13 Riding the tide

Socially-engaged art and resilience in an uncertain future

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Introduction

This chapter asks how theoretical and practical approaches developed in the field of socially-engaged art can extend current discourse around resilience and community engagement in the social sciences.[1] We address this question as practising artists, drawing on our experience working collaboratively with different communities – including both academic partners and geographically defined groups – and specifically with flood-affected communities, where resilience is a prominent concern. Our approach is informed by the belief that focusing on relational process rather than output opens space for generative encounters and implies a transformative reading of resilience, in contrast with more directly instrumental approaches. We highlight the central role of uncertainty in the creative processes of art-making and ask how artistic strategies for working productively with uncertainty can contribute – both to understandings of resilience in other disciplines and to promoting community resilience.

This practice-based reflection is further informed by examples from the work of artists and theorists who actively engage with particular social contexts, and with the various challenges faced by different communities. To typify this work we choose the term 'socially-engaged' out of a number of competing terms for what is not an artistic movement but a more-or-less distinct field of practice – one which emphasises dialogue and embeddedness within a broader social arena. Following Kester (2000) we, therefore, define socially-engaged art for present purposes as that in which – firstly – human relations constitute the primary artistic medium, and – secondly – the dialogical process of artist and participant leads the evolution of the work.

Current writing on resilience and the arts tends to revolve around one of two questions – either the effectiveness of art as a tool for social change, or the correct place of instrumental considerations in the evaluation of contemporary art (Belfiore, 2002, p. 9; Matarasso, 2013, pp. 9–10). In this chapter, we seek to extend this conversation by asking instead whether the accumulated critical and practical insights of socially-engaged art might offer new ways of thinking about both resilience and community, beyond the frameworks familiar to social and environmental science, policy and planning.

The word resilience admits multiple interpretations. In the next section of this chapter, we clarify our treatment of some of the key concepts at stake. We discuss briefly how resilience is defined in relation to a perceived climate of uncertainty, and review the implications of habitual discourse around concepts such as community and engagement, as well as the challenges facing co-productive approaches to both research and artistic practice. In the third section, we sketch out the historical development of contemporary socially-engaged art practice and review some of the ethical, aesthetic and political considerations that have shaped its critical evolution. To summarise, we propose four dimensions of socially-engaged art practice we believe have a bearing on how we think about resilience: *New ways of working*, *Embracing Uncertainty*, *Expanded frames of reference*, and *Creative language*. Finally, we review these ideas in relation to a brief case study of our own joint work and discuss some of the practical considerations when putting them into practice.

Critical context: uncertainty, resilience, and the 'social turn'

The current interest in social resilience (Adger, 2000; Brose, 2015; Elms, 2015) arises in the context of an era of perceived uncertainty about global futures – marked by violent conflict, environmental degradation, economic and political crisis, displacement, and the prospect of traumatic climate change. While this state of perceived crisis may or may not be historically exceptional, increasingly extreme weather events, in particular, present the global community with challenges experienced globally at an unprecedented scale. As these events become a frequent feature of everyday life for populations around the globe, the question of resilience and how we achieve it has thus become a matter of significance at societal and community levels. From a government and institutional perspective, promoting the resilience of specific communities is a pragmatic means to mitigate the destabilising impacts of rapid change – in other words, to maintain the function of existing systems in the face of external impact. Top-down implementations of resilience planning, however, raise questions of how resilience objectives are identified and achieved, and by what methods these initiatives can be kept relevant to specific places and specific communities.

Resilience and the paradigm of endemic risk

Models of resilience vary between resilience as the capacity of a system to return to a former state, and as the capacity of a system to produce new adaptations, treating stability as a conservative or progressive concept, respectively. Both readings, however, define resilience in relation to external impacts – leading critics to point out that resilience discourse can obscure structural barriers to the thriving of communities, within existing social systems (Whittle et al., 2010). That the rise of resilience discourse has prompted significant critical concern is reflected in recent literature

(Adger, 2000; Evans and Reid, 2014; McEwen and Jones, 2012), and likewise in the rationale of the conference for which a version of this chapter was originally produced. It is important to bear in mind the different possible implications of current resilience discourse when contextualised, for example, within neoliberal paradigms of serial welfare reform (Macpherson et al., 2014, p. 30).

Brad Evans and Julian Reid, in their recent book *Resilient Life* (2014), point to a problematic conflation of resilience with resistance, or the ability of a system to withstand the negative impact of catastrophic events – effectively reducing the nature of the political to a question of bare survivability. This becomes particularly alarming in the context of a neoliberal order underpinned by the ideology of endemic risk, in which catastrophic events play a politically definitive role (Massumi, 2009). Framing external hazards as the primary threat to society presupposes the existence of an implicitly universal and desirable *status quo*, and in so doing also obscures the links between socio-economic privilege (or lack of it) and vulnerability to extreme events – as evidenced for example by the long history of flood management and differential impacts in New Orleans (McEwen et al., 2012; Smith, 2006). It is a logic which, write Evans and Reid (2014, p. 22), denies the possibility of 'an affirmative thinking', capable of imagining or demanding a different world.

We see cultivating resilience – conceived as the autonomous capacity of communities to thrive despite adverse experience (Macpherson et al., 2012, p. 3) – as a critical part of socially-engaged practice. Unless we are content to maintain things as they are, however, we believe it necessary to think of resilience in transformative terms. Since those most vulnerable to – for example – extreme weather events are often also those most disadvantaged within existing social structures, resilience for these communities may be at least as dependent on the ability to change the *status quo*, as upon the ability to withstand external hazards (Whittle et al., 2010, pp. 11–12). This last point is of particular relevance to our concern here, since socially-engaged art frequently aspires both to initiate transformative processes and to propose radically different frames of reference for imagining and creating social spaces and relations.

Co-production and community engagement

This heightened attention to resilience coincides with a shift in concerns and ways of working within the social sciences and other related disciplines, including a renewed emphasis on co-production of research. Socially-engaged art practice has to some extent co-evolved with participatory research, and both are informed also by activist and social considerations. The increasing focus in both spheres on engaging and working more inclusively, and specifically on engaging with communities identified as 'vulnerable' or 'at risk', reinforces the need for effective ways of working across disciplinary

and societal divides. In this context, it becomes necessary to examine the relations of power within a co-productive association. It cannot be taken for granted that co-productive relationships – in either art or academic research – will not replicate or obscure underlying imbalances of power, both within participant groups, and more broadly in society (Askins and Pain, 2011, p. 815; Gaventa and Cornwall, 2006; Macpherson et al., 2014, p. 28). This has implications for any claims of authenticity or appropriateness predicated upon the collaborative nature of the research process. The search for appropriate methodologies to work with and around these difficulties remains an active preoccupation of both artists and researchers attempting to develop exchange-based models for knowledge generation (Flowerdew and Martin, 2005, p. 144).

'Community' in perspective

Community, too, is a concept which often goes unexamined in public and political discourse. Despite its obvious appeal, however, the concept is problematic in many ways and has largely passed out of sociological analysis (Brint, 2001). A given community is defined by specific characteristics held in common – at various registers, from the biological to the metaphysical. Communities are not, however, discrete and homogeneous units – instead community boundaries overlap, clash and disrupt one another. Uncritical treatment of 'community' as a singular entity obscures internal differences, as well as the necessary exclusion implicit in any act of categorisation. In addition, the idealised community can become a vehicle for projected values and assumptions, or as a source of instant validation. Finally, communities are not necessarily comparable across cultures and geographical contexts – a point attested by the lack of truly equivalent terms in different languages.[2] All these considerations must be borne in mind when considering the definition of community resilience, as well as when developing an approach to promoting it in practice.

Art in social context

From formal aesthetics to dialogic practice

The emergence of socially-engaged art is part of a spatial expansion in contemporary art over the past century, from designated art spaces to the public realm. This move beyond the gallery has it roots in the twentieth-century Avant-garde and is perhaps an inevitable consequence of its association with social critique and experimentation. As Bruguera (2011, n.p.) states: "we do not have to enter the Louvre or the castles, we have to enter people's houses, people's lives, this is where useful art is." One of the first and most influential artists to explore this line was Joseph Beuys, whose concept of social sculpture laid the ground for a new generation of practitioners who

saw society at large as the medium, rather than the consumers, of artistic practice.

The Artist Placement Group (APG), formed in London in the mid-1960s, developed a new model for artistic practice based on this principle (Rasmussen, 2009; Tate, n.d.). The group negotiated residencies in which artists worked directly in non-art spaces such as government departments and commercial companies. The APG introduced the maxim that 'the context is half the work' – a significant departure from the classic white cube of the gallery, which traditionally treats the artwork as a discrete and self-contained object. They made the case for the relevance of art as an integrated part of contemporary life and production – not as a creative means to improve efficiency or delivery of desired objectives, but as an open-ended, critical, and uncertain mode of production which makes its own necessary and relevant contribution to the social sphere.

Where APG primarily focused on industry and government as spheres of operation, others such as the 'community arts' movement placed an emphasis on working with people in less institutional settings. Later artists drew on both, to inform their models of socially-engaged practice. '*Up in the Air*', a seminal project initiated by artist Neville Gabie and based in a condemned high-rise housing estate in Liverpool implemented the principles of APG's manifesto in a new setting. By inviting a selection of artists to carry out long-term residencies in empty apartments on the site, the project opened space for exploratory creative processes and relationships to emerge through a dialogic encounter between artists and residents. As the field evolved, artists found diverse ways of working within the new relational dynamics in which they found themselves:

> "These cultural practices indicate the new social order – ways of life that emphasise participation, challenge power, and expand disciplines ranging from urban planning and community work to theatre and the visual arts."
>
> (Thompson, 2012, p. 19)

This attention to the role of art in the social sphere (and concomitantly, the role of the social sphere in art), has presented a complex entanglement of ethical, aesthetic and political considerations. The resulting debate is typified (in the UK) by the critical dispute between Claire Bishop and Grant Kester, which broadly contrast two points of view on the effective sphere of disruptive politics (Bishop, 2005, 2006; Kester, 2006). Where Bishop criticises indiscriminate, conciliatory tendencies in socially-engaged practice, Kester rejects traditional aesthetic parameters as inextricably rooted in cultural dynamics of power and privilege. What both critics have in common is an interest in the inextricably political role of art, and the simplistic inadequacy of models that treat art as a form of social 'improvement'.

The authors of this chapter share Bishop's concern at the instrumentalisation of this kind of work in European cultural policy as it develops in tandem with the dismantling of the welfare state. However, Bishop fails to recognise the potential of dialogic practice for generating politically transformative encounters. The sensibilities and challenges of socially-engaged practice demand a new approach to understanding 'quality' in art (Belfiore, 2002). Traditional frameworks are not merely inadequate in this context; they tend to reinforce the stratifications and perceived boundaries which such practice aims to disrupt. The aesthetic paradigms of modernism and postmodernism, for example, rest heavily on formal innovation as a meter of success, tending to omit or to downplay attention to the subjective and culturally constructed nature of aesthetic parameters (Kester, 2000). Socially-engaged artists instead attempt to find new ways of making meaningful work, or making work meaningful:

> 'In socially-engaged practice, artists attempt to extend the parameters beyond aesthetics to operate in a broader social context: it is not about the next new thing in art, it is about a change that reaches far outside of an art discourse'
>
> (Reyes, 2014, n.p.)

To this effect, artists have moved towards developing new frameworks, such as the functional parameters of Tania Bruguera's *Arte Útil* (Useful Art), which assigns to art a generative and problem-solving role:

> '*Useful Art* is a way of working with aesthetic experiences that focus on the implementation of art in society where art's function is no longer to be a space for 'signalling' problems, but the place from which to create the proposal and implementation of possible solutions. We should go back to the times when art was not something to look at in awe, but something to generate from. If it is political art, it deals with the consequences, if it deals with the consequences, I think it has to be useful art.'
>
> (Bruguera, 2011, n.p.)

Dangers of instrumentalisation

In becoming 'useful', however, artists risk subjecting their practice to instrumentalisation through the implicit and explicit agendas of commissioning and funding bodies (Bishop, 2012). It is important to note, in Bruguera's case, that art is proposed as a generative tool – a way to create space from which to make collaborative solutions that emerge as part of the artistic process. Arts advocates sail close to the wind when they find themselves justifying arts spending by promoting, for example, art's capacity to engage 'hard-to-reach' groups or stimulate economic growth and urban 'renewal'

(Belfiore, 2002, p. 104). Once art is discussed in terms of usefulness it becomes necessary to ask whose interests are served, and how. Caught between aesthetics on the one hand and utility on the other, socially-engaged artists are left to ask what kind of practice most closely reflects both the interests of participants and the aspirations of artistic practice, as opposed to social provision, governance, or activism.

Helix Arts, in NE England, developed a five-point critical framework for what they call 'dialogical participatory art' that goes some way towards reconciling the above questions – proposing a model that incorporates both a participatory, co-productive approach and an attention to the (positive) disruptive potential of art operating at multiple concurrent registers:

> "Dialogic participatory art:
>
> 1 enables people to explore what is meaningful to them
> 2 is creative, challenging and potentially disruptive
> 3 understands that our identities are the stories we tell ourselves about ourselves
> 4 is situated within, and has a deep understanding of, particular contexts
> 5 is a shared process of creative enquiry and learning between artists and participants"
>
> (Lowe, 2012, pp. 6–7)

New ways of working: intersections of art and resilience in practice

As indicated above, two major shifts have driven social enquiry in the arts: first, the move from dedicated spaces such as museums and galleries to a wider social context, and second, the emergence of dialogic and participatory responses to issues of power and visibility made visible by that move. This demands also a shift in the role of the artist, from creating artefacts to making interventions which open spaces of possibility and unfamiliar dynamics. This is a shift affected with varying degrees of success and commitment – perhaps expressed in its most ideal form in the concept of 'social sculpture': Beuys casts society in its entirety as a single, evolving, and collective artwork, in which all individuals participate as artists who can intervene at will in the process of creation. In *7,000 Oak Trees: City Forestation Instead of City Administration* (1982), for example, Beuys took advantage of a commission from the Dokumenta festival in Kassel to catalyse a large scale social project with a significant environmental legacy for the city (Körner and Bellin-Harder, 2009). Delivering a pile of granite stones to the site, he specified that each stone could be removed only to a new location within the city, where an oak was to be planted beside it. The

work replaced traditional conceptions of sculpture with a direct intervention into everyday life. This blurring of the life/art boundary set the scene for a new emphasis in contemporary art practice: "Couldn't everyone's life become a work of art? Why should the lamp or house be an object, but not our life?" (Foucault, 1991, p. 350).

The rationale of art as intervention attempts to enact tangible, practical effects in ways that also articulate a cultural shift – to suggest new ways of seeing or doing and the possibility of engaging in transformative ways with the social sphere. In the work *"Palas por pistolas"* (2008), for example, Pedro Reyes coordinated a project in Culiacán, Mexico – a city with an extremely high rate of gun deaths. Voluntary donations of weapons were collected in exchange for domestic appliances. The 1,527 weapons were crushed in a symbolic public event, and the metal converted into an identical number of shovels, which were distributed through schools and art institutions, inviting people to plant 1,527 trees to combat deforestation in Mexico (Weintraub, 2012, pp. 259–264). Individual participation at different stages of the project built up incrementally to create a powerful, collectively enacted metaphor for the possibility of fundamental social change.

While projects such as these, at a grand scale, attempt to evoke a participatory transformative potential within the social realm, they also cast the artist in an orchestrating role. The enabling aspirations of socially-engaged art often exist in tension with an implicit hierarchy in which artists reproduce existing social stratification. One challenge for socially-engaged artists, then is to find new ways of working which acknowledge and disrupt these dynamics.

Though these questions remain unresolved and ongoing challenges for any kind of practice that engages with the social world, participatory art differs substantially in aims and conceptual frameworks from social-scientific research. Furthermore, it offers a different array of methodological approaches – one that deserves further examination. One such characteristic is the ability of art to resonate simultaneously at different registers – combining immediately practical effect with other modes of cultural meaning and knowledge-making.

In the following section, we look at further examples from our own and other artists' work, and propose three characteristics of socially-engaged artistic process that speak to current concerns around resilience and community engagement: embracing uncertainty, expanded frames of reference, and creative language.

Embracing uncertainty

In the field of risk reduction and management, uncertainty may feature principally as an obstacle to effective analysis, and a complication in planning and mitigation (see for instance Apel et al., 2004). In contemporary

art practice, however, uncertainty is not only integral to the working process, but a guiding principle, shaping the vectors of artistic enquiry. The artist working at the productive margin of their field does not usually work towards a predetermined result. Art practice is instead a process of devising strategies for working productively with uncertainty. This is particularly true of a concept-led or process-led art practice, such as socially-engaged art, in which the selection of media, technique, and methods respond to specific contexts where unfamiliar challenges give shape to the work. This is a process that often involves letting go of prior expectations and learning from accident, contingency, and unexpected encounter. Finding ways to relate to uncertainty as a generative field of possibility, and to operate comfortably and creatively within this field, is a form of resilient practice which has application at a practical level in situations such as extreme weather, where the destabilising effects of traumatic events present both challenges and opportunities for affected communities (Whittle et al., 2010).

Francis Alys' *When Faith Moves Mountains* (2002) was conceived in response to a climate of uncertainty in Peru following the collapse of the Fujimori government. Alys invited 500 students to work together to displace a sand dune by a few centimetres, in an epic choreographed shovelling event. Here the stated aim – to move the dune – was in fact a method used to bring about a transformative social encounter, and restore a sense of faith in the possibilities of collective action. In the words of one participant: "the people who took part felt totally involved and the fact that it took on such a huge dimension will generate one story after another which will be passed on like an oral tradition" (*When Faith Moves Mountains (the making of)*, 2002).

This approach can also work at more intimate scales to draw out and amplify existing currents within a community. In *Unconscious Power: the Act of Collective Creativity* (2014; see Figure 13.1) Seila Fernández Arconada worked with local residents and artists in Tongjianju – one of the last low-rise neighbourhoods in Chonqging, China, which originated as social housing and today faces rapid clearance and development. In this officially neglected public space, the abundant discarded material is reimagined and reused in different ways. The project explored the role of creativity, inspired by the creative practices of residents who generate artefacts and extravagant installations from found materials, incorporating them into the aesthetic and practical dimensions of their everyday lives.

Informal conversations and organised workshops with residents, alongside a collaborative public exhibition and event, avoided talking about art, and instead focussed on the transformative role of creative practice within daily lived experience. The project also brought a new attention to practices that otherwise went unremarked, and led to the establishment of *T1*, a creative platform working in Tongjianju to generate a longer-term legacy of the project within the local community.



Figure 13.1 Unconscious power, the act of collective creativity.
Source: Seila Fernandez Arconada in Tongjianju, China, 2014.

Expanded frames of reference

Creative practice encourages an appreciation of lateral, tangential and incidental processes that are often undervalued in rationalist frameworks. Although artistic experimentation may follow rigorously applied procedures, the intention is often to unsettle familiar conventions and to arrive at unexpected results. In a participatory art process, exploring the familiar from unfamiliar angles can offer participants an opportunity to understand themselves and the world in new ways (Lowe, 2012).

A related, though separate, dimension of socially-engaged practice is that artists frequently move between social contexts, and bring into contact worlds that would normally remain apart. Participatory art affords opportunities to encounter unfamiliar outlooks, and so offers expanded frames of reference through which to understand familiar experiences.

Finally, this aspect of creative practice can be a way of opening space for voices and narratives that are otherwise less heard. This goes some way to addressing issues of power and visibility, firstly by generating opportunities for those voices to become more audible, and secondly by opening spaces for communities to imagine themselves and the world differently. Clarissa Hayward, in '*De-Facing Power*' (2000, p. 39), writes that political freedom is 'the capacity to participate in shaping the limits that define what is socially possible.' Where that capacity is unequally distributed, socially-engaged art may be one way of beginning to redress the imbalance.

These possibilities are explored in Jeremy Deller's The Battle of Orgreave (2002) – the re-enactment of a historical confrontation between picketers and police that took place near the Orgreave coking plant in 1984 (The Battle of Orgreave, 2002). Deller worked with professional historic re-enactors, alongside non-professional participants who had been involved in the original conflict, from both sides of the picket lines. Here the role of the artist was not to produce an object or representation, but to frame a new kind of encounter (Thompson, 2012, p. 17). By bringing people together to revisit their past experiences and evolving sense of community identity through a creative encounter with others' stories, Deller offered an expanded frame of reference for understanding traumatic events and their ongoing effects in a divided community.

Creative language

Creative process operates as an expanded form of language, in that it enables us to process ideas and events, and to communicate about them, through embodied, material, and experiential registers alongside symbolic and cognitive dimensions. By providing multiple parallel lines of approach, art can help facilitate and enhance dialogue, rather than shutting it down. This has application not only regarding addressing traumatic events, but also to collaboration across disciplines and fields of experience or expertise, including between science and art.

Art and the sciences have a long-shared history as research methodologies (Hesse-Honegger, 2001). Specialisation within the academies has increasingly separated them, but while disciplines clearly employ methodologies to support particular objectives, this chapter rejects traditional binaries of objectivity (attributed to science) and subjectivity (attributed to art). The challenges of thriving in an uncertain world are as much cultural as technical, and there is much to be said for cultivating approaches that reconcile these frames of response.

In *The Land of the Summer People* (2014 – ongoing; Figure 13.2) Seila Fernández Arconada works with Professor Thorsten Wagener at the University of Bristol, UK. The project explores the unstable relationships between human-beings, water and place by exploring flood impact in Somerset, England. Exploring methodologies of both art and scientific disciplines, the project aims to generate new ways of understanding research and disciplinary language, as each discipline generates its own terminology that can isolate and detach it from common discourse. Through a series of workshops, invited artists and student engineers have been gradually taken out of their respective comfort zones, combining their various skills and expertise to engage with each other and with flood-affected communities in Somerset. Creative process became a means of connecting and developing expanded frames of reference for researchers, artists, and residents engaging in different ways with the floods.



Figure 13.2 The land of the summer people.
Source: Seila Fernandez Arconada in the Somerset Moors and Levels, 2014.

Artistic responses to social and environmental concerns can also take effect in practical ways. *HighWaterLine* began as a solo performance in which artist Eve Mosher walked the 200-year flood risk contours in her native New York with an ambulatory chalk marker (Nadir, 2015). After Hurricane Sandy faithfully replicated the artist's original chalk line, the work was reinvented as a community-based project that could be realised in different cities, in order to engage more meaningfully with communities at risk of flooding. The authors of this chapter became involved as community members when *HighWaterLine* was initiated in Bristol in 2014 (HighWaterLine, n.d.). The project avoided relying on 'obvious' partners and worked to build a broad and autonomous group – the process of planning and negotiating became a primary component of the work. The ensuing encounters and relationships have had multiple spin-off effects – for example an initiative to 'sunlight' a culverted stream in Greville Smyth Park and create a soft flood-management scheme, which – despite lack of funding and difficulties engaging local government support – has persisted thanks to the continuing efforts of residents inspired by the project.

Art practice can often have immediate practical and political effects – Beuys, for example, had an influential role in the emergence of environmental politics in Germany, establishing the Free International University for Creativity and Interdisciplinary Research (1973) and founding the German Green Party. Together, the three characteristics we have here outlined – *embracing uncertainty, expanded frames of reference* and *creative*

language – offer a different way of thinking about both community and resilience when working in a socially-engaged setting. What is at stake in all the examples above is a redistribution in relations of power – situating the conditions of possibility for resilience in the different ways people can come together to understand both trauma and opportunity in new ways, and to imagine and demand a different world. In the following section, we look again at the role of these three concepts as expressed in a brief case study of our own joint work, and discuss some of the practical considerations we encountered, in attempting to enact them in practice.

Some: when – a brief case study

Many of the themes discussed in this chapter are illustrated in the authors' ongoing collaborative project *Some:when – celebrating cohesion through the watery heritage of the Somerset Moors and Levels*. Initiated by the artists in response to severe flooding in Somerset, England, in the winter of 2013–14, *Some:when* is based mainly in the vicinity of Langport, on the River Parrett. The process so far has involved a series of workshops (see Figure 13.3), encounters, journeys and public events centred around



Figure 13.3 Some: when Project, 2014–5 Students at Curry Mallet CofE Primary School, Somerset, making collages from reclaimed plastic bags and wrappers as part of a workshop exploring Somerset's watery pasts and futures.

Source: Seila Fernandez Arconada.

the construction of a Somerset 'flatner': a traditional flat-bottomed boat. This working craft was built for use on the region's numerous waterways, but also features conspicuously in the photographic record and community memory as a mode of transport in times of flood (Seaton, 2013; Smylie, 2012) – celebrated as a practical and affordable solution for navigating life in a changeable environment. The boat was chosen as a focal point for the project to highlight the centrality of both water and human ingenuity in shaping the history of life on the levels, and to evoke the past resilience of local communities in relation to present uncertainty.

Recent flooding has raised significant controversy around questions of how water can and should be managed in Somerset (Bates, 2014; British Broadcasting Corporation, 2014). The gestural and short-term political responses exacerbated controversy while doing little to resolve the questions. Flooding was framed as an exceptional traumatic event, with little attention to what flooding revealed about longer term problematic relationships. The *Some:when* project was conceived as a counter to this kind of reactive approach, which reinforces a particular model of resilience – based on resistance to crisis events rather than substantive change and adaptation to meet future challenges. We were struck by the discrepancy between public representation of the issues, and the kind of active discussion we saw taking place among community networks, both on the ground and through social media (see for example Flooding on the Levels Action Group, n.d.). Noting the inadequacy of top-down approaches to negotiating how we live in and with this changeable landscape, we began to draw connections to the longer history of flooding on the Moors and Levels, and ask how routes to resilience could be found in a deep and sustained relationship to landscape.

With *Some: when* we hoped to offer a new way of working with these questions, and an affirmative framework to counter the reductive presentation of public discourse. As a creative language, this framework offered a different way of bringing people together to address a potentially divisive theme. It was also chosen to suggest another frame of reference for thinking about flooding – embracing uncertainty as a generative force in the cultural history of the region, and in the development of the specific art project. Importantly, this way of working brought together a range of people to extend these ideas beyond our original concept as initiating artists. The flatner was built by hand in Langport using a mix of reclaimed and new materials (as well as skill and expertise) sourced variously from participants and local benefactors. The processes of negotiation, collaboration and celebration that accompanied the making of the boat were used to open space for conversations and encounters that approached difficult issues – flood management, land use, climate change and community politics – in a new way.

Our evocation of past resilience provided a starting point for participants to develop and share new frames of reference. At times this framing became simply an opportunity to engage with local heritage, while others seized the inspiration to imagine possible responses to current and future

challenges. Providing a framework that people could relate to from different standpoints was also a playful way of bringing people together who might otherwise have been already divided along habitual lines determined by existing interests and agendas. Artistic practice was used as a different way in to looking at complex dynamics of power, access and privilege which shape responses to these issues, and to support a lively and constructive dynamic across habitual divisions. That this was realised to some degree was affirmed for us by participants, who noted as an achievement that *Some:when* events were attended by groups and individuals not normally seen together.

The project also connected with, and was shaped by, active currents within the local community. The creative space opened around the process of making the boat brought new energy and inspiration for groups such as the River Users' Group and Transition Town Movement. Dependence upon the good will and involvement of community members helped shape the project to suit participant's desires and interests. For example, a procession which carried the boat from the historic wharf to the town hall was intended partly to highlight issues of restricted access to the river, which is managed by the Environment Agency with minimal involvement of residents (see Figure 13.4). Without further research on the role of *Some: when* in contributing to broader social and political processes that took place at the time, we would avoid making claims for the direct effects of the project



Figure 13.4 Some: when project – procession along Bow Street, Langport, 2015.
Source: Some: when project, anonymous workshop participant.

at this stage. One place we might start such an enquiry, however, is with participants of *Some: when* who, towards the end of the project, acted to diversify local government by collectively standing as candidates and so forcing an election. This could be a interesting study, but would require the kind of long-term, qualitative follow-up for which provision is lamentably rare in art funding, as in research.

Adopting uncertainty as a principal, and developing the project through dialogical process with participants, offered a different kind of imaginative space for political engagement which we saw people take up in their own lives. Importantly for the question of assessing resilience impacts, our way of working was embedded within existing contexts and was taken up by participants in relation to their own aspirations and concerns. We did not seek to maintain ownership of project outcomes, but attended instead to the integrity of our own authorial voices, as participants within a dynamic relationship.

The funding structure of the project became a factor in different ways, which both helped and hindered our attempts to contribute meaningfully to local communities. *Some:when* began in 2014 as an independent initiative rooted in our shared long-term interest in the area – not, as is usually the case, in response to a formalised artist opportunity. The project was funded initially by a small grant from the Somerset Community Foundation – later extended through crowdfunding and small business donations – and relied to a great extent on the active hospitality and participation of local residents.

Material concerns such as sourcing space, tools and materials for construction marked both the strengths and weaknesses of the project. The shared hunt for practical solutions became an immediate way for participants to take ownership from the start and facilitated the kind of dialogical relationship we have described above. At the same time, this framework raised the risk of placing a strain upon local resources which – though freely shared – we, as the artists, were not suitably placed to evaluate against any possible contribution or benefits of the project.

Finally, funding has been a significant constraint on the scope of the project – *Some: when* continues to have a gallery presence, but at the time of writing this is somewhat removed from the original community context, and it has been difficult to return to Langport to initiate a new stage for the work. Concerns that are briefly addressed in an art or research context often remain present and dynamic for the communities involved, after funding for artists or researchers has run out (Belfiore, 2002, p. 97). This is well articulated in the informal feedback we have received from participants, for example Annie Shillabeer, a youth worker very actively involved in the project, who described: "the joy of seeing the finished boat on the river and everyone's happiness, and thinking: 'this is just the start'" (see Figure 13.5).



Figure 13.5 Some: when project – launching the flatner on the River Parrett.
Source: Simon Lee Dicker.

Conclusion

In this chapter, we have asked how insights from the theory and practice of socially engaged art can contribute to a wider understanding of resilience in the social sciences and beyond. We have looked at the frameworks that socially-engaged art offers, for thinking about the resilience of communities, and about how resilience might be supported through dialogic exchange and collaboration.

We have observed that resilience as a concept has multiple readings and applications, and suggested that a transformative approach is necessary, if resilience thinking is to avoid either replicating or obscuring the influence of structural disadvantage on the relative vulnerability of particular communities. Drawing on our own work and that of other socially-engaged artists, we have shown that transformative approaches can be entwined with immediate and practical outcomes through the capacity of art to work simultaneously at multiple registers.

We have discussed some of the ways in which artistic practice, in particular, offers new skills for engaging productively with uncertainty, generating expanded frames of reference, and building meaningful relations across perceived boundaries. We have shown that artistic practice offers routes to both greater cohesion and critical engagement when working with communities to promote greater resilience.

Finally, we have discussed some of the barriers to working productively in community settings, noting that the limitations of current funding schemes may restrict both the long-term meaningful contribution of socially-engaged art projects to the resilience of communities, and the capacity to evaluate and assess their impact to inform future policy. If we are to develop models of practice which meaningfully support community resilience, then, we suggest two things are important. On the one hand, supporting longer term involvement and follow-up evaluation on the part of artists and researchers, and on the other, finding ways of ensuring that short-term involvement facilitates and enables autonomous longer-term initiatives or sustainable afterlives within local community contexts.

While we find little value in uncritical treatments of socially-engaged art as a panacea for social problems or a tool for effecting community 'improvement', we conclude that that socially-engaged art does offer significant methodological and theoretical insights to the project of supporting community resilience, not least because of a long history of critical engagement with the challenges of working meaningfully in community settings.

Notes

1 A version of this chapter was first presented at the conference 'Resilience – Just Do It?', at the University of Groningen, 9 and 10 October 2014).
2 When discussing co-production and socially-engaged practice, it is difficult to avoid using the word 'community', despite its shortcomings. We have therefore tried instead to avoid the definite article and the unqualified singular form of the word; the implication being that we see community as always porous, fluid and contradictory rather than fixed and discrete.

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