

Exchange Values, a New Aesthetics and Multi-stakeholder Processes

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The challenge of living, surviving, thriving - indeed of sustaining life - within the world of globalisation is still very new to us. Globalisation can conjure up many different images - of rapid flows of "funny money"; of the unprecedented power of multinational organisations; of the accessibility of so many people to so many others through the internet; of the awesome statistics on the rich-poor divide; of the rapid spread of AIDS; of global warming; of the World Cup; of the planet seen from space; of despair; of hope. How do we make sense of these images, which are on a scale that is quite new to us? How do we make sense of the dislocation brought on by the newness of it all?

The 1992 Rio conference provided an early and significant new institutional context for us to think about these questions, to debate values and agree on new ways forward. It focused not only on the progress generated by the new forces of globalisation, but also on the challenges brought on by the globalisation of social, economic and environmental risks. And it recognised the need to tackle these challenges through local initiatives as well as international agreements. Local Agenda 21, one of the most significant institutional inventions to come out of Rio, created a new space for local governments to work with their communities to build new models of socially just and environmentally sustainable progress.

Ten years on, Johannesburg 2002 offers us a chance to take stock as well as to plan for the next phase of global development. Many different types of debate are taking place, among government officials, NGOs, the business community, and some involving all of these. Here I want to single out one particular debate that is taking place in Johannesburg alongside the World Summit as part of a programme of 'social art' at the Johannesburg Art Gallery - entitled Exchange Values: Images of Invisible Lives.

Exchange Values is a large-scale social sculpture, conceived and developed by Shelley Sacks in collaboration with banana growers of the Windward Islands, which creates an interface between the producers and consumers of a product, in this case, bananas. The installation centres round stitched 'sheets of skin' from 20 randomly selected boxes of Windward Island bananas. These sheets of skin, held taut on metal rack-like structures, are contrasted with 10,000 unnumbered skins on the floor. The artist traced each box back to its origin in the Caribbean and recorded the voices of the growers. The consumer stands face to face with the skin, while listening through headphones to each farmer speaking about their situation, multinational control of markets, or some other aspect of their lives affected by the global economy.

A number of forums take place alongside the physical installation. From these it is clear that the work becomes an imaginative space in which to enter the situation of banana growers, to picture the world economy, to consider what sustainable agricultural production would mean, and our potential power as consumers to decide what we will consume and why.

The creation of such an imaginative space is the central intention underlying the Exchange Values project. Through the metaphoric form we are drawn into a sense of the oppression that lies beneath the surface of many current modes of multinational production, into the absurdity of unemployment, and above all, the extent of our voicelessness in these global processes. In this imaginative space we can meet, engage with others and begin to act, exploring and realising the power we have as consumers to determine what we consume and how it is produced.

In the context of Johannesburg however, the significance of Exchange Values goes beyond the creation of an imaginative space focusing specifically on the politics of banana consumption; it also brings us back to some of the questions with which we started. How do we confront the scale and novelty of globalisation? What languages do we need to make sense of these changes? What are the institutional forms that will allow us to plan effectively for sustainable futures?

In terms of new institutional forms, one of the most significant developments over the past decade has been in arrangements for new types of partnership working which are capable of enabling people and

organisations from very different backgrounds to work together in an increasingly complex political, social and economic environment.

Very broadly, these arrangements are known as multi-stakeholder processes (MSPs). These are processes that share a number of common features. They bring together all major stakeholders in new forms of decision-making structure on a particular issue; recognise the importance of achieving equity and accountability in communication between stakeholders; and are based on democratic principles of transparency and participation.

Critically, MSPs aim to build sufficient trust across diverse views that mutual understanding and agreement can be generated. There are now many examples of such processes. At the global level, the UN Commission for Sustainable Development has been particularly active in experimenting with MSPs in support of its work in following up Rio and in preparing for Johannesburg. In many parts of the world there have also been numerous applications of MSPs in the development and enactment of Local Agenda 21s.

However, MSPs are still a new species in the complex biodiversity of governance and decision-making structures; they are by no means fully evolved or defined. Many of the issues within the globalisation and sustainable development debates are not only intellectually complex, but also ethically demanding. The sheer weight of responsibility encapsulated within these debates can act to anaesthetise imagination and ingenuity. The levels of trust required to maintain an aesthetic responsiveness and insight will require a new wave of experimentation.

For me, this is the potential significance of Exchange Values and the work of the social sculpture movement. 'Social sculpture' works with art events and objects, not as aesthetic statements in themselves, but as a means of enabling human dialogue to be suffused by, and strengthened through, an aesthetic response. The intention therefore is to free the aesthetic form from its entrapment to material art objects or to the institutions of artistic performance, and to seek its re-instatement through artistic metaphor at the heart of dialogue.

This would appear to offer some quite profound opportunities for the next wave of MSPs and associated institutions of governance for sustainable development. In the first wave of MSPs the focus has been on the choreography of debate, on the movement between smaller and larger fora, on the facilitation of new ground rules for participation and inclusion, and on combining different ways of talking about the past, present and future. These designs have enabled a greater diversity of perspectives and knowledges to be present within a dialogue, for example for the scientific to sit alongside the lay perspective, and for economic rigour to be tempered by 'softer' analyses.

My hope is that in the next wave, drawing on what can be learned from Exchange Values and other social sculptures, we can discover not only how to embrace even greater diversity, but also how to create an aesthetic resilience within which a collaborative wisdom can emerge.