

PAL COUSCOUS GLOBAL LAB 27 MAY to 1 JUNE 2009: EVALUATION**CONTENTS**

Page	Section
1	Introduction
2	Why evaluate?
	Methodology
3	Conclusions and recommendations for the future
4-8	Questions and responses

INTRODUCTION

The Couscous Global Lab brought UK-based, young (between the ages of 17 and 30) artists and activists from diverse communities together with international artists and youth policymakers to engage in creative forms of debating ‘cool politics’, ‘opposites’ and ‘difficult’ countries.

The Lab was residential, in Kent, and took place over six days at the end of May 2009. It was funded by grants from the EU Youth in Action Programme and from Creativity, Culture and Education (CCE).

It was inspired by the experiences of a group of young people who began meeting together in a low-budget art project in a high school in Amsterdam in 2001. These first dialogues in Holland went on to become a festival, then a popular national TV series, *Couscous & Cola*, which was also broadcast worldwide by Al Jazeera and nominated for an Emmy.

The Lab set out to explore possibilities for developing the concept of global intimacy by filming enquiry and debate, which would stimulate artistic responses to ideas generated by all the Lab participants. It was designed and produced by PAL. PAL has a 20-year record of producing unique experimental cross-disciplinary residential Labs for major talent in the arts and sciences, in education and the networked society, in research and policymaking. PAL’s success is based on the fact that everyone who takes part in a Lab expects to push the limits of their practice and of the context in which they are working. This requires a commitment to risk taking and to making challenging new work; the process always produces unexpected results.

The Lab was directed by the Dutch documentary filmmaker and Couscous Global Director Maartje Nevejan. She brought and her creative team from Holland who were working together in this way for the first time. Lab dynamics were shaped by debating issues of personal importance to each participant. Ideas generated and responses to them shaped the content on a day-by-day basis. This process involved enquiry, questioning and listening, dialogue, creative writing (words/music, interactive media), improvisatory performance and creative exploration of exchange of information with policy makers.

PAL COUSCOUS GLOBAL LAB 27 MAY to 1 JUNE 2009: EVALUATION

Why evaluate?

For PAL, it is important to know what people learned from their Lab experience so that we can be constantly testing our methodology for future Labs. Each Lab helps to inform the next. In this particular situation, the Lab was a pilot informing the development of a proposed new four-year programme of Labs.

For PAL's funders, they want to learn what people got out of their participation in the Lab so that they understand more about the value of their investment and so that they can look forward to further work emerging from the pilot. They are also curious about the impact and relevance of artistic work in the context of global issues such as democracy and the influence on young people's ideas about citizenship through contemporary global social networking activities.

Methodology

In June 2009, two weeks after the end of the Lab, I wrote to all participants to seek feedback on how the Lab changed their way of seeing their work. I asked five questions, see below, and invited them to respond in whatever way they thought best. The questions were qualitative and subjective, with the fifth being left open for them to make whatever comment they wished.

By 10th August I had received 19 responses out of a possible 26. Three of these were in narrative form rather than a direct response to each of the questions and they have their own special way of describing how they were inspired. The remainder did not respond, even after a reminder, but I am aware that some of them are out of the country (or their country) and two are touring. **My thanks go to all those who took part in the Lab and in the evaluation exercise.**

I have read all the individual feedback carefully and judged for myself what particular issues are being raised and by how many people. Of course, some matters might be raised by just one or two people and I have tried to pay due attention to those too.

This summary captures messages about the Lab itself and about what has helped participants to open up new personal and collaborative spaces. Much of what is written reflects the immediate afterglow of the Lab and a further follow-up, maybe in the early New Year 2010, would reveal more detail about what new work had been inspired, initiated or produced.

Questions

1. Looking back, how did the Lab create the space for you to think differently about your work, to be challenged and to take risks?
2. Please tell us how you changed the course of the Lab process in response to the enquiry sessions in the first few days, which explored 'opposites' and ideas around 'global intimacy'?
3. What specific work would you like to be doing in the future, that was inspired by the unexpected people you met and/or new ideas developed as a result of your Lab experience?
4. And who would you most like to influence through the work you are doing now and in the future?
5. Lastly a completely open invitation to comment freely on any aspect of your Lab experience.

PAL COUSCOUS GLOBAL LAB 27 MAY to 1 JUNE 2009: EVALUATION**CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE FUTURE**

It is absolutely clear that the Lab participants, old and young, UK-based and Dutch, artists and cultural activists/policymakers who responded to this set of questions gained much from the experience of six days working and reflecting together and learning about each other's practice and values. Their future work will be changed directly or indirectly, immediately or in the medium/long term.

There is overwhelming evidence of an appetite for action, for an artistic response to global issues such as community cohesion, identity, societal change, environment security and politics. This group doesn't want to keep it to themselves; there is a commitment to intercultural dialogue and understanding and to seeking to influence those in authority as well as those without authority.

They believe, too, in the capability and capacity of artists and their work to help people to make meaning of their lives and of their potential to shape their world. They talk of the desire to seek out and learn from their 'opposites' and to spread 'global intimacy' perhaps in a 'viral' way (my phrase).

The PAL Lab methodology and process has been appreciated and praised for its effectiveness in creating a careful mix of people and a safe space in which risks are taken, to the benefit of individuals and their own, or collective, work. Time to reflect, interrogate and toss ideas around is rare in the nano-second 21st century and this group has seen its benefits.

There are many new ideas for individual and collaborative work, some of which are already being explored with the PAL team. We would expect to see much more of this happening over the next few months and, where developing ideas for new work has not been possible, to learn more about the barriers which get in the way.

Filming took place throughout the duration of the Lab. The resulting DVD contains in-depth coverage of Lab activities as well as short clips for each of the participants to put on their own websites.

Recommendations

1. That we write again to the Lab participants in the early New Year 2010, to learn more about how the group is networking to provide support and challenge to each other and what work is emerging from that process.
2. That the valuable messages which have manifested in this Lab should inform PAL's plans over the next four years to develop and research a new paradigm for international artistic dialogue and direct action by young people whose lives are shaped and overly dictated by rapidly changing environmental and political change.

PAL COUSCOUS GLOBAL LAB 27 MAY to 1 JUNE 2009: EVALUATION

QUESTION 1: Looking back, how did the Lab create the space for you to think differently about your work, to be challenged and to take risks?

Here are some of the aspects which have been highlighted. I have put the most frequent at the top and the others in descending order. Unless it says so, these are positive words.

1. Working with new and talented people from different disciplines, who are willing to be honest and to challenge. And, associated with that,
2. Finding different creative perspectives, networks, future work and ideas.
3. However, one commented that talent was a little dilute and that s/he was disappointed that there weren't more people capable of making a deeper theatrical experience.
4. Having safe space and time, away from the demands of everyday life and work pressures. Having an 'unplanned, unscripted exchange'.
5. Many mentioned the special environment of Bore Place, its isolation and the food. In fact the chef, Andrew, gets a special mention not just for cooking but for being willing to participate in some of the activities.
6. The chance to reflect, 'clear my head' and focus
7. Finding resources within oneself, or each other, and enjoying personal affirmation
8. Taking risks, including personal risks such as self disclosure. People mentioned the need for courage, expression, willingness to air thoughts, even unpopular ones.
9. There are five mentions of the enquiry process, including one which described it as an intrusion, albeit valuable.
10. Two mentions were made of the joy of making performance and another who said there wasn't enough.
11. One commented on how we are constantly defined by ourselves and others. Labels shape our lives, but here, at the Lab, 'labels slip into the obsolete'.
12. Somebody proposed that the concept of Global Intimacy did not go far enough. It should instead be 'Global Ideology' but we are not told how.
13. Alwine, who filmed the process, made sensitive observations about her dual roles as participant and observer. This made her doubly aware of when it was appropriate to use the camera not just to capture but also to give people the chance to express their feelings.

QUESTION 2: Please tell us how you changed the course of the Lab process in response to the enquiry sessions in the first few days, which explored 'opposites' and ideas around 'global intimacy'?

This question provoked people to write about the challenging and uncomfortable nature of the enquiries while trying to rationalise them as part of a Lab plan or

PAL COUSCOUS GLOBAL LAB 27 MAY to 1 JUNE 2009: EVALUATION

process. One respondent simply wrote '?'. Nevertheless, here are some of the observations and tensions described under four headings.

1. **Opposites and intimacy:** Most people explored, several through their responses, the attraction and necessity of working with people and ideas we might consider to be 'opposite'. They came to like differences and learned as much about their own feelings and identities as they did about others. They recognised the creative dynamic between distance and intimacy. One respondent, though, was frustrated that opposites and intimacy were dealt with too superficially, even sentimentally. There was potential to drill deeper but this felt incompatible with the Lab 'plan'.
2. **Enquiries:** Described by Maartje Nevejan in her feedback as a powerful tool combining traditional Sufi methods with Western psychology. Many people were of the view that the early enquiry episodes were challenging and somewhat uncomfortable but that they also helped to explore and release tension, and to individuals revealing something new and valuable inside themselves. Enquiry makes room for dialogue. The point is made that enquiries laid the foundation for the work which was made in the second half of the Lab.

Did enquiries go on too long? Some felt manipulated by the process and out of control, that there was a lack of clarity. Certainly, by the third day, there was a resolute and, they say, successful grasping of the nettle by participants, to take the Lab into a more constructive, collaborative and supportive phase. A very welcome evening dialogue was mentioned as the point at which there was a shift in control. After that, the Lab participants became co-developers.

3. **Artistic expression:** Some responded to their positive and negative experiences of the enquiries by starting to make art, though there is a view that opportunities for creative expression were limited. However, a theatre performance was devised and rehearsed, poetry and rap was improvised, and a computer installation was generated. These seem to have been a powerful and necessary response on the part of artists to the dynamic experienced through exploration of opposites and intimacy.
4. **Lab direction and explanation:** There is some criticism in the feedback about the hidden nature of the enquiry process and how that was expected to evolve into a powerful, artist-led Lab. Some wanted explanation at the beginning so that they could go with the flow, feel more relaxed and comfortable, feel more in control. There seems no doubt, though, that all were participating on a peer to peer basis in the last two days.

What was the dynamic between the more mature and experienced Dutch-speaking team from Holland and the younger (not all of them) artists/policymakers from the UK? There's no basis for conclusion in the feedback I have solicited but two people commented about differences in age.

One suggestion: We need a PAL Lab for World Leaders!

PAL COUSCOUS GLOBAL LAB 27 MAY to 1 JUNE 2009: EVALUATION**QUESTION 3: What specific work would you like to be doing in the future, that was inspired by the unexpected people you met and/or new ideas developed as a result of your Lab experience?**

It should be borne in mind that this question was asked within a month of the Lab. Early responses indicated that people intended to develop work and that they were excitedly looking forward to collaborations and sharing of ideas. Some pieces are already the subject of early applications for funding.

We would expect, though, that it would be some months, even years, before we could see work which had begun its life at the Lab. In some cases the Lab experience will inspire completely new and unattributed works or will be transmitted to other people who are acquainted with Lab participants. We really need to ask them again in the New Year 2010.

Here is a summary of points made, both in relation to actual ideas and also to people or activities which had been inspiring. Significantly, everyone intends to take action, some aren't sure exactly what, yet.

1. Many people talked about the way they were inspired by the mix of people and art forms at the Lab and the potential of the diverse network to provide support and challenge in the future. Talking to older Muslims was valued and the perspectives and experience of the 'Dutch team' (as they were labeled) was key. People valued the chance to work with those who are their 'opposites' and they plan to seek out and continue that practice as part of their work.
2. In the feedback (which is not a public document) people mentioned other Lab participants by name, including several where ideas have been generated and there is an intention to try to develop work together. The person who gets the most mentions is Mohsin Abbas of Arts Versa, who is a producer; the 'art of extremism' is just one attraction and there is an idea for an international event called SPOKEN (© Adam).
3. Enquiry as a way to open up dialogue and creative collaboration features in several responses and some have started to test the approach in other contexts, including movement analysis and with business studies students.
4. Dialogue through creativity and making art;
 - a. About globalism, identity and culture
 - b. With young artists, policymakers and politics more broadly
 - c. In community and cross-cultural projects
 - d. About political, societal and environmental change
 - e. Using different art forms and practices to convey messages
5. Some people described how they have looked with new eyes at their existing work, they feel refreshed, see it differently with a new focus, have a 'sudden urge' to go back to it.

PAL COUSCOUS GLOBAL LAB 27 MAY to 1 JUNE 2009: EVALUATION**QUESTION 4: And who would you most like to influence through the work you are doing now and in the future?**

There is a strong desire to shake up and refresh the status quo and influence people through artistic practice, though some people aren't sure exactly how that will be done, as yet. From 'everyone', to those who don't share our views, the 'old elite' in the arts sector, people in other arts disciplines and those who have lost a sense of play and curiosity about the environment all get mentions. Specific audiences include:

1. Communities, organisations and people not engaged in the arts or with each other in community relations (Muslims and non-Muslims)
2. Arts sector and artists working on intercultural dialogue
3. Youth and cultural policy makers
4. Young people in schools, and educationalists. The potential afforded by social networking is highlighted
5. Funders, to encourage them to take risks and to invest in people as well as projects
6. Media designers, to take account of sensory perception and the way we see the physical world

QUESTION 5: Lastly a completely open invitation to comment freely on any aspect of your Lab experience.

There were many personal reflections on the Lab and any attempt to reflect them all in a summary seems rather presumptuous. Here are just a few key points;

1. The environment of Bore Place and the care and attention of the PAL team, the Lab Director and her colleagues from Holland are all praised. Significantly this goes beyond comfort to an appreciation that the safe place created enabled people to take risks and to find the time and space to reflect upon previous and new work or aspirations.
2. The PAL Lab process and all that involves was mentioned by several people as having a significant impact on them and on their potential work in the future. In fact, one person would have appreciated knowing more about PAL and other Labs. It has to be said, though, that some would have appreciated clarity on Lab expectations from the first day.
3. Many acknowledge the uncomfortable places they were invited into (through the enquiries and opposites) but all see its value.

PAL COUSCOUS GLOBAL LAB 27 MAY to 1 JUNE 2009: EVALUATION

4. As mentioned above (under the second question) a concern was raised as to whether the difference in ages between the experience Dutch team and the younger artists from the UK had been a negative factor. One of the younger artists would have liked a clearer explanation of the anticipated Lab process from the Lab Director, and suspected that she might have misjudged the depth and capability of the younger participants. As a consequence they had felt a little left out of early decisions about the Lab and that more making and producing would have allowed better creative solutions.
5. A final quote, from a filmmaker, 'Good characters, a good story, a conflict and a resolution'.