

GENTLE INTERVENTIONS

A TELL PROJECT

PERAMBULATING ART WORKSHOPS WITH PASSERS-BY.

Introduction

TELL (Treasures of the East London Line) is an action research project celebrating the past, present and future of the East London Line through collaboration with local community groups.

Postgraduate students from the MA in Cross Sectoral and Community Arts at Goldsmiths College, New Cross, engaged with local schools, the local community and people on journeys in and around the line in a series of participatory arts activities throughout May 2007.

The East London Line connects some of London's less affluent boroughs and communities whilst also providing links to one of its most important centres of commerce. In this way it offers a unique picture of this shifting part of the capital, its rich local history and its vibrant cultural diversity.

Participants in the project were given an opportunity to offer their personal stories, memories and reflections. The programme created a platform for community engagement that both captured the past and looked forward to the future.

TELL works within an agenda of sustainable, healthy, liveable and safer communities and aims to creatively consult and give voice to local communities.

As part of the TELL project a day of perambulating workshops were held in and around the streets near Rotherhithe station on the East London Line.

The varied mix of gentle interventions and interactions with passers by that the group met included drawing, painting, music workshops, digital photography, local heritage workshops, singing, storytelling, reminiscing, mapping, dancing, puppetry and picnics, along with generally leaving a little magic and smiles as the workshop moved through the streets.

This is a record of that day.

Scene 1: Art stall in street beside Rotherhithe station: art/music activities 5-10% of passers-by engage with us. Ages from 2 to 65+. Raindrops add to the drawings.

It's raining when we leave Rotherhithe station. Douglas suggests a spot under the nearest trees around 2 metal benches. We are near, but not too near, a pedestrian crossing and behind hip height metal bars on one side which at first appear to be a disadvantage, but in retrospect prevent scurrying mothers with pushchairs inadvertently knocking over the table. Douglas in a white boiler-suit with photos ironed on it, Michael in a green boiler suit with posters and photos and Beth in black puppeteer garb topped by a veiled black hat.

We lay instruments and felt pens etc along with a metal globe of the world on the table. Douglas puts up posters on a line between 2 trees behind us, twirls green and gold around them and adds flowers to soften the metal bars in front of us. Actually Douglas has picked the perfect place near a crossroads where the pedestrian footway from the riverfront crosses the longest street in London.

We have our stage but can we engage with the passers-by in the dripping rain? Occasionally a red London bus draws up at the pedestrian crossing and the passengers have a good view of us. It reminds us of the passengers on the platform watching brides being flung out of wedding cars Van Erven's 'Community Theatre' film of the Sydney train theatre.

Michael produces watery sounds on the Mbira (thumb piano) which produce a gentle rain melody which resounds down Railway Terrace almost as far as the Brunel Museum. Our first requests of 'Would you like to do a drawing?' get no takers or a 'maybe on the way back from shopping', so after discussion we think it is too threatening so adjust it to 'We are doing a project about Journeys ...'

This is more promising and we soon have our first participant - a woman who stops to ask the price of the globe of the world draws a boat in turquoise, her boat 'The Magic Flute' berthed at Chatham, and conversation is easy and flows to the East London line and other topics. As she was our very first participant, Douglas spontaneously presents her with a prize of a gingerbread man with turquoise smartie eyes.

Many gentle interventions ensue:

An Australian tourist stops to show us her brand new wheeled case - she does not want to draw or play



music but Yes, she will send a photo to the 'New Perspectives' website. "That's easy for me to do" she says with confidence. The invitation to contribute to Douglas' 'New Perspectives' website prevents us from being just a 'here today, gone tomorrow' creative experience.

An older man has had an adventurous morning: he writes in the little book that he helped a man with multiple sclerosis lying in the park and says he waited half an hour for an ambulance. We believe him, he seems a Good Citizen of the World.

A man declares that he has had a 'hard, long, rough, tough journey' and writes this in the big book. He then elaborates on this, he made a million and then lost it but is not embittered. He says he will contribute to the 'New Perspectives' website.

Two textile students draw and also play the thumb piano with Michael.

Suddenly it's taking off: team members are making different interventions concurrently:

A woman in purple gets off her brand new bike (her first in England, she used to bike in Poona, India) and draws her new bike in the big book as the textile students are drawing in the little book. Actually she is lost and wants directions to Canary Wharf. We stop other passers-by to ask for directions and one gives detailed directions while sheltering from the rain under a folded newspaper she holds over her head.

Remember the man who asked for a cigarette and Douglas does a deal of a cigarette for a drawing. He does not demur and draws in red the streets and houses beyond.

Remember our youngest participant aged 2 who confidently held the fat purple pen (didn't put it in her mouth) and made her drawing in the little book.

A Finnish family put a blob of blu tak on the globe to indicate their home town as does an artist from Northern Ireland who does a very careful drawing in green and blue of 'rings in space' indicating he said "the journey that returns to the place where it left".

There is so much going on at some points that it is not possible to register all that is happening. I know 'fresh perspectives' cards are explained and passed out and that the music keeps up a watery accompaniment to the raindrops that embellish the drawings.



It is very noticeable that people are most attracted to the little book of earthen-type paper onto which Beth has carefully fixed small squares of white paper on alternate pages. People feel the size is manageable, and the way the picture space is framed makes it special and alluring. Of the instruments, people seem more attracted to the thumb pianos.

We pack our things and wander through the streets.

LONG HARD ROAD TOUCH
JOURNEY



Scene 2: Brunel museum: art/music activities. We are on the threshold between street and indoors.

The rain eases and we picnic and dry off, and practice our Paddy works on the Railway song as we walk down to the Brunel museum.

At the Brunel Museum George Jones' 'Banquet in the Tunnel' painting is admired. We sing Paddy Works on the Railway. The acoustics are good and we think that as the song is about the 1840's that maybe it had been sung on that spot in those distant days. The 3 men there contribute to the little book. It is WARM in there and we unthaw.

Interval

To the churchyard full of flowers (we feel we are in the depths of the countryside) and to the Simplicity cafe for welcome large mugs of hot chocolate. The Brazilian waitress contributes to our little book and inadvertently pockets the top of the blue felt pen. She owns up.

We leave and begin our journey again.



Scene 3: Inside Office of Bubble Theatre: art/music/theatre activities. 90% staff engage with us. Appear to be age range 20's - 50's. We are the passers-by who drop in.

Since we left our pitch beside Rotherhithe station, there are no cars. We are on walking terrain. We ask directions to the Bubble Theatre office which is rather a metal shed fortress. Is this going to be a 'Freedom to Fail' experience for us? We buzz the bell and say 'We are students from Goldsmiths who are doing a perambulating Art workshop'. We are buzzed in.

We ascend the stairs and enter a large open plan office to be greeted with great excitement although one man steadfastly focuses on his computer screen throughout the entire duration of our visit. But he is the only non-participant. One woman starts on a very detailed beautiful pink painting in our little book so paper plates are passed out to others who want to join in and even frisbied across to the other side of the room.

The volunteer coordinator says 'I must go and fetch my work placement students' and when she brings them back, we invite her to 'pick a puppet'. She picks Queen Victoria and so Queen Victoria's journey through the Thames Tunnel in July 1827 is enacted with musical sound effects, with herself as Queen Victoria and her colleagues as courtiers.

Then the song Paddy Works on the Railway is announced and song sheets and instruments are passed out, with everyone invited to join in 'especially loudly if they think they cannot sing well'. Beth asks for the 'least important person in the room' and after a short silence a woman offers herself and is made the tragic love interest of the song. We ask for a volunteer to be Paddy and a woman volunteers from the far back of the room. She's good at acting having a sore back and also dies with enthusiasm.

It is noticeable that the men (in a minority among the women) hang back while the women engage even one might say with passion. We pack up quickly and the woman who did the beautiful painting for us makes sure the puppets are not left behind. The volunteer coordinator asks us to explain the 'context' and we say we are students doing a 'teamwork' module so we have to carry out a workshop with people we would not normally engage with. 'Fresh perspectives' cards are left and 5 artistic paper plates are gathered in as we slip away.

We come out in the air feeling reinvigorated by their enthusiasm for what we did. We suppose that they



feel they've enjoyed having the 'tables turned' on them as it is usually themselves charged with engaging the public in theatre/art/music activities.

We continue our journey.

Fresh Perspectives

A mobile technology project by TELL

Take a fresh perspective!

Look afresh at your everyday Journey, take a snapshot with your mobile phone or camera and email it to the **Fresh Perspectives** web site.



To become involved send your images to
FRESHPERSPECTIVES.tell@phlog.net

To see a different perspective visit - phlog.net/user/FRESHPERSPECTIVES

Photographs, videos, text and audio recordings of the changing landscape and community along the East London Line will be showcased as part of the TELL Arts Festival in December 2007

TELL

Treasures of the East London Line

www.myspace.com/tellproject



Scene 4: Waterfront: art/music/photo activities. 3 older men, oldest of whom was 65. Outside venue. Rain has stopped. They are passers-by who have sat down, we are passers-by who join them.

We are monetarily disorientated but find our way through a beautiful park (the moated house of Edward III is nearby) and come out by a mysterious Georgian house standing alone on the riverfront. (Actually this is alongside the famous Kings' Steps where watermen gathered for centuries).

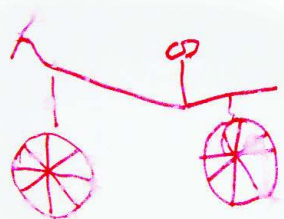
We meet three men with cans of beer and a dog. We ask about the house and get the wry reply 'it's old. Look there are more old houses over there.' Undeterred the little book is brought out and the man who is sitting apart from the other two is invited to contribute. To our surprise he is keen to paint a view of Tower Bridge wreathed in a light afternoon mist and does so with enormous care and attention.

Meanwhile, the thumb pianos come out and a second man is soon performing a sustained duet with Michael. The digital camera comes out, permission is sought and a portrait of the third man is taken against the backdrop of the river. He is shown the portrait and approves. Douglas suggests to him that he take pictures of the group. He does so. Conversations flow.

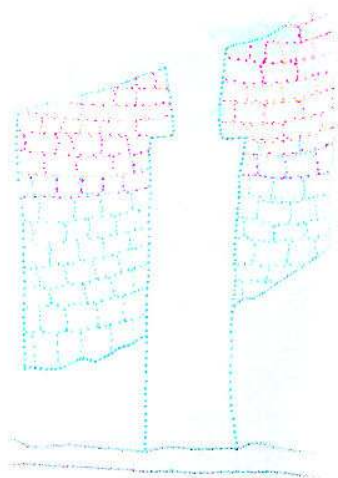
We bring out the birthday cake and they help us sing happy birthday though politely decline both cake and rum. The second man does a drawing. As we pack up and take our leave, they wish us good luck.

It is 4.30pm - our perambulating workshop has lasted four and a half hours!





SNEHAL AKOLKAR
1st Bike in England.

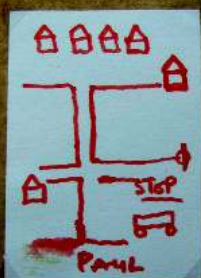


Looking up from the platform
Rotherhithe station.



MAGIC FLUTE
David Fisher

Found a man
with his finger
in his pants -
called an ambulance
—
John Nosworthy



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