Mars missions and roadless trips: art that creates its own community

Socially engaged practice could change the world. But first we need another name to describe something that is part of everyday life

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The Roadless Trip gives anyone the opportunity to express what they'd like for the future. Photograph: John Hunter/RULER

It wasn't long into the recent Devoted and Disgruntled (D&D) discussion on socially engaged practice when someone asked: "What's another name for this goddamn arts practice?!"

The language we use to talk about the work we make comes weighted with academic and industry jargon. I am just as guilty of perpetuating this as anyone else. Ironically, socially engaged performance-making is often about doing exactly the opposite: it happens right in the middle of everyday life. Which is of course what community-based theatre often does too. So what makes socially engaged practice different?

In watching this sort of work, I have often noticed that whether you are meeting with groups of elderly women in community centres, presenting a project to a charity group or engaging with young families, the conversation often rapidly turns to a version of the same question. What would it be like if we could start from scratch? What kind of world are we building? What kind of future do we want to live in? To a lot of people this question is brand new, and the possibility that we all have the agency to make a difference feels real for the first time when explored in collaboration with a bunch of artists.

For their project A Decade With Mars, Bristol-based artists Ella Good and Nicki Kent have committed to spending the next 10 years interacting with a group of people who have all applied to be part of the Mars One Mission. Mars One describes itself as a "not for profit foundation with the goal of establishing a permanent human settlement on Mars".

In spending time getting to know this group of individuals (who are all very different), and inviting them to get to know each other, Ella and Nicki are creating a micro-community of people who would otherwise not have had the opportunity to meet.

In a similar vein, Sarah Woods' excellent The Roadless Trip gives anyone the opportunity to express what they'd like for the future. Woods has taken her repurposed ambulance The Tripper to homeless centres, housing co-operatives, senior learners' groups and many more.

As Lyn Gardner suggested in a recent blog, this kind of work enables artists to develop relationships with the public which go beyond the exchange of money for a ticket to a show. In concluding that "if we value the community, maybe they will value us", there's an assumption that *community* is something that exists in the abstract, on its own. The artist, as outsider, can come in and work with the community. Perhaps somewhat cynically, I don't agree, believing that because of the way that society is currently organised, community doesn't happen on its own. However, and perhaps much more positively, I feel that we can all get to work on creating community. And that's what socially engaged practice tries to do.

In resisting easily understandable definitions, and in operating outside of what we commonly see as valuable (particularly culturally), socially engaged practice feels like a vehicle through which radical transformation can happen. Yes, I am talking about making the world a better place.

Perhaps, and with no value judgment, there is a difference between community arts and socially engaged practice. Where community arts demonstrates clear benefits for the participants in a specific community, socially engaged practice creates its own communities and generates the sort of value that cannot be immediately measured. What would it look like if we each took responsibility for making

things happen? If we didn't hesitate to ask for the things we want to see happen? What if we put [Fun Palaces](#) on the [map](#) for more than just one weekend of the year? What if we grew it into a village, a town, or a city…?

Of course to empower every individual in the idea that it is possible to use art to create the kind of society that works for each and every one of us, we need to free ourselves from the kind of language which alienates other people. Then everyone might want to be part of it.