

Work Experience

Taking Part in All Sided Games

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Abstract

Collective is a visual arts organisation based in Edinburgh. In 2012-2014 Collective produced 'All Sided Games' (ASG), a commissions programme placing artists in and around venues built or used for the Commonwealth Games in Scotland. As an anthropologist-planner I was invited to undertake an experimental evaluation of ASG. The role of the study was in support of Collective's future programming by better describing what happens in practice to funders and stakeholders. My approach was to evoke the experience of taking part through amassing descriptions of being a participant myself alongside the experience of others. Exploring the evocative evaluation design, in this paper I weave descriptions of the experience of taking part within a broader narrative of the research process. I trace how the works stretch me towards understanding our collective nature; and how reading the texts also stretch readers towards a more intimate understanding of the way art works.

Keywords: Art, applied anthropology, description, ethnography, evaluation.

Chalk lines on grass

On a bright spring morning I take the train up the UK east coast from Newcastle upon Tyne to Edinburgh. From Waverley station I turn left down a main shopping street to make my way to Holyrood Park. Walking away from the city centre, after fifteen minutes I can see where I am to go, but can't work out how to get there. I ask a builder at work on the roadside. He points towards a small passageway leaving the main road. I nip through. I am welcomed by a bright blue sky above swathes of green grass. Walking towards a glass and concrete building, I can just make out the white lines of a running track on grass. I pass cameras and other equipment sprawled around a small tent on the green. On entering, I trace a reception area to the right and toilets on the left. The main room is playing host to a huddle of official looking people. Some are drinking tea. Later I am introduced to them as health and safety officers. To the back is a trestle table covered with a white cloth. Through a half-opened venetian blind I can see Arthur's Seat in the distance.

I went to Edinburgh to take part in *001-100*: an artwork commissioned by Collective from Cristina Lucas as part of All Sided Games (ASG). *001-100* was a 100 metre run for 100 people aged between zero to 100. Based in Edinburgh, Collective is a contemporary visual arts organisation delivering exhibitions, and projects. ASG (2012-2014) placed artists in and around Commonwealth Games venues in Scotland. To inform future programming, the Director invited me to explore ways to evaluate ASG. Rather than understanding evaluation as a process of measuring outcomes against policy or funding criteria, as an 'evaluator' I set out to evoke the experience of taking part as a way to generate discussion with Collective.

After *001-100*, I took part in works as they were being made and presented: *Play Summit* (Nils Norman), a three-day event considering the state of play in Scotland; The Queen's Baton Celebrations at Meadowbank sports centre including the presentation of *Dialectograms* (Mitch Miller) – highly detailed drawings of the Piershill Community Flat and Meadowbank Sports Centre, and *No Conflict, No Irony (I love the whole world)* (Jacob Dahlgren) – a film charting the design and making of a 100-metre banner in collaboration with families across Edinburgh then walked to Salisbury Crags; *Brighthouse* (Florrie James) a film set in 2044, exploring ideas around regeneration in the east end of Glasgow; and *A Leisure Complex* (Dennis McNulty), a promenade performance event exploring the histories of Carnoustie Leisure Centre. Echoing the descriptive strategy of the evaluation document, this paper explores this experimental evaluation case study.

43 at the time

Collective staff and I had discussed my role. I was to be a 'steward'. I introduce myself to other helpers and asked what would be useful for me to do. I put my coat and bag in the cupboard behind the registration desk. It holds piles of paper to be filled in by attendees. I help arrange the Tunnock's Teacakes and other biscuits on the trestle table. I am told there are not enough runners registered. Some people must have cancelled (I guess). When everyone is checked in, myself and other stewards are asked if we would run. I hadn't thought about *being* a runner. I had put on trainers as 'sensible footwear'. I was wearing standard trousers and my usual check jacket. I had also brought a big waterproof puffa coat, in case it rained or got cold. 'Yes, of course, I will run!' Runners had registered by age between 0 to 100. There was a pregnant woman registered at 0. Number one was a pram of triplets and parents. The oldest runners were in their 80s. Due to some no-shows and wanting to keep people as close to their age as possible, numbers had been shuffled. I was 43 at the time. I was given the number 48.

Everyone got their numbers. Some people got changed. We went outside. As stewards we had high visibility waistcoats on. I was cold, so I put my big coat on and squeezed the waistcoat on over the top. We walk towards rows of white lines. From inside the building, you didn't really get a sense of the expanse of the 100 lanes. We fanned out by number. Collective staff members guide us to our spot with loud hailer. I looked down to the lower numbers to see the starter-man. He had his official Commonwealth Games outfit on. We wait while he gets ready to shoot the pistol. I take my jacket off and give it to one of the other stewards. Bang. Running. A feeling of feet on soft wet-ness. Slippery. Right hand forward, left. Trying to pull my body with my arms. My face: opening and smiling. Starting to laugh. Feeling open. Really enjoying it. Seeing others in front, and laughing. I am not very fast! We were asked to keep running after the 100 metres of the track. Not to just stop. I kept going, looking out to my sides and seeing people feather out. We walk back to the building. I ran the second race. I watch the third.

A passageway

After getting off the train, I had walked away from the city centre. After walking for a while, I could see where I was to go, but couldn't work out how to get there. I asked a builder who was working on the roadside if he knew how to get in. He had pointed towards a small passageway, a space on the side of the road. The space opens a gap for me to move before I run. Kathleen Stewart's 'space on the side of the road' is the site of an opening or reopening into the story of America: a narrative space, it fashions 'room for manoeuvre' (1993: 03). 'It tells its story through interruptions, amassed densities of description, evocations of voices and the conditions of their possibility' (Stewart, 1993: 07). Rather than understanding ethnography as a way of representing ASG, I follow Stephen Tyler's view of ethnography as a way to *avoid* representation: 'by evoking in the reader responses that cannot be commensurate with the writer's' (Strathern, 2004:

07). To evaluate ASG I ‘ran’ with this. I set out to evoke responses to foster understandings for Collective. By amassing descriptions of being in the programme alongside the stories of others I set out to foster new openings for discussion about evaluation, ASG and the work of Collective.

Before developing an academic practice I worked across the field of visual arts. As a UK independent project director-cum-curator-commissioner, I evaluated artworks in contexts of community development (eg. Crawshaw, 2007). As an ‘independent evaluator’ I became frustrated with my brief to look for intentional outcomes in service to the socio-economic targets of ‘evidence-based policy’ (Pawson, 2006). To better articulate the multiple effects of art in ‘social contexts’ I left doing visual arts practice to journey through the social sciences to explore ways for articulating what it does. Traversing international development, planning and anthropology I set out to explore ways to notice what we are not looking for. As exploratory, this invitation from Collective presented opportunity to re-visit my departure point; to consider how my emergent practice as an anthropologist-planner (Crawshaw, 2012) might perform amidst this invitation to explore possibilities for evaluation over and above collecting evidence against funding criteria.

To find out how to get to where I was going I asked a builder at work on the roadside. My interruption stopped him digging. My question prompted him to point towards a passageway. I have used this scene from my field notes (and memory) as a device to introduce my approach to writing the evaluation document: as a way to craft a thinking space for further manoeuvre with and for Collective. On getting off the train, I walked past taxis, shops, bins and buses, fast-walking people rushing to work past early amblers and breakfast coffee-drinkers. After fifteen minutes I meet the construction site. Red and white plastic road signs mark out an oblong shape. A broken Tarmac surface reveals lumpy earth beneath. To the side, a man looks towards me wearing a high visibility jacket holding a shovel. I catch his eye. I re-tell this scene to ensure we have glimpsed the many activities at play on that day. There are not only artists and curators at work but many other urban dwellers going about their daily business. As the philosophy of John Dewey (1934), *001-100* is not ‘separate’ from this urban activity but part of the continuous unfolding of the day-to-day of the city.

Anthropology with art

‘Every art does something with some physical material, the body or something outside the body, with or without the use of intervening tools’ (Dewey, 1934: 48). John Dewey notes that it is common to understand that physical ‘outer’ materials are changed through the experience of art, but not that our ‘inner’ human selves are also changed (1934: 77). Beyond the relationships of curators, artists and other professionals ‘art world’ conventions are embodied in ‘equipment, materials [...] and other things’ (Becker, 2008 (1982): 63). Gell’s anthropological theory of art is action-centred; an ‘index’ where objects merge with people (1998: 09). In response to anthropological theories of art, Ingold proposes whilst we might ‘learn much about art from the analysis of its objects, we learn nothing *from* it (italics added)’ (2013: 08). Rather than anthropology *of*, Ingold advocates for anthropology *with* art. What can we learn with and in ASG?

As the process that brings artefacts into being, Ingold discusses ‘making’ as combining the generative currents of materials with the sensory awareness of practitioners (Ingold, 2013: 07). Contemporary art practice, of course, is not limited to artefacts. For example, artworks can be understood as a form of sociality (Vergunst and Vermehren, 2012) and ‘the curatorial’ of contemporary practice blurs the boundaries between artists as the makers of artworks and curators as the makers of exhibitions (O’Neill and Wilson, 2015). Across the arts and social sciences we acknowledge our social world as a ‘collision and combination of plural actants’ (Amin, 2011: 108). No longer do we understand knowledge as a mirror onto ‘nature’ for ‘society’

but as continually in the making among inhabitants amidst landscapes (Descola and Pálsson, 1996). The work of ASG takes place in and around buildings, landscapes and communities. As a discipline, art shares with anthropology a concern to 'reawaken our senses and to allow knowledge to grow from the inside in the unfolding of life' (Ingold, 2013: 08). In accounting for the change in 'inner' as well as 'outer' materials how might my sensory awareness be altered by taking part in ASG? What will I learn from the inside of the unfolding works?

More than measuring

This paper draws on a modest independent study. Over nine-months during 2014, I explored the experience of participating in ASG. The research included: interviews with three steering group members; participant-observation; interviewing ten participants and four artists; facilitating discussions with Collective staff; writing a 25,000 word report, circulating for comment and discussing responses. Drawing on interview material, the final document weaves a reflective essay through descriptions of my own experience of taking part. The text is generative, at each stage it loops back and forth to consider other experience. As a writing strategy, subsequent episodes in the text draw on thoughts left over from a previous position (Strathern, 2004: xxv). Perhaps an unusual format for an evaluation document, it does not explain ASG. Rather, as advocated by Latour (1988) I describe events to allow space for the reader to enact their own reflections.

My intention was not to compare one project with another, but explore the nuance of our individual experience. Semi-structured, I asked each interviewee the same questions. I explained that although I was an 'evaluator' I would not ask them for their opinion of how much they liked or enjoyed anything but more to describe what they remember about their experience. The questions were: how did you find out about 'it'; what happened – when you first arrived, during, after you left. I did not ask them about art, artists or artworks specifically. I waited for them to describe their experience in their own terms. The interviews with artists were similarly framed, I asked them: How did you get involved with ASG/what was your invitation? How did the invitation relate to your practice? My intention was not to interview all artists to make comparisons, but as a way to expand my understanding of their practice. As examples of the writing style and content, the passages to follow are an edited selection from the evaluation document.

In taking part

The gun went off. We were running. I had an uplifting feeling of flowing between my physical self and my environment. I felt awakened. I can say that I had an aesthetic experience, a flowing between my 'inner' human emotions and 'outer' physical materials of grass, and the wind in my hair. My experience of bodily connection is difficult to describe. When I interview my fellow runners, they also find 'it' difficult to put in to words. When I ask a man a few lanes up from me to tell me about his run, after a long intake of breath he says, 'yes, that is the hard question to answer – but I will try!' In trying, he and others tell me it was fun, sheer fun, enjoyable, a real L.A.R.F.: 'a whole bunch of people that were just going for it'. This is, of course, warming to know that people have enjoyed themselves, but how has this sheer enjoyment come about? What does it produce? As we continue in our conversation more detailed attempts to describe what actually happens emerge. Once the pistol went off, his initial feeling was, 'oh no, am I going to be left at the end!' At this point, he says, a feeling of competition kicks in: 'you can't deny your animal instinct'; the notion that we are going to be first, he suggests, is 'built in to us'. He seems to be saying that what is 'built in' is perhaps not usually noticeable, but this activity has let our 'inner' (animalistic) material out.

I attend *Play Summit* (Nils Norman), a three-day programme of walks, seminars and play

activity exploring the nature of play. In the seminar programme, we learn that loose materials are a key ingredients of adventure play. Purpose-made static slides and swings are replaced by tyres, wood, muck and stuff. Play is not to be pre-defined but discovered through self-orientation. Drawing on Heidegger (1971), Ingold distinguishes ‘building’ and ‘dwelling’ perspectives: rather than regarding the landscape as built, the world ‘is known to those who dwell therein, who inhabit its places and journey along the paths connecting them’ (2000: 193). We know through being in landscape. *Play Summit* reminds me of this.

I go to the Meadowbank Sports Centre. I have been a few times. I absolutely love the building. Built in 1968, it feels like the ‘70s. It has that trainer smell. There are different coloured stripes everywhere. On indoor courts for sporting activities of all kinds, and traced along the angles of vaults and other equipment. The manager took me down to the indoor racetrack. This is where Jacob Dahlgren had done a lot of the family workshops in preparation for making the banner to walk to Salisbury Crags. She told me that everyone had to wear stripes, and Jacob wore a different striped t-shirt everyday. The day of the walk was wet and windy.

It is a bright afternoon. I made my way up Calton Hill to Collective. I really enjoy the walk in the knowledge of the view to be had on arrival. I am struck by the amount of activity up there. The heritage buildings feel like a set for our every-day performance. I walked round the Portakabin, the temporary home for the gallery. I say ‘hello’ to two of the stewards who I have ‘worked’ with before. We start unpacking the small juice cartons for kids as well as beers. We put the juice on the table and decide to leave the beer in buckets of ice underneath. I take a sneak preview of inside The Dome. There is quite a large black screen with temporary walls either side. Rows of seating were placed in front. It looks like a little cinema. A couple of stewards at the gallery information desk are putting popcorn in yellow striped cartons: sweet and salty. It feels like a performance of making a cinema in preparation for a film. We watch the film documentation of our run. When talking to runners there are mixed reactions to the footage. Some are thrilled with it. Some disappointed: that it does not show the day as they experienced it; that it is not a more formal occasion; that they haven’t had the opportunity to share the film (as yet) with friends and family.

I return to Meadowbank on the bus. A man on reception points me to a stairwell that will take me to the space I am looking for. I stand in front of the *Dialectograms* (Mitch Miller). Because I am in the actual building, I take more note of the Meadowbank drawing (rather than that of the Piershill Community Flat). It combines a sort of architectural outline with intimate mini stories of relationships that make the building. I think of the building, not as bricks and mortar with stripes on top, but as a melding of relationships amidst the reception desk, the nets, baskets, and punch bags of the public areas, and the conversations behind closed doors. There is a rat for example. A woman in an old-style tracksuit stands beside me. ‘Hello, do you work here?’ I ask. ‘Yes, this is a drawing of here, this is what it is *really* like, warts-n-all!’ I say I think it is really interesting to see the building described through these small stories. She let me know that it is going to be put in the reception area, ‘so everyone can see’.

I’m watching *Brighthouse* (Florrie James) in the Portakabin-cum-gallery on Calton Hill. There is a river at the beginning. A radio station. There are shots of the city that look a bit like an area we had a guided walk as part of *Play Summit*. I hear a familiar voice. It is the guide! I recognised he is talking about the playground he works in: ‘All decisions are made, by them, for them. Two women are in a tent. One says something like: ‘these are only words, you know there are no laws here’. Another line I specifically remember: ‘security isn’t freedom’. There radio station presenter makes an address: ‘I don’t speak to a passive public but a community united in difference [...]. You may travel beyond the border, but if the centre finds you it will not let you come back. For everyone’s labour requires contact with the outer zone. Individuals were turned in to numbers, knowledge came [...] you are free to live life as a whole human being’.

Rancière suggest that ‘the real must be fictionalized in order to be thought’ (2004/09: 38). In watching *Brighthouse* I felt a distance. Unlike the intense intimacy of *Dialectograms* – drawing me in to a place, I had a sensation of hovering over. To be given time to consider my actions in advance of arriving to do something. A chance to consider what I might do: to think about my actions. That considering our selves requires us to levitate above our everyday, in order to alter our perspective. My perspective is changed. I have not participated in the making of the film, but the work makes me a participant of the world in a slightly different way. My drama is intentional. A slap in the face. A wake up call: as a ‘whole human being’ how should I be?

I’m driving North of Dundee to Carnoustie. It takes just short of four hours. I follow my GPS to the sea front to the leisure centre. It is still light. There is something familiar about the building. I guess it isn’t as old as Meadowbank, but still feels like something from my youth; somewhere I might have gone to a disco. I pull back a primary painted doorframe and walk inside out of the wind. There is a reception table in front of me with an ornate low-level flower display on it. I remember that the stuff the flowers are put in for these sorts of displays is called oasis. *A Leisure Complex* (Dennis McNulty) felt like slow movements of understanding with and in the building. Through a collage of audio and performance, the work slowly, skillfully tempted me to move somewhere new; to be somewhere new; to be new. Rather than thinking or talking about the building, I am being and feeling with the windows, floors, and walls; curtains, handrails, furniture.

The lay of the land

Art’s strained affiliation with socio economic policy objectives is a well-travelled path (eg. Bennet and Belfiore, 2008; Belfiore, 2012). The language of audit fuels cultural debate (Strathern, 2010). I presumed there would be expectations for this research to speak directly to funding objectives. To manage expectations from the beginning I met with ASG steering group officers from Creative Scotland and engage Scotland. I was surprised to find that there was warm support for this exploratory study. Officers were keen to do something ‘more than measuring’. Their view was of an opportunity to ‘take time to notice’ and engage with the ‘slippery-ness of knowledge’. I undertook the evaluation-research with their support.

Whilst writing this paper, I am reminded by Heather Campbell (2015): that our quest is not for the development of knowledge, but for action; and to this end, ‘applied’ research is perhaps more challenging than its ‘pure’ cousin. In support of doing something with new knowledge with and in art, I prepared an interim discussion paper – ‘The Lay of the Land’. It is usual for evaluation material to be presented after analysis by sector consultants as short paragraphs or bullet points. ‘Lay of the Land’ included a collage of ‘raw’ anonymous dialogue. I layered short accounts from my own narration alongside a other participants’ descriptions, as described in their interviews. ‘It feels like I am speaking directly to participants’ says a staff member. I was pleased that my evocative strategy had produced an intimate experience. However, the close nature of the material put us on edge. ‘It’s like holding up a mirror!’ said someone. Reading the experience of participants in their own words was challenging. In turn I found their challenges difficult. Had I mismanaged the delicate nature of their first readings of this material?

At a follow-up meeting, I shared concerns about my own conduct with Collective staff. In our conversations we acknowledge that the meeting *was* difficult: we shared stories of night worry, tense backs and sick stomachs. As difficult however, we agree it was an important part of the process. By amassing descriptions as a collage of experience, the document evoked what it was like to take part, and how this experience flowed in and out of people’s day-to-day lives and expectations. The material had challenged our assumptions about participant experience. The interviews with participants of *001-100* had been particularly revealing. Un-prompted, some had explored the balance of power between the artist and Collective and participants. At times this

was challenging to read. This knowledge of the participant-experience, however will inform future programming.

Participant-interviewees are not named in the document. Artists and steering group members are named. The named contributors were circulated a draft document for comment. Some of the artists' feedback explored what had happened for them in reading. Comments include that: '[the document] belongs in the whole thing – not an adjunct, but a natural growth of All Sided Games'; 'it works as an evaluation though because it maintains a personal reflective space for itself amid the swim of events'; '[it] manages to write down things that I had previously imagined were un-write-downable'; 'repetitions and references create a strong impression of 'the wake of the artworks''. The steering group officers say they got closer to understanding the work than is usual.

Somersault

I have presented my experience of 'evaluating' ASG. The paper situates the document I produced – 'Somersault: Experience All Sided Games' (as the 'output' of the evaluation commission), within the broader research process. Instead of cutting-down the 25,000 words of the full evaluation transcript, I have attempted to weave some of its content (to give enough of its flavour) amidst the story of its making and reception. On the 21st March 2014 I arrived in Edinburgh to take part in *001-100*. I have enjoyed telling my story of how I found where I was going. I asked a builder who pointed towards a space on the side of the road. This story provided opportunity to introduce my evocative intentions for writing, as well as my relational perspective. The story, however, starts earlier. The digging begins with Collective. By inviting me to explore approaches to evaluating ASG, Collective had pushed the boundaries already. As supported by Creative Scotland and stakeholders I found room to manoeuvre: to do something 'more than measuring', to 'take time' and consider the 'slippery-ness of knowledge'. To do something more than measuring, I set out to evoke taking part by interweaving my experience with others. Of course, I am limited by vocabulary. To support my ambition I tried to develop a creative rhythm to the writing; something I am committed to continue.

The philosopher of multiplicity, Isabelle Stengers (2011) argues for slow understanding. She suggests we live in a world of 'bullet points' where concepts are spoken quickly and loudly. We are entrenched in linguistic shortcuts to understanding. Through their robust construction, rather than offering windows to new horizons, these concepts become closed doors. They block entry to new interpretations. The works of ASG are not fast constructions. They take time. Mitch's *Dialectograms* are made of time. Time to talk, time to listen, time to draw, to rub out, draw again, to check feelings and emotions, to adjust, and again and again until there is a mutual feeling of it being ok to frame relationships in the world like that. You can feel the sensitivity at play when you look at the drawings. Trust me. As an 'evaluator' my approach has been to keep track in field. This also takes time. To describe what goes on in practice, (although modest in terms of academic research) this evaluation has been a much larger investment for Collective than circulating a questionnaire for example. I hope the work provides mutual exchange.

After lining up to run, my co-runners recall people 'stretching and doing lunges'. Lisette Josephides suggests that ethnographers are transformed by the fieldwork experience and end up in a different place from where they started, 'they stretch themselves to meet others in a new place through an imperilling of the self' (2010: 74). Each person taking part in ASG (Collective staff, artists, sports facility users, runners, walkers etc.) are 'imperilled' by doing so – we are shifted (I feel this during the programme). As cited by Josephides (2010), Tausig calls this imperilling of self 'somersaulting'. ASG has produced collective somersaults of understanding. We have all been somersaulted somewhere else. Taking part in ASG stretched me to notice in-between people, buildings and things. ASG softened my hold to make room for understanding the

complexity of the way we are inter-connected. I notice how I am being in the world. I 'learnt' this with the works.

The works of ASG utilise different strategies for interweaving our collective nature. They include physicality, acts of making, sensory engagement and fiction. What unites them is experimentation. Those taking part are privy to the parameters of the operation (as a walk, run, making banners etc.) but what will actually happen cannot be described in advance. They are acts of finding out. We do not know until we take part in the process. By stepping out of the usual way of doing things, Collective made room for much-needed exploration for how we better account for what happens in practice. I thank them for making the opportunity.

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