

Connected Communities

FOODSCAPES

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Roz Hall, Knowle West Media Centre

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Executive Summary

FOODSCAPES was an AHRC Connected Communities project (2013) that explored the use of art as a way of opening up discussion about food. Participants in the project included Knowle West Media Centre, The Matthew Tree Project (TMTP), the Edible Landscapes Movement (ELM), UWE Bristol, University of Southampton, the James Hutton Institute and Paul Hurley (artist-in-residence).

Together, we explored how arts intervention and cultural engagement can help address food, food poverty, and sustainable communities. As co-designed action research, the project also examined how arts intervention can enhance interchange between community organisations and research institutions. Throughout Foodscapes there was an attempt to integrate the research questions, arts programming and evaluative activities into the actual process of the work, so that these activities could become entwined and, it is hoped, more meaningful for all involved.

Researchers and Project Partners

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Key words

food, food poverty, community engagement, ecological citizen, sustainable communities, performative methods, bread, ethnography

FOODSCAPES

Foodscares was a 9-month follow-on project funded through the Communities, Cultures, Environments and Sustainability research development workshop (Bristol, May 2012). The project ran from February – October 2013. At the heart of our research was a 10-day participatory exhibition at the Parlour Showrooms located in the centre of Bristol. Key aims of the project included:

- to exchange ideas about the relationships between creative practice, food and community;
- to engage and develop performative research methods including how knowledges are formed through ‘lived embodied practical experiences’ (Roe and Greenhough, 2013);
- To explore how performative art and participatory research can serve to mobilise, generate and sustain a new politics of care around food that embraces the health of society, the sustainability of the environment and social justice.

OUR APPROACH

In Foodscares, we examined the idea of ‘sustainable futures’ with individuals who suffer from food insecurity. We held a series of group meetings and focus group workshops, volunteered at a local food charity, and engaged directly in the activities of our project partners as part of a mixture of participative arts practice and qualitative research methodologies. Working with staff, volunteers and clients at TMTP and ELM, we focused on food practices (e.g. accessing, eating, cooking and sharing food) and how they relate to challenges surrounding food security.

OUR EVENT

Foodscares centred on a 10-day interactive and performative exhibition – visited by over 900 people – in Bristol’s city centre. During the event, participants shared and exchanged knowledge and experiences about food and participated in activities being undertaken by members of the project team. We purposefully avoided didactic methods of exchange and relied on the juxtaposition of various food practices and materials to create non-linear experiences to solicit conversation and draw out meaning.

Juxtaposition: within the art space, visitors were confronted with a contrasting set of food-related practices such as growing, baking, eating, preparing meals, and shopping. This included two ‘green walls’ loaded with edible plants (courgettes, aubergines, tomatoes, strawberries and others), planting workshops, a food bank parcel, photographs of meals cooked by individuals suffering from food insecurity, a chicken plucking demonstration, and daily bread baking sessions. The juxtaposition of these food materials and practices helped to bring people together from different backgrounds and

disrupted taken-for-granted assumptions about consumption, food security, and boundaries between art and the everyday.

Non-linear experience: The exhibition was designed to allow for an open-ended interaction with the artists, works of art, and food through both 'doing' and witnessing. Through these activities and experiences knowledge was co-produced by a dynamic and productive blurring of the relations between artist-researcher-participant-material.

KEY OUTCOMES

Enacting ecological citizenship: participants were invited to respond not as ethical consumers but as ecological citizens. There was nothing to buy, nor information about 'improved' ethical supply chains, the emphasis wasn't on giving attention to local, fair trade, organic or animal welfare-friendly products, nor was advice available about 'how to food shop': if we had done this, we would have been enacting the ethical consumer. Instead we encouraged people to attend to different lived experiences with food preparation and eating.

Material and performative engagement: The exhibition brought together experiences, materiality and aesthetics of our diverse project partners into a performative and multisensory space. This offered visitors a direct bodily engagement – kneading bread, smell of tomato plants, weight of the foodbank shopping basket – with some of the research material we were working with. As bread was central to our exhibition, the qualities and characteristics of ingredients such as flour, water, and yeast structured particular experiences. Involvement in bread-baking meant sticky hands, a slow repetitive pace of kneading, attention to the texture of dough and a more precise awareness of time and intensities such as heat and air. During these sessions, we found that it was the slowness of the process – even soda bread takes over an hour to bake – which helped to forge dialogue, communication and exchange.

Exhibition space as temporary autonomous zone: The event facilitated experiences that challenged assumptions about the daily practice of (food) consumption. This underlined our efforts to engage visitors not as ethical consumers, but as ecological citizens. It also contested consumptive attitudes towards the art experience - visitors were often not sure whether the exhibition or its components were 'art', and so engaged with it more actively and directly than they would have in a conventional gallery setting.

LEARNING FROM EXPERIENCE WITH COMMUNITIES

Foodscares aimed for meaningful involvement from community partners and individual participants. This was a two-way process. On the one hand, researchers participated directly in community environments. For example, both artists and academics volunteered at TMTP in the Foodstore and supermarket food donation stands in order to experience some of the rhythms, feelings and affects associated with emergency food aid delivery. This provided a sense of the crucial role the emergency food aid provider plays in many people's lives, as well as those who make up the community of food donors. On the other hand, community partners were brought into planning and development meetings in order to help devise appropriate and meaningful arts interventions that could support their work. Overall, we highlight three broad lessons related to our engagement experiences with Foodscares:

Embedding evaluation in design and delivery: Drawing on KWMC experience, evaluation was embedded into the project so that the research questions were foundational to creative exchanges, rather than being separate, or bolted onto the creative experience. This approach helped us not only to understand our effectiveness, but also to assess how best to engage people on the research themes of food, food poverty and sustainable communities. Creative processes – such as 'what did you eat?' word clouds populated by participants – were the basis of exchanges through which different perspectives and experiences were shared and documented. The work prompted people to think about food experiences and to consider the concepts we were exploring. However, in a short project such as this, the approach also meant that some of the impacts which fall outside of the duration of the work would be difficult to catch and encounter. As a result, we have also conducted follow-up interviews with various participants and stakeholders.

Ethnographic field work: Carrying out ethnographic research was extremely valuable. Taking active roles at TMTP allowed us to share in the experiences of being a volunteer and to be affected by the lives of those who access emergency food aid. The knowledge gained from being a participant observer and to be practically engaged with the running of the TMTP's Foodstore offered greater opportunities to understand how meeting the needs of those struggling to feed themselves and their family actually takes place.

Multiple forms of engagement and outputs: We found that it was valuable to engage participants in practices and outputs that served multiple and diverse interests. For example, photovoice was an effective means of bringing individuals into the art-making process and as a more traditional visual methodological research tool for apprehending diverse food practices within the larger TMTP community. It also served as a novel engagement with participant's food lifestyles, motivating participants, TMTP and visitors to reflect upon the visual presentation of their food lives. We also used bread baking to build skills, trade knowledge about food, form friendships and learn about the experiences of volunteers, those accessing emergency food aid, and people from Bristol who stopped in to see what we were doing. We know that many participants still call on the skills and friendships formed during involvement with Foodscares.

POTENTIAL BENEFITS OF THE RESEARCH FOR COMMUNITIES AND OTHER STAKEHOLDERS

Many participants commented on the impact of Foodscapes on their eating and food preparation habits. One woman who attended the Foodscapes exhibition and had used the foodstore in the summer of 2013, reported that as a consequence of participating in the project's bread baking activities she was now regularly baking bread for her family and neighbours who sourced their bread through her. TMTP indicated to us that through learning bread baking skills she now had found her place in the community and this skill could also be used for employment, or just to feed her family and support her local community with fresh bread to eat.

In addition, both TMTP and ELM stressed that Foodscapes changed the way they work and has helped make their activities more effective. For example, Sue Baic, a nutritionist and dietician working with TMTP found that by working with Foodscapes, she was able to recognise a broader role for food beyond nutrition. This included a better understanding of the social power of cooking together. As Sue notes 'I was both surprised and delighted at how many of the clients really engaged with the process of hands-on bread making...Some clients still talk about it a year on and we have incorporated more of these sort of recipes into discussions, practice and planning of our Cook Smart course. We might not have done this without our engagement with Foodscapes'

At ELM, Mil Lusk reported that Foodscapes has had significant impact on their way of thinking and their approach to their work. ELM has always focussed on growing food and have encountered barriers when trying to distribute this food. After working with Foodscapes, they have realised the power of making and eating together and are now harvesting and making things collectively, with the local community. For example, this summer they have harvested strawberries and then held a strawberry jam-making workshop, which local people and volunteers attended with empty jam jars and took home jars of jam that they had made themselves.

RECOMMENDATIONS / FUTURE RESEARCH PLANS

Gifting food: The place of NGOs in emergency food aid provision provides the scope for any member of society to be involved in the donation and receipt of food when it becomes the responsibility of the community, not the State to intervene when individuals are in need. Equally, the dynamics of emergency food aid provision which connects shoppers and eaters through donation and receipt of food illustrates how food inspires charitable offerings, an openness to embrace new cultural experiences and to learn new skills in individuals. Consequently, the potential of folding in the experiences of multiple lives around food in diverse eating experiences into the distribution networks of emergency food aid has profound political, economic and ethical possibilities as they

weave a new food provisioning system that creates novel relations with the corporate food sector, the concerned food citizen and resilient lifestyle skill-making.

Coming together around food, art and research: The potential of food (given the common, shared and familiar nature of food preparation and consumption) to open up a dialogic space that is shared and familiar but also potentially radical is something that could be usefully explored further. The power and potential of art processes and integrated evaluation approaches and the mechanisms they might provide for ensuring an equality of exchange and input as well as creative forms of documenting that exchange and input, are also worthy of further exploration.

Using key research skills: We found that while it is critical to engage community partners from the start, there remains an important role for researchers to engage and learn about the community with which they are working. This means exploring and valuing 'traditional' data collection methods which can provide background information and contribute to the refinement of research and engagement strategies. Of course, these practices should be transparently embedded within an overall participatory process.

Follow-on work: Dr Roe is continuing to carry out research with TMTP to study the role of emergency food aid provision to make dietary and nutritional intervention into the lives of clients. This project is bringing new insights into how TMTP clients use and value different foodstuffs they are given, plus the challenges they have cooking and preparing food. Against this context, approaches for making interventions to improve dietary and nutritional health are being experimented with, for example the contents of cookery classes and guides.

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www.paulhurley.org

The Connected Communities

Connected Communities is a cross-Council Programme being led by the AHRC in partnership with the EPSRC, ESRC, MRC and NERC and a range of external partners. The current vision for the Programme is:

"to mobilise the potential for increasingly inter-connected, culturally diverse, communities to enhance participation, prosperity, sustainability, health & well-being by better connecting research, stakeholders and communities."

Further details about the Programme can be found on the AHRC's Connected Communities web pages at:

www.ahrc.ac.uk/FundingOpportunities/Pages/connectedcommunities.aspx

