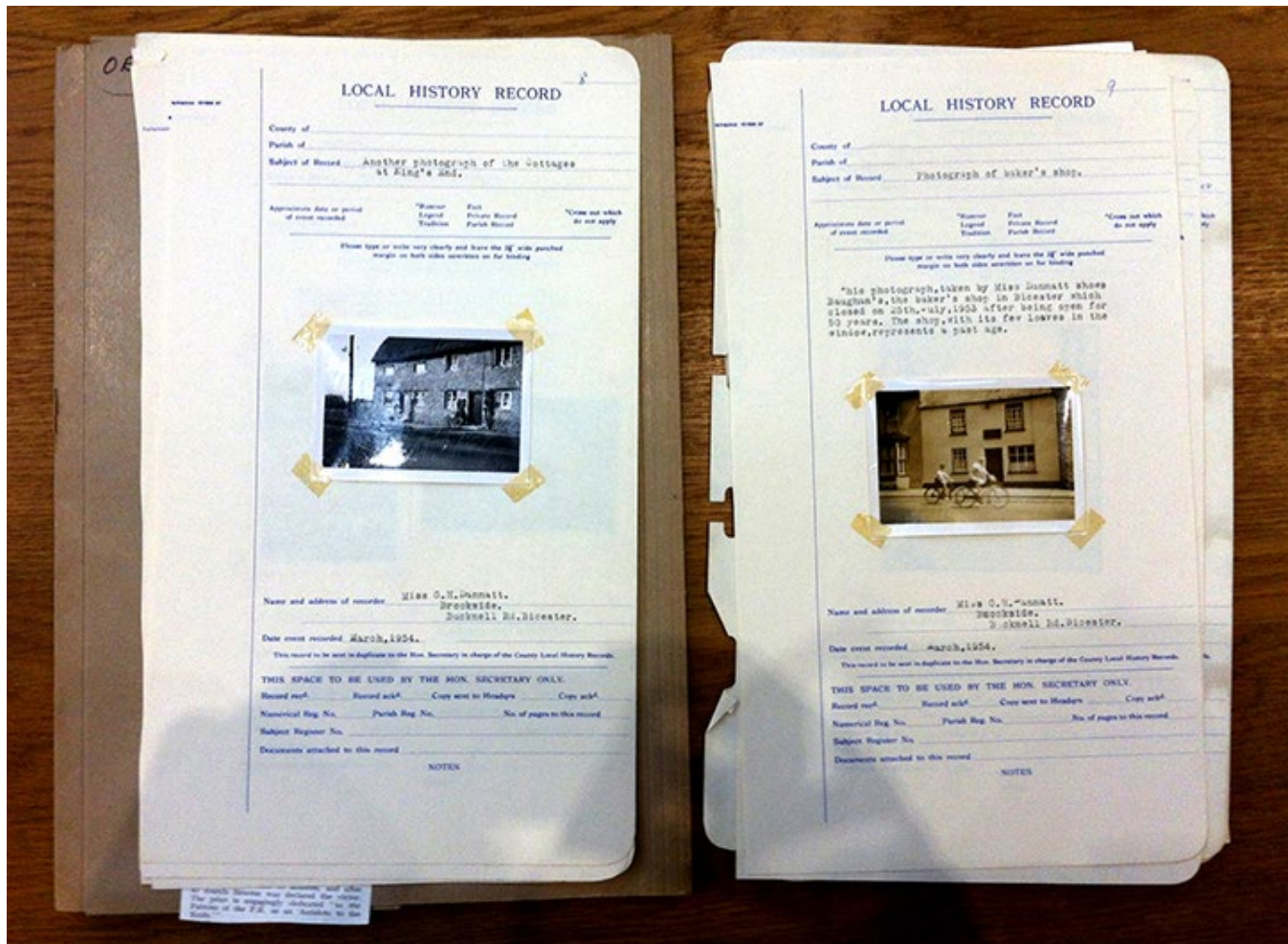
In my case this consortium of international investors and developers was my client. My commission was the result of UK planning law that makes it obligatory for some large-scale development projects to finance ‘public art’ projects. In order to fulfill this obligation the developers hired a specialized arts and health commissioning agency, who in turn hired me.

Actions & Reactions

I started working on the project in late summer 2013. I visited a local archive and was scowled at by the staff for the vagueness of my inquiry. I leafed through books and scrolled through microfilm, but could not quite muster up sufficient enthusiasm to pursue any of the material in greater depth. I pondered the forcefield I was navigating and wondered how I would handle the brief. I aimlessly requested more files, papers and audio-cassettes.

What eventually caught my eye was none of the actual content, but a piece of archival stationery. The so-called ‘Local History Records’ from the 1950ies were forms that had been filled out, presumably by an archivist, recording whatever data had been presented to them. The content was

² This information was not part of my official briefing documents, but I became aware of this out during a casual conversation with a team member. I mention this to clarify that while I do not have exact data in regards to the financial model used for this particular development I was given a sufficiently detailed outline to understand its basic mechanisms.



Snapshots of Local History Record forms encountered at a local archive..

diverse and included both text and image. For example, one sheet contained a list of local crafts while another showed photographs of cottages that were about to be demolished. What piqued my interest was a part of the form listing qualifiers that were supposed to be applied to the record: 'Rumour, Legend, Tradition, Fact, Private Record, Parish Record.' They were printed alongside the instruction: 'Cross out which do not apply.' I thought this list could be read as a playful reference to the malleability of historical material and immediately decided to use it. I shortened it to 'Rumour,

Legend, Tradition, Fact' and made it the title and framework of my project.

I decided to recreate the 'Local History Record' form from the archive in an enlarged poster format. This would be the basis for my main outcome. I was hopeful that using these qualifiers meant I could work with local heritage while also drawing attention to its contrivance. Yes, this is the town's heritage, but only some elements are verifiable fact. A significant proportion is improvised and fabricated.

My thinking at this point was influenced by Eric Hobsbawm's notion of the 'invented tradition'. He uses this term to describe relatively new rituals and practices that derive their legitimacy by implying continuity with a suitably historic past (Hobsbawm & Ranger 1983). Of course all traditions are 'invented' at some point in time. Some of them are deliberately constructed while other practices develop more organically. Hobsbawm's specific interest lies with claims of legitimacy through vague but largely erroneous historical association.

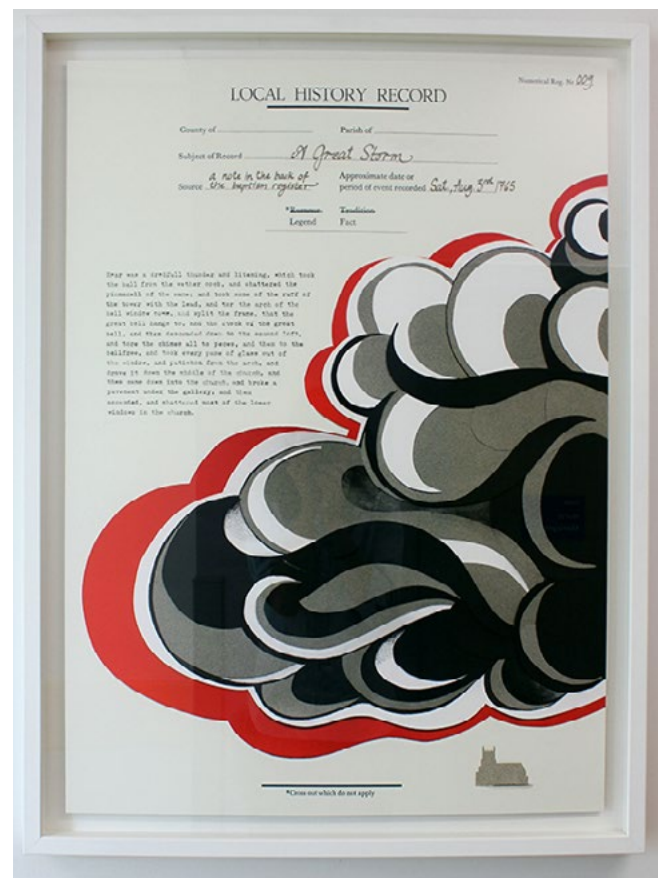
If traditions can be invented, could I, rather than just documenting components of the town's heritage, actively embellish the material I encountered? Could I maybe contribute to the shaping of heritage, perhaps even deliberately put some rumours into circulation? What if I produced 'Local History Records' that contained stories I had in fact invented? Wouldn't ticking the 'Rumour' box on the form give me the license to be playful with my records?

So rather than just trying to capture what I found and translating it in ways expected of an illustrator, I manipulated some of my source material. By doing so I was hoping to address some of the contentious assumptions arising from the paradigm of public art that underpinned my brief:

Firstly, the quasi-ethnographic position the artist finds herself in is rarely questioned. The artist is expected to quite naturally and magnanimously fuse with, depict and advocate for a community. While an artist may indeed identify with a particular group and their concerns, an element of self-interest will also often play a role. Although there are many artists who have developed innovative and interesting ways to work with community groups, in the final instance it is the artist who shapes the work, is credited with the piece and who arguable receives the most benefits. Rather than pretending otherwise, I wanted to draw attention to the fact that I am not a disinterested community spokesperson, but a creative practitioner who has a vested interest in this project. I wanted to highlight my inevitable authorial authority, not hide it.

The second assumption I wanted to address concerned the affective associations with the idea of community. Besides the points raised by Iris Marion Young, I had additional reservations. I was uncomfortable with the idea of community as the locus for extraction of supposedly authentic source material. Hal Foster (1990) describes the notion of 'alterity' that is at work here: the community group is identified as the exotic other, who somehow has special access to primary, authentic subject matter. I was uncomfortable with this idea that is at the root of many well-meaning community projects. What if the community engagement process merely yields mundane or inadequate material?





Previous page and above: two of my Local History Record panels

Overall I was hoping that my slightly deceptive Local History Records could draw attention to the contrived and manipulated notion of heritage as well as the problematic assumptions underpinning community participation in public art. I thought that I had found a way to handle the concepts specified in my brief that appreciated their value, while simultaneously showing up some of the problematic assumptions they were riding on.

Over the next 12 months I developed three outcomes all based on the same idea: that we all continuously reinvent and manipulate our heritage. The central part of my commission was made up of the 12 A1-sized Local History Records. I collected stories for these during meetings with local residents, talking to them either about personal family stories or an aspect of local history. I accessed additional material through various archives, books, videos and pamphlets.

Of the 12 panels, three contained embellishments that I actively implanted. I took care to make these embellishments benign and harmless. Some of the material I encountered was in itself already quite fantastical and improbable. I saw myself as one unreliable narrator amongst many.

I illustrated the stories in a variety of different styles, giving over the majority of the space on the poster to the image. The choice of visual language was in most cases determined by the story it was accompanying. For example I illustrated a record of a 19th century merchant's diary with a paper-cut silhouette, a craft particularly popular at the time. Some illustrations were actually photographic, when this suited the content best. In other cases stylistic decisions were made on the grounds of what I felt was visually lacking from the set as a whole.

I typed the written part of the record on an old typewriter. After scanning and printing the illustration and text digitally, I was generously instructed and supported by Sheena Calvert at her letterpress studio .918 press to manually print the 'form' part of the record. Finally I completed the pieces by 'filling out' the form with a pen by hand.

My second output was a sound-piece. In an archive I had come across an old interview with a local author who talked about writing a folk song for the town in the late 1960ies. I thought this was a perfect example of an invented tradition. The song had a tune that sounded appropriately old and 'folksy' and the lyrics invoked a 'ten-hundred' year old history, although the actual song was under 50 years old. I decided to partially rewrite the lyrics based on an interview I had conducted with a nurse from the hospital about her daily routines and I enlisted a semi-professional local choir to develop and record the song with me.

When I reported on this plan at a meeting, NHS managers vigorously rejected my rewritten lyrics. The whole concept of having a sound piece that played twice a day in a transitory space (a staircase) was not particularly well received. I made the case that this would be just the kind of project that would give a substantial number of people (the choir members, their friends and family) a feeling of having a stake in the new hospital development. Eventually we agreed that I would work with the choir to record the song with the original lyrics.

My third piece was a publication. I decided to produce it as a record of the process that lead to the finished pieces:



Publication produced in collaboration with photographer Michael Whelan and graphic designer Jessie Price. .



people, conversations, landscapes, snippets of text and imagery. But the book was also a piece in its own right. Photographer Michael Whelan, graphic designer Jessie Price and I worked together to create a publication that resonates with the overall theme: heritage as a continuous retelling and adapting of stories – a patchwork of rumours, legends, traditions and facts.

CONCLUSION

When I set out to work on this brief, I was experiencing the tension of wanting to complete and critique the project simultaneously. I wanted the work to be appropriate for a healthcare environment but I also wanted to show reflexive self-awareness of the socio-economic and spatio-cultural context I was operating in.

This might well be an irreconcilable pair of conflicting aims. Did I want to have it both ways? The moral high-ground bestowed by the critique, and the rewards of realizing a commercial commission?

Now that the project is completed and I find myself reflecting on it, disentangling the numerous forces that contributed to its eventual shape, it is clear that my aims were but two amongst many. The construction company needed to fulfill their planning obligations and were keen to send the local council a list of names and activities, to prove there had been sufficient engagement with the local community. The longer the list, the better. Nursing staff were understandably concerned with the aesthetic qualities of the pieces. The NHS management was worried about various guidelines and regulations that might be contravened by the artwork. The choir wanted to write a positive news story for their newsletter. The architect had secretly always wanted a big sculpture suspended in the atrium. With so many interests at play, it is difficult to draw up evaluative criteria by which to assess the work.

In some ways I certainly succeeded: I got paid. I received many warm and positive responses to the work from members of the community and NHS representatives. I was invited to talk and now write about the project in this article. But in other ways I undoubtedly failed.

The most obvious failure is the sound-piece. I was unable to convince skeptical NHS staff of its merits, but nevertheless persisted with its production. It was rewarding to work with the choir and I am very pleased with the recordings we produced. But, perhaps quite predictably, I was told that staff

at the hospital have now switched it off after only a short time in operation, so it is debatable whether it was worth the effort.

A more complicated problem emerged around one of the panels. A participant whose story I used became upset when she saw the finished piece. Her contribution centered on the life-story of a local historic figure. She had an idiosyncratic flamboyant style in which she told this person's tale. She drew information from a range of sources that she blended together to forge a seamless story with lots of fanciful detail. It so happens that there is also a novel based on the same historic figure. In an attempt to generate the best possible version of the story I decided to combine the transcript of the participant's narration with some text from the novel.

I was so enthralled to my concept of mixing fact and fiction that I failed to consider how this would play out for a participant. She, of course, was puzzled and upset to see her contribution modified without consent. Captivated by my idea I had acted negligently and arrogantly. I replaced the panel and covered the cost of doing so myself.

This incident illustrates what I now believe to be the central problem of this project:

My key idea – the fact that I manipulated my material; that I purposefully introduced some rumours, hoping to comment on the notions of heritage and community participation – was essentially my personal secret. Yes, the four qualifiers on the posters are visible for all to see and yes, every time I modified the source material I made sure to tick the 'Rumour' box, but it would be impossible for a viewer to know whether I was recording a rumour or producing one. My denouement was private.

In the conclusion to his essay 'The Artist as Ethnographer' Hal Foster reluctantly endorses work that 'attempts to frame the framer as he or she frames the other' (1996:203). But he follows this with a note of caution: '[...] [R]eflexivity can lead to hermeticism, even narcissism [...]. *And what does critical distance guarantee?* Has this notion become somewhat mythical, acritical, a form of magical protection,



A member of staff at the hospital views one of my panels. Photography by Manuela Barczewski.

a purity ritual of its own?' (1996:203, Italics in original.) I confess to coveting this magical protection of self-reflexivity myself, and I wonder how the concealed nature of my critical interventions affects this dilemma. Is there any value at all in such private self-reflexivity?

At this point it serves us well to recall that Foster operates within a fine art discourse, with its particular histories, interests and anxieties. The self-reflexive outsider is a far more common figure there than amongst illustrators or designers. Illustration by its very nature is more overtly connected to the turbulent jostle of commercial, social and political concerns. In a recent editorial for *Varoom* magazine editor John O'Reilly coined the term 'pulp friction' to describe illustration's inherent involvement in this complicated melee (O'Reilly 2015).

So how do we navigate this 'pulp friction'? What are the options available to us when operating in the midst of corporate interests, personal ambitions and ethical considerations? It is vital for us to have a space to reflect on the roles we are invited to perform, the services we are asked to render. It is however probably impossible to do this in the same arena, the same articulation, the same product that is also intended to satisfy those corporate interests. But perhaps writing for and reading this journal, gives us a room for contemplation that is not possible when juggling commissions in an attempt to make a living as an illustrator.

I opened this article with two main questions. The first one concerned the possibilities available to me in relation to the complex forcefield I found myself in while working on this commission. I landed in a slightly awkward place. I sought to secretly outmaneuver the constraints of my position, but ended up delighting no one but myself.

My second question concerned the purpose and value of writing this piece. I do hope this article opens itself up to a larger audience than the artwork it describes. Writing these pages has certainly helped me evolve my thinking. Hopefully it encourages a larger conversation about the multilayered complexities we all navigate when working on commissions. Earlier I lamented the private nature of my denouement. Well, it is no longer so. If you have read this far, you are now my accomplice. Perhaps it is only now that the project is complete?

Acknowledgements

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