



# How to run a public *guerrilla* art project?

Insights from "Microcosm" Summer 2010

# Introduction

If you've picked up this document, then you're already curious about installing a "guerrilla" public art project. In the rest of this document, you'll find curatorial statements and project details and our forms, here we'll set out an overview of what motivated us and some of the hardest and easiest things to accomplish.

The first question you have to ask is why public and, separately, why guerrilla? Many curators and artists have worked on commissioned and non-commissioned (I.e. guerrilla) projects for many different reasons. For us, it was a chance to tackle a specific issue: why are there unused spaces in a very expensive city? This issue extends more broadly to the question of who should take stewardship over common land.

We did not necessarily intend to be guerrilla, recognizing there may be political undercurrents which we may not want to be tagged with. But at the same time, being pragmatic, we didn't want to be held up by bureaucracy or a sponsor's agenda. We ended up working to a 2-prong plan, 1 plan if we get permission, another if we didn't.

Before we go into the actual projects, let me go back to the beginning where we decided to have a project board. I don't believe you need one to do a guerrilla art project. For us, having decided to go down the public route we decided to make it as "public" as possible and we had an open call for the board (you'll find a copy of our call for a board that we sent via arts community notice boards e.g. Arts Jobs in the UK, facebook, etc.. ). If you are going to recruit a board, you may want to think about how it can help the project. On our board was Frances Christie a landscape architect with experience in the area we wanted to install in, and she was very helpful in providing contacts in the local civic counsel. Sachin Kaeley is an artist and curator and was helpful in providing the artist's perspective particularly at our planning stage. Our 3rd member, Chrissy Meijns is an art historian and we appreciated her questioning of the process and the introduction to Elisa Caldarola who writes the key note essay in this document. We deliberately kept the board small for ease of communication and to give everyone a chance to be as involved as they wanted to be. I would add that if you are planning something around a specific community, it might also be helpful to have members of the community help and support you. Our board was asked to help frame the project and choose the artists; we would interact with the artists or work on the installation.

We drafted ideas around which to frame the project, and after a broad discussion with the board, decided on the idea of "microcosm". This then set in motion a call for artists. We received 30+ applications, the board selected 3. At this point, we should acknowledge that the framing of the idea and artists selection is traditionally the role of the curators, not a board, but this was also part of our personal curatorial exercise: to ask what is curating by testing the limits of its

*This book contains information and images from the "Microcosm" project produced by AUGUST art, London, 2010.*

*Artists: Bram Thomas Arnold, Noa Edwards, Liam Herne*

*Board Members: Frances Christie, Sachin Kaeley, Chrissy Meijns*

*Essayist: Elisa Caldarola*

*AUGUST art Team: Winnie Sze, Effie Vourakis and Valeria Iacovelli*



extension and reduction of control?

We met the 3 artists in person, a process we would highly recommend if you are to have an open call. It's important to establish trust between you and the artists, especially if your experience with each other is nil or limited.

We would advise setting out 2 things in particular. One is to be very straightforward and clear about the project's aims. An artist's and the project's aims may not always agree, and it is much better to make sure that everyone at least hears and understands the primary objective upfront. This is not to say that the curator should subsume or undermine the artists' work in anyway. It is to make sure the artist's and the project's interests are in line.

The second key thing is to set out the curator's and the artists' responsibilities. No one would sign up if they weren't strongly interested or committed, but things like who finds and decides on location need to be agreed, and transportation, installation and other costs could get out of hand. We drafted the press releases, but ensured the artists agreed before publication.

On to the specifics of and lessons learnt from each project. The first was Liam Herne with "Emergency Shelters", a set of tents by way of shelter for anyone who needed it. We liked to thank Liam for his professionalism and quiet way of getting on with things. Herne's project was over 2 sites and installed at 2 different times of the day. The first was on a left over piece of land between 2 very busy streets. We decided to install before morning rush hour to maximize exposure to commuters. We got lots of curious stares, most openly, but no one asked us what we were doing. We expected rain, but what we hadn't planned for was wind. Imagine trying to install not only a tent, but one of fragile material in gusting wind under time pressure. We managed to put one up after 45 minutes – original plan: 10 minutes – but I think the wind tore it to shreds over the next 12 hours. The second site was in a park, installed early evening, frankly to avoid the park's wardens. We came up with a better plan for putting up the tents. However, they did not last more than 48 hours. Our suspicion is that some, if not all, of them went to the obviously homeless man who had been curiously watching our progress.

The second project was Noa Edwards. Edwards' original proposal and actual piece changed quite significantly. As curators and artists, we know to expect this in any project, but if you have a board, do be mindful about keeping communication channels open. Edwards' original proposal could not be achieved because she needed a dirt path – it turns out there aren't many well-travelled dirt paths in central London! Edwards' actual piece was etched plasters to repair some of the many potholes in London. Edwards' challenge was to come up with a plaster "formula" that could take the etching, be sturdy enough to not crumble under stepping, but not be permanent or damaging to the ecosystem. She had 1 month and because of her tireless enthusiasm and energy, she was able to achieve this successfully. Edwards' project attracted more solicitous attention, fortunately we had enough people on hand to answer questions and hand out press releases.

We always knew our third and last project would be tricky. Bram Thomas Arnold

proposed to build a structure from detritus he would've gathered from the area, built in reaction to the project's location. Given the likely size, anywhere up to 3 metres area and height, and the length of time needed to install, ideally we needed a sponsored space. At this point we shall talk about getting local council permission. We have to admit that everyone we met at the relevant council was very open and interested. Each person hoped to help us by passing us on to someone whom they felt could help us. As you may imagine, being asked for permission to install an art work temporarily is not a common occurrence for civil servants and not being sure we'd ever arrive at the end of the decision-making tree, in the end we gave up. Having said that, we have since discovered you can apply for permission to use some part of a park/green space (although presumably this would be region dependent). For the spaces we were looking at, it would cost a 3 figure sum – and that's under the not-for-profit category – take 3+ weeks to process. (Incidentally, the fee and processing time to apply for a license to host, say, a pop-up bar on a street corner was 7X less and 1 week less).

Arnold's project was guerrilla and the space we chose, despite it being weed-infested and filled with rubbish, turned out to be private property, owned by the adjoining parking lot. The employees of the lot were very supportive and helpfully referred us to someone they thought might grant us permission, who also helpfully referred us to someone else who might grant permission... in the end we gave up. We couldn't knowingly trespass and we sadly removed Arnold's installation, half built. We posted a sign on a tree with an apology for the failed installation. Interestingly that sheet of A4 printed in black & white, font 11, garnered quite a bit of attention from passersby. It was always a risk of the project that this might happen, so our last lesson is to be very clear to the artists about this risk. We would like to thank Arnold for his professionalism and hope that his piece will materialize in some other form in his practice.

This leaves this document as the close of the project. Arnold had said of his piece built from detritus which would revert back to detritus or with the materials salvaged for other uses, that he saw it as a continuing narrative. And a similar intention is how we would like to see this document, as a means to help other projects, should you wish to make them. If one of our aims was to ask who holds stewardship of common land, we like to hear your answers.

Good luck and we look forward to the happy happenstance of finding your piece.

## Getting ready for guerrilla... arm yourself with patience!

*Even if you're planning to install in the middle of a nowhere, it will belong to someone. the stalls of public bureaucracy or any ings, on the other hand this is something diplomacy. See guerrilla as an art me- patience, time, and efforts as operating worth it? The following operational issues and downsides of guerrilla.*

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Although guerrilla may be marked by a certain degree of spon- research, especially on identifying a **location**, one that real- environment being encumbered or endangered. If your project it will have to be located in an area of public passage and/ is someone's land, the choice of location may turn out to be board recruited through an open call, and recruiting artists

taneity, it also relies critically on strategic planning and izes your project's objectives without the local community and is to be **public** in the sense of being for everyone to enjoy, or be visible by anyone without trespassing. Because all land particularly critical. In our case, we also felt that having a in the same way, would add to the public scope of our project.

Adopting the practice of guerrilla may have a special con- this choice is very likely to limit your **funding options**. and only few are likely to be on board with the idea of sup- without permission. Alternatively, you may try resorting to sonal, they are more likely to be sympathetic with your

ceptual significance within your project, but bear in mind Most funders are known to support more orthodox activities porting a project which involves occupying someone's land sponsors-in-kind: because donations tend to be more per- cause.

Guerilla projects require even greater attention to issues public space and involving the general, possibly unaware, your intended project and site, you may wish to call in an sponsor-in-kind. This may be a professional architect or other scientist.

of **general and environmental safety** as they are set in a public. But who's to say what's dangerous? Depending on expert and persuade them to get involved as an advisor or constructor or landscape designer, or even a botanist or

**Is it wise to advertize?** Absolutely! Although discre- still a primary concern. For people to enjoy the show, ket the project well in advance through word of mouth net. Location details were revealed only close to each

tion is of the essence with guerrilla, visibility is they need to know it's there. Our strategy was to mar- as well as through selected press and on the inter- opening date through e-vites, Facebook and Twitter.

Finally, before moving on to the banana skins that the in- you plan to leave your work in site without supervision, **vandalized, damaged or stolen**. It is important that you and tions -- or, simply, put yourselves at peace with it.

stallation phase may reserve, here's one final thought. If there's a fairly significant chance that the work may be the artists are aware of these risks and take your precau-

## Installation day

*As soon as you reach your designated installation site and start spreading around your tools and eccentric artist materials, you become immediately exposed to the wondering gaze of passers-by: local residents, visitors and people who travel to the area daily, street cleaners and local police patrols. Some may look at you with suspicion or concern, others with genuine curiosity. What to do in order to minimize unwanted attention without alienating potential visitors and successfully complete installation?*

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**Programme your installation time** with a site-specific approach because people are generally too busy going their own way to their nose. If you're installing in a quiet neighbourhood, recommend the following:

proach in mind. Paradoxically rush hours may work better take note of anything extra-ordinary happening right under instead, you're bound to be spotted, in which case, we

**Act naturally**, you're less likely to be noticed.

Have some **marketing or informational material** with you and in the project to the official opening if there's going to

perhaps invite every stranger who shows genuine interest be one.

If you think you're not going to get away with it without charming, generous and inventive! You may even consider prevent (or at least discuss) any potential objection. At the surprise factor!

avoiding confrontation, **prepare to negotiate**. Be polite, sending in a preliminary delegation to test the water and the same time, be aware that this way you're compromising

If despite all precautions you're confronted with open opposition, don't let things get out of hand and **be prepared to abandon ship**.

position, don't let things get out of hand and **be prepared**

This is when a **plan b** may come in handy.

Whether or not you managed to go through with installation and whether your project lasted for a minute, a day or longer, you may want to **document it** if it fits your conceptual purpose, with images, a video or just a diary. We recommend it, as if anything this day is bound to offer a good story and we think a good story may well be worth the hassle.



## Microcosm: the projects

Series project: 1 of 3

Project title: Emergency Shelter

Artist: Liam Herne

Exhibition date: Friday 16 July until the tents are gone

Location 1: Shoreditch Park(south-west side)

Location 2: Junction of City Road & East Road



Series project: 2 of 3

Artist: Noa Edwards

Title: Between surfaces

Exhibition date: Thursday 5 August until the repair casts decay

Location: Baldwin Terrace continuing along Regent's Canal towpath



Series in project: 3 of 3

Artist: Bram Thomas Arnold

Title: The Architecture of Decay

Exhibition date: Thursday 2 Sep --

Location: Junction of Shepherdess Walk & City Rd



## Microcosm: A critical essay by Elisa Caldarola

When I first read the call for artists for Microcosm - AUGUST art exhibition for Summer 2010 - I thought it did not put many constraints on works to be presented. It asked artists to engage with unused public spaces and, indeed, the concept of "unused" itself, as well as with the notion of co-existence of spatial and temporal dimensions of various scales, with special attention to the micro-level. It specified that the surroundings of the gallery - which faces Regent's Canal in Islington - were to be the location for the exhibition. (Later, the location was extended to a few more nearby areas). At first, those requirements sounded rather loose to me, but the more I thought about it the more I realised that the call for artists was indeed expressing a very specific view and ambition, and that it was in fact quite challenging. It is my opinion that with Microcosm AUGUST art wanted to set up an exhibition of works that were not made to be exhibited since, instead of occupying public space and attracting attention to themselves, they had to attract attention to the unused space where they would have been set. This is a requirement that is not easy to meet, because it involves

abandoning the usual logic of art shows, where, if there is a physical object that is the work, then it is that object which naturally occupies the focus of attention.

Bram Thomas Arnold, Noa Edwards, and Liam Herne were selected by a panel, itself selected through an open call, so that participation to the decision process was shared by a heterogeneous portion of art public. Their works are not related to each other, but they all follow AUGUST art guidelines with originality, relating to the exhibition set and exalting its qualities. Moreover, although they are urban interventions exclusively conceived for Microcosm, they all relate to previous work by their creators. Liam Herne, protagonist of the first episode of Microcosm, created shelter-like structures out of aluminium wrap, that are reminiscent of previous performances and sculptures of his. Herne has previously wrapped himself and/or various objects with aluminium wrap, tape, and cellophane. Noa Edwards, the second artist to exhibit her work, chose the iconographic material for her plaster installation from fragments of previous etchings and drawings of hers. Finally,

Bram Thomas Arnold - who created a pyramidal structure made out of pieces of debris found around the exhibition area - has been experimenting for a while with debris sculptures and memory of things past. Microcosm then is not only consistent with AUGUST art's view, but also coherent with the research patterns followed by Arnold, Edwards, and Herne.

In London space is hugely valued and scarce and there seems to be no square centimetre in the city which is not owned or used by someone. It takes a good deal of work to discover areas that remain (or seem to remain) untouched. And it takes a switch to a different scale: from the macro-level of buildings, cars stuck in the traffic, and madding crowds, to the micro-level of a short stretch of footpath, of a forgotten corner in a neighbourhood park, of a triangle covered in grass at the junction between two roads. This is the dimension of Microcosm. Artists were asked to inquire into the life of forgotten areas, to bring to the surface undetected city stories, to use the microscope, rather than the telescope. Moreover, the term "microcosm" does not only refer to micro-

spaces, but it implies those spaces to be ordered ones ("cosmos" meaning "order" and "ordered world" in Greek). Microcosms have to be ordered units, where everything is in its right place. Where does the order come from in Microcosm the exhibition? On the one hand, it is an order that pre-exists the intervention of the artists: in London forgotten places are seldom truly untouched, while they often host people many passer-bys tend to ignore, such as homeless people and drunks. What for many is an unseen space, for those who use it is like a cosmos, a place with a meaning and an identity. Moreover, "unused" areas host organized forms of life we do not pay much attention to, such as insects, rats, and other city animals. On the other hand, artists established microcosms with their own interventions on the "unused" areas, by means of building up narratives about them with their works. In what follows I shall make a few remarks on each of the three episodes of Microcosm, with particular attention to the fact that each artist used a different medium and performed a different kind of ordering action, embodying a meditation on the topic of the exhibition.



Liam Herne's Emergency Shelter consisted of three glowing, somehow imposing aluminium wrap shelters on a corner in Shoreditch Park and another similar shelter at the junction of City Road and East Road. More than a sculpture, it was a performance, where the artist offered the shelters to the city, consigning them to their destiny. Subsequently, the shelters might have offered refuge to homeless people, or have been used by passer-bys accidentally caught in a rainfall, or they might have been removed or carried away by the wind. No matter what happened to the shelters, Herne's work was essentially a positive gesture, partly motivated by the awareness that contemporary cities do not offer any shelter for free. The unused turns into usable, the unseen is made to shine.

Herne has wrapped himself in cellophane and other material during previous performances. He taped up a bus stop in Poland, bound chairs and trees in tape, and wrapped up a room and all its content in bubble wrap. More recently, he used aluminium paper for his wrapping experiments. In Microcosm only the wrapping paper is left, there is no artist or person to be wrapped. The artist has abandoned the place like a snake abandons

its skin. The shelter is a trace left by human intervention, but it is impermanent and could easily turn into just another piece of urban waste forgotten on a corner.

Noa Edwards has cast plasters to fill pot holes in the street outside the Gallery (Baldwin Terrace) and on the nearby towpath along Regent's Canal. On the plasters are images of the sky, fragments, or reproductions of previous etchings of Edward's. This is a pictorial work that shows a strong preoccupation with maintaining harmony between what is up and what is down, what is inside the picture and what is outside: images of the sky lay on the ground, and rain from the sky will finally wash the images out. The work gives form to an osmotic act where the artist's imagery blends with the environment around Regent's Canal. It is a perfect embodiment of the idea of an ordered world, a cosmos.

Filling in holes in the pavement, the plasters attract our attention to otherwise unnoticed small areas: they look like something in-between a chewing gum and a piece of mosaic work. Some images might look like landscapes from imaginary planets, but the artist stresses that they are supposed to be about the very

sky we know but don't really observe with much attention. Edwards extends the realm of the unseen and the unused from earth to the sky: always up there, the sky remains a big unseen most of the time. By means of representing it on her plasters Edwards brings it back to our gaze.

Walking around the exhibition site Bram Thomas Arnold gathered debris from buildings in the area. He marked each piece with a few notes on the place and circumstance of its rescue. He planned to install a pyramidal structure made out of the collected debris on the green area at the junction of Shepherdess Walk and city Road. Unfortunately, due to complaints from the owners of the nearby car park, The Architecture of Decay had to be removed before the installation had been completed. However, such an accident was in the spirit of Microcosm: the project was open to whatever reaction it would have prompted. Rather than negotiating space for art, Microcosm sought to make art happen in unseen spaces, running the risk of an unhappy ending.

Arnold's sculptures are the result of an act of regeneration, where debris that was borrowed from the city is brought back to the city in

a new, organized form. They are composed of bits of pre-existent worlds that have made it into another world, smaller in scale. The structures look like portable temples, or portable funerary monuments. Their link with dead is also given by the fact that they come from dying things, such as disrupted buildings and old furniture. Arnold has often worked with material collected during walks and train trips, engaging with memories, especially memory of the dead ones. The Architecture of Decay is another step into his exploration of the leftovers of cities and the stories they carry with them.

Microcosm presented an art that was about the city and was intended to be impermanent, to be absorbed, processed by the city itself. It was an art integral to its location: if the city were a brain, Microcosm would be like sparks of neural activity through old and unexplored spaces in the brain, triggering half-forgotten memories. I would like this project to be continued and perhaps, one day, go viral. Big cities would become an even more interesting place to live in, and a tiny bit more humane.

Elisa Caldarola, September 2010



## Microcosm – a public exhibition, summer 2010

### Invitation to propose a project

We invite you to submit a proposal for our public exhibition; the projects will be chosen by our temporary project board. All media welcome.

This is to be an exhibition about the unused spaces in London. The space between railway platforms and back gardens, empty lots filled with rubbish, weed-infested verges running next to pedestrian walkways; the spaces that cause irritation, discomfort or indifference, which we no longer “see”.

This is also to be an exhibition about the concept of “unused”. Whilst those aforementioned spaces are unused by us, they are busily being used by insects, rodents, and plants. Further down the invisibility scale, there are microorganisms and bacteria.

In being about both, this exhibition is about the coexistence of different scales: the different microcosms - ours, the insects', the bacteria's... - and different scales of time - human lived time, the time for plants to grow, the scale of climatic time...

We could draw inspiration from Steve McQueen's work for the 53rd Venice Biennale, Giardini (2009), in which he filmed the biennale location when the biennales are not on. It is empty of humans except the lonely guard and the few who come for illicit encounters. Yet dogs scavenge, snails inch, leaves absorb rain. Human time is marked by street lights turning on and off.

We could also draw inspiration from Carl Andre's public artworks: for example, in *Secant* (1977), units of timber are systematically arranged to create a line through a field. The line can be seen as a path. The line, in dividing the space, can also turn the awareness towards the space itself. Perhaps the mind oscillates between both readings.

We propose wandering about these microcosms through a public exhibition along a section of the Regent's Canal in Islington. Our intention is to host the exhibition through 1 of the summer months, with the space reverting back once the exhibition is over. We invite you to propose a project to fill 1 of 5-8 “allotments”. All media, including process-based, are welcome though should be in line with the curatorial query and not be damaging to the public or ecosystem. Please read the attached project specifications and application form for more details. There is no application fee; there is a £50 honorarium; proposals will be selected by the project board. We look forward to your proposals.

## Project specifications

The exhibition's intention is to be public comprising an open call for temporary project board members (who have been chosen), an open invitation to artists, to be held in a public space which will revert back at the end of the exhibition. Artists must be prepared to accept that the exhibition is public but may be without the support of the owner of the property.

Projects which pose undue health & safety risk to public and or potential damage to the space and ecosystem cannot be accepted.

### Exhibition location, project sites, installation, infrastructure and timing:

The exhibition will run along a section of the Regent's Canal in Islington and there are 3 possible locations to site works.

One is the weed-infested verge which runs along the pedestrian walkway, of varying width from ½ to 3 metres. Projects will be demarcated with borders, most likely using 2 by 4 (inch) boards, which reference garden allotments, with the space sized to accommodate the projects.

On one side of the verge are buildings and foundation walls mainly of brick. 2-d works can be leaned against the walls though artists should be aware that we will not accept permanent fixtures of any kind including paint, glue, nails and screws. The canal edge and adjoining basin could also host projects. Artists will need to consider methods for placing, anchoring and removing the works, and must respect the wildlife that lives in the canal.

Aside from that already mentioned, no other infrastructure (such as additional walls, floors, etc) will be provided – or indeed recommended excepting in specific circumstances. All installation is the responsibility of the artist.

The exhibition will be held over 1 of the summer months. The works will remain in situ (outdoors, unsheltered) during this period.

## Emergency Shelter



Liam Herne



Noa Edwards



Between surfaces



The Architecture of Decay  
Bram Thomas Arnold



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