

LOCATING A TEMPORARY COMMON SPACE: CULTURAL EXCHANGES IN WEEDPATCH



Image by Heather Connolly for CoLab – Oct 2006

'He vivido aquí en el Norte como 5 años

Trabajo en la uva, algodón, amarre, mandarinas

En donde aya trabajo ahí voy a trabajar

I've lived here on the north side about five years

I work on grapes, cotton, amarre, tangerines

Wherever there is work I go to work ¹

The women started coming in the '80s, '84 and '85,

Since the 1980s and 90s all the children started to come,

The youth would finish elementary

And they would aspire to come to 'el norte' (the US)²

Introduction

Migration patterns have diverse historical roots – war, famine and poverty account for the dislocation of many communities. The global flow of technology, information, labour and capital has, however, become a particular characteristic of the 21st century and its ‘human traffic’. Cultural exchange amongst diasporic communities and the recent emergence of ‘transmigrants’, those whose lives are made crossing and recrossing national boundaries, are increasingly challenging notions of identity. Does this lead to the isolation or converging of cultures or, as Homi Bhabha has asked, is there a hybrid ‘third space’ whereby cultures come together? ³

Cultural identity also emerges from and through a sense of place. The particularities of place - local factors such as the built environment, spatial design and planning - can all profoundly affect the behaviour and attachment of people to the environment in which they live. Doreen Massey, who has written extensively on the relationship between place and identity, has emphasised that whilst human inter-relations and social activities are directly related to a spatial and geographical locality, we also need to re-think ‘place’ as fluid, unfixed and relational. As she reminds us, ‘place’ and ‘community’ have only rarely been coterminous. ⁴

Working for four weeks on their project – *Incubate* - amongst the diverse migrant and indigenous communities of Southern California, the artists’ collective *CoLab*, faced the complexities of operating at the intersection of place, ethnicity and identity. Bhabha’s comments about ‘the radical incommensurability of translation’ in his book *The Location of Culture*⁵ has a particular resonance with their experience. In a community with three languages - Mexican-Spanish, Mixteco ⁶ and Anglo-American - *CoLab* quickly identified ‘language’ as not only the key site of cultural contestation, but also the prime site for their own artistic explorations and interventions.

Besides revealing the rich fabric of local transitory cultures, the resulting artworks and events created onsite - largely based around the gathering, telling and translating of stories - highlighted the problems and paradoxes of migrant communities and their popular perception. Also, inadvertently and in a small way, the *CoLab* project incubated a mutable ‘temporary common space’ which facilitated dialogue within the community itself. This resonates with the ideas of Patricia Phillips who has written extensively about the contested definitions and practices of public art. In place of the routine installation of permanent projects, she has advocated public art practices which are provocative and investigative, practices which create a

psychological as much as a physical space – a ‘forum’ for dialogue and multiple voices. As Phillips has argued,

‘...a public art that truly explores the rich symbiotic topography of civic, social and cultural forces can take place anywhere – and for any length of time...[it] would *create* the forum for the poignant and potent dialogue between public ideals and private impulses, between obligation and desire, between being of a community and solitude....’⁷

CoLab and the public realm

CoLab was set up by three Midlands-based British artists – Heather Connelly, Jo Dacombe and Jayne Murray. The collective was set up partly to explore the practice of collaborative working. Primarily, though, it has focused upon a single specific initiative the *Incubate* project. They came together through a common background in practising in the public realm and a shared interest in developing alternative approaches and strategies for working with communities. The idea of artists collaborating on public work which has a participative element is not new: in the 1960s and 70s, there were a range of groups working in this way, such as GRAV⁸ in Paris or Eventstructure, a collective of artists working across Europe. Since the 1990s though, critics such as Nicholas Bourriaud have identified new contemporary participative contexts for art-making – ‘relational’ approaches⁹ – and there is a currency of interventionist models for public practice whereby artists produce temporary or ephemeral artworks both with and in communities.¹⁰ A critical debate about these new forms of public practice has been generated, particularly since Claire Bishop’s article on the current ‘social turn’ was published in *Artforum* in February 2006.¹¹ Inevitably, ‘engaged’ forms of practice will vary widely in terms of values, aesthetic and motivations - and the activism versus aesthetics debate is a tired one - but it is important to balance this against the contribution which particular practices – such as muf¹² - have made to communities and the shaping of places and environments.

The *CoLab* collective, however, is particularly interesting – not just because they are a group of artists working together in the public realm - but because of the unusual working method and approach they specifically adopted in the *Incubate* project. With a shared ethos and commitment to ‘process’ rather than ‘production’, they aimed to use their practice to initiate art-making which involved community ownership without being ‘community art’. Their aim was to ‘use art as a vehicle through which to engage with people and place’¹³. As Jo Dacombe has commented,

'It was about re-engaging with the familiar...finding a way that our work would be communicating with the people and the place...and re-engaging them with their place...'¹⁴

CoLab set themselves the challenge of going to a place as 'cultural outsiders' with the idea that, through dialogue and interaction, they would research, engage and respond in a way that seemed appropriate at the time and with no pre-conceived ideas about what that might be. One of the artists, Murray, has commented that, for her, the project was about 'learning through difference – cultural, social and material - by practising in another place.'¹⁵ In effect, *CoLab*'s aim was to engage in transcultural exchange as a form of practice.

Adopting the research methodology of the 'laboratory experiment' was particularly important for the group. This was partly based on the 'experiential' approach which two of the artists had taken in an earlier public art and regeneration project in Corby ¹⁶, but it also echoes the strategies of contemporary artists like Andrea Zittel ¹⁷. Drawing on scientific practices and 'action research' models, the *Incubate* project was set out in a series of planning documents whereby the artists discussed their aim of 'testing a hypothesis' ¹⁸, evaluating findings within a live situation and intervening and collaborating in a specific environment.¹⁹ Echoing Miwon Kwon's writings about the development of new forms of site-specific work which embrace discourse ²⁰, one of the key motives of *Incubate* was 'to generate a discursive environment' through creative means. ²¹

Selecting a 'site of international insignificance'

Incubate was set up through an advertisement placed in the art press in which *CoLab* sought invitations from individuals or communities who considered themselves to be a 'site of international insignificance'. In exchange, *CoLab* offered to spend time researching, responding and creating work in the host community or site. ²² After receiving a range of 'invitations' – from alternative gallery spaces and organisations across Europe and the US – *CoLab* selected the Arts Council of Kern's (ACK) invitation to Weedpatch community in Kern County, California.

The paradoxical nature of Weedpatch and its claim for 'insignificant' status particularly appealed to *CoLab*. The historical, cultural and social composition of the community is complex and contradictory. Of course, the United States has a long history of public art – more recently, it boasts a formidable network of innovative public art projects – particularly with artists such as Suzanne Lacey and 'new genre public art' emerging in the 1980s. ²³ Whilst the Arts Council of Kern (ACK) provided the institutional framework and organisational support, with limited

resources and geographical isolation, they were interested in developing how they deliver and support public art beyond traditional forms of practice. Consequently, ACK gave *CoLab* an enthusiastic welcome as they anticipated that the project might initiate new ways of thinking about public art in the region.

Weedpatch's 'insignificance' – or at least its marginality - was underlined by social and economic impoverishment as the area has been inhabited and colonised by different groups of migrant workers for decades, many of whom continue making the familiar journey from migrant accommodation to trailer parks and, finally, houses.

On the other hand, Weedpatch holds an enormously significant and symbolic place in American social, political and collective memory as it was immortalised in John Steinbeck's novel *The Grapes of Wrath* published in 1939. Between 1935 and 1940, over one million people left their homes in Oklahoma, Texas, Arkansas and Missouri where shifts in land ownership and the changing nature of agriculture were exacerbated by the 'Dust Bowl' conditions. Families travelled hundreds of miles along Route 66 to seek work in California and many of them ended up in the Arvin Federal Government Camp, renamed by Steinbeck as 'Weedpatch'. Life in the one-room tin cabins and tents was difficult and the 'okies' were ridiculed and marginalised but, with the passage of time, that history is being reclaimed and appropriated. The original Weedpatch Camp and School have acquired heritage status and a collective pride is expressed through events such as the annual Dust Bowl celebration – although, importantly, not all current residents associate or identify with that history which many perceive as 'white'/North American heritage.

A key issue for *CoLab* in selecting a site with such a history was to get beyond its literary connections and attempt to approach the place with no agenda in mind - to work with the community as it is today "a small town of around 2000 people living in 13 streets".²⁴ Some wooden buildings from the original camp, post office, community centre and library have been restored and relocated in an area designated as 'historic'. Other wooden buildings that were originally sited in the camp can be spotted around the town, moved reused and rebuilt. Occasionally, the previous life of the place is secretly embedded in the environment with, for example, retrieved fragments of old linoleum and wall coverings often incorporated into later buildings. In the new migrant accommodation Sunset Camp, the buildings are now adobe; duplexes have replaced the tin cabins. Now the camp houses a new wave of migrant workers as Mexicans precariously seek a new life of prosperity in *el norte*.

Working In Weedpatch

From the start of their four weeks' residency, *CoLab* identified a number of unanticipated problems – an early task was identifying the place and locating 'the community' itself as they found themselves in a place with no sign, no community centre and no central meeting place. The lack of communal signifiers and the fact that there was no place for social exchange or cohesion proved to be key obstacles. On the other hand, these were also crucial factors in influencing the activities and outcomes of the project as *CoLab* quickly identified that there was not one but 'a number of communities'.²⁵ Gradually, Weedpatch revealed itself to *CoLab* as a range of largely separate communities each with its own language, cultural and popular memories, histories and practices. Given the time limitations, finding a way to work in an inclusive and creative way with this heterogeneous community of Oaxacans, Mexicans, Mixteco-speakers and various generations of migrant workers – and without a translator or any immediate means of solving the issue of communication - presented a considerable challenge.

The diverse range of indigenous and second languages also offered a fertile source of cultural and social signification. Sarat Maharaj has written about the complexities and richness produced by the dissonance and difference in translation²⁶ – whilst meaning and nuance is sometimes lost and distorted, there is the potential for cultural gain and cultural exchange. In focusing around language and story-gathering through offering the community an 'open-ended story recording service'²⁷, the *Incubate* project has resonances with the ideas of Maharaj. The hybrid and segregated nature of the communities emerged through the complex processes of multi-lingual translation. With the assistance of local residents and translators, some individual stories were translated from Mixteco to Spanish to Anglo-American, others from Spanish to Anglo-American or from Anglo-American into Spanish and then Mixteco. As a purely oral language with a limited range of vocabulary, Mixteco posed particular problems for translators. In cases where there is no Mixteco equivalent for a word, this has resulted in the inventive creation of hybrid expressions or elaborate descriptions.²⁸ *CoLab* found that the shifts of meaning and misunderstandings resulting from this multi-layered process were uncontrollable and unpredictable but they were also an enriching and revealing aspect of the project.²⁹ As part of *CoLab*'s commitment to 'giving something back to the community'³⁰, an audio-visual installation resulted. From the individual recordings, a Weedpatch story - *Meanings Significado* – was threaded together into an image-text-sound work.

The month project culminated in the presentation of *Meanings Significado* at two different events in Weedpatch. A participatory plenary symposium was set up by the Arts Council of

Kern; attended by various project partners, academics and representatives from the local press, it facilitated an informal discussion of the process and outcomes of the project. Also, a separate celebratory community event enabled local artists, storytellers and - most importantly - the residents of Weedpatch community to come together and listen to each others stories at 'listening posts'. This exchange of stories was particularly important as it initiated a cross-community dialogue which, it emerged, had rarely occurred previously.³¹ Released from the barriers and hierarchies of language, the project facilitated cultural exchange amongst the host community in a number of interesting and unexpected ways – a 'temporary common space' was created.

Return, reflection and response

Since the *Incubate* project, the three artists have found different ways of responding to their own experiences in Weedpatch. After reflecting, the individual artists are making work that both disseminates and responds to what happened with a range of transcultural explorations, conversations and connections. Working as a collective, they are committed to the dissemination of their 'laboratory' findings, but, whilst cultural exchange remains a common concern, they will be translating their individual experiences and ideas into different locations, formats and media.³² Three particular events, each with a different focus arising from distinct issues raised by the project, have already been organised for the East and West Midlands. In June 2007, the first event in Leicester - *Interchange: Cultural Exchanges in the Public Realm* – has an international focus. It aims to bring together artists and urban designers to consider the interaction and inter-relationship of communities of different, often migratory, cultures with the built environment. The event contrasts the *CoLab* experience in Weedpatch with the *Interval* project in Australia, reflecting on international experiences that take us outside our 'comfort zone' and require cultural exchange in new places. It will also address how artists are articulating the stories and experiences of ordinary people and will explore their contribution to defining a sense of place.

For *CoLab*, one of the most stark differences about working in Weedpatch was the absence of public space where people coincide, to share and learn – so the public realm and the value of public places will be the focus of another event in Rowley Regis, in the 'Black Country' area of the West Midlands. Murray's project, *Missing you already*, will highlight the ever-shifting ownership and roles of public places as they change with the times. One hundred people who live or work in Rowley Regis have been asked to respond to questions about a public space

they would miss. Given that the design and ownership of the British public realm can be seen as shifting into a more American model this work is considered timely and hopes to explore current values and understanding of shared spaces. These spaces will be highlighted for one day on 7th July. Additionally the event will feature follow-up work by the other artists. Dacombe has continued to explore story-telling through a range of open-ended installation works. The installation, *Interruptions*, representing one of her 'journey-stories', makes oblique reference to the 'remoteness of the Weedpatch experience'.³³ The embroidered ribbons in the work are a metaphor for remembering and forgetting but they also refer back to the mnemonic devices used by ancient Aztec cultures. The threads also represent the start-stop journeys and unending stories of ordinary lives. For Connelly, an artist whose practice has most recently been focused on narrative and sound, the most interesting part of the Weedpatch project has been to reflect on the complexities and richness of the languages she encountered there. In '*Translating Weedpatch*', an audio work, Connelly explores some of the issues and discourses raised by 'translation'³⁴, bringing together multiple characters and narratives, the audience can experience the emotional expression, the textures and rhythm of language of the people of Weedpatch. A third event focused around the issue of migration is planned to take place in Autumn 2007 in Lincolnshire. In this, *CoLab* will be taking part in a seminar workshop which will form part of the regional network, *Making the Connections: Arts, Migration and Diaspora*³⁵.

One needs to be cautious about claiming that art projects can affect or develop cultural exchange – as Patricia Phillips commented in the 1990s, 'public art cannot mend, heal, or rationalize a nostalgia-driven desire to return to less volatile times.'³⁶ Furthermore, the public art 'mantra' of culture-led regeneration dominated the 1990s but the relationship between public art and regeneration is problematic and complex.³⁷ A positive outcome of the project has been the involvement of the Arts Council of Kern County in different approaches to public art and the project in the West Midlands aims to develop and continue that relationship. *Incubate* explored the intersections of language, culture, history and politics in relation to the particularities of physical place – but it also raised generic questions which the three artists will continue to explore in different locations and in different formats and places. For a brief moment in Weedpatch, *Incubate* explored the liminal gaps between language, meaning and understanding and engendered a 'temporary common space' in the absence of a material/physical one for cross-cultural dialogue between immigrant communities on the borders of Mexico. Perhaps new spaces for cultural exchange amongst Britain's resident immigrant communities will develop from the artists' ongoing projects and collaborations, making a small contribution to Sarat Maharaj's idea of reindexing hybridity as 'an unfinished, self-unthreading force...as an open-

ended one that is shot through with memories and intimations of the untranslatable.³⁸ Alongside the cross-cultural aspects of the Weedpatch project, CoLab's work connects to current questions about the contested nature of public space, its value and ownership. Allied to Patricia Phillips ideas on 'public art as a sign of life', it engages with a wider re-thinking of what it is to work as an artist in the public realm and underlines the vital and meaningful contribution that art practice can make to communities.

'Public art is about the free field – the play – of creative vision. The point is not just to produce another thing for people to step back and admire, but to create an opportunity – a situation – that enables viewers to look back at the world with renewed perspectives and clear angles of vision.'³⁹

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¹ From Maria Sanchez Cruz's story, recorded, translated and featured in 'Meanings Significado', as part of *Incubate* – a project carried out by *CoLab* at Weedpatch, Kern County, California, October 28th to November 5th 2006. Any transcription 'errors' resulting from oral translations were purposefully retained - these 'slippages' formed an integral aspect of the project.

² From Juan Lopez's story, *ibid*.

³ See Homi Bhabha, 'The Third Space : An Interview with Homi Bhabha' in J.Rutherford, (ed.) *Identity, Culture, Difference*, London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1990, pp. 207-221.

⁴ Doreen Massey, *Space, Place and Gender*, Cambridge: Polity Press, 1994, p. 147.

⁵ Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, London: Routledge, 1994.

⁶ Mixteco is an ancient indigenous language from the Oaxacan region of Mexico. As it has no common written form, it is largely an oral language with a limited vocabulary. The Mixteco community in Weedpatch originate largely from one particular Oaxacan village, San Juan Mixtepec.

⁷ Patricia Phillips, 'Out of Order : The Public Art Machine' *Artforum*, Issue 27, December 1988, pp. 92-97. For a more recent text, see 'Public Art: A Renewable Resource', in Malcolm Miles and Tim Hall (eds), *Urban Futures*, London: Routledge, 2003.

⁸ Groupe de Recherche d'Art Visuel (GRAV) was founded in 1960 in Paris by a group of Argentine artists Julio Le Parc, Horacio García Rossi, Francisco Sobrino, François Molleret, Joël Stein and Yvaral.

- ⁹ See Nicholas Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics*, Paris: Les Presses du Reel, 2002
- ¹⁰ The work of Lucy Orta and Jeremy Deller might be cited here.
- ¹¹ Claire Bishop, 'The Social Turn: Collaboration and Its Discontents', *Artforum*, February 2006
- ¹² Since 1996, muf, a London-based collaborative group of artists and architects, have established a reputation for pioneering and innovative projects that address the social, spatial and economic infrastructures of the public realm. See muf manuals available at www.muf.co.uk
- ¹³ Author's interview with Heather Connelly, April 2007
- ¹⁴ Author's interview with Jo Dacombe, April 2007
- ¹⁵ Author's correspondence with Jayne Murray, May 2007
- ¹⁶ In summer 2006, Jayne Murray and Jo Dacombe worked on *Thinkspace* – an urban regeneration project devised and set up by Jo Dacombe, based in the ex-steel town, Corby, Northamptonshire. The project is ongoing and can be followed at www.thinkspace.org.uk. For further information email Jo Dacombe at thinkspace@ntlworld.com
- ¹⁷ For information on Andrea Zittel's desert-living project see Andrea Zittel, *Diary*, Milan: Terna Celeste Editions, 2003
- ¹⁸ Author's interview with Connelly and Dacombe.
- ¹⁹ In brief, the methodology set out in CoLab planning documents outlined the recognition, location and definition of an issue, formulating a hypothesis to address it, the employment of deductive reasoning, actively testing the hypothesis and concluding with an appraisal of results.
- ²⁰ Miwon Kwon, 'One Place after Another : Notes on Site Specificity' in *October*, No. 80, Spring 1997, pp. 85-96.
- ²¹ *Ibid.*
- ²² After selecting the Arts Council of Kern's invitation to Weedpatch, CoLab applied for Arts Council of England (www.artscouncil.org) funding to facilitate a longer residency. For information on arts activity in Kern County see www.kernarts.org.
- ²³ For example, see the work of Lucy Lippard, Martha Rosler, Ukeles Mierle Laderman et al in Suzanne Lacey (ed), *Mapping the Terrain; New Genre Public Art*, Seattle: Bay Press, 1995, p. 70
- ²⁴ David Nigel Lloyd, Assistant Executive Director and Director of Arts Programs, Arts Council of Kern.
- ²⁵ Author's interviews with Connelly and Dacombe.
- ²⁶ Sarat Maharaj, 'Perfidious Fidelity: The Untranslatability of the Other' in *Global Visions*, London: Kala Press/INIVA, 1994
- ²⁷ Author's interviews Connelly, Dacombe and correspondence with Murray – CoLab was capitalising also on the fact that there was an established tradition of oral interviewing amongst the region's indigenous communities through various anthropological studies.
- ²⁸ For example, Mixteco speakers referred to computers as 'machines of the devil' in their interviews.
- ²⁹ Stories were told by Maria Mares, Dalia Villalon Jeanette Dhaliwal, Wade Meinke, Emma Worley, Pamela Worley, Barbara Worley, Julio Hernandez Cruz, Maria Cruz Sanchez, Mr. & Mrs. Bobadilla, Marco Antonio Garcia Vega, Cruz Ramos, Victoria and Domingo Medina, Juan Lopez, Earl Shelton, Mattaeo Velazco, Josefina Rojas, and Evonne Dunlap. Stories were recorded in Spanish, English and Mixteco and translated by Rosa Lopez, Hector Hernandez, Guillermina Sanchez, Patti Ramirez, Cruz Ramos and Roberto Escudero. Various residents also offered other skills to the project e.g. Ryan Edquist, assisted with filmmaking and has continued collaborating with Connelly on her follow-up activities.
- ³⁰ Author's interviews with Connelly and Dacombe.
- ³¹ All residents were provided with the cd recording *Meanings Significado*. Audio clips from the stories of Victoria, Julio, Maria, Josefina, Earl and El Ranchito can be heard on the *CoLab Incubate* project archive pages at www.longhouse.uk
- ³² Author's interviews with Connelly and Dacombe.
- ³³ Author's interview with Dacombe.
- ³⁴ See Walter Benjamin, 'The Task of the Translator' [1923] in Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations*, (trans. Harry Zohn; edited and introduction Hannah Arendt), New York: Schocken Books, 1968
- ³⁵ For further details see http://www.lboro.ac.uk/departments/ss/global_refugees/index.html
- ³⁶ Patricia Phillips, 'Public Construction' in Suzanne Lacey (ed), *Mapping the Terrain; New Genre Public Art*, Seattle: Bay Press, 1995, p. 70
- ³⁷ Tim Hall has written extensively on the employment of public art within urban regeneration, see, for example, 'Opening up Public Art's Spaces: Art, Regeneration and Audience' in Malcolm Miles and Nicola Kirkham, (eds), *Cultures and Settlements, Advances and Art in Urban Futures*, London: Intellect Books, 2003
- ³⁸ Sarat Maharaj, *op. cit.* also available at <http://www.iniva.org/entransit/essay/text.html>
- ³⁹ Patricia Phillips, 'Public Construction' in Suzanne Lacey (ed), *Mapping the Terrain; New Genre Public Art*, Seattle: Bay Press, 1995, p. 70.



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