

11th January 2010

The Customer is King



[http://2.bp.blogspot.com/_Ey1wyUcG6lw/S0rsrC-tZyI/AAAAAAAAAGM/7RW1OZh5tWg/s1600-h/01_casapretovelho%2520web.jpg]

FrenchMottershead are the London based partnership best known for exploring participatory and site specific art that engages with local communities and explores notions of identity and social rituals. The SHOPS project [http://www.sitegallery.org/whats_on/] is the latest strand in a line of work which began in 2005 at ANTI Festival, Kuopio, Finland. The original Five Shops commission saw FrenchMottershead work with independent shops, who were in turn asked to invite their customers to participate in a group photograph that was then printed and gifted to the shop itself.

Site Gallery, Sheffield, commissioned FrenchMottershead to spend two years developing these ideas in Brazil, China, Romania, Slovenia, Turkey and Sheffield 2008-2009 and the final exhibition of the work from this ongoing project is currently on display in Sheffield; a collection of photographic prints, videos and texts, documenting the mirco-communities surrounding the global shops they worked with. The exhibition, displayed at Site Gallery Sheffield until 13 February narrates these individual experiences and joins them as the photographic snap shots, interviews and supporting texts of the artists time spent in these communities are presented side by side.

On seeing these disparate and diverse shops and their communities from all over the globe, the viewer is presented with a focused subject, from which the human behaviors that connect these shops comes into view. These behaviors are predominately ones borne out of trust, repetition and the familial. They display individual and community identities and the need for social interaction in everyday life. The human relationships that are rooted in the interactions of the shop are seen in this project as equally valued to the customers as the goods of utility the customers are buying; the food, DIY supplies, cigarettes, meat and veg.

The project in studying and involving the communities visited, raises wider artistic concerns than just social relationships and common traits in close knit communities however. SHOPS, treads a fine line between ethnographic study and artistic practice. SHOPS is a site specific piece of work but one where the audience is exposed to the documentation of the process, rather than the real time event itself. How the artists navigate through the ethical and moral codes needed in dealing with these communities is buried in the processes and seemingly insignificant decisions the artists made in how they interacted with the shopkeepers and customers. In their texts exploring the process we can see FrenchMottershead as artists differ in their approach to cultural anthropologist conducting a piece of field research, in that they have complete freedom in how much they wish to interact, if at all, and how they build and then leave the relationship. They are in fact, despite their artistic funding, completely free from beauracroy and codes of practice. They are two individuals making up their own rules of interaction. Which of these two approaches results in the most positive experience for the participants or reveals the most interesting outcomes is however unknown here, as the artists draw no comparisons. But it is nevertheless an important point to consider as the artists, in this case FrenchMottershead, not only rely on input from the community in order to create the art, but the art becomes wholly reliant upon that input.

Finding shops and communities who were interested in the project and willing to engage with the process was the first challenge for FrenchMottershead. During a talk at the exhibition opening the artists comment

that by using local professionals from the town in which they found themselves helped to broker relationships in a short time frame as having only four to five weeks to build a trusting relationship with the shopkeepers and their customers is of course no easy task. The local producers, interpreters and photographers FrenchMottershead brought on board all helped to persuade locals to participate and grant consent for the photography to take place. But it also brought a third party to an already complicated set up, making it difficult to define artist, subject and artwork, as FrenchMottershead, locals and even local artists all played a part in the making of the work.

Enver Korkamz, the butcher in Tepebashi Istanbul was an ideal subject for the project. Many different groups of the local community interacted with Enver and his shop and his willingness to take part and complete trust in the artists, was reflected when those who trusted Enver also began to trust the project and became involved. A collection of photographs were printed for Enver and hung on his Butchers shop tiled wall on the last day of FrenchMottershead's stay in Istanbul. In Sheffield hangs an exact replica of the pictures currently found on Enver's shop wall, specially taken for him of the individuals and groups he interacts with every day.

This collection in particular demonstrates the organic process the artists were working towards in each case study and also the clarity of how documenting a SHOP and its customers is an alternative artistic study and documentation of a community. The prints show the children who Enver was asked to watch, the friends who left their keys and valuables with him, the women who borrowed his stools to sit outside. In this case, it is clear to see how a local shop can become much more than a business. Enver's shop crosses many boundaries as it becomes a place of not only trade for meat, but Enver himself morphs into many possible alternative roles including social worker, youth worker and neighborhood watchman as well as butcher. Yet outside any of these formalised roles, Enver and his shop are here seen as a real life example of how all these roles and community duties can and still do exist in society of their own accord.

The most fascinating part noted in the documentation of Enver's butcher shop, was not the final prints on the wall, but the quote that to gain the communities trust, FrenchMottershead with their local photographer had taken many photographs that the community asked for in the weeks prior to the final shoot. In the style of a true ethnographic study the artists could not merely observe the community, but had to find a role within the group themselves and did so in becoming the village photographer. These were photographs the community wanted taking; photographs of the elderly members of the community, mothers, grandads, friends, who had never had their photograph taken before, photographs unseen here. Taken as a gesture of good will, a building block of the relationship between artist and participant, these photographs exist outside of the gallery work and possibly outside of the artwork - a gift for the community alone. These were the offerings gifted before the artists took a snapshot of their SHOP and community, and the care FrenchMottershead took in building these genuine relationships is the crux of the project that really makes this a sound artistic endeavor opposed to an exploitative voyeuristic one.

Unfortunately these images, negotiated and commissioned by the people of the community, are not on display here in the exhibition, which perhaps makes them even more fascinating than the prints that do hang in Sheffield. Reading about them is exciting in that the text unravels even more of what it means to be a tight-knit community than the artists prints do. The final prints I feel fail to demonstrate the most interesting aspect of this artistic endeavor, that of the negotiation and compromises at the heart of any relationship, and the actual interaction between a western artist and international shop, its community and the individual personalities that make it.


In hearing the artists speak, delving into the online blog and leafing through the catalogue that was made

as an extension of the project, there lies some fascinating content, international comparisons and musings on human interaction as it took place in real time across the globe. But this is an artwork that is not necessarily visual or easily consumed. The final photographs that were printed indeed were also curated by the communities themselves, as the artists only printed the shot everyone was happy with, no one with their bad side showing or pulling a face they weren't happy with. Some of the pictures such as the Sheffield hat shop 'J B Hats 'n' Things' print do let the personalities shine through in their skilled portraiture. But SHOPS is a project with many layers, and as the real art at the centre of this piece lies in the negotiating, chatting, repeated visits and placating of these people, so the exhibition relies on the curation of the visitor, in making sense of all this evidence and material for oneself. The artwork can be seen in the act itself, the live event and the many discussions and photographs taken and exchanged before any official photographs were taken. As in the nature of the ephemeral act, to be the audience is now to be the voyeur of documentation, unwrapping the layers of what once was and trying to capture something of that which can never be recreated in real time.

Joanna Loveday

The FrenchMottershead SHOPS Project is on from 21 November – 13 February 2010 at Site Gallery, Sheffield, S1 2BS http://www.sitegallery.org/whats_on/ [http://www.sitegallery.org/whats_on/]

Posted 11th January 2010 by [Joanna Loveday](#)

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