



The Locus+ Archive

A potted history of The Basement Group, Projects UK and Locus+
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From Another Time, Place and Context
Peter Davies

The alternative drive in the visual arts in north-east England has consistently come from disenfranchised penniless artists and curators/activators, usually recent graduates from the three Tyne and Wear universities.

As Visual Arts Officer for Northern Arts (1974–93), the then regional arts association for the northern region, it was evident to me we occupied a changing landscape. The heavy industrial base of ship-building, coal mining, steel and engineering was largely lost. New technologies dawned. The arts survived on the pressure plates of regional/national policies, structures and funding.

The Victorian art galleries were poor. Whilst new independent art trusts were springing up (Sunderland Arts Centre, LYC, Bede Gallery, The Side, Spectro Arts Workshop), much of the real action was outside the traditional gallery space; north-east England played a significant part in the development and acceptance of non-gallery- based artists' practice and projects. This can be seen in everything from the influence of Grizedale artists working along the river corridors to the 1980s planning departments addressing urban regeneration with the Gateshead sculpture programme; Bottle of Notes (1994), a Claus Oldenburg and Coosje Van Bruggen sculpture in Middlesbrough; Art on the Metro; C2C, the Sustrans Whitehaven to Sunderland cycle route with its large art commissions; and the Tyne and Wear Development Corporation programmes. It was only later, with the establishment of lottery funds, that a more 'official' platform of art institutions was created, i.e. BALTIC Centre for Contemporary Art, The National Glass Centre and Middlesbrough Institute of Modern Art (MIMA).

Artist's projects, placements and residencies (e.g. Durham Cathedral Artist in Residence) – together with the National Garden Festival, Gateshead, EDGE, and the three Tyne Internationals – led to Newcastle being awarded the UK Year of Visual Arts 1996. Crucial to this alignment was the intermeshing of new forms of artists' support offered by Northern Arts and the rise of artists' organisations and facilities such as Artists Newsletter, artists' studios, Northern Print, Artists Agency now Helix Arts, etc. Newer manifestations are now also evident – in the Waygood Gallery and Studios, Globe Gallery, VANE, the Cohesion Glass Network and Design Newcastle (collective) – as is the powerful presence of the universities and their practice led research and exhibition galleries.

Of central importance during this period was the distinguished lineage of performance, installation, sited and process-based work from the programmes of Ayton Basement, The Basement Group and Projects UK to Locus+. For some 30 years, this Tyneside project- based programme has exerted its influence within this area of practice in the UK.

Ayton Basement, established in 1976 by Keith Frake, Nigel Frost, David Killen, Peter Todd and Margaret Warwick, was a double-barrelled shotgun warehouse space on Newcastle's Quayside – its creative heart beat located not far away in Newcastle Polytechnic. Ayton Basement was Tyneside's first artists' venue for contemporary work in video, film and live performance. It closed in 1978 after promoting a diverse exploratory programme. Three of the remaining members, Nigel Frost, David Killen and Peter Todd then relocated the presentation of work to the basement of Spectro Arts Workshop – a decision which had implications for the future.

The Basement Group, as it was constituted in 1979, was a remarkable collective of six artists: highly talented, like-minded, committed and a good team – or so it proved. I remember the fresh pitch that John Adams, Jon Bewley, Belinda Williams, Ken Gill, Dick Grayson and John Kippin made to Northern Arts. These young artists were facilitating and curating a programme at the same time as pursuing their own practice. UK/international contacts with similar art organisations were established. Imports were used to inform, create and collaborate; exports were used for the dissemination of ideas, new work and projects. With some ten performances a month in the space as well as the group touring their own practice, The Basement at its height was something very special.

The Basement Group's evolution into Projects UK in 1984 created another influential UK model. Again it was brought about through the programme treadmill, the drain of voluntary time and meagre resources. Life/career choices also impacted on the group dynamic. The nature of the programme put more emphasis on sited and temporary works and its delivery changed. Projects UK eventually became office based, with a staff of two, Jon Bewley and Simon Herbert.

Projects UK and later Locus+ created space for Jon Bewley, who is the key figure running through this narrative. Jon is a striker. He leads the line with distinction. The game is about creating chances and realising the resulting opportunities. The performance and track record of Projects UK/Locus+ is second to none.

Locus+'s organisational strengths are its good eye, a clear strategic vision, an innovative artist-empowered programme, a commitment to place, teamwork and loyalty. Simon Herbert, who kept the game going for a time in Projects UK, and presently Jonty Tarbuck, have, both in their different ways made very able, sustained and creative contributions. This consistency and support can also be seen in the board of trustees, with John Kippin (Chair) and John Adams as long standing ex-Basement Group members.

To fast forward the story, Projects UK, which had taken over the mantle from Spectro Arts Workshop, closed in 1992 – it had been too far ahead of its time. Jon Bewley and Simon Herbert guided the tricky transfer period to the establishment of an independent new organisation. Locus+ was created, which can be seen to have undertaken larger, often more ambitious, projects as well as publishing books and artists' multiples. What has been remarkably consistent throughout has been the sureness of touch, the sense of political astuteness and the drive to empower artists. The mission, commitment and quality are all evident in the programme, as is a sense of adventure and ambition. Collaborators are attracted; naturally, good relationships exist with artists. Different audiences, specific communities and a wide range of issues have been continually addressed. The only frustrations tend to be those associated with the challenges presented by bureaucracies.

These I shared and Administration Works (1982) was my challenge to the orthodoxy of

state funding of the arts. I established an alternative arts office in The Basement and became resident. Various actions were taken to address issues, such as Salami Slices of funding, achieved with a chain saw. Decisions were made on a number of natural forces, such as weather, as well as man made systems. I still audit the Annual Accounts. Facilitating artists' projects is a financial and political high wire act. In Locus+'s case one particularly remembers the loss of major projects, notably Richard Wilson's The Joint's Jumping (1996–99) neon-light proposal for the façade of BAL TIC and Damien Hirst's c.120 feet-high Double Helix – for an east quayside site – a salute to genetics at the end of the 20th century.

Over 30 years – what a roll call of artists; what startling performances, events and artworks. Performances; such as Charlie Hooker in Gateshead car park or Alastair MacLennan's 120-hour continuous performance/installation in an old warehouse; sited or temporary work by Mona Hatoum, Stefan Gec, Anya Gallaccio and John Newling; editions by Mark Wallinger, Layla Curtis, etc.; or recent commissions such as Chris Burden's Ghost Ship (2005) and Nathan Coley's Show Home (2003) ... and so on. From the earliest days there was material to be collected. At the core of this was the photographic/film/video documentation associated with an active programme. Alongside this grew the associated ephemera, objects, editions and books of a leading UK/international commissioning agency.

Locus+ realised it had gradually established an important UK research resource. The Locus+ Archive documents issue-based practice in various formats, locations and public contexts by artists ranging from established international 'names' to those at the start of their careers. Its content traces this area of work, the development of the influential Tyneside model, as well as raising various questions about art and multi-disciplinary practice.

This Will Not Happen Without You is a telling title. In institutional terms, it can be read as describing the difficulty of finding adequate support and resources to house, conserve and activate such an archive. While supported by Arts Council England as an organisation, Locus+ additionally wanted to establish a long term higher education partnership. A UK tender for the Locus+ Archive was advertised. It was awarded to the University of Sunderland, where the archive is now located.

This book and exhibition are witness to progress and wider interests in this area. In 2006 the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) funded the University of Sunderland and Locus+ to establish two Collaborative Doctorates to undertake research into non gallery-based practice, which were awarded to Matt Hearn and Michelle Allen. The Universities of Ulster and Sunderland together with Locus+ have also been successful with an AHRC Archive Research Training grant.

Overall, the aims are to make this important archive accessible and to enable evaluation and research into the history of performance, installation, sited and process works it documents. In doing so, the Locus+ Archive will generate its own research-led programme, re-evaluating and re-contextualising ideas and work. Current issue based practice and artists will be engaged, informing new work together with Locus+'s own future.