

The Art of Not Knowing

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It's 1985. A small boy, Paul Colley, is held in the centre of the frame, his limbs repeatedly exercised by adults holding him prone on a table. His limbs are moved in quick rhythms to help him develop 'cross-patterning', a step in the healthy development of a child that most parents never need to know enough about to name.

It's not easy to watch this video document. Any parent would recognise the graze of fear in moments when a scan or test might reveal something 'wrong' with their child's development. That kind of private fear dispels for most, but for children with severe neurological impairments, like Paul and the circle that supports them, a challenging journey, bridging a too-separate world is already underway.

Rather than accepting the limited medical or social response of the time, Paul's parents, artists Kate Adams and Tony Colley, took the unusual step of using video to help child development specialists understand him more fully. "We were recording to monitor change and also to give us a record," Adams says. "The goals were clear and progressive, like recording Paul's exercise routine - designed to head off scoliosis of his spine - to give him greater mobility as he grew up."

When, a few years later, she and the late Jon Cole set up Project Art Works to work with young people with complex needs, this intimate family experience inspired the company's use of video as a creative and documentary tool.

December 2011. Milton Keynes' MK Gallery. Twenty six years on and the small boy in the video is now a mobile man, with a strong screen presence, taking us on a journey. *The Not Knowing of Another* is a four-screen film installation, charting Paul's progress through an industrial building, over a railway bridge and out on to an expansive beach at sunset. The small act of crossing a bridge or walking on a beach opens out into existential reflections on what it can mean to move, to negotiate a step, to come to the liminal space of the sea shore. To see. To respond. To imagine what another sees, beyond the routine of the 'neuro-typical'.

A young woman, perhaps seventeen, comes into the gallery with her younger brother and within a few seconds says, "That's disgusting." She leaves before I have a chance to talk with her, but soon returns with her mother, who says the same, only more forcefully. I ask them to talk with me about what they have seen. Their frustration and annoyance are clear. The mother speaks of how her disabled son is called names on the bus or street. "Putting someone up like that in a video is just exploiting him. It's wrong. People will just be laughing at him. How can his family let him do that?" We look back at the screens. There is a shot of Paul being gently guided over the bridge by Adams. He responds to the sound of a passing train. "There's Mum." I say. "She developed this journey to help understand and bring parts of Paul's life to people like me who don't know enough about it. It's making me stop and think and empathise and hopefully, learn. I'm not laughing at him. If I'm really awake, I think he might be teaching me."



Top: Tony Colley 1985 VHS video still



Above: Kate Adams *The Not Knowing of Another* 2008

Neither answered, but their discomfort was instructive. Even to show this work is painful for some – and sometimes from surprising quarters. Both mother and daughter insisted, "It's not art." The implication was that art could not include the image of people like their son and brother. Visibility to them meant the fear of derision and their attitude reflected a broader cultural exclusion.

Adams' video art intervenes here. It is inter-woven with her commitment to bringing an understanding of Paul's experience to audiences – at times, she says, even to "meld consciousness". Somewhere, competing with refusal and anxiety, is the golden thread of empathy. There is an invitation to see as another sees, to imagine, to look in a way that connects us, rather than reducing us to voyeurs.

Anyone navigating this area needs to be ready to meet fear and taboos, heightened emotion and the relief of seeing truths, long-suppressed, find expression. Why is it seemingly so difficult to see the person as more than the disability and to appreciate artwork which breathes in a place of our mutuality? Project Art Works lives this tension.

Its contribution is significant in developing social critique, but its unique and unfolding contribution to documentary and video art lie in another place: the conceptual strength of the process of collaboration. The video practice of Adams, Cole and Project Art Works' core artists – Tim Corrigan, Sarah Broome and Annis Joslin – has produced a body of different filmic styles. *Sensory Soundings* (2009) filmed by Ben Rivers and Corrigan, features the exploration of space in Fort Brockhurst by long-term studio collaborator, Fred Mazzio and others. Fred's somatic experience of the space and built environment – how it sounds, feels and looks – is punctuated by Corrigan gently holding his hand. But this is Fred's exploration, enabled rather than defined by Corrigan's (or Project Art Works') hands.

Nine other artists have made individual film portraits for *In Transit*, a Project Art Works' series about the transition from education to adult care. Eden Kötting is the subject of a reflective film study by Gideon Koppel, studded with long takes that give a sense of how Eden herself may experience the activity around her. Andrew Kötting's video portrait of Mark Fraser is music-led, with a jaunty style, far

from Koppel's proscenium frames, but shares the centrality of the experience of a person with complex needs. The *In Transit* films offer a richer insight into an individual's character and needs than a paper-based description. In shaping these portraits the artists balance the need for a documentary tool with a film artist's practice.

Some of the video work has evolved into joint projects with pairs of artists, one of whom has complex needs. Project Art Works configures a space where communication can unfold more vividly through live sound and video projections. Many people with severe neurological impairments are non-verbal. For some with restricted movement, the video image is an exciting revelation, giving a live expansion of any moment in the studio – allowing a person to have a more moment by moment, real-time extension of their experience, especially in the process of making art work.

Developing and understanding communication is a tender process on both sides – a process of listening, giving attention and learning to respond to what can be understood or intuited. As Paul Shephard says: "We talk of the predicament that society has in relating to special people but there's a counter-predicament in how special people experience society."¹

Documentation as a research tool remains central to Project Art Works' practice. Every Tuesday morning for a year, the team filmed participants with complex needs for ten minutes. They were filmed in the same order each week, whatever they were doing. The results of this partnership with the Hastings and Rother NHS Partnership Trust Challenging Needs Service and a clinical psychologist were then analysed to monitor any changes that individuals may experience over a year of participation in the workshops.

Several of Project Art Works' events and videos emerge from a determination to make collaboration meaningful and to feature the process of production as an experimental space for a new kind of visibility. In a recent seminar, a live video-link featured pairs of artists collaborating on new work – one artist with severe neurological impairments and one without. Seminar participants visited the Project Art Works studio and the process of collaboration was projected as a backdrop to discussions. The gallery was thus re-configured



MK Gallery collaboration 2011
Video still

as a new site in which to showcase a process – a more ethical process in that the person with complex needs is newly and radically central.

Conceptually this work resonates with Phil Collins' Turner Prize exhibit *The Return of The Real* (2006). Collins showcased a video installation describing a critique of the exploitative pressures of 'reality TV', ending the show with a working TV research office, Shady Lane Productions. Project Art Works dares to conceive a yet more open space of production – at best even a redemptive space – where production ethics are foregrounded and discussed, including the honest challenges of how to work with consent when a contributor may not be capable of expressing consent in ways that are recognisable in the norms of documentary ethics.

The emphasis on collaboration and exploration takes us to a unique crossroads of artistic and documentary impulses. More than this, it helps imagine and then gesture towards a new crossroads of neurological diversity, a place that is hard to conceive in a mainstream culture that has yet to reflect substantially on the experience of severe neurological impairment and the art born of it.

"This is not work of certainty," Adams says. "It is a work of doubt and the necessary honesty of self-questioning that allows self-doubt to have its proper place in the process of developing a way of working. What other way can there be but feeling one's way, frame by frame, discovering a response, paying very close attention to it, especially in our context when the individual would have to respond first in order to know how we are co-creating."

The Not Knowing of Another may suggest that 'the other' can never truly be deciphered, but the work also shows that it is possible to intimate another's point of view, approximate their responses, attempt temporary or contingent interpretations or simply let the camera roll. Through these films, mothers and fathers like Adams and Kötting find a way of gesturing life into a video art form. For Kötting, his daughter Eden is a key; "I work with Eden because I can't not work with Eden. Work before her feels very slight."²

Adams' work likewise asks questions of us and what it means to relate to another: to see our humanity reflected in another.

It begs further questions: who is the artist here? How does art emerge through relationship? It pre-supposes an ethics of intention which is to be felt through research and in the work. Instead of seeking to define collaboration, Project Art Works' aspiration is to develop a methodology that can acknowledge the realm of 'not knowing'. It is a place where doubt and tentative, tender exploration unite people in an extended humanism – speaking a language of gesture, inference, intuition and feeling. Ultimately, it is beyond text, words and the sometime comfort that comes from an ability to draw down and define a specified meaning.

Project Art Works' videos are fresh and innovative and at times awkward and uncomfortable. Pioneering, conceptually and aesthetically strong, they may be baffling or intriguing to many mainstream arts organisations. They do not fit neatly into traditions of video art, or even of Outsider Art but instead extend and challenge video language and ways of working – most strikingly in the radical insistence on the artistic value of expression of talented people, whatever their neurology. Their simple presence and assisted self-expression in many works, so clearly foregrounding and uniting ethics and aesthetics, invites the viewer to travel to a new place. "You have to fall in love to do this work," says Tim Corrigan. Looking at the best of it may make you love again.

1 Presentation to seminar at MK Gallery *Extreme Insight into Built Space*, 9 December 2011

2 Q&A at Whitechapel Gallery, 8/3/12

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