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Creative Cities Assignment

CoolTan Arts – An Inclusive Creative Milieu

1991 saw a local arts based cooperative occupy a former suntan oil factory in Effra Road, Brixton that had lain empty for several years. This was a period which saw the commencement of government policy which sought to link creativity and more particularly art education to explicit economic benefit through the need to show a quantifiable financial return. In this environment the occupiers of the CoolTan factory provided creative and educational opportunities for individuals that would otherwise be excluded for reasons of poverty, ill health, or mental distress.

The current organisation of CoolTan Arts emerged from this activity and sought to continue the ethos of the groups from which it had sprung. CoolTan stayed in Brixton until 2006 when they moved to their current site on the Walworth Road. This site falls within Southwark, an area with amongst the very highest levels of poor mental wellbeing in the UK. Furthermore people who have lower levels of mental wellbeing are amongst the most socially excluded members of society. (McCrone et al. 2006).

Today CoolTan Arts is an organisation run by and for people with experience of mental distress, and seeks to adhere to a core belief that "mental well-being is enhanced by the power of creativity." (CoolTan Arts 2012). Space and opportunity is made available to participate in a wide range of creative practices including visual art, textiles, performance, poetry and digital arts.

Community involvement is fundamental to CoolTan's endeavours and many activities involve novel ways of approaching this. Explicit is the desire to dispel the stigma still associated with issues of mental distress, and dismantle the barriers that lead to misunderstanding and exclusion. Their exhibition spaces have been used by other groups for showing their work, whilst CoolTan have exhibited and performed work in a wide range of venues.



The "Largactyl Shuffle" series of organised walks plays an important role in rendering visible the creativity, presence and contribution of a disenfranchised group. These events are named, with dark humour, after a controversial anti-psychotic medication first used in the 1950s, and known by many who have experienced its effects as a "chemical cosh". In those to whom it is administered a side effect known as the Largactyl shuffle is

common. This involves an urge to walk almost constantly in small, shuffling steps. The walks today involve a guided walk around Southwark, aimed at promoting mental and physical wellbeing, with each walk focussed on particular aspects of the area.



Fig. 1 CoolTan Arts Summer Solstice Midnight "Largactyl Shuffle" from Tate Modern to Maudsley Hospital. 2010

(Source CoolTan Arts)

CoolTan can be regarded as an organisation that has grown from efforts of local people and in which the highest value rests upon inclusivity. Creativity is seen to arise from all members of the community, and engagement in creative practice offers benefits to a wide range of citizens.

The "Creative City" concept has as its focus the perceived need to develop cities in an economic sense (Landry 2000). This discourse inextricably yokes creative practice to the service of promoting economic growth in cities. In Florida's conceptualisation the objective is to keep ahead of supposedly competing cities, and attain a higher position in a notional ranking. The key to success is seen to rest in the ability of cities to attract a particular "Creative Class" to live and work within them (Florida 2002). This group, which represents around 30% of the population in the US, is claimed to behave in ways that both produce and consume the products of creativity in a virtuous economic cycle. As such movement and migration of people is fundamental to the successful city envisaged by Florida:

"Traditional notions of what it means to be a close, cohesive community and society tend to inhibit economic growth and innovation. Where strong ties among people were once important, weak ties are now more effective" (Florida 2003).

Yet extensive migration is not without its challenges at a personal and societal level. Whilst the picture in terms of the effect of internal or international movement on health is complex, it is clear that migrants

tend to be at greater risk of mental distress than those with stronger connections and rootedness in the area in which they live (Bhugra & Jones 2001).

Could it be that the processes that Florida's ideas seek to promote are causing societal changes that necessitate an increased need for organisations such as CoolTan Arts? Ironic then that such creativity arises from people that Florida barely recognises. A creative group which seeks to privilege inclusiveness in a way that is incongruent with the systemic inequalities and inherently exclusive notions of the "Creative Class".

References

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