
As part of the Folkestone Triennial, Public Works created a work that visualized the town's existing cultural networks and spaces, as well as new ones produced by and as part of the festival.

Nominated by Sarah Wang

Public Works were one of 50 artists invited to respond to an open brief to produce an artwork for the first Folkestone Triennial, *Tales of Time and Space* (14 June – 14 September 2008), which aimed to examine changing notions of art in the public realm.

Reacting to the Triennial's role in the culture led regeneration of Folkestone, their proposal, one of 22 selected for the show, was to create a work that visualized Folkestone's existing cultural networks and spaces as well as new ones produced by and as part of the Triennial.

The resulting artwork, 'Folkestonomy', was developed over ten months and built on the group's ongoing exploration of how communities use public space and grew out of an interest in mapping and pictograms.

The final work occupied both real and virtual space. The offline component, originally conceived as a bespoke structure similar to Public Work's 'Mobile Porch' (2002), resulted in what the collective describe as a mobile mapping station that consists of a reappropriated electric milk van equipped with a computer system and a collection of modified road signs ('tags').

The online component is a content management system and database, essentially a mapping framework, activated by members of the public who were invited to select tags, or create their own, to trace their experience of Folkestone and the Triennial.

Each individual's map was then uploaded onto the website (folkestonomy.net) where it was combined with other individual maps to create a kind of metamap of the Triennial audience experience – giving visual structure to the formal and informal links between people, artworks, and organizations involved.

The key to understanding this work is in its name, 'Folkestonomy' - a cross between Folks Stone and folksonomy. The former references the history of the area, which legend says may have been named after a 'Folka's Stone', a rock where people met to talk and celebrate.

The latter is a subject indexing system typically used in internet communities, such as social networking site Flickr, which uses symbols called 'tags' (keywords or category labels) to help you find related items within the index.

As with folksonomy, 'Folkestonomy', is open to unlimited participants and is non hierarchical. All tags are created equal but grow in size according to how frequently they are associated. Therefore the largest tag could be seen as the areas contemporary Folka's rock.

Like folksonomy, it rejects the status quo and provides an alternative visual language of regeneration to the one focused on bricks and mortar, usually represented by masterplans and architectural models.

When asked if the work was a success, Public Works said they felt the most successful element was the interface, which encouraged approximately 650 people to take part. I agreed that the physical interface, worked well both aesthetically and in terms of functionality. The bold colourful roadwork aesthetic was both attractive, piquing the interest of passersby, and appropriate because it indicated a work in progress - the ongoing ever changing mapping of cultural networks and spaces.

Having said that, no matter how slick the production and how smooth the functionality, ultimately, as is often the case with artwork involving technology, its success depends on the competency of the invigilation staff to ensure viewers are able to engage with the work and on whether the piece is simply working or not. Luckily for Public Works, thanks to the friendly invigilators, 'Folkestonomy' was a triumph, but for me one question remains - If 'Folkestonomy' really is to go beyond the realm of art and be used as a functional tool, then how will the data be used to impact the cultural regeneration of Folkestone?

Further information

Public Works are a London based collective consisting of architects Sandra Denicke-Polcher, Torange Khonsari, Andreas Lang and artist Kathrin Bohm who have been working with each other in different combinations since 1998. For the making of 'Folkestonomy', Public Works invited digital media technologist Dorian Moore to collaborate with them on the development of the bespoke content management system, database and interface.

→ publicworksgroup.net