Shifting concepts of public space

New Meaning: *New Meaning/Dialogue*

By Helen Eriksen

The New Meaning project was established in 2000 by Gry Ulrichsen and Ebba Moi, former students of the Academy of Visual Arts, Trondheim. The project was initiated as an artist strategy by which to engage with "reality" at a time when it, according to Ulrichsen was: "..unacceptable to work (in the art arena) with something that could be interpreted as moralistic, educational or political….we were incredibly eager to participate in reality and to be part of a bigger constellation."[1]

New Meaning has developed into two locally based project initiatives in Oslo and Trondheim and includes project managers and participants from various professional backgrounds. New Meaning has used forms such as the publication of magazines, games, pod casts and live performances to reach their audiences. Participants come from a wide range of communities, including Afghanistan, Brasil, Colombia, France, India, Iran, Iraq, Italy, Norway, Somalia, Sweden, and Scotland.

The Generator project group invited New Meaning to participate with a developing project entitled: *New Meaning/Dialogue; a project focused on the understanding of dialogue and conflict resolution.* The project managers for *New Meaning/Dialogue* were Hanin Al Khamisi, Sayed Zahir Nasir, and Seyed Jamil Naser with founder member Gry Ulrichsen as the project coordinator. The project managers held conflict resolution workshops for young people newly arrived in Norway. The visual art product was a mural in Trondheim developed by participants of *New Meaning/Dialogue*. The theme of the mural was the first inhabitants of earth, and participant reflections on the process of making the work can be found on the official Generator web site.[2]

In short, the New Meaning agenda is to develop sustainable projects focused on the pragmatics of social change. Artist Gry Ulrichsen says the following of her working rationale for socially engaged art in this transdisciplinary forum,

> It's nice to work with people who are not that self-critical or, they are probably critical in their own field, but not where I am used to being critical. I experience the strong self-critical attitude or the critical distance that visual artists are so good at focusing on, often creates a reluctance to act and the artists can seem egocentric or pompous in their work.

Further, regarding the production of art in a community setting, she states that, "I find it liberating to work with people from other disciplines. Sometimes, I can see that the project doesn't function too well in the art arena – but when it works in other arenas it doesn't seem so important."

The idea of the mural as the product of conflict resolution between young people from different ethnic backgrounds obviously stems from the presence of an artist within the group. However, as Ulrichsen stresses, *this is not an aesthetic exercise*. In an interview, with Gry Ulrichsen and Hanin Al-Khamisi,[3] Ulrichsen questioned aesthetic criteria and referred to murals that she had seen in New York that showed both obvious lead artist signatures and more participant led variants. Murals that had an obvious artist mandate and a clear signature functioned satisfactorily aesthetically, however, the content of the murals less lead by aesthetic signature were as striking and perhaps more "passionate". The implication being that each strategy had a particular strength, as well as weaknesses.

However, does this indicate that we have to accept the relegation of community art projects lacking the obvious aesthetic influence of a lead artist mandate to "outsider art"? Do we neglect to appreciate the "so-called" aesthetic considerations or do we learn to read aesthetics in another manner; perhaps concentrating on the narrative or performative structure rather than formalist structures; thereby reading the meaning and idea outside the criteria of contemporary formal aesthetic norms? Surely, that would cause a professional conflict; everybody knows that art is made by artists. It is blatantly clear that another way of reviewing such projects is needed that does not undermine visual art as a professional discipline nor rejects transdisciplinary participatory projects as unworthy of being taken into consideration.

Another concern is not as to how and why this particular mural should be considered of aesthetic value, but how the act of "creating," which is the basic building block of art, becomes a link in a conflict resolution programme. What does the act of making something in a collaborative process do to the participants, either professional artists or not? Ulrichsen suggests that the mural is a way in which to learn co-operation and states: "We consider a mural to be a good medium to express an idea publicly, develop creativity, learn to collaborate and increase self-respect that can help to bring people from different backgrounds together…."

In a project researching decision making in corporate organisational structures Henry Mintzberg and Frances Westley looked at three strategies of decision making: *thinking first, doing first and seeing first.[4]* The *thinking first* and *seeing first* scenarios are most relevant in relation to understanding the function of the processes encouraged by New Meaning's working processes. The *thinking first* strategy of decision making has a clearly defined process in which participants discussed problems and seemed to reach consensus through logical debate. It was reported that participants in the *thinking first* exercise spent almost no time to consider in what way to approach an issue. Conventional analytic frameworks were quickly adopted and early implementation of these frameworks in the process of decision was seen to blunt explorative discussion and arguments easily became categorical. The researchers concluded that *"thinking comes too easily to most of us."*

However, the group then moved onto a *seeing first* workshop in which they were given the task of creating a collage with coloured paper, pens, scissors and glue. Their task was to visualise the issues discussed in the *thinking first* workshop. Participants reported that decisions and consensus reached in the *thinking first* workshop felt superficial, "more of a compromise" and in no way adequate enough to make a collage. "In thinking first we focused on the problems; in seeing first we focused on the solutions" as one participant expressed it. When *seeing first* methods were applied it seems that the level of insight into an issue is deepened. Furthermore, in order to reach this level "the group members have to find out more about one another's capabilities and collaborate more closely."

It was also reported that the *seeing first* methods "were more emotive and more laughter was heard" and the energy level was described as high; it stimulated action. In relation to the diagrammatic representation of the *thinking first* workshops that suggested logical deduction and solution to the issue in focus, the pictures that resulted from the *seeing first* workshops

invited interpretation and in many ways suggested the process of decision making (conflict resolution). Seen from this perspective *New Meaning/Dialogue* is retesting this theory, with the mural as a performative step in the process rather than the end result.

New Meaning's participation in Generator is a good portal into the issues surrounding contemporary art practice within public space for the following reasons: it is project based, it is a local project with its own integrity and an existing local identity, it has a *raison d'être* beyond the art industry and thus operates beyond the bounds of a "normal" temporary public art commission, it focuses on processes of communication, and it is rooted within a framework of the transdisciplinary .

New Meaning can indeed be identified as a transdisciplinary project through the background of the team, its aims, working structure and pragmatic agenda. In *New Meaning/Dialogue* the project is driven by Sayed Zahir Nasir (certified public accountant), Hanin Nidhal Al-Khamisi (social economics student and part time interpreter and negotiator for the Conflicts' Tribunal in Sør-Trøndelag), Gry Ulrichsen (visual artist and teacher), Seyed Jamil Naser (political scientist and interpreter).

> New Meaning's transdisciplinary (…) helps the group to work constructively and allows the group to take part and be active in different social fields and activities. Moreover, the transdisciplinary of New Meaning gives the group the chance to work independently and use our ability for solving our own problems and works.[5]

The group has developed towards a pragmatically focused discourse that is problem solving rather than an academic discussion. When considering New Meaning as a project, its flash points, in relation to the disciplines that it encompasses, can be seen more generically as inherent problems of working transdisciplinary. According to Rudolf Kötter and Phillip W. Balsiger, the two main stumbling blocks in transdisciplinary projects are firstly approval (funding) and secondly the final report (critique).[6] It seems that the only known reviewing system for transdisciplinary projects is the peer reviewing system[7] which splinters the knowledge and thereby the project into its partial contributions.

> The normal peer reviewer can only be characterised by the standard comment that he only assesses what is covered by his own disciplinary competence and this leads to a dilemma. On the one hand it cannot a priori be expected that a top performance by a disciplinary contribution will stand out in importance from the whole project. On the other, the strong aspects of a very original contribution could lead to disciplinary methods used as standards to provide answers to questions from fields outside the specific discipline.[8]

The peer review of New Meaning's participation in Generator will be by individuals with closely related disciplines, perhaps without the competence to judge the project due to the absence of valid transdisciplinary, as well as aesthetic anchor points. Unlike the scientific report, the report phase of Generator is manifest in a mural and can be tempting to assess in terms of the single discipline of visual art. However, Naser S. Jamil, New Meaning project manager, says: "in fact, New Meaning and *New Meaning/Dialog* is a successful product of the artists in the group."[9] Here the artistic product is seen as the project itself rather than its manifestations.

Generator defines itself as a discussion arena for the theme of shifting artist practices within the public realm and is specifically aimed to expose new forms of public art to a wider audience within a specific time frame. However, the risk element that the umbrella project embraces in relation to encompassing a so-called discursive, collaborative project is heightened by that project's own sense of risk. A project such as *New Meaning/Dialogue* is dependent on a well founded discursive practice at a grass roots level. Discursive methodology in itself suggests that the artist cannot push or intimidate participants into "art action" that they are not fully comfortable with. If this should occur, the project would be considered a failure and the foundation of a locally rooted autonomous practice lost. Credibility in the community involved in the project would be minimal and longer-term investments in the project would be lost. It is tempting to contrast this scenario with the failure of an imported "parachuted" artist project that would have minimal effect on a *serial artist project* in an international arena.[10]

As Miwon Kwon suggests, there is a fundamental difference in "parachuting" an artist into a project to participate, and allowing local grass roots artist practice to develop through participation.[11] She illustrates the fraught nature of local interests and the interests of an art community/industry restless to make a mark in an ever increasing international market. I suggest that the "parachuted" artist also encounters a risk factor in relation to the maintenance of artistic credibility with the commissioner rather than with public project participants; a well founded dialogue between curator and artist is paramount during project development. This can be contrasted to the autonomy that local grass roots projects enjoy but which perhaps hinders communication of project development to the commissioner.

A general risk factor in embracing New Meaning as a discursive project breaking new territory can be seen in the lack of guarantee of a physical manifestation of the project process

within the time frame of the event itself. The innovation of discursive projects seems to be a requirement for funding. In the quote below Ebba Moi suggests that funding agencies mandate for funding short term art projects are based on concepts of art as innovative rather than sustainable in the long run:

> (…) we have been advised by funding institutions to change the project's name to suggest some sort of renewal. Lurking behind this you can read a reactionary attitude with the idea that art should always be innovative. Like… you shouldn't carry on with work like New Meaning too long; it has to be a short term experiment then you have to dive straight into the next "Professor Boffin" idea! The problem with this is that it can easily end up on a shopping trip in human needs by using other people as material in an artistic strategy without giving anything in return. There has to be a mutual exchange. If artists can contribute to a real change – something that many artists claim they do – then they need a continuity and commitment for more than a month![12]

Therefore, discursive artist projects anchored in local communities encounter hindrances. Even a well established and stable project group such as New Meaning cannot guarantee that previous collaborators have the time or inclination to initiate a new project; new working constellations have to be formed, expertise developed, user groups defined, terms of production negotiated, extra funding and new partnerships have to be developed within a consensual framework. Thus, in regards to these practical considerations it seems that the locally anchored discursive project aspiring to long term sustainable development can easily be in conflict with the more experimental nature of a short term umbrella project with a mission statement to create room for discussion.[13]

Furthermore, in order to understand the conflict of positions that local participatory projects and the international "parachuted" artist's experience, there needs to be a greater understanding of prevailing aesthetic criteria and the ensuing power of its value system in the international art market. This conflict of positioning that directly addresses the role of the visual artist within the local community and international art industry needs to be taken up as a theme by artist communities.

Claire Bishop addresses two main strands in the understanding of discursive or relational practices.[14] She suggests that there is a confrontation between *non-believers* (aesthetes) who dismiss socially engaged practices as non-art and *believers* who reject aesthetic questions as irrelevant and synonymous with "cultural hierarchy" and the market. However, while Bishop goes on to say that aesthetes can in many ways be deemed as irrelevant, the socially engaged practices, "have a tendency to self-marginalise to the point of inadvertently reinforcing art's autonomy, thereby preventing a productive rapprochement between art and life."[15]

Whilst Bishop points to the contradictions of socially engaged art her departure point seems to be through an undefined assumptive idea of "aesthetics." Bishop goes on to argue that our understanding of "aesthetic" needs to be reassessed and perhaps redefined through the work of John Dewey or more recently by Richard Shustermann.[16] While Bishop articulates her admiration for art projects that do not give up the lead artist mandate, it has to be argued that this admiration can be based in a system of aesthetic judgement that perpetuates the international art market; *the signature*. This concept of signature and artist as commodity and recognition as the value indicator in the international art market is almost aesthetically irreconcilable with a project involving non-artist participants in a local transdisciplinary project such as New Meaning's. As Adrian Piper suggests in her notes on funk:

> for me, what it means is that the experience of sharing, commonality and self transcendence turn out to be more intense and significant in some ways than the post-modernist categories most of us art types bring to aesthetic experience. This is important to me because I don't believe these categories should be the sole arbiters of aesthetic experience.[17]

The mural in New Meaning's strategy of conflict resolution on the geographic periphery, accentuates the need for redefining aesthetic criteria. Moreover, it tests the case study scenario of *seeing first* by Rudolf Kötter and Phillip W. Balsiger, with reflections of participant experience freely available. However, the participants in Trondheim and surrounding areas are not corporate managers hungry for promotion if they crack the team-work code as in Kötter and Balsiger's case study. Participants in this project have a deeper cultural investment in the conflict areas raised in the forum provided by New Meaning. This is not a game to make an aesthetically pleasing wall decoration but a deadly serious meeting of individuals wishing to rise above personal boundaries to gain insight into their own, as well as others culturally framed conflicts. When seen in this context the argument of authorial mandate seems rather contrived. Therefore, I suggest that Claire Bishop's call for the search for a new definition of aesthetics take into consideration Adrian Piper's description of performative transcendence.

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[1] Interview with Beate Pedersen, *Billedkunst*, June 2005.

[2] http://generator2007.no/wp/?cat=16

[3] Interview 17.08.07

[4] Henry Mintzberg and Frances Westley: Decision Making: It's not what you think. *MIT Sloan Management Review,* Vol 42, No. 3 Spring 2001, pp 89-93.

[5] Naser S.Jamil, e-mail response 12.09.07

[6] Rudolf Kötter and Phillip W. Balsiger: *Interdisciplinarity and Transdisciplinarity: A Constant Challenge to the Sciences.* Issues in Integrative Studies No. 17 pp 87-120 (1999)

[7] *Peer review* (known as *refereeing* in some academic fields) is a process of subjecting an author's scholarly work, research or ideas to the scrutiny of others who are experts in the same field. It is used primarily by editors to select and to screen submitted manuscripts, and by funding agencies, to decide the awarding of grants. The peer review process aims to make authors meet the standards of their discipline, and of science in general. Publications and awards that have not undergone peer review are likely to be regarded with suspicion by scholars and professionals in many fields. Even refereed journals, however, can contain errors. source: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Peer_review

[8] Rudolf Kötter and Phillip W. Balsiger: *Loc Cit*

[9] Naser S.Jamil, e-mail response 12.09.07

[10] Miwon Kwon: *One Place After Another: Site-specific Art and Locational Identity*, Mit Press**,** (2001) for discussion on parachuted artist strategies and sustainable community art projects.

[11] Miwon Kwon: *One Place After Another: Site-specific Art and Locational Identity*, Mit Press**,** (2001)

[12] Interview with Beate Pedersen, *Billedkunst*, June 2005

[13] Miwon Kwon: *Op Cit*

[14] Claire Bishop: *The Social Turn: Collaboration and its Discontents,* www.artforum.com (Feb/2006)

[15] Claire Bishop: *The Social Turn: Collaboration and its Discontents,* www.artforum.com (Feb/2006)

[16] John Dewey: *Art as Experience* (1934), Richard Shustermann: *Performing Live: Aesthetic Alternatives at the Ends of Art* (2000)

[17] Adrian Piper: *Notes on Funk II,* (1983)