

Go on! Have another one!

by Joanna Callaghan, December 2004

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photo: Joanna callaghan

On a cold bright Sunday at the end of October I took the Jubilee line to Bermondsey, walked a bit and found the gallery Coleman Project Space located in a pretty street, ten minutes from the station.

There I was greeted by two young women dressed in customised white and yellow suits offering me a cup of tea. I sat down on one of the camp stretchers, next to a neatly folded blanket and careful to stay within the yellow and black emergency zone marked on the floor. Sitting on another stretcher opposite me were two older ladies. They nodded and smiled at me while drinking cups of tea and chatting. Next in was Ron Henocq director of the neighbour Café Gallery Project who sat down like he was home at last. Very soon an elderly couple were spotted crossing the street in our direction, quickly they were greeted with cups of tea, bottoms moved along and things began to get lively. Then to add to the interesting concoction, a well dressed man who turned out to be a local architect came in to find out more about the project. Everyone started talking at once. For a Sunday morning it was a lively affair.

Artist Paula Roush showed me some of the press clippings that the project had received while talking about the history of the idea and its evolution. I was surprised at the number of 'entry points' the project had for local people and organisations. There were the ex-workers of the Peek Freans biscuit factory, a driving force behind the project, arts students from Camberwell College

of Arts enacting emergency situations and distributing food aid, local film studio Sands Films had lent rare film footage and other images from their picture library and then of course there was the artists and curators that form part of the local network of the Coleman Project Space. It occurred to me while sitting there munching on a rather delicious biscuit that here was a real, authentic and contemporary community arts project. Roush had accomplished something quite remarkable. The fusing and channeling of varied local populations into a highly original conceptual arts project. A project that has historical relevance, that highlights the political and social repercussions of urban regeneration and fosters positive and productive relationships between art and local communities. Not only that, but there was a real, tangible product that could have an impact on real, tangible people! Phew! What an achievement.

Still reeling from the possibility of such an idea I left the project space, loaded up with biscuits for distribution. Now I was going out to test the product of this creative fusion in a real world situation. Thirty minutes later I was standing in front of the St John's Church in Waterloo Road. I have always noticed the large number of homeless people who hang around this church and I thought it might a good spot to distribute some emergency food relief. I spotted a couple sitting under a pink blanket and gave them each a biscuit. They were puzzled by the packaging, the woman began reading the instructions carefully while the man grinned at me with a toothless smile. There were others who called to me reaching through for the boxes. There were no thanks or awkward moments they just took the boxes and sat down again. Next stop was Charing Cross where I saw an old man standing on the street staring into passing traffic. I approached him and gave him a biscuit. He took it and put it in his

pocket thanking me profusely. Next to Trafalgar Square where a middle aged man in a tracksuit was hobbling towards me. I gave him a box which he began shaking violently. He asked me what was in it. I said biscuits but I'm not sure he believed me. He was puzzled by it's shape, no ordinary donations looked like this it seemed. He held it in front of him as if it was an important parcel to send or to be received. There was a dignity in that gesture that touched me. He held my hand for a while and looked off vacantly into the lights.

I felt a peculiar mix of emotions. I am not someone who gives money to beggars, nor do I take an active interest in any kind of charity. But I am not unaware of the problems that exist, it's just that I have never found the 'right' way for me to address the issue. Standing with this biscuit in my hand, produced in association with elderly, local ex-workers of the Freans Biscuit Factory, who had in turn supplied biscuits to the starving populations of Paris for a food relief operation in 1870, the process and meaning of which was transferred and enacted within a modern setting that saw hundred of arts students and locals play out a situation that could occur in a distant future and that does occur now in many countries where hunger and starvation is the reality, I could see that this biscuit carried a great deal of meaning. I suddenly saw a productive, original and creative way to address the issue of hunger within urban environments. I felt elated. Not because I was "helping" in a pseudo-christian guise of compassion and charity, but rather because here was an art project with real, transferable and relevant meaning. I had at last found the 'right' way.