

Taking a look at inspiration
An analysis of the relationship between the artwork and collective feelings of engagement with an audience in particular reference to the 'Free Art Friday' movement



The concept of Free Art Friday (FAF) is a simple one. It involves the artistic creation of a piece of art which is left in a public space for a passerby to find and keep. FAF originated from the conscious efforts of an individual street artist to make a positive change in his local environment. A whole new concept then evolved. The re-use of materials to make pieces of art which are given away for free, to an unknown member of the public - giving art away on Friday was optional, but preferred, as it encourages the artist to maintain participation in the artistic movement. This essay will explore the process of Free Art Friday, the liberation of artistic creation, the placement of the 'gift' in public, the 'situation' which is then created, and the possible effects of documentation after the art has been found.

FAF is a desirable concept for many artists. For some the act of giving art away for free is a new and enjoyable experience. Each piece of art contains part of the artist that made it, a thought, an idea or emotion. To give away a part of you is something special. We have all experienced the feeling when giving a considered gift, more so when we know it has taken time and effort to produce - for these gifts to go to a complete stranger adds a new meaning to selflessness (Melvind, 2007). Despite the warming sensation which people get from the act of giving; this is not the only motive, as the creation of art is often confined by the constraints of commerce - the need to make a living.

"The forces of imagination, from which he draws his strength, have disruptive and capricious power which he must manage with economy. If he indulges in imagination too freely, it may run wild and destroy him and his work by excess"

(Wind, 1969, pp. 2)

The above quote articulates the frequent need to produce works which are accepted by the public. By removing the need to produce art for financial gain, it liberates the artist to experiment in new ways of creation, to voice an idea, shout a political message, or amuse and confuse the viewer. The movement is not confined to painted artworks, it embraces the use of poems or songs which can be hidden in a library book for the next reader to enjoy, a sculpture made from old records, a cassette or CD left hanging from a branch of a tree.



MyDogSighs, December 2006, Painting on cardboard left in Portsmouth



Fetchcollection, 27th June 2007, Painting on carvas left in Exeter



Fetchcollection, 8th August 2008, Painting on canvas left on Blackpod Sands



Fetchcollection, 9th August 2008, Painting on canvas left in Dart mouth

As demonstrated, the piece of artwork does not have to be 'beautifully' crafted all on canvas. The location, materials and various styles of artistic expression vary greatly within each FAF creation; sensations therefore manifest themselves differently within each 'situation'. Due to the complexities of these various sensations they will not be

deconstructed individually; rather the essay will focus on the act of giving itself and the liberation of such a process.

The benefits of Free Art Friday are boundless. By attaching much less importance to the sales value of art, it creates a contemplative immersion in their work. Much similar to the work of Dadaist, the 'uselessness' of their work allows artists to develop their skills and discover new techniques, with the additional reward of satisfaction when leaving something special for others to collect. The non-attachment and selflessness promoted by FAF is similar to the laborious method used in the creation of Buddhist sand paintings, as soon as they are finished, they scoop them into a jar and pour the sand into a river - the act of creation is far more important than self-congratulation or monetary gain. At first it may prove difficult to let go, but the ability to not tie yourself to a piece allows for artistic liberation, the pleasure of giving, the possibility that it might inspire others to create their own art, the opportunity to make someone's day, and for the artist to imagine and possibly discover the journey of a piece of art.



Fetchcollection, 7th August 2008, Painting on canvas left in Dartmouth

Art is not only tied to the need for financial gain, it can often be clouded by gallery and dealer issues. FAF focuses the artist on the act itself, giving artistic freedom to each individual participant, including the opportunity for the artist to act as curator in their own public gallery – to free up the network of art interaction outside of gallery

spaces. Art and money interact in many institutions – in particular, museums (Freeland, 2001). FAF artists have complete ownership and choice of location when ‘dropping’ their work in public; a brick wall outside a petrol station or the step of an unknown doorway, the possibilities are endless. The surrounding environment can enhance the aesthetics of the work, more so than a white wall in the sterile environment of a commercial gallery. This demand for white walls and associated desire of ‘clear’ thought is often taken for granted in modern architecture (Pinder, 2005). Museums convey standards about arts value and quality, a dominant critique or categorization of work; promoting specific themes and preconceived meanings. FAF bypasses the politics of museum display with their public installations, making their work accessible to the so-called masses. Freedom from the shackles of authority was important for surrealist artists as they were able to create a ‘situation’ that disrupts the normative and expected societal practices which hegemonic powers lay down. FAF formulates a re-assertion of public space in which the public are free of preconceptions to develop their understanding of space beyond practical day-to-day living. A wider commitment to revolution and questioning of established codes of space and time.



Fetchcollection, 7th August 2008, Painting on canvas left in Dartmouth

A city is not just a collection of buildings, infrastructures, hospitals and workers. There is more than the physical construction of space, there are number of underlying hegemonic social structures which people consciously or subconsciously adhere to (Pile, 2005). People are walkers in the city, following the tracks of urban text without being able to read it, a voyeur. A participant however, will try another path, analyze

the "microbe-like, singular and plural practices which an urbanistic system was supposed to administer or suppress" (De Certeau, 1984, pp. 96). Free Art Friday is one example of how artists can shock society out of its dream and awaken it to its own historical agency (Harrington, 2004). FAF members disrupt the perceptual same, illuminating the practices of everyday life which people adhere to; forming a unitary urbanism which forges a critique of city life, from the revolutionary struggle to transform social space and everyday life.

Situationists were some of the first avant-gardes to openly challenge social structures with 'unusual' ephemeral practices. The acts of self-propaganda in 1968 Paris confronted Guy Debord's description of city life; an urban space cul-de-sac in which people have reached a dead end due to the controlling effects of modernity. Psychogeography allowed the study of precise laws and specific effects of the geographical environment (consciously organized or not) on the emotions and behaviour of individuals. These studies were based around actions which opened new routes of interaction – of which Free Art Friday forms one such situation.

All street artists whether producing a static or removable piece of art, hope to promote discussion in one form or another. They have the ambition for an audience to recognize their work, for the people to question the clutter of visual images in the urban environment, or perhaps to make a political impact. As Manco says, "...if you want to get your point across there's only one way to do it: get your message where the public can see it" (2002, pp. 6). The possible motives for public intervention are almost endless, whether for egotistical recognition or the promotion of free speech, FAF is a legal way to have voice, unlike the illegal methods of graffiti used by the Situationists in 1960's Paris. A 'situation' is a concrete and deliberately constructed moment by the collective organization of a unitary ambience and game of events which challenge contemporary capitalist culture and politics.

People who find these 'gifts', unaware of the FAF movement, may be hesitant to take such a piece. In a highly commercialized city people are not used to getting something for nothing, therefore they may question if the artwork was left for someone else to take, or whether they should leave it for other people's enjoyment – manifesting a fear of 'unacceptable' behavior. To prevent this artists rarely adhere or nail their work to a surface, its temporary status is overtly expressed with a sign saying "Please take me" or the accompaniment of a Free Art Friday sticker. The curator's details are often left on the back of art installations such that the person who takes the 'gift' can contact the artist if they wish to do so. One such example is below:

"I just wanted to say how much I love your work and what you are doing around Portsmouth is truly inspirational and fantastic! I walk a lot around the town but now it's like a mini adventure on the chance that I might come across one of your creations which brightens up my day"

Henri Lefebvre criticized the way in which people's practices of everyday life are mediated through social structures, and how this conceptual framework limits the ways in which they view their environment. The collector of the piece of art experiences a situation which challenges the standard monetary transactions which commercialized society enforces. They experience a unique moment (Jameson, 1988), a situation of *détournement* framed by both space and time – producing ephemeral cultural reverberations which would differ at any other space in time. Therefore the acceptance of such a 'gift' represents the disregard of consumerist power in the landscape, a moment in which complexities of socially produced spatialities are challenged by a change in perception. With the use of psychogeographic techniques such as the *dérive* or drifting, situationists lead people to revisit the way in which they look at urban spaces – making the familiar, unfamiliar. Free Art Friday urges people to follow their emotions and look at the city in a radical way – to reach out and accept the 'free gift' from a stranger. *Dérive* was not a random activity, but a deliberate act of *détournement* to look at spaces and spatiality differently (Pile, 2005). It is an important method as it was used to discuss the unpleasant nature of the city in which emotions are removed; people distance their actions from their feelings. Situations, such as FAF bring attention to the absurdity of space, the lack of emotion in society; opening up new transient passages through varied ambiances – playful behavior and awareness of psychogeographical effects. Tim Cresswell (1996) argued that individual actions, such as situationism, transgress social expectations of spatial behavior, denaturalizing dominant norms, thereby subverting and revealing the power relations present.

Artists are also encouraged to document these situations. Taking a photo of the 'gift' in its new, but not final location, and then to upload and display these images on the Internet (www.flickr.com/groups/freeartfriday/) is an attempt to capture the constructions of momentary ambiances of life and their transformation into passionate disturbances of hegemonic culture. Photos form a virtual photo album which can be accessed all over the world, to invoke and inspire other artists to participate in the FAF movement, whilst providing a platform for discussion. Although the documentation of these acts uncovers moments in which social structures are temporarily removed, it is an impractical, idealistic scheme for social and political

reform. The important nodes of non-conformity cannot be reproduced within a fragmented representation of the 'situation' as important components of space, time, and social structures are absent. However these photos can be used to explore the acceptable and unacceptable modes of social intervention, based upon web users' immediate reaction to the virtual photo which they see before them.

FAF, like surrealism, strips artistic creations of their ordinary and normal significance (Freeland, 2001). "L'art pour l'art" (art for art's sake) creates a proud art which is no one's servant (Pile, 2005); a series of surprising juxtapositions of expression. This approach exposes the psychological truths in order to create a compelling image that was beyond ordinary formal organization, a free act of expression – evoking empathy from the viewer.

"...nothing gives us greater pleasure than to commune with images that are so free"

(Wind, 1969, pp. 13)

Most work by Free Art Friday's participants is humorous and good natured, with the desire to reduce the mediocre aspects of people's urban existence, to remove the empty moments of life as frequently possible. While making the viewer question themselves, the art, and whether or not they have the right to take what they see before them, it also challenges the public to break outside the routines of everyday life, to expect the unexpected, and view the landscape as a place for leisure and play. By adopting this attitude and employing free movement (dérive) allows people to drop their usual motives of participation and explore their surrounding environment more critically. Without the social and commercial constraints of mobility, they become a participant and not a voyeur.

Many things in the world are considered 'free', but fail to hold up to the true meaning of the word. They are often subject to gallery regulations, consumer demand and the 'need' to follow a specific set of guidelines. FAF attempts to remove as many of these boundaries as possible to increase public awareness that along with the need to sell art and promote an artist (Cook, 1996), there is also the need to fight the standard parameters of the social structure which we adhere to, and most profoundly, the need to embellish and entertain in a non-profit way without the need to cause damage to property. Situationist's ideas echo profoundly within Free Art Friday. They form a number of overt moments in which people do not have to strain to discover the mysteries of the sidewalk (Pinder, 2005); transcending alienation and

demonstrating the potential realm of freedom, the ability to create situations in keeping with peoples' own needs and desires. The use of the city as a gallery and mode of free public expression is an example of ephemeral disruption of the highly commercialized emitter-acceptor semiotic system, an attempt to bring about better urban futures, suggesting that there are no 'real' concrete doctrines for artistic creation and behavior in public space.

Bibliography

- Benjamin, W.** (1968) *Illuminations: The work of art in the age of mechanical reproductions*.
- Cook, D.** (1996) *The Culture Industry Revisited*. Rowman & Littlefield Publishers.
- Cosgrove, D. E.** (1984) *Social Formation and Symbolic Landscape (With a new introduction)*. The University of Wisconsin Press.
- Cresswell, T.** (1996) *In place/out of place: geography, ideology, and transgression*. Minneapolis. University of Minnesota Press.
- De Certeau, M.** (1984) *The Practice of Everyday Life*. California Press.
- Freeland, C.** (2001) *Art Theory: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford Press.
- Harrington, A.** (2004) *Art and Social Theory*. Polity Press Ltd.
- Harrison, C. and Wood, P.** (2003) *Art in Theory 1900-2000: An Anthology of Changing Ideas*. Blackwell Publishing.
- Howells, R.** (2003) *Visual Culture*. Blackwell.
- Jameson, F.** (1988) *The Ideologies of Theory: Essays 1971-1986*. Routledge.
- Lee, J.** (2006) *Talk Back: The Bubble Project*. Mark Batty Publisher.
- Manco, T.** (2002) *Stencil Graffiti*. London: Thames and Hudson.
- Pile, S.** (2005) *Red Cities*. SAGE Publications.
- Pinder, D.** (2005) *Visions of the city*. Edinburgh University Press.
- Shahn** (1957) *The Shape of Content*. Harvard.
- Sheppard, A.** (1987) *Aesthetics: An introduction to the philosophy of art*. OPUS
- Stadler, J.** (2002) Intersubjective, Embodied, Evaluative Perception: A Phenomenological Approach to the Ethics of Film. *Quarterly Review of Film and Video*, Vol. 19, pp. 237-248. Routledge.
- Tufnell, M and Crickmay, C.** (2004) *A Widening Field: Journeys in body and imagination*. Dance Books.
- Wind, E.** (1969) *Art and Anarchy*. Vintage Books.