

**anna harding**

republicart-interview on *interference*

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**raimund minichbauer:** you are the one who developed the idea of *interference* and you curated the project together with ilze black. how did the idea come about and how was the choice and combination of the four projects<sup>1</sup> which form *interference* made?

**anna harding:** i proposed to develop a public sound project called *interference* as part of *republicart*. then, last summer i brought my colleague ilze in to work on this with me. we met various artists and talked about what kind of projects we were interested in, and we ended up deciding that it was not going to be site-specific in the sense of sound-installations, but that it would be more like participation in the sounds of the city - absorbing what is happening and then throwing in something as a response to what is going on. the project is actually uncompromisingly local, and i really like that aspect of it. it is something that a gallery would find impossible to do, because they would be scared that they wouldn't get the audience, or that people wouldn't find it, etc. i think *interference* is very much filling a gap that the art world in london finds impossible to deal with, because it is so preoccupied with corporate image and audience statistics, they would never be able to take on this kind of work. but we also linked up with high profile art institutions like the whitechapel gallery, who listed our events in their brochure, and by this created some awareness of the work within mainstream art culture as well as very local.

if you are doing a project like this, you have got to really work hard on the audience and the participation - that involves huge amounts of work. it is not just about producing the art, it is actually about producing the engagement in the art.

we invited each artist to make a proposal and then discussed with them our opinion in relation to knowledge of the area. (graeme miller's project was already commissioned by the museum of london and artsadmin.) i feel i have some insight into how things work in these communities. i have lived in the area most of the time since 86 and have kids in local schools. i think a lot of knowledge of how communities work has to inform this kind of project. and it is that kind of knowledge that most gallery curators don't really have the expertise in, something that i think is lacking in the art world. i am really interested in - and i've written about this actually - curatorial practice and degrees of specialism required to work with participatory projects. you can't just as a curator think that you can work in local communities without any specialist knowledge. that is really problematic.

**raimund minichbauer:** what topics have you written about?

**anna harding:** i have written since 96/97 on participatory practice and about the aspirations versus the outcomes, the claims versus the reality. i often find that public art projects can be documented in a certain way, which makes them look as if they were extremely effective, but the reality might have been completely different, or: different people's expectations or experiences of the project are so diverse: the artist might have thought it was terrible, but a participant might have thought it was fantastic. there are so many different combinations of good and bad, effective and ineffective. i am very interested in how a project like this involves so many different parties and different perceptions of quality and of success. as a curator i am always interested in the experimental points, where you really question your practice, or you are really testing what your practice can achieve. i always find thinking you can do anything in a local community hugely problematic, because there are so many questions like: what are your motivations here? why are you doing this? who is it for? why do you think you know anything about this? i think it is really important constantly questioning your motives and the material you are generating, and keeping it responsive, and really taking on board the feedback, or really seeking feedback, because i think it is often easier not to know what people thought. actually you don't learn anything unless you really want to know what someone really felt, that they didn't like something, or that it was embarrassing

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<sup>1</sup> *linked, magnetic migration, radio20pwhitechapel, radio cycle*, cf:

<http://www.interference.org.uk/>

or really inspiring. you just need to know those things, i am really seeking feedback, so that the next projects will benefit from such knowledge. it is an ongoing practice. it is not just: this is me, that's my project, move on to the next show. if you choose to engage in a participatory project, you have to have a commitment to learning from it.

**raimund minichbauer:** where does the idea come from - to interfere in the sounds of the city?

**anna harding:** it is not about interference IN sounds but that sounds ARE interference, like a crackle in the air waves. in fact this project was inspired very much by a summer i spent in rotterdam. i was a curator in residence and stayed in an artist-run studio building. one evening i just recorded out of the window of the studio, just the surround sound out of the window, and it was such an amazing, really, really hot night in this heat wave summer. you know, hanging outside on the balcony at night, you hear these incredible sounds coming out of people's windows. like in venice, you suddenly hear someone strike up an opera out of their window and you can't see where it is coming from, but you just hear this amazing sound. i just had this really crisp summernight-sound, and it was just like people's conversation out of their window - i've got the recording somewhere, i was thinking that it maybe inspired this project in a way. summer nights can be really noisy in london, kids play out in the streets really late, and people have their parties, everyone's got their windows open. so i just thought maybe this project could tune in to some of that and give a bit of space to that fantastic quality of sound. that's my personal aspiration, but what we end up with - it is all in development as we speak. it is about what is around you now, what it feels like, expressing that back.

**raimund minichbauer:** *interference* refers generally to east london and focuses on the local area - tower hamlets, bow, south-east hackney -, where one can find e.g. the catchment area of the temporary radio station of *radio cycle* and also the live-presentations of *interference* in the framework of the bow arts festivals will take place. what is the trait of this area?

**anna harding:** south east hackney - a central feature is victoria park and then there is regents canal, on which the community is neighbouring. it is quite a mixed community. there are certain bits, which are very gentrified. there is a lot of money coming in - people who work in canary wharf buying up houses; it is very expensive. there is also a strong old cockney community, which is still very vibrant in bow particularly, but also in south hackney. in addition to those that's a very mixed community, there is a lot of turkish people, there is a lot of somali people, different african communities. bow has a very old chinese community, going back two-three hundred years, greek, kurkish, vietnamese, and then there is a very strong bangladeshi community - further into whitechapel.

**raimund minichbauer:** did the area change a lot through this gentrification process and the people working in canary wharf coming in?

**anna harding:** well, there are different pockets. there is a lot of council housing - the area was bombed heavily during the war, so there are a lot of post-war estates, which are culturally diverse. then there are victorian terraces, which are combinations of housing association rents, which tend to be culturally diverse, and then privately owned homes, which are a mixture of old cockney families and new people, who have money.

i've mainly been promoting our project through the local schools and the community centres. people with money don't tend to use those facilities. so we are really addressing a genuine local public as opposed to people who live here but go to a private school for instance, or people who are out at work all day and don't know what goes on down the street. it addresses people who use *idea store* because there is free internet access. if you go down and see who uses those facilities, it is people who are smart/intelligent, who make the most of free resources and make good use of local facilities.

**raimund minichbauer:** *idea store* is a cooperation partner of *interference*. what kind of facility is it?

**anna harding:** it was opened about 18 months ago. in the borough tower hamlets. they decided that they wanted to create a new generation of library that is more accessible and better used by

the community. they gradually closed down old libraries - to a lot of people's horror. this is the first of a new type of library/cafe/internet-access<sup>2</sup>. it is a landmark new organization, part of new orientations within the council of tower hamlets. the head of the council, michael keith, is professor of urban studies at goldsmiths college. and sergio dogliani, the director of the idea store, comes from a background running an adult education centre; he is very familiar with getting people involved in community activity.

**raimund minichbauer:** the *interference* projects are often connected with schools.

**anna harding:** yes, for example as part of zoe irvine's *magnetic migration music*, we have set up stalls and run them the last couple of weekends at school summer fairs. normally in a school fair, there are stalls where you can play different games. so we just set up our table with bits of old cassette tape, a tape recorder, some cards to hand out, and collecting envelopes, so people come by saying, "well what's your stall?", and we can say: "if you find a tape, send it in." it is all about one to one talking to people. Also *radio20pwhitechapel*: the project demonstrates pilot uses of the uphone system, which gives people the possibility to phone in and have their messages automatically uploaded to the internet. at my request, kate rich has set up a special uphone service, responding to the big problem in hackney with school-places, lots of kids haven't got a place in school next year. there are lots of very angry parents around, so i said: "look, they really need a phone line to get their stories down."

**raimund minichbauer:** what is the environment for *radio cycle* here on the local radio like?

**anna harding:** on the radio very close to our frequency, you've got ghana radio, you've got london greek radio, endless pirate stations, overlapping on the radio dial. so each different community is served by it's own radio station. and this is the question i have for the artists and my co-curator, to define the audience this is for. because to me that is the most important thing that people tune in because this is something they identify with or it represents them. what is the community of this project? or is it generating a week long community, a temporary community? how does that manifest itself? how many people listen in when you are doing on air broadcast? and that i find really a problem in terms of putting out a project without any sense of feedback. you've really got to know. you've got to check down the streets and ask did you listen in? what did you think of it?

**raimund minichbauer:** the projects in *republicart* explore participatory practices mostly on the basis of visual arts and the specificity of *interference* is that it is a sound project. what are your experiences - does sound trigger a different form of participation?

**anna harding:** i would say, it probably does - in the sense that visual art has so many preconceptions associated with it that sound doesn't. for instance, at the launch of graeme miller's project yesterday, the deputy mayor made a speech saying, when they were approached about this art project, they imagined a mural or a banner. that is their preconception of a public art work. they were surprised to find that it was sound, they had never thought of this being art. by working directly through sound you don't have the barrier of saying "is it art," having to overcome the threshold of "what is art?" and "art isn't for me" etc. it is just sound, everyone listens to the radio, everyone makes sound. you don't have to go through the art route, it is much more direct. All those in the project have an art convention behind them, and as a curator my background is also the tradition of visual art. but finding the gallery system sometimes limiting, it can be much more enjoyable working more directly with audiences. you can forget all those hang-ups about going over the threshold into hallowed art space - ok, participation in any project involves ownership and thresholds, opting in or out, but the conversation is much easier, because cassettes, audio tape, radio is an everyday transaction. at the same time, everyone involved is coming out of a fine art practice, as opposed to a musician. i think therefore you've got a specific take on sounds, a conceptual take on what you are trying to do with it, which is quite different from a musician.

**raimund minichbauer:** thank you very much!

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<sup>2</sup> <http://www.ideastore.co.uk/>