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TITLE: 'WORKING WITH ORGANISED GROUPS' - A MOBILE COMMUNITY ARTS TEAM

This article comes out of questions raised and left on the air on the first evening of the Conference when I showed videotapes made by Jubilee Community Arts with Sandwell Tenants Liaison Committee and Sandwell Committee Against Racism and Fascism. In trying to identify why 'organised' groups feature quite centrally in Jubilee's programme, I am not concerned (at this stage) to argue any specific alignment for community arts. It just seems to me that the working context for some community arts projects actually gives rise quite logically and organically to a particular emphasis in their working methods. We do of course have policy discussions. We do evaluate, constantly, the pattern of our work. But if a Company elects to work throughout a borough the size of Sandwell, with a population of 300,000, 57,000 Council tenancies, and a large proportion of ethnic minority owner-occupiers, it may well be that some of the choices have already been made for you. Of course the working methods of all community arts projects are shaped by their working context. At one end of the spectrum are those projects which are resident in one particular area or estate. There is the relaxed familiarity of daily contact with local residents at the shops or in the pub. Even door-to-door canvassing is feasible. The backbone of the programme is perhaps provided by regular workshops. People can be brought together for the first time simply because they want to 'do' community arts. They can take their time to find a direction or set their own goals and, from the start, they can locate their group within the overall picture of the other projects going on and the other workshop activities available. At the other end of the spectrum, are those companies which tour nationally. One project might be followed by another perhaps at the other end of the country. The process almost becomes the product and can be tailored and packaged to answer particular needs or specific demands. The work can be programmed through the year, not in terms of regular workshops, but as carefully devised projects with clear objectives determined from the outset in consultation with the sponsoring or host organisation.

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Jubilee occupies a territory somewhere in between the two. Other urban projects with similarly wide catchment areas have been able to provide a focal point of contact with the community by building up their base as a resource facility or have become attached to community education projects, advice centres, or law centres. Jubilee, and perhaps some of the rural community arts projects, have had to develop other contact mechanisms - primarily responsive to the groups and issues which continually emerge from the community itself. How?

Damp problems become a major issue and are taken up by the Tenants Liaison Committee (comprised of delegates from several T.A.s around the borough). We make contact and, in the resulting video project, all stages of the campaign are documented and the finished tape shown to specially called meetings of tenants on problem estates.

The N.F. announce a meeting in West Bromwich, to take place the week after Southall. With our local Committee against Racism and Fascism (another delegate organisation) we make a videotaped record of the demonstration and of the organisational work beforehand which is then edited to be used in the Defence Campaign for those arrested.

The project with the Liaison Committee lasted 9 months. The tape for S.C.A.R.F. was produced in 3 weeks. The time scale is determined not by a project workers regular timetabled commitments, or by a planned programme for the year, but by the demands and objectives of the organisation involved. The steadily building momentum of a regular workshop would be inappropriate; the intensive experience of a one-week, or even a one-month 'residency' would not be feasible. The project lasts as long as the particular struggle and reflects the tempo of its progress and its crises.

Other groups are 'organised' only in the sense that they have come together around common interests or shared demands. A group of women begins to pressure the local authority over the lack of play facilities on their estate. The Social Services Department calls a meeting of all agencies involved in work with children, each of which offers 'all the help and advice we can', but does nothing. We work with the women, initially, on a poster campaign which draws in new members from the estate. Our involvement then resolves itself into a series of regular, weekly sessions run on our converted double-decker bus. A successful one-week summer playscheme jointly organised with us in the local Youth Centre re-inforces the process, and the continued use of the building by a new, independent playgroup is successfully negotiated with the local authority.

One feature of the process is that the group involved already have a collective identity. They do not see themselves as the Jubilee mothers and toddlers group, or the Jubilee drama group. Common interests or objectives have already been identified and have produced a group momentum against which they can measure the skills and contribution of the community arts worker. Reliance on the worker is minimised, the demands placed on us can be made specific, and the pursuit of an overall objective allows the autonomy of the group to gradually re-assert itself as our involvement diminishes.

Occasionally, however, it is still possible for us to bring new groups together, to initiate projects. In these cases, the main consideration is not so much to do with where the social need is greatest, but with whether our knowledge of an area suggests that a real potential exists for the formation of a new, self-reliant group around a particular issue or interest.

On one estate there is a well-established tenants association. After seven years, the officers have got the complaints and repairs procedures so well sewn up that the majority of tenants see less and less need to get actively involved themselves in the running of the association. Under the nominal auspices of the T.A. we run a one-week summer playscheme which begins to involve some of the parents of the area. Building on that interest the T.A. itself applies for an Urban Aid grant to run a four week scheme this coming summer. The scheme is approved and a new group of adults (and kids) are drawn in to form a sub-committee which will plan and run the project. Many are becoming active members of the T.A. for the first time and are therefore becoming exposed to other issues such as rents, repairs, and the cuts in local services.

But whatever the problems, if a Company is working over a wide geographical area, that very context makes many other working methods impractical. And if the value of our work is not to evaporate as soon as the project ends we believe that there is no alternative to a programme built within, and re-inforcing the momentum for change which exists within the community itself. In situations such as these, we frequently find ourselves working initially through one or two key personalities in the area. Where we are proposing or offering completely new directions, the level of support required from us is greater and the momentum of the group itself is less certain. Two things then become important. Firstly that some kind of supportive mechanism should be available on-the-spot - be it from the local youth worker, or from the more established activists of the tenants association. And secondly that the group itself should devise its own organisational structure emphasising its essential character as a local initiative, with clear objectives, and locally accountable - rather than an 'ad hoc' group of 'interested parties' drawn together by an outside team of professional workers.

Working with organisations which may be based anywhere within a large metropolitan borough does create problems. Some of them are practical: getting equipment and materials to the right place at the right time; keeping up to date with what other workers are doing on the other side of town; getting access to buildings or parking spaces for the Bus; going to meeting after meeting; trying to plan the next few months, or even the working week, when the Company's programme can be as volatile or as intractable as the issues and campaigns with which we have aligned ourselves.

Other problems concern the philosophy or the nature of the work itself. 'Art' is not yet readily intelligible as an instrument of change. It is sometimes necessary, initially, to demonstrate the case, to produce the goods yourself, before a group will be motivated to take control of the process themselves. Even then, it is frequently only a partial view of community arts which can be achieved - Jubilee 'works with kids', 'does murals', or 'prints/posters'. And in any case, if art is relevant, it must be relevant to the other tasks in hand. The clearer an organisation's own objectives in the pursuit of a particular campaign or issue, the more specific and urgent will be its demands: the very fact that the arts worker engages with the group at a point of struggle, means that the videotape, the mural, or the poster resumes its value as a product, a resource, and its contribution is ultimately assessed by its efficacy rather than by who held the camera or who did the artwork.

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CREDIT: STEVE TROW, JUBILEE COMMUNITY ARTS