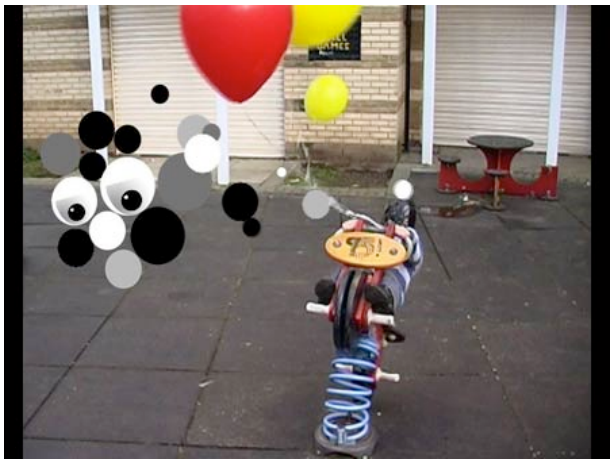
Alex Schady interviewed by Melanie Keen

Co-commissioned by Animate Projects and Camden Arts Centre, Alex Schady undertook the Magic Lantern animation residency programme from September 2008 to March 2009. The residency was structured around two film screenings curated by the residency artist, including animations made during Camden Arts Centre's festival workshops and a selection of films from the Animate archive. After collaboration with families from Lithos Road Community Centre, the residency culminated with the creation of a new work, Everything Must Go, which was shown at Camden Arts Centre in March 2009.



Still from Everything Must Go

Could you tell me how you came to be involved in the Magic Lantern residency and describe what you did on the residency?

Camden Arts Centre approached me initially and told me of the residency. For a while now what I've become very interested in is the crossover between education work and my own practice. I'd started asking myself, whenever somebody approached me for a project, "What's in it for me?" and with this project it really felt like I'd be able to make a piece of work in collaboration with others, that was part of my own practice and so on that level I find it very interesting. And then I met up with Animate Projects and Camden Arts Centre, we got on and decided to take it forward.

It was a project where I was going to be working quite specifically with families on a particular estate, Lithos Road Estate, near Camden Arts Centre in north London. I was going to be working with these families and we were going to be exploring some themes. But it became apparent, fairly early on in the project that that wasn't going to work, because the contacts with the family weren't as strong as may be we'd hoped. That there wasn't an automatic audience that were going to just be there waiting to work with me. That's really when we started devising what the project was and it's

funny because the very first thing that I'd agreed with Camden was that that I wasn't a children's entertainer, that I wasn't a crèche, that I wasn't there to have people off load their errant children on me while they got on with other things. And yet maybe because we'd said that early on, I decided very quickly that maybe that's what I actually was, and how that could be a very interesting creative starting point. To decide that I was precisely a kids entertainer; I was a sort of crèche for people who wanted their kids to do something on a Saturday morning.

And so what we did, and this isn't visible in the film, is we would set up a kiosk every Saturday morning with a large gazebo next to it. The kiosk was a big cardboard construction, it said 'Kiosk' across the top and I had a soup pot and I'd make soup and I'd have bread every morning. Inside the gazebo there were lots of exciting materials and I'd yell at kids from the middle… it's a sort of green patch in the middle of the estate and I'd just yell at the kids that I saw "Making soup, does anybody want soup? Does anybody want to take part in an activity?" and over time they started to recognise that on Saturday mornings they had this strange club, for want of a better word.

And over what period of time was this?

About seven weeks.

And each week I would have a set of materials and something that we were working towards. So we might be making a giant balloon sculpture or we might be making kind of exploding bottles or we might be doing some particular activity that I thought might engage that group of young people. But I also had in the back of my mind a shot or a set of shots that I thought might be quite useful out of that.

Now I didn't always get the shots I intended to get. Sometimes I got something quite different but I felt it was important for me to start off with something that I had in mind that might work for that. And over the seven weeks I got hours of footage of the kids, usually dressed up. I decided from the beginning that to make it coherent it was important that they all had a uniform or an outfit that they would wear and the outfits were things they made themselves out of tape and that would link all the shots.

And then there is this series of events that happened on the square, and that is what the final film is… there are no adults in the film. That's quite important - it's these children that do these mysterious activities that seem to be quite precise, that seem to have quite a focus and yet as we as an audience aren't necessarily aware of that focus. We don't necessarily know why they're doing these mysterious activities but…

And this is Everything Must Go?

Yes this is the film Everything Must Go. It was the culmination of the residency, but there were other elements. Initially it was quite a vague project and for me that was very useful because it meant that I could create my own structure for the project and determine where it was going. But there were always going to be these workshops at the beginning and it wasn't clear who those workshops were with or how they might

link to the final piece. There were going to be a couple of events within Camden Arts Centre, where I'd be curating an evening of films from the Animate archive. And there would be some workshop component to that as well and then there were the workshops on site at Lithos Road that led to Everything Must Go.

It was very, very useful to do those initial projects at Camden Arts Centre because actually getting access to the Animate archive meant that I could really immerse myself in, I guess, the context of animation in that sort of language. I'd done some animation before but it wasn't necessarily my background and it was quite useful just to see what lots of other artists were making and on that level it was very useful. And also to get a chance to see how I could work with animation and young adults and in a sense it's something that you might think would obviously fit together - kids and animation - it's going to be great.

But I was very clear about certain things that I didn't want. The vision of kids and animation is that we all sit round and move bits of paper round and do a stop motion thing… brightly coloured things that wave at you and I… And although I really like looking at that stuff, that's not what my particular interest was. I didn't want to do that sort of stuff.

So in setting up the workshop that I did initially for Magic Lantern I wanted to see if I could make something that incorporated live video and in someway responded to the notion of animation and that that might be then something that I can carry through to the final piece.

Still from Audience, made at the In With the New workshop

So in the project we did at Camden Arts Centre there's some footage that I've shot beforehand of myself and, as it happens, my two sisters. We're sat round this table laughing and it's this three seconds of laughter that's on a loop. Then people invited into Camden Arts Centre are asked to make a sculpture using very, very basic materials that then gets put on to a blue screen and is live, that can be sort of transmitted through to the original piece of footage and is superimposed over the piece of footage so that it looks as if the three of us have conjured up this sculptural

apparition. So we're laughing as this mysterious object that's just been made and rotates. Every person that came along could make an object; Every person that came along could see their object animated within to the film.

That throws up two different issues for me about the ways in which you work. I suppose the first thing is about this idea of creating an illusion, about how much the kind of apparatus of the illusion is also visible.

You're right - I do really like this idea of the illusion and possibly something magical but I'm not interested in tricking the audience or not beyond a certain point. I like that the mechanism by which that illusion is created is visible within the piece and for me there's two things. One is just that the thrill of the making is left intact in the piece if you do that but it's also that there's a pathos if you allow that magic to fall apart. That one should realise that it's a sort of flawed attempt to create magic if you like. And that the flaw of that inability for the thing to really trick you, to really be magic, should be very much part of what the work's about. Grasping at something that isn't quite magical.

You mentioned that earlier, in relation to the work that you did… where you had inserted yourself into the film.

In that specific piece what I've got is a short clip from the film Brief Encounter and it's the scene where Celia Johnson the main actress is in distress, she's running through the rain, she leans against a lamppost and contemplates this impossible love affair and it's a sort of epic romantic moment in sort of classic cinema. I wanted in some way to insert myself within the film and so what I did was take these cut out of my own head and I've placed them over the top of the moving image on screen and record that. So you have this very clumsy attempt to insert yourself within the narrative of the film and in a sense that's what we were talking about earlier. This making the magic apparent but the very clumsiness, the very hopelessness of that endeavour - "I'm never going to be part of that film. I'm never going to be that woman running down the street in this impossible love affair".

Still from Encounter

I think especially with that sort of romantic cinema, there is a yearning to take part in it, and I wanted to explore that yearning. So that in a sense it's that wiling yourself into the narrative, wanting to break through the silver screen into the film. That's something that interested… showing the strings… all the sticky tape that goes to make something. It's intriguing for me because it is that "Look I'm trying really hard to get into this but it's flawed, it's not going to happen".

In Everything Must Go there's a kind of mystery, a ritualistic aspect to it, but are you expecting the viewer to believe what they see, that there are these children cut adrift from the rest of society? Forming their own rules and rituals? It's just an interesting juxtaposition between breaking down a fiction and then creating another one.

There is a group of children, there is a sculptural object, they are pushing the object. You can see something that very definitely is happening in real time and yet there's a whole series of narratives that we place over the top of that that are, to a certain extent fictitious. I hope that in a way what that does is open up a space in which to reconsider what's happening in that particular estate on Lithos Road. If there are these kids, doing these things that verging on the antisocial, then there's a sense in which I'm allowing that to happen and that is being recorded, but there's also some fantasy aspect to that which I think is quite apparent to the viewer.

I don't think as a viewer we imagine that it's a documentary in which there are genuinely these kids who have created this mystic cult, but I do think that some of the ways kids play and some of the ways kids interact with spaces is made apparent through that fiction of the cult.

Is that generally the way you tend to work with young people? That they're part of a process but they're also part of the work as well and that in the relationship of them becoming part of the work there's a sort of mutual agreement?

And I'm going to mention that term 'socially engaged practice' which is a sort of umbrella term that you might throw at work where we're engaging with, I don't know, 'members of the public' - that's another loaded term. I'm very aware that there's a certain amount of responsibility for the artist that comes with that position - that I'm in a position potentially to abuse that relationship.

I could film them and get things to happen and then have this project that I call my own work and I've just gone in and used them and that's something that you do have to be careful I think of. But equally I'm aware that there's an expectation that socially engaged practice is going to be very much about the needs and the wants and the desires of that group of individuals and not the needs and the wants and desires of the artist. Where the artist goes in and asks a group of people what they would like to do - that doesn't interest me as much. I've seen things done with that version of things that are great but it's just not my way into it.

I'm very clear that "This is a piece of work that I'm going to be making. These are the boundaries. These are things that we might be engaging. Do you want to take part?" So that would always be my starting point so that if somebody agrees to take part it's very much on an understood basis. Having said that, there are certain conditions that one doesn't want to trespass so I'd always show the film to people involved in the film before anyone else got a chance to see it.

I wouldn't be there with them editing it, but I would allow them to say to me "Well actually I really don't want that shot in there" or "Please could you remove that". But beyond that it's a piece of work where my practice is colliding or coming into contact with this other group of minds, of people, of things, and that's going to have an effect on what I do. I'm not bulldozing through them but it's my practice colliding with them rather than me asking them what they want to do.

What did the young people think about the final work? Did you have a screening for them?

We did a screening at Camden and most of them came along. They were really pleased, they really liked it. I think they were quite surprised that it ended up looking vaguely mysterious and they liked that it looked as if they were up to some mysterious activity. They were very, very keen on their own performances within it so when their moment happens in the film they're very attentive to what's happening.

Still from Everything Must Go

They liked seeing themselves on screen and that isn't always the case, and I think partly I was lucky with the group of young people, but also, I'd chosen partly conceal their faces with these masks meant so that they could be a little bit less self conscious about their own presence in the film. Sometimes it can be quite difficult for people to see themselves and in that context it seemed like they were super heroes.

How does that relate to the piece that you did in Whitstable about the alleyways? How did those young people respond to that - I imagine the process was very different?

With that project I'd explained to them in advance that I was going to be playing them some video that they had to describe in as much detail as possible and that something was going to happen in the video that was unexpected. So in the recording of that piece there was a big sense of anticipation and each child was taken through separately because I had to record them one by one and they couldn't re-enter the classroom until everyone had been through the process.

I played them back that footage with just their voices describing this apparition but we can't see it. I think again because there was this dramatic unveiling of this thing that they hadn't known about and suddenly they do know about it, they felt as if they were in on the secret. They knew about this apparition now because they'd all gone through the process. And I think they felt quite excited that they were talking about something that wasn't visible, because they had one up on the viewer, they knew more than the viewer knew. So there seemed to be something there that they quite liked.

Could you just talk a little bit about the Whitstable project?

I was commissioned as part of Whitstable Biannual to make a sound work that worked with any group of individuals I wanted to in Whitstable. It was very, very vague. I'd filmed the alleyways in Whitstable that are sort of landmarks in the town and then I'd inserted into that footage some very crude apparitions. They suddenly appear in the alleyway, these mini sculptural apparitions. So for me they were interesting sculptures - a little black object that rotates - a sort of vaguely space shipy flying saucer object that comes in from the left hand side.

Still from Isolated Incidents: Third incident - Squeeze Gut Alley

And the children are talking about the alleyways in the first instance, and they don't know that something's going to appear, and when it does appear there's this moment of realisation that this magic event has happened and they suddenly say "Oh there's a spaceship - it's rotating. It's an alien… it's coming towards me. It's glittering. It's doing things." But then, when I playback the footage or the sound piece I remove the visuals, so the audience only hears a group of children who describe, in quite accurate detail, these alleyways that we're all familiar with - and there's a still image of the alleyway that we can refer to - and then when the apparitions happen, the audience doesn't see

that. All we see is the same alleyway with nothing happening, and the voices of these strange children who can see apparitions that we as adults can't see. So there's a sort of land of the triffids where these children have these magic powers.

I guess I was playing with that idea of the apparition, of the mysterious.

I was thinking about the film that you showed the young people in this instance and the final look of Everything Must Go. I imagined that prior to seeing the final film the young people might not have known that there'd be animation inserted into the film. And I wondered how animation functions within the making of moving image for you, particularly as we're sitting here in your studio surrounded by these sculptural objects. How you, as a maker of the objects, does animation feature in your practice?

It's quite specific in that piece and that's the thing I was most nervous about when showing the young people the film was the animation, because the animations are often over their faces or they're strange geometric forms that seem to hover around them and there was something almost menacing. I felt a bit anxious about that.

Actually they took it in their stride. They were delighted with them, but I think that was luck rather than my careful planning. With Brief Encounter, what interested me was that it was this two dimensional paper head that tries to fit itself into the screen, into something that was originally three dimensional and here again with the animations I saw them here in a very similar way.

They're very, very flat, the animations in Everything Must Go - they're produced really clumsily using Final Cut, not a programme that's meant for animations and has very limited potential. It interests me that I had these very confining parameters within which I could animate, and what I wanted was for them to be these flat intrusions that never quite manage to become part of the video space. They hover above the video space and become these stickers that somehow prevent us from grasping the space behind it. It was this concentrating on the surface of the screen.

I saw some of the motifs for the animations in - and the title comes from - these colourful neon coloured signs that you see on windows - certainly up and down the Holloway Road where I live - "Last few days of the sale", "Everything must go", "Free chips" or whatever - these neon signs that stick on the window and don't become quite of the shop. They're hovering in this window space and taken out of context, those slogans become almost threatening. The animations hold that same position, that sticker on top of the window not within the space itself.

Would you say that was characteristic of the way that you've done participatory work or are there other models that you use? Because you're very clear about your role as the artist, in being very clear about the kind of prescribed boundaries of working in collaboration in a participatory way.

There are other models where I'm not making a piece of work that I think is my own piece of work. For years I worked in education or with projects within schools where I would go into the school and devise a series of workshops in response either to an exhibition or to a given theme or to an artist's work, and there I'm not necessarily interested in making my own piece of work, I'm interested in what might happen if the students or the young people make their own piece of work. Even then I am still quite interested in these very strict rules that I set up in advance.

More often than not my way of working is to do that, to set up quite a rigid structure, parameters, and then allow something to happen within that structure. So it gives them something to kick against. Here's what I'm imposing now, do whatever you want to do within that. So it still feels quite structured, quite ordered, but there's no ultimate moment where I have to take the stuff away and turn it into something that I call my own work.

I plan just enough into the future so that the next day's activity is determined and then by the end of that day I'll reassess what's happened so far, where's this going and then I'll construct a structure for the next section.

I don't necessarily construct a structure for the next seven weeks "This is what I'm going to do and it's not going to shift". It does shift a lot. I'm open to the young people or the adults, whomever I'm working with shifting what/where the project's going but it may be they're not always entirely aware of that because I'm doing that once something has happened.

So do you think that there are clear distinctions between participation, especially in terms of your practice as an artist, and education work and then making it up. Is that possible for any artist - maybe you need to make those clear decisions about it?

It's curious because initially, when I first started working in education, I was very clear that they were very distinct. That my work as an educator and my work as a practising artist were these two distinct areas that might influence each other, might talk to each other, but were different things. The more I've done it, the more I'm interested in the grey area in between what happens if one thing becomes the other.

And it's taken a while for me to figure out how I might allow a workshop situation into my own practice and how I might allow that to become a piece of my own work and really I think that was about being able to define the boundaries for the audience but also being able to let go of some of the control. That's what's interesting for me about participation - with a lot of the work I do I'm always in control of what I'm doing. There's something there that's imposing its own restrictions on what I'm doing but with participation that's very clear. There's this group of other minds of other people who have interesting things to say or interesting ways of doing things that aren't controllable by me. I can't say "We're going to do it this way and it happens" - they

shift the action along. They make things happen and that's what's very interesting for me about collaboration or participation that it can open up that space for me.

Could you say more about this idea about collaboration - because there are issues around authorship but also, you raised some interesting points about the collaboration being about a kind of particular frisson you might have, or a friction; Something that pulls and pushes against the way of working. How does collaboration with other artists relate to your kind of participation with members of the public?

That's something I'd been doing before I managed to figure out how to collaborate with members of the public and produce a piece of work.

I'd already started collaborating with other artists and seeing what happened there. I think the term collaboration gets bandied about and for me it was very important when I did collaboration that it felt like genuine collaboration, that it wasn't something where one person does one thing, one person another… so one person might film, one person might edit and then that's the film. That was less interesting to me. What I really wanted to do was to figure out - can we both film? Can we both edit? Can we both be involved at every step of the process and… because I think then there really is real friction there, you're really having to decide what you do. And in the work that I do with Hadas Kedar, an Israeli artist that I've been collaborating with for about ten years, we gave ourselves quite strict instructions or rules at the beginning, neither of us can say no to the other person's idea. Anything that's suggested we have to say yes to and try it out. We give ourselves instructions before we start the process so there's some sort of structure to what we're doing and it's a cumulative process so over time each event that happens gets added to the last event. I mean it's probably the most traumatic work I make.

At some point in the process we are furious with each other because we feel that the other person's ruined the piece of work and yet it's absolutely in a sense the life blood of being able to make work - to have that rub, because I think I can be happy with the way I'm making stuff and sort of just amble along and never question what I'm making if I don't have those external rubs coming in to the process. Really making it difficult for me - and those sort of collaborators or those structures that I create or those people who participate in projects - are those things that make it difficult for me to do it the way that I've always done it.

How does that relate to Five Years, the artists' collaborative you're part of?

Well we've been running that now for just over ten years and it's been a fluctuating group. I've been involved since the beginning but about three years ago we took on a load of extra members and I see it as an extension of my practice in the studio. That I have certain concerns, certain things that I'm interested in, certain things that I'm exploring and that through Five Years I can investigate those things curatorially as well as by making something or shooting something. In a sense that's another form of

collaboration. I'm making work, about the supernatural say, and if I invite six other artists to respond to a particular brief then I have this collaborative show that's a series of people's work and, and that can really again, really give you something as an artist. You see all these other perspectives on a theme that you're exploring and that is what really keeps me very interested in Five Years - the potential to explore something as an artist, but curatorially - not by making something.

I think we're just about coming full circle as we kind of draw to the end of the interview. I'm interested in this idea of time and duration and immersion within the nature of collaboration because I think that in some socially engaged projects that the intention is very good but actually the experience and process can be short lived. I'm wondering about the relationship, because you have established this ten year relationship with another artist - Hadas, then with Five Years… I'm wondering if there's a possibility that you can have these ongoing collaborations with people who aren't artists. I think I struggle with that idea with some participation work that I've done - I think three months isn't enough, six months isn't enough, in terms of participation, I wonder if you'd thought about that in terms of your longer dealing with collaborations?

I think that often and it is quite curious that in a sense it's an expectation that's put on socially engaged practice - that it should have a beneficial effect on the environment or on the particular place that it's happening or with that particular group of students or young people or adults or whoever you might be collaborating with. And I think to a certain extent that's justified but it's quite a lot to ask of a project that it do that. I certainly don't feel that any project I do has to be good for you. I don't feel that that's my primary impulse in the project - that I'm doing this work and it will improve those people - partly because I think that I don't have the ability to improve other people. All I can do is interact with them and hopefully we both get something out of that and there's a process that creates something that is interesting but I don't necessarily feel that I have to make their lives, their environment, their things better.

Having said that, I would be very interested in a project that had a longer life because the more you interact with someone the more you can have a response with someone and the more elaborate, the more intricate, that collaboration can be. You can allow yourself and the people participating in the project much more freedom if you've been doing it longer because you know the expectations are set up, they know the sort of way we might be working, they know the sort of output that might be coming from that and it just means that there's the possibility to take something much, much further if you take it over a longer period of time. There is inevitably an issue of a funding for those sorts of projects and they're usually quite focussed, they're relatively short lived. There's a very determined outcome at the end of them and I think it can be quite difficult then to maintain that over years and years and years.

I know that Camden are quite interesting in exploring projects over longer time spans, but not with the same artists necessarily, so Magic Lantern will be happening again this

year, but it will be a different artist brought in so that community in Lithos Road will have a continued relationship with Camden Arts Centre rather than with a specific artist.

Alex Schady is an artist and filmmaker with a broad interdisciplinary practice. His work uses materials immediately to hand, incorporating modern-life ephemera that is manipulated and re-interpreted across a variety of media. Combining craft techniques and digital processes his most recent work uses the language of science fiction to explore the psyche of contemporary culture.

Alongside his own practice he works collaboratively with Hadas Kedar, an Israeli artist. Based 2,000 miles apart they produce work by establishing rules and instructions, only coming together on-site to construct the final installations. In 2009, they are completing a public art commission for Tontine Street Studios in Folkestone.

Alex Schady is also co-founder of an artist-run gallery space, Five Years. Founded in 1998, Five Years enables artists to develop links between the production and curation of visual art, and to explore the processes and discourses of exhibiting.

http://www.fiveyears.org.uk

Melanie Keen is a curator and consultant. Recent projects include: an education resource, which uses contemporary art and culture to explore the history and legacies of the transatlantic slave trade, for *Understanding Slavery*, National Maritime Museum, London; *Necessary Journeys*, an Arts Council England programme in collaboration with bfi Black World which included artists' residencies in film archives; commissioning a film score for Borderline; an international symposium in collaboration with Tate Modern; travel bursaries for artists; and an illustrated book.

Other independent projects include *A Better Place?* (2004) with Erika Tan and Melissa Bliss for Bow Festival; and *48 Hours* (1999), Tablet Gallery, London including Jacqueline Donachie, Mary Evans, Ella Gibbs, muf, Tomoko Takahashi and Jessica Voorsanger.

She was Projects Curator at Iniva until 2003 and projects include Simon Tegala's *Anabiosis* and Yinka Shonibare's *Diary of a Victorian Dandy*.

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