

The Community Artist`s Tale

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The Relationship between artist and patron can be tricky at the best of times. When the patron/employer is a large corporation the possibility of misunderstanding is multiplied creator and administrator frequently have different terms of reference. However, as a community artist, Lesley has left her mark on Milton Keynes in the form of murals, concrete play sculptures and woodcarvings. Working with the local residents including children, her "gallery" has been the playgrounds, pavements and underpasses of the city.

I came to Milton Keynes after I left art college in 1977. My sister already lived here and I came to stay one afternoon at the end of September as I was feeling a bit depressed as I couldn't find a job. She was working, so I went off for bike rides, one of which took me to Wolverton Job Centre. It was purely by chance I went to the lady on the desk and she told me about this job creation scheme that was at Stacey Hill Studios assisting Liz Leyh, the Artist in Residence at that time. I filled in the forms and got the job. It was supposed to be for a school leaver so the money was dreadful but I was happy because I'd got a job.

Liz was doing various town-art projects, things that she'd make with her team and then put into situ – like the concrete cows – and she was doing the odd school project and a few community art type things. I was one of the team of four on this Job Creation project, three of us had been to Art School so she had quite an accomplished bunch I suppose.

My interest in community art stemmed from a dissatisfaction with the type of art we were encouraged to produce at college – a beautiful finished piece of painting or sculpture, purely for a gallery-going public. I felt this had little relevance to me and became more interested in how art could relate to everyday people. These ideas were all fairly theoretical at College but through getting that job in Milton Keynes I became involved in a practical way.

Liz's contract with the Development Corporation ended in August 1978 and when I joined the November before, the concrete cows were already on the go. Really, they were her parting gift to the city. I don't think they were designed to bring the world renown to Milton Keynes. I think she did them as a bit of a joke and because once cows grazed on the fields that the city was built on. I can't remember the exact reasons, it was a long time ago. Concrete is actually used a lot because it is cheap, versatile, quick and very durable and you can paint it bright colours. You couldn't do bronze play-sculptures.

The Blooming Cows.

Liz packed her bags and winged her way back to America, and practically the same night some person knocked the cow's heads off with a sledgehammer. Meanwhile I'd put an application in to the Corporation to see if I could be funded for a year to do community arts project because I'd done one or two when I was working

for Liz. Anyway, as a result of the blooming cows being vandalised I got a letter from the Corporation asking me to put in a quote for replacing the cow`s heads. I did this and thought great, a bit of extra cash. Now, when they sussed that I was the same person who`d just applied for a year`s funding they immediately arranged that my first project should be mending the cow`s heads. What`s that got to do with community art I shall never know. And then from then on every time something terrible happened to the cows I was always commandeered to maintain them. Once it was three times a year which irritated me as I was only maintaining my own work once a year or less and the Corporation never bothered to tell me if something dreadful happened to my sculptures. If the cows had a spot of damage I had to drop everything and go and sort it out!

By and large my work was given very little publicity by the Corporation. I made them for and with the local communities anyway so it didn`t really matter. I did have one thing publicised by the corporation and I was very cross about it at the time. I did a mural at Great Linford local centre and it took six months to prepare with the children from the Gatehouse School for the Deaf. We did an enormous amount of preparation and design work while waiting for better weather and me and Bill Billings and the children spent months painting it. At the same time the Daily Mirror was running a National mural awards scheme. I thought, great, this could be good for the school and good for me so I sent in photographs and documentation. We didn`t expect to win but we got a commendation which was very good. The Corporation publicity machine found out about this and got hold of the BBC2 news programme that has subtitles for the deaf. It was all quite appropriate. I found out through the grapevine that this T.V. crew was coming and it was only by a stroke of luck that I happened to be at the school that day and I happened to look out of the window. I saw all the cameramen etc, trooping about and I wondered why they hadn`t asked me any questions and suddenly I saw this woman from the Development Corporation publicity office telling them all about the mural, not letting them anywhere near me. I thought it was a cheek but typical. It was great for the school as it was shown twice on BBC2, but it was the way the Corporation took the publicity of the mural over without consulting me that was annoying.

There are community artists in other towns all doing diverse things, but Milton Keynes begs landmarks and that`s what I set out to make. I never did as much as I`d have liked as I was plodding along on my own. The Corporation never had enough money to work with me. As it was, my contract had to be renewed every year until last year when my job finished. I thought the reason was that they`d had me for five years and felt they`d like to fund other community artists but I haven`t seen any new blood as yet.

I think all the projects I did were worthwhile. Each one was tailored to the needs of the people involved and the situation. All the things I did were in response to either a request by the local community or by landscape architects to enhance their play areas. And the local community always participated to a large extent, apart from the griffin because the play area was long overdue to be built and I had to make a griffin off site with the help of the Community Service Order people and Youth Training

Scheme people. But when it went on site I was very conscious that the local people might not want this huge thing dumped in their play area so I got the local school children to design the colour scheme and help paint it. When I was standing outside shivering in the middle of winter I used to wonder about how worthwhile it all was!

Always Very Careful

When I was working with all the kids on the wood carving I was always very careful because some of the kids would be only ten or eleven and I did realise that I had a potentially lethal situation. I used to show them exactly how to use the tools and drilled into them that their feet wouldn't touch the ground if there was any larking about! I must have had lots of kids working on woodcarvings over the years and never had any accidents. In the Oliver Wells carving project we worked one to one with the kids. I had another girl helping me and the kids took turns. The staff and we were very keen that they should all have a go and there were only two who couldn't manage. I had a haemophiliac and a boy with brittle bones working on the carving and they never came to any harm.

I think there should be a place for all sorts of art from gallery art to community art, but my one objection to the prestigious art objects in Milton Keynes like the figure of Eight and the Circle of Light is the amount of money those things cost especially when that money could have kept me in business for another few years! What really gets me is the amount of publicity these pieces of civic sculpture get and the lack of publicity that's been given to community art projects.

I Like My Little House

I now work part-time under Manpower Services Commission in a drop in resource centre for the unemployed, catering particularly for people with learning difficulties so now I find I do very little instruction and most of my time is spent teaching maths and English. It's a job. These days you can count yourself lucky if you have one. I think I'd quite happily leave Milton Keynes if I was offered something good though the idea of packing everything up fills me with horror. I like my little house and garden in Neath Hill; and would be loathe to give it up, especially, if I was to go to say, London, I'd be back in bedsit land like I was ten years ago.