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The Provision of Possibilities

By Minnie Scott

In this recent archival opus, the fragile legacy of Newcastle based curatorial project – variously incarnated as The Basement Group, Projects UK and, finally, Locus+ – is imaginatively and rowdily conserved. Review of *This Will Not Happen Without You* by Minnie Scott

This Will Not Happen Without You: From the Collective Archive of The Basement Group, Projects UK and Locus+ (1977-2007) contains, along with essays and photo documentation, a vinyl EP called ‘Logorrhoea’. The sleeve notes explain:

Each member of The Basement Group was allocated a track to record their composition on. This was done without ever hearing what any of the others had recorded on theirs. The whole cacophonous row was then mixed down by a seventh person... It is this mix you hear on the record.

In some respects this audio work can stand in for the spirit of the whole publication, a book which ambitiously brings together myriad voices from ‘the collective archives’ of three Newcastle-based project groups/commissioning agencies working between 1977 up to the present day. Presenting a coherent narrative about an evolving artist-run project venue turned commissioning agency that has been active for the last 30 years under three different names, presenting the work of more than 230 artists in the first four years alone, is a hard trick to pull off. What is exciting about this attempt is that it squares up to the task bravely by including a rich range of documentation. Importantly, it also features writings which explore the very impossibility, but not futility, of fully recording and summarizing Live Art and site-specific performances and events.

[IMAGE]

The Basement, exterior, c.1980

The challenges the editors and contributors have faced is to chart the development and changes of these groups (perhaps they could be termed ‘organisations’, but never ‘institutions’) without distilling the narrative into something easy and smooth or oppressively authoritative. Like the seventh person mixing *Logorrhoea*, the cacophony of archive, anecdote, critique and history is cherished rather than suppressed by the editorial team. This sense of a kind of textual democracy could disrupt any sense of cohesion between these successive incarnations. It could beg the question, why bring the three groups together into a single volume in the first place? The groups are linked together by the people involved, but the book shows us more than this: a significant continuity, which includes and transcends geographical particularity, has remained in place while organisational and commissioning structures have evolved. The founding focus on the political and social environment has remained a central tenet, and this continuity has, almost paradoxically, necessitated regular re-evaluations of how a regional project group might operate. As Richard Grayson remarks of the latest incarnation, Locus+, ‘the challenge of context renews itself’ (p.179). Grayson’s three essays provide a helpful genealogy – the Ayton Basement begat The Basement Group begat Projects UK begat Locus+ – and also the chronological scaffolding through which different forms of text are woven. While it accompanies an exhibition of the same name, this is no ordinary show catalogue – flipping and browsing through it will upturn fascinating texts and almost frustratingly intriguing performance documentary images but only a sustained reading from start to finish can put these brilliant fragments into the carefully-drawn context of a polyvocal narrative. This is a story as well as an archive.

The other fundamental ‘problem’ which the text squares up to is that of documentation and the archive itself. Early on in the book, Andrew Wilson’s essay, ‘Notes towards the Inevitability of History’, addresses the double-bind of practitioners of Live Art. If the history of art is, as he claims ‘a narrative formed through the preservation of objects’ then to leave an archival trace is to be made available to the co-option of the dominant history, to have one’s avant-garde teeth filed down. Later, Peter Suchin, describing the commodification of contemporary art, reiterates this dilemma in terms of the commercialisation of the conceptual:

...the market gradually adapted itself not to the selling of the primary material constituting Conceptual Art but to the means used to document these often elusive works. Photographs, maps, diagrams, texts and other secondary entities were exchanged as a substitute for, or pointers to, works whose properties transgressed conventional definitions of art. (p. 182)

To be lost to posterity after the moment of performance or to be instrumentalised by market forces, that is the question.

Ian Breakwell provides a third possibility by questioning the ‘authenticated “truth”’ of archival material pertaining to specific works. His enquiry relates specifically to works, such as the *n* project by Lloyd Gibson and Mark Little, that are conceived from the start as being only indirectly accessible to the public though various forms of documentation. The uncertainty regarding the total validity of this ‘evidence’ is a central element of the project, as in algebra where *n* is an unknown value and the interest is in the equations through which it is pursued.

[IMAGE]

The Basement Group, c.1983

Most of the works which have come into being with the assistance of The Basement Group, Projects UK, and Locus+ do not conform to this trope of deliberate inaccessibility; on the contrary, The Basement were bringing a diverse audience of art students, Newcastle and Gateshead residents and international artists into the presence of performances long before the term ‘access’ became an eviscerated buzzword. But for me, who wasn’t yet born when this public first started attending the bi-weekly Basement events, this collection, which includes self-confessedly selective memories (present peering back into the past) along with images and documents from the moment of performance itself (past peering forward to the present), is my only way in. The voices in this archive tell subtly different stories even when describing the same events; there are points of overlap, moments of contradiction or even error, but this is not intended obfuscation. As Monica Ross observes in her examination of the positions that performance art can assume in posterity,

Invited to reconstitute meaning from the material that the archive holds, as much as from the gaps a collection indicates, the agency of the archive situates us within a structure of investigation whose yield is variable and unpredictable. (p.107)

The archive then is always an intellectual rallying call, as the title of this one makes explicit. But the inclusive interpellation of the title refers not only to the hundreds of artists, teachers, organisers and participants who have been involved with one or other group over the last thirty years; ‘you’ is also of course the reader whose engagement with the text will shape their understanding of the history it documents. Of course this book is an edited archive, and, selection has gone on before the reader is involved, but by including such investigations into the issues of recording, preserving and transmitting across time as Wilson, Suchin, Breakwell and Ross undertake the text as a whole foregrounds the problems and opportunities of its form. By withdrawing from claims of being either a definitive chronicle or an exclusive, auratic document, this particular archive negotiates its status carefully and

reflexively.

The Basement Group, the first incarnation of the project group to be addressed in the text, is also the most difficult to summarise in terms of the work it hosted and facilitated. With an open-door selection policy that was rare and generous in its inception in the late '70s (and that seems even more so today), John Adams, Jon Bewley, Ken Gill, Richard Grayson, John Kippin, and Belinda Williams facilitated two performances a week in the barrel-vaulted basement beneath Spectro Arts. Participating artists included tutors from Newcastle Upon Tyne Polytechnic, where several of the group were studying. This is not to suggest that this was a closed shop for the group's inner circle, but rather that from the beginning they were succeeding in producing 'horizontal structures' among audience and participants (p.42). After four years of bringing hundreds of events and performances to The Basement, it became clear that this pace of programming could not be maintained to the satisfaction of all involved, as Ken Gill's incisive and cheeky mock-mission statement, 'A Strategy for the Future: Or How to Sound Pompous and Self Important,' makes clear. Projects UK began a new phase of office-based commissioning and facilitating of site-specific Live Art, initiating the New Work Newcastle performance festival in 1986. The central aims driving this change are described in practical physical and geographical terms (creating a centre for artistic activity which was at once international and regionally specific, bringing Live Art out of the gallery or project space) but of course also have strong theoretical implications for the production of new work.

[IMAGE]

Anya Gallaccio, *Repens*, 2000

The latest incarnation of the group, Locus+, has been operating as a commissioning agency since 1993. The 'Curriculum Vitae' included at the back of the volume gives the simplest sense of the transition between the groups' remit: The Basement Group section is crammed with artists' names, Project UK's pages are a little less crowded, often with artists listed under festival headings, then Locus+, whose CV includes fewer artists' with more in-depth description of their projects, highlights the group's developing focus on artists' publications. Indeed, the last third of the book concentrates more heavily on individual artists' projects which have been commissioned through Locus+, with less of the reflexive emphasis on the organisation itself that is so prominent in earlier sections. One of the contradictions that this book has to negotiate is the radical changes in working structure and commissioning practice that have taken place over the last thirty years, while at the same time drawing out enough connections for the idea of some theoretical continuity between incarnations (and the whole premise of this text) to be maintained. When Paul Bonaventura asks whether Locus+ is 'less politically engaged than its predecessors', Jon Bewley replies, 'It's just that we're not so didactic or "shouty" these days...our projects are less about spectacle and more about legacy' (p.25). Yet this hint that the groups' collective history has been one of progressive refinement runs counter to the general sense given by both the content and structure of this text. The democracy of the archive form makes it impossible to look back condescendingly at The Basement Group; instead, the text creates a space where current practices can be assessed in the rich context of contradiction and development.

In charting this history and the changing roles of each successive group, especially the latter two, the book necessarily reflects on the role of the artist-curator. Peter Davies uses the term 'activator', which comes closest to the impression of all three groups' attitude to their role (p.202). Early on in the book, Jon Bewley notes that 'All three organisations have had as a central tenet of their existence that the institution should be the servant of the artist' (p.26). Not dictating the terms in which a work will come into being but asking 'What do you need?' 'How can we help?', in other words facilitating rather than circumscribing the works they were involved with. Indeed, it is in the smaller organisational details that you get the most intimate and intriguing idea of the day-to-day workings of each group. Simon Herbert, who has worked within both Projects UK and Locus+, provides a great sense of what this

peripatetic facilitating involved:

Always a new site host – of warehouses, civic spaces, football stadia, private stately homes, community centres, fire stations – to persuade. Always a new production specialist – structural engineers, book-binders, rifle range supervisors, boat operators, landscape gardeners – with brains to pick. Always a new element – roses, potatoes, holy wafers, smoke machines, submarines – to source. Always a new intermediary – community workers, educationalists, historical societies, lesbian groups – to help initiate audience engagement. (p.104)

Helen Cadwallader also reminisces about the heterogeneous tasks she undertook for Locus+, scouring flea-markets for props and liaising with the London Rubber Company for a donation of 1000 condoms to attach to the programme for a performance by Annie Sprinkle (p.142). These details are not irrelevant flotsam of anecdote on the tide of the archive; on the contrary, amid the lucid theorisation of the aims of each group and the drawing up of a web of cultural and political contexts, such vignettes give a strong sense of the sweat that the ‘activators’ expended on each project. They also make tangible the idea that physical and social context was central to the activities of Projects UK and Locus+.

[IMAGE]

Annie Sprinkle, *Sluts & Goddesses*, 1990

The text is scrupulous about putting this attitude to curating into relation with other contemporary arts practitioners who were also pushing at existing models of the curatorial role, such as Naomi Siderfin. The inclusion of voices from other, parallel, regional arts organisations, such as Malcolm Dickson on Transmission and regeneration and its discontents in Glasgow, also puts the groups’ counter-metropolitanism into a wider context. Again, the balance is struck between emphasising the unique provision of possibilities that Projects UK and Locus+ have offered the artists they have worked with, and drawing out the national and international networks in which their projects took place.

As several of the contributors reflect on, this has evidently been a challenging book to put together. The result is a triumph of intelligently self-reflexive writing and editorial work. Monica Ross: ‘It is on the nature of the archive’s complicity and on the agency of its keepers, whether archivists, curators or related cultural producers, that the re-assembly of the performance work, like the story, depends’ (p.107). In its totality, it is not an easy book. The swift changes in tone, from Richard Grayson’s earnest chronicle to the ‘jagged and toothy pincers’ of Ben Watson’s scintillating diatribe, are stimulating but exhausting (p.133). What is perhaps most striking about the collection is how the priorities and organisational practices of all three groups, which were radical in their inception, remain so. The literally avant-garde attitude is striking because it has not become commonplace over the last 30 years; there is as much need for such experimental, context-minded commissioning as ever, perhaps the need is increasing. In a powerful sense, *This Will Not Happen Without You* functions, as its title indicates, as a call to arms. In a painfully enduring historical moment in which ‘the depoliticisation of art, atomisation of social movements, and the revision or erasure of aspects of history’ are the norm, to borrow Malcolm Dickson’s indictment of the general state of things, there is more need than ever for ‘conscientious cultural workers.’ Let’s take this as our sourcebook.

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This Will Not Happen Without You: From the Collective Archive of The Basement Group, Projects UK and Locus+ (1977-2007), Locus+ Publications, 2007