

HELEN MANCHESTER How might art participate in productive critiques of regulatory systems and structures (but also work as a form of prefigurative politics?)

Performative ontologies and art practice: The Productive Margins Isolation and Loneliness project involved older people, community organisations and academic researchers from the social sciences. During the project we worked in two different community settings to explore issues of social isolation and loneliness for older people. We characterize our approach as adopting a performative ontology which acknowledged the activism inherent in knowledge production and asked questions about how we open up possibilities for thinking and doing in order to participate in build new practices in the world (Gibson Graham, 2008).

Ontological reframing: In the social isolation and loneliness project we worked alongside artists in one of our settings to initially make visible people and things that had been rendered non credible/non existent in understandings of support for those experiencing loneliness and isolation in the community. This was important as there was very little desire to discuss the issues of loneliness and isolation in the community due to a sense of 'research fatigue' and considerable stigma attached to loneliness and isolation which was often considered to involve self regulation – to be an individual's 'problem' that they should work on solving themselves.

Re-reading to uncover the possible: Through working with a local storyteller, poet and photographer we were able to map and identify informal networks of care and carers (the hidden economies of care) in the area. The materials and processes used by the artists in preparing for and curating an exhibition made visible the stories of loneliness in the area in a form that opened up dialogue and conversation, rather than shutting it down. This involved, for instance, singing with older people in a care home, taking photographs of the hilly topography, the bilberry bushes and the desolate children's playground, alongside recorded audio conversations, later put together as poems, with informal carers and older people in the area. The exhibition extended understandings of experiences of isolation in the area through highlighting the impact of natural and urban landscapes on the community's sense of its own isolation and loneliness, the differences between internal and external spaces of isolation and the regulatory nature of these spaces. This initial work brought forward the need to avoid the words 'loneliness and isolation' which carried with them a stigma, and a focus on self-help and to reframe the work around the terms 'connection (and disconnection)'.

Creativity in generate actual possibilities: In the research the practice itself was seen as the research activity and the material outcomes of practice represented the findings. However, in this case this was just the beginning of the process. Through inviting policy makers, practitioners and older people to the exhibition their co-presence in this space, and their interactions with the artists and their materials, created a potential to build new relations and alliances in finding solutions at a local level. This was further developed through a series of site exchanges in which the material created from different settings (eg the care home and the bingo club) were shared with the other. This was intended to make credible a diversity of experiences, as well as material infrastructures, stressing the interdependence between settings in tackling issues of loneliness and isolation.