

*PAPER FOR:*  
**SITE / SIGHT <-> SOURCE / RESOURCE CONFERENCE**  
*@ EXETER UNIVERSITY > SEPT 04*

Taxi Gallery is a black cab not a white cube  
And the meter is still running

Taxi Gallery is an experiment - a 'what if' enquiry begun partly in reaction to the problematics of what Miwon Kwon has identified as the phenomenon of the itinerant site-specific artist - caught on a treadmill of short term, parachute style projects removed from/ and removing me from my own everyday life, neighbourhood and its concerns.

So, what if I put this B Reg Austin FX4R, mechanically defunct but otherwise practically pristine in my own front garden? What if, instead of asking whether a site-specific work can travel to a different site, I offer this 'site' to a range of different artists? Does it, have potential for multiple responses? What if I commit to this project for a substantial period of time - say three years? How will my neighbours respond? What kinds of conversations and exchanges will occur? How will this intervention figure in the context of the community in which I live? Can Taxi Gallery be an artwork?

This paper is an interim report, 2 years in and at the beginning of the final year of the Taxi Gallery project.

There have been 22 exhibitions at Taxi Gallery to date since it opened formally in September 2002.

Artists exhibiting at Taxi Gallery have tended to focus in on the Taxi itself rather than the broader context of the street or neighbourhood or indeed on the issue of my imposition of Taxi Gallery upon them. This may be a tacit acknowledgement that these issues are my responsibility as author-artist of the project as a whole or equally well might be due to the self-funded limitations upon their time and budgets in making the work. What is clear is that artists have seized the creative space that Taxi Gallery has offered their practice and that many have found it a valuable opportunity.

Inevitably a number of artists have made works that directly refer to the experiential space of the taxi journey, its previous use or imagined history

Jan Cain took a twenty-minute taxi journey around London recording her observations and reminiscences live onto minidisk – the resulting audio monologue ‘Ride’ being the first show at Taxi Gallery.

Architect and artist Helen Stratford spent a day from 8am to 2am the following morning accompanying a local Taxi driver on his day’s work – she interviewed passengers and logged the day’s journeys in minute detail. Focussing particularly on the affect of objects brought by the passengers to their Taxi journey she created a manual/map which was placed in conversation with her alteration of Taxi Gallery with strange garments inspired by driving gloves, hygiene strips or settee covers.

In Taxi Noir Slap Red Anya Lewin imagined a previous life for the Taxi as Gangster’s getaway car and drawing on Film Noir imagery and soundtracks created a series of short black comedy video pieces experienced by the visitor in the blacked out cab.

Artist’s whose practice more usually inhabits the white cube gallery have reflected this sensibility in their use of the taxi site as vitrine, frame, plinth or sculptural object

A number of artists have resited works made previously for or in response to other sites and contexts. The most successful being works where the iconic associations of the London Taxi have played into the subject matter of the work.

Matt Rogalsky and Chloe Steele’s Perfect/Imperfect originally created as a sound and drawing installation for the nearby stately home Elveden Hall became a scrolling blueprint projection with the soundscape inside the Taxi using the only known recording of

Queen Victoria's voice say almost unintelligibly "Britain ... has never forgotten ... what the answer can be ... The answer can be ... Britain!"

Rona Lee's H.A.P.P.Y originally made for an empty church in Dilston Grove as a video installation for its pulpit played off the Taxi as a distinctive feature of London (as is Speaker's Corner) and in its reconfiguration suggested an opinionated driver haranguing his passenger on the topic of the day!

Elsbeth Owen chose to literally take up residence in the Taxi for a period of three weeks - adopting the role of Material Woman she entertained visitors, generated texts and stories and gradually adorned the taxi with curtains or caparisons made during the three-week performance from donations of materials given and posted to her by neighbours and audiences further afield.

This programme of exhibitions has been supplemented by two Christmas installations and a 2003 New Year show organised by myself in which audiences were invited to contribute acrostic poems spelling out the word RESOLUTION to be transcribed onto the coachwork of the Taxi, many of the contributions referred to the debates at that time around UN Resolution 1441 as well as the tradition of making personal resolves for the new year.

Finally, an open submission postcard exhibition led to the selection of 6 designs for printing and artists residencies in the local primary school resulted in two exhibitions of the children's work - miniature portraits and junk sculpture passengers and a driver.

The response from artists and art audiences both locally and further afield have been clearly enthusiastic and generative. Opening events, performances and artist's talks in the neighbouring Scout Hut have been well attended by audiences in the main already familiar with and interested in contemporary art practice. A third year with a further 5 exhibitions, a week long FM radio broadcast and a final commission has been made possible by Arts Council funding. On these terms its easy already to evaluate Taxi Gallery as a successful, if unusual, artist-led artspace.

But Taxi Gallery is an artwork and I am an artist not a curator.

In, Relational Aesthetics, Nicolas Bourriaud suggests that:

“If a work of art is successful, it will invariably set its sight beyond its mere presence in space: it will be open to dialogue, discussion and that form of inter-human negotiation that Marcel Duchamp called “the co-efficient of art” which is a temporal process, being played out here and now”

So what of my neighbours? the passersby, the people who happen upon Taxi Gallery by chance in their everyday? What of the co-efficient of Taxi Gallery as in artwork within this context and community?

Stanesfield Rd, is a street of 55 council houses – many of which still occupied by elderly widows and widowers who have lived there since the houses were built in the 1950’s having brought up their families here. It is part of an area designated by the City Council as one of urban deprivation – with a higher than average, for the city number, of unemployed, single parent families, pensioners etc etc. Two large council estates separated by the main arterial road between Cambridge and Newmarket – one with a slightly rougher image than the other – I’ve lived in both and Stanesfield Rd is definitely the more genteel of the two – a conservative (with a small c) area, neat front gardens and net curtains frowning on the odd neighbour who neglects to mow their lawn and fails to put their bins out on time. Polite, reserved, preferring to keep themselves to themselves, curbing their curiosity, anxious about the unfamiliar, fearful of the strange. It would be fair to say that this is a culturally disenfranchised community, with little or no experience in viewing or responding to contemporary art practice.

Since Taxi Gallery began I have been keeping an online logbook or diary. These are just some of the small moments of dialogue and human interaction, from the many that I register and the many more that pass me by.

These excerpts are in chronological order >

The gallery has been open for a week ... I've noticed that people walking by have begun to cross over to the other side of the street .... wanting to avoid this strange thing that has appeared? this is going to be a long conversation to get going .... I'm going to have to be patient.

Some teenage girls are gathered around the sign reading the notice – I go out to talk to them, they're bemused, they don't really 'get' it – I've tried to use accessible and plain language without being patronising – I explain that I'm using the Taxi as an unusual kind of art gallery – I'm shocked when one of them asks "what is a gallery?" – this provides me with a quite different base line starting point for the conversation I'm trying to engage with. I had (wrongly) assumed that people would at least have some idea about what a conventional art gallery is.

In area where newly planted trees are regularly uprooted or snapped, bus shelters graffitied and telephone boxes smashed - the absence of any kind of vandalism towards Taxi Gallery is one of the most tangibly positive acknowledgements I've received to date.

My son, whose bedroom overlooks the Taxi, tells me he's overheard teenagers outside on the street at night talking about Matt Rogalsky and Chloe Steele's video projection – "what s that it's 'wicked'

I bump into Anne and John who live opposite when I was delivering invites to an opening and they were very sweet and friendly and said thank you for keeping us in touch but it's not really for people like us - I found that so depressing and also felt slightly guilty that I've imposed something upon their lives that they find difficult and uncomfortable to deal with.

A typical moment has just happened .... sitting here in my front room working at the computer, and I hear a boy's voice shouting "Come here – look at this!" his head is just about visible through the mesh of 'Bound' around the Taxi – he's calling to his family – "Come and see what's happened to the Taxi!"

Marge, my 87 year old next-door-neighbour makes her first comment on an exhibition – she really wanted to tell me that for her Laura’s “Bound” piece is about strangulation – whilst her friend Joan, joining the conversation said “no I was thinking about it this morning – its my confused mind!”.

Just received an email that I find ridiculously heartening

Dear Sir/ Madam,

My daughter, Leah, attend the Abbey Meadows School, and as part of her summer holiday project she has to find out about her local community, as you are part of the community would it be possible if you could let me know how long you have been established in Stanesfield Road, this would be a great help for her project.

Thank-you very much for your time

Tracy

(parent)

The Dustbinman stopped me today to tell me how much he enjoys collecting bins on Stanesfield Rd – looking forward to what the next exhibition might be – he tells me there’s usually a conversation about each show in the Dustcart cab.

Delivering leaflets today and John was keen to tell me that at night the Postcard exhibition looks like lots of tiny windows - he was so excited about how amazing it looks. But as I left he had to tell me that "I still don't understand you know".

During Elspeth’s residency - the postman smiled and joked with her; passers-by have called out – Keep It Up! And good for you! children have dropped by to chat and to give her sweets from their lunchboxes. Whilst waiting for Fish & Chip van one evening Elspeth tells me that Jasmine (aged 10) asked her “Would you call what you’re doing - Having an experience?”

It’s really striking how the junk sculpture passengers have drawn visitors into the garden whenever I glance outside there’s someone peering into the Taxi smiling and pointing. The life size passengers

and driver have something of the scarecrow or Guy Fawkes dummy about them - recognisable popular culture forms, not immediately consignable as "art" - is this the reason for its particular popularity?

Recently I delivered a questionnaire to the neighbourhood requesting feedback on Taxi Gallery so far - I received just 6% back as replies which I have to admit I was disappointed by even though those that I did receive were largely positive describing Taxi Gallery as interesting, enjoyable, a community contribution, a bit of fun, a talking point and particularly mentioning the Christmas exhibitions as being one's that they have enjoyed - which is hardly surprising since a little front garden flamboyance is not so "strange" at Christmas as at other times of the year.

I have found Pierre Joris' reflection on the 'strange' in *Nomad Poetics* a useful one in this context

"The strange in the dictionary is first off the unfamiliar, the previously unknown; secondly it is the out of the ordinary, the unusual, the striking - that which differs from the normal. There are thus already two strangenesses: one that just happens at some point to be unknown but will become familiar once it has been experienced; and another one that is so other that it strikes you, that it opposes your familiarity so fiercely it remains other, keeping its strangeness."

After two years, whilst my neighbours have now become familiar with Taxi Gallery to the point where they are no longer crossing the street or avoiding catching my eye and small moments of conversation, response and exchange are now happening - it is still for them "strange" - or as one of their questionnaires replies stated - different.

I have not made it easy for my neighbours - quite apart from the monthly changes of artistic response to the Taxi - its placing behind the hedge with a narrow entrance demands of them quite some degree of confidence and urgent curiosity. I have imposed Taxi Gallery without invitation and consultation (except for my very immediate neighbours) and am arguably guilty of the charge

levelled at Richard Serra for Tilted Arc of an “arrogant, highly inappropriate assertion of a private self on public grounds”.

I am conscious of Taxi Gallery holding a dialogue with two communities – not entirely separate but only slightly overlapping. Taxi Gallery is not a community art project, it was not and is not setting out to educate, inspire or incorporate my neighbours into art connoisseurs, critics or even artists nor does it dare to presume to be usefully addressing the very real social issues that they face in their day to day lives.

Miwon Kwon talks about the task of today’s site-oriented practice as a relational specificity holding the “adjacencies and distances between one thing, one person, one place, one thought, one fragment next to another.” The Taxi Gallery as a site-oriented experiment has proved a generative and discursive context for multiple artists’ responses to a specific site and has been met with gentle tolerance of its strangeness, tentative engagement and a slow accumulation of small moments of dialogue and exchange. When the Taxi Gallery project draws to a point of conclusion next year I’d hope to be able to apply Kwon’s assertion that “this relational sensibility can turn local encounters into long term commitments and transform passing intimacies into indelible, intractable social marks”

For now the meter is still running .....

## **Bibliography**

Nicolas Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics*, Pub: les presses du réel, France 2002

Miwon Kwon, *One Place After Another - Site-Specific Art And Locational Identity*, Pub: MIT press, Massachusetts 2002

Pierre Joris, *A Nomad Poetics - Essays*, Pub Wesleyan University Press, Connecticut 2003