Dominic from Luton is Impossible

A few years ago I wrote an editorial for *Art and Public Sphere* journal entitled ‘Heckle, Hiss, Howl and Holler’.[[1]](#endnote-1) When Dominic Allan asked me to think about his work and contribute to this book I immediately thought about my heckler. I am not sure why, as I had always imagined the heckler as a ‘she’, which was part of her impossibility. Then I wondered if her initial appearance in my mind had coincided with my first meeting him, but on reflection I definitely wrote about her earlier than that. I did not even live in Northampton (which is not that far from Luton) when she popped up. Now I believe that it is the impossibility of Allan’s artworks and the impossibility of the heckler that made me connect the two.

Maybe I should start by explaining the heckler and see if you can appreciate the link between the work of Dominic Allan and this fiction of mine. In digging the heckler out of its typical context in comedy I am considering her potential to rethink or ‘open up’ a series of what are hitherto fixed ideas. You see, I think there is something useful in exploring the agency of the heckler as an impossible speaker. And Allan’s work, actions and speech (even meeting him in person) remind me of everything impossible. Who is it that takes over their elderly parents’ house [*Sunridge Avenue Projects,* 2016] to install artworks by others in the spare bedroom, the front room, the bathroom, even the kitchen, and then opens it up for the public to visit, eat lunch and hang out? Allan is *the impossible son.*

**Reclaim the heckler, reclaim public opinion**

My idea is to retrieve the heckler, recover her from the conception that she is a bad-mannered interrupter in order to consider her potential for open dialogue. I want to think through the idea of the heckler in two ways – firstly as an approach to understanding the public sphere and secondly as a potential actor *in* the public sphere - I mean this in the Habermasian sense - the public sphere as the activity of opinion formation, not to be confused with public space or the public domain. Therefore, the heckler can be an actant intervening in a specific situation, at the same time she can also be involved in a long-term approach to rearranging public opinion.

We live with a public sphere that is colonised by the press. Our opinions are continually moulded by what we read in the papers and what we watch on the TV news. Think Brexit - this wasn’t an overnight landslide of public opinion (contrary to Theresa May’s recent rhetoric ‘Brexit means Brexit’,[[2]](#endnote-2) it was only achieved through a slight majority) but was rather a long-term campaign of attrition, communicated through by the media, that systematically eroded, some of, the British public’s belief in the value of our formal relationship with Europe for public benefit. Consequently, when people were asked to vote about whether they wanted to stay or not, 52% were of the opinion, fostered by the press, that there was little reason to continue to belong to the European Union.

**The heckler and arts relationship to the social**

For me, heckling has the capacity to be political beyond a representation of controversial outbursts or an impolite and catastrophic upset of liberal turn-taking in today’s political landscape. I think there is potential to think about the heckler as a ‘device’ for rethinking art’s relation to the social; this can be achieved by conceiving of art as part of the process of opinion formation.

Nicholas Bourriaud’s *Relational Aesthetics* has dominated the idea of social and sociable art practices since the late 1990’s;[[3]](#endnote-3) the notion of the participant within the production of an artwork has been used as a way to circumnavigate the problems identified with the hierarchy and power of authorship. Participation via co-production promotes consensus as a key process of interpersonal relations and agreement becomes the desired end in the production of the co–produced artwork. However neat this seems as a solution to shared authorship, it overlooks a further audience of the newly realised artwork. For sure this process of co-production creates more authors but it does not eliminate the audience, viewer or spectator. Works made in this way can prove to be closer to a rehearsal for agreement than a useful method for the production of art. This looks and feels like a democratic process of art making, but it assumes that both democracy and art production are achieved through the process of debate and that this results in consensus.

For those participating in this process it enables original opinions to change and new views to be formed, but for those looking at the resulting works it does not necessarily foreground the development of further exchanges. What is needed is an interruption in the consensual approach to participation. Affirmative proclamations can embed the earliest shaped opinions whilst controversial edicts can be ignored; for opinion formation we need to state what we believe in, publish it and in this way call forth collaborators.

In *Call Mum* (2014), Allan runs the idea of ‘calling mum’ up an actual flagpole, installed at Cardiff castle battlement. This artwork operates beyond the initial impression of displacement; it is not just the creation of a new meaning by the juxtaposition of esteemed architecture with everyday activity. Neither do I think it should be reduced to a semiological pun or seen as an empty gesture. It is as a genuine reminder – I had better call my mum. As I dial the number I am thinking about how she is; I imagine myself there with her. When I contemplate *Call Mum* I am not interested in the way meaning has been adjusted in the public realm through contradictory signs, I want to imagine my mum. Allan has prompted an action and it doesn’t matter whether I actually call my mum or not. I have been made to think about her.

**Participants turned hecklers**

It’s June 2015, I am at Northampton University degree show, it is the opening night. Without announcement ten people dressed in black enter the car park carrying a banner. Nine of them are wearing balaclavas and one is wearing a clown mask. They are all wearing black t-shirts, which have the logo ‘£45K’ printed across the front.[[4]](#endnote-4) They walk very purposefully to the side of the building. Other visitors and exhibitors start to notice them but they are absolutely intent on what they are doing and do not make eye contact with us. They climb up to the first floor roof, now almost everyone is watching them, they stand in a line, they hold up their banner, which says, ‘Where is our third term?’ The guy with the clown mask lights a flare and holds it up. They stand there just long enough to gain our attention and for us to read their banner. The Head of Fine Art is furious and the Assistant Dean of School appears to take command. The police are called and arrive after the event looking slightly bemused as the happening is explained to them. They relax when they realise we are at an art school exhibition opening and there is no real threat to anyone’s safety. There are no accidents but I am sure there is no risk assessment either. Allan has been working on a ‘third term’[[5]](#endnote-5) social project with 2nd year Fine Art students and I slowly realise we are stood there viewing the result. Are these protestors the result of a participatory art project? Has Allan turned the impossible participant into the participant as heckler?

It occurs to me that in this artwork Allan has produced a method to transform consensual participation into opinion formation. Allan is an *impossible tutor.*

The impossibility of how Allan’s artworks come about is the agency of his work; I cannot consider them as formal or ironic. They seem to be genuinely impossible outbursts, explosions aggravated by contemporary issues surrounding the way we have to live. Allan’s works are impossible because they are funny, open, courageous, contradictory but always hopeful.

For me, the heckler is the impossible speaker, the unacceptable talker, the bigmouth in the crowd, the whistleblower, the trouble-maker, the barracker, the jeerer, the gabber, but make no mistake, the heckler is never understood as the schmoozer or the gracious, she is always part of the hoi polloi. I know now that she comes from Luton.

Allan, like the heckler, is not interested in rational reasoned exchanges and his works are not limited to the straight forward use of language. Consider bodily acts, make speech acts as well as speeches, generate sounds; say Yuck, Argh and Err, shout Boo, sigh loudly, breathe heavily, hiss, howl and holler, shriek, scream and cry for the right to interrupt and please do as Allan does, always out of turn.

Mel Jordan

1. Jordan, M, ‘Heckle, Hiss, Howl and Holler’, *Art & the Public Sphere*. Vol.1, Issue. 2. pp. 117- 119. Bristol: Intellect, 2011 [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Brexit Means Brexit [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Bourriaud. N, *Relational Aesthetics*, Dijon: Les Presses du Reel, 1998 [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. The estimated amount it costs to undertake a three-year degree course in the UK. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. The 2nd Fine Art students at Northampton have to vacate their studio spaces and give workshop priority to final year students, a usual happening in Fine Art Courses up and down the country. The Fine Art staff at Northampton University initiated a third term project so the students had alternative resources.

Reference: Jordan, M (2017) *Dominic from Luton is Impossible,* Dominic from Luton, (ed Allan, D),pp 10 – 15, Sunridge Avenue Projects, Luton, UK. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)