

# *Why do social art projects look like participant ethnography?*

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**ASAP Conference 27 – 30 October 2021 - RECIPROCITY**

Panel: Social Media and the Public Sphere

Thursday, October 28, 11:00 AM-1:00 PM EDT

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**Mel Jordan**, Centre for Postdigital Cultures, Coventry University, UK, artist, member of the Partisan Social Club

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# Aim of the paper

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- Due to the rivalries and contestations present in the definition of contemporary art practice we ask how do ethnographers claiming to use art methods, understand the multiplicities of contemporary art research
  - To explore in which ways contemporary art practice resembles participant ethnography
  - To recognise the difference between the terms artistic methods and art practice
  - To reach a better understanding of how contemporary art practice can contribute to ethnographic processes with people
  - To ask if contemporary art can de-assemble and re-assemble the social in ways that conventional ethnographic methods might not be able to achieve
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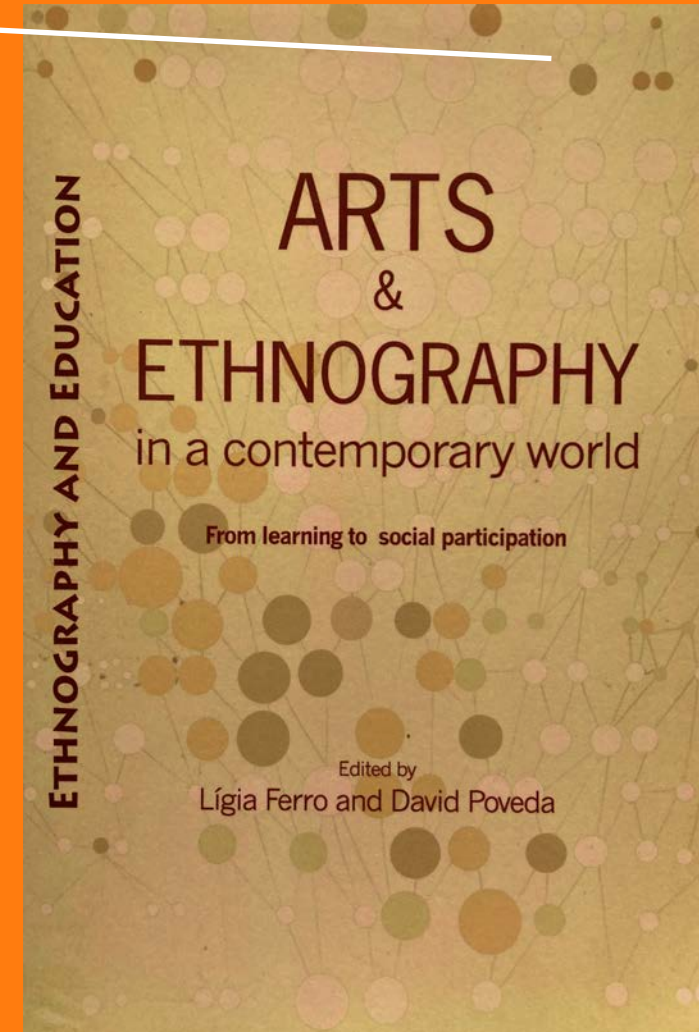
# How we will address the aim of the paper

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- Reflect on our chapter *Misrecognitions in the Practice of Art and Ethnography, Arts and Ethnography in a Contemporary World* (2019)
  - Present an overview of debates in contemporary art practice, in particular social art practice
  - Introduce two art projects by the Partisan Social Club
  - Describe a recent extracurricular project with 12 PhD students entitled *How to talk to the city*, Partisan Social Club, in which we explore art and ethnographic methods and they partake in a meta ethnography to experience using artistic practice to understand their social context
  - Conclusions and reflections
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# Misrecognitions in the Practice of Art and Ethnography

- We revisit the function of anthropology for contemporary art through Hal Foster's seminal essay, 'Artist as Ethnographer?'
- We then examine ways in which artists have collaborated with sociologists in recent UK research projects
- We consider a collaborative project by the Partisan Social Club and the Freee art collective (with the Forum for Democratic Practices)
- We conclude that understanding the antagonistic aspect of each field is an essential part of successful collaborations between disciplines



# Contemporary Art Debates

## 1990- 2000's

### 1960's

Rejection of formal art practices, debates between Painting and Sculpture.

**Dematerialization of the art object** (Lippard 1972)

Conceptual art, Text art, Land art, The body, identity, representation the social function of art.

Artists: Adrian Piper, Merle Laderman Ukeles, Judy Chicago, Robert Smithson.

- **Relational Aesthetics** as described by Bourriaud (1998) identifies artists practices that utilise relational processes. Artists: Felix Torres Garcia, Jens Haaning

- **Social Turn** coined by Bishop (2006), to describe a shift in art practice to include social and political arrangements. Bishop uses Mouffe's theory of agonism to move from the convivial to the antagonistic. Artists: Santiago Sierra

- **The dialogical** – as theorised by Kester (2004), emphasis on conversation and collaboration, community art practice and activism. Artists: Suzane Lacy and Stephen Willets

### 2010 - 2020's

- **Sociopolitical aesthetics:** (Charnley, K: 2021) 'Post- object;' artworks that address political matters through content and methods. Includes practices known as socially engaged art practice, performative practices, site specificity, institutional critique, art activism, artist collectives. Reflects upon what art and politics could be now in the context of neo-liberalism and to include decolonial theories of art and life

Thus social practices are not only 'sociable' encounters, but are critical engagements that produce observations on the world. Artists: Phil Collins, Bouchra Khalili and Forensic Architecture



# Contemporary Art 1960's



From Left to Right:  
 Adrian Piper *Mythic Being*, 1973 – 1975,. Merle Laderman Ukeles,  
 1973 *Hartford Wash: Maintenance Outside*, Judy Chicago, *The  
 Dinner Party*, 1974–79, Robert Smithson, *Spiral Jetty*, 1970,



# Contemporary Art 1990 - 2000's



From Left to Right clockwise:  
 Jens Haaning, *Arabic Joke Posters* 2006, Stephen Willats, *Brentford Towers* 1985, Suzanne Lacy, *The Crystal Quilt* 1987, Santiago Sierra, *160 cm Line Tattooed on 4 People*, 2000 Felix González-Torres' *Untitled (Portrait of Ross in L.A.)*



# Contemporary Art 2010 - 2020's



From Left to Right clockwise: Bouchra Khalili, *The mapping journey*, Phil Collins, *marxism today (prologue)* 2010 HD video installation, Forensic Architecture, *True to scale*, 2020



# Partisan Social Club art projects

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## 1. Art – Study-Action

- Study together rather than co-create - emphasis on re-commoning processes rather than the production of individual artworks
- Turns participants into active members that take over and create meta schemes within the project – explores multiplicities of ways of being together
- Creates multiple responses for artistic production that consider care, commoning and collectivising
- Utilise spaces of the art gallery to develop alternative public spheres – to provoke culture-led re-commoning

# 1. Art – Study-Action



Partisan Social Club, On Being together: membership, collectives and unions, Slogans and Embodiment. Activity and making by members, workshop documentation, 13 September, Partisan Social Club, Beaconsfield Gallery Vauxhall, London, 2018



Partisan Social Club, After Thompson: An Inquiry into the Principles of the Distribution of Wealth Most Conducive to Human Happiness: 'Is This T-shirt Working Hard Enough?' Sadie Edginton & Khaver Idrees, Yukako Tanaka. In this workshop the artists will be exploring the use of t-shirts in displaying printed political text. The artists have devised a set of shapes out of their languages of English and Arabic that people can play with to create text and patterns. We invite you to join us to create printed words. T-shirts will be available, also feel free to bring your own! Friday 15 November. Coventry Biennial, The Row, Coventry UK, 2019

# Partisan Social Club Art projects

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## 2. Social and Public Kiosks

- Puts a non-commercial structure in the public realm, (beyond the art gallery context)
- Proposes new methods for opinion formation via agonistic methods of agree and disagree (Slogan writing, manifesto readings and spoken choirs)
- Focus on the passerby rather than predetermined groups of interest – resists community naming
- Badge making, slogan writing, poster making to declare opinion and to publishing them in public space



## 2. Social and Public Kiosks



Free art collective, Public Kiosk, spoken choir reading of the 'Manifesto for Art', Cardiff With Culture: Visioning the City, g39, Cardiff, September 2016.



Researchers from the Centre for Democratic Practices (CfDP) The University of Northampton with passers-by at the Social Kiosk Market Square Northampton. Interviews were held to ascertain voter patterns on the recent Brexit referendum. Reasons on how people voted and why would then inform the design of the 'Why? Map'. 2016. Photograph Joe Brown.

**Practice – project**

## **Becoming a Public Ethnographer**

Feb – July 2021 Institute of Education, University College London

### **Becoming Public Ethnographers: Aims and Objectives**

Becoming public ethnographers develops knowledge and skills in ethnography

This initiative consists of a series of lectures and workshops aiming to strengthen PhD students' ethnographic voices and get involved in societal debates about social change.

These project fosters different ways of representing knowledge and dialoguing with the multiple publics that our research intends to address.

Main output: development of an ethnographic product (text, performance, installation) enabling us to engage with our publics.



# Study and Re-commoning Culture

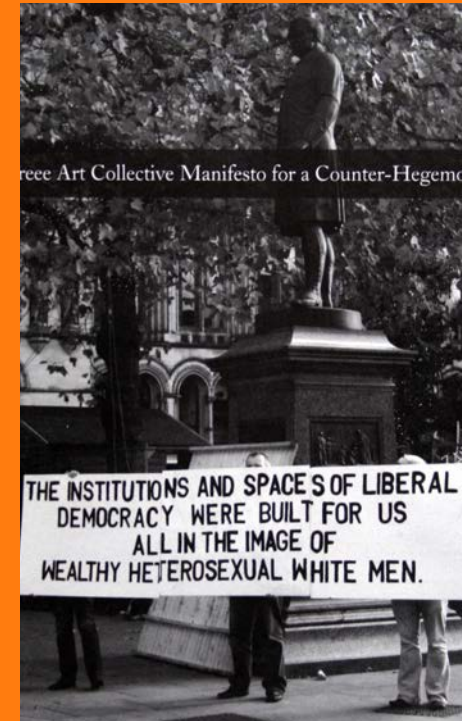
## *How to talk to the city*, Partisan Social Club

### How to talk to the city:

Public interventions and observations in the practice of art and ethnography

#### Aim

The aim of this workshop project is to develop the skills of the group in relation to understanding and participating in ethnographic processes that utilise a creative dimension. The idea is that every member will develop an artwork that engages with the public realm, both in terms of content and presentation. We will use artistic techniques to foster different ways of producing and representing knowledge. We will also experience how it feels to be a subject in an ethnographic process, by sharing our ideas, development and final works with the group.



Free art collective,  
*How to talk to public art*, 2005



Toppling the Statue of Edward Colston,  
Bristol, 2020



# *How to talk to the city*, Partisan Social Club

## Project Aims:

- Make a piece of art work based on issues that matter to you in relation to the city
- 6 days of working together

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| <b>Day 1</b><br>Thurs 20 May<br><br>Aim:<br>Introduction to project | 10.am – 12pm<br>Welcome. Introduction to all members<br>Presentation 1 AH&MJ<br>‘Why do social art projects look like partici-pant ethnography?’<br>Presentation 2 AH&MJ<br>‘Art, Study Action’   | 1pm -3pm<br>Project briefing AH&MJ<br><br>Content: ‘Perspectives on the city’<br>Questions and discussions  |
| <b>Day 2</b><br>Fri 21 May<br><br>Aim:<br>Developing Practice       | 10am – 12pm<br>Presentation 3 AH&MJ<br>‘Misrecognitions in the practice of art and ethnography’<br>Questions and discussion<br><br>Discussion: What is it like working with others, how does it feel being public in the public realm? Exchange expeirences                                   | 1.30pm – 3.30pm<br>Presentation 4 AH & MJ<br>Artistic ways of production – What to make & how to make things? Sites and places<br>Questions and discussions<br><br>Members to present initial ideas |
| <b>Day 3</b><br>Mon 7 June<br><br>Aim:<br>Artistic Techniques       | 10am – 12pm<br>Presentation 5 AH&MJ<br>Health and safety /Ethics<br>Photographs and documentation – all things production / artistic to consider<br><br>Video on how to document by designer Michael Wright <a href="https://millennialcreative.co.uk/">https://millennialcreative.co.uk/</a> | 1.30pm – 3.30pm<br>Presentation by members of initial ideas to date<br><br>Selecting sites/ Planning action<br>Making safely<br>Testing ideas<br>Any questions on techniques and production         |

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| <b>Day 4</b><br>Fri 11 June<br><br>Aim:<br>Final ideas              | 10am – 12pm<br><br>Members present progress<br>Double check H&S<br>Final questions about production  | 1.30pm – 3.30pm<br><br>Members present progress<br>Double check H&S<br>Final questions about production  |
| <b>Day 5</b><br>Thurs 24 June                                       | All members making their art work in the public realm  | All members making their art work in the public realm  |
| <b>Day 6</b><br>Fri 26 June<br><br>Aim:<br>Presentation Conclusions | 10am – 12pm<br>Sharing and discussion<br>Each member to present using documentation and field notes/ ethnographies<br><br>Zoe Taylor Illustrator will join us to capture some of our ‘feeding back’ by drawings us speaking / re-enacting our scripts performances etc<br><a href="http://www.zoetaylor.co.uk">www.zoetaylor.co.uk</a> | 1.00pm – 3.00pm<br>Sharing and discussion<br>Each member to present using documentation and field notes/ ethnographies<br><br>All materials submitted / shared google / drop box etc |

# How to talk to the city, Partisan Social Club

## Online Meetings and presentation:

- Make a piece of art work based on issues that matter to you in relation to the city
- 6 days of working together





# How to talk to the city, Partisan Social Club

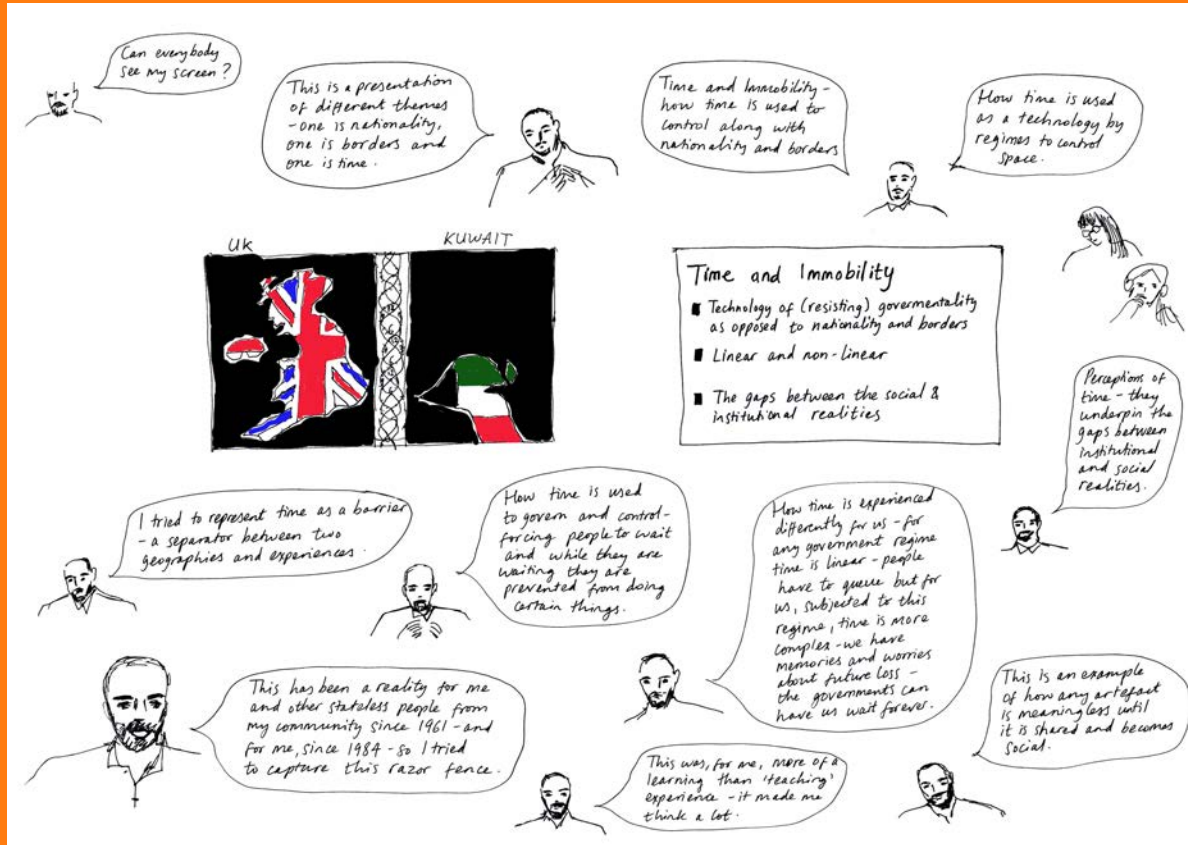
## Group Projects 1. Who is the other?





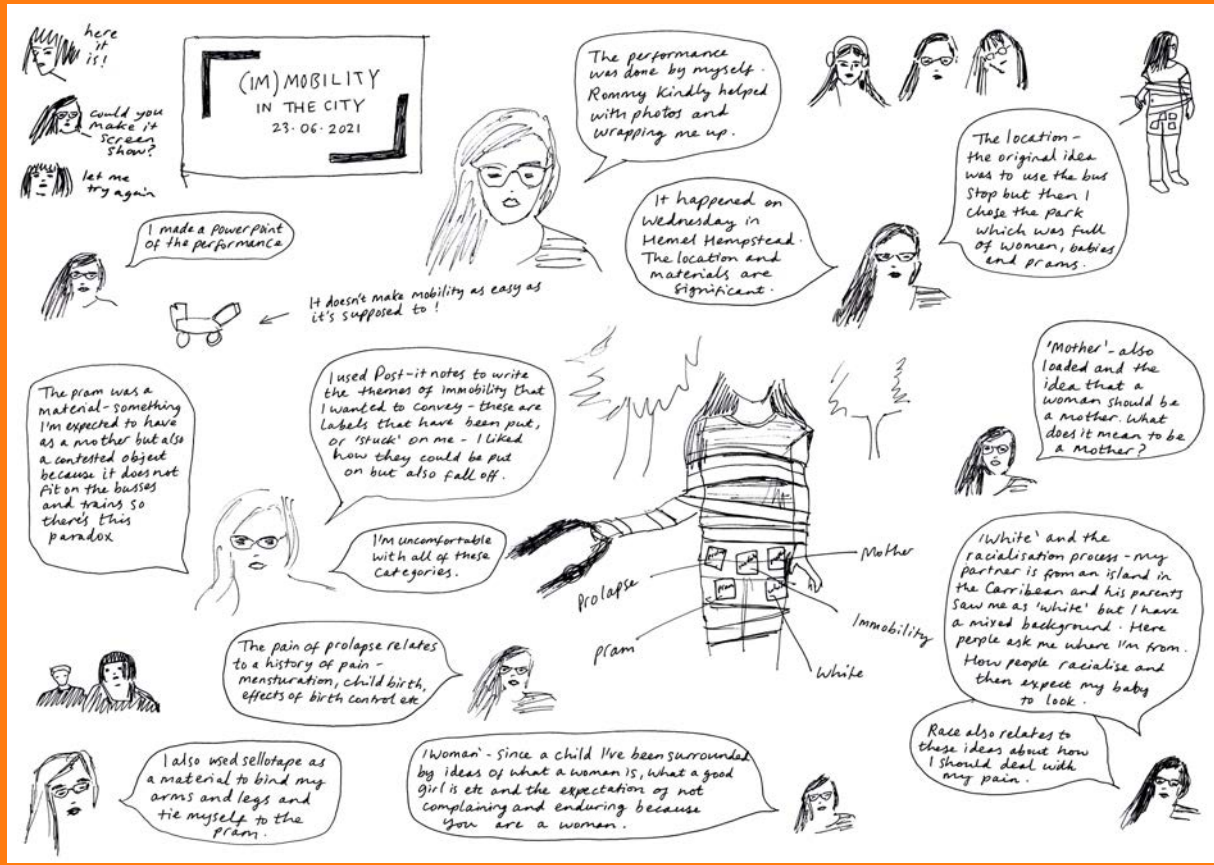
# How to talk to the city, Partisan Social Club

## Group Projects 2. Time and Immobility



# How to talk to the city, Partisan Social Club

## Group Projects 3. (Im)mobility in the city



# Conclusions and reflections

- The group began the project by thinking art was elite and not much use to the political situation, this shifted when thinking about politics in CAP artworks as a type of communication and therefore a contribution to the public sphere
- Most of the group's experience of space – in their home contexts and as visitors to the UK presented various barriers that impinged upon their ability to contribute to the public sphere. One member was a refugee and this instigated a debate about the limits of citizenship within the making of public sphere. 6 female members of the group decided to work together on a project in the public realm
- In response to the group PSC realised that their approach to art and the public sphere was dominated by western art practices and they adjusted this to learn more about MENA artists and artworks
- The groups responses were informed by CAP methods and tools - CAP highlights contested histories and theories of identity and representation as well as new methods of mediation which can inform ethnographic study - this brought an awareness of the problematics of asking others to share their experiences
- Members found that they could produce artworks as tools for communication that did not need specialised craft skills, they used these tools to articulate their own stories and research enquires, reflected their own political positions
- By working together and with others the group began to think of what could be reciprocal in the ethnographic process
- Artists can identity and reflect upon social problems, but they also intervene and act on the world through refusing the way things are and producing new imaginaries. CAP suggests at a positionality and is a form of communication. Is there space for collaborations between scholars and audiences that bring this to the understanding of the social?
- After Latour's theories on the social, can CAP enable a de-assembling and a re-assembling of the social in ways that conventional ethnographic methods might not be able to achieve?



# Thanks for listening

Special thanks to:

- Nidal Alhajsleiman, Rommy Anabalon Schaaf, Alfonso Del Percio, Gabriela Greenaway, Luke Holmes, Ahmad Jaber, Nazanin Rahimi, Somayeh Rahimi, Cecile Remy, Cyrine Saab, Javiera Sandoval Limari, Zoe Taylor, Mingdan Wu, Michael Wright