Give and Take: the possibility & problematic of transcultural exchange

Emma Cocker
Education Development Manager, Site Gallery, Sheffield

Like many gallery educators, I have at times felt as though I have been trying to reinvent the wheel. I have looked at the project work and practices of other organisations, and though their target audiences may vary, the aims and strategies seem remarkably familiar. And if this is true on the national level, then surely there are parallels and echoes on a larger scale. In a world brought closer through communications technology and the process of globalisation have we all begun to work in the same way?

A recent research project at Site Gallery in Sheffield attempted to explore this question further. The 'Forum for Alternative Methods of Education' (FAME) was designed to identify transferable models of practice from a range of European partners in Spain, Finland and the UK. [1] The aim was to identify methodologies which could promote learning opportunities to new audiences. [2] With reference to some of the project findings and current writing on globalisation, internationalism and hybridism, I hope to reflect upon both the successes and limitations of FAME.

Global vs Local
Site Gallery has been one of the UK partners in FAME since 2002. We became involved in the project because of the gallery's increasingly international focus and the emergence of its community education programme.

1

Participation in FAME has since demanded a rigorous consideration of some of the potential tensions between the global and the local.

Site Gallery is an international centre for contemporary art offering a programme of exhibitions and educational events on photography, film and video, installation, and electronic arts. The new media production centre at the gallery has stimulated work, research and debate about digital media and has led to an increase in social, cultural and technological exchange - a symptom of the broader phenomenon of globalisation. Recent projects such as 'SlipStream' and 'Transmute' [3] have involved collaborations with artists and other venues, and reflect Site's desire to explore the potential of these technologies through international links.

Alongside the expansion of global networks, the gallery has also been active in establishing links with the local community. A programme has emerged to encourage involvement from diverse community and voluntary groups, providing opportunities for new audiences (often marginalised from traditional mainstream services) to participate in cultural activity.

The development of the education policy at Site has, in part, evolved out of an exploration of the relationship (and the potential conflict) between the global and the local. Is the gallery's digital media programme, with its own network, language and desire for transglobal exchange, compatible with a community programme which aims to address the needs of the local, the individual and the non-user? Projects involving new technologies may hold utopian promise, yet the languages are often closed. Whilst information technology is indeed a 'global' language, the ability to use it depends on access to its hardware and initiation into its secret codes.

In light of this, the education project work at Site has prioritised training in the use of digital technologies, thereby acknowledging that without a basic understanding and vocabulary, large sectors of the community remain disengaged and silenced. In recent years, Site has delivered a range of projects, workshops and short courses which have been successful in terms of attracting new audiences to the gallery, enabling them to use the production facilities on offer, and in some cases to progress on to mainstream visual arts education.

Site's participation in FAME arose out of a desire to explore alternative models of practice. We wanted to develop partnerships with organisations and local communities that championed access using different approaches to our own.

Working with European partners, the aim of FAME has been to research, collate and pilot alternative methods of engaging learners in educational activity, with a focus on the visual and performative arts. The focus of the research has been to develop methods of working with 'disadvantaged adults' (the specific nature of these groups being influenced by their geographical and cultural location). Drawing on the experiences of project partners (and their networks), the aim has been to collate information on different case studies, evaluation methods and training approaches, and to

2

post them on to a website for discussion. Using the internet as a platform for dialogue, the intention was to create a sounding space which would encourage partners to apply new working methods to their own projects. Following a period of project piloting, a series of transnational seminars and e-groups have been organised for partners to discuss their findings. It is anticipated that by testing out different methods of practice, successful strategies will emerge which can be disseminated through a website and a publication at the end of 2003.

Differences

In the past, education projects at Site have tended to emphasise building confidence and experience through the development of specific skills and understanding. For example, in 'Close Up', a partnership project between Site and the 'Young Women's Housing Project', a group of young adults worked with an artist to gain new skills in photography and digital image making. Similarly, a collaboration with Nomad Plus (an organisation which supports vulnerably housed individuals), touched upon ideas of performance and masquerade through the practical exploration of the roles of the director, cast, and photographer.

In contrast, many of the other European case studies seemed to give greater emphasis to bonding and group work, offering 'ice-breaker' and warm up activities, and making use of talk and play. These approaches stressed process rather than product. Acknowledging this difference prompted a period of reflection. Was Site prepared to embrace change? Was the point in sharing practices really to assimilate different values and approaches, or was it to confirm or validate what was already believed effective?

In September 2002, Site Gallery hosted the second stage of the transnational project seminars, which brought together a number of the project partners to share practices developed in the context of the project. Over 25 educators, artists, and workshop leaders came together in the education space at Site Gallery to profile case studies, test out working methods, and evaluate strategies. Over three days it became apparent that there was a shared set of values, but also that there was something that was failing to 'translate'. What had at first appeared to be shared languages and common methodologies, slipped to reveal a range of different approaches where cultural specificity and custom carried powerful influence. Icebreaker exercises involving touch, trust and performance were received reticently by some of the UK partners. Visualisation exercises failed to bridge the cultural gap due to vagaries of interpretation. Gradually a sense of uncertainty about the project became palpable in the pauses between the translations from one language to another.

Crosscurrents

Though the transfer of working methods had perhaps been unsuccessful, the seminar did raise important issues, which have since been reflected upon in relation- to other cultural writing.

In the exhibition catalogue text for ARS 01, Maaretta Jaukkuri offers a framework which has enabled a more rigorous consideration of both the

3

problems and excitements of FAME and of cultural exchange in general. [4] Jaukkuri discusses culture with reference to motion rather than stasis. Culture is in a 'constant state of hybridisation, which is brought about by the energy flow arising from constant crossing of boundaries'. [5] Using the metaphor of the river, she conceives of the influence from other cultures as crosscurrents possessing different strengths. Seen in this way, FAME has brought a dynamism and a fresh energy to the way in which project work has been approached at Site.

One outcome from the project has been a distinct change in approach at Site. Ideas from FAME have enabled us to take risks and to embrace uncertain and fluid outcomes. 'Imaginary Borders' for example - an online digital arts project linked to the exhibition *Imaginary Balkans* - traded a structured, skills-based approach in favour of a more experimental, process-led one. Using many of the participatory visualisation and icebreaking exercises that emerged out of FAME, a group of young people, working alongside artists Edina Husanovic and Mitra Memarzia, explored the city through maps, walks, digital imagery, text and discussion. Ideas of communication and distance, unknown territory, short cuts and personal stories of the city space were explored in online exchanges with young people in the Balkans.

A third space
Fredric Jameson and Homi K. Bhabha have put forward the concept of a 'third space'. Here, two things encounter each other or collide to create new spaces, 'where difference is neither the One nor the Other, but something else besides, in-between'. [6] Throughout FAME there have been 'third spaces': locations, real or virtual, where exchange has been possible. The website and the meetings provided a closed environment where it was possible to think differently, adopt new languages, and create a hybrid voice that existed somewhere in the crossover between the differing practices. In this protected space it was possible to act in the knowledge that some things would never transfer. For example, elements of the role play and visualisation work seemed to be culturally specific, or favoured the particular local context of an organisation. Whilst such practices may never transfer beyond their particular context, FAME nevertheless provided the possibility of an exchange.

Translation
The creation of an international space through globalisation has established a 'meeting ground for a multiplicity of tongues, visual grammars and styles'. [7] Culturally-bound languages have come to be altered and a vocabulary has emerged to speak of common sensory and emotional experience. Whilst this has opened up the possibility of shared languages, there is still a dependency upon translation. And as Sarat Maharj argues: 'The dependency of the meaning of a language on its own cultural setting always leaves translation incomplete.' [8]

FAME was delivered and debated in three main languages: Spanish, Finnish and English. Language skills varied between participants; many of the UK partners were conversant in English only, whilst the Finnish co-ordinator was

4

tri-lingual and was relied upon for translations. The transnational seminars involved a complex reinterpretation of every spoken word. They were evidence that in transcultural exchange there will always be a surplus or deficit in translation - a difference of understanding. Throughout the project there was also an uneasiness about the hierarchy between languages: a risk of a slippage into the common shared tongue thus forcing a 'global' voice. In the process of globalisation many cultural subtleties and differences become obscured or lost. Like all cross-cultural projects FAME ran the risk of allowing already dominant cultures to dominate further. [9]

There is, then, a need for the local language - a counter tongue to the dominant voice of global culture. Whilst projects like FAME reflect a desire to transgress cultural barriers, individual cultural experiences will continue to colour interpretation and interaction. Whilst we may be operating within a global framework, it is still perhaps our cultural specificity and local agendas that determine the particular direction we take. FAME has revealed shared goals and values amongst its partner organisations, but not necessarily shared pedagogy. What is required therefore is to 'think globally but act locally'. Projects may need to meld local content and regional concerns with national or global interests, and reflect the 'move from knowledge as abstract, universal and objective to socially useful, local knowledge with an emphasis on situated, embodied and perspectival knowledge and values'. [10]

The experience of FAME has enabled Site Gallery to rethink its education programming. It has also called into question the concepts of transferability, translation and shared languages. One conclusion is that it is often the specificity and uniqueness of context that ensures that new projects continue to push the boundaries of educational work. The search for best practice may identify 'tried and tested' routes by which project work can be navigated, but sometimes innovation exists only in the uncharted territories.

Notes
[1] Partners included Barcelona University (Spain); Casc Antic Neighbourhood Association (Spain); GEIPPES - Group of Educators for the Integration of Peo ple in Peril of Social Exclusion (Spain); Helsinki Polytechnic Stadia (Finland); Viittakivi International Centre (Finland); Hämeenlinna Settlement (Finland); CEDI Ltd - Community Economic Development International Ltd (UK); Site Gallery (UK); Quay Arts (UK)
[2] The target audience were disadvantaged adults aged 16 years and above.
[3] In conjunction with the BTV Convergence Media Festival, 'SlipStream' focused on the integration of streaming media technologies into artistic contexts, and included a live web cast to include the larger international community. 'Transmute' used streaming media technology in order to connect Site Gallery and the Brisbane Powerhouse for a real time/dual site event.
[4] Jaukkuri, M. (2001), 'Unfolding Perspectives' in *ARS 01*, Helsinki Kiasma, pp. 21-23
[5] Ibid. p.22, Jaukkuri's reference to the Russian semiotician, Juri Lotman, is based on Nikos Papastergiadis' article 'Tracing Hybridity in Theory' published in *Turbulence of Migration*, Cambridge (2000)

[6] Ibid. p.23, quoting Homi K. Bhabha, *Location of Culture*, London, New York (1998)

[7] Ibid. p.22, quoting Sarat Maharaj, 'Perfidious Fidelity: The Untranslatability of the Other', published in *Global Visions; Towards a New Internationalism in the Visual Arts*. London (1994), p.28

[8] Ibid. p.22

[9] Ibid. p.23

[10] Kvale, S. (1992), 'From the Archaeology of the Psyche to the Architecture of Cultural Landscapes' in *Psychology and Postmodernism*, Sage Publications Ltd.

_____

Emma Cocker is the Education Development Manager at Site Gallery, a leading centre for contemporary art and production facility for photography and electronic media. She is responsible for the programming, policy and practice within the education programme at the gallery. She also lectures in photography within further education and has a visual arts background after graduating in Fine Art: Video and Photography.

_____