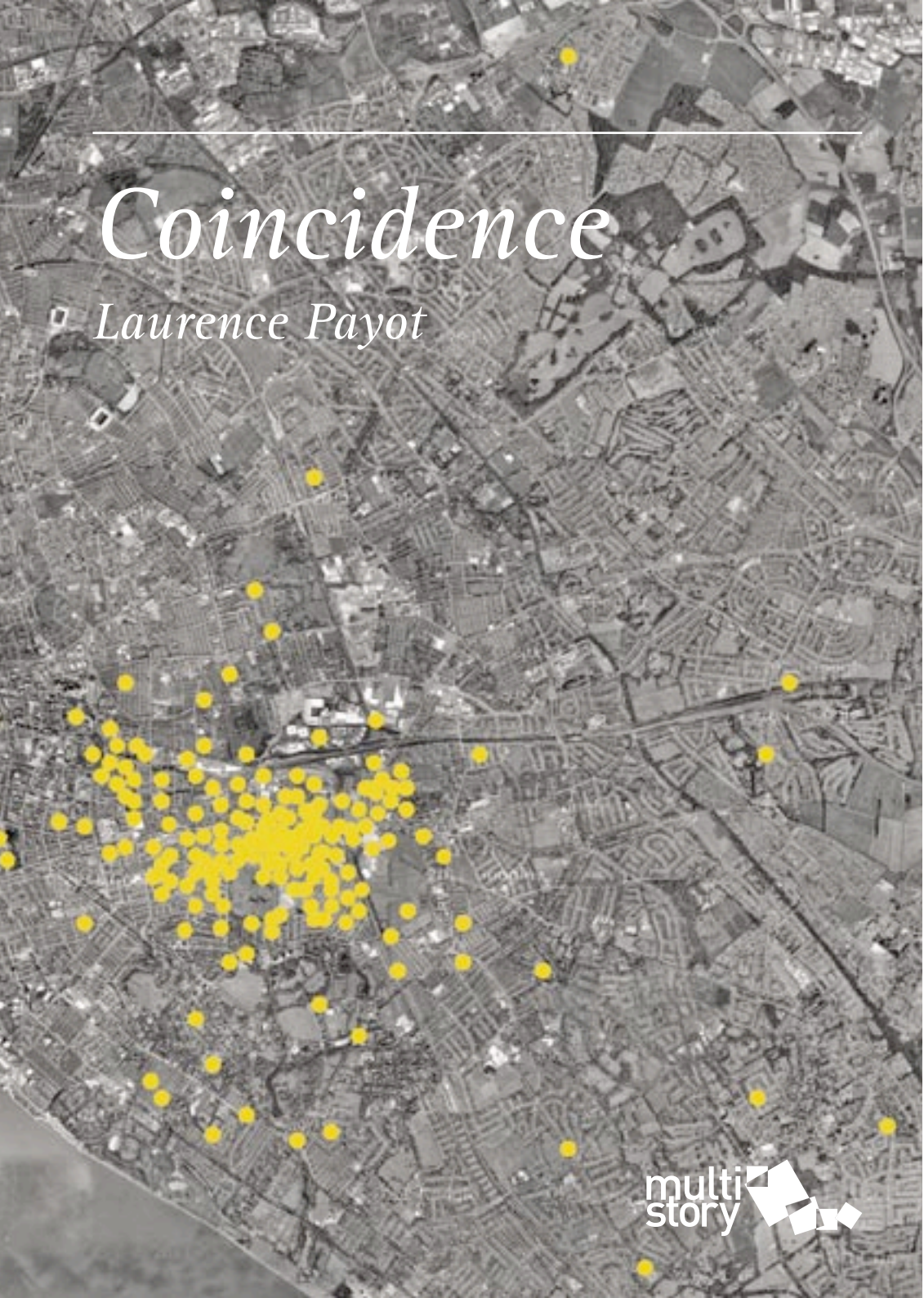


Coincidence

Laurence Payot

multi story

COINCIDENCE

"The everyday is the place where repetition and creativity confront each other."
(Henri Lefebvre)

Originally from Metz in France, I graduated from the Ecole Nationale des Beaux Arts in Lyon, and am currently based in Liverpool, UK. Living in a different country made me notice how my everyday behaviour has been influenced by people living here.

When I first heard someone saying 'thanks' to the driver when leaving the bus, I was a bit surprised. Now, it is something that I do every time. Such apparently small social exchanges and cultural actions, attitudes and gestures have profoundly and unexpectedly affected my own presentation and thus, to some extent, informed my thinking as an artist.

What if I could create a performance that would slightly transform everyday behaviour, or suggest new ways to go about our daily lives? What if a subtle shift in daily routine could make people more aware of a place, address existing social issues or frustrations, and inspire people to reshape the place in which they live?

These thoughts and questions formed the basis for my Action Research project and gave form to Coincidence.

HOW IT ALL STARTED

The first seeds for 'Coincidence' started to grow in August 2010.

After spending a few months abroad, working on 'Rumeur' with the newly built Pompidou Centre in Metz, France and on 'The Man Who Was Everywhere' with the Belluard Bollwerk International Festival in Switzerland, I needed time in my studio to reflect and think about where my practice should go next.

I have always felt strongly about the power that art can have when presented out of the art institution context. By placing my work directly in the streets, I can play with people's perception on a more direct level, without the frames, the walls and the other barriers that ordinarily separate the work from the real world; it allows me to break the safe line and bring my work into the space of the 'real'.

Over the last few years, I therefore started to make paintings, sculptures, interventions for urban environments that created short-circuits in everyday perception. For example; 'Eyre Street in Eyre Street' was a billboard image of a street placed back in the same street, and 'Same Old, Same Old' provided an incidental coincidence of two packets of crisps spilled on the floor in exactly the same position.

Working alongside painters and sculptors in my studio at The Royal Standard, I realised that my approach to making work wasn't simply about object production but about how the resulting object could make the viewer think and react within a specific context. This realisation began to shift my practice as I started to experiment with people's reaction to the work rather than with images and objects per se. The artworks I was creating still had a physical manifestation but their raison d'être was to create a situation.

Shift of focus1: from the work to the audience

People looking at 'I Thought It Was Real', Bristol, UK, 2010 (project funded by Arts Council England).

'I Thought It Was Real' proved a turning point. I created a resin statue of myself as a human statue performing in the street. This static representation of me – looking like a person trying to be a statue – became more real than any hyperrealist replica of a human body because of the context it was placed within, playing with people's expectations and preconceptions of what should be located in that setting.

The statue was toured for a day at a time in a number of city centre locations around the UK. This 'magic' object started to create an event in itself. Passers-by would stop to see the 'street performer' moving but its body remained totally still and silent. This tension disturbed the audience. Slightly unnerved, strangers began talking about the mystery of the still street performer. The crowds gathered and would stare incredulously. Nobody dared to break the perfect circle created by the crowd. As people waited for a small sign of life (a blink, a small twitch), the tension grew until someone found the courage to get closer and finally touch the street performer. This action revealed its true statue state.

As I was documenting the project, my focus shifted from the statue to the crowd and I realised it was the audience that was important and not the statue.

"As I was documenting the project, my focus shifted from the statue to the crowd and I realised it was the audience that was important and not the statue."

Shift of focus 2: from performers to livers

For my following project, working with the Belluard Bollwerk International, I decided to work directly with people. I devised a one-day performance in Fribourg, Switzerland with 23 local young men who volunteered to take part. In order to break the visual routine of the town centre, and to infiltrate a new myth within the place, we used repetition to create an unexpected vision.

Throughout the day, the performers walked around the streets wearing the same outfit (black shoes, jeans, blue hood, carrying a white plastic bag) and followed a precise route. The uniformity of the ubiquitous hood instantly made them look like they were the same character: 'The Man Who Was Everywhere'. As people started to notice them (or 'him'), a rumour spread throughout the shops and cafés on the borders of the route.

People's doubts, questions and reactions were recorded through interviews with the performers. As these started to reveal how people reacted and how it made them feel, I understood that my audience was not only people in the street but the performers as well: "People are looking at us but finally we are looking at them too; somehow, the centre of the performance is reversed"; "Do I want to make eye contact and provoke a reaction; what if I walk slower?"

The Man Who Was Everywhere, performers in dressing room, Fribourg, Switzerland, 2010

Although dressed to become de (or re) personalised, each performer developed their own take on how this character should behave and started to create subtlety within the performance and make it their own. The richness that they brought was something I wanted to investigate further in future projects. How could I empower performers more and give them greater freedom to shape the piece? How could I reduce the power relationship between me, as a 'director' of the piece and them, as 'performers'? How could I create a piece that was more democratic and thus have a more genuine effect on a place?

Guy Debord believed that "the role played by a passive or merely bit-part playing 'public' should constantly diminish, while that played by those who cannot be called actors, but rather, in a new sense of the term, 'livers', must steadily increase." If I was to concentrate on the experience of the performers (or 'livers'), how could their actions change their own experience of the world? ●

"How could I create a piece that was more democratic and thus have a more genuine effect on a place?"

LONGHOUSE ACTION RESEARCH: THINKING TIME

As I was searching for ways to develop this new path of work, I was invited to take part in Longhouse Action Research 2010-11. The theme was 'connection between people, connection between people and places'. It fitted perfectly with my current concerns and would allow me time to develop a strong project over a longer period.

Most of my past projects had been commission-based and I am usually given a specific context to work within, so I hoped that this bursary would allow me to have creative control, both in terms of content and context, and to find the right opportunities and partners to develop the project in a more intuitive way.

Research, thoughts and inspiration

Like Cildo Meireles, I wanted to work with "real life situation itself" and "what it could spark off in the body of society", rather than with "metaphorical representations of situations". But if I were to put a system in place, would it become staged and thus impossible for it to merge with the 'real'? Could I ever break the barrier between real and staged?

Baudrillard gave me some answers in Simulacra and Simulation (first published by Éditions Galilée, 1981), with the example of a simulated hold-up: if we were to simulate a hold-up in a bank, one client may still faint and die and we would immediately find ourselves back in the real world. So yes, actions could be simulated and 'staged' but their effect could also, in fact, become real.

"Could I ever break the barrier between real and staged?"

Seeing the work of Francis Alys at Tate Modern was a real inspiration and I was fascinated by the power of collectiveness in the performance 'When Faith Moves Mountains': On April 11, 2002, five hundred volunteers were supplied with shovels and asked to form a single line at the foot of a giant sand dune in Ventanilla, an area outside Lima. This human comb pushed a certain quantity of sand a certain distance, thereby moving a sixteen-hundred-foot-long sand dune about four inches from its original position. The documentary film shows how the action became owned by the volunteers and how its emotional effect went beyond the power of the artist. There is something magical about seeing hundreds of people acting towards the same goal and this is something I wanted to investigate.

Ai Wei Wei's work 'Fairytale', a performance for which he brought 1001 people from China to Kassel in Germany for Documenta 2007, had a similar impact of numbers. However, what interested me was the fact that people taking part didn't have to perform as such, they simply had to 'be there'. The documentary film shows the participants' experiences through their life in China, the build up to the trip and their visit to Kassel, rather than how they were perceived whilst in Germany. Beyond the concept of the performance, the work seemed to be about offering these people the chance to travel out of China; an experience they would not have had access to otherwise. The work seemed to focus on the performers as livers, rather than on audiences in Kassel.

Other readings such as Nicolas Bourriaud's 'Relational Aesthetics', Yoko Ono's book of 'Instruction Pieces', Auguste Boal's 'Theatre of the Oppressed', and Benedict Anderson's 'Imagined Communities', also influenced my train of thoughts.

Drawing Systems

I decided to put my ideas into a visual form and started to create a series of new drawings. These naturally took the shape of what I call 'Systems', for which I focused on people as the main element in the work.

The Systems allowed me to investigate spatially how situations can be created within social networks or urban crowds. While creating the drawings, I was not thinking about a specific form that the work should take but rather about connections, transformations, shifts: each system could be the start of an endless possibility of projects depending on which context I would develop it within.

System number 11, 2011 – Pen and sticky dots on paper

System number 12, 2011 – Pen and sticky dots on paper

System number 13, 2011 – Pen and sticky dots on paper

First threads for a new project

A strong framework was thus beginning to emerge for my next project with the following main ambitions:

- For the project to be accessible/open and to welcome a large number of people to take part.
- For the project to merge with the 'real' (unannounced, non spectacular).
- For the project to help redefine a sense of place and to explore and accentuate connections between people and between people and the place they live in.

"I wondered if repeated everyday actions would start to become noticed if they were performed within a specific place by a large amount of people."

Influenced by the idea of repetition used for 'The Man Who Was Everywhere', I wondered if repeated everyday actions would start to become noticed if they were performed within a specific place by a large amount of people. What if for one day, hundreds of people in the same town used a different or unfamiliar word, wore a certain type of outfit, or interacted with people in an unexpected way? I started to think about everyday routine, the things that we do mechanically, the things that we do because it is the right way to do it, wherever we are at that time, and how I could challenge that.

I started to put together a 'system' for a project which I called Coincidence:

- I would consult people within an area and ask them how they would like to challenge everyday behaviour.
- I would then use their suggestions to create a series of daily actions.
- Each daily action would then be sent by text message to hundreds of people taking part who could 'perform' the action within their daily routines.
- I would gather people's experiences as they would slightly alter their daily routine and thereby create coincidences within an area and potentially transform existing behaviour, perception and relationships. ●

COINCIDENCE: THE PERFORMANCE

My next step was to find a location to pilot the project as well as partners and stakeholders to work with. I wanted to focus on areas undergoing regeneration that were characterised by physical and social change and where the project could therefore potentially help redefine a sense of place.

For the pilot, it felt appropriate to work within Liverpool so I got in touch with Lesley Woodbridge, Public Art Officer at the City Council. Lesley was interested in the project and we quickly agreed that the Picton Renewal area, to the east of the city centre, would benefit from Coincidence. With no funding available from the Council we applied to Arts Council England's Grants for the Arts programme to facilitate the project.

"People were keen to use the project to meet other residents and to accentuate and strengthen interaction between people across their neighbourhood."

I met with key people (local councillors, community group leaders, shopkeepers and local residents) in the area to establish a strong network of local support and contacted Metal, a local arts organisation based at the heart of Picton. Metal had existing links with the community and also wished to gather new audiences for their amazing space at Edge Hill Station. Their subsequent support and ongoing advice proved invaluable and provided me with a tangible route into the local community as well as a base for my activity.

In order to see which shape or path the project could take, I devised a short questionnaire and wandered around the streets of Picton to ask people about their thoughts on Coincidence. What emerged strongly was that people were keen to use the project to meet other residents and to accentuate and strengthen interaction between people across their neighbourhood. There was a clear sense that the strength of community was fading away.

Coincidence: Runcorn – a pilot study

As the scope and support for Coincidence evolved in Picton it was a coincidence that Louise Hesketh (Halton Visual Arts Officer based at The Brindley Gallery in Runcorn) invited me to devise an imaginative project as part of Brindley's community engagement programme 'Creative Runcorn'. This felt like the perfect opportunity to test the project on a smaller scale by focusing on Runcorn Old Town – a neatly defined area to work within (and with financial support from Halton Borough Council).

For Coincidence: Runcorn, our aim was to work with seven organisations or community groups as well as local residents in order to gather a minimum of 70 participants. The performance would last for seven days, with seven separate actions performed. In two weeks we exceeded our expectations and gathered 100 people to participate along with 100 children from the local primary school. Each participant received a little yellow badge so that they could spot other people taking part. We held a series of meetings with local groups and asked attendants what they wanted to do with the project:

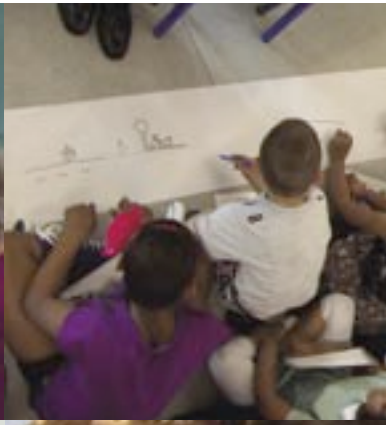
- What are people's daily routines?
- How do people behave on a daily basis?
- How would you define Runcorn as a place?
- What if we could transform everyday behaviours?
- What if we could do things differently?

The process of asking participants to come up with their own actions for the performance was a key aspect of the project. The simple fact of thinking about the everyday in a new light, of questioning normality and local behaviour was a huge part of the artwork. Seven agreed daily actions subsequently emerged from these discussions.

For example:

- Many participants regretted the loss of times when people used to speak more and say hello to each other in the street, so the first action became: 'Let's all say good morning, good afternoon, good evening, to as many people as possible'.
- People also mentioned the fact that, as part of their daily routine, they tend to always take the same route, always cross paths with the same people and, even though Runcorn is small, they didn't necessarily know some of the streets around where they lived. The resulting action was: 'Let's all take a different route', with the idea of transforming the way people move about for one day.
- And so on...

"The process of asking participants to come up with their own actions for the performance was a key aspect of the project."



Top Row:
Meeting with the WAM Centre, Picton, May 2011 – still from Coincidence film
Meeting with the Greenhouse Project, Picton, May 2011 – still from Coincidence film
Meeting with the Caribbean Centre, Picton, May 2011 – still from Coincidence film

Bottom Row:
Meeting with Our Lady of Good Help, May 2011 – still from Coincidence film
Meeting with local residents at Metal, May 2011 – still from Coincidence film
Meeting with the Powerhouse Foyer, May 2011 – still from Coincidence film

Coincidence: Runcorn – feedback and reflection

In order to record the performance, participants received a diary to write down their daily experience. They were also invited to share their story on the website, which had a daily blog page. The recorded comments give insight into the situations created by Coincidence: Runcorn and how the performance of each action affected the participants as well as people around them.

At the end of the project, a celebratory event was organised at The Brindley and participants came together and shared their experiences. A limited edition booklet that gathered comments and images from the blog was also produced and distributed.

"Maybe the collective effort was more of an emotional support for participants to challenge themselves."

Participants told me that the project had made them more aware of the place in which they live and of the people around them. Taking part gave them the confidence to become 'actors' within their community as they could see the impact that their small actions could make. Some of the actions resulted in creating unusual situations and the forging of new relationships; some simply provided participants with some fun and excitement; and others still prompted deeper questions and aspirations.

Participants' feedback revealed the fact that, even though a lot of people took part, the actions were too subtle to create visible coincidences. As people performed their actions in different places and at different times of the day, the repetition was not necessarily visible by the wider public. This is something I would tackle in following stages of the project but, for Picton, I would focus on the performers' direct experience and small situations created around them rather than the bigger picture (a human point of view rather than a map view). Maybe the collective effort was more of an emotional support for participants to challenge themselves (i.e. it's OK to try this out because other people are doing it too). I would also think about devising a few actions that could be more visible so that the participants, as well as the wider public, could spot them. These would also bring an element of collectiveness and celebration of the project.

Participants also expressed their desire in having a bigger final event, joined with an exhibition, in order to show the project to a wider audience. This is something I decided to take forward for the next round of the project in Picton.

Coincidence: Picton – testing the project in a different context

It was now time to try the project in another area and see how people would shape the project in a different context.

With the ambition to get numbers higher, I started a three-week trawl through an array of different organisations and shops and met hundreds of wonderful people. Some of the group sessions were documented by videosmith, Sam Meech, who filmed the project throughout its development. As in Runcorn, the same aspirations to reinforce links between people and transform the area were positively evident.

"I sang under the big trees on my road, very apprehensive, but it was an amazing and empowering experience."
(Dee)

Actions such as 'Let's all drop flower seeds in places that need it' responded to the abundance of wasteland in the neighbourhood and people's aspirations to make good use of it. Other actions, such as 'Let's draw a hopscotch in the street for people to use on their way past' clearly expressed a collective desire to make their community more lively and open, with children playing in the streets. Actions that were about interactions between people were also popular, as 'smiling in the street' and 'saying hello to strangers' were mentioned at nearly every meeting.

The project in Picton was subsequently defined by a set of 14 actions that took place over 14 consecutive days. Many of the participants' stories are available on the project website: www.coincidenceproject.co.uk

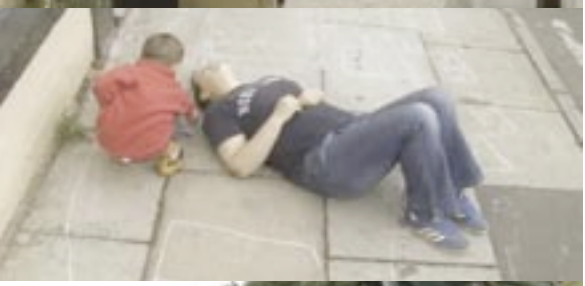
Other stories were presented in a limited edition newspaper. Here are a few stories gathered from the blog:

Friday 3 June 2011:
'Let's leave our thoughts in public spaces.'
"OMG can't believe I did that! I was so nervous! It's in Sefton Park in front of the old aviary. I wrote it big in coloured chalk: WE ARE BEAUTY, WE ARE TRUTH, WE ARE STARDUST, WE ARE GOLDEN + a heart with a flower in it. I am still shaking... I hope it doesn't rain...I don't know about you but it's one of the best things I've ever done!"
(Karen)

Tuesday 24 May 2011:
'Let's pass on a smile and a hello maybe.'
"Stuck in traffic in the pouring rain, I looked at the bus next to me and saw a lady looking glumly at the sky. She was probably in her late fifties and had the homely look of a dinner lady. She must have felt my gaze because she turned to look at me. I smiled and mouthed "Hello". She looked over her shoulder to look for the person I was speaking to before looking back. "Me?" she mouthed, pointing to herself in confusion. "Yes," I mouthed back. "You!" She looked flattered and started to laugh. As the bus pulled away and carried off the lady and her smile to some unknown destination, I realised just how easy it is to brighten someone else's day, and your own."
(Tracy)

Tuesday 31 May:
'Let's drop flower seeds in places that need it.'
"I picked sunflowers and poppies from the pile and took them to work. At the end of the day I was crouched at the side of the building pressing the seeds into a bald patch of earth. Some people left to go home but made no comment. I hope they come up, they'll look lovely. I must do the same in my own garden..."
(Emma)

BREAD
Store
Express
T.W.W



Laurence looking at his area as if he was a tourist, Picton, May 2011 – still from Coincidence film

Jodie and Nicola planting seeds in places that need it, Picton, May 2011 – still from Coincidence film

Tom walking in the streets dressed in white, Picton, May 2011 – still from Coincidence film

Neighbour hopping on a hopscotch drawn by Coincidence participant, Picton, May 2011 – still from Coincidence film

Claire offering a flower to a stranger, Picton, May 2011 – still from Coincidence film

Chloe writing her thoughts in public spaces, Picton, May 2011 – still from Coincidence film

Daniel talking to a stranger, Picton, May 2011 – still from Coincidence film

Ruth and her child drawing in the street, Picton, May 2011 – still from Coincidence film

Angela watching the world go by, Picton, May 2011 – still from Coincidence film

Coincidence: Picton – exhibition at Metal

Images from exhibition preview at Metal – Photographs by Ian Poulson

I worked closely with videosmith Sam Meech to create a documentary film for Coincidence. Filming the journey of the project allowed us to share in the participants' lives for a couple of hours each day, as well as keeping a 'trace' of some of the ephemeral situations created throughout Picton. For each action we selected two participants who then decided how to perform the daily action in their own way. The resulting film resembles a small portrait collection that is enriched by the presence of each participant. Such poignancy adds genuine authenticity to the participatory process at the heart of Coincidence. The film is available to see on my website **www.laurencepayot.com.**

Following the performance, we curated an exhibition at Metal to showcase the film, launch the free Coincidence newspaper, and to gather people's feedback. The opening night was attended by over 100 visitors and people obviously felt able to talk to each other as if they all belonged to the same group. A map was produced during the exhibition on which participants could place a dot on the Picton map to reveal the scope of the project.

"Filming the journey of Coincidence allowed us to share in the participants's lives for a couple of hours each day, and the blog gave us a trace of some of the ephemeral situations created throughout Picton."

Coincidence: Picton – feedback and reflection

Images from exhibition preview at Metal – Photographs by Ian Poulson

For me, the surprising outcome of the project was the diversity of interpretations for each of the actions and the various ways in which people perceived the project. Coincidence went beyond my control and that's what made it really exciting. On the performance days, all I could do was send the message and wait for stories to appear: for me to discover what Coincidence created on that day.

There was of course some mystery as to why Coincidence was a success. Why did so many individuals feel compelled to participate in a project facilitated by somebody they had never met? What was it that attracted people to the project? In response to a questionnaire people said they decided to take part because of its 'local nature'; they thought it was an initiative that could 'harmonise' the community; some felt that it gave ordinary people the chance to be creative; or simply because they liked the challenge and it intrigued them.

Personal responses to Coincidence included:

- "Reading the blog page everyday is what I enjoyed the most";
- "It gave me the confidence to speak to people I wouldn't have had the courage to before";
- "It gave me something to look forward to each day and took me out of my comfort zone";
- "It made me feel part of a community";
- "It made me realise that life is, indeed, a gift and we all have a part to play";
- "Making normal things felt special".

I also asked participants what they felt Coincidence did for the area. Responses were:

- "It created a buzz of happiness and awareness of others";
- "It made people feel more active";
- "It made me realise how diverse and unique it is around here; it gave me a sense of pride in living here";
- "Coincidence should be made an annual event across Liverpool". ●

"On the performance days, all I could do was send the message and wait for stories to appear: for me to discover what Coincidence created on that day."

FUTURE LIFE FOR COINCIDENCE

"The participants were becoming the viewers, or the audience of something they initiated."

Coincidence on tour

The fantastic experience of working with so many great people and the feedback from participants makes me believe that there is a huge potential for the project to develop in other cities. My basic aim when developing the context for Coincidence was to create a flexible system in which participants could play a direct role in shaping and creating the work. I am looking forward to trying out Coincidence in other contexts, i.e. cities around the UK, but also abroad where different cultures may give Coincidence a different meaning. The project would take on a completely different shape every time it is performed but the collective experience, exchange and equal footing of participants would remain the cornerstone of its development and delivery.

I am excited about what would happen in these different contexts. What actions would be suggested? How political and critical could they become? Where would the limit of my selective control stand if controversial ideas came out of the project? How much of a catalyst could it become to transform collective behaviour?

Coincidence in smaller environments

Another avenue for Coincidence would be to perform it in a more focused space (for example an office, hospital, supermarket, school), where daily routine is common place, and the chance to break boundaries would challenge preconceptions of how to behave in a place. A primary school took part in Coincidence:Runcorn, and their experience of the project was different than other participants as there was a large amount of people in one place performing the daily action. They were not performing in isolation but became part a bigger collective performance. One child commented on the first action, which was 'to say good morning and good afternoon to as people as possible':

"It was a bit scary because everyone was coming to me to say good morning. It was good and exciting as well. People were happier than normal."

I think that the impact of Coincidence in such places may have a stronger effect on participants and more legacy as people living/working in a place would remember a new and exciting shared experience within that space.

Coincidence
The pursuit of performers becoming the audience

By looking at Coincidence from an observer's point of view, I started to think about how the participants, while performing an action, were creating a cascade of responses around them ("As we started to draw a hopscotch snail, a man appeared at the window. He eyed us curiously, then began laughing, then playfully conveyed his thoughts on our doodling: 'VANDALS!'. He came out to chat with us and find out what we were up to"). The participants were becoming the viewers, or the audience of something they initiated.

I would like to develop a new project based around this idea: I am imagining it to take the form of written words worn by people, and which would initiate situations for the 'wearer' of the words to witness. ●

Credits

Working on Coincidence has been more than a creative process. It took me on a journey which has transformed the way I work with and include people in my work. Many thanks to Longhouse and their genuine support throughout the Action Research Programme, to Lesley Woodbridge from Liverpool City Council for her generous advice, and to The Brindley, Halton Borough Council, Metal, and Arts Council England for their financial support.

And a huge thank you to the hundreds of participants who made Coincidence possible. ●

Laurence Payot
September, 2011

Action Research Programme

Longhouse is a programme of work carried out by community arts organisation, Multistory. Longhouse is dedicated to the professional development of artists and provides knowledge, support and opportunities for artists to develop new learning and skills to broaden their understanding of working in the public realm.

Action Research is the process of practically testing ideas as a means of increasing knowledge, understanding and rationale in order to develop practice and learning. During 2010-11, the Longhouse programme commissioned a number of artists to undertake a period of action research to adopt new approaches, ideas, methodologies and connections to develop their existing practice.

Coincidence

What if you created a performance that would slightly transform everyday behaviour or suggest new ways to go about our everyday lives? What if this shift in daily routine could make people more aware of place? Laurence's Action Research bursary provided an opportunity for her to playfully and practically test and find answers to these questions. Coincidence is a set of daily actions carried out by participants that are intended to challenge everyday behaviours, routines and perceptions of place and locality.

Supported by
ARTS COUNCIL ENGLAND

multi story