

Electronic Village Galleries

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Outline of *Electronic Village Galleries* project for *The Cornwall Workshop* October 2011.

The Cornwall Workshop 2011 was initiated by the independent curator Teresa Gleadowe and developed in collaboration with Tate St Ives under the auspices of the Tate Research Centre: Creative Communities.

Electronic Village Galleries (EVG) is an ongoing project that I've been developing for a couple of years and which builds on work that I've undertaken around emergence of a 'distributed network form' within contemporary art. The project began with a pilot phase funded by Arts Council England which ran during April and May 2011. The project will continue this Autumn with *Extraction:Projection* - curated collections of artists' videos first shown at The Exchange, Penzance as part of the Penzance Convention in May 2012 now set to tour Cornwall in partnership with Electronic Village Galleries.

Given that today, this is just a short presentation outlining the project, I'll focus primarily on the pilot phase. One of the main reasons for setting up Electronic Village Galleries was to produce a framework/platform which provides opportunities for art audiences to engage with international art in dispersed rural contexts. A related aim was to provide a platform or a framework within which arts communities in Cornwall could be supported to host international new media art events in their local village halls.

The project is made up of a number of elements that come together in different ways and different times – at the local events, online, in the catalogue etc. These elements include: art works; curators; hosts; participants; events; archives; documentation; dissemination platforms; encounters; food; dialogues/debates; collaborative interpretation; contemporary art contexts; local contexts and specificity; protocols.

Curators

For the pilot, a number of established and emerging curators working within new media art contexts were invited to put together small collections of art works that were easily portable and which could be installed in a range of rural non-gallery venues.

Hosts

As well, three artists/curators based in Cornwall were invited to each host an event at which some of the curated collections would be shown. It was envisaged that each event would take place in a public venue in a town or village in Cornwall with which the host had an ongoing association.

Venue

Each host was responsible for finding an appropriate venue, selecting which collections they would like to show, deciding on the display of the work, finding ways to foster a convivial environment, providing food and drink and devising some way (appropriate to the particular community) to encourage debate and dialogue around the work.

Events

There were three events: Penryn, Zennor and Liskeard. All of the events were very different to each other – having been framed in relation to specific local communities and contexts. Given the constraints on rural village halls, it was decided early on that the events would last for just a few hours rather than the work being on show for a few days. The curators and the hosts were given the specifications of available kit (computers, projectors, screens etc).

Website/Catalogue

Information about each collection, each artwork and each event was uploaded to the EVG website. It was decided that a catalogue would be produced in a modular format so that the relevant sections could be printed off as required by each host.

Visiting Speakers were invited to talk about and discuss ideas relevant to the work and the events at Penryn and Zennor, and this aspect proved to be very popular with the audience. At Liskeard, the host decided upon a different approach and organized for a number of Cornwall-based artists/curators people to spend some time with the collections –getting to know the work – and then to be available to discuss the work with visitors on a one-to-one basis as required. It was an approach that worked very well at this particular venue.

Documentation

Each event was documented through video and photographs and the material uploaded to the website. In addition, a Cornwall based artist conducted 'vox pops' with participants at each event, and this material is also available on the web site. Thirty people were interviewed – providing a very useful means of evaluating aspects of the project.

Collaborative interpretation of the artworks was an important part of the project and a London-based new media art practitioner and theorist engaged in dialogue with curators, hosts and participants via email about the artworks, collections, events and the project as a whole. This material was also uploaded to the website.

What Was Learnt

The most important thing that emerged from the pilot was - That it is possible to engage local audiences in local events based around 'difficult' contemporary art. I think this was possible because the project is devised around principles of sharing, participation, and discussion. The framework was devised in a way that enabled a series of protocols – rules/instructions – to be followed by all the curators and the hosts. And which will be used for future events. These protocols were mutually agreed by those involved - emerging through dialogue, and in response to whether particular aspects of the project 'felt right' to those involved.

The protocols and the framework which holds together the various elements are sufficiently flexible to enable meaningful re-positioning of the project and its elements at each enactment, at each event.

There were challenges to showing net art. It's a form of art that is not immediately accessible to an audience that is unfamiliar with it's contexts. It doesn't have an immediate aesthetic appeal, and it isn't just conceptual either – it needs to be engaged with. A surprising number of people we interviewed responded positively to the work, and said that they would now go and engage with it online. Many liked viewing the work as part of a collective event rather than at home on the computer. Some people didn't engage so much with the work, nonetheless felt positive about the events themselves and felt that the opportunity for discussion and debate was very useful and enjoyable.

There were technical challenges too. Most of collections were net based (that is, they required live internet connections) and it was very difficult to find venues with internet access. In Penryn – the only venue with dedicated internet access, the wireless wouldn't work and everything had to be connected using cables. In addition, there was a power cut a couple of hours before the event started – but it was resolved in time. At Zennor, there was internet connection and no mobile phone coverage so the whole event focused around the one 'offline' collection that had been devised. At Liskeard, there was no Internet connection but because there was reliable mobile phone coverage, dongles could be used to run the net-based collections.

Managing that many collections with the available equipment was challenging, as was setting up the kit in the time available. Some kit broke. If the project were to continue long term then new ways of managing and delivering the kit to the venues would need to be devised. New Skills specific to the project were developed by everyone involved in curating and hosting, catalogue and website design, catering. If the project expands as planned, then it will be important to work with people in a way that means we all develop our knowledge and skills.

Future Plans

- Devising new programmes of contemporary art (whether initiated by EVG or in partnership with other curators, galleries, arts organisations)
- Disseminating the collections to a wider audience whilst maintaining principles of active engagement.
- Developing new relationships with a range of venues across Cornwall and further afield
- Contributing to the development of artists and curators through their work with EVG to host events; to develop their skills and gain experience of organising and hosting contemporary art events pertinent to their local communities
- Through the EVG website, contributing to the development of an online community of curators, artists, hosts, audience members, that might act as a catalyst for discussion around contemporary art
- Developing new collaborative, multi-voiced interpretation material
- The development of a wide range of interpretation materials is seen as key to EVG's strategy for the development of new audiences for contemporary art.

- In the context of art galleries and museums, interpretation material is the means by which audiences discover more about a particular work. Such material usually includes wall texts, labels, catalogue texts and video interviews.
- Often it is the gallery curators and the 'institutional voice' that frames the way that art is understood. The idea behind this concept is to enable many different people (artists, curators, audiences) to share their thoughts and ideas about the work and have them recorded and distributed alongside the work itself.
- The range of interpretation material is likely to include electronic press kit segments: 'vox pops' with participants at the event; video recorded talks by internationally recognized artists, curators and contemporary art specialists; interviews with the artists featured in the collection, and with curators who devised collections; edited textual dialogues between artists, curators, hosts, and audience members online and offline.
- Documentation of events, including audience vox pops, will be archived as a valuable online resource and also be used as a starting point for specific audience development events.

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