

The Politics of The Gesture

An Open Seminar with Andreas Lang of Public works

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Kim Trogal (**KT**): I should say that the title of the session was chosen by me, and Andreas has kindly agreed to reflect on his work in these terms. The theme is forming part of a chapter in my PhD; the overall thesis is about the ethics of care and for me, public works is a good example of a practice, which is looking after relations with others. So in your work I was interested to find out more about these small-scale actions and also to understand the larger context of your projects.

Andreas Lang (**AL**): I'm aware that some people have seen this five times already, so I apologise if I repeat myself! I have put together a few projects that illustrate on the one hand our practice but maybe also allows us to reflect on specific examples of what a gesture in the context of our work might be.

There is a specific interest we have developed that deals with artefacts and developing products as part of a methodology of participatory process and how these products might inform a larger space or address a larger scale. In a way that's what we are working on at the moment, trying to find how these small actions often embodied in a product can start to become bigger. And that 'bigger' can be in terms of a network, in terms of the scale of a building, or it could be in terms of the duration of a project.

So, I think I'll just dive in, but please interrupt or heckle or whatever! It would be quite nice to get some critical feedback.

So public works, we are four artists and architects, and we have been going for ten or fifteen years. It all started quite informally and it grew into a studio. So we don't really employ people, it's all pretty much on freelance and more like collaboration, we would like to call it. So it's quite a flexible studio situation, which we all like but it also limits you in terms of production, of larger buildings sometimes.

I've just gone through a few situations that are important, which I think you could say are gestures in some form, and we had feedback that they were important for some people.

The first one is me as a student. This was the first gesture I could think about. We were asked by our tutor to implement a conflict in the city and I offered free compliments. And it's kind of that moment where you place yourself in the public realm, with an intention you are quite open about. It's quite an awkward moment, when you go out and do whatever you do, like offer free compliments. But the experience, once you get over the awkwardness, is always quite rewarding. So a lot of our projects deal with the idea of intervening in public space with a very

personal agenda. Trying to test something and trying to look for something, some kind of a dialogue. Doing something together in the public to test both what's possible, and to maybe create something new.

KT: Can I just comment on the slide? There is a definition of gesture here- "an action performed in the knowledge it will have no effect"...

AL: I mean that's taken from the dictionary, and its interesting because its also a dilemma. Things that are quite ephemeral, they are not being measured as such. It's often quite difficult to evaluate and judge the long-term effect of it. But it's also a critique that it's not having an impact.

KT: Following some of the readings I've done on gestures, or non-verbal communication, they are always about relationships and so there is always information in that. So even if you get "no effect" it still maybe tells you something?

AL: But a lot of our work is to do with inviting people to join in, so the way you approach someone, the body language, the way you prepare the situation, that you have food and all that, it all becomes quite crucial. So there is a lot of communication and there is a lot of invitation to participate, but in a way how you instrumentalise these situations I think is difficult. Does that answer the question?

KT: Yes, but I was also thinking that if they have 'no effect' it could be seen as 'tokenistic,' but a token can be a proof as well.

AL: I don't subscribe to that, I think they have a value and they have an impact but just that they are not easy to measure or to quantify.

Peter Blundell Jones (**PBJ**): If that's a dictionary definition, then that's a usage of the word, which is you might say an empty gesture or 'only' a gesture. So it's rather negative, which the dictionary has to list. So maybe the question is can a gesture ever be empty?

AL: I guess where we come across it is in evaluation. We do these projects where people have given money to us and they say 'what's the outcome?' And how do you start measuring it. This is an ongoing discussion. It becomes nearly accountability.

Doina Petrescu (**DP**): Maybe this is about gestures in an architectural practice context. Where you have to evaluate the outputs and how do you deal with this.

AL: Maybe I'll go on, it's only the first slide! When we set up, we deliberately wanted to be quite open with our studio situation. Because we noticed that the studio we shared with architects become quite hermetic spaces quite quickly. It becomes about a specific form of production on your computer, drawings and things happen in a very abstract world of the screen, and quite far away somehow. Its not these spaces that maybe you are used to in the

[teaching] studio where it's a lot about the discussion of ideas and a certain optimism and excitement. And we felt quite disappointed by that. The space set up with the enthusiasm, coming out of college, became this nine to five workplace, where people were sitting with their headphones and there was no discourse any more.

So when we set up our own space we were quite conscious to subvert that. One way was to make the space public every once in a while, to invite people in and to host people. So we are hosting these 'Friday sessions,' which are once a month, where we never present but we are the host, we ask friends to come and show their work. It's a setting which is not institutionalised, between practitioners, between peers. Sometimes five people turn up sometimes fifty. We always by beer, sometimes we make soup. The feedback we get is especially from architects, who are quite astonished that it's the most amazing thing ever. With artists it's much more common that you discuss practice and you go to openings much more and events where you mix and mingle. But it seems in architecture these networks are quite inaccessible. So it's become a way of accessing our network and opening a form of generosity I guess. It's not only the beer but it's also that a lot of people that come are quite competitive about their jobs. It's quite a competitive environment, so there's a lot of feedback we get in which it's a nice moment in which to meet again and talk among peers. So I think that's a strong gesture for me that we do as a practice. Even though it might not have been our motivation.

I'll show some projects, which you may have seen five times, but you asked to see them! And they start to talk about different moments.

So the mobile porch is the first project we ever did straight out of college. And it was really about providing a platform in public space on which things that are maybe often hidden, or do not have a space in the public realm can be brought out, and tested I guess.

It's a mobile structure that roamed for two months under the Westway, and it could do all these acrobatics, open up and flip over, and provide many different kinds or types of spaces. And we had a mobile phone so you could call us if you want to use it. I think we had 50 activities over two months, and they ranged from really quite small things, well I show a few. But we were on site everyday for these two months and a lot of it was just us hanging out with this weird thing, being approachable. So the discussion always started with 'what the hell is this?' and then you start to get into a dialogue. In a way, the way you present yourself on site, a certain openness or approachability, with a certain curiosity is...well when I was thinking about it, suddenly everything turned into a gesture.

So that's the object, but I think these objects in architecture, the way it presents itself has a role in making things accessible, open and approachable. The other thing is that we always try not to be too precious. A lot of the situations we've worked in was where architecture was copyrighted, so the user can't actually invent it any more. And I guess that's also a form of a gesture that, you don't about it, you not allowed to touch these walls, so in a way the opposite was for us to build an object that had a frame and then the skin is quite cheap, plywood. And we could just cut into it, drill into it, draw onto it. Of course when the object was delivered it was this precious, newly designed object, it was quite difficult to put your marker to it, because you are messing it up. I think there is this moment where that becomes quite important. What kind of preciousness you communicate.

So just a few examples: this is one happy hour, where we offered alcohol for free for one hour, which is an instant success- of course! But there was also of course the worry that 'you are going to attract all the bums and homeless people, the drunks...' but these are the moments which are quite important where you test assumptions people have. Of course there were hardly any drunks, but there was always a mix of quite diverse group of people that would join into the event quite randomly. The cross section of nearly all the events was completely a random group.

This was Nicoline van Harskamp, who offered a swap shop, its on Portobello market, so it's a highly commercial area. And she offered a swap shop where you couldn't buy anything with money but you could trade it. And it had to have equal sentimental value or emotional value. So the whole thing was a negotiation of how much it's worth for you. There are super swaps, where you really have to give something quite precious to you. The super swaps are the ones that are in high demand. This polka dot jacket was in high demand.

This is another artist who name I forgot unfortunately, a French artist. She invited people to sit with her in silence, until they are fed up. [Shows small video clip].

What's more important is the space it allows these gestures to take place. Its like a platform for communication I guess but also a way of trying to do things in the public realm which maybe have gotten lost or ... It adds a playful way of interacting, intervening and maybe shaping public realm. We've always described it on the one hand as objects and as a toy. We quite like this idea of a toy, often a toy doesn't explain itself necessarily, it explains itself through you playing with it, and you give meanings to it. So the program is in a way a bit ambiguous, but its being invented as you interact with it. Also the fact that it roams. In that case it was quite interesting that the landlord commissioned us and it became quite an interesting way for them to explore again, what their public realm is. And they are more in the mode of maintenance I guess and not in the mode of encouraging interaction.

KT: Who was the client?

AL: Westway Development Trust. They own a one mile long strip under the Westway. It was an art project and arts projects are often open briefs, which are quite a difference to architectural projects, where you are invited on the basis of your practice and your previous work, but not a preconceived idea about what you should be doing. So you can invent the project in a way. There are often some parameters set by funders but it's not a kind of straightforward service that you might have in architecture. So it's a way of testing ideas for us. Are there questions?

Adam Park (**AP**): I was just interested in how those sorts of commissions, those sorts of work, is it only accessible to you because you have the 'tag' of artist? Whereas in some architectural work that you do, maybe commissioners would be scared off if it was just architecture that you did? That architecture is about buildings and that's not what people want?

AL: I think it's often that you do one project that leads onto the next. And we started with the threshold of art and architecture, and that leads to getting known for a certain kind of work in certain contexts. But it's becoming

increasingly normal that architects operate in these kinds of contexts, nearly as artists. It's quite common, I don't think they are scared of architects. But the preconception is still that architects do buildings. So it takes a bit of convincing, and previous work helps.

Tim Chapman (TC): I don't know what the aim of the developer was, when bringing you in. Sometimes I feel that these smaller projects, although they do try to appeal to a broader demographic, really do attract a certain class of people, middle, creative classes. And perhaps isolate even further those who wouldn't want to be involved. Is this something that you think about in your role?

AL: Its not a developer that invited us and it wasn't with a view to develop. The Westway Development Trust is a very interesting trust because it's a prototype of a trust that developed in the 1970s after they built this motorway, which was quite a brutal exercise. It separated the communities, and the communities claimed the land back under the motorway, for community use. They set up a trust, which over the years has become quite interesting, that has been replicated in different parts of the world. So it's not a profit driven exercise, it's a community enterprise.

They had an arts programme and an arts officer, to think about artistic interventions in the public realm and that's how they approached us. We were quite interested in the way they manage. After twenty years you have a bit of a routine and you've grown. Its often banal things like asking the staff to help us push the mobile porch through their land and their being quite reluctant to start sweating in their shirt. By having that quite direct involvement with the public realm which is physical, as awkward as me pushing something and then your friend sees you and thinks what are you doing? Breaking this boundary has been quite important.

In terms of who the audience is, its been extremely mixed. I agree there is a danger it becomes white, middle class, but I think that in many of our projects this hasn't been the case. Sometimes it helps that we are German in a funny way, because we fall outside that class thing a little bit. I speak with my German accent and in a lot of situations it has been beneficial I think. So learn German!

I think this idea of having open platforms for exchange, which is quite informal, exchange is quite important. A project that followed a few years later where we tried to see how we can create that exchange in a different way. And we thought of an economy, that it would be really nice to invent an informal economy. We were invited by the Serpentine Gallery in Kensington Gardens, for a project, which was a residency. They invited us, again with an open brief, to hang out and develop a project. We wanted to deal with the park as a public space, introduce a different kind of exchange economy to it. We also had the idea that maybe we can collect different narratives of the park users in objects and then trade these objects.

So the project is called *park products*. The second phase when it went live was a market stall that would tour the gardens and it would have eleven products and they were not for sale, they were bartered. And they were developed with different user groups of the park. The idea was to work with the resources of the park, they could be cultural, physical, political, social whatever and they get embodied into the products. I'm just going to go through one or two products quickly.

They are the gardeners, one of the groups. You can see they all have their arms like this [folds arms], some of them at least. We negotiated with them half an hour every week, that we can work with them, and it was quite a process. Going from them being quite cynical about working to defending, if someone would say something negative about what they were doing.

Again its this awkward moment, where you come with this quite abstract idea and talk to someone who's completely not interested in design or art or architecture, and somehow try dialogue with them. I think the moment where often with consultation or often you come and you want something. In these cases the minute you start bringing something, where it's not so much about you getting, but you giving it becomes quite interesting. In this case we collaborated with product design students at the Royal College of Art, which is next to the park, and so is a resource of the park in a way and we teamed them up. So it was us, the gardeners and the students. And the students would start to make prototypes, and that was the moment everything started to shift in terms of conversation.

The gardeners really wanted to work with the compost, the Royal compost, which is collected from all the royal parks. It was collected in a space very close to the gallery but invisible to the public. So it's an everyday space for the gardeners and an everyday situation, but only to them. The idea of working with the compost was also to talk very directly about their understanding and their involvement with the park. So we invented the 'Chompost Bar' which is like a chocolate bar, made out of Royal 'chompost,' and that was one of the products. The nice thing with this, we tried with the gardeners to produce it. So they became producers of their own product. We made a mould and they pressed it, with their digger. So every night they would squeeze six 'chompost bars' with their digger.

The idea is that you have a very localised production and dissemination. You tell me where the gesture is within this?

DP: Well you have chosen this set of users of the park, who are usually not seen and not considered as users. They are those doing the reproductive work, and are invisible. So to see them is already a gesture I think. Then to make them producers, as you say, and not just maintainers, of something that became a currency, is already a gesture.

AL: I think so. The currency was always set by the group. In this case the gardeners were fed up with being asked directions for the Diana memorial, which was their main interaction with the public. If you came to the stall and you like the 'chompost bar' if you want to have it, you have to find a gardener and offer your help for five minutes, ten minutes whatever the gardener decides and they signed a note and you can retrieve your chompost bar.

Every object had a different task attached to it, or a different currency. It wasn't great help for the gardeners, but it's a gesture of recognition, acknowledgement or interaction.

DP: And also the compost, which is the dirt part of the garden that smells, has been brought up to the front, and became chocolate.

AL: They are very proud of their chompost bar!

KT: Did the designers of each product decide on the task?

AL: It started with walks in a way, walking and talking about the park. Then we and the designers started to suggest themes and topics and then at one point made prototypes. But it also depended how proactive the groups were, some other groups were much more proactive in making things. It depends who leads the design process. Is that what you mean?

KT: I was just wondering more about how this negotiation, the bartering I mean, took place. For instance, who set the tasks or rules, I suppose.

AL: It became a discussion. In the end it was a group of people working on it, us, but mainly the gardeners in this case. Mainly in the group. What's interesting here is that the role of who's the expert gets completely opened up, because they are experts *in the garden*. In a very specific way, how they deal with the park. And product designers are experts in product design, but they were equal.

There is this picture here, in Japan of a product designer, submitted the project for a competition and got shortlisted and suddenly realised he had to list all the gardeners as authors. Which for us is interesting but for him it was quite a surprise. So it is about a multi-authored or co-authored objects.

That's the final publication, which is a kind of product catalogue when it was live. I just show one other product which is the magpie jewellery. This was developed with another set of gardeners. There are a lot of magpies and they collect shiny things and integrate them into their nests. The gardeners harvest these nests every once in a while. The idea was you get the magpie jewellery and you inscribe a wish on it and you lose it in the park. With the hope that the magpie will pick it up and put it in the nest. And it's made of silver, so it's quite precious, obviously it being Kensington,

DP: Then the gardeners are finding it in the nests...!

AL: But the biggest shock for a lot of people was that you can't buy anything from the stall. So there was a lot of interest. People are so used to purchasing things, and you couldn't. And then you finally get that piece of silver and you are meant to lose it, in order for a bird to find it. So its quite optimistic and I haven't found a nest which has the magpie jewellery integrated into it. But in a way, the gesture, or provocation, for you to go to the trouble of purchasing something that you should lose, the optimism that's behind it, I quite like. I think that's a kind of gesture.

DP: Of introducing another economy, and a logic and affect that goes with it.

KT: But a real gift economy, because you're not accumulating, or not holding on to things.

AL: But a lot of people liked the idea, a lot of people didn't unwrap it, they just liked the narrative associated with the idea, mentally, you lose it for a bird to pick it up. So I think there is something about this, in this image this creates which is important. How you think suddenly about the park. Of course there's an area where most of the magpies nest so it becomes a localised in some way.

?: Did the gardeners carry on with the magpie charms after you'd finished?

AL: We were quite keen... as the Royal Parks were undergoing a change that they have to generate more revenue, and they partly did that through souvenirs, and we had a lot of conversations, why not use this method of creating different kinds of souvenirs. But it wasn't fitting into the corporate guidelines,

?: Do you think its those corporate guidelines that stop a lot of projects that you do, that stops your initial gesture being sustained or transformed into something else by the people you work with? Is it something you come up against? Maybe that's when gestures start to become perceived as empty gestures, if they have a set lifecycle?

AL: I think it becomes quite difficult to institutionalise them as such. I guess that's what would happen. We went back a few years later as a chance to revisit the project and we talked to a lot of people who had participated. And we found quite a lot of people that had made links through the project. But it was not so much institutionalised, although in a way it did because the park and the serpentine gallery didn't have much contact, they didn't collaborate a lot. Now they've set up a residency project together, but whether that's down to us? But it was definitely one of the icebreakers.

There are people who met in the weirdest ways through the project and are still in contact. But it's quite difficult to quantify it or claim that. The long term is the question we are struggling with and how to do it. With the mobile porch it was also that we were on site every day and we were animating it, with this one, we were already trying to set up a mechanism where we are not on site everyday and its not about our presence. So its already one step removed.

KT: Did you ever try to map out the relations that came from the project, either by accident or... perhaps in your book?

AL: Yes, we made these drawings, for us it's the space that's quite carefully constructed. So that's the situation you will encounter, there's one invigilator explaining what all these products are and it's quite a complicated story. But it was quite successful. People would come and go off, do things, come back, look at things. So there was a constant telling and retelling of all these different stories about the park, from the gardener to the catering staff, to the people who hug the tree. For us that's kind of an image of the architecture we are quite interested in. Hardly any physical space, but there are lots of relationships that will happen and are being constructed. So when we went back we tried to find a way to graphically describe it. Or how that project would look like.

We started really by revisiting situations which have become irrelevant and marking them in a way. So that [image] was the opening, that was quite nice because you couldn't see the objects at all, just people, so the project completely disappeared. These are all the spaces in the serpentine we used, the only space we didn't use was the gallery space. It [the drawing] is just marking out the different spaces. This was the first project that went beyond the fence of the serpentine. The local links with institutions, that were mainly made with informal, accidental encounters. The official routes hardly worked. We would write an official letter to Royal College, it was more once we had met someone. One of the gardeners was playing in band with the departmental chief of the Imperial College and that's how that link came about. And that seems to have been quite the standard, very informal networking.

The canteen that became a design studio so that transformation for half an hour was important. I didn't show this project, but that was about trying to get a squirrel to jump through hoops, and people trying that for two or three hours at a time, so this route became important. All these different moments we tried to trace and that's an overview, of that project. I think it fails on many levels as a mapping. It was an attempt at trying to visualise the moments that make that project.

KT: perhaps what's difficult to represent is the qualitative aspect of your work. For instance, speaking about mobile porch, you mentioned that it was through your body, body language that you were able to be open, I don't know if you are even conscious of it when you do it?

AL: Yes, I think its often nicer represented in a film. I don't know. You [Doina] do a lot of amazing mappings. It's quite analytical. In later project we're trying to set up the collecting of the data and which data you collect into the making of the project. This [park projects drawings] was in a way in hindsight, trying to describe something.

The project I'm going to show now is trying to embed it into the website, and that we are starting tracing some of the connections. So you understand how all these little actions start to become part of something larger.

DP: I think mapping in real time is certainly one way of tackling this with the possibility of recognising every moment and all the contributions.

AL: but it's quite laborious

DP: yes, and its maybe not appropriate for everything,

KT: Does the method of recording negatively interfere with what's taking place? But that seems relatively discrete...? Could it be the way of trying to record overrides what you're doing?

AL: Well it's nearly a project in itself. Its partly to do with resources, its fine to film to document one meeting but you have so many meetings and so many informal encounters, you really have to be so strict reminding yourself, going sitting down, uploading this or that onto something, formatting it. Whatever! It's quite a task.

AP: But if it's a film, it's already quite an authored, edited thing?

AL: We struggle with how you represent our kind of architecture. And we've done a number of projects around it. But in the end when you build a building and you have your fantastic rendering it always more instantly convincing.

PBJ: Why do you need a secondary record? If you have a social event, a birthday party, for example, that exists for the people who did it, and in their memories. So why is it necessary to reproduce it? Does the thing itself get displaced into the record and the record becomes the primary reality of it?

AL: I guess what we are interested in, is not so much the retrospective description of it, but finding a way of representing the kind of space we are interested in and also to propose it further, to project it further. It was a study of something that for us was quite interesting as an architectural space- how do we represent it in order to also start using the same methodology, maybe of drawing it, to think it further.

For example we did one project in Folkstone, which was to do with the Folkstone regeneration, and they have a cultural led regeneration. They initiated new buildings, like in a new concert hall, which is instantly recognisable as a new value you get, or that's what you think at least. But they also initiated what you might say 'soft spaces,' for example Folkstone art festival, where 25 artists worked for a year in Folkstone and produced these art pieces. Much more ephemeral and much less recognised as contributing to the regeneration. They set up a lot of spaces, they set up a lot of these experiences you are speaking about, where people get involved, and how do you start to represent that? So it has an equal value to the rendering of the concert hall?

For us that's interesting, to make that visible and therefore valuable in that discussion. So its not to re-celebrate, or re-document. But to represent its value.

PBJ: But when you had your stone-age ritual. You had to remember how to do it again, and maybe it would be slightly different each time. But there was the event and the re-enactment. There wasn't a pseudo-event carried as a permanent record.

DP: I think here, its not only about events, but about I would say, social architecture, about another way of understanding architecture that is not only about temporality, but its about showing all these other things that contribute to architecture. By representing it, also you learn about it, and you understand it in a different way.

PBJ: I appreciate that but how do you stop the substance of it being lost, by being taken over by the secondary record? Where the secondary record becomes the essential version rather than the thing itself?

CB: I think that's a by-product of our understanding of what a record is. I'm interested in the survey, and the idea that you can record a site and take that away and work with that, rather than the actuality of it. I think there is a shift in value to that document that we have to question. I'm interested in performative archaeology where practitioners are trying to understand a past event that possibly no one witnessed. They build up what they call as 'thick

description,' which they do not claim to be the event. It's a completely separate thing. It's a site in its own sense. I think we should say that the site has shifted. And that's where we could create proposals rather than trying to recreate the original event.

DP: I think we should come back to the discussion, as we are slipping a little bit into a discussion about representation.

AL: Ok. I'll show two more projects, which are in the making, which basically draw from this project. They are not about representation, but trying to deal with the idea of working with artefacts, with trying to capture the relationships to a place, and between people and an object. And how these come together to form a larger space. Park products came together as a market stall, in Colchester we are trying to deal on the scale of a city. To invent a space which deals with hosting. And the International Village Shop is really trying to set up an international network of practitioners who deal with a form of co-authored artefacts.

DP: I think what is very important to say, is that the object or product is the kind of core that ties things together, not the building.

AL: It's quite nice to capture, I don't know, scales, or the way it's produced, with the narratives, they can be passed on. So with the magpie jewellery it also can travel.

DP: And it's always at the body-scale, so you always keep the body-scale within all these other scales.

AL: Which is a limitation and also what we are trying to find out. How far you can push it. So the idea with Colchester Inn is very similar to park products. We're working with ten groups in Colchester to create a new space, maybe as big as this room, a bit smaller. That will become a freestanding, pavilion like structure, which is a guest room, so to speak for Colchester. So it's about hosting, where people can host each other, not Colchester hosting tourists, but maybe also. The cinema group can show their films there, its open. There are very few spaces, I've found in Colchester where you can do this... like a guest room but for a town.

We wanted to construct it with ten groups, with each group we went through a process of designing one of the components of that space. At the moment we're working with four groups, that's why I have this visualisation. We have a curtain, a kitchen unit, we have a cloud, which is the roof made out of knick-knacks and we have a time zone. So these are the focal points so far. I'll just go through one or two of the products, so you get an idea of the process. It's really not concluded, so it's a bit rough around the edges.

So the first group we worked with was the Colchester Chinese Cultural Society, which is not only Chinese people, but its set up by the Chinese community in Colchester as a way of promoting their culture. This was really an invitation by the commissioner, that we should work with them. The meeting starts with a reflection on how everyone hosts each other. That is cultural, but also the little gestures we have, from providing food, to keeping the

door open, and there's always the most obvious- the cup of tea but the more you talk about it and reflect, slowly differences and particularities come out that are maybe specific to the group.

With the Chinese Cultural Society we started to have lots of dinners, every meeting was in someone else's house, which was quite unusual. And everyone tried to outdo the one from before in making the best dumpling. The meetings would start at 4pm, end at 12am and they were brilliant. Suddenly we realised that they don't know each other so much and they never go to each other's house. That's why they became such long meetings.

As a reflection on different ways of hosting the two that really stuck out were this idea of showing each other quite staged photographs, of the wedding, you can see the wedding photos in the background. And the idea of giving a souvenir, often that had to do with the decorative knot making of the Chinese tradition. Anyone Chinese here?

?: yes

AL: Are you married?! Do you know about decorative knot making?

?: Yes but we don't do that, young people don't do that. We just use Western style normally.

AL: They were quite keen on it. So this was what slowly filtered out as two topics to work with. There was a series of workshops, to try to imagine together, collaging or trying to draw. Also we invited experts, once the direction of the project is more clear, we found a master in Chinese knot making in Bristol and she came and gave workshops. For us, it was to understand, not that we become experts in knot making but more to understand the symbolism that lies behind it.

It's not only about the Chinese culture, but about the Chinese culture in Colchester. So there's a big maritime history, or context, and this is Beth Pawson in Ipswich who has a knot museum. This room is a museum and there is a collection of maritime knots that often have quite a strong relationship to Colchester. So it was a way of bringing these stories together.

So we started knotting and made quite a lot of prototypes. The idea was to make a piece that acts as a picture frame, that is somehow knotted and can come together as a curtain. We started knotting, some of the knots were done by the master, but we had to translate it into something which can be produced in our budget. Also we moved away from this craft element and became more abstract. So we invented this knot frame, which is made of Perspex, it can be sold and bought as a product and the proceeds go to the project and the society and come together as a curtain. This is testing it in the gallery.

That's the first building component in a way, the skin is knot-making but also it suggests a programme that when the pavilion is live it will be something about staging photographs, that will go in there. So it also suggests an activity. This is with a group of students from the 3D, there the discussion pretty much revolved around the front room, that when the queen comes to your house you put her in the front room! and it's this room where you host. Often you

have very specific pieces in there that trigger conversation, conversation pieces like the lamp that has some specific narrative. So we traced that into knick-knacks. The idea that you have a visitor and through an object it breaks the conversation, and it might reveal something about yourself. We started collecting knick-knacks of Colchester, knick-knack might be a way of making a conversation piece. We started collecting and its been quite interesting in there, because people get quite offended by the term knick-knack and people had arguments with their wife of what are you doing, this is not a knick-knack... but there was this moment where we used the gallery to test it. So things happen here, we talk about it, then we get the gallery for three days but then we make it public. This is quite an important moment where you test it in a dynamic of public, where people pass by, and respond to it. They tell you its crap, or they ignore it, or they engage with it. And it was surprising how much people engage with it.

All these knick-knacks were given to us. So it started a dynamic of people giving knick-knack and wanting it back. This was a guy who found this in the back of his van and has had it for 20 years and its completely useless and worthless but it is something quite valuable to him.

The building component will be the roof, made out of knick-knacks, so it's a knick-knack cloud. We've worked with a programmer where we have these RF ID tags, each knick knack has a tag and you put it on a reader and it gives you a little bit of the narrative that's recorded. So the cloud starts to speak. That worked amazingly well, so we tried it, set up the technology so in a way you take one knick knack and hear a little bit of a narrative of someone and how 'he got it from his auntie who is now dead... and doesn't dare throw it away' and people start to construct that kind of narrative through knick knacks. That going to be, hopefully, the roof, collecting a tonne of knick-knacks from Colchester.

We are also quite keen to imagine what kind of activity or programme can develop out of it. So for this we had a series of collector talks, so this topic of why do you collect, who collects, what do you collect became quite interesting. So now we're working with the local museum who of course has a collection. Here Phil has a collection of Pez, and on this evening there were five collectors and they talk with other collectors, and they were in outrage when he just took the box and dumped them [the Pez collection] here on the floor and all the collectors went... [sharp intake of breath!] because he is not precious about it. Then this is an artist project, he's trying to buy up all these figures, I don't know what they're called, in order to see if he can affect the value of them! I think he has 200 of them, they're quite rare!

The way the project works is that we have a two week-long exhibition every now and then to test, to assemble it, so these programmes are a part of the exhibition. When it goes live next year we hope this idea of collectors discourse and amateur collectors coming together will become part of what the Colchester Inn will host. Also the man who had this argument with his wife, and was really against the term knick-knack, he wanted a deeper kind of conversation. So he's been organising these knick-knack encounters, where he invites, quite formally, people to bring an object that has meaning to them, and talk about them. And you think it's quite naff, but actually they work amazingly well. There are five-ten people, they don't know each other but through that object there is really quite a personal conversation developing. In a way, I don't know how to take it back to gesture- you can do that?

KT: Well I guess it's that the objects allow the opportunity for a conversation to take place. But... actually, I wanted to ask you, in one of your other projects I forget the name, where you had a blue float, and helped build up again a collection of objects, which were very carefully displayed with a story with each of them. Looking after a collection like this is a lot of work and I wondered what happens to all these objects, in that project you created an archive, and I wondered what will happen here?

AL: In Egremont the folk archive, that was a man collecting, he started the collection. He has an interest in the collection, and we made the collection public and in a way extended it. So the collection is with him. The collection was specific to the town, so it has a value to the town. Here we are working with the museum and we tried to convince them that they should get the knick-knack collection afterwards but they don't have space.

PBJ: Because they're not valuable enough or because they're not within the museum canon? It's an interesting frontier, and at what point can they, the objects, cross it?

AL: They have weird objects in there, which you would consider valuable in. And she [the curator?] really wants to have an iPhone or an iPad in it. So they collect things which are very everyday, objects you discard. I think it's the volume of it. But people, I don't know what it is about Colchester, it has so many knick-knack shops. There seems to be a lot of that stuff there. People would come in, and in four days we met four pig collectors, collecting ceramic pigs, plastic pigs. So maybe there's a way of giving it away.

The last group I'll show, we call them random individuals as they were just interested in participating in the project but weren't formulated as a group. We made this public tea party and the idea was to connect to the Roman past of Colchester. We built a clay oven in a day and made a picnic. So it's the idea of making an oven and cooking in the oven. And we made an invitation, which is printed from tea consumed by the commissioner, and then silk screened onto the invitation. So in making the tea party a number of products started to appear, from an oven, to tea ink, you can see the doily boards, cast of material, on top of the doily boards a recipe book. One of the things we did do in one of the exhibitions, we invited people everyday at three, to bring a cake- so a signature cake. The mayor came and brought her cake, everyone across the board, from organisations to individuals brought a cake. So everyday at three, there was a gesture of having cake. I guess what was interesting about it, two things, one was the commissioners 'first sight' are building a new building which no one in the city likes, politically it's such a hot potato, and there was a common saying that what is 'first sight' doing anyway, they are just drinking tea and eating cake. So suddenly we are offering cake at 'first sight,' so it was kind of a nice pun. But the fact how people suddenly brought their cake and talked about food, and there's a Colchester pudding, and there are certain foods which are quite specific to Colchester suddenly being discussed and brought out into the open, and shared. This moment of sharing everyday at three became quite important. We made a giant cake stand these are the doily boards.

This is the website, which as I said earlier we're trying to record all the stages as the project takes place, All the moments of hosting, whether you give me a cup of tea, make an amazing cake, or buy tea at the vending machine, we're trying to draw on the typology of all the hosting moments that came through the project. And finally the last project or should we talk?

CB: I'd like to ask something. It strikes me that out of these products and interactions that you provoke. That there could be spatial proposals, larger, more permanent perhaps, spatial proposals coming out, if they were nurtured, funded, resourced in any way. Are you actively looking for those opportunities?

AL: For us, the opportunity, we want to work with 7 to 10 groups, each making components and really building that building, so that will happen next year. I guess you imply that they can be even bigger proposals coming out of it. I don't know.

CB: It's a really interesting way of making a piece of architecture and on a permanent, larger scale. That you're letting things emerge and attracting resources I suppose and support through testing small things. And so it goes completely against the way that we're used to commissioning architecture; a client who decides what you're going to do with which site, what's going to happen.

AL: In this project the scale is set by the pavilion-like structure. I guess what we are doing in Hackney Wick would do that, but it is quite difficult to find funding. It's quite difficult to articulate that process even to funders. In a way, each collaboration you would have to commission separately. At the moment, one thing we are trying to do is negotiate a piece of land on which this thing can play out. But the ambition, the interest is to think it out in the long term and bigger, in the development of a site.

RT: You spoke about the scaling up and continuity between different projects, I think you said something like, it transforms into different things, bigger, a network, it could be a building or duration. Are there projects you've simply completely abandoned and never returned to in any way?

AL: Yes. I mean they're projects that don't work out. They don't succeed, in whatever way.

RT: So they don't deserve nurturing in any way?

AL: Hmm. No, I guess what we're trying to do now... We invited to a lot of the smaller projects, to propose something for a festival, of Canary Wharf for example, who invited us to do something for a three-day event. We used that in a way to buy equipment or test an idea, which then continues in another project, which is maybe more self initiated. For example we did these seed bombs with a press, we bought the press for Canary Wharf, but that press now lives with us in the garden [abbey gardens], in a social context, where we've started to produce certain products with it. That's how we seem to operate more and more. We try to network and overlap these different projects so they feed into ...

RT: So they have their own economy within your practice?

AL: Yes, and they feed the practice, the interest of the practice in a specific way. And there are some contexts we've explored, for example working in a corporate context, which just didn't work as a project at all. And we haven't had the ambition in a way to go and find out again how we could make that context.

KT: Which project was that?

AL: It's called future gallery... and the name itself is so awful! It's already the compromise between corporate communications and us. Yes, it didn't work and for reasons that are very easy to understand but it sometimes happens. It often happens when the expectations are quite different.

KT: In the case of Colchester Inn, I just wondered, you are funded through an arts commission? [inaudible!]

AL: Yes.

KT: You seem to be quite mindful of the politics of the place. At the temporary urbanism discussion organised by Florian you spoke of the economic issues around the temporary use of land, such as holding or increasing value for developers, gentrification and so on. Do you think that these more socially oriented projects, participative projects also have a function in that way? That they have a kind of currency?

AL: I guess you could argue in Colchester there is a role of mediating for the organisation. They have really a difficult situation publicly with the building they've been building, which nearly bankrupted the city. So we act as agents and there is a certain role, the project places on mediating. But I don't think that's why they invited us, it's not the intention but its part of it. And I'm aware of it. So they have a political dimension....

PBJ: Do you just move from one project to the next? Without really knowing what it's going to be? Is your role as catalyst in how you interact with these situations?

TC: Yes, do you see yourself as that catalyst? Or do you see yourself as a co-creator? In the way you could refute the role of the architect over the next 50 years. John Thacker has said the role of the architect will become not like a form giver but like somebody who can influence large groups of people into action. So is it like a catalyst, or co-creator where you don't have control over large groups of people?

AL: I think a bit of both. I don't think we go from project to project. I think there's a clear, growing intention of what we would like to do, to test and to apply what we have been doing so far in specific contexts. Making that transition from being commissioned to self-commissioned, it's slower than we thought. We're writing funding applications. We restructured ourselves into a different kind of company, to access different funding. In a way that is improving slower than anticipated, yet at the same time we're being invited to more projects. The way we use these projects has changed, that we direct them differently towards our interests. So they're not discrete projects by themselves hopefully they feed into a line of thought and feed each other. There are some practices, which are very good at being a catalyst. But we are also quite keen on collaborating. So it's really a bit of both.

PBJ: It seems that there are the events, there are the places, but you don't seem to be interested in the long-term specific of the place. Where its come form or where its going. That doesn't seem to be the primary focus?

AL: There is an interest in the long-term transformation of the site. If I could show it, one of the projects is the transformation of an existing site into a community garden, which is long term. Again the objects play a role in networking this site, extending it. Also, the work we are doing in Hackney Wick now really has this interest of adopting a site and transforming it long term. And that's where the discussion last came up, about the temporary use of sites, which at the moment is happening left, right and centre. It's quite critical and how you negotiate. But I guess in these proposals you are right. The long term is not so strong, it's unclear. For instance in Colchester Inn its unclear how long it will be up, it can be one year it can be longer. But that's the limit of it. It's quite a contained piece of architecture that might be able to travel.

JU: I guess with Park Products, compared to other Serpentine Pavilions, was in fact more long term in terms of relationships and impact?

AL: But there is something. We've developed this land [Abbey Gardens] into this garden, a harvest garden. And that was me as a resident not as public works. But when we got the site it did bring something into the equation that I'd always neglected, the fact that when you have a piece of land people actually feel quite strongly about it and want to participate in shaping it. So that experience for me was quite interesting, suddenly how the land focuses a community as well.

In Hackney Wick we tried to negotiate this, to get a piece of land, which hopefully is not one of those owned by a developer who wants to keep it warm for five years. So there's a politics in what kind of site you use. Then through that start to apply a methodology, in layering it.

KT: This is you as public works, trying to get the land?

AL: Yes, as public works. Although it's a bit unclear. At the moment we're talking to the user group of a park and maybe we will work with them, but it's linked to the transformation of a site, through a series of smaller collaborations and actions.

KT: In fact I live quite close to you, I live in Hackney. What's been apparent for a long time really is the way public funds are used to lever gentrification. It's quite documented. I just wondered how you feel about that and how aware you are of that when making these objects. Do you feel that it ever becomes instrumentalised in another way? Have you ever observed that?

AL: No I haven't yet. But yes, building relations has a value and who owns that value, or rather who profits?

KT: Yes that's what I'm interested in, and why I put the word politics in the title for the seminar.

AL: Yes I'm interested in this too. On this site [Abbey Gardens] for example we manage to secure it long term because it's a scheduled monument, it's on top of a ruin. That is quite lucky, but also important- it *can't* be developed so easily and it's in public ownership. What Canning Town, for example, is doing now is that they make sites available for temporary use left, right and centre to re-brand the area through temporary projects. And I find that quite cynical in a way, I can understand it, somehow, from the council's point of view. They don't have money, all they have is sites to make available, but they seem to import a practice and community to activate these sites and create some kind of value that is ultimately used to create a situation for a developer to profit from. I find this quite difficult. In Hackney, what's happening a lot with the Olympics, a lot of the engagement is really supporting the Olympics, very top down.

We've done consultation in a way, but we very quickly withdrew from it because I think the process is quite critical. Consultation happens in the beginning and then a lot of time passes, nothing happens and there's very little feedback loop and there's very little of actually doing things together.

JU: Very often these things are used to diffuse situations. I went to a workshop where some artists said something like 'we went and some people we're going to be evicted from their houses. And they were really angry! So we did this really nice project and they were really nice to us.' Of course the people didn't want to be rude to the artists, because it wasn't their fault. But effectively they were used as a kind of barrier between two sets of people to diffuse tension. It just seemed wrong, actually they had a right to be angry, placing the artist into that situation.

KT: To come back to gestures. When you were speaking about the monument. This is maybe used as a gesture of protection? Some things need protection [like a right to be angry!]. This is something that can be named. Also, when you were speaking about objects too. The way they cross boundaries or thresholds, making personal relations possible, with narratives, that wouldn't be possible otherwise. This is a gesture that connects maybe?

PBJ: Well of course objects used to be primary carriers of memory, along with buildings. You had relatively low powers to transform the environment, building methods and so on. But the buildings were the only semi-permanent things that you had with your oral culture, everything else was in the memory or enacted physical ritual. Then the object with their memories were tokens *in that world*, and there were far fewer of them and they were much more valuable, because people had to make them and maybe they carried more memories? I certainly think that architecture carried much more because you inscribed all your ideas about the way the world works in it. It was an ideal vehicle for that, to demonstrate to your children how things happen. The buildings and objects were mnemonics. But with the knick-knacks that's kind of coming back! Also as one gets older and the things around one's house are all the things which have memories attached, how long you've had them, who they belonged to before, where they came from. Maybe they can have quite an oppressive quality too? You know, you can't throw that away because it's from aunt Maud and she's now dead, it's my connection with her...

AL: But that's quite funny because in the project we get knick-knacks for that reason. Suddenly it's a place to give it to, where you don't throw it away! And its still has a role! Maybe I'll end with one gesture from this. So that's the

monument, we first started this project with very small-scale events on the street because we didn't have access to the site. And then documented them on the website and that was really to make them public, make them visible. The other thing is that it's quite a rough street, a burnt out car once a week, fly tipping. I used this old crate and built this basket in order to harvest the apples of the apple tree, and create a little gesture of sharing it. And people said, that's not going to last, it will be gone in a week and it lasted two years, that basket. And now it's developed into an honesty stall. From that, when we got funding we [public works] developed these baskets, which lock into a mobile honesty stall. Also, when we built a new gate on the left, these baskets are locked into this gate. So that's a gesture, doing something quite direct, testing it and now it gets translated into this. We don't make money with this, it's excess produce. I mean we never check how much [money] people leave but that gesture is quite important for the street.

PBJ: That's fantastic! Also, if that's a permanent transformation in habits...

KT: But I think it's interesting the way the level of respect people would have anyway, is often underestimated.

AL: Probably they would do. But! Every time I go out of my house and I see that the basket hasn't been nicked I am quite happy! These have been here for over a year and there was not a single issue.

PBJ: they realise you're policing it?

AL: No... I mean I'm not policing it in that way. I walk past it every day...

KT: I think it's that people recognise a gift?

AL: Yes, I think there's something in the gesture of generosity that people appreciate and they can read in the aesthetics of a place.

KT: I've also been looking at a project in Todmorden, a local food project, where they are also growing things publicly and giving them away. There are groups that look after different bits, but everything is supposed to be everyone. What's interesting is that often people don't take it because they can see the work, but they will take things like probably apples for instance, as they fall naturally and will grow back next year...

JU: But putting it in the basket though! Because its still in the ground in Todmorden. So it's really framing it as a gift.

AL: We have a similar problem. In this garden you don't have a plot, you do everything collectively. So there's a group of maybe 30-50 people that garden on a regular basis. They put a lot of time in, but they don't take enough produce. So we have too much produce left over. That's common to gift economies. People are more willing to give than they are to take.

KT: When I went up to Todmorden somebody asked me if I'd taken anything, and no of course not, because I haven't contributed anything. In their project, sometimes things are quite marked, you know who is looking after what. So if you know children have grown a load of leeks, you're not going to take it. What's interesting in your case, is that it did last. I think people have respect for the fact that you offer.

AL: I have one last gesture! This is the gesture in motion. So we started to produce other products for the garden, it's not only food. We bought this press and we started pressing these seed bombs. So the idea is that you garden remotely. It's basically soil from the site and it came up as an idea quite early on, when we didn't have access to the site, and thought maybe we could use seed bombs. So soil from the site and seeds from the site travel in a way. We did a number of walks in Hackney Wick, and workshops where we used the press, as well as starting to plant this route of sunflowers. I think the gesture I like, is the act of throwing, where everyone feels quite naughty! It's quite weird, because you have quite a nicely designed block. You have to break it and discard it. There's something that seems to be wrong when you throw things in the city, even though you are planting things. So it's always quite interesting, I've done three of these walks. At the beginning people get their ammunition and at first they are quite reluctant to throw and then you can't stop them! And then they get quite inventive into how and where to throw it. It's charmingly militant!

But I got this picture the other day of someone, who photographed a poppy that has grown out of a seed bomb. He wasn't part of the walk, so he hadn't thrown it, but he still noticed it. Which I thought was quite nice, this recognition came back. So that's my last gesture.

KT: Well, thank you very much. It's really appreciated, it's really good.

AL: Your welcome, thank you for the questions!