

Searching for Art's New Publics

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Jeni Walwin

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The Henry Moore
Foundation

following the transition from public art object to public art participant in his quest for art as a social benefit. Mike Ostler was a participant in Nina Pope's film project *Bataville: We Are Not Afraid of the Future* and he is as vehement in his distaste for the art object as he is for his celebration of the film and the journey he has taken with Nina's project, which continues to this day with his responsibility for the Bata Reminiscence and Resource Centre. The mutability of the art object in an exhibition context is unravelled by Paul O'Neill in the closing essay which proposes an evolving, collaborative, non-hierarchical, co-productive process for exhibition-making.

One reading of the title of this book *Searching for Art's New Publics* might suggest that the people that the word *Publics* refers to are ones that we have yet to find, but I hope that the reader will soon realize that these people are here already, all around us, engaged in art practice, collaborating, participating and influencing. They are as much a part of art as they are of the everyday. The only reason that they have traditionally been separated from so many of our discussions of art practice to date is that, as Dave Beech alludes to so poignantly in his essay, we cannot focus on a theory of art which deals with the art of encounter, if we are not 'at the same time rethinking social relations at large'. This is surely reinforcing the potential role that art can play in the shaping of our society, if only we are ready to respond to the call.

Keynote Essay

Don't Look Now! Art after the Viewer and beyond Participation

Dave Beech



Free, Protest is Beautiful, photograph, poster, 2007.

Collective authorship represents the promissory social space of the organization of art's ensemble of skills and competences beyond their privatization in 'first person' expression, aesthetics, and the whole panoply of possessive individualism inherent in the Cartesian Theatre.¹

John Roberts

Introduction

Why would we want to search out art's new publics? Are they not already there? Or, better still, aren't we already here? The short answer is 'no'. The slightly longer answer is 'absolutely not' – because it is important to be absolute here to avoid relativism and instrumentalism. Art's new publics are neither to be understood in the relativist sense promoted by postmodernism (what is new is the disappearance of the new), nor in the instrumentalized sense promoted first by publically funded art institutions with their outreach programmes and now part of the fabric of arts administration (new audiences are scooped up from previously neglected demographics). Rather, I want to talk about the new as a qualitative shift, something akin to revolution. Following J.L. Austin² I want to say: not just the new, that is to say not just any old new, but the *really* new, where 'really' distinguishes between false or apparent versions of the new on the one hand, and genuine or deep versions of the new on the other.

My model of the really new public for art is drawn from Slavoj Žižek's analysis of a bitter joke in Brecht's famous poem 'The Solution' in which he reasons, ironically, that since 'the people/ had forfeited the confidence of the government/ and could win it back only/ by redoubled efforts' the government had decided 'to dissolve the people/ and elect another'. Shockingly, perhaps, Žižek argues that it is Brecht, not the government, that is wrong in this scenario: 'one should bravely admit that it is in effect a duty – even *the* duty – of a revolutionary body aware of its historical task, to transform the body of the empirical people into a body of Truth'³. I think Žižek is absolutely right, here, and I think what he has to say applies to art, too. Art can only regard itself as revolutionary if and only if it is wholeheartedly committed to the task of transforming its 'empirical' public into a new public – a really new public.

Even if the transformation of art's public into a revolutionary body of truth is not on the cards at the moment, our understanding of art and its publics must, nevertheless, be understood in these terms or else we are left with one of its 'empirical' publics presented as its only, rightful or true public.⁴ What has to be transformed, in this task, is not just the body of the public in the collective sense, but also the body – and the senses – of each and every member of that public. In other words, pleasures and sensations will not be untouched by the transformation of art's public. Unlike Žižek's example, though, this transformation cannot occur within art from the top down. No government can impose this new public on art. It will emerge – or be produced – only as the result of changes to art itself. At present contemporary art is taking this challenge, I want to argue here, to the very heart of the aesthetic experience of art by doing away with the viewer. Let me explain.

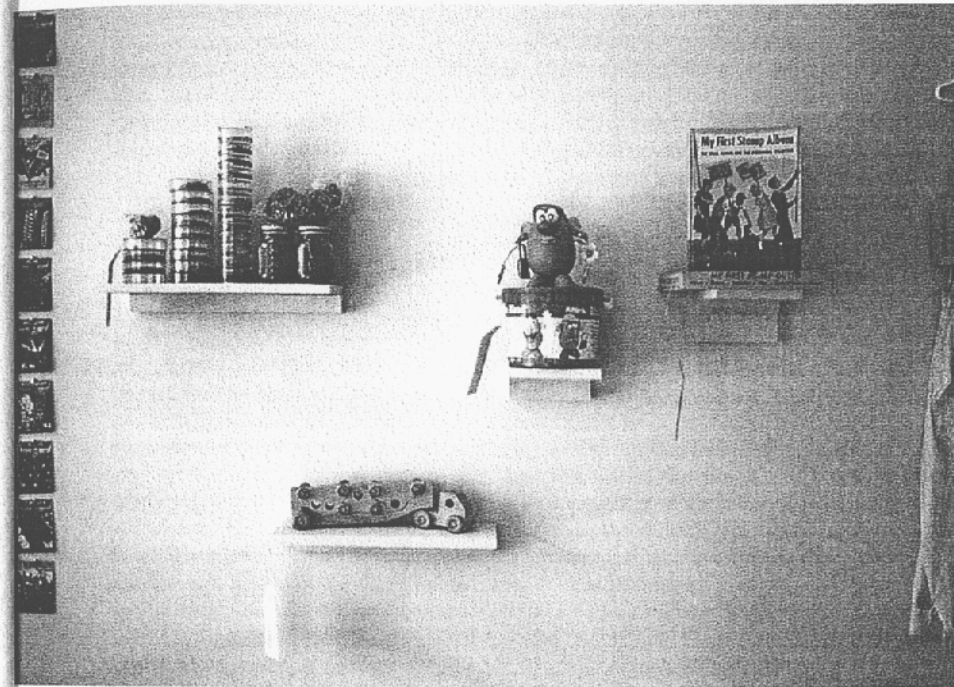
The Viewer and its Rivals

It now seems like an age since art theory raised the question of the 'disembodied eye' of the gallery-going viewer. Nowadays we hear less about the viewer and of viewing art than we do about interactivity, participation and dialogue. A new art of the social encounter has transformed our conception of the viewer along similar lines to the transformation of the art object during minimalism, conceptualism and post-minimalism, when attention to the immanent qualities of the autonomous work seeped out into an interest in the space, site, process and documentation of the work. The viewer has lost its erstwhile shape, and the familiar ideologies that went along with it. The viewer isn't dead, but the gallery is now occupied by new rival subjects and bodies, and much of the new art is no longer made with that customary aesthetic subject – the viewer – in mind.

Before going on to examine how the art of encounter promises to transform art's public into a really new kind of public, however, I need to mention the fact that it has not entered art's terrain unopposed. It is only to be expected, of course, that the new art of the encounter, which constitutes an assault on art and aesthetics, would not be allowed to do so uncontested. It finds itself in competition with the 'new formalism'⁵ of Jim Lambie, Roger Hiorns, Eva Rothschild, Shahin Afrassiabi and Gary Webb. If we were to draw a distinction between the new art of encounter and the new formalism, we would do well to couch it in terms of their different publics, or their differently framed experience of art. And if we do, then, I think we will see that the new formalism appears to preserve exactly those qualities and experiences that the new art of encounter threatens. It is, so to speak, a precise picture of what the current incumbents of artistic taste think is most at risk from the new art of encounter.

The new formalism is therefore like the post-Enlightenment religious believer characterized by Alenka Zupančič⁶ in terms of a joke:

a man believes that he is a grain of seed. He is taken to a mental institution, where the doctors eventually convince him that he is not a grain, but a man. He leaves cured but



Harrell Fletcher and Jon Rubin, *Garage Sale*, Gallery HERE, Oakland, CA, 1993.

returns within seconds claiming that there is a chicken outside the door that wants to eat him. 'Dear fellow,' says the doctor; 'you know very well that you are not a seed.' 'Of course I know that,' he replies, 'but does the chicken know?'

Zupančič shows that knowledge alone is not sufficient to effect change. As such, visual pleasures and aesthetic practices will persist not necessarily out of a lack of knowledge about the expansion of art's social ontology, but as a result of that knowledge and despite it.

But now that the new social ontology of art has been thematized in the new art of encounter, there is no putting it back in the box. Indeed, what happens is that the new formalism starts to be praised for traces of social encounter detected in it. Lambie's use of junk shops, for instance, or Hiorns' abandoned Home Space Available project will be picked up on because they bridge the gap between the two opposing camps. But, like the man in the joke frightened of the chicken who ultimately retreats from the full implications of what he knows, the new formalism must ultimately retreat from the full implications of the social, because, insofar as it is formalist, it cannot do away with the viewer altogether.

In fact, any trace of social encounter found within the new formalism, I would argue, ought not be credited to this art at all but to the art of encounter it opposes. For, just like when modernist formalism transformed our perception of painting and sculpture so that we began to see pre-modern works in terms of their abstract qualities, the new social ontology of art applies even to that work which remains aloof from it. This point is made by Nicolas Bourriaud when he argues that the history of art could now be rewritten retrospectively as a history of art's social encounters. 'Today,' he goes on, 'this history seems to have taken a new turn. After the area of relations between humankind and deity and then between humankind and the object, artistic practice is now focused upon the sphere of inter-human relations.'⁷

There is no viewer of these inter-human relations, and if there were then this would probably be seen as a troubling social presence that affects the inter-human action that it views. At the same time any objects that are used within these inter-human relational artworks are generally *used* rather than *viewed*. Liam Gillick's work, for instance, can be understood as a politicization of the visual in art and culture. The work is always visual, he has said, because he is interested in how the visual environment structures behaviour. Hence, even when his work looks well designed or even beautiful, it 'is better as a backdrop to activity'.⁸ Whatever else is going on in Gillick's work, in tandem with the works of many of his peers, here we are quite clearly cast by the artwork *not* as a viewer. The idea of art-as-backdrop is, therefore, simultaneously the idea of the viewer as no longer a viewer (without prescribing what else they might become). 'If some people just stand with their backs to the work and talk to each other then that's good,'⁹ Gillick has said. This is a glimpse of something new to do with art.

An art not to be looked at is an art that proposes a thorough reconfiguration of art's materiality, agents and agencies: the art object is no longer necessarily the primary focus of the encounter with art; the white box institutions in which we encounter art adapt by

mimicking libraries, cafés and other social spaces; the artist itself turns to unfamiliar skills to produce the new art; and art's addressee, no longer necessarily even a gallery-goer, is not a viewer, but is a subject expanded with a range of new activities and new styles of engagement.

We need to understand two things here. First, the assault on the viewer, which has roots both in conceptualism's critique of the primacy of the visual in art, and earlier in Duchamp's dismissal of 'opticality'. Secondly, we need to understand the rise of the concept of relationality and practices of participation, collaboration and performativity that have largely been taken to replace the gap left by the ousted viewer. We should not assume, however, that participation (and its relational cousins) is the best or only way of thinking about art after the waning of the viewer. I want to suggest, in fact, that the true value of the displacement of the viewer can only be obtained if we think beyond participation.

The Post-Cartesian Artist

In *The Intangibilities of Form* John Roberts provides a clear and full articulation of what he calls the emergence of the 'post-Cartesian artist'¹⁰ after Duchamp. 'Too often the discussion of the readymade languishes in the realm of stylistic analysis, the philosophical discussion of art and anti-art, or, more recently, the Institutional Theory of Art,' Roberts says, 'not as a technical category.'¹¹ With this new focus in mind, he argues that Duchamp inaugurated a shift away from handcraft and representation that ushered in 'a discourse on the diffusion of authorship through the social division of labour'.¹² That is to say, Duchamp should not be understood simply as rejecting art, authorship or skill with his introduction of the readymade. No, the key transformation is that the readymade 'brings the link between artistic technique and general social technique in the modern period into inescapable view'.¹³

Duchamp creates a disruptive 'diffusion' that we need to see as having a double movement in which art sheds its old techniques and absorbs the whole gamut of techniques at large. The result is an ontology of art in which there are no longer any specifically artistic skills or techniques, such as painting or sculpture, that define art (what Thierry de Duve calls 'generic art'¹⁴), in which art draws its techniques from industry, politics, entertainment, philosophy, science and so on – without limit. An example that suggests itself is Alex Farquharson's list of Carsten Holler's practices: 'zoologist, botanist, paediatrician, physiologist, psychologist, occupational therapist, pharmacist, optician, architect, vehicle designer, evolutionary theorist and political activist'.¹⁵

Roberts' new reading of Duchamp is also a new reading of art after Duchamp. What Roberts calls the 'aggressive Cartesianism and asocial aestheticism of modernism',¹⁶ is radically undermined by Duchamp and then redoubled by Warhol's 'Factory', but it is only fully jettisoned by conceptualism, when art's preoccupation with crafting a unique object is replaced with a repertoire of techniques borrowed from anywhere and everywhere. And this means, among other things, that the artist goes through the same kind of expansive

transformation and can no longer be identified or conceptualized in the old ways. This is the birth of the post-Cartesian artist.

Thus, for Roberts, 'the artist's voice becomes subordinate to the forces of reproducibility and general social technique'.¹⁷ This means 'making' art (often, making without making) with non-artistic skills and techniques, 'making' with the hands of others and 'making' through instruction. This subordination opens the artist up to a multitude of previously unavailable roles, discourses and modes of address:

The displacement of the first person singular discourages the author to think of himself or herself as a unified subject bounded intellectually and conversationally at art historical precedents (rather than, say, for example, a performer of a set of cognitive/artistic skills indebted to the problems of philosophy and science and other non-artistic discourses).¹⁸

This displacement of the first person singular, of course, may often mean the artist working in the first person plural i.e. collaboratively.

The Art of Encounter

It is not just the art object and the artist that is transformed by these developments within the post-Duchampian ontology of art. The birth of the post-Cartesian artist is matched by the transformation of the encounter with art. The viewer isn't dead, but its hegemony – the reign of the 'disembodied eye' – has been broken. However, we cannot go on to develop a theory of the post-Cartesian viewer, as the viewer of art as viewer is Cartesian through and through.

A detailed and expansive debate has been taking place over the past several years about the relative merits of various categories of social encounter in art. I want to argue that this interest in interactivity, participation and dialogue in contemporary art, that jettisons the Cartesian 'viewer' from art, is one of the most conspicuous legacies of the post-Duchampian ontology of art. So, we can say that this ontology is the *shared ground* of (1) Nicolas Bourriaud's relational and convivial aesthetic, (2) Claire Bishop's art of antagonistic social relations and (3) Grant Kester's advocacy of artists and arts collectives who operate 'between art and the broader social and political world'.¹⁹ I want to group these competing approaches to contemporary practice under the heading 'the art of encounter'. And I want to explain its relation to the post-Cartesian artist. This will then allow me to engage more critically with the inadequacies of current thinking on art's social ontology.

Nicolas Bourriaud published his first book, *Relational Aesthetics* just a few months after Matthew Collings launched *Blimey!*²⁰ into the mediascape. From the outset, Collings' book looked cynical – the author preferred to think of it as ironic and intelligent – in its reluctant but resigned packaging of young British art. However, it was not the work that was superficial but its reception at home. This became clear after the translation of *Relational Aesthetics* into

English in 2002. By comparison, *Blimey!* which had previously seemed cool, knowing and sophisticated, looked frothy. Bourriaud, albeit by focusing on a different constellation of this generation of artists, showed that something much deeper and more sophisticated could be seen within this work. For all its failings, Bourriaud's book raised the intellectual stakes.

Bourriaud provided a sophisticated theoretical defence of such social events as Rirkrit Tiravanija's Thai soup installations, Carsten Höller's scientific tricks, games and amusement rides and Andrea Zittel's furniture-as-meeting-place. Saying that these relational works 'outline so many hands-on utopias'²¹ Bourriaud at once politicizes contemporary art and situates it beyond actual political processes. 'So the artist sets his sight more and more clearly on the relations that his work will create among his public, and on the invention of models of sociability', Bourriaud explains.

I mean that over and above the relational character intrinsic to the artwork, the figures of reference of the sphere of human relations have now become fully-fledged artistic 'forms'. Meetings, encounters, events, various types of collaboration between people, games, festivals, and places of conviviality...represent, today, aesthetic objects likely to be looked at as such.²²

Claire Bishop takes issue with Bourriaud's emphasis on conviviality and 'immanent togetherness', emphasizing instead an art that reveals real antagonisms within its social and cultural exchanges. Bishop is right to ask questions about 'the *quality* of the relationships in relational aesthetics'. In particular she seeks to contrast the 'informal chattiness' of a typical relational artwork with the inherent friction that Chantal Mouffe argues is necessary for any genuine democratic process or political dialogue. For this reason she highlights projects 'marked by sensations of unease and discomfort rather than belonging, because the work acknowledges the impossibility of a "microtopia" and instead sustains a tension among viewers, participants, and context'.²³ She cites the work of Santiago Sierra and Thomas Hirschhorn as examples of work that is disruptive and destabilizing with friction, awkwardness and discomfort.

Bishop's main argument – that Bourriaud's conviviality is not adequately antagonistic to count as democratic – provides a strong corrective to Bourriaud's ethics of inter-subjectivity. In the process, Bishop makes the case for an antagonistic (i.e. political) rather than convivial (i.e. ethical) account of art's social relations. Nevertheless, Bishop's account turns on its own structural absence. She promotes antagonism and censures conviviality insofar as they are present *in the work itself*. In other words, she presupposes that the politics of the encounter has to be resolved formally in the work. This is why she praises Sierra and Hirschhorn: she is after works that are *marked* by antagonism. But why would the antagonism have to appear *in the work*? Does Bishop not neglect the variety of possible ways in which hegemony can be challenged and the variety of ways in which art can contribute to that process?

Grant Kester has offered a third model that neither limits its social encounters to convivial ones nor restricts its political antagonisms to ones that mark the work. In the book

Conversation Pieces, Kester tracks a politically spiced-up 'new genre public art'.²⁴ Unlike Bishop, though, his approach does not focus on the dialogical *structure* of artworks and more on the dialogical encounters with communities, emphasizing the contrast between a 'patronizing form of tourism' and 'a more reciprocal process of dialogue and mutual education'.²⁵

Kester thus proposes a new role for the artist: 'A dialogical aesthetic suggests a very different image of the artist, one defined in terms of openness, of listening...intersubjective vulnerability relative to the viewer or collaborator'.²⁶ By focusing on the conduct of the artist in relation to the communities it encounters, Kester's argument, unfortunately, defaults into a moralizing analysis. However, there is a more serious problem. There is an in-built limit to Kester's account. The social models and techniques that Kester's dialogical artists use typically derive from political contexts, such as WochenKlausur, who have collaborated with communities to help set up functional temporary institutions to assist and support socially marginalized groups. But why restrict the art of encounter to political forms of organization and communication? A political interrogation of the art of encounter surely does not require that artworks take their models of encounter from the political field.

Where does this leave us? We now have three theories of contemporary art's new social ontology, each of which has been subjected to critique. First, Bourriaud's utopian celebration of inter-human conviviality, which avoids antagonism. Second, Bishop's art of antagonism, which underestimates the diversity of ways in which art can contribute to counter-hegemonic struggle. Third, Kester's dialogical art, which reverts to an ethics of the artist's conduct. And together they map a context, albeit incomplete, of the art of encounter. They also provide a set of debates through which we might begin to evaluate a variety of specific works and theories, especially in terms of its relative ethics, politics and social relations. We are now, therefore, in a position to assess the various claims made on behalf of interactivity, participation, collaboration and co-operation in contemporary art.

Include Me Out!

I want to consider interactivity, participation, collaboration and co-operation in contemporary art as a structured set of relations. They are best defined, I'm suggesting, in terms of each other. I want to dwell for a moment on the words themselves. Interactivity has two means, which tend to be conflated in discussions of interactivity in art: (1) acting with each other and (2) (especially in computer science) responding to the user. Participation means having a share, taking part or being part of a whole. Collaboration (broken down as co-labouring), means working together, as does co-operation. Neglecting these differences, the discussion of interactivity, participation, collaboration and co-operation in contemporary art, is reduced to a one-dimensional measurement of the degree to which the work's public is active within the work, including, crucially, how early or late that activity is.

In her book *Participation*, Claire Bishop correctly distinguishes between participation and interactivity, explaining that the latter, especially in connection with developments in digital technology, merely incorporates the viewer 'physically' (pressing buttons, jumping on sensitive pads and so on). Participation, Bishop points out, is not so much 'physical' as 'social'. And this is precisely the sort of distinction that fuels the advocacy of participatory art.

There is a temptation, therefore, to treat participation as a solution to the problems endemic to the whole range of prior forms of cultural engagement, from the elitism of the aesthete to the passivity of the spectator, and from the compliance of the observer to the distance of the onlooker. Acknowledging the problematic social histories of these forms of engagement, which are still in the process of being written up, the rhetoric of participation proposes a break. Participation is thought of as a style of cultural engagement that does away with all previous problematic forms of cultural engagement by eradicating the distinction between all of the previous cultural types and all cultural relations between them.

Miwon Kwon, in the book *One Place after Another*, interprets the rhetoric of participation within 'new genre public art' as precisely that of democratizing art with 'pluralist inclusivity, multicultural representation and consensus-building'²⁷ that shifts the focus 'from the artist to the audience, from object to process, from production to reception, and emphasises the importance of a direct, apparently unmediated engagement with particular audience groups (ideally through shared authorship in collaborations)'.²⁸ Kwon remains sceptical about such claims, and rightly so. Participation, although disguised as a generous shrinking of cultural division, can be seen as an extension of art's hegemony and, as Grant Kester argues, an opportunity for the artist to profit from their social privilege.

Jacques Rancière highlights this by arguing that participation carries a pernicious distinction that participation cannot shake off: that between those who participate and those who don't. Even if we view participation in its rosier light, Rancière argues that its effects are socially divisive. The critique of participation is, here, immanent to the development of participation as an inclusive practice that does not and cannot include all. Seen in this way, participation must be excluding because it sets up a new economy which separates society into participants and non-participants, or those who are participation-rich and those who are participation-poor.

It is vital to the critique of participation, therefore, that we locate it within – rather than beyond – the differential field of culture's social relations, as a particular form or style of cultural engagement with its own constraints, problems and subjectivities. We can begin by noting that the participant typically is not cast as an agent of critique or subversion but rather as one who is invited to accept the parameters of the art project. To participate in an art event, whether it is organized by Rirkrit Tiravanija, Jeremy Deller, Santiago Sierra or Johanna Billing, is to enter into a pre-established social environment that casts the participant in a very specific role.

The point is not to single out individual artists who fail to meet the potential of participation's promise. The point, rather, is that participation *always* involves a specific invitation and a

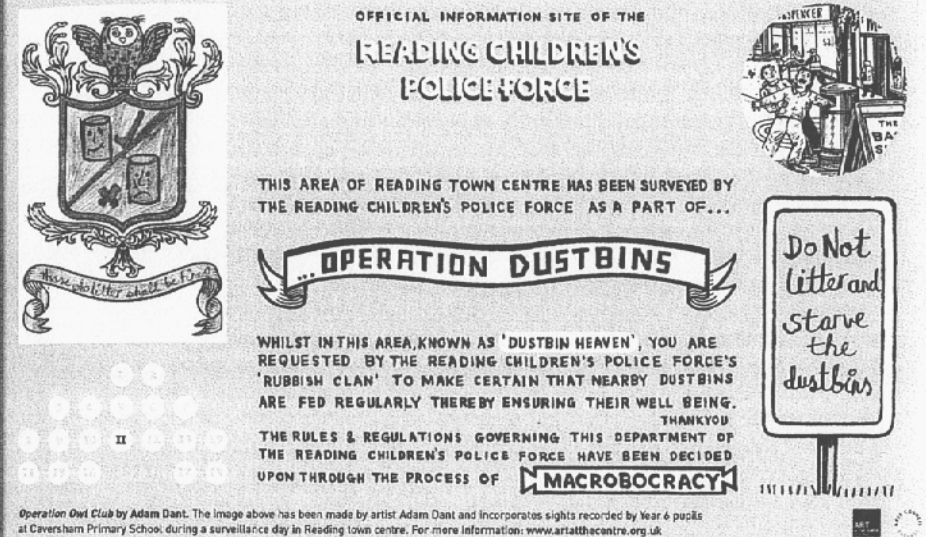
specific formation of the participant's subjectivity, even when the artist asks them simply to be themselves. The critique of participation must release us from the grip of the simple binary logic which opposes participation to exclusion and passivity. If participation entails its own forms of limitations on the participant then the simple binary needs to be replaced with a constellation of overlapping economies of agency, control, self-determination and power. Within such a constellation participants take their place alongside the viewer, observer, spectator, consumer and the whole panoply of culture's modes of subjectivity and their social relations.

Both in art and politics, participation is an image of a much longed for social reconciliation but it is not a mechanism for bringing about the required transformation. In politics, participation vainly hopes to provide the ends of revolution without the revolution itself. And in art, participation seems to offer to heal the rift between art and social life without the need for any messy and painful confrontations between cultural rivals.

There is, perhaps, great potential in the proposal of participating in a promising situation – and this is presumably the only scenario envisaged by the supporters of participation. However, there is potential horror within the threat of participating in an unpromising situation. Participation presupposes its own promise, therefore, by assuming the benign character of the situation to which the participant is invited. As such, participation sounds promising only until you imagine unpromising circumstances in which you might be asked to participate. In troubled and troubling circumstances, participation is a malign violating force that neutralizes difference and dissent.

Consider, for instance, Gillian Wearing's *Signs that Say What You Want Them to Say and Not Signs that Say What Someone Else Wants You to Say*, 1992–1993. When someone complains that such work is ultimately controlled by the artist, or that the work addresses those internal to contemporary art rather than those represented by the images, what is tapped into is the underlying tension between art and the rest of culture. The point behind the complaint is that the participation of civilians in artworks does not fundamentally challenge the cultural distinctions that separate them from the artist and the minority community of art. In fact, participation simply re-enacts that relationship in an ethnographic fashion. It would be unfair to expect a single artwork to overcome such systemic ills, but this is precisely the problem with the concept of participation: it is based on the misconception that properties of the artwork could offer a technical solution to art's social marginalization.

One way of getting a handle on the limitations and constraints imposed on the participant is to contrast participation with collaboration. It is the shortfall between participation and collaboration that leads to perennial questions about the degree of choice, control and agency of the participant. Is participation always voluntary? Are all participants equal and are they equal with the artist? How can participation involve co-authorship rather than some attenuated and localised content? The rhetoric of participation often conflates participation with collaboration to head off such questions. Collaborators, however, are distinct from participants insofar as they share authorial rights over the artwork that permits them, among



Adam Dant, *Operation Owl Club*, 2004.

other things, to make fundamental decisions about the key structural features of the work. That is, collaborators have rights that are withheld from participants. Participants relate to artists in many ways, including the anthropological, managerial, philanthropic, journalistic, convivial and other modes. The distinction between them remains.

Don't Look...What Now?

So, when I said earlier that interactivity, participation, collaboration and so forth can be seen as an incomplete map of art within the post-Duchampian ontology of art, I meant that we have a very narrow view of the possibilities. The main restriction on contemporary practice, I would say, is the over-emphasis on redressing the power of the author. Co-authorship is certainly a major element of post-Cartesian art, but it is clearly not *all* that it implies.

It is essential to recognize the devaluation of the 'first person' in art – and artists are collaborating today at an unprecedented rate, as well as addressing their various 'publics' as participants and encouraging them to participate or collaborate with each other – but working together, both co-operatively and antagonistically, and getting help from technicians, professionals and experts, is the tip of the post-Cartesian iceberg.

We used to have three heroically singular elements to art: the artist, the art object and the viewer. All of these have been opened up to 'general social technique', creating a lot of anxiety and excitement, and a handful of theories, each promoting one possible way of being post-Cartesian. We need to see that the critique and transformation of the gallery, which has occurred roughly at the same time, is fundamentally related to the emergence of the art of encounter: the gallery is the institution of those three singulars, and therefore it cannot survive their demise. Thus, the gallery, which has begun to mimic or host other institutions, has itself been opened up to general social technique.

So, it is not an adequate response to the current state of art to celebrate collaboration or participation in contemporary art. Nor can we merely add these social elements together to arrive at an ideal practice (an arts collective working with participants on self-institutionalizing events from materials and skills at large). In fact, while social authorship and social cultural reception seem to both follow from the post-Cartesian condition, collaboration and participation, as we understand them, are unhappy together. If you have collaborators and participants working together, you have a *hierarchy* of authorship, responsibility and control.

The fundamental reason why the current map we have is incomplete and inadequate is that it does not yet face up to the fact that when art is opened up to general social technique, our theory of art has to become a theory of the society that we want. We simply cannot have a theory of the art of encounter without at the same time rethinking social relations at large. We need a better map. More importantly, though, we need to change the landscape that is being mapped.

Notes

1. Roberts, J., *The Intangibilities of Form* (London: Verso, 2007), p. 125.
2. Austin, J.L., *Sense and Sensibilia* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1962), pp. 73–76.
3. Slavoj Žižek, *The Parallax View*, MIT, 2006, p. 49.
4. This is, in effect, I would argue, what the discourse of aesthetics invariably does. It reduces the field of artistic experience to an inherited set of 'aesthetic' experiences which are derived from the history of engaging with art. No future can be made out of it. No art can be guided by it without sacrificing its Žizekian duty to transform the body of the empirical public.
5. See Evans, N., 'Tired of the Soup du Jour?: Some Problems with New Formalism', *Variant*, 2(16), 2001, pp. 35–37.
6. Zupančič, A., *The Odd One In*, (Cambridge, MA: MIT, 2008), p. 173.
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8. Gillick, L., *Renovation Filter: Recent Past and Near Future*, catalogue, Arnolfini Gallery, Bristol, 2000, p. 16.
9. Gillick, *Renovation Filter*, p. 16.
10. Roberts, *The Intangibilities of Form*, pp. 101–132.
11. Roberts, *The Intangibilities of Form*, p. 22.
12. Roberts, *The Intangibilities of Form*, p. 53.
13. Roberts, *The Intangibilities of Form*, p. 53.
14. de Duve, T., *Kant After Duchamp* (Cambridge, MA: MIT, 1999), p. 51.
15. Farquharson, A., 'Before and After Science', *Frieze*, 85, 2004, p. 93.
16. Roberts, *The Intangibilities of Form*, p. 128.
17. Roberts, *The Intangibilities of Form*, p. 115.
18. Roberts, *The Intangibilities of Form*, pp. 115–116.
19. Kester, G., *Conversation Pieces: Community + Communication in Modern Art*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), p. 9.
20. Collings, M., *Blimey! From Bohemia to Britpop: London Art World from Francis Bacon to Damien Hirst* (London: 21 Publishing, 1997).
21. Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics*, p. 9.
22. Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics*, p. 28.
23. Bishop, C., 'Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics', *October*, 110, 2004, p. 70. My emphasis.
24. See Lacy, S., *Mapping the Terrain: New Genre Public Art* (Seattle: Bay Press, 1995).
25. Kester, *Conversation Pieces*, p. 151.
26. Kester, *Conversation Pieces*, p. 110.
27. Kwon, M., *One Place after Another* (Cambridge, MA: MIT), 2004.
28. Kwon, *One Place after Another*, p. 107.

Chapter 4

Who Speaks? Who Listens? *Het Reservaat* and *Critical Friends*

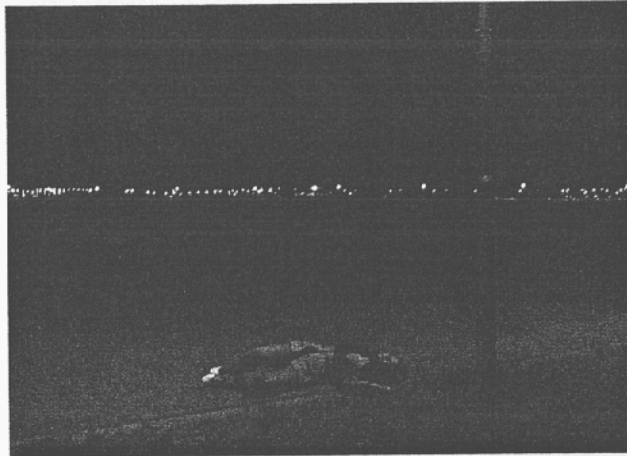
Sophie Hope

As a curator, academic and artist-enabler, Sophie Hope questions the assumptions we make for public art projects in relation to the position of the commissioned artist, the curator, the participant (the public) and the evaluator. She focuses on two recent projects in which she has been centrally involved. For Het Reservaat in Holland she tests out new relationships between artists and participants – as an artist, wherever possible, taking a back seat in proceedings, and allowing those living and working in the site of the work to adopt a commanding role in developing the detail of the project. In Critical Friends for the Greenwich Peninsula in London, a collectivized approach to evaluation is devised and executed by the people that the project aims to include. In much of her work Hope demonstrates by practical example that it is possible for 'participation' to be seen as an open process, filled with democratic possibility, drawing together on an equal basis amateurs and professional artists, people with a range of skills and experience, who congregate and collaborate, shifting their previously fixed positions, becoming alternately producers and spectators, viewers and evaluators.

About twenty parents and children cycle by on their way to a sporting event, half of them are wearing blue, the other half orange T-shirts. Young people living in different parts of this town are already beginning to compete against each other.

In May 2006 I made my first trip to the new town Leidsche Rijn, on the outskirts of Utrecht, Holland. I was hosted and funded by Beyond, the publicly funded art agency that was commissioning art as part of a new housing development (<http://www.beyondutrecht.nl/>). What became clear to me during my first few days of being in 'residence', hearing about all the art that had taken place in Leidsche Rijn, was that I wanted to work with the people who had inadvertently paid for me to be there. It was difficult to meet that public, however, without a dog or small child. They were the main things I saw in the many parks; there were no pubs in Leidsche Rijn. Life went on in the private homes, surrounded by fences. I had to find a way of being invited in to people's homes if I wanted to start working with the residents.

A common model of commissioning art is to parachute artists in to work in a location for a given amount of time. The artist then makes some work and moves on to their next project somewhere else. In this text, I want to explore the issues relating to public participation for the project in Leidsche Rijn. I suggest that the role of the artist in the form of a paid commission inevitably negates the extent of co-authorship. It might be that the contradictory roles and agendas of artists, commissioners and so-called 'participants' ignore the role of the



spectator. In the search for 'co-authorship' and 'collaboration' a natural conclusion may be to abolish artists' commissions which rely on the separation of (unpaid) 'participants' from (paid) 'artists'. I go on to introduce *Critical Friends* which investigates some of these problems and possibilities.

The masterplan for Leidsche Rijn was completed in 1997. By 2007, the town, still only half-complete had accumulated over 15,000 residents, makeshift supermarkets, plenty of primary schools and a Leidsche Rijn anthem. Built on agricultural land, numerous archeological sites and incorporating two existing villages (Vleuten and De Meern), Leidsche Rijn is not merely a suburb but the largest 'new' town ever to be built in the Netherlands. Leidsche Rijn is an extremely popular place to live. Houses are sold before they are built. The first families to move there had experienced the urbanization of the landscape and were ready to move on to pastures new, expectant of fresh beginnings in the pristine new-builds and ordered, fenced-in lawns.

I started to ask myself, what would happen to Leidsche Rijn in the future? Will its apparent success continue? How will such experiments in ideal living pan out over the centuries to come? I was imagining the innocent sporting events turning sinister as the different parts of Leidsche Rijn became more gated, resources more scarce and battles commencing between these communities. Often the urban experiments of yesteryear are laughed upon today. We are in perpetual motion, inventing, responding and surviving.

I began asking these questions through a series of workshops and conversations at Number 19, the artists' residence where I was staying on the edge of the new development. It was like a temporary spaceship structure set apart from the rest of the housing development. These workshops, informal conversations and two projects in local primary schools run by local artists focused on the next thousand years of Leidsche Rijn using themes such as the environment, education, family-life, work, culture and religion. Thinking about the future of a newly built town was a way of unveiling the different ideologies and perceptions people have of today, allowing us to imagine the future triumphs and failures of such an ideal place to live. I worked with local journalists, politicians, schools, a teenage rock band, tai chi class, the local vicar and staff at a local second-hand shop, most of whom then 'performed' in a one-day outdoor live action/event on 15 July 2007 which attracted over 800 'spectators', mainly residents of Leidsche Rijn.

The performance was called *Het Reservaat* (meaning 'open-air museum' in Dutch) and was made possible because of the collaboration between local residents. I had decided to spread my three month contract over a year and was travelling to Leidsche Rijn every other month for a week or two at a time. The project needed co-ordination on the ground and through Beyond I met Daphne De Bruin and Joost de Groot who Beyond paid to help

Top left: Sophie Hope, *Art is Useless*, staged protest outside Het Reservaat, 2007.

Middle left: Sophie Hope, *Dead in Leidsche Rijn*, 2007.

Bottom left: *Critical Friends*, front cover of magazine, 2008.

co-ordinate the performance. Joost and Daphne live in Leidsche Rijn and had extensive experience of producing community performances, something I had never done before. They were instrumental in developing the concept of the performance and working with me and the other participants to turn the ideas into a realistic format.

The idea was to create a dialogue with the past, present and future in Leidsche Rijn. Our open-air museum was set on the site of Castellum Hoge Woerd, a Roman Fort, now a public park and orchard. It was a re-enactment of life in 2007 by and for people living in the year 3007. We wanted to look again at today with fresh eyes as if we have travelled in a time machine from the future back to the present. The press release read:

Het Reservaat: Back to the Present

Where time stood still for a thousand years, a place of wonderment where everyday moments of 2007 have been captured in time for future generations.

This world Heritage site is the most well preserved picture of life in 2007. It has come to be known as the 16th wonder of the world. For one day only you can experience how people lived, worked and played in the Leidsche Rijn of 2007! The beautiful town of Leidsche Rijn was built in the beginning of the 21st Century, over a thousand years ago. Opening this summer (for one day only!) is a re-creation of life as it was when the town was still being developed in 2007. Now underwater, the creators of *Het Reservaat* give you the chance to tour a part of the old authentic town and talk to some of the children and families who populated this amazing experiment in living all those years ago at a time of great expectations and new beginnings.

Taste the unusual food people used to eat (for energy but also pleasure!) and find out what a fluffy animal named a 'sheep' was used for. Visit a reconstruction of a 'family home' and find out what happened in a 'kitchen'. Our experienced and professional archeologists recently excavated an ancient 'automobile' – one of the most revered objects in the early 21st Century. Come and learn what it was used for! Meet children from 2007 and talk to them about the strange ideas they had for the future. Discover how wrong or right they were! Listen to live performances of sounds (often called 'music'). Discover how 'politicians' of 2007 explain 'democracy' and their plans for our future (you can judge how wrong or right they were!) and learn about how 'religion' informed the lifestyles and survival of the people of 2007. And lots more!

We had to convince the visitors arriving on the Sunday of the performance that they were from the future. They entered a 'time tunnel' and listened to a soundscape explaining the context. Everyone was given a pair of swimming goggles so they could see on the seabed the archeological remains of this settlement dating back to the early twenty-first century. Upon exiting the time tunnel into the sunlight of the open-air museum, the visitors were greeted by guides dressed in white overalls and blue goggles and shown around the museum and introduced to the re-enacted life of this ancient 'new' town. The guides were from a local action-improvisation club and improvised their way around the museum, creating weird

and wonderful stories about the role of old people, farmyard animals, petrol and rock bands. There were mixed reactions from visitors to the museum, from amusement to bafflement – some visitors were angry that the guides had got it wrong, arguing life was different in 2007; others played along and asked questions as if they were from 3007. To a certain extent the 'spectators' were becoming the 'performers' in the event.

The fifteen simultaneous 'scenes' were devised and 'performed' by the different interest-groups, who carried out their everyday activities, such as practicing tai chi, discussing 'democracy', performing music, playing board games and drinking tea. Putting these everyday scenes together, slightly exaggerating or misinterpreting them, and combining absurdity with celebration, provided a way in for people to question their own lives. For example, the visitors were told the band were bigger than the Beatles in 2007 and every hour they would screech around the park in an orange jeep followed by paparazzi (a group of local photography enthusiasts) and the guides warned the visitors not to approach the older people ('grandmas and grandpas' playing board games) as they may be in danger of being hugged and might not let you go. Some of the guides remarked after the event:

What I also remember vividly, is the great atmosphere among all the people who were helping in this way or the other on Sunday. Everybody was cheerful, and everybody was very pleased with what was accomplished that day. And their enthusiasm really helped to stay focused and in high spirits all day. Wonderful!

All in all, it was a great art project. Unlike most art projects I know of, actually. It was very accessible, and last Sunday I think that we really brought art to a lot of people, who normally would not have shown much interest in it. That deserves many compliments!

Het Reservaat was an opportunity for visitors to consider their own ideas for the future – politically, environmentally, socially and economically. This one-day museum aimed to be a site bustling with contradictory views, ambitions and ideologies with the combination of visitors, performances, props and interventions triggering both laughter and puzzled looks.

Het Reservaat was trying to be more than a fun day out for all the family. But to what extent did people experience 'critical engagement'? Did the intention to create a critical art project that 'got people thinking' and that was beyond a 'fun day out' actually occur and if so, how? Did it need an artist for this to happen? How can the project have encouraged critical and/or political thinking (and action) when it was being funded by the government through the taxpayers I was trying to engage? How does this affect people's relationship to the artist they have inadvertently paid to be there?

As commissioned artist I wanted to incorporate a critique of my own role within the project as a characteristic of early twenty-first century culture that could find a place in the museum. I decided to erect a staged protest outside the entrance to the museum, using cardboard placards tied to lampposts, using statements from the local media about earlier Beyond art projects in Leidsche Rijn, such as, 'waste of money' and 'art is useless'. The protest

could have been directed at the event, pre-empting some of the visitors' comments, or a part of the performance itself. Apart from being approached by the police while installing the placards, I did not hear any feedback from this part of the performance. Indeed, it is symptomatic of such commissions that the artist moves on and life resumes as before. By temporarily coming together we created a collective moment that may or may not have lived on in different ways. I heard later, for example, that many of the children who came to the event carried on wearing their goggles to school for some time afterwards. There was no formal evaluation or feedback from the event, besides informal conversations and local press coverage and it is difficult to ascertain the different meanings and experiences of 'critical engagement' with *Het Reservaat*.

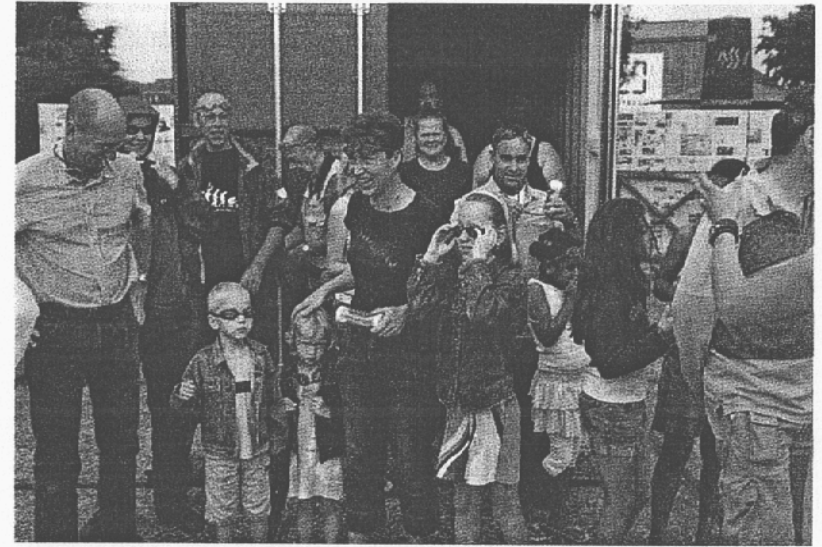
More recently, in 2008, I wanted to continue to explore what a collective reflection on a process of commissioning art might be like – how can the collective process of making/performing be continued and reflected in the critical analysis of what it means to commission art that is 'participatory'? How are the so-called 'participants' involved in this critical reflection? While I still hope to revisit Leidsche Rijn to carry out such a reflective process, I have begun a project in another area of urban development – the Greenwich Peninsula in South-East London, where I am working with a group of past and present 'participants' of 'collaborative' art projects to develop a critically reflective approach to questioning the role of art on the Peninsula.

Critical Friends is a small group of staff and associates of Stream, an arts organization based in Greenwich, London (<http://www.streamarts.org.uk/>). It is a cross between a steering committee, a focus group and an informal collective of local residents, staff and associates. I initiated this group with my colleague Rebecca Maguire in autumn 2008 after an invitation to evaluate the next series of art commissions Stream are planning for the Greenwich Peninsula. I evaluated the last series of projects, *Peninsula*, in 2005–2007. Rather than undertake an independent evaluation this time, I wanted to see if we could evolve the process of evaluation as a collectivized approach that is devised and carried out by the people the projects aim to include. The idea is for this to be a study group and not a group being studied.

They have devised some key questions they would like to ask of past, present and future art projects on the Peninsula and are currently carrying out interviews and observations as a way of starting to address their questions. A magazine (<http://en.calameo.com/books/000013925ebd57db8363a>), private blog and regular meetings are sites for the group to share findings, re-address their questions and feed into the process of commissioning art at Stream.

Critical Friends is a way of revisiting art commissions from the perspective of people linked to Stream. As a method, it aims to address the imbalance of those who critique, commission, decide and retell the experience of art by recognizing and building on the diverse expertise of those involved:

who has the right to ask whom what questions?; Who has the right to answer?; who has the right to see what?; who has the right to say what?; who has the right to speak for whom?²¹



Sophie Hope, *Het Reservaat*, exiting the time-tunnel into the museum, 2007.



Critical Friends is simultaneously adopting the method of a socially engaged art process while at the same time interrogating these methods. The research is the responsibility and preserve of each of those involved. I have my agenda and motives as do others in the group. The power structure cannot be ignored however, as Rebecca and I are paid facilitators and others in the group are volunteering their time at the moment (this may change depending on how it develops). The format of *Critical Friends* is open enough at this stage to define its own purpose and direction with Rebecca and me working as facilitators of that process. So far this has been about encouraging people to pursue their existing critical knowledge of the commissioning process. Two contributors are 'serial participants' who are perpetually consulted by artists and often take part in art projects commissioned by *Stream*. They are the unofficial, unpaid experts of the area. They have a unique view of commissioned art from that perspective. We are discussing with the group how they might document and research their inquiries and feed in to the process. For example, someone is writing a diary of her observations of a youth radio station and another has interviewed her neighbours about rumours of a current art project being developing in the area.

Both *Het Reservaat* and *Critical Friends* are examples of collective research and performance that I am facilitating and analysing. At times I am more in control while at other times, other people involved take control. The process evolves because of this shared input. In writing this text now, I am the one, yet again, who is speaking and writing. To open up the narrating would be the next step for *Het Reservaat*, just as we are trying to do with *Critical Friends*. The re-presentation of socially engaged art rarely reflects the supposedly collaborative aspect of the work. Lea Kantonen raises the issue of power plays in her essay on shared expertise in fieldwork, research process, artistic presentation and representation:

Participatory research isn't symmetrical. The researcher wants to get knowledge about the community in question, she strives towards a close relationship with members of the community, and formulates the knowledge both by listening to them and by relating to the traditions of the academic institutions. Though dependent on her collaborators only she is rewarded for her accomplishments in the academic community. She is applauded for 'refraining' from her authority and 'sharing' her expertise with the researched. The same asymmetry concerns community-based art. The artist shares the authorship with the community, but only the artist is rewarded and recognised by the art community.²

Barbara Heyl also acknowledges that 'researchers have considerable control over the "reporting" and the outcome, while still striving to empower the respondents through respectful listening'.³ I think *Critical Friends* and *Het Reservaat* are guilty of Kantonen and Heyl's assertions because they still rely on a model of commissioning art that privileges the artist. By collectively re-presenting some of the issues raised through these projects I would like to explore ways of redistributing to a wider audience the roles, resources and responsibilities of such work. This means finding new ways of drawing on aspects of

performative social science such as 'ethnodrama' as well as socially engaged art practices and evaluation.

Ethnodrama, developed by Jim Mienczakowski, is where 'co-performers read performance scripts based on fieldwork and interviews conducted in the fieldsetting'.⁴ It is about 'giving the text back to the readers and informants in the recognition that we are all co-performers in each other's lives' (ibid.). The idea is that 'informants' control the text and its representation.

Ethnodrama sits within an extant school of theatre which searches for social change but differs from other forms of similar theatre in that it adheres to the principles of formal and recognisable ethnographic research methodology, above and beyond the artist's demands of aesthetics, in its attempt to produce a cultural critique.⁵

Mienczakowski suggests that *performed ethnography* might be more accessible than traditional written reports. *Critical Friends* and *Het Reservaat* as ethnodrama, for example, involves the performing of scenarios as a way of reporting and communicating to a wider audience. The act of storytelling, reflecting and proposing is redistributed among the group and the experience is co-authored as a result. The roles of artist, commissioner and participant become blurred and reclaimed in a performative act that challenges traditional approaches to commissioning art, rendering the search for the spectator obsolete.

Critical Friends currently includes:

Rachel Gibson
Isabel Lilly
Rohini Malik Okon
Anthony Nicolaou
Andy Robinson
Bre Stitt
Rich Sylvester
Anne Webb

Het Reservaat included:

Pieter van Amelsvoort
Daphne de Bruin
Dries van Dyke
Joost de Groot
Marielle Hendriks
Wouter de Heus
Gerben Joustra
Jan de Jonge
Pim van der Meer

Petra Mijjer
Arie Nico
Mike Ocon
Brigit Postman
Hans Sakkers
Jacobi Verheul
Herre Wynia
Staff of Emmaus
Students at Monterssori Arcade School
Students at de Achtbaan School
Eitherway (band)
De Maan Theatre Group
Jan Griffioen's tai chi class
Theatre Sport group

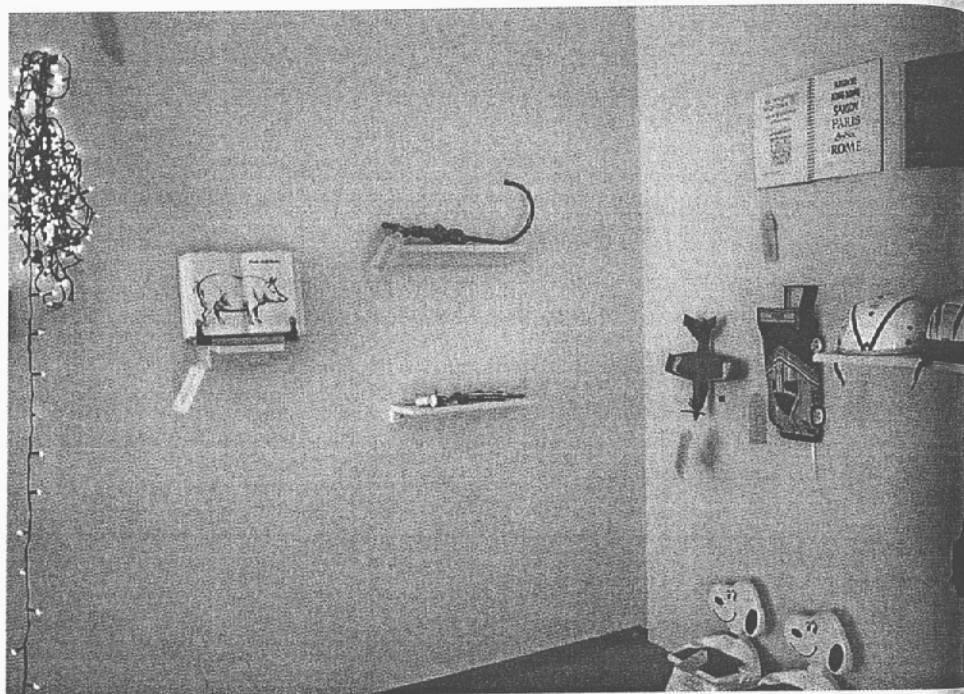
Notes

1. N. Denzin, 'The Reflexive Interview and a Performative Social Science', *Qualitative Research*, 1(23), 2001, p. 23–46. Quoting Anna Deavere Smith (26).
2. L. Kantonen, 'Shared Expertise in Fieldwork, Research Process, Artistic Presentation and Representation', *Geist*, 11, 12, 14, 2007–2008, pp. 182–196 (184).
3. B.S. Heyl, 'Ethnographic Interviewing', in eds, Atkinson et al., *Handbook of Ethnography* (Thousand Oaks: Sage, 2001), p. 376.
4. Denzin, 'The Reflexive Interview', p. 26.
5. J. Mienczakowski, 'Ethnodrama: Performed Research – Limitations and Potential', in eds, Atkinson et al., *Handbook of Ethnography* (Thousand Oaks: Sage, 2001), p. 470.

Chapter 5

Tell Me Your Story: An Interview with Artist Harrell Fletcher

Marisa Sánchez



Harrell Fletcher and Jon Rubin, *Garage Sale*, Gallery HERE, Oakland, CA, 1993.

On 4 August 2007, Marisa C. Sánchez sat down with Harrell Fletcher at his home in Portland, Oregon to discuss his art practice. For over a decade, Fletcher has encouraged a rethinking of the sites of artistic production by moving towards an expanded view of the artist's studio as well as supporting a much broader understanding of the role of the artist. His socially engaged approach repositions art into the public realm and he hopes to build communities through the exchange of art that can take many forms including storytelling and shared experience.

When Sánchez met with the artist to talk about the formation of his working process, Fletcher was anticipating the inaugural semester of the Art and Social Practice MFA at Portland State University, Oregon. Fletcher's efforts to establish an experimental, interdisciplinary and non-traditional programme within an academic institution were about to be realized.

The following is an excerpt from a longer conversation that took place that day. Sánchez talked with Fletcher about his work as an artist considering a range of projects from the early 1990s, when he was a graduate student at California College of Arts and Design, through to his current practice that engages diverse audiences and participants, as in the website project *Learning to Love You More*.

MARISA SÁNCHEZ

I want to begin by asking, how or at what time did you think that your approach to making socially engaged work was possible for you? I know you made certain decisions in graduate school about how you could develop your work in the public realm and now, sixteen years later, you have shaped that practice. Let's begin there.

HARRELL FLETCHER

When I arrived at graduate school I was surrounded by artists who were going off to their studios to make work, and that is what I had been looking forward to for a long time, but what is ironic is that when I got that opportunity it was no longer of interest to me. I asked myself 'what am I doing?' – going off to make work and then expecting people to look at it seemed slightly egotistical. That is not a slight on people who do that, it's just my own personal feeling for myself. I was also meeting people who were working on things that were socially activated – needle exchange programmes and the like. I was looking at them and then looking at us, my fellow MFA students; it made me think I didn't want to retreat to my own isolated spot and think my strange thoughts and make my little things and then hope people would buy them. I began thinking about how I could connect my interest

in documentary practice with visual art, and use it as a way of making work for galleries and museums, and I guess I just made the simple conclusion that I could in fact do that and focus on a group of people specific to the area surrounding a venue as the subject/participants.

MARISA SÁNCHEZ

It's of interest to me that your socially engaged approach is not necessarily about the creation of a discrete object or a traditional studio-based practice, and yet the work often remains connected to conventional frameworks of exhibiting the 'product' in a commercial gallery or an art institution. Can you talk about your ideas for creating work which involves people who are not trained in art making, and how the work can then exist in those venues?

HARRELL FLETCHER

If I had been trained as something else, as a sociologist or a writer, my venue would have been different. Trained as I was, I had access to these venues and I saw myself as a facilitator for getting people's work into venues normally reserved for specialists and for people who were trained and official in that way, artist people.

MARISA SÁNCHEZ

Did you ever make objects?

HARRELL FLETCHER

Yes I did, ever since I was a kid I have made all these objects and drawings and I love that. But a funny thing happened when I came out of undergraduate school. I was very absorbed in the art world at that point, but mostly people seemed to be motivated by the need to have a review in *Artforum* or getting into the Whitney Biennial or selling in a commercial gallery. But I wound up working in a grade school in the Santa Cruz mountains for a year. My purpose was to make art with the kids and I was fascinated by their motivations, especially the young ones in kindergarten. They needed to make things because they really had something to express. They would have an interest in whatever it was – an insect or lizard – they would do some drawings, show them to someone, and they would be fulfilled by that. I realized that was my own motivation too when I was a kid, but that simple system had been worked out of me and I started having these ulterior motives that were really not about that expressing and sharing anymore, or being excited about something. Instead I somehow got tied into these other things. In a sense I distrusted myself, I did not want to be the one generating that work any more. When I do work for a public gallery I want it to be not just about myself for myself, I leave that stuff at home.

MARISA SÁNCHEZ

When was the first time you can remember working that way? What was the first thing you made?

HARRELL FLETCHER

I suppose the first thing was a book. I made a lot of books, first individual books, then Xerox books, and then an interview with my great aunt Grace. I put this book together, just a transcript of the interview. It was very simple, just capturing the moment and letting people into it. But funny things would happen, people would show their mom, and tell me their mom loved my work and I thought 'Wow, do I want someone's mom to like my work?' I realized I did, and this has led me into doing more projects for people's moms and all sorts of other kinds of people as well.

MARISA SÁNCHEZ

It seems to have had a circular effect for you by allowing you or even inspiring you to create work that encourages others to make the private public.

HARRELL FLETCHER

Yes, reality TV wasn't around when I started to make this work. There were precedents like Frederick Wiseman's films or *An American Family*. I think the way that reality TV went was the opposite to my work, so it is funny that the private/public thing has occurred in this other form.

MARISA SÁNCHEZ

When people contribute to *Learning to Love You More* (LTYLM) some of the submissions have a confessional quality. Do you feel reality TV has informed the process?

HARRELL FLETCHER

I think in some of them, but not all. In *Learning to Love You More* it's not the primary interest to get confessions. There are 63 assignments at the moment and what we are looking for is a range of experiences – a few of them are confessional or very personal, a lot of them are about stepping out of yourself and engaging with other people.

MARISA SÁNCHEZ

One in particular that sticks in my mind is the assignment which asks the participant to record the sound that keeps them up at night. In some ways, the engagement with the website sets up an interaction where the camera, the lens, is brought into the home. That intimate, private space is then offered for display on a public site so that others can engage with it, viewing and reading about another person's experience.

HARRELL FLETCHER

...yes, and sympathize with...It's horrible if there is some kind of sound keeping you up. I've been through it, and it's nice to be able to share what you are going through with other people.

MARISA SÁNCHEZ

Can you talk about some of the responses to that particular assignment?

HARRELL FLETCHER

There are normal ones like traffic outside, cats making a lot of noise, there are babies, there are all sorts of different generator sounds, a whole range of things like that.

MARISA SÁNCHEZ

Do you often have interaction with people who submit work?

HARRELL FLETCHER

No not really, but there are over 8,000 participants at the moment. There is most notably Laura Lark in Texas, who we have done an event with and a few others who have approached me, but the vast majority we don't know who they are, except through their reports.

MARISA SÁNCHEZ

Recently, you have been collaborating with the Oliver family, who live in Seattle and are attempting to complete all of the 63 assignments on LTLYM in two months. How did this challenge come about? Did you know the family or did they simply sign up on LTLYM? Did you place a call for entries to families interested in participating?

HARRELL FLETCHER

Well, first of all we were asked to take part in the Bumbershoot Festival held in Seattle, Washington from 1-3 September 2007. We were reluctant to pursue it because we were pretty stretched at the time, but I think there is always a solution to every problem. So Miranda (who I work with on that project) and I had a phone conversation, and the idea was to invite a local family so that people felt connected to it. We had already talked to the organizer and he then said 'Well I know a family who live next door to me, and they were perfect for it. They were paid a fee so I suspect that might have been some of the motivation but they are enthusiastic about it too, although we have never met them. We have emailed them and we shall meet them on the final night of the exhibition.

MARISA SÁNCHEZ

They keep an active blog (<http://oliverlove.blogspot.com/>), so viewers can read their progress as they complete assignments and watch how they are doing throughout their journey.

HARRELL FLETCHER

It was just an experiment, in that we don't usually make the assignments obligatory for anyone to do, so it was quite a stretch to ask them to do all of them. I felt that would make an interesting show, but no one has actually done it before. Usually it is about the range of people. This is just a different take on it. The family comprises a mother and father and four

kids, two boys and two girls. The oldest is twenty and I think the youngest is six, and they are involving their friends as well.

MARISA SÁNCHEZ

In many ways, this project is taking shape outside of your control. As part of your practice, you place a lot of trust in other people to realize your ideas. You establish a structure and they create the work. Do you feel a responsibility to the audience and participants for their contributions?

HARRELL FLETCHER

Well, it varies in that there is one extreme, when we work with vast numbers of people and we create a very tight structure into which they put their content. The other extreme is when I work with an individual very closely. For example, I worked with a young boy in France and asked him if he were to make a sculpture for a sculpture park what would it be? There was no guarantee that I would do it but the content was all his. He came up with something really interesting, which I would never have thought of, to make a turtle out of gold and

Harrell Fletcher, *Corentine's Turtle*, Domaine De Kerguehenec, Brittany, France, 2006.



paint it green. I was so excited about it that I was determined to realize it, because I had offered the project out to a lot of people and got different proposals and that is the one that I went with. I worked with him over three summers and I became his assistant. In some ways what I do is offer structure or support to a point where people can realize a project – a framework in which to contain it. With the turtle piece, he is offering me a lot; giving me this idea, and of course I give him credit as I do on all things, giving me his time, but I also give him a lot; offering him the access to the sculpture park, materials, a budget, to enable him to realize something that otherwise he would not be able to do. It's a reciprocal relationship.

MARISA SÁNCHEZ

Can you talk about the garage sale, an early work you created in collaboration with another artist and people from the community?

HARRELL FLETCHER

It was a really early piece that I made with another artist Jon Rubin, who was a year ahead of me at graduate school. We spent a year and half doing things that were about the area, and one of the things that was happening were garage sales. We decided to do a show about garage sales. First we opened a gallery in a vacant store. We contacted the people who owned it and asked them if we were able to use it for exhibitions, and they let us for free. We very specifically wanted a store in order to be on street level with windows and in a place where people would be able to just walk in, rather than being in a warehouse area or upstairs which would instantly physically deter people from coming in. Rather than curate a show with pieces from various garage sales, we put an ad in the paper and asked people to contact us if they were going to have a garage sale. Jon and I would display the items for sale and invite the families back in to tell us the stories behind each object and we would type those up and put them on tags attached to the objects. The audience just assumed it was a store, and walked around, read the stories and learned about the families through their objects. The show was up for a week and on the weekend the families came in to sell off the objects as if it were a normal garage sale. We would then do another one the next week, and we did a series of them that way.

MARISA SÁNCHEZ

And the family was given all of the proceeds from the sale?

HARRELL FLETCHER

Yes. The stipulation was that they had to sell their stuff for the same price they would have if it was just in the garage or front yard. They couldn't just hike up the prices because it was in a gallery. People would try to buy from us during the week and we would say 'Listen we don't own these things, it's not ours, come back on the weekend and it will be like 50 cents'; but they would try and entice us with 40 bucks for a lamp or something and I would say 'I can't do that'.

MARISA SÁNCHEZ

Do you think this confusion happened because the experience began to be understood as a contemporary art project and the sale was in a gallery context with objects showcased on shelves?

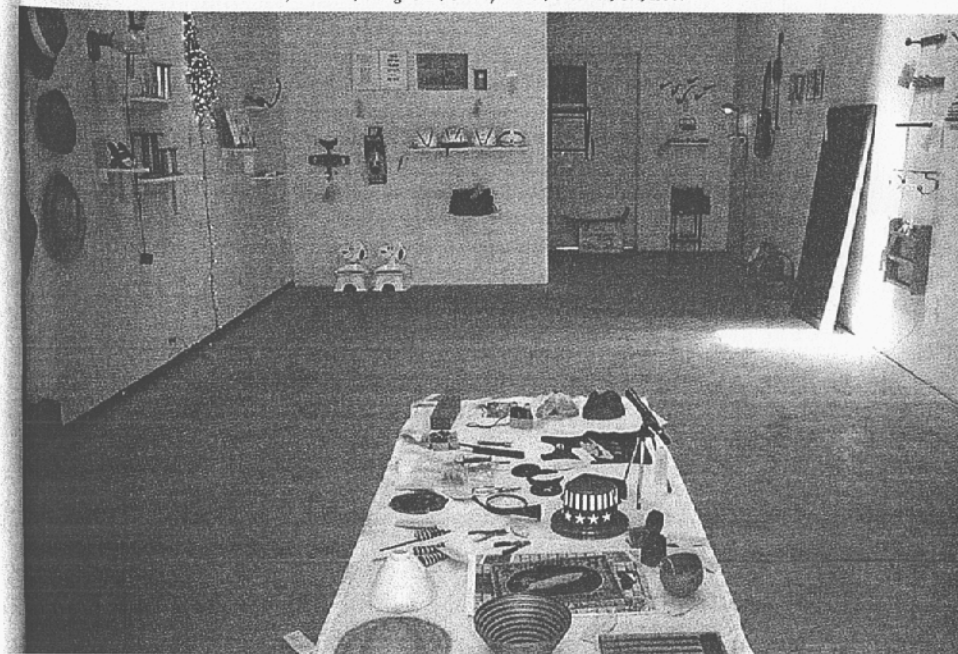
HARRELL FLETCHER

It's something that I have learned in general when you take almost any object and put it in a museum or gallery it is going to look a lot more valuable than in a thrift store or on the street. To a large extent the art world uses that, something made in the studio as art looks a lot better in a gallery, and it turns out you can do that with almost anything. At that time, we didn't really have any fame value so I don't think that is the point of why they wanted to buy it. It was more that they really liked something and they wanted to get it and didn't want to wait till the weekend.

MARISA SÁNCHEZ

You made that work early in 1993 and, at that time, you were already collecting personal histories. A strong part of your practice is listening to the oral histories of the people you work with. Why are you interested in other people's stories?

Harrell Fletcher and Jon Rubin, *Garage Sale*, Gallery HERE, Oakland, CA, 1993.



HARRELL FLETCHER

I think it goes back to the piece I did on my great aunt Grace which was a pretty straight oral history, with a few surprises. I wanted her to talk about the good old days, but she wasn't interested in that. I like that it becomes a way to learn about things, in a first person way. In the three blocks that was the gallery neighbourhood in Oakland, I could walk around and learn about the Second World War from a man sitting in his apartment courtyard, and the Turkish Atrocity from the guy who owns the rug store across the street, and Japanese concentration camps from the principal of the middle school, and hip hop from some kid who lived down the street. This vast amount of information is readily available, but no one knows how to access it, and in most cases it just disappears. We did a show about the World War II man and his garden, and he died six months later. Many of these things are lost too, but realizing that was a huge discovery for me. Once I figured out I could work in this way, the world opened up to me, and I could go anywhere, and there is this vast amount of knowledge and skills, talent and interest, that on my own I would not be interested in necessarily, but because I have decided to be someone who is interested in people who are interested in things, that opens up a whole host of other things, which includes for example Star Trek and Ulysses, subjects I would never have encountered on my own.

MARISA SÁNCHEZ

Were you ever surprised by an individual's willingness to offer so much information to you?

HARRELL FLETCHER

I was at first, but I think I am now used to it, and if you show interest in people they are generally very generous, gracious and willing to talk. It may just be a normal human attribute that people want to tell you about their life and things they care about, and if they sense you are genuinely, a sincere person they are willing to do that with you.

MARISA SÁNCHEZ

Have you ever been in the situation where someone has refused to share? I know you wouldn't force anyone to contribute, but have you ever encountered someone who was clearly unhappy with what they shared and then approached you after they saw it on the website or after it was included in a show?

HARRELL FLETCHER

That is a reaction that everyone always assumes will occur, but it is not obligatory to take part and I never twist anyone's arm. In the case of *Learning to Love You More*, we are not using some kind of stealth software to learn about the lives of people and then publish what we find. The participants are willingly contributing, so it has never come up in that way. There have been a few cases where people have contacted us and asked us to take things out of their submissions but later changed their mind. It might be that their circumstances had changed in some way or they just found it too revealing and then we would just remove it.

One report that was really amazing was slightly painful to take off, but we just did it because that's what the participant requested. Working with Jon Rubin on a project with this guy Anthony Powers, who told us an amazing story, and he then said he did not want that to be part of the show we were doing with him, so we deleted it and there were a million other things to work with.

MARISA SÁNCHEZ

In some cases you are working with a community, but in other instances like in the video, *Sunglints* (2000), created in St Paul, Minnesota, you document your appreciation of the small, everyday wonders you discover. Do you do this simultaneously with the community-based practice and do you choose to exhibit these works in a gallery and/or museum?

HARRELL FLETCHER

After leaving graduate school I didn't work with commercial galleries for ten years so I got out of that frame of mind. I wasn't automatically making things to be sold, which I think most artists do. After ten years of resistance I could think about it again and I felt okay about showing things that are for sale. There are also residual things from my projects which commercial galleries are interested in, but that is really a tiny part of my practice.

MARISA SÁNCHEZ

You are equally prepared to work with the Whitney, a commercial gallery in London and a man down the street. It's clear that within your practice you want that fluidity of experience and you do not limit yourself to any hierarchical structure.

HARRELL FLETCHER

Yes I think that is something I have pursued. You are taught that everything should be according to a hierarchy. You start showing at a bookstore or something like that (though some artists resist that), then you work with an obscure gallery, then you switch to mainstream gallery, then into museums and once you have done that you don't go backwards; you don't return to those earlier venues, unless it is a very special occasion. My sense was I should work across a horizontal field which could include the Whitney, a commercial gallery or someone's front yard or any other context. My hope was that things could be interesting and useful in any of those situations and in some way it would benefit institutions in that they had access to a rather unorthodox approach. There are a bunch of conditions institutions have to deal with each time they work with me and I hope this opens the door for more people to work in that way.

MARISA SÁNCHEZ

At the university where you teach I imagine students ask 'How do you operate in the public realm and how do I find my niche in this contemporary art context?' I wonder how do you encourage them to pursue their careers as artists or art practitioners?

HARRELL FLETCHER

It varies from individual to individual, but I think I have to show them that they don't have to just try travelling down the traditional path to art stardom. There are lots of other ways for artists to function in society, most of which I haven't tried myself, but if they are open to opportunities and are really creative, not just in the art objects they make, but in a larger way, the world can open up to them.

Part II

Sonic Openness

For many artists sound has offered an attractive option as a means of producing work, but it is not just for its sonic quality that it holds sway. This section considers the many ways in which artists have used sound as a means of opening up their work to collaboration and participation, drawing people in through the spoken word, song, oral recollection, computer technology, found and recorded sound, and occasionally, though often unrehearsed, with orchestral instruments.