

Interview - Laurence Payot

Written by E-International Relations

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Artist Laurence Payot works in collaboration with people and communities – local, global, established or invented – to create collective events and objects that question and re-invent our sense of belonging. By becoming part of her work, people are given tools to connect with one another and experience everyday places from a different perspective. The exchange between the materials and the people that form her artwork is the key ingredient for the creative alchemy to happen. She was born in Metz (France), graduated from the Ecole Nationale des Beaux-Arts de Lyon in 2005, and is currently based at The Royal Standard studios in Liverpool (UK). Payot has been commissioned nationally and internationally by renowned organisations, including the Pompidou Centre-Metz (France), Tate Modern, Liverpool Biennial, National Trust (UK) and the Belluard Bollwerk International (Switzerland). She was awarded the prestigious SkyArts Ignition: Futures Fund 2012, a one-year bursary and documentary by the TV channel SkyArts, and was shortlisted for the Liverpool Art Prize in 2013. Recently, she collaborated with professionals from other fields, including digital coders, scientists, poets and musicians, giving extra layers to her work.

Where do you see the most exciting work happening in your field?

Artists that come to mind are Ai Wei Wei or Tania Bugliera. But also I feel most inspired by artists and organisations working outside of institutions. We have this strange commercial relationship with art, you're either good or bad at it, and you get marked on how good you are. But the essence of creativity does not need the stamp of a gallery. For example, watch this video about a local choir who sing for the dying and give hope and spirituality through their voice. I particularly like artworks that collide directly with the real world, placed in the public realm. Their suggestion for change and new possibilities goes further than a metaphor, it becomes real. People interact with it. They love it or hate it. People see it by chance.

How has the way you understand the world changed over time, and what (or who) prompted the most significant shifts in your thinking?

We're living in a time of change, I think, and hope, that people believe that individual actions can have an impact. In my work, I always value and embrace other people's ideas, I try to make projects which are as collaborative as possible, and let myself be guided by unexpected people and places. I think everybody's voice is worth listening to. I think, and hope, that people taking part in creative projects come out of them with this feeling of power, the feeling of believing in their intuition and creativity. Our current system (educational and political) tends to suppress our ability to do that or has failed in valuing this. But we can see this failure now, and people need creativity (whatever form that takes) in their lives to be happy.

My way of seeing the world has also shifted recently. I have been working with scientists a lot and exploring the universe (infinity) and the body (ever-changing and worlds within me). It is helping to focus on the moment. I used to create more static work, and I now embrace live art, and the power of the moment more and more. Something might be ephemeral, but it may have a strong impact on people who experience it. Everything is ephemeral when we look at it on a big scale. We're too attached to objects; capitalism is not helping creativity.

Your new project Angels (funded by Arts Council England) has been gathering stories from refugees and

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displaced people across the UK. What are the key themes that are emerging from your work and how do people want to express these themes?

After Brexit, I felt racism on a personal level for the first time in the UK, being originally from France and having a very strong accent. I wanted to do something to help change people's perceptions of immigrants. People who have left their home have done it for very real, very powerful reasons. You don't leave your home, your family, your friends, just like that. Their stories are diverse and amazing. They come from all over the world, and have very diverse stories. The key themes emerging for me are strength and resilience, hope and optimism, as well as sadness and struggles. Life in the UK is safer but not always easier mentally. We should look up to them and follow their aspirations. And this is what I am trying to do with Angels: their portraits are projected in big scale, above head height. They tell us the words we might all need to hear, such as 'keep going, and you'll get there', or "don't listen to anyone who tells you that you can't achieve your dream".

Belonging is a reoccurring theme in your work. How can art help people achieve a sense of belonging without creating closed groups, forging an 'us and them' mentality?

I always invite local communities to take part in my work, wherever I am working at the time, and I have to start somewhere, focusing on particular groups. But everybody is always welcome to join in, and I try to make sure I put systems in place for that, allowing people to contribute in different ways (getting in touch online, attending a drop-in session, etc.). I try and be as inclusive as I can, and for that reason I don't feel like we are creating a "them", though we are creating an "us".

The themes I explore are often universal human themes (love, death, friendship, belonging, wind, light...), and everyone can relate to them. If someone challenges what I do, I try to include it if I can, unless it becomes a subject for division or hatred. For example, with my current project "Angels", I wanted to talk to people who are refugees or asylum seekers in the UK about hope and dreams, about their spiritual side, and what keeps them strong in hard times. Angels are present across cultures, and people take that concept in the way they want. For atheists, angels might be other people in their lives. For some, angels are an everyday reality, they believe they have 1 or 2 angels on their side. And if people don't want to talk about angels, then that's fine too. We'd talk about hope. To avoid this 'us' (the viewers of the work), and 'them' (the refugees and asylum seekers in the videos), I included a range of people in the portraits, including staff and volunteers, and myself.

You described your global project '1 in a Million You' as a "democratic exchange" between your original idea and active public participation. Can you elaborate on the significance of "democratic exchange" in relation to your work?

What I mean is that people are free to interpret the work in the way they want. '1 In A Million You' was an open call, inviting people to become part of a new online tribe. They were sent a temporary tattoo mask through the post and could then interpret that mask in the way they wanted. Some used it in a straightforward appropriate way. Some people re-designed the mask, some chopped it, some wrote about it, some created videos. I was really open to receiving any interpretation. It was interesting for me as an artist to let go of the aesthetic and see what would happen if I gave people creative control. In political terms, this is about trust, trusting people to make their own decisions within creating systems that cater for and see the value of diversity.

Your 2013 project 'Dunstable Wind Charming Day' is a contemporary folklore that celebrates unique local identity with a focus on the future rather than re-enacting the past. How does this type of local project contribute to cultural identity in wider UK society?

This project was one of my most successful ones in terms of bringing a community together. But this was only possible with a strong support network. Artists can't do it on their own, and councils need to recognise how powerful it can be when you give communities the chance to re-invent themselves. Past folklore was created so why not create new ones, re-imagine our identity, in respect of the past. In Dunstable, we created 'Wind Charming Day', a day to celebrate the local wind that has such an effect on the town. People took part in various ways, from dance, to music,

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poetry, jewelry making, and face painting. It felt amazing seeing people turning up on the day with costumes they had designed (including dog costumes!). It felt vibrant, everyone was contributing to the same aim of celebrating the wind – and the invisible things of life we cannot understand. I would love to do a similar project in other cities and see what new folklores emerge from other places.

The Posttraumatic Growth Inventory was developed as an instrument to assess positive outcomes reported by those who have experienced traumatic events. In what ways can contributing to community art projects cultivate growth in these areas?

The inventory includes five key factors within its 21 scales. The first factor is 'new possibilities'. To me, this is what art is all about. I used to love drawing when I was little because on my piece of paper, I could take all the decisions of form, colour, no one else could tell me what to do. Through art you can imagine the world you want. Now I try and do the same as I use to, but the piece of paper has turned into the streets, and I can decide how I want to change them. This is why it is so important for me to create work outside of the gallery walls, outside of the white page.

The second factor is 'relating to others'. We do that when we look at any piece of art. We relate to another person (the artist) instantly. And then works in the public realm bring us together (I cried with strangers many times while watching or taking part in public performances). What I am most excited about is the connection between people who don't know each other, and people from different backgrounds. Two very different things placed together create a wonderful third one, the principle of true symbiosis – diversity.

The third factor is 'personal strength'. Through being creative you realise that your ideas and thoughts are unique. Even through simple things like life drawing, with a group of people looking at the same things, it's a great exercise to discuss how we all perceive things differently, and all views have value. 'Spiritual change' is the fourth factor. I think artworks that really impact on me have spiritual meanings. The art form that can take me there the best is usually music. I think, again, that it relates to our most basic human feelings of connections to something wider than ourselves. To me it manifests itself through giving form to the things we cannot grasp with our physical senses and logical brain. The final factor is 'appreciation of life'. There is no treasure to look for, it is all here in front of us, we just need to open our eyes. The magic is not in the objects themselves but in the way we perceive them. It comes in through our senses, it's transformed inside us, and it comes back out as emotions and energy.

In what ways can art influence global politics?

I believe art can have (and has had) a huge impact, but we need to support artists better and understand the unqualifiable usefulness of art. Art is crucial if we want to live in democratic societies, it is part of free speech, of the right to express your gut instinct. It is always a tricky balance because the money for art has to come from somewhere. It is a fine line between commissioner's propaganda, aiming to send their own message through artists (being public or private commissions), and artists talking for themselves. But artists need to be paid in order to have the time to make good work.

What relevance does art have for students of Politics and International Relations, and what advice can you give students interested in exploring this area?

I think for students, and everyone else, being curious and experiencing new ways of perceiving the world around us, exploring new possibilities for doing things, is essential. Art doesn't give any answers but allows you to think differently – though only if you listen to your own instinctive emotional response. People can sometimes expect a lot from art, they want to understand, they want to 'get it'. I say, don't judge artists, young and old, emerging or talented. Just be thankful for the experience because all they want to do is share something with you, communicate something that is not always clear and understandable. I see art as a collective dream of our current society. It help us digest, assimilate, think ahead. Experiencing art trains your brain to accept change and difference. And don't forget, we are all artists. I wish more adults would draw or take on creative activities without the fear of failure. Art is not about the finished product, it's about the process. Good things come out of the processes of failure and trying again. Great politicians and people who changed the world had creative minds, the guts to take risks and try new ways, and the

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same desire as artists to change the world for the better.