

Simon Lee Dicker

WEST COKER

'Nothing much ever happened at West Coker. No great man was born or lived or died there. No battle was fought near it nor did any constitutional crisis have its rise in its neighbourhood. It was never the centre of great industry nor the source of wide spreading trade. No relic of saint nor monument of art nor scene of natural beauty ever attracted visitors.'

The Annals of West Coker
Sir Matthew Nathan, 1957

This was our starting point: a place in the middle of nowhere, where nothing much ever happened. Obviously, it is not as dramatic as that, as Sir Matthew Nathan still managed to write over 500 pages about West Coker, but creatively this seemed like a good place to start. A blank canvas.

The Old School Room of Church St, West Coker was originally built in 1850 but after 26 years, the educational needs of the village had quickly outgrown the space and a new school was built. The Old School Room became a social space and un-official village hall hosting all manner of gatherings over the next 160 years.

After working without a studio for six years myself and my partner Chantelle Henocq moved into the Old School Room as a base for our art and design practices, and the Old School Room became OSR Projects. The Old School Room has held a special place in the heart of the village over many generations and we did not want to close that door. As a natural extension of my arts practice, I was keen to keep it as a place of learning, meeting and sharing that through the filter of contemporary art, was still a place for people to come together.

Since 2011 we have produced ambitious, critically and socially engaged art projects bringing artists and communities together, both locally and further afield. By placing people at the centre of artistic activity, through creative partnerships and community collaboration, we celebrate artistic activity as a way to develop rich and multiple understandings of the world around us.

The original focus on the building shifted towards the idea of OR Projects becoming more of a transitional artist group, that could inhabit spaces and work in other contexts aside from a gallery or studio. This led to numerous off-site projects in places and spaces beyond the walls of the school room, such as *The Weather Station* (2015-18) that took artistic activity across the South West of the UK (including *b-side festival*, Dorset, 2016) and K lhaus Berlin as part of *SLUICE Exchange* (2018).

The Weather Station (2015-18) was instrumental in developing our approach to working with other artist-led groups, galleries and organisations. Forming loose partnerships, more akin to a dance than a marriage, we invited a handful of groups that we wanted to work with to co-select artists for projects, adding a real breadth and depth to our programme.

Closer to home, a partnership with Dawes Twinetworks - a museum and social history project located in West Coker that looks at the heritage of the twine industry - has become a long-standing relationship that enables us to extend the reach of contemporary art in our small corner of Somerset. In 2015, I was invited to be artist in residence at the museum, which led to an exhibition at Dawe's Twinetworks and OR Projects. The work connected the two locations, and I made a publication of drawings alongside poems by the local poetry group. This in turn helped the Dawes Twinetworks team understand how contemporary art could help them to find new ways of looking at the social, political and environmental heritage of the Twinetworks and bring in new audiences.

The following year I curated *Ropewalkers* (2016), a series of residencies that culminated in an immersive sound work by Simon Whetham entitled *Trace Evidence*; Jo Ball's *Patches of Blue Sky* that re-visited the tradition of growing flax to make linen twine; and Andy Parker's *A New Voyage* performance and sculpture that weaved together personal histories with that of 'local lad' William Dampier and the Twinetworks.

Building on the success of previous projects and the relationships we had built with local people, community groups, businesses and regional arts partners, we were successful in receiving an Arts Council England Project Grant to deliver a three-day arts festival across the neighbouring villages of East & West Coker. The first iteration of **Od Arts Festival - *The Art of Rivalry***, co-curated with Bob Gelsthorpe, took place in 2018 and explored artistic, romantic and neighbourly frictions through multi-site curated exhibitions, new commissions, and participatory projects by artists and artist-led groups. Venues, public spaces and the landscape became the sites for making and sharing of contemporary art, performance, music, discussions and workshops; each playfully addressing themes of animosity, conflict and rivalry, but always circling back to our central values of bringing people together.

This was followed by another festival that was to take place in 2020 but due to country-wide lockdowns, eventually took place in 2021. Devised with co-curator Vickie Fear before the hiatus of Covid, this festival had the guiding theme of *Alone with Everybody*. The festival explored notions of solitude, loneliness and isolation through playful, experimental and performative artworks that probed different aspects of aloneness. We asked how it might be liberating as well as difficult to be alone. The festival included the work of 25 artists across 15 locations as well as an online programme of remote workshops, screenings and events: carefully considering the role that distance played on us at that time.

For one of the events, artists Fairland Collective were commissioned to create a feast for the Cokers and to support this we had plans to work with local schools to make plates for the meal. Initially we intended to go into schools to run the workshops but plans were scuppered due to Covid, so we set up our *Lockdown Pottery* to continue with the project

remotely. *Lockdown Pottery* packs were delivered to six schools in South Somerset and guidance, in the form of a video tutorial by my 11-year-old son, enabled 150 pupils to produce ceramic tableware that was exhibited as part of *Od Arts Festival 2021 - Alone with Everybody*.

Lockdown Pottery continued throughout the pandemic. We produced further projects for all ages that provided access to clay, an introduction to hand-building ceramics at home and an online creative community. In 2021, our ambition as a community was realised and we were awarded a National Lottery Community Fund grant which allowed us to purchase a community Kiln to run regular ceramic-based activities at OSR.

Artists are valuable members of - and play a critical role in - local communities, cultures and economies and though perhaps irregularly funded and always in-flux, this fluidity provides us with the ability to act and react to the needs and wants of our community. What we have achieved as a community ensures that West Coker can never again be described as a place where nothing ever happens.