

Brief Encounters: A Walk Around Canterbury with an Old Polaroid Camera and Some Out of Date Film

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In this paper, I attempt to reveal the potential of the seemingly insignificant encounters that could hold the ingredients for transformative moments in participatory art projects.

My art practice evolves around engagement with people and place, and relies on reflective personal journal entries to help evaluate situations and interactions. Consequently, my process is heavily dependent on chance encounters with other people; encounters which ultimately affect the creative materials of everyday life, such as dialogue, a sense of the other, and situations.

In *The Critique of Everyday Life* (Vol. II) Henri Lefebvre distinguishes moments from the everyday, and suggests that the precursors to such moments “are there in embryonic form, but it is difficult to make them out with any clarity.”¹ Lefebvre’s “moments” hold value and spring forth from everyday life only to fail, ultimately fading away and returning us back to everyday-ness. It is the embryos of those moments that I am interested in revealing for this short paper. Using an extract from my personal journal, made while the experience was still fresh in my mind, and together with samples of instant photographs, I will attempt to pin down some of the “partial moments” I encountered during a walk around Canterbury in Kent.

Having used an old instant camera and some out-of-date film, the photographs exaggerate the impossibility of capturing the ephemeral quality of a moment. The dried-up chemical compound resists the camera rollers as it is pressed across the picture plane of the Polaroid object. The photo object (as opposed to the photo digital) is precious; each release of the camera shutter begins the demise of another chemically distorted image--first appearing before our very eyes, then slowly fading away, unnoticed. And just like my social practice, there is an element of chance in regard to whether it will lead to anything at all.

Diary Extract – Brief Encounters

Canterbury is a tourist trap, with gorgeous architecture and sites of historical significance around every corner. The city attracts visitors from around the world, and I found myself faced with a language barrier at the first hurdle. My French is far from useful and after a couple of attempts to make conversation with tourists it became clear that we couldn’t understand each other, and that we were all transitory in the space.



Polaroid 1: Busy street.

I grew less likely to engage with the tourists after assuming (rightly or wrongly) that they would be just as lost I was. Instead I chose professionals, who were easier to locate. Some people were on their way to/from work (wearing branded aprons, for example) and others interacted with me as a customer. I went to a café for a cup of tea. Upon asking the waitress about her favorite place in the city, she made an assumption about me, too; she went on to describe in great detail “where to get the best picture of the Cathedral.” I went with her assumption that I was a tourist, and I adopted the same opening question when approaching tourists: developing rapport, albeit in an embryonic state (assuming the people I’m engaging with also want to photograph the Cathedral).



Polaroid 2: A glimpse of the Cathedral.

My chance to use this new opening line came and went before I could deploy it. I was enjoying a view of the river near The Friends House when a man who was trimming the grass on the riverbank emerged onto the bridge. He initiated a conversation about the battery life of his power trimmer.



Polaroid 3: The riverbank.

He simply looked at me and said, “It’s gone again and doesn’t last very long at all, which is probably a good thing as there is a nest just there,” and he pointed to the spot where Not sure about the use of this word (contacted), how about the word ‘touched’his trimmers had clearly not touched the long grass. When I asked whether it was bees or wasps in there, he explained, “ducks, with eggs inside.”



Polaroid 4: The Friends House.

I asked if he was responsible for the adjacent Friends House garden, commenting how gorgeous it was with immaculately trimmed trees and hedges. He started to walk away with the dead trimmer in hand, and without looking back, said, “well... it’s not just me.” He never did turn back, just kept walking away towards the garage on the far side of the Friends House.

I felt a little rejected, convincing myself that maybe he had other things to do. I wonder what happened? Had I said something to offend him? Did he have somewhere to go? Did he not want to talk about “the others” who tended the garden, and if so, why not? Maybe he was deaf, and that once he had turned away, he couldn’t hear a thing. After all, it was he who had started the conversation in the first place, and then casually walked away. I never got to ask him about the best place to photograph the Cathedral.

Just then, a middle-aged couple arrived to see what I was looking at. “What a wonderful view,” the lady smiled. “Yes, it’s lovely,” I replied. As she leant her elbows on the wall of the

bridge, I shuffled along so she and her companion could see what I had been admiring: the reflection of an old building and a weeping willow tree, with sunbathers further up the distant banks of the river.



Polaroid 5: View from a bridge.

As the couple settled on the bridge, I immediately stepped back and slowly walked away to give them space to enjoy the view in their own space--their own moment.

End of Diary Extract.

In socially engaged art projects “moments” are considered as situations of personal change, transformative in some way. A participant, (the artist or a member of the community) can have a transformative moment where their perspective on life changes; often making changes to their everyday routine as a result of socially engaged art processes (educationally,

politically, health, wellbeing, etc.). The relationship between artist and participant is crucial, and one that demands that the artist becomes a member (often temporarily) of the community.

“It is not by looking at things but by dwelling in them, that we understand their joint meaning”² Michael Polanyi points out--it isn't enough, he suggests, to look at something in a bid to understand it, we must ultimately be able to empathize with the thing; seeing it in its own context is part of that process of understanding. Grant Kester, in his model of a dialogical aesthetic, acknowledges the importance of listening; together with Polanyi's theory of indwelling he helps to contextualize my interactions in the here and now, with local truths and “recognising the social context from which others speak, judge and act.”³

The instant photographs are abstract representations of my experiences (the first stages of a potential project) and while they fail to capture my social interactions, on a visual level they represent a series of potential moments which could lead, through further engagement, to enhanced states of “indwelling.” Henri Lefebvre's moment is also heavily dependent on the materials of everyday life, as it “weaves itself into the fabric of the everyday, and transforms it,” drawing on local resources/materials such as “something happening close by, something contingent and accidental.”⁴

Tim Ingold, when talking about the creative process of making, also identifies with this deep level of engagement with the everyday as “the artisan couples his own movements and gestures – indeed his very life – with the becoming of his materials, joining with and following the forces and flows that bring his work to fruition.”⁵ My walk around Canterbury barely skimmed the surface of everyday life, but highlighted a straightforward strategy for mapping the interests of the artist as they attempt (often intuitively) to locate the elusive embryonic moments. The Polaroid photographs attempt to capture the partial totalities, half-baked moments, and imagined potentialities--just like the “moment,” the fugitive medium is destined to fail and fade away from the time/space in which it was created.

Arguably, the socially engaged artist is out to stop the moment from simply slipping back into everyday-ness without a trace--instead aiming to gather resources for a special moment that may change the everyday for the better (somehow benefiting the social / political / educational, health and wellbeing of participants). As it turned out, Canterbury tales were left untold, and we are now presented with a mere surface pattern of the place.

In the context of socially engaged art practice, each encounter plays its part in the formation of dialogical precursors to transformative moments, even though those special moments may be a long time from occurring, or indeed they may never happen at all. The

failing photograph, in its attempt to be an actual moment, becomes a prompt for further creative inquiry, which is informed by personal and intuitive responses in time and space.

Socially engaged art projects are heavily dependent on the slow passing of time: allowing for things to happen naturally, with the artist and participants relying on what Ingold refers to as “intuition in action.”⁶ My projects evolve intuitively, they are live, emerging without rehearsal and no fixed design in mind. They work in and with the flow of life or, as Ingold might say, *with* the grain of the wood rather than against it. The artist’s role as a facilitator of morphogenetic and dialogical approaches brings with it a tacit understanding of the creative process. It also brings a confidence that allows the art work to grow organically--in tune with the local environment and its people.

Tim Ingold suggests that the creative process is very much a social interchange between maker and materials, a communication of tension between both forces. The inter-subjective exchanges between all the participants (including the artist) can occur on deeply intimate levels when given time to develop naturally; they are the building blocks of socially engaged practice, interweaving creative endeavor between art and life. It is at such profound levels where, at times, the blurring of everyday life and art go unnoticed. Sometimes the art of participation is stretched to the point of breaking down, but always something happens, and shared meanings emerge.

¹ Henri Lefebvre, *Critique Of Everyday Life* Vol 1. (Paris: Verso, 2014), 638.

² Michael Polanyi, *The Tacit Dimension* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2009) 68.

³ Grant H Kester, *Conversation Pieces : Community and Communication in Modern Art* (Berkeley and Los Angeles London: University of California Press, 2004), 113.

⁴ Lefebvre, 630.

⁵ Tim Ingold, *Making: Anthropology, Archeology, Art and Architecture* (London: Routledge, 2013), 31.

⁶ Ibid., 25.

Notes to Section 3: Explorations by Anderson, Alston, and Harper