

Public Kiosk, (Mel Jordan, Andy Hewitt - Free art collective)

AHRC Common Ground Event: the first national gathering of the AHRC Commons, 21st June 2016, York University

Field Notes from participant observation by Roxana Morosanu

We arrive about an hour before the event starts. The site looks a bit under construction/ in progress. Outside, safety tape surrounds a few grassy areas; there's an interesting mix of nature (the lake, vegetation and singing birds) and built environment, with a set of new buildings combining wood and metal. Inside, academics are dressing up their stalls. We register and are given our badges.

The ground floor feels like the exhibitors' room of an international conference: blue panels divide the stalls and are used as background walls to pin posters on. While we dress the kiosk, some of the organizers stop by to say hello and comment on the kiosk: a woman observes that it's higher than the surrounding exhibition panels, and so it stands out from the rest. We are situated on a corner towards the back of the room and opposite the coffee and lunch area. There is a lot of traffic in front of the kiosk. Early on, while we are still setting up, a white-haired man stops to ask information about the Common Ground event. When we point out that the registration and info point are by the main entrance, he says that as we call ourselves a public kiosk he thought we might deal with enquires from the public.

Andy (Hewitt) shows me how to make badges and I start putting together badges, looking up from time to time to see what's happening around. There seems to be a high flux of people in the first two hours; some take a look and stop to have a chat while others look like they are in a hurry. The people who stop during this stage seem to be really interested and Mel (Jordan) has long chats with them (such as with a woman from the Manchester People's Museum). Andy and Helena (Hunter, Tate Learning Department) are blowing up balloons and dressing the kiosk with scarves and slogans, and they invite the people who stop by to choose a badge. It's exciting to see a badge being born! There is a fixed set of operations and movements to be followed all the time – and I devise my own method that implies pushing the handle down on the side rather than in front – but the artwork varies, so every badge is different: you don't feel like you're making the same product over and over again. There aren't five or ten standard types of badges, but their variety, in terms of slogans, colours and fonts, is innumerable. Later, this is what makes people spend a long time looking at the sheets of paper with badge artwork trying to choose one. There aren't any clues on why the badges are on the same page: there isn't an exclusive page with blue badges, or one with slogans on borders, but they are all mixed together. This makes the process of choosing a badge different from the choice one makes in a supermarket: it's not a choice between a set of existing brands in the biscuit section, because the slogans are not logos – they come in all fonts and colours.

While I make the badges, a woman interested in the badge machine asks me how it works and I show her. Later she comes back and makes some badges for us. We start writing slogans on coloured cardboard; there is a list of slogans inspired by the work of Spinoza and we copy them using marker pens. I choose a slogan about the future that I see in connexion to environmental concerns and to my previous work on time; I copy it by hand paying attention to the calligraphy, absorbed in the task. I feel that there is truth in the slogan and that I want to say it, to cling to it, to associate myself to it; and I do this a bit through the act of writing it down. A woman remarks

one of the newly written slogans, about knowledge and agency. She is really excited and impressed with the slogan and asks for a badge with it. It's a longer slogan and Mel designs the artwork to fit on a big size badge.

There is a Skype call with David (Beech) also a member of the Free art collective. Mel shows him the kiosk and he suggests new slogans in relation to the referendum. We write some down and pin them on the kiosk. Later, several people remark the slogan 'Love always wants to remain and never leave' and some take photos of it.

During lunch I sit at a small table across the kiosk. This gives me a different perspective of the context and the dynamic. The people passing by often take furtive looks at the kiosk, even if they don't actually stop. It's hard to not remark the kiosk; when entering the lobby from the back doors the kiosk stands out – celebratory and intriguing in the middle of a mass of educational stalls that look boring in comparison. The event generally feels like academics showcasing their work to each other; there isn't the sense of other audiences, even if the entrance is free. All, or most of, the people who stop at the kiosk wear a name badge around their neck. They are there primarily for their own presentations or stalls.

In the afternoon, as people emerge out of seminar rooms, the kiosk gets really busy. We have given away most of the badges we made in the morning, and now people want to choose and make their own badge. There is great enthusiasm around making your own badge and a small queue is formed. Some ask if they can make more than one, as the slogans are just too good and hard to choose from. A woman from the 3D printing stall makes 5 or 6 badges and later I see her wearing all of them on the lanyard of her name badge. Others who have been in the building all day, aware of the kiosk, find now the time to come by in order to take something home, before it's all over and we start packing up. One guy asks if he could have a copy of the three banners, which are designed in special typography. Keri Facer comes wearing a badge with 'The economists are wrong' which someone else picked from the kiosk and gifted to her, telling her that she should come and take a look at the kiosk. This means that rumours about, and objects from, the kiosk have circulated already.

In the taxi towards the train station I think about the genuine interest and enthusiasm that the slogans and badges provoked, and about the reactions of recognition and complicity at the love-remain slogan. It might be a time when people need more than ever to set - or reaffirm - their moral compass. The slogans talked about a set of moral values that they perhaps used to hold to; but it's not enough to hold without affirming. These values, familiar to many, have not been asserted enough in the referendum campaign; the main arguments were rather technical—economic, not ethical. So maybe people were happy to find those values again at the kiosk, on badges; and to reaffirm them for themselves by choosing and wearing a badge.