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Snappy Valley:
Photography and Socially Engaged Art Education

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Introduction

Snappy Valley is a process led community photography group I set up in October 2019 in Todmorden, a West Yorkshire town in the North of England. The aim of the group was to engage the local community in a photography project with a view to develop participants' individual creative practice as well as create a socially engaged and collaborative body of work. This collective work would in time, reflect the group's interests and serve as a document of a particular time and place. The name *Snappy Valley* reflects the geographical location of Todmorden and is a playful reference to the BBC TV series *Happy Valley* (IMBd, 2014) set in this area.

As part of this thesis I will discuss the planning process and influences that determined the initial engagement strategies for *Snappy Valley* and evaluate how these strategies developed during the project. I will also look at participatory pedagogy and socially engaged art education approaches employed throughout the project. I will examine how the initial strategies were adapted to engage the group during lockdown and evaluate the impact of transitioning to online engagement during a global pandemic. I will also consider the wellbeing aspect of a socially engaged practice and the therapeutic impact of photography. Furthermore, I will consider to what extent the project sits within a broader socially engaged photography context and analyse current limitations defining the subject within the discourse. Finally, I will evaluate the success of the project from my own position as a practitioner, educator and facilitator and from the perspectives of the *Snappy Valley* participants.

Background and Context

In order to gain a better understanding of the project and the ideas that informed and shaped this process, it is important to note the social context in which *Snappy Valley* was formed, including my background in community engagement and education.

A former West Yorkshire mill town, in recent years Todmorden has experienced an increase of young professionals moving into the area due to low property cost and its accessible geographical location providing an easy commute to Manchester, Leeds and Bradford. The town is renowned for its community activism, most famously as a birthplace of *Incredible Edible*¹ which over the years has become a global guerrilla community gardening movement planting vegetables and fruit trees in unused public spaces. Having moved here in Spring 2019, I started planning my own community engagement in a form of a photography group; on one hand to develop a socially engaged photography project as part of my MA studies, but also to become part of the community by sharing my skills, experience and expertise in photography. Rather than taking pictures simply as a technical skill, I wanted to use photography as a tool for participants self-discovery, to connect to others and build bonds between the individuals. Even though socially engaged projects ‘depend on a community for their existence’, they also function as ‘community building mechanisms.’ (Helguera, 2011, p. 9)

Pablo Helguera (2011, p. 30) states that in order to have a successful socially engaged art project, there has to be an understanding of the social framework in which the project will take place and the way it will be negotiated with the participants. Taking this into account, it was difficult to plan for *Snappy Valley* with a particular demographic in mind. I placed adverts on Facebook groups dedicated to Todmorden communities with an invitation to join a local photography group where participation was open to anyone with any interest in photography.

On the surface Todmorden is an idyllic place to live with affordable housing, beautiful countryside and a lot going on culturally, but there is a divide in the community between the

¹ <https://www.incredible-edible-todmorden.co.uk/>

original population and the new settlers, sometimes referred to in a derogatory term as ‘offcomedens’. The popularity of Todmorden and the increased numbers of new residents is gradually leading to gentrification. Politically the new community members are predominantly liberal, whereas comparatively, the traditionally working class Todmordians lean towards the right. Much of the community activism taking place is organised by the new community members, which typically engages those same new community members. Expectedly, all the participants that chose to engage with *Snappy Valley* had moved to Todmorden in recent years.

During the planning process I also reflected on the many community arts, education and outreach projects² I have been involved with in the past and how they have directly influenced and informed my approach to social engagement. I have worked with a range of communities from different backgrounds and abilities that has given me an understanding of various engagement strategies, issues surrounding safeguarding and assessing participants needs in different situations. Through these experiences I have learned good engagement practices and have reflected on strategies that had minimal impact on the engaged communities. I recognised that in general, a lot of these projects were ‘trying to fulfil quotas set by grant makers’ (Helguera, 2011, p. 23) in order to justify the funding through the benefits they provided for the involved communities. Although the activities were educational and offered a promise of some social benefit to those involved, the actual value of these engagements appeared to be nominal and mostly symbolic. Often it was difficult to quantify any genuine impact due to the short-term nature of these projects. Instead, evidence of the engagement such as social media coverage, blogposts and photographed activities, were used to validate the impact.

The realisation that many arts organisations deliver their community engagement and outreach programmes in this symbolic manner had left me disillusioned by the practice.

² I worked with young people as part of *Arts in Action* project exploring ideas of identity and media images, introducing the participants to creative ways to express themselves through photography. I also planned and delivered twelve week photography workshops for the community as part of Swansea Metropolitan University’s *Saturday Art School* for children and adults. I worked on the *Olion* project aimed at young people that were not in education, employment or training, on making a documentary film and assisting other creative workshops. I was Arts Outreach Coordinator at a Swansea based public art organisation, Locws International, where I planned and delivered an outreach programme for the local communities that included taking complex themes in contemporary art and making them accessible to the public through workshops and art events. On moving to Manchester in 2014, I volunteered at Venture Arts supporting photography workshops for adults with learning disabilities.

Helguera (2011, p. 13) states that a ‘nominal or symbolic interaction’ described above cannot be compared with an ‘in-depth, long-term exchange of ideas, experiences, and collaborations’, which constitutes a socially engaged practice. Undoubtedly, short-term projects have the capacity to benefit those taking part, yet it was clear that in order to have more meaningful impact, it was necessary to engage the participants over a significant period of time.

My aim was to allow *Snappy Valley* to develop organically, taking into account the group’s demographic and dynamic, and responding to participants’ interests. Instead of providing a formal photography education to a community group, I was looking to employ socially engaged approaches rooted in pedagogy as an engagement tool for this community. By doing this, I could ensure that the project included elements of formal teaching and learning that would equip the participants with technical photography skills, but also would enable them to become ‘fluent in photography’ (Photo Pedagogy, n.d.), that is, to articulate thoughts, take part in discussions and use photography as a tool to represent wider issues and ideas. This framework in art education was established by Paulo Freire’s (1972) theoretical viewpoint of employing pedagogy as a vehicle for social transformation and even liberation. Freire suggested that critical understanding comes as a consequence of a ‘problem-posing education’ (Freire, 1972, p. 56) where the students become ‘critical co-investigators in dialogue with the teacher’ (Freire, p. 54). Even though *Snappy Valley* is set within a pedagogical framework involving a volume of teaching and learning, the most important part of the project lays within the process itself, in participants ability to express themselves through images and in the stories that accompany the photographs.

Socially Engaged Art Education

In order to have a working understanding, I would like to clarify some theoretical perspectives that informed the engagement strategies for *Snappy Valley*. Socially engaged practice, also referred to as socially engaged art (SEA) includes ‘any artform which involves people and communities in debate, collaboration or social interaction’ (Tate, 2020).

Therefore socially engaged photography (SEP) is part of the SEA discourse, but uses photography as the primary medium for the engagement. As an artist I have established a photographic practice specialising in portraiture, employing methods of documentary and performance through still and moving image. In contrast to SEP which involves working together with a community collaboratively, documentary and portraiture photography often represent people and communities on their behalf, portraying a subjective viewpoint of the world. A socially engaged practice is process led, participatory, collaborative and community building, and the process of the engagement is often valued over the visual outcome. It creates an ‘emancipated community’ where participants willingly take part in a conversation which enables them to ‘extract enough critical and experiential wealth to walk away feeling enriched, perhaps even claiming some ownership of the experience or ability to reproduce it with others’ (Helguera, 2011, p. 13).



Figure 1

Following on Freire’s pedagogical framework, both art and education hold the potential for social transformation. Socially engaged art education (SEAE) involves ‘community as part of the learning environment’ (Schlemmer, 2017, p. 16). This includes participatory pedagogy

which creates a space for democratic teaching and learning that ‘aims to promote the ideals of equity, equality and co-agency’ (Simpson, 2018, pp. 7 - 8). Therefore, participants shape their learning and contribute to the curriculum through active participation which involves pedagogical strategies such as situated learning, dialogical discourse and teachers as problem posers. (Schlemmer, 2017, p. 11)

I embraced a SEAE framework to structure the project and deliberated strategies described above in creating a curriculum for *Snappy Valley*. This included PowerPoint presentations that considered the history of photography and contemporary practice which provided context through examining the function of photography and its position within our culture.



Figure 2

Snappy Valley meetings took place monthly in a local pub, The Golden Lion, which offered an informal setting and was already hosting many other community interest groups. Each meeting was structured as a lecture exploring a particular subject such as self-portraiture, family, community, strangers etc. I chose these topics in this particular order as I wanted the group to learn about the subject gradually, turning within and considering self-representation (*Figure 1*), turning to their families and exploring their relationships through photography (*Figure 2*), representing their considered communities (*Figure 3*) and making connections through photographing strangers (*Figure 4*). We looked at contemporary photographers that examine these particular themes in their work, such as Cindy Sherman, Nan Goldin, Richard Billingham, Emmet Gowin and Martin Parr, introducing the group to the many different working strategies employed in representing these topics. Each subject we studied then formed a photographic assignment for the following meeting where the images were shared

with others and opened for peer critique. This approach functioned as an informal assessment to evaluate the progress of the participants, and an opportunity to offer critical feedback.

Throughout the presentations the participants were involved in a continuous discussion and dissemination of the theme. The dialogical focus as part of SEA creates an environment for interaction between the participants and the artist, where the conversation is as important as ‘the “work” itself’ (Kester, 2000, p.5). Through this process participants developed their critical cognition and were introduced to the visual language within contemporary photography that would allow them to consider a range of approaches in their own image-making process. In response, the group created images that were critically considered and that functioned beyond the immediate visual quality of a photograph. Moreover, discussing the monthly assignments allowed the group to learn more about one another as the images revealed personal stories of participants lives and experiences. The dialogical approach together with active participation within SEAE encourages ‘an active vocabulary designed to engage, to interact, to exchange, to connect, to communicate, to interrogate, to resist, to question, to provoke, to instigate, to enable, to negotiate, to participate, to collaborate, to reciprocate ... to transform’ (Schlemmer, 2017, p. 17).



Figure 3

From the start *Snappy Valley* participants were encouraged to share presentations of their own interests or creative practices that were not always strictly photographic. Contributing content to the monthly meetings provided a sense of agency and an opportunity to take ownership of the project and deepened an understanding of the personal and creative experiences of others. Therefore, the process of ‘learning about others, while at the same time

reflecting upon one's own identity' (Schlemmer, 2017, p. 11) enabled the group members to consider social issues from a broader perspective. 'Consequently, this framework combines the participatory nature of the artistic encounter together with critical, reflective, and social actions that are pedagogically oriented' (Schlemmer, 2017, p. 17).

Within the first six months *Snappy Valley* had engaged eight core participants that had attended and contributed to every meeting. The group consisted of men and women aged 28-56 with little or no former education in photography. In April 2020 the group was set to make collaborative collages that would represent Todmorden, embracing the surrounding landmarks, exploring the rich local folklore and reflecting on participants own sense of place. The group also anticipated to take part in a collaborative photography session in a newly identified development site in the centre of Todmorden with a view to engage the local community in a conversation surrounding the site. However, these plans had to be put on hold when unforeseen circumstances took place in March 2020 as a global pandemic posed unexpected challenges for *Snappy Valley*.



Figure 4

Lockdown

Lockdown meant we had to abandon our original plans and change the way in which we were working. In order to continue with the project, from here on all engagement had to be done online. The importance of the group had also gained a different meaning as the online meetings offered some sense of normality for participants during a time of disorientating collective uncertainty.



Figure 5

Throughout lockdown *Snappy Valley* met online every Tuesday using the online platform Zoom to facilitate the meetings. The first few weekly meetings served predominantly for wellbeing purposes, to come together in an online space and provide support for one another whilst adjusting to the new circumstances. Even though the content of the online meetings developed organically overtime, the social and the dialogical focus of *Snappy Valley* formed a significant part of the practice. Furthermore, my engagement strategies became flexible and process led, considering participants needs and responding to the level of interest in set activities.



Figure 6

At the start, the group attempted some collaborative strategies such as creating collages remotely, but the process proved to be too complicated due to technical limitations and not

everyone was able to participate in these activities. Instead, I changed the approach by inviting the participants to capture their personal lockdown experiences through photography. Over the following six weeks *Snappy Valley* created a wealth of images that reflected participants' daily lockdown routines, representing the subject from a range of approaches such as personal or objective, poetic or documentary (*Figure 5*). In addition to weekly meetings, I also offered optional online one-to-one reviews to discuss individual practices in more detail considering composition, editing and potential for development. Having an ongoing assignment with a weekly peer critique and discussion enabled participants to learn through practice, developing their individual approach more critically. The group gained a deeper understanding of photography and explored the semiotic nature of the subject by creating images that function as a signifier for a broader idea or a feeling. The photographs also became a starting point for a conversation that reflected on participants individual and collective experiences which gave an opportunity for the processing and accepting of the unusual circumstances.



Figure 7

In addition to image making and peer support, the regular meetings encouraged the group to start conversations that considered some social and political issues locally. The group discussed *Snappy Valley's* role within the broader context of Todmorden communities and deliberated on how to use photography in order to challenge current divisions. There was an agreement that the incentive for change would come from our own attitudes and behaviour. The group recognised the importance of having an ethical and collaborative approach when taking photographs within the community. This included having open conversations with community members and creating a space for others to express themselves. This recognition formed a breakthrough for the group as the participants themselves were looking to employ socially engaged strategies in approaching this issue. Even though the divide in the

community is both cultural and socioeconomic, the participants were looking to potentially transform the situation through the use of photography. A socially engaged approach can bring an insight into a particular situation by attaching itself to ‘subjects and problems that normally belong to other disciplines’ (Helguera, 2011, p. 5). These critical elements of the practice provide a ‘rich territory for examination’ (Schlemmer, 2017, p. 8) increasing reflective understanding that can make the problem or a condition more visible.



Figure 8

As lockdown eased, documenting our daily experiences became less relevant and there were fewer images brought to the meetings. It was important for me to recognise when a particular approach was no longer working and the group’s interest in an assignment was declining. In response, we started experimenting with various participant-led collaborative image-making strategies. These approaches ranged from taking an image at a particular time every day (Figure 8) to a photo-association game passed on from one person to another. The participants also produced content for the meetings by creating a weekly image quiz of close-up photographs taken of domestic objects in their homes.

One of the early ideas when planning for *Snappy Valley* was to invite local photographers to deliver talks for the group, but lockdown had made it impossible. However, now that all meetings were taking place online, I was able to invite both national and international practitioners to join our meetings and share their practice with the group. At the end of June 2020, we started hosting guest speakers including Rosie Day³ from Oregon, US; Mario

³ www.rosieday.com

Popham⁴ based in Manchester; Pål Henrik Ekern⁵ from Norway; Megan Powell⁶ in Manchester; Layla Sailor⁷ in Hong Kong and Darren O'Brien⁸ based in Sheffield. These practitioners work within a range of photographic disciplines including art photography, documentary, photojournalism, fashion and socially engaged practice. The talks gave in-depth insights into individual projects, highlighting different subjects and issues the practitioners choose to focus on. Having a direct conversation with these guest photographers enabled participants to ask questions and learn about various working strategies and gain a deeper understanding of the realities of working as a photographer professionally. The guest practitioners set mini projects for the group who responded to their practice by exploring these ideas locally (*Figure 14 & 15*). As a result, the group created strong and considered images that reflected their own individuality, but also represented Todmorden and its residents. The online environment had given us the opportunity to involve other practitioners and essentially, this approach created a unique learning environment which otherwise would not have been accessible for the *Snappy Valley* participants.



Figure 9

All visiting photographers dedicated their time to *Snappy Valley* voluntarily and as a sign of appreciation, the group collaborated on creating a *Kindness* greeting card (*Figure 9*) which

⁴ <http://mariopopham.com>

⁵ <https://www.preusmuseum.no/eng>

⁶ <http://www.megan-powell.com/>

⁷ <http://laylasailor.com/>

⁸ www.darrenjobrien.com

was printed and posted to all guest photographers. The word ‘kindnesses’ has become synonymous with Todmorden, it can be seen everywhere; there are large *Kindness* banners dotted around the town, local businesses embrace the *Kindness* message and small *Kindness* signs are visible in residents’ windows. The incentive for this *Kindness* movement was Todmorden residents' response to the national rise in hate crimes and racist incidents after the Brexit vote in 2016 (Halifax Courier, 2020). For *Snappy Valley*, this seemed the obvious message to share and each participant photographed one letter from the word in a way that also reflected their own interests or personality. The card was designed to mirror the online meeting screen layout which has now become a symbol of lockdown. The printed volume of cards was split between the group members for them to send to their friends and family, and to give out to the community of Todmorden as a sign of hope and community spirit.



Figure 10

Throughout lockdown some participants developed cohesive bodies of work whilst others experimented from week-to-week using a range of photographic approaches. Group member Patrick captured documentary images of Todmorden taken on his daily dog walks creating a detailed portrait of the town and its residents (*Figure 10*). Patrick discussed some of his work in an online interview: “During the first few weeks when life felt pretty strange, I started to have a theme which was about barriers, because I felt like most people were quite separated from the rest of the society. Isolated. A little bit lonely. Even being outdoors with my dog felt eery quiet on the streets and although that changed overtime, some of my favourite photographs are from that early period where the world felt surreal. I haven’t looked at this image (*Figure 11*) for three-four months and it actually quite unsettles me now. I can see pain in there and uneasiness. It is funny how time changes how you view things sometimes.

I think we did quite a good job of capturing the oddness of lockdown. It was a relief to have something to do.”



Figure 11

Patrick also reflected on how his perception of photography has changed since joining *Snappy Valley*: “Historically I have walked around with a camera and if I see something interesting, I will photograph it. I am much more aware about context now when I am looking at an image. But also, when I am taking it and trying to think more about it. I go, well ok, what am I trying to say? And also, whether that’s always relevant or not because I am not the other person watching it. So, I have to be more conscious of what they might be thinking of it as well. So yes, I definitely learned something through that process.”

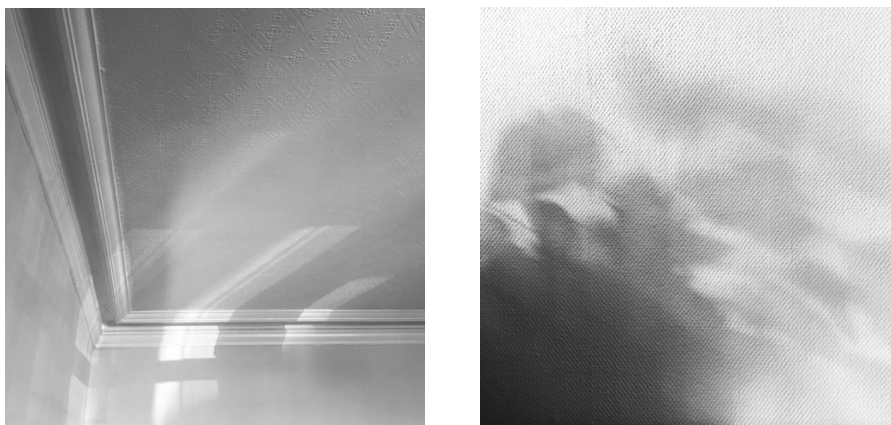


Figure 12

Nerissa’s quiet and personal reflections of still lives, shadows and rainbow diptychs offered a more intimate and poetic response to lockdown. She reflected in her interview: “I was thinking about the symbolism of lockdown and it was at the time when everybody was clapping for the NHS and rainbows were quite a big image that you could see in people’s houses everywhere. I had the idea of representing the rainbow, but actually photographing

inside and outside (*Figure 7*). It really kept me going at this time and it overwhelmed me because I could not stop looking for details and it made my daily walks a lot more meaningful. I am not sure that I would produce this kind of work now because we are out more. When you are confined to your house you start noticing all the really small details that you wouldn't normally look at or notice. These images (*Figure 12*) feel very much of the time and that's passed now."



Figure 13

Jerome developed a series of self-portraits (*Figure 13*) challenging the stereotypes of masculinity and race representation. He talked about these images in his interview.

"I got out of the shower and saw myself in the mirror, it occurred to me that if the mirror was a photograph, I have never seen a photograph like that; of somebody of my race, of somebody who is a man and somebody who does not have a perfect media body. I got my camera and I wanted the images to be quite against what you would typically call masculine. There is a space within the masculinity for something more than what we see. Before *Snappy Valley*, I was never interested in taking photos of myself, I was never interested in representing myself. I was used to photography represents things rather than myself."

The impact of *Snappy Valley* becomes evident in these interviews. Here the participants demonstrate a critical awareness they have gained during the project, contextualising their

experiences through images and considering concepts surrounding photography and representation. The wellbeing aspect of the group is also reflected in participants observations where the act of photography functions to objectify the pandemic, allowing the individuals to process their feelings through capturing and discussing imagery.

Even though lockdown changed the course of the project, it also meant that as a practitioner I had more time to devote to the group. Weekly meetings would have been difficult to manage in normal circumstances, especially as the group is run on a voluntary basis with no budget or funding. To put into perspective the affect that lockdown had on the project, *Snappy Valley* held six meetings in the six months prior to the pandemic and twenty meetings in the following six months. Because of this, the group formed more meaningful relationships unifying around an arts practice at a time when human contact was strictly limited. This environment became a safe space for participants to express their feelings and gain support from the group. Lockdown enabled *Snappy Valley* to create an extensive body of work whilst the online platform allowed us to host many guest speakers from further afield. By continuously re-evaluating and adjusting the working strategies to suit the situation, I had turned the limitations to our advantage.



Figure 14

Defending Practice

There is a tendency for SEA projects to justify or defend their work to be regarded as a critical, contemporary arts practice. This often happens because SEA is being closely linked to community arts which ‘usually operates outside of the mainstream art world’ (Birchall, 2013, p. 8) therefore it is important to differentiate between the two. The position of SEA as a critical, contemporary arts practice depends on the art industry’s recognition which often is just a ‘question of labelling and mediation by curators and institutions’ (Birchall, 2013, p. 8). This can be related to broader issues of commodification of the arts and its ability to be sold in the marketplace, but also the aesthetic value of the work and its place within an art gallery. SEA is often a group participation that does not produce a tangible artwork, rather focusing on ‘transformatively expressive actions with the hope of deepening connections, enriching community, and cultivating individuality, mutual understanding, and interpersonal appreciation (Riggle, 2020, p. 23). Not only can it be challenging to monetise such practice, but it also requires new means of ‘analysing art that are no longer linked solely to visuality’ (Bishop, 2012, p. 7). It is currently difficult to contextualise *Snappy Valley* in this framework as the group has not held any exhibitions and is not linked to any arts institutions or funding bodies. However, the group participants consider their engagement to be a contemporary arts practice. Whilst I understand the need for defending the practice in this broader artworld context in order to gain validation, the framework defining SEA is not always entirely helpful and can be limiting.

‘Socially engaged practice is a loaded and sometimes quite messy and hugely diverse term’ (Wewiora, 2020). It comes in many shapes and forms, yet there are some defining foundation principles that have been broadly discussed by many theorists. According to Pablo Helguera (2011, p. 2), SEA is still a ‘working construct’ as a category, but it ‘depends on social intercourse as a factor for its existence’. In addition to this, there are many other aspects that would validate *Snappy Valley* as a socially engaged practice. The project is relational and community building, it is process-led and conversation starting, it is participatory and collaborative, democratic and ethical. The engagement has had a positive impact on participants wellbeing and has instilled ‘integrity, personal pride and community identity’ (Schlemmer, 2017, p. 12). However, SEA also attempts to identify and engage ‘at-risk and underserved populations’ (Schlemmer, 2017, p. 12) that are *in need* for a positive social or political change, consequently justifying *the need* of the engaged community.

It is understandable that grant makers would seek to fulfil this justification in order to offer funding to communities that otherwise would not have access to such opportunities. However, the notion of recognising a community which from the outside appears to have *a need* for change and providing an artist with “institutional authority” (Birchall, 2013, p. 6) to help bring about the change, holds somewhat condescending qualities. Such an approach focuses on conflict, disadvantage and underrepresentation and overlooks the benefits socially engaged projects can have on any community. *Snappy Valley* does not quantify as a community *in need* and even though the group often engages in conversations surrounding social or political issues, the practice to date has not driven any considerable social or political change. Therefore, according to Schlemmer (2017, p. 3) *Snappy Valley* does not qualify as an SEP because ‘community-based practices that merely invite public participation without keeping this as the focus do not fully embody socially engaged practices’. To define SEP by Schlemmer’s framework completely overlooks the positive impact this process can have on a group of individuals where social or political change could be only one of the potential outcomes.

Every community is unique; each group has its own needs that require individual approaches. All communities have a right to agency and to access creativity. Socially and economically deprived areas would no doubt benefit from arts funding and engagement, but in reality, this is not an arts funding issue, but rather a social and political issue. If SEA lands itself exclusively to serve the disadvantaged and those identified *in need*, then the arts practice limits itself to one side of the socio-economic spectrum. When arts organisations invest their funds to benefit social issues, we potentially give the government an excuse to continue to ignore the ‘undesired’ populations.

Perhaps it is more helpful to accept that a good SEA practice is fluid, specific to the engaged community and to some degree, transformative. Pablo Helguera (2011, p. xiv) points out that ‘regulatory mandates’ are restrictive to the arts practice which, in order to exist, requires a certain level of ‘opacity and ambiguity’. Instead of focusing on dogmatic limitations stating what SEA cannot be, it is best to embrace the foundation principles that outline a good practice; a project that is process led, participatory, collaborative and community building will no doubt have some transformative effect on its participants.

For *Snappy Valley*, the socially transformative influences came from exploring a range of subjects portrayed by contemporary photography. This led the group to discuss subjects surrounding identity, gender representation and the gaze, racial representation, ethics, suffering and exploitation. Through these discussions, participants were able to develop an understanding of how photography disseminates broader social and political issues. This process influenced their understanding of the world and invited them to consider their own position within it.

However, one of the more significant effects the weekly lockdown meetings had on participants was the positive impact on their wellbeing which, inadvertently, evoked social change on a personal level. This welfare aspect of photography is often considered within a socially engaged framework. For example, Daniel Regan uses photography in his socially engaged work to help people to process a particular issue which can be ‘heavily therapeutic’ and suggests that using photography regularly can help an individual to untangle their thoughts and to ‘process things and create a sense of narrative and storytelling’ (Wewiora, 2020). The therapeutic aspect of photography has also been previously highlighted by photography practitioners such as Jo Spence and Hannah Wilke (Rogers, 2018, pp. 66-71), who used image making as a tool to deal with the traumatic experience of illness and accepting their own mortality. The benefits of using photography for wellbeing purposes can be considered from a psychotherapeutic perspective, but, as a tool, is often overlooked in art therapy (Kopytin, 2004, p. 49). However, there are many health-promoting aspects that photography can bring for a group or an individual.

From the perspective of art therapy, photography can help an individual to observe changes brought on by external circumstances and express their feelings and ideas through images (Kopytin, 2004, p. 51). For *Snappy Valley* this was particularly significant during the first eight weeks of lockdown. The online meetings offered social interaction and support and provided a sense of order whilst the process of photographing our daily lives gave an opportunity to make sense of what was happening and reflect on our feelings. Photography also has the ability to link people together, structure relationships and ‘provide a sense of order and cohesion in individual or group situations’ (Kopytin, 2004, p. 50). The importance of *Snappy Valley* was highlighted by group member Patrick in his interview: “During lockdown I was often trying to find things to do and therefore *Snappy Valley* really helped me and helped all of us get through what was a really unusual time.” Another group member

Nerissa reflected: “Without the group I would not have picked up my camera every week. Or every day! Some weeks I was picking it up every day. It was definitely some kind of therapy.” Furthermore, the storytelling accompanying photographs when we share them with others can help to ‘render our attitude’ towards what is visible but can also reveal what is hidden behind them (Kopytin, 2004, p. 50). During early lockdown, the picture making was often mechanical and the significance of these images was only revealed when discussing them with the group. For example, the meaning of seeing people on the streets had changed because there was so little to do outside and it was possible to identify exactly where these people were going. This seemingly insignificant realisation added a lot of gravity to a *surreal* reality. Finally, image making can be used to represent feelings and ‘objectify changes’ creating a protective distance between a traumatic experience and oneself (Kopytin, 2004, p. 51). *Snappy Valley* became a wellness hub that gave participants a sense of agency whilst using photography as a tool to objectify and process the pandemic.

On reflection, *Snappy Valley* embodies many of the principles defining SEP; the project is relational and process-led and has created a community in its own right. The practice of taking and sharing images allowed the group to learn more about each other creating deeper connections and initiating many meaningful conversations. The process of weekly lockdown meetings developed intuitively, and the therapeutic aspect of the activities was circumstantial yet transformative for the group.



Figure 15

Conclusion

The success of a socially engaged project is not always tangible. The visual outcomes are only a small part of the process which has an invaluable impact on the participants and cannot always be communicated to the audience. Measuring the success of a SEP project from the extent of the social or political change it has delivered for their communities can diminish the importance of the practice, as projects that inspire transformation on a personal or a more local level are just as significant. This becomes evident in the *Snappy Valley* participants feedback (see Additional Information p.25) highlighting the impact this process has had on each individual. The value of this engagement is expressed from the therapeutic point of view, providing a sense of normality and support; from a social perspective, creating a sense of belonging and forming new friendships; and also, from the point of view of learning, developing creative skills throughout this project. From my perspective as a practitioner, facilitator, educator and a participant, *Snappy Valley* is a successful project demonstrating many aspects that constitute a good SEP practice.

Almost a year since the project started, *Snappy Valley* has become a well-established community group that continues to successfully engage in the SEP practice. Through employing SEAE approaches over a significant period of time, the participants have gained an in-depth understanding of contemporary photography and developed a visual vocabulary that allows them to express their ideas through photography. As part of the project, the participants have improved their technical image-making skills and have created a significant body of photographic work, especially during lockdown, forming a document of a particular time and place. The transition from monthly face-to-face meetings to weekly online meetings through lockdown greatly benefited *Snappy Valley*. Being furloughed allowed me to dedicate more time for the project which significantly increased the number of meetings we held. Having weekly interactions has provided support and given the opportunity for the group to form meaningful relationships, which has had a positive impact on participants wellbeing. *Snappy Valley* will continue to meet online every Tuesday until life returns to comparative normality and it becomes possible to meet again in person.

Additional information

Snappy Valley Participant Feedback

Scarlett

'Snappy Valley has been a real tonic, particularly during lockdown. Being part of this group has given me a sense of normality during a really challenging, confusing, and sometimes terrifying time. We have not only developed our practice individually and collectively, but we have also created strong and supportive friendships, as well as a safe space to chat openly about how we are feeling during this tumultuous time. Being privileged enough to experience a number of amazing photographers give talks about their practice has been truly inspiring and insightful and has allowed us to challenge our thoughts and feelings regarding photography, as well as the world around us. The talks have been a particular highlight of mine. *Snappy Valley* has given me a really strong sense of community and belonging, in a time perhaps where it would have been extremely easy to feel very isolated and alone. It's a really special thing to be a part of.'

Jerome

'I have been seriously interested in photography for just under a year and I have been in *Snappy Valley* since it started. I have learned lots of things I wouldn't have learned if it wasn't for *Snappy Valley*. What I have mostly enjoyed, from the whole process before lockdown but especially in lockdown, is the inspiration. Especially right at the beginning where I was just not taking photos at all and then you showed me what other photographers were doing and it really got me back out wanting to take photos. I think some of my best work has been in lockdown and with the group, so I am very grateful for that.'

Daniel

'As an outsider to Tod and only being in one meeting in person for *Snappy*, these online meetings were weird as talking with a stranger in public could be easier than on a Zoom. But being the group that it is, everything became natural and looking forward to every Tuesday. On the back of that, the homework and mini projects gave me a sense of community with the *Snappy* and their members. My favorite work was the photo chain as this put us like on a waiting list to get our chance to participate. Most recently, the guest talks, opened up my eyes to a different reality, and work from other artists maybe indirectly affected ours.'

Hannah

‘The two big things for me are creative inspiration and socialising. I’ve found out about so many photographers and styles of imagery that I haven’t seen before. I’ve also learnt how to talk about photographs as well and think about narratives. It’s increased my confidence as a creative person. It’s great that we all now have a set of references from the presentations that we can discuss, such as “This really reminds me of Sally Mann or Steve McCurry”. I particularly liked the project where we all had to take a photo at the same time every day. That was really heightened lockdown faze and it just felt like we were doing something together. I think it’s worked really well how we share our photographs each session and discuss our thoughts behind them. Just personally, me not making the time to do the homework every week has been frustrating for me. However, I still feel like I get lots of out the sessions and feel inspired every week.’

Patrick

‘We’re a tight group of disparate, but like-minded individuals when it comes to art and culture which often leads to interesting and thought-provoking conversations. Since the group started, I feel that I understand the cultural importance of photography far more and that I've also become far more conscious of my own work through constructive criticism and in particular, that an image can be interpreted in many different ways and that I need to be mindful of that with my own work. One of the things I have really enjoyed, particularly when meetings began to be held once a week over Zoom, rather than once a month, because of Covid-19 lockdown, is that because we usually had "homework", every week felt like an exhibition. I have been taking photos for many years and although I'm not a complete one trick pony, I guess I do also have my own style, so to see fellow members of the group interpret a homework brief and deliver a set of photographs so very different to mine, it was always a pleasure, but more importantly for me, became an education too.’

Nerissa

‘*Snappy Valley* has given me the headspace to be creative and share images and ideas with others. The feedback from the group has had a direct influence on building my self-esteem and drive and has given me the courage to believe in my work. I have a place to be challenged and channel my thoughts and feeling into images. During lockdown I organized the homework into my week. I was working, doing my daily exercise and then doing the homework, so that really had a big impact because I put so much energy into creative

thinking. I would have felt so flat without it, I pick up my camera and my mood just lifts! Every week it has been something really different, really challenging and seeing everybody else's work has just been so inspiring. It is like a gallery of work every week. The standard of the work is unbelievable. We were strangers and we have come together through this. You can see everybody's practice evolving so much, it is really high standard.'

Mark

'*Snappy Valley* has served a dual purpose these past months. Through seeing others work, and through the talks from guest photographers, I know my practice has improved and I have enjoyed pushing myself to meet the challenges. It has also been great to meet a new group of people who I now consider friends. The weekly Zoom meetings have become something to look forward to and a fantastic opportunity to talk, not only about photography, but about just about anything else! The tasks we have been given have also given this strange time a little structure and something to take one's mind off everything else that's going on. From a photography point of view, I have really enjoyed the guest speakers we have had. Seeing someone else's work and the context behind it has been really inspiring and I have enjoyed the challenges set by the speakers, even if they have pushed me to work in ways I would not normally. In fact, probably because of this it has been amazing to see everyone's practice develop over time, not just in lockdown but since last October. I think we have created some truly impressive work and I'm looking forward to being able to celebrate that when we finally get to exhibit some of it.'

Dominic

'The things I love most about *Snappy Valley* are some of the lessons we did, especially at the beginning. I was quite inspired by those, learning to take photographs a different way. The photographer's talks combined with the homework for me are really good. For instance, this week I thought more about taking pictures than perhaps I ever have done. As someone who didn't trust further education due to various reasons the chance to work in a differing environment has been an inspiring challenge, Lasma has injected a post-secondary perspective into an environment that had stagnated so much that it needed improving, I'm very grateful for this.'

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