



Article

Creative Relations

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Creative Relations – William Titley

Introduction

In 'MAKING: ANTHROPOLOGY, ARCHEOLOGY, ART AND ARCHITECTURE', Tim Ingold explores the act of making in the context of the creation of objects and the use of the maker's materials. His descriptions of engaging with materials and the creative processes involved also hold true when working with people and places in a socially engaged art context. Ingold defines two significant approaches to the creative process; morphogenesis, which places 'the maker from the outset as a participant in amongst a world of active materials', and hylomorphism, when a practitioner imposes 'forms internal to the mind upon a material world...' (Ingold 2013 p.21).

Grant Kester in his book CONVERSATION PIECES contrasts two kinds of aesthetic; one portraying the modern artist as a genius who produces objects that are experienced through an immediate aesthetic response to that object, and 'a dialogical aesthetic', which 'suggests a very different image of the artist, one defined in terms of openness, of listening, and of a willingness to accept a position of dependence and intersubjective vulnerability relative to the viewer or collaborator' (Kester 2004 p.110). His chapter on dialogical aesthetics goes a long way to providing a framework for evaluating the work of socially engaged artists, demonstrating that time, ethics, listening, exchange, openness, context, empathy, collectivity, legacy, acknowledging all forms of communication and recognising the artist as participant all come in to play when discussing such work.

Most of Kester's components can also be found in Ingold's descriptions of engagement with materials, and both of them consider materials as having direct connections to the social world around them at the time at which they were made, viewed, found and used. I aim to apply their theories directly to the context of working with people in an attempt to shed light on particular moments in my creative process. I aim to do this by presenting them in the context of Ingold's morphogenetic and hylomorphic approaches, together with Kester's model for a dialogical aesthetic, which highlights critical aspects of socially engaged arts practice.

In this paper, therefore, I use auto-ethnographic methods to present information from my personal diaries as an artist who has lived in the community where the artwork took place all his life. In doing so, I attempt to reveal the importance of seemingly insignificant data by making diary entries after each event and then expanding/reflecting on them at a later date.

Through reporting about a project with male home carers, I'm going to present some of the interactions which took place between myself (as the artist) and the participants as we got to know each other, and became part of each other's lives. The text takes the form of a series of extracts taken directly from my own personal journals followed by a commentary on each. These have been selected to highlight the similarities between Ingold's descriptions of creativity and Kester's model for a dialogical aesthetic, which highlights key

points in the engagement processes of a socially engaged artist. These reflective notes, made while the experiences were still fresh in my mind, help to illustrate the impact not only on the participants but also upon the artist as a participant in the social process.

The project came about through collaboration between a local health care organisation, whose aims are to support and connect voluntary carers in Lancashire, and 'Superslowway', which is one of 21 projects in England called Creative People and Places (CCP). The CCPs, funded by the Lottery and the Arts Council England aim to present opportunities to involve 'more people choosing, creating and taking part in brilliant art experiences in the places where they live'. (CCP Website)

Originally titled 'Shed Life Ways', the proposal by the caring organisation identified a need to engage particularly with male home carers. The case was made that 45% of registered carers are male and that they especially feel isolated and find it difficult to open up to other people. It was proposed to create a shed or sheds for men to hang out in and engage in craft, with the ultimate goal for the group to grow in numbers, become independent and run their group themselves. In fact, the group that was formed shared a workshop and kitchen space with The Canal & Rivers Trust, and the participants became less interested in making a shed, feeling that they didn't need one, and more interested in a new title for their group 'Men Who Care'.

The names of participants have been changed for anonymity.

Diary extract no. 1 - First Impressions

It's always a little unsettling going to meet a new group of people and I guess that's just the nature of the unknown. With a decent supply of tea and nibbles, we each chatted about our interests, hobbies, careers and... space. A shed space (not 'shared space' but can be) now occupied by life essentials for absent companions. Absent and yet present, connected electronically and emotionally to the passengers on this journey via mobile technology, a super-fast superhighway on this very super-slow-way.

Football banter and the cost of playing these days soon led to the decoration of cakes in a time when life in miniature laid down well-trodden tracks, from sheds to houses and back again, to the sound of 10 years worth of Scottish Highland Bagpipes.

Cutting across golden carpets flecked with fisherman blues we emerged from deep within tunnels, into the rushes of forward motion, gently pressing ripples at a pace... of... approximately... 5... miles... per hour.

Where to next, I wondered?

End of diary extract no. 1

I wrote the above text after being introduced to a small group of five men on a narrow-boat trip on the Leeds and Liverpool Canal. Every few months the local caring organization arranged activities and day-trips for home carers to find respite from their usual everyday duties. A couple of men on the trip had met before on other organized activities but most, like me had not been acquainted before. Three of the men agreed to meet up with me a month later and we shared some of our life stories. We lost one member to relocation and another to transport issues, leaving just one man and an artist. So there we were... at some kind of beginning. The goal posts had changed, we didn't have a group to work with, we had to try and create one... or perhaps it could be a project about just one man and an artist?

I am the artist and Tony is a man responsible for the care and welfare of his wife, who suffers a variety of debilitating health conditions, often rendering her housebound for days at a time.

This is a story of men and although they are no longer in a boat, they are nonetheless travelling companions. The boat is a suitable metaphor for imagining a group of people moving together through time and space, and the narrow boat itself suggests a particular speed of travel; a pace that allows for reflection on our experiences, our resources and the surrounding terrain.

We rejoin the story many weeks after the boat trip where Tony and I are discussing how we could attract more men to join us. We conjured up images of a future in numbers but more realistically we considered the prospect of travelling alone, just the two of us on 'our' journey. We dreamed of a community space for men who care, and of taking such a space with us on our travels, to engage with other people and to let them know that we exist, and that we care.

Occasionally, a new member John would join us for a brew, bringing with him a voracious appetite for conversation. He looks after his wife 24/7, who is in the latter stages of dementia, which impacts deeply on his own wellbeing through lack of both sleep and other human contact outside of his home. We reassured him that it's ok to drop in whenever it suits him, and that the group could develop according to all our interests. Just before leaving on his first visit, he made a point of expressing how much he had enjoyed spending time with us, and that he felt much calmer than when he arrived. This change in him was clearly visible, the more we talked about art and life over breakfast, the more relaxed and relieved he appeared to be. It was obvious to Tony who pointed out to me that John was actually in a seriously vulnerable state of mind.

We agreed to keep John's home situation in mind as the weeks went by, meeting over breakfast every Friday morning: talking, listening and listening some more, sharing our hopes for the group; maybe we could create some

art, or share a new skill like cooking our favourite food. The conversation led to John inviting us to lunch at his house, and we accepted.

The more I thought about it, the more I started to worry about safeguarding and ethical issues. We were three blokes who didn't really know each other, and yet we had just agreed to meet at one of our houses for lunch. What if something unexpected occurred and everyone got stressed out?

Diary extract no. 2 - Chilli House Visit

I was a little anxious at the thought of meeting his partner, I've not experienced the company of someone with dementia before and didn't know what to expect. Would they freak out at having strangers in the house? I drove to John's house with Tony, who didn't seem phased at all and that helped to calm my nerves a little. Besides, as we were travelling over, John sent me a text to say that it would be just us three. I was still nervous though, I guess I'm just not used to house visits. That reminds me, I saw my best mate last week and we haven't had a social for over 10 years, and I haven't seen my brothers and sisters for months.

John encouraged Tony to help with the cooking, they both like to cook, and I volunteered to photograph the whole process for the blog. John seemed tense but that was his usual starting position whenever we got together. In between the cooking stages, John showed us a photo album from the time he spent with his wife's family abroad. He met her in London and they spent a lot of time travelling the world together before she suddenly became ill. He also showed us his military photos, a letter from the Queen, and his decorative cap badges, all proudly displayed on the walls. Once the pan was full of meat, veg and stock, the chilli was left to simmer while we enjoyed the garden; listening to music from the good old days and enjoying views of the local countryside. He is interested in photography and asks me questions about the subject but I rarely get chance to reply before he is off on another enquiry. Back in the kitchen and it's time for a taste. It was way 'too salty' for Tony and I quickly interjected with how much 'I loved all the different textures of the meat and depth of flavour'. I think that was more of me avoiding conflict than a conscious facilitation of the situation.

End of Diary Extract no 2

It felt like a real privilege to be invited into John's house and for him to share with us his secret recipe of 'Five Meats Chilli'. He openly shared his life history by talking us through family albums and souvenir collections, all of which indicated a successful military background and a love for travelling on exotic holidays with his beloved family.

The visit to John's house was my first exposure to life as a carer. It was a glimpse into his physical and very personal world. Tony seemed to take it in his stride, while on the other hand; I became aware that I'd not actually been to someone's house (outside of my family circle) for quite some time.

Diary extract no. 3 – A walk in the hills

At our next meeting we went for a walk in the countryside and I took along my 4-year-old grandson. He has met John before at a local art event and got on well with him. I thought it would be a good way to lighten the mood, which could get quite intense at times. This was also an opportunity for me to reciprocate the lunch at John's house by sharing an important and precious part of my life.

Tony and I were worried about the length of the walk and I slipped our concerns into the conversation but John didn't seem to notice. I was a little worried about Tony's breathing (him not being the fittest and also an asthmatic) as we headed up the incline on that very hot day. My grandson was happy holding Rovers' (John's dog) leash and then Tony used it to help pull him self up the hill. John guided us to a beautiful spot by the river, perfect for dropping heavy stones in the deepest parts, the challenge being to make the biggest splash, much to the giddy delight of my grandson and the much older lads too.

We strolled back down the hill to the café for a bacon sandwich. The conversation was allowed to develop according to John's financial insecurities and somehow ended up with him declaring that as an artist I have no idea what poverty is. I was actually offended by his remarks and was just about to tell him so, when Tony calmly diffused the situation by explaining that 'we've all experienced poverty in different ways at some point in our lives'. We all nodded in agreement, laughing at my grandson's face as he struggled with his fast melting ice-lolly.

End of diary extract no. 3

A walk in the hills was a suggestion from John and not something that Tony would normally fit into his spare time. I could sense that he was worried about the distance of the walk and the incline it involved but afterwards he was so proud that he had completed it given 'how unfit' he thought he was.

It was towards the end of the activity that it became clear that all members contribute to the facilitation process. Tony interjecting to diffuse a potential altercation between John and me is a good example of sharing the direction of the dialogue and a responsibility for the group.

Diary extract no. 4 - A reflection of the self

We had our usual breakfast meeting and talked for a few minutes about the wardrobes, which we had bought some weeks ago at a local antiques warehouse, not really sure what to use them for. Tony was in a bad mood due to lack of sleep and he seemed a bit cranky, and uninterested in the wardrobes. Instead, we made a list of words relating to caring; both negative and positive words, and he read the list out loud while I recorded it with the intention of playing it back inside the wardrobes as a mini art installation.

Negative words:

Sadness, resentment, guilt, helplessness, weak, detached, misinformed, scapegoated, invisible, soft, forsaken, downtrodden, misunderstood, forgotten, depressed, and unfocused.

Positive words:

Supportive, strong, caring, empathy, understanding, more rounded, mature, better informed, headstrong, focused, and happy.

End of diary extract no. 4

Part way through this very casual conversation, I became aware that we were painting a picture (in words) of Tony's life, an unseen part of him made visible for all to see, and also for him to see. That moment in the kitchen, presented us both with what the artist Stephen Willats refers to as 'the question', which enables participants to step back far enough to see an image of themselves and their own lives; a moment of detachment from the situation, and time enough to be critically objective. (Kester 2004)

Diary extract no. 5 - A change

I was expecting Tony to be down after England's football performance but he got in the car with a big smile on his face and went on to tell me how great he was feeling after not having a cigarette since Sunday. He'd also cut down his calorie intake and has been walking for about 3 miles per day; changing his food choices to include a healthier diet, less meat, less fat, and less sugar. We both spoke about how proud we were of him to take such a drastic life-changing step towards a positive future. He said he feels much better and is sleeping soundly too.

End of diary extract no. 5

No one had encouraged Tony to make the life-changing decisions that he'd made but they were important enough for him to share his joy at implementing the goals into his daily routine. As humans we are influenced by the company we keep and both Tony and I have managed to affect each other's lives. The behaviour and beliefs of one person influencing the other, arguably impacts on the development of local customs and cultures. For instance, I am a member of the local athletics club and have shared stories of running around the local hills for pleasure, and Tony's love for the local football club has influenced my decision to buy a season ticket. Could it be that our dialogical exchanges have led both of us to re-evaluate our lives and to make changes accordingly?

In Kester's model for a dialogical aesthetic he argues for an alternative approach to the way that art is interpreted and identifies a need to shift our understanding of the work of art towards the 'process of communicative exchange rather than a physical object.' (Kester 2004, p.90). With this in mind the intersubjective social exchanges between Tony and me reveal themselves

as the work of art, which in turn locates itself deep in the everyday lives of participants.

Conclusion

'It is not by looking at things but by dwelling in them, that we understand their joint meaning.' (Polanyi & Sen 2009)

The activities that have occurred through Ingold's morphogenetic approach have produced periods of 'indwelling', offering each other an opportunity to see the world from another perspective. As Polanyi and Sen point out, it isn't enough to look at something in a bid to understand it, we must ultimately be able to empathize with the thing if we are ever to get close to understanding it, and seeing the thing in its own context is part of that process of understanding.

While Kester stipulates that 'we can never claim to fully inhabit the other's subject position' he adds that 'we can imagine, and this imagination, thus approximation, can radically alter our sense of who we are' (Kester 2004 p.115).

Kester's model for a dialogical aesthetic acknowledges the importance of listening and together with Polanyi and Sen's process of indwelling helps to contextualize the Men Who Care project in the here and now, with local truths '...recognising the social context from which others speak, judge and act' (Kester 2004 p.113).

Ingold also identifies with this deep level of engagement 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' (Ingold 2013 p.31). He also recognizes the need for space 'to allow knowledge to grow from the inside of being in the unfolding of life' (Ingold 2013, p. 8). The longevity of dialogical art projects depends on the sound foundations of sincere friendships and genuine interconnectedness, enhanced through the process of sharing real life experiences.

Bringing together the male carers on the canal barge at the beginning of the project presented the opportunity for tenuous links to grow into intimate bonds. None of us knew what would actually come out of that initial stranger-meets-stranger experience. No one foresaw the impact of the project on the health and well being of the participants. Tony commented in the first few weeks how important it was for him to be able to chat to someone who doesn't verbally abuse him, putting him down for being on social benefits or for being overweight. His low self-esteem is something that I have witnessed a definite improvement in during the time we have spent together. From being unable to sit in the window at a fast food restaurant for fear of what people would think of him, to losing over three stones in weight and taking up regular exercise including walking and weight training. He is now calorie conscious and makes every effort to stick to his positive life-style changes.

We met almost every week for at least 2 hours for several months and every session involved dialogue. Sometimes we met with the intention of developing ideas about how to attract new members or suggestions for day trips, only to sit down in the kitchen with a brew and a catch-up on how their week had unfolded.

In the back of my mind, the artwork seemed to be developing in connection with a couple of wardrobes we'd bought one day while browsing a local auction house. We thought they would come in handy for storing things. I saw them for their functionality and felt that they somehow represented a forgotten kind of man. They looked very different on the outside (in size and design) but inside they were ordered just the same, with shelves labeled for specific items of a gentlemen's attire; socks, ties, shirts, collars, cufflinks etc. For many weeks they acted as an oversized larder for tea and coffee supplies as we sat discussing strategies to attract more members or pitching ideas for a creative activity programme. Those regular conversations became opportunities for participants to express concerns about their individual personal situations; each scenario quite different but connected deeply through the context of home caring, which is a subject I have no experience of. I listened as they shared their pain and frustration of being invisible, of not receiving the help they so desperately needed, of being trapped without proper social care and support.

I was gently moulded into the role of counselor; the sessions becoming a sounding board for anything on their mind. I responded to the prodding and the shaping as I attempted to facilitate their frustrations caused by the lack of support from the government benefit system. I scoped out participant interests, trying to find common ground without getting into arguments, clashing of opinions or cultures. It would have been all too easy to hit a nerve or to say something offensive, given the low self-esteem of the group; due mainly to the lack of sleep on top of all the frustrations of being a carer in a world that appears not to care.

Hearing one participant telling another about how the regular meetings are a 'lifesaver' is a great indication of how feedback is shared within and beyond the group, and it's not coerced from them, but instead they offer it, as a gift from the participants to the world around them. After a game of bowls with John and his friend, I overheard John telling his friend 'I know we don't do much at these Friday morning meetings but they are a real godsend and they keep me sane, I don't know what I would do without them'.

I've also witnessed changes in the behaviour of individual participants. I would often be asked technical advice regarding digital cameras and upon offering my advice the participant would change the subject, or ask another question before I had chance to finish the answer. More recently, and after many months of asking, the participant actually took it on board and started to use his camera in the session. This was a small but significant step for the participant. On another occasion, a participant and his wife told me that they can see a real positive change in his self-esteem due to the benefits of attending the regular meetings, which have led to improvements to his

personal health and well-being; he himself claims he has grown in confidence enough to quit smoking, control a healthier diet, and to take up regular exercise.

As for the impact on the artist, I too had sleepless nights, often troubled by their harrowing stories, and sometimes just worrying about the sustainability of the group. My personal life was also affected in other ways due to the social proximity of participants. I live in the same borough and we know the same places, people, and shops and so on. We talked about old schools, local football clubs, favourite cafes and pubs, terrible transport networks, and old friends. The dialogical process produced moments of self-reflection, and in effect held up a mirror to all participants, including the artist. I've had my own moments of realization about my personal life during the project and I've made changes, which are no doubt the results of being a participant in this project, from reconnecting with old school pals to buying season tickets to the local football club with my brother.

It was the Chilli-making house visit where I realized I was lacking some social skills, in respect of being a houseguest. It got me thinking about the last time I actually visited a friend, it was then that I realized I had lost contact with my closest friends. We can see from that particular diary entry that I'd had my own transformative moment in the project timeline.

Socially engaged art projects are heavily dependent on time to allow for things to happen naturally, with the artist and participants relying on what Ingold refers to as 'intuition in action' (Ingold 2013, p.25) My projects do indeed 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 approaches brings with them a tacit understanding of the creative process and a confidence, which allows things to grow organically, in tune with the local environment, people and place.

Had I adopted a more hylomorphic method, with an end product in mind before I met the male carers group, then the social activities that we all took part in would arguably not have occurred: Crown Green Bowling, visits to art galleries, browsing antique shops, cooking at John's house, and walking in the local hills were all activities that emerged from open dialogue sessions with group. With a more hylomorphic approach, I would have steered the group towards developing and producing my vision, with little time for digression, and consequently little room for collective emergence to occur.

The hylomorphic approach identifies participants as tools and/or labour in the production of the artists' vision, while the morphogenetic approach allows for a shared creative vision to emerge through the process of intersubjective exchange. This morphogenetic understanding of creativity places the maker/artist in a more humble position than the one portrayed by the hylomorphic model where the artist as the 'genius' has a fixed predetermined design already in mind. The morphogenetic artist is a participant in the collective creative endeavours of shared experiences and this approach to

engagement can be applied to Ingold's earthly materials and Kester's communities in the form of listening, responding, etc. There are clear crossovers and similarities within the context of the creativity processes at work. Ingold's mode of communication in the context of the maker responding to particular qualities of a given material like stone, wood or clay, and the inter-subjective encounters, of which Grant Kester refers to, work in a similar way; the artist engages in a series of interactions with potential participants/or materials.

There was a natural tension generated by the encounters and the social proximity of participants in this project. This tension was not dissimilar to Ingold's basket weaving exercise where the maker bends the willow branches into shape in order to create a weave: 'The form was not imposed on the material from without, but rather generated in this force field, comprised by the relations between the weaver and the willow' (Ingold 2013 p.22). Similarly, it is the direct social connection between each other, which provides the necessary tension/friction between all the participants, holding the network together and attributing to its overall dynamic. The regular inter-subjective exchanges between participants are crucial properties of the network, enabling it to develop, expanding or contracting, and ultimately contributing to the potential of an emerging collective future. Tension often revealed itself in communications, whether engaging in small talk, planning a shared experience or non-participation in group activities. It all depended how life was treating each participant at that particular moment in time.

In the same way that exploring the physical qualities of a certain material strengthens the relationship between the material and the maker, leading to unexpected forms, conversations can often lead into unknown territories and it takes a lot of trust and confidence on both sides to allow that to happen in a way that produces positive results. Grant Kester refers to a 'discursive space' (p.122), where artists and participants are not bound by a fixed topical agenda but allowed to digress in conversation, ultimately progressing through dialogue towards some kind of personal transformation in the form of new perspectives and insights.

Even though the commission has ended I'm still 'in residence' in another way. I can't simply walk away, I'm already deeply rooted in the area, having been born and bred there, the project has been started but an end has not yet been designated.

As Tim Ingold points out, making is very much a social activity between the maker and the materials, a communication of tension between both forces. When the artist is a participant among participants in the creative process, embedded socially engaged art practice is located at the morphogenetic end of the spectrum. In the context of the male carers group, the inter-subjective exchanges between all the participants (including the artist) occur on a deeply intimate and personal level. It is a level where at times the blurring of everyday life and art go unnoticed and sometimes the art of participation is stretched to the point of breaking down but always... things happen and shared meanings emerge.

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