



'With Linda's skills in setting up public exhibitions and my own knowledge in new media, it proved a good learning experience for both of us.'

Professional Development
Case Study:

Cross Mentoring

Artist Support Papers
Tim Skinner and Linda Theophilus

firstsite

'The beauty throughout this project was a mutual visual understanding, and the willingness to impart knowledge.'

Although of different generations, Tim Skinner and Linda Theophilus have both significantly developed their artistic careers over the past decade. Tim, who is in his late twenties, now works as an international new media artist. He is also keen to further his work as a curator. Linda is an experienced freelance curator who retrained as an artist in her fifties. Recognising each others' skills, they decided to share their different experiences as a way to further their professional development in a unique cross-mentoring relationship.

Tim and Linda began their cross-mentoring project in January 2009, centering it upon organising and curating the annual 'Outside' exhibition held every summer in the grounds of Cuckoo Farm Studios, where Tim and Linda are both tenants.

Tim and Linda jointly applied for funding from Essex County Council (unsuccessful) and Arts Council England, from whom they received a 'Grants for the Arts' award of £5,000. This funding went towards:

a) Research and development trips to:

Stour Valley Arts
Wysing Arts Centre
Contemporary Art Norwich (CAN)

b) Commissioning new artworks:

They set out to explore presenting new media work outside through their exhibition. Sound artists Jessica Curry, Stuart Bowditch/Damien Robinson and installation artist Gordon Flemons were commissioned to make new site-specific works.



Outside 09 installation shots, courtesy of Tim Skinner & Linda Theophilus, 2009



c) Costs associated with running the exhibition:

Such as transport, artists' site visits and equipment.

Support in kind was provided by Cuckoo Farm Studios and firstsite.

Cross-mentoring process

'During our cross-mentoring sessions, we adopted an informal approach – emailing back and forth with ideas, and meeting most weeks at the Studios. We often began by discussing what we had done since we last met and how our own work was going. This included talking about opportunities we had each found out about and quickly led to us swapping information about commissions, calls for artists or contacts that might be useful.'

Tim suggested various publications and websites that could expand Linda's knowledge of new media. Linda suggested galleries and other venues that might interest Tim. She also talked to him about the development of his work since his student days, about his inspirations and motivations and it is hoped that she will eventually write a piece about his practice.

Each artist shadowed the other in their area of expertise, to learn by listening and experiencing how each other made contacts both by telephone and in face-to-face meetings. In Linda's case how she approached other arts professionals and in Tim's how he communicated with other artists working in sound and new media. At the beginning of the project Linda mostly took the lead but this changed over the months as they had more contact with the artists, prepared publicity and graphic material, and went into the logistics of setting up the show, when Tim led. A more formal structure was provided by monthly meetings with Laura Earley (firstsite).

'Preparing for these meetings helped us to organise our thoughts. Applying for funding forced us to write down our ideas and aspirations for the project in a structured and considered way. We found that we had compatible attitudes to working together over the year and were flexible in accommodating commitments to individual work, domestic pressures, travel hiccups and illness. This extended into the exhibition period when one of us needed to be there each day. Meeting at the Studios meant we could easily drop in on the other, at a convenient moment, rather than stick rigidly to an appointment time.'

Research and Development trips

An important element of the project was research visits to other organisations both in the region and further afield:

'We decided to visit Wysing as it is a studio complex (though more developed than Cuckoo Farm Studios) with a track record of staging an outdoor exhibition programme. We elected to visit Stour Valley Arts as its whole programme is focused on commissioning site-specific work, shown in Forestry Commission woodland with permanent public access. In both cases we were able to meet with members of staff, and introduce ourselves and our project to them. Being able to talk to the curators gave the chance to gain full insight into curatorial practices and was an invaluable networking tool. Subsequently Tim was short listed for an early career Fellowship with Stour Valley Arts.

Our visit to CAN (Contemporary Art Norwich) was Tim's first experience of art in Norwich. It enabled us to visit a range of venues and exhibitions across the city, from SCVA (Sainsbury Centre for the Visual Arts) to the artist-run Outpost. We were able to see many video, sound and film based works as part of East International. It was an important opportunity



Research and Development visits, courtesy of Tim Skinner and Linda Theophilus, 2009



to discuss our own practices, the variety of city centre venues, and the works we encountered as well as their curation and display.'

A model without money?

'We expect our cross-mentoring will continue in a less formal way, based on the professional relationship we have formed over the past year.

Funding is not absolutely necessary for cross-mentoring. It is based on an exchange; each participant could agree to commit the same number of days contact and advice in a mutually beneficial arrangement. All that is needed to begin is knowledge of what you can offer and what you need.

We had funding towards travel expenses and the visits (entrance fees, subsistence) but a partnership project could build on each participant's own plans to go to other galleries, attend Private Views, visit fellow artists' studios, all of which can be made more cost effective by car sharing.

We took a relaxed approach – although we had some financial support for our time, we met for many more days than were funded. A key benefit of this approach is that our relationship can continue to develop well into the future. As well as conversations about curation, we each feel confident about discussing both the practical and intellectual aspects of our own artwork with each other.

We strongly recommend our 'self-help' approach to professional development and hope that a similar scheme continues at Cuckoo Farm Studios - we would really like to see next year's Outside exhibition being curated by Tim and a new collaborator, to continue the process.'

Artist statements

Linda Theophilus

Much of my work deals with exchange – exchange between respectable daily life, and the repressed, untidy, non-linear, haphazard life of the mind, or between 'female' niceness and unsettling 'male' strength and grit. These oppositions are also translated into the physical aspects of the work – inside/outside, above/beneath, in front/behind.

I am intrigued by the messages and signals held in domestic objects – the aspirations, dreams and tensions that bric-a-brac, textiles and furniture can hold. Using these materials, sourced from junk shops and charity stores, I make assemblages and installations, using juxtapositions of everyday things. I also make site-specific work which increasingly includes video elements, and that draws attention to overlooked or subliminal aspects of a familiar location.

The elements I hope for in my work are a sense of being unsettled, and of the work tugging at something not quite identified, something on the edge of memory.

Tim Skinner

For many years my work has explored the visual beauty generated by sound's unique ability to manipulate water. Over the last thirty months I have spent most of my time working in video, this medium allowing me to play with the sonically formed visuals, creating new landscapes and new aesthetic worlds. Now in 2010 there is a definite shift in appearance of my works, the landscapes becoming more ambiguous, more abstract and so far removed from their original starting point. The artistic freedom I once enjoyed when painting has now returned, and is appearing within my video work.



Linda Theophilus, *White Stuff*, 2009, photo: Linda Theophilus



Tim Skinner, *12:5*, video still, 2009, courtesy Tim Skinner



Since moving into video during the summer of 2007 my work has been exhibited in New York, Copenhagen, Illinois, Melbourne, London and Rotterdam.

Artists' Support Programme: case studies

As part of its Artists' Support Programme firstsite is publishing a series of case studies as resources for artists. These texts are produced in response to professional development initiatives devised and led by artists from the East region, which firstsite has either supported or considers as models of good practice. The case studies are designed to inspire and inform other artists through a combination of practical guide and honest evaluation.

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