Charles Esche interviews the Freee Art Collective

Charles Esche: Do the spoken choirs relate to Occupy systems of mediation and communication?

Freee: It is critical of them in the sense that they are techniques of consensus; we are trying to generate techniques of dissensus.

Charles Esche: I see. Right!

Freee: We are trying to come up with ways of introducing people to disagreement. Some people find it emotionally very difficult to be in a room and disagree with someone face to face, and so we're trying to come up with techniques that demonstrate divergence not as a personal confrontation but as a disagreement about ideas. So, all the things that we have been doing, such as the social kiosks and the badge wearing, is to get people to disagree openly with each other but in an environment where it doesn't feel as if you are breaking some community by doing that.

Charles Esche: Yes, yes.

Freee: I suppose we think, as well, on a more abstract level, that the idea of neoliberalism comes out of liberal democracy and an idea of consensus – or populism – and forgets to think about dissensus. Putting us all together in ways that we feel we can't disagree, this limits our ability to move forward collectively; and closes down disagreement through consensus. We want to reposit the idea that democracy includes dissensus as well.

Charles Esche: Although you could say that neoliberalism was the thing that introduced dissensus as opposed to social democracy. I mean, you think about Thatcher and Reagan at the beginning of the political introduction of neoliberalism, rather than the authoritarian one in Chile and so on. You have this democratic introduction. You think about Thatcher! I grew up in England and Scotland as a teenager and I grew up with that: the manager's right to manage, the majority shouldn't lord it over the minority, the idea of the enemy within, the idea of not building a consensus with the miners, and so on, groups within society that should be excluded from society. And now with Brexit, of course, that feels, from a distance to some extent, like the 48% have been completely eliminated.

Freee: Isn't that a form of populism rather than encouraging dissensus?

Charles Esche: Yes, I suppose, if you're thinking about Chantal Mouffe or Ranciere – friendly enemies – then yes, it's not that. That dissensus is within a democratic framework. It's about not eliminating the other.

Freee: Exactly!

Charles Esche: The idea of friendly enemies is that they are still friendly. The Carl Schmidt thing about enemy enemies seems to be closer to what neoliberalists were working on. It is working on dissensus but the elimination of that dissensus. Building

not a new consensus but a new authoritarian picture. Take Brexit, there's a lot of people – presumably like you three – probably don't agree with it but you have no voice. There is no political voice within the system. So the system is eliminating dissensus whether that's from the Left or the Right or whatever.

Freee: The problem that we've got with Mouffe and Ranciere in that respect is that they seem to understand dissensus entirely in terms of how you might address the state or the established power bloc, whereas for us dissensus is much more local than that. It is to do with actual conversations. But we've found ourselves in situations before where we have been asked to work with other groups and we turn up and it is already decided before you get there what this group is going to do. At this point we always say, 'but we haven't discussed this yet' or 'I don't know whether I agree with you yet'. There has been the assumption within the Left that what we're dissenting against is whatever is in power, and so there's built in dissensual mechanism for the Left.

Charles Esche: So, how can I intervene here?

Freee: We are using this interview in a publication around a recent project at NN gallery. The 'Freee Carracci Institute', brought together a number of techniques that start with a slogan or an idea and rework it, regenerate it and reproduce it, in several ways. We published slogans from previous projects, rethought them, and then we invited a number of artists, people we know, to work with it, change it, and so on. The project book brings together these exchanges and subsequent additions. For example, we asked comedian Dave Green to make a routine out of a list of our slogans and he performed this to another audience in the exhibition, mid-way through it. It was hilarious and he gave us a good load of satire!

Sometimes we make billboard posters or kiosks and people think they look a bit like a painting and sculptures. So, we're trying to move away from the contemplation of those things and at the same time we're trying not to be the education programme of the gallery. Is there anything in the middle between these two extremes? And how do we not just fall into that same mode of accepted engagement processes?

More specifically we are thinking about how people form opinions. You don't just have your opinions; an opinion is formed socially. This meets another point where, if you want to override modernist autonomous art, you have to say that art has the power of opinion formation. We're interested in what art does there on a number of levels. The conversation that we are having will be part of that book. We're trying to make the book in a way that does not invite a contemplative response to the exhibition, and make the book 'other' to the project, an addition, something in itself. Everyone who was in the project is in the book; the contributions add to the project, they are not merely reflections on it. It's not a classic catalogue. It's post-project. We were in the NN gallery for six weeks where we were constantly 'producing' in the gallery and we want this book to be part of the continued production.

Charles Esche: Was it also an exhibition? Or was that the process for producing slogans? Was there an exhibition element in it? It would be interesting to talk about the exhibition protocol, in the way that it can be opinion forming or not. Contemplation is

built into the various formats, the various protocols of what an exhibition is. Is it possible to address that or is it only inadequately addressed?

Freee: Yes it was an exhibition. We are seen as didactic. There is a misunderstanding of the way that we want to participate. It seems like it is not convivial enough, or it seems like we never let the participants say what they think. We say what we think and then we use that as a point of departure. The manifestos come back to that. We believe that if you say something directly rather than say pose a question then you allow somebody to disagree not to imagine what the right answer is. When you read a manifesto you can say, "I agree with that bit but not with that bit". It would be really useful for us if you could pull out some of the issues in this.

Charles Esche: Ok, I think what you've just said comes back to the idea of creating dissensus. The way to build consensus is to start with a blank piece of paper and to fill it in. The critique is about you not building consensus. It is what you are not trying to do, but the critique seems to be that you are having too many opinions yourselves. Dissensus is only generated, I guess, by somebody actually saying something you disagree with or otherwise how do you generate dissensus? I don't know. If you don't have any difference of opinion how do you generate it?

Freee: We agree. Dissensus has to start from a different place, and a place of difference. It starts with where you are at. We're interested in both an art and a politics that is not based on this idea of self-expression. The art we make isn't self-expressive but also the politics isn't just about asking 'what opinion do you *have*?' It is about getting people together and disagreeing in order to change. The disagreement is not like a kind of flat disagreement in which one person says one thing and another person says another, or one person believes one thing and another person believes something else. It's not about saying 'I disagree' in order to shore up what you already think and what you already are. Instead, it is the beginning of a conversation in which you and all of us can be transformed through this process. So, in a sense, it's not about there being a kind of ideal of consensus or dissensus; it's about using these operations technically in a process of opinion formation and the transformation of the opinion-holder.

Charles Esche: And then, I suppose, the question would be whether art is the tradition in which that can be done? Or why would art be the tradition in which that could be done?

Freee: It is not about selecting art as the correct realm for it. As artists that is what you are doing so you do it in your workplace, so to speak.

Charles Esche: So, art is an *a priori choice*?

Freee: Let's say, instead, art wouldn't be excluded from this process. So, as artists we would bring this to our work in a way that we would also hope that people in other forms of work would bring it to their work too.

Charles Esche: Ok, so your identification as an artist is an *a priori* then?

Freee: Only insofar as we reject the position of those artists who have left art in order to engage in politics. We made the decision to do the politics within art rather than thinking that art is the wrong place for politics.

Charles Esche: Yes, so that's formative. In a way, that decision forms everything.

Freee: Yes. So, it's not *a priori*...

Charles Esche: It is a legitimate question to find out what the foundations are. If we agree about the idea of dissensus, which seems to make sense to me, and how do you analyse how opinions are formed, then art isn't necessarily (and not the only one) the most appropriate one.

Freee: Also, the whole issue about agreement and disagreement and opinion formation in our work is equally a response to the aesthetic tradition within art. So, it is about trying to find a new way of being a subject within art. For us, the subject within art is not a self-expressive subject with tastes and fixed opinions. So, for us, the question of dissensus and the pursuit of politics within art, is an extension of the avant-garde idea of turning the aesthetic subject into a critical subject.

Charles Esche: Yeah, yeah, yeah. Yes.

Freee: It's about politicising the viewer, in that sense. Art brings you to the idea of the self-expressive subject; part of this is a thing about liking and disliking; you have an opinion about an artwork, but you're not sure where it comes from. Thinking about opinion formation reveals that that attitude is sedimented and produced from other forms of ideas of taste or whatever.

Charles Esche: Maybe it's good to start here then we can unroll these other things. There's an idea of aesthetic education, I suppose, which museums and exhibitions are meant to provide. You go round and you gather an education which means that your opinions change in relationship to certain particular images that you see, and those things that you initially don't understand or don't like or in some way feel no aesthetic joy, become things that later you do feel those things. You come to understand, you have an aesthetic experience, you know, potentially, of transformations of this idea of pleasure, and that that is something which isn't entirely instinctive that everybody shares but is something that needs to be educated.

Freee: Yes. Yes.

Charles Esche: That would be a tradition that maybe you could use to explain what you're doing in terms of the traditions of art? Not only the avant-garde but also the longer traditions of art. So a Kantian idea of art. I mean, it's not that long, it's two hundred years, but its still the one that we use. Really, all the institutions that we've got are based on it. That tradition is one that is about making opinions but it's about making opinions that are aesthetically charged rather than politically charged. And I suppose that would be the shift. Like you say, a politicisation of that opinion formation. But using those techniques of opinion forming. You would hope that the trajectory would be one of

coming in without politics, like you would come into the museum without taste, and you would leave with politics.

Freee: [giggles] Yes. [laughs] Yes. That's why we call it politicisation. It is like aestheticisation in that sense.

Charles Esche: Yes! And it's sensitising yourself to your politics, in a way. You could keep a kind of Kantian idea, almost of a disinterested spectator in the beginning, but its an apolitical spectator who becomes a politicised spectator.

Freee: That would be the model, but I don't think that that's the reality. I think that we assume that people have a politics of some kind before they encounter the work, so it's not analogous to them having no taste.

Charles Esche: ok…

Freee: But what we try to give them is a different sense of politics as an action, as collective actions. So, politics isn't about what I vote for or what I believe, of saying these are my principles and my values, as a mode of self-expression. We imagine people come into contact with our work with a kind of self-expressive model of politics and we hope that they leave with a much more transformative, collective and dialogical sense of politics.

Charles Esche: So, is self-expressive in that terms closer to kitsch?

Freee: [Long pause] You mean standardised and predetermined?

Charles Esche: Yes. Sentimental, based on emotional response…

Freee: Possibly but the primary thing for us would be that it is individualistic. That politics is mine, my politics. It is like when people have that attitude to kitsch when they say 'I know that it's not very good but I like it anyway'. And you have that personal relationship to it. My secret pleasures!

Charles Esche: Yes, but it's quite interesting to parallel that to kitsch, because it's about triggering a certain memory or a certain incident, so that this object – not to overload it – is fetishistic in recalling a certain moment. It becomes a symbol. Kitsch is sentimental without all the analysis of the condition. So, art or the avant-garde – if we put kitsch and the avant-garde opposite each other the avant-garde would try to not be sentimental, would try to achieve some kind of objectivity in its analysis of form or its analysis of its relationship to the viewer or the space or whatever. They try to have some kind of argument as to why that works or doesn't work. And you get the extremes of systems painting and things like that. So, that idea that art or the identity of the artist as an *a priori* choice which then says, given the fact that I am artist, this is what I can do with that art. I can politicise it or I want to politicise it. Is that fair?

Freee: I don't think it is *a priori*. It feels more Sartrean than that.

Charles Esche: Existential, you mean? Of being an artist…

Freee: Not of being an artist but of continuing to be an artist. For me, I continue to be an artist because of a mission around what we're talking about. There's something to be done. I'm just trying to compare it with Liberate Tate or some other politically engaged art that is more a single campaign. It doesn't feel right to say I am an artist and therefore I stay an artist. Or, I'm an artist so I know how to do it and I can do it here. It feels like something other than that.

Charles Esche: Aha…

Freee: The reasons people give for leaving art, for quitting being an artist, just don't seem to be that persuasive. I mean, it seems to be based on either a mishandled theory of art and its politics (about being totally corrupted by capitalism, or something) or of a complete misunderstanding of politics as only being about addressing yourself directly to the state. And art not being the best way to do that. That seems to be a very narrow, thin idea of politics. Party politics! So, it leaves too much politics out and it leaves too much art out.

Charles Esche: That makes sense to me. In this current British election I can see there's no voice that represents the majority of the people. There is no debate around the issues that actually need to be debated. The political structure has forbidden, through the media and various other reasons, the discussion of what might be meaningfully discussed, even in an objective sense. Like do you want to have a nationalised health service or not; do you want to have basic social security systems or not; do you want to cut yourself off from Europe or not. Those things don't even seem to be on the table. They're not being discussed even though they seem to be fundamental. Of course, a lot of the populist movements in Europe are a reaction to precisely that form of democratic deficit…

Freee: Yes…

Charles Esche: … in that here, the fact that things weren't allowed to be discussed, including immigration, welfare systems and things like that, allowed somebody like [Geert] Wilders to break through. So, in a sense, the answer – the way that people's opinions have changed in the last twenty years (and I include myself within the transformative left, you know) – is that twenty years of working on the transformative left and trying to produce a different kind of politics has actually produced the opposite or at least the reaction to the same symptoms that we've identified as being the failure of liberal democracy, has produced an authoritarian populism, a rightist xenophobic populism, much more effectively than its produced anything on the left, which is a wee bit concerning about our strategies, I think.

Freee: You talk about this deficit, and there is a deficit, but in my experience what I feel that has gone missing more than anything else is that when I was being politicised as a teenager it was in people's kitchens. There were feminist group meetings, Maoist meetings, postcolonial meetings in people's kitchens, in some private space, with maybe 25 people if you were lucky. And when we had the Poll Tax protests, that initially started out in people's kitchens and then it got too big to we went upstairs in pubs. What's interesting for me, is that these were on the borders, half inside and half outside,

organised left groups. The Labour Party and the Unions and the revolutionary parties were all kind of involved, though the leadership usually distanced itself from these popular protests, but what was driving everything was just outside of organised left institutions. It's as if the left institutions simply don't count if you don't have this other force just outside them. These self-organised politicised groups often provided the agenda for the official left, such as women's rights, race and so on.

Charles Esche: Off the top of my head, there's an interesting switch that happens where the kitchen and the party get replaced by the internet group and social media. The problem with that is that the discussion is so much more superficial. It's shorter and much quicker. And it's not really about saying look we agree in general but let's sort out what happens and how we agree in particular. As we all remember, those leftist arguments could be extremely dissensual in those kitchens! [giggles] And that dissension doesn't really exist in the sense that what you have is the option to like or not like. You can respond, of course, it does happen, it's not impossible, but it's quite rare and, it seems to me, to be getting rarer, actually (but maybe that's my personal experience) that you really have a discussion on Facebook. Facebook is the only one that really allows it. Instagram and Twitter don't really allow that kind of discussion amongst two people who agree on some essential politics – like social justice or something – but they disagree about a lot of other stuff. That's not happening. Not that two-hour process where you're sitting and maybe drifting off sometimes but still listening to those discussions. So, what happens is some kind of confirmation. There's a group of people that think that I'm right and there's not much analysis or self-criticism of that or refinement of the proposals. It makes action all the more difficult because it's just an opinion, people agree with you, you're happy about it, and that's kind of it. I'm trying to work out why. I agree with you completely that, if you think about the Workers Education Councils or the processes in the 1920s or 1930s or even earlier in the nineteenth century of union organisation which were based on doorsteps, kitchens, pubs, they gradually generated a sense of solidarity, of common endeavour, of common interest, that all those things then produced the consequence of people who started acting. And, it seems to me that at some point (you know, I'd say after '89 is the crucial moment, in a way, but it started already after '79 and '80 with Thatcher and Reagan, in the West), that at that point the left basically abandoned all those techniques somehow, or just forgot about them and started closing itself off in its own bubble. By the 90s it no longer has its own story to sell because there was no real existing socialism that could be argued about and debated. And so trying to recapture that is maybe what partly the kiosks and the elements of collective decision making – what you're calling dissensus but it's also sort of collective decision making – that seems to be trying to recapture some of that idea of what you called a local dissensus. It's about specific issues in a specific place. And that that seems to be where you are going with the spoken choirs and things like that. Would that be fair, that there's a link between what you were talking about in terms of those kitchens and the works you're doing now?

Freee: Yes. Yes. Yes. I think we're really interested in the collective as well. We've been talking about trying to think about the difference between ethics and politics. And it seems to us that this idea of campaigning and what you were saying there about the left attaching itself to some sort of pragmatic position, maybe it goes that way because of what's happening with the right in the 80s, and so I think we were trying to think about moving away from the ethics of individualism and trying to move towards the politics of

the collective. That is really important to us. And that's why we're not interested in single issue campaigns or feeling individually ok that you recycle your glass. People are in crisis: what do you do, what *do* you do? Ethically, is an easier way or a more straightforward way to deal with it than politically and collectively. So, for us the collective has become a really important point of trying to change or overturn or protest against the individual. So, your question about the kitchen and some of our techniques, I guess there is an attempt, in some kind of weak way, to take over the exhibition space and be there for as long as we possibly can (although not some marathon of presence), we invite other people in, we have conversations around the issues we present. And we establish the topics of conversation for people to disagree with in a more situated way. This is what's happening in the exhibition we had at NN or even when we go to a conference and we take a manifesto that is knowingly thinking about those people at the conference, with them in mind, it's not something totally off the wall or tangential to the event. The Engage conference at Liverpool, for instance, when we were thinking about the fact that we have an audience of education officers from galleries. So there are some particularities that we know and we are trying to get them involved in at that stage. It's not abstract! There is a clear rationale in terms of what we bring to the table.

Charles Esche: Are the kiosks mostly done in those conditions where there is a specific group of people that are already gathered together? And then they come out of their conference or their regular activity and then the kiosk is the place where this spoken choir happens? Is that how it works? How does the crowd gather in the kiosk?

Freee: We have a little illustration here. This is what the kiosks look like. We close them when they are not operational. We remove these sections and it becomes a place where conversation can take place. This was in the NN gallery space. I suppose that was the first time we've had it as essentially the thing in the space that. In general this structure travels around. That's what appeared in Liverpool, that's what went to the market square in Northampton and activated conversations around Brexit.

Charles Esche: And that was just passersby at that point?

Freee: Yes, outside it's the passersby. In the gallery it tends to be more invited people. Or the art gallery passerby. We know there are different publics, and we're always aware, when we're operating the kiosks, that there are specific groups, or interest groups, that you find. We're interested in the passerby. We're aware of trying to undo the passerby in some respects, especially in the gallery. We like to imagine you can convert the art-gallery-passerby into an art-gallery-going-politicized subject. We're interested in the passerby in terms of the opportunities that arise - the recognition that someone who is a shopper or someone who's wandering along are potentially politicised subjects already and you actually call them forth by setting this up and having a conversation with them about something that is clearly political due to the nature of the techniques, graphics, and so on.

That brings us back to the idea of developing audiences or managing publics. We've come a bit unstuck with the Arts Council. We don't want to talk that language of developing an audience for art. We want to call counter-publics. That sounds like it could be the same thing, but obviously it is particular and different. I think the kiosks come from this other thing that we haven't talked about: about not giving up and always

thinking there's an alternative. It would be easier if we gave up the Left and gave up on this idea of politicisation, on the idea of transformation, but we are always trying to think about where there is potential and try to identify it and what will work with it. So, one of the things we thought about with the kiosk is the potential for a kiosk that is not a commercial space. Usually, kiosks are for selling things. but they are also interesting because they are DIYey, you know, instant and immediate. There are corporate kiosks on street corners, but the idea that there is one person in a kiosk and there is a set of exchanges around them is interesting. You can have social exchanges through selling things, of course, but we wondered what might happen if the kiosk was not about selling anything, wasn't a commercial space but was a space for exchanging ideas and opinions. That's where we came to with the kiosk. And with the passerby we're always thinking about the potential of the passerby. It was around the time of the Tottenham Riots. There was a lot of debunking about rioters stealing things and – I don't blame them, but anyway – this dominant idea that they were corrupt. The idea that everyone is just a consumer! You walk down the road and you're turned. Another glorified consumer. I suppose, at that time, we were trying to think of the passerby as someone who has a series of moments – it's a temporal relationship to the public realm and what's going on there. Therefore, there's always a chance for some political potential and not just signing everybody off to be a consumer. There's a sort of optimism…

Charles Esche: Yes!

Freee: … in some of the things we do.

[Recording goes silent]

Freee: The Forum for Democratic Practices asked if they could use the kiosk as a space from which to survey passerbys in Northampton Market Square. They wanted to find out how the Northampton public had formed their opinion, (majority leave), about Brexit. They gathered the information then we worked with them and a graphic designer to translate this into a map of Brexit opinions. What we discovered was a lot of misinformation was used in the establishment of values and opinions; they were about assumptions about, you know, how much we paid Europe or how much Europe had control over our legislation, work and practices. People made claims about the EU that were factually incorrect.

Charles Esche: I see.

Freee: The map was been presented at the theatre, in Northampton . It became really interesting to see a secondary passerby going back to the thing that had come out of that original encounter and then write on top of that. The map is another technique to produce and rethink opinion formation.

Charles Esche: It is amazing how much of that is media manipulation – I mean, the reason they've got these false assumptions, or that these assumptions are not based on any facts is largely through media manipulation, I think – they didn't generate this £350M per day out of thin air, they generated it because the media spread it around in a false way. Fake news is something that belongs to the Right. It is frustrating in a way.

Your analysis seems to be totally correct but it has been taken over by another political agenda.

Freee: Ethics?

Charles Esche: yes.

Freee: Ethics are really important. You know, the Left would not want to be, there'd be something immoral in regenerating fake news, so the Left prides itself on its ethics, on its correctness…

Charles Esche: Yes, yes, but it would be interesting to analyse what kind of ethics are behind that idea of the ethical. What are the ethics that are applied there? It's another discussion but there is a kind of assumption about goodness, ethics, justice, fairness or whatever on the Left which don't really stand up to too much scrutiny, to be very honest. Once you start analysing how those things manifest themselves in terms of the debate and whose included and whose excluded in that debate and how do you create inclusions and exclusions from it. So, I think trying to include the passerby and including the gallery as a site of production and a site of production which continues what happened before and takes it in other forms is interesting. Like you're talking about with the Forum for Democractic Practices or another way in which someone is able to contribute, or the kiosks: they all seem to be really important versions of how it could work. It must be quite exciting. Good. How are we doing?

Freee: Probably got enough haven't we?

Everyone: Yes!