

The Fermenting Room (return of the rhizome) Plot 16 Residency - Art in Rose Hill

brook & black

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Location: Modern Art Oxford and Rose Hill, Oxford

Summary

The Fermenting Room was an off-site, temporary public art work commissioned by Modern Art Oxford (MAO) for the *Art in Rose Hill* Programme - a series of artist-led works that took place over four years in Rose Hill, Oxford. Over a period of two years, artists-in-residence *brook & black* developed a work that negotiated both sites. This activity resulted in a large-scale sculpture, a limited edition beer, an artists' newspaper and several events at MAO and the Allotments which attempted to embrace diverse communities and to strengthen the overarching premise of the commission.

Overview

Organised by MAO, *Art in Rose Hill* was launched as a pilot project in 2007 with funding from the Paul Hamlyn Foundation (PHF). Its aim was to increase opportunities to engage with the contemporary visual arts located on the Rose Hill housing estate in Oxford and to make tangible links between Rose Hill and MAO with its international exhibitions programme. It was funded until 2011 with a further major 3-year project grant from PHF and additional project support from Oxford City Council's Area Committee Community Fund. The artist commission programme was curated by Sarah Mossop (Head of Learning & Partnerships, MAO) with project management by Erica Burton and Natasha Vicars.

The programme commissioned a series of temporary, on-site (Rose Hill, Oxford) works. These were by artists: Katy Beinart – *The Alternative Bus Tour* and *Street Lights* (with Jo Huyg); Maria Pask – *Deja Vu*; James Capper – *Ripper Teeth in Action*; and Sarah Kenchington – *Sound House*. In addition, the artist Jon Lockhart was commissioned to lead art activities for fathers and their children at Rose Hill and Littlemore Children's Centre. The final commission was with *brook & black*, a collaborative arts partnership, who were appointed to work over a two year period as artists-in-residence at Rose Hill Allotments, Oxford.

Background/context

Oxford is the second fastest growing city in the UK and Rose Hill¹ is a large housing estate, in one of the city's most deprived areas. A major regeneration scheme is currently taking place on Rose Hill involving Oxford City Council and Oxford Citizens' Housing Association, with the construction of 254 new homes. MAO is the largest gallery devoted to modern and contemporary art in South East England. Founded in 1965, the gallery has a national and international reputation for the quality of its exhibitions and its accompanying community and education programme. The key aim of *Art in Rose Hill* was to facilitate a dialogue about

contemporary art practice where one would probably not otherwise have taken place. This commission was to take place on the allotments - a site comprising of eighty eight plots over 6.7 acres, situated between Rose Hill and Iffley Village. These allotments host a diverse and eclectic community of gardeners from sixteen different countries.

The Process

Responding to an Artists' Brief through an advertised tender period, brook & black were appointed in January 2010. The Brief stated that MAO was looking for a local artist *'to work with them on their allotment'* and that, in addition, the artist would need to *'realise activities with a horticultural/artistic theme, grow vegetables, facilitate public event days, participate in Allotment Association meetings and events, engage with local residents through the work and provide opportunities for the staff of MAO to engage with the work'*.

The artists undertook a research period, which was extended from one month to three at the artists' request. brook & black visited sites and buildings of similar design and use to both the allotment and the gallery (originally a brewery in the 1800s), talked to local people and walked the site. They then proposed a 30ft long, 25ft high sculptural work which would follow the architectural form of MAO and be planted with hops around its base, that would grow to cover the frame and (hopefully) result in a beer. After concept design presentations and an extended conversation with both the Curator and Gallery Director, Michael Stanley, the Brief was revised to last eighteen months, for which additional funding was sought. The artists wished to develop more meaningful relationships with the allotment holders and to build a more ambitious work. More consideration and time were needed in order to achieve this.

In order to bring the different strands of the project together, the artists were concurrently working in their studios; drawing and making maquettes; working on the allotment land with the gallery, its staff, the engineers and the brewers; and working with the allotment community. Project Management was an essential ingredient, both in order to support links between all parties, to provide real links between sites, and also to manage the day-to-day organisation and the press and publicity. This work was nudged forward and shaped by the seasons: activity in the spring as plant growth took hold; the autumn harvest, bottling and preparation; and the clearing work during winter and planning for the year ahead.

The Work

Over the two-year residency the artists also made a number of smaller works or elements as part of the whole commission:

- An artists' newspaper disseminated regionally by MAO (Autumn 2010);
- A limited edition beer, reviewed by Campaign for Real Ale and *Art Review* (Winter 2010);
- The sculpture: design, fabrication and installation (Spring 2011);
- A time-lapse video documenting the hops overtaking the sculpture (Spring – September 2011);
- Iain Sinclair (author, psychogeographer) delivered a public talk in response to the work (MAO, July 2011);
- Launch event with poetry, music and dancing (September 2011);
- Artists' forum devised by brook & black with curators Frances Lord and Sophie Hope (October 2011);
- A community engagement and consultation programme.

The Budget

The original budget was £2,000, to include materials and artists' fee. As the project grew, this increased through negotiation and additional grant allocation was requested from the funders as the project moved into a second year. These negotiations resulted in a total artists' fee of £3,000 and the materials budget was increased to £8,000, resulting in a total project budget of £11,000. Some of this expenditure was offset by the sale of the Plot 16 Limited Edition beer in the MAO Cafe.

Feedback

Much work is undertaken by contemporary practitioners to mediate between different communities, to make work that is site responsive or has at its heart the transformative, unpredictability of growth. This project embraced many of these considerations. However, to make work on an allotment over nearly two years is to become part of that small band of people who are plotting, planting and looking up to nod or wave as a wheelbarrow is trundled past. It was both an intimate task, charting the frustrations and anxieties of whether things will grow as you hope, but more importantly here, it was handling the building of an artwork on a site that is essentially for growing and the good of all. Allotments are not-for-profit, they are for providing food and for sharing tasks and time. Art is often at odds with this implied democracy; more ferocious, with audiences often not generous with their time. But here, on the allotment, the sculpture seemed plausible, perhaps as it had visual references to a greenhouse; open, with a see-through frame structure. Similarly, the growing of hops for beer making was understood, and as a bottled object it mediated different publics and consumers with coverage both in *Art Review* (March 2011) and *The Oxford Drinker* (November 2011). Onsite building frame workshops, hosted visits as part of 'Open Doors' (an Oxford Preservation Trust annual event), beer launches at MAO, and the artists partaking in Spring and Autumn village hall allotment parties - these occasions of face-to-face contact meant that real relationships and friendships were forged over the imponderables of management and manure, beer and art.

Key Issues

Off-site Projects

The fact that there was an artists' Research & Development period enabled the artists to better understand the complexities and opportunities which the off-site residency afforded for all. The opportunity to discuss the extension of the artists' Brief with the Curator and the Gallery Director resulted in a more open and discursive relationship between the artists and the MAO staff, leading to a more ambitious project.

Project Management

Project management was in place throughout the duration of the *Plot 16* residency to address the requirements of Allotment Association Rules and Regulations, Health and Safety for public engagement participants, funding requirements, audience monitoring, the budget, and undertaking the press and publicity. This meant that the artists' time was exclusively allocated in order to maximise contact with the community and focus on the work being made.

Artist Development

When the off-site project was concluded, the invitation by MAO for the artists to take up a further period of work in the MAO Project Space was pivotal for them. This 'after-care' provided by the Gallery enabled the artists to extract and maximise some of the thoughts that were too embedded during the project itself. It enabled the artists to consolidate their responses to the residency, to make new work and to be part of 'Cultivation Field', a research symposium and exhibition at Reading University.

Conclusion

Plot 16 led to a greater public focus on, and enthusiasm for, the allotment, which helped support additional funding awards providing new equipment and the painting of the Big Shed by Oxford Brookes Students. In 2012, the Rose Hill allotments won the Alderman Knight Shield for the best kept allotment site 2012, a competition run jointly by the Oxford and District Federation of Allotment Associations and the City Council Parks Department.

The elements of this project which are invaluable to contemporary art practice are: giving artists the time and space to take risks; being prepared to reconsider the 'delivery of a project'; and running a timeline without all the markers known. The imagination has freedom to create surprising connections, associations that dissolve the idea of an end date.

New Writings, New Imaginings

As with many works, commissioned as either temporary or permanent pieces, when they are no longer where they were first located, we can wonder at their transition from presence to absence. The traces or references are often only to be found in critical reviews, catalogues and publicity, which in themselves are very often devoid of additional imaginative space. However, two works written in response to *The Fermenting Room (return of the rhizome)* residency expand the field of imagination. On completion of the project, Dr Tracey Warr, whose practice is based on writing with artists as opposed to writing about them, was commissioned to write a text. This was done after visiting the work on-site and after holding a conversation with the artists. Taking a different approach, this time purely responding to the project images and conversations with the artists, Professor Jane Rendell has written a text that enables us to navigate another hop-filled time and place. These texts have their own place, generate their own intrigue, and offer new ways of considering art criticism and/or art writing.

We are deeply grateful to Sarah Mossop for her insightful Introduction text, and to Dr Tracey Warr and Professor Jane Rendell for their poetic contributions the project.

Web links

brook & black at: <http://www.axisweb.org/>

brook & black project video at: <http://vimeo.com/58251828>

'Cultivation Field' Symposium and exhibition at: www.cultivationfield.org/about

Modern Art Oxford (MAO): <http://www.modernartoxford.org.uk/whats-on/the-fermenting-room-return-of-the-rhizome/about/>

ⁱ *A Regeneration Framework for Oxford to 2026*, Oxford City Council, 2009