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# Art & Spectacle

Articles on art and spectacle

## Creation and Interest

By Jason Read

Peter Hallward's new book *Out of this World: Deleuze and the Philosophy of Creation* constructs the French philosopher as a mystic whose ideas, however inspiring, are politically useless. Jason Read, who has made his own claims for Deleuze as an indispensable political thinker, welcomes and contests this new approach

Peter Hallward's *Out of this World: Deleuze and the Philosophy of Creation* represents something of an event in the Anglo-American reception of Deleuze. Whereas for years the dominant trend of writing on Gilles Deleuze (and Félix Guattari) has been a series of guides and introductions to the dense and perplexing philosophy of Deleuze, Hallward's book is, by contrast, a critical engagement, even a polemic. Hallward argues that Deleuze's central problem, that of creation, is posed with such an austerity, such a detachment from any engagement with the created world of subjects, histories, and social conditions, that it ultimately dematerialises into an idealistic, or theophantic philosophy. A philosophy in which every individual process or thing is conceived as a manifestation or expression of God or a conceptual equivalent of God (pure creative potential, force, energy, life) (p.4). Hallward's argument is thus specifically aimed at those who find in Deleuze a philosophy useful for understanding and transforming social conditions. Hallward does not deny that Deleuze's philosophy is inspirational, just that this inspiration is ultimately misdirected for politics (p.164). As one who has found inspiration in Deleuze's work, more specifically Deleuze and Guattari's engagement with Marx, and thus considers Deleuze to be a useful thinker for political philosophy, Hallward's book is an important challenge.<sup>1</sup>

### Seven Days of Creation, Day One

Image > Seven Days of Creation, Day One

Hallward does not directly engage writers who have attempted to harness some of the force of Deleuze's writing for a political project, they, (or rather we), are left to the footnotes, instead he engages with the core of Deleuze's ontology. Hallward thus borrows a principle from Deleuze's own writing, arguing that every philosopher is animated by just one problem. Despite the apparent heterogeneity of Deleuze's writings, on cinema, Spinoza, Bergson, Francis Bacon, Proust, etc. there is one central concern underlying these approaches. The various different topics or matters of Deleuze's writing are simply different cases of a general philosophical problem, that of absolute creation.<sup>2</sup> Just as absolute creation can only be grasped from the perspective of actual creatures, created subjects, modes of living, and works of art, the philosophy of absolute creation can only be articulated through an engagement with multiple creations – the works of cinema, Spinoza, anthropology, etc. Hallward's interpretation, like Alain Badiou's, goes against the dominant interpretation, which sees Deleuze as a philosopher of anarchic difference. In arguing for the unity of the problem underlying Deleuze's writings Hallward includes references to the four books that Deleuze wrote with Félix Guattari (the two volumes of *Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, *Kafka*, and *What is Philosophy?*), in doing so he

follows a general trend in writing on Deleuze, which has tended to subsume Guattari under Deleuze, recognizing the collectively authored books as simply extensions of problems and concepts in Deleuze's writing.<sup>3</sup> What makes this particularly striking in Hallward's case is that the fundamental argument of this book concerns Deleuze's attention, or rather inattention, to the material realities of history, politics, and subjectivity. Politics and history appear most strongly in the books that Deleuze wrote with Guattari. To subsume the collectively authored works under the name of Deleuze, to write of them as a continuation rather than a transformation of problems and concepts begun with such works as the *Logic of Sense* and *Difference and Repetition*, is to argue that this difference makes no difference. This is in effect Hallward's argument in general, however, his failure to address Guattari as a separate thinker ultimately reveals a tendency to force a unity on the works of Deleuze as well as Deleuze and Guattari.

As Deleuze argues (and Hallward cites) in writing on a philosopher one can never begin with a critique: "You have to be inspired, visited by the geniuses you denounce." Before proceeding to criticize the limitations of Hallward's book it is necessary to begin with its strengths, which are many. The strength of Hallward's exposition of Deleuze's thought stems from its method, focusing on a generic orientation of thought rather than the specific terminology and problem of Deleuze's various works. Hallward does not view Deleuze's thought as a progression over time, or passing through the distinct philosophical subfields of ontology, ethics, and aesthetics, but as a unity, as a philosophical event and not a history. The general orientation of Deleuze's thought is "Being is creativity" (p.1). For Deleuze the task of philosophy is to grasp the process of creation that underlies every created thing. This process of creation is what Deleuze calls the "virtual", a word that is deceptive since it suggests what is artificial or less real. For Deleuze the virtual, even though it cannot be represented or grasped, is reality. It is more real than the fixed, the finite, the actual. This can be seen with respect to time: even though the present appears to be real, it is necessarily fleeting and ephemeral, the "now" which passes at the moment it is uttered. What is real is not the present, but the past, the unrepresentable totality of time. What can be said of time can be said of reality in general, it is not the present thing or object that is real but the process that brings them into existence. "In reality it is the virtual, not the actual, that is creative or determinant" (p.33).

The strength of Hallward's analysis is in grasping the relation between the actual and the virtual, as the relation that underlies the various dualisms that litter Deleuze (and Guattari's) work: active/passive, paranoid/schizophrenic, movement image/time image, etc (p.82).<sup>4</sup> Deleuze and Guattari's various dualisms, which are repeatedly invoked, and then dropped, as the furniture that Deleuze and Guattari are constantly rearranging, are often read as the positive and negative terms.<sup>5</sup> The positive term of Deleuze and Guattari's analysis is that which is closest to, must open to, the virtual creation that traverses it. However, Deleuze (and Guattari) insist that the positive term is inseparable from the negative term, deterritorialization cannot be dissociated from reterritorialization. Absolute creation only exists in relation to its opposite. "Only an absolute virtual or non actual force creates, but it only creates through the relative, the actual the creature" (p.96). Any attempt to grasp the virtual without passing through the actual, to grasp the absolute process of creation without relative figures, concepts and desires leads to "chaos" (p.130). The virtual is primary, but is not self sufficient, as with Spinoza, substance can only be grasped through the modes.

#### Seven days of Creation, day Four

Image > Seven days of Creation, day Four

The primacy of creation over the created, of the virtual over the actual, leads to the following problem: "although there are only creations, these can give rise to creatures which then get in the way of creation. There are only creations, but some of these creations give rise to the unavoidable illusion of creatureal independence" (p.55). In other words, why do we fail to see the virtual creation, instead

taking the actual creatures, created things, as reality? If all of the philosophers in Deleuze's tradition of minor thought have a similar perspective in which a process, *natura naturans* or the striving of the *conatus* for Spinoza, creative evolution or the spiritual memory for Bergson, the will to power in Nietzsche, is more real, closer to the creative process of being, they all also have different answers to the critical question as to why the process of creating alienates itself in separate created things. Spinoza's critique of superstition is not the same as Bergson's critique of the fallacies of natural perception, which in turn is not the same as Nietzsche's critique of resentment. Deleuze's writing cuts across these different writers borrowing different aspects of their ontology and criticism. Given that these different writers have different ontological and epistemological commitments the question arises as to which is dominant, or how this specific minor tradition is articulated into a philosophical system. For Hallward it is Bergson's response to this question that is dominant over Deleuze's thought. Bergson demonstrated how it is in our practical interest to perceive the world in terms of discrete objects, delineated movements, and distinct moments of time (p.17). As much as being is creation, we are created by the forces of evolution to necessarily mis-recognize this process. The fundamental mis-recognition that defines our existence is in Bergson's version a fact of nature, a fact of life. As Hallward writes: "The way we live obscures the reality of life" (p.26). This is in keeping with Hallward's interpretation of Deleuze as a vitalist. What is striking, however, is that the other philosophers give an answer that is less a matter of nature, than of history and society. This is most striking in Deleuze and Guattari's interpretation of Marx in *Anti-Oedipus*. As Deleuze and Guattari write:

Let us remember once again one of Marx's caveats: we cannot tell from the mere taste of the wheat who grew it; the product gives us no hint as to the system and relations of production. The product appears to be all the more specific, incredibly specific and readily describable, the more closely the theoretician relates it to ideal forms of causation, comprehension, or expression, rather than to the real process of production on which it depends.<sup>6</sup>

Even though they do not use the term, Deleuze and Guattari's analysis here comes close to the concept of reification: the transformation of a process into a thing, an object. If the general problem of Deleuze's philosophy is how a creative process becomes misrecognized as a thing, as a subject or object, Deleuze's work with Guattari, most notably *Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, introduces an analysis that locates this problem within a history of production, and the mode of production. As Deleuze and Guattari argue each regime of social production is confronted with the same problem: how to code or regulate the flows of desiring production. In other words, how to suppress and contain the creative power that underlies any social formation. Deleuze and Guattari's answer, which takes the form of a sustained polemic against psychoanalysis and an engagement with anthropology and political economy, is that a social formation does this by assigning desire particular interests and aims, coding it, that is by subjecting it to a particular form of subjectivity and a particular object. We do not enter into the world always already oriented towards a particular (impossible) object, as psychoanalysis claims, but rather it is the process of history, a matter of micro-politics, that assigns an object to desire and interest to a subject.

Interest is an important term in Hallward's criticism. It underlies his emphasis on a Bergsonian anthropology, or natural history, in defining Deleuze's critique of everyday consciousness and subjectivity. Interest is what individuates us into subjects, and it is interest that carves up the world into discrete objects and experiences. "The domain of the actual is thus subordinated to the requirements of interest and to the actions required for the pursuit of interest" (p.31). Not incidentally interest is also central problem of Badiou's political philosophy of the subject. For Badiou interest is fundamentally animalistic, the struggle for survival is what we have in common with all living things.<sup>8</sup> It is against this animalistic struggle that the subject is constituted as a subject of truth, a truth whether it is amorous, artistic, or political, is by definition something disinterested, or not in our interest. It is

something that we risk our life and existence for. Moreover, Badiou argues that it is in the name of 'interest' that every political process is interrupted and diverted, the subject of truth is reduced to a subject of interest and politics becomes nothing more than the struggle of interests and opinions.<sup>9</sup> Deleuze and Guattari also argue that interest defines a limited and truncated aspect of human existence. However, for Deleuze and Guattari, interest is not the residue of a purely animalistic existence, rather it is the product of a particular social formation.

Once interests have been defined within the confines of a society, the rational is the way in which people pursue those interests and attempt to realize them. But underneath that, you find desires, investments of desire that are not to be confused with investments of interests, and on which interests depend for their determination and very distribution: an enormous flow, all kinds of libidinal-unconscious flows that constitute the delirium of this society.<sup>10</sup>

Interest is always oriented towards the goals and desires of a particular society, in our society towards the demands for money and consumer goods while in a feudal society it would be oriented towards prestige and honour, it is for this reason that Deleuze and Guattari argue that interest can never be revolutionary. In contrast to this desire is by definition revolutionary, it is the virtual creative power that exceeds any social formation. Both Badiou and Deleuze and Guattari have articulated a politics that is against interest, a redemption from interest. They differ not only in terms of what they oppose to interest, for Badiou it is truth and for Deleuze and Guattari (at least for their writing of the early '70s) it is desire, but also in how they understand interest. For Badiou it is a fundamentally animalistic aspect of existence, while for Deleuze and Guattari it is the product of a particular social formation. For Badiou interest is an anthropological problem, having to do with the struggle between the human animal and the immortal truths that we are capable of, while for Deleuze and Guattari it is a problem of the socio-political order. It is the conflict between the particular form of subjectivity a social formation requires and the virtual powers that exceed any social formation.

To return to Hallward's criticism of Deleuze, it is possible to say that he has imposed some of Badiou's categories on his interpretation of Deleuze (making Deleuze a 'bad' Badiou), but more importantly he has overlooked the rather substantial changes within Deleuze's thought. He has subordinated the history of Deleuze's thought to a unity of becoming, effacing the actual changes in grasping the virtual creation. These changes relate not only to Deleuze's collaboration with Guattari, but to his eventual politicisation. His engagement with the realities of capital and the state. This engagement modifies substantially the general problem of Deleuze's thought. In Deleuze's writing with Guattari, at least the two volumes of *Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, the actual is no longer a byproduct of our limited human perception, an effect of evolutionary adaptations, but an effect of socio-political strategies of control. Thus, it is not so much that Hallward argues against the political dimensions of Deleuze's thought, his very approach effaces it from the beginning. In order to assess the relevance of Deleuze's thought for politics it will be necessary to at least acknowledge the effects politics had on Deleuze's thought: the events of May '68, the work with Groupe d'Information sur les Prisons, with Félix Guattari, and the debates with Foucault. Despite this criticism Hallward's book presents substantial questions for any reader of Deleuze, or contemporary philosophy. These questions (which cannot be dealt with fully here) have to do with the relation between ontological and political commitments and ultimately with the meaning of 'materialism' in contemporary philosophy and politics: a question which began with Marx's first thesis on Feuerbach and continues through contemporary debates on 'immaterial labour'.<sup>11</sup> Hallward's *Out of this World* puts to an end the introductions to Deleuze, and begins the process of debate.

Peter Hallward, *Out of this World: Deleuze and the Philosophy of Creation*, London, Verso, 2006. ISBN: 184467556N

## NOTES

[1] See my *The Micro-Politics of Capital: Marx and the Prehistory of the Present*.

[2] On this point Hallward is in complete agreement with Badiou's critique on this point. The heterogeneity of topics is only apparent. While it is true that Deleuze always begins from a specific case, rather than a general principle, this case is only a 'case of' a general problem, that of creation. 'The rights of the heterogeneous are, therefore, simultaneously imperative and limited' [*Deleuze: The Clamor of Being*, p. 15].

[3] The question of Félix Guattari's influence on the collectively authored works cannot even be addressed in the Anglo-American world due to the paucity of translations. However, the recent publication of books such as *Anti-Oedipus Papers* addresses this gap.

[4] Hallward agrees with Badiou that despite the fact that the distinction between active and passive seems preeminent in Deleuze, underlying his interpretations of Spinoza and Nietzsche, this dualism is itself simply another version of the far more central dualism of virtual/actual. [*Deleuze: The Clamor of Being*, p. 34].

[5] Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, p. 20.

[6] Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus*, p. 24.

[7] An early essay by Hallward titled 'Gilles Deleuze and the Redemption from Interest' indicates how much Hallward focuses on 'interest' as the defining feature of worldly existence.

[8] Alain Badiou, *Ethics: An Essay on the Understanding of Evil*, p. 46.

[9] As Badiou writes, 'there is the idea that interest lies at the heart of every subjective demand. Today, this continues to be the principle and perhaps only argument used in favour of the market economy' [*Metapolitics*, p. 133].

[10] Gilles Deleuze *Desert Islands and other texts* p. 262. The use of the terms 'interest' and 'desire' relates to a short period in Deleuze and Guattari's works, generally in the writing of *Anti-Oedipus* and the interviews and essays from that period. The terms disappear in *A Thousand Plateaus*, but not the problem. It reappears in relation to the difference between 'majorities' and 'minorities'. Maurizio Lazzarato argues for the fundamental continuity of these problems in *Les Révolutions du Capitalisme*.

[11] Marx first 'Theses on Feuerbach' states. 'The chief defect of all hitherto existing materialism is that of Feuerbach included is that the thing, reality, sensuousness, is conceived only in the form of the object or of contemplation, but not as sensuous human activity, practice, not subjectively. Hence, in contradistinction to materialism, the active materialism after Marx must begin with paradoxical status of Marx's relationship to materialism. [The Philosophy of Marx, p.25] side was developed abstractly by idealism which, of course, does not know real, sensuous activity as such.' As Etienne Balibar argues Marx's materialism is a materialism without matter, what is material is not an object, such as the body, but transformative activity itself. Any discussion of the problematic status of 'materialism' after Marx must begin with paradoxical status of Marx's relationship to materialism. [The Philosophy of Marx, p. 25]

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## Sustaining Autonomous Media Networks â Part II

By Simon Worthington

In Mute's second review addressing the state of debate among autonomous media producers, Simon Worthington reports back from Transmission, a video activist's gathering held at an old fort (Forte Prenestino) in Rome this June. The groups were left to self-organise and self-document, which they did with a military efficiency befitting their surroundings. The central question? How to build an independent video network strong enough, and techie enough to put a hole in YouTube's Hoover-bag

[IMAGE]

In early June over forty online video activist groups gathered for Transmission, a four day meeting in Rome, to work on improving content sharing, video distribution and collaborative working among independent media practitioners. The event consisted of open forums, presentations, workshops, discussion groups, coding sessions, content swapping and what turned out to be intensive note taking and documentation, with several WikiBooks being initiated from the sessions. The event took place in Forte Prenestino, a social centre based in an 18th century fort located in a residential suburb of the city â drawbridge, portcullis, dungeons included. Forte Prenestino was occupied in 1986 by the local punk

movement, and since then has facilitated cultural and political initiatives. Since its conversion into a social centre, the fort has been involved with the cyberpunk scene, first taking part in pre-internet networks like European Counter Net and, for the past two years, running a hacklab. At the same time as Transmission, a comics and graffiti festival called Crack! Fumetti dirompenti! was going on, in which the fort was being reworked into a Terry Gilligan like film set, with graffiti reaching two stories high.

The Transmission participants came from many parts of the world â Asia, the Americas, Europe and the Pacific. These different contexts for video production proved to be very important for understanding how to work with users/audiences and encourage participation. The groups came from across the entire spectrum of alternative media, from institutional NGOs to autonomous anti-capitalists, from video makers to Free Open Source Software (FOSS) developers and from grass roots initiatives to union supported bodies. The event coordinators had set up Transmission so that the participants could organise the schedule and agenda within a framework of the theme of infrastructures for video activism and social justice. In the run up to the gathering, groups had been invited to suggest workshops and discussions via an email list. On arrival at the fort open forums were very quickly established for groups to meet and fill in the detail of the four day program with the responsibility of coordinating different events, discussions or workshops.

The second lead from the event coordinators was a focus on the current lack of coordination between media projects in the social movements and the risks of duplicating efforts resulting from a lack of awareness. This applies to the many areas of networked video production, for example P2P networks, syndication, Content Management Systems (CMSs), translation, collaborative working software and video encoding standards. Many groups have different crossovers involving collaborations or an awareness of one another, but the need for more effective collaboration resonated unanimously.

It is clear that many of the groups attending had comprised the avant-garde of video based citizen journalism such as Indymedia, V2V and Democracy Now!, to name but a few. As the Transmission organisers pointed out, greater coordination between these groups is badly needed, and in some senses this has come from the current growth of corporate internet worldwide. In a perverse way corporate players like Google Video and Web 2.0 start-ups like YouTube have taken advantage of user generated content in true corporate vampiric fashion (e.g. in June 2006, youtube.com received 65,000 video uploads). User participation or Open Publishing has long been advocated by media democracy advocates and theorists, an ethos with roots in precedents like Bertolt Brecht's ideas of radio as a two way medium not just a broadcast system. The pressure on the web at present is coming from convergent media where the traditional broadcasters and media corporations are moving onto the web, bringing with them conventional TV-derived forms of user generated content, like *100 great home movie pet disasters*. Conversely corporate media groups are part of a tendency that is creating a social norm of participation that the social movement can only hope will have other effects and give people a taste for taking video footage or photos of their workplace or injustice in their communities.

[IMAGE]

With a background in Open IPR and FOSS the social movements' video groups are experimenting live with how their networks and messages of social justice and media democracy can negotiate this new phase of the internet's convergent media landscape. It is the practical use of FOSS and accompanying values of sharing and collaboration that continues to give media activists a growing tool box for facilitating citizen journalism. Through the workshops and meetings a couple of examples of FOSS projects came up for people to make use of.

Firstly, Asia247.tv, a WebTV news outfit based in Malaysia, produces pan-Asian news on the web in English, using Joomla CMS for their main web site in conjunction with a Wordpress blogging tool implementation for their satellite site because of its usability. In both cases Asia247 has been able to customise the software to allow the delivery of podcast news on a daily bases. For Asia247 the podcast has been their preferred delivery format to spread social and labour news among commuters, as they make their way to work with video playback on handheld devices. The video podcast is something that is already prevalent across Asia and it is only a matter of time before it becomes one of the main ways to watch video worldwide.

Democracy Player, not to be confused with Democracy Now! the US indepenent news programme, is FOSS platform for delivering WebTV. The player collects video RSS feeds with summaries from video producers all over the web, allowing the user to build their own customised WebTV channel from the RSS feeds. The Democracy Player is produced by the Participatory Culture Foundation and is part of a new generation of tools that use RSS to overcome the distributed nature of content on the web through filtering and aggregation. Important to this filtering process is the ability for users to make decisions about what is import to them and share that information with other users.

As the Transmission event progressed, it became evident that the relatively new but quickly maturing set of FOSS tools and open standards could be reaching a tipping point where barriers to building networks for user input and accessing audiences start breaking down. If this happens, and Transmission participants certainly seemed to think so, then the long held ambitions of democratic citizen journalism may become a reality.

Many initiatives and collaborations developed from the Transmission event and one of these initiatives was to have a follow on event this October in London, called Re:transmission, which will focus on completing work on some of the core projects identified at this year's meeting in Rome. These projects have been selected because the group thinks that they can be made into actually existing tools and form the basis for solving many of the community's other technical needs. Through discussion and workshops this October in London, the projects listed below will be refined and further developed. After the event, teams will integrate the event input and complete work on software, standards and documentation to make the following services available for use:

- Visibility â Semantic Web classification for alternative media content
- Common aggregation site â using Democracy Player or other FOSS Delicious like systems
- International screening database â CiviCRM based software system
- Documentation â a WikiBook to survey and develop online video documentation

Limehouse Town Hall will be the main venue for Re:transmission, where there will be a mixture of closed and public events including; a 24/7 hacklab (run by Rampart Social Centre), screening facilities, workshops and training, working meetings, forums, open sessions, presentations and most importantly a kitchen. Additionally screenings will be taking place at the South Bank Centre.

Â Â Â

[IMAGE]

Additional info and links:

List of projects taking part in Transmission: <http://www.transmission.cc/wiki/Projects>

Notes: [http://www.transmission.cc/wiki/Main\\_Page](http://www.transmission.cc/wiki/Main_Page)

Wiki books originated from event:

Video â <http://en.wikibooks.org/wiki/Video>

Convergence and collaboration âÂ

[http://en.wikibooks.org/wiki/Convergence\\_and\\_collaboration\\_model](http://en.wikibooks.org/wiki/Convergence_and_collaboration_model)

Appropriate use â [http://en.wikibooks.org/wiki/Appropriate\\_use](http://en.wikibooks.org/wiki/Appropriate_use)

Democracy Now!: <http://www.democracynow.org/>

Democracy Player: <http://www.getdemocracy.com/>

Asia247: <http://asia247.tv>

European Counter Net (about): <http://www.xs4all.nl/~tank/ecn/>

Google Video <http://video.google.co.uk/>

You Tube <http://youtube.com/>

Â Â Â

Transmission

Organised by:

EngageMedia: <http://engagemedia.org/>

Candida TV: <http://candidatv.tv/>

Clearer Channel: <http://clearerchannel.org/>

With assistance from:

Association for Progressive Communications: <http://apc.org.au/>

Community Communications Online: <http://c2o.org/>

Funded by:

Open Society Institute <http://opensocietyinstitute.org/>

Re:transmission

London 13-15 October, 2006

Limehouse Town Hall

<http://transmission.cc/re:transmission> Â

re AT transmission.cc

Simon Worthington is part of the coordinating team for the London Re:transmission event.

## **Sustaining Autonomous Media Networks â Part I**

ByEmily Munro

There have been several reality checking events this year in which independent media producers have got together to assess their efforts to build support networks aimed at nurturing autonomous media production â improving visibility, accessibility, knowledge sharing and participation â as commercial players make ever deeper inroads into the participatory power of the net. In Part 1 of Mute's double review, Emily Munro reports on the Mag.net (Magazine Network of Electronic Cultural Publishers) meeting which took place at Glasgow's CCA this April as part of the Work of Media Art in the Age of Digital Reproduction symposium organised by Street Level Photoworks

In the age of digital reproduction, Kevin Murray has suggested, the gallery plinth is on the brink of obsolescence. The objects which the plinth once supported, and held up more suggestively for admiration than for scrutiny, are evaporating from the white cube to be transposed into the black box of the projected installation. Plinth is superseded by screen, the modernist art object by shadowy avatars, and depth by surface. Murray is the director of Craft Victoria in Melbourne, an exhibition centre with its own online publication dedicated to âconsidering the role of the hand as a creative tool in contemporary societyâ. As such he is especially concerned with the materiality of the crafted object and the ways in which an object's physical presence, tactility and contexts of (re)production and exhibition impinge upon the distinctions made between âartâ and âcraftâ. Indeed, in addressing the

issue of how one might come to terms with the craftsmanship of a supposed non-object, Murray reflects â[t]he challenge is now similar to one faced by Peter Pan â how to stitch the shadow back onto material form.â.[1]

In this instance of debating craft and its manifestations, the shadow is an interesting metaphor because of its connotations of both presence and loss. It is not the shadow itself which causes perhaps the most profound of Peter's many existential crises, but the broken relationship between shadow and experience, between reality and its impression. The problem of connectivity, though, is not confined to the realm of fairy stories and traditional 'cottage industries', as Murray demonstrates. It is an issue acutely felt now in a time of technological hyper-connectivity, not only by individuals but also by institutions and movements reliant on being 'plugged in' both to the public sphere and lines of direct and interactive communication. It is a complicated political issue because the facilitation of connectivity can imply either totalitarianism ('Big Brother') or participatory democracy (and in the case of the *Endemol* TV series, the illusion of both). The back-lit, ethereal universe of the internet, while hardly appearing shadowy, can nevertheless feel a world apart, offering us the imprimatur of what is 'actually out there' but never fully connecting us to solid people, institutions or objects and producing frustratingly idealistic conceptions of the net *demos*. The network: illusion. The forum: immaterial. And yet ironically, given its ghostly and shape-shifting properties, the shadow is a reminder of physicality, of our likeness to objects and to other living things, which although comparatively 'inactive' share in common with us a measurable presence between ground and sky; a reminder, then, that life, production and consumption do not just occur in the space of the mind but are materially located.

In the field of independent electronic publishing, particularly with specialist interest publications, recognition and connectivity (in terms of interactivity and the audience's engagement with that invitation or obligation) are ever-present issues impacting upon the material sustainability of the project. In recent years an attempt to tackle the difficulty of potential isolation online, both from users and from like-minded organisations, emerged through Mag.net (Magazine Network of Electronic Cultural Publishers) which began operating around 2003 supported by the principle that collaboration amongst participants was preferable to competition.[2] Mag.net brought a range of small-scale cultural publishers from across Europe together at meetings and through email round-robins in order to discuss common experiences in independent publishing and, in particular, to address the relationship between online and offline content in their initiatives. Already in 2005 the network was sounding its own death-knell having reached something of an impasse following a largely unsuccessful attempt to set up a common subscription system. Rather than crumpling under the strain of defeatism, however, the Mag.net members decided to publish a collection of essays on the network and its sympathies which could mark the passing of their publications into a new phase. This collection was launched on 29th April 2006 at the CCA in Glasgow following a day of presentations by some of those who had participated in the Mag.net venture. The publishers' discussion was performed as one half of a two-day symposium on *The Work of Media Art in the Age of Digital Reproduction*, an event which brought together artists, publishers, researchers and writers. As with the problem of reconnecting Peter's shadow to his body, the symposium focused on a number of concerns arising from the separation of digital and 'analogue' production and consumption as well as their mutual reinforcement and confluence. Questions around the significance of print in a supposedly digital era and of the material contribution of paper as digital publishing's analogue emerged alongside discussions on political and cultural activism in electronic cultural publishing, copyleft and creative commons.

Daniel Jewesbury â an artist, researcher, writer and co-editor of *Variant* magazine â who chaired the sessions began by noting the enabling function of networks. Participation in an internet-led network can dispense with hierarchy and, as has been said with respect to Indymedia, encourage a 'radical democracy' that is inclusive, plural and transparent.[3] At the same time, the sustainability of a

network can be threatened by lack of consensus amongst members (not always a bad thing, of course) and, more damagingly, by ambivalence and passivity. One might suspect that these could have been Mag.net's own viral adversaries in the end, but witnessing a generally convivial mood amongst the members present and a record in the shape of *The Mag.net reader*, indifference did not appear to have been the problem. Instead, it seemed to be the necessary investment of time and resources in the maintenance of the network for the independent publications involved which had collapsed the deck. The Mag.net members present articulated a common desire to increase their visibility as contemporary critical cultural publishers and to improve distribution of their publications. Miren Eraso describes these objectives in her contribution to *The Mag.net reader* and comments that although the seeming 'accessibility' of the internet purports to offer solutions for effective dissemination of information, it can, paradoxically, lower a magazine's chances of visibility.[4] Several Mag.net members, then, embrace the *Mute* slogan 'proud to be flesh', publishing on paper while being acutely aware of the tension this choice invokes with respect to the commentary on digital culture integral to each magazine's project.Â Â

The dissemination of information using paper and ink can be interpreted as principled action in a context where dominant, commercial communications interests are driving the digital revolution. It appeared to be the case during the symposium that many of the Mag.net publishers have been working in the interstices, neither wholly adopting one medium or another but instead falling between, or filling up, the cracks. The material fact of this is not radical at all - many large publishers are currently feeling their way through the 'transition', if indeed it is that, from hard-copy to online publication. What I find interesting is that despite their strong and in some cases defining engagement with digital and net cultures, independent cultural publishers are resisting complete digitalisation and/or finding it politically and creatively ineffective. At the same time, the use of electronic media by marginalised groups is important for facilitating networked participation and resistance to the dominant orthodoxies. Slavo Krekovic, editor of the Slovak *3/4 magazine*, explained during the symposium how the effort to sustain online publication was in itself an attempt to influence the policy of the Slovak government who overwhelmingly privilege print publications in their funding provision. Publishing independently in Slovak and online is also an act of cultural self-assertion given the dominance of the English language in net culture. Miren Eraso's presentation further emphasised the importance of understanding expression as a political act. Her publication, *Zehar*, appears in three languages - Basque, Spanish and English - to solicit engagement from a wider variety of readers and also to state the value of expression through different (including marginal) languages. The translation of print into electronic culture and vice versa can be understood as such expressivity.

The alternation between freedom of choice and necessity involved in the search for appropriate media and modes of expression was a persistent underlying theme at the symposium. A balance between pragmatism and idealism that could be conceptually mapped to the relationship between copyright and expression. The enthusiasm of several Mag.net members for creative commons licenses, copyleft and hacktivism should be noted here. With these issues held in the background, questions around reach, dissemination and use, if not debated forthright, all the same came to the fore in the speakers' descriptions of their publications. Christian Hoeller spoke, for instance, of the 'interdisciplinary' spread of his publication *Springerin*, which attempts to critically address cultural issues beyond a Eurocentric focus, and, in particular, to understand new media as operating in a globalised framework of cultural complexity. This, Hoeller said, involves the magazine's expansion beyond the 'art world proper' to consider other spheres of artistic engagement such as cyber, pop and academic cultures and to encourage the contextualisation of art production within intersecting (art) historical discourses. This and the descriptions of several other publications were evocative for me of problems around the production and conservation of cultural memory and of the difficulties involved in trying to engage critically with new technologies, their cultural and artistic use and significance. It was gratifying, then, to see that the problem of archiving was not entirely eschewed on this occasion. In an open discussion,

the archiving issue was addressed with respect to Print on Demand, publishing to order, and the importance of being able to record how publications and their subsequent revisions have emerged from particular historical contexts. The archiving issue is, of course, also a material one, especially with regard to digital culture and the drive of technology towards seemingly immaterial forms (while at the same time resolutely *âmaterialistâ* in their capitalist orientation), taking us back to the difficulties of shadows, their maintenance, preservation and display.

To return to Murray's plinth, we have met with a situation where there is pressure to put aside older forms of display in favour of new visual apparatuses with increased participatory functions. The carefully edited, unalterable print magazine could, some argue, sink into obsolescence with the rise of the flexible net mag, printed on demand or dipped into via Google *â* the ostensible monopoly of which could itself determine what becomes *âavailable onlineâ*. By retaining print *as part of* the critical engagement with net culture, the Mag.net publishers presenting at the CCA in Glasgow demonstrate the limit as well as the inducements of technological determinism and, in particular, evolutionary points of view on the production and consumption of culture. The plinth, one might add, has not disappeared, even if its primary function in contemporary art galleries now appears to be holding up TV screens.

There is evident craft involved in designing and implementing the sorts of publishing projects initiated by the Mag.net members. In a radical interpretation, the art and politics of craft is not simply taking pride in the parochial. Rather, a politics of craft aims to make a seemingly insular form of expression resonate not only with those in the craft-worker's immediate surroundings but also with others elsewhere who are concerned to assert locality and specificity in otherwise homogenising cultures. This politics of craft is at work (and play) in the negotiations made by the publishers, between on and offline activities and electronic and print production, in order to reach, and intervene in, the public sphere. The question as to what extent publishing actually constitutes the public sphere is, of course, a valid one to raise here. In thinking about the popularity of message boards and blogs as a form of self-publishing, it is interesting to bear in mind that what we refer to when we discuss *âthe public sphereâ* is usually the *materialisation* of public debate. Making material is, after all, essentially what publishing does and it is for this reason that the Mag.net network was started (to aid the realisation and distribution of cultural debate through publishing) and, in the end, faltered precisely because of material difficulties.

At the Glasgow symposium, Alessandro Ludovico from *Neural* magazine was emphatic that the launch of *The Mag.net reader* be understood not as a testament to the memory of a group effort which had collapsed but as a new manifesto for the network. This is not to say that Mag.net as was has been, or should be, reborn, but rather that *The Mag.net reader* offers a proposal for the future of networks formed to assess and critique digital culture. The Documenta 12 art exhibition, to be held at Kassel next year and curated by Roger Buergel, will see the inclusion of *âdocumenta 12 magazineâ*, a convergence of more than 70 print and online magazines and journals participating in debates on the Documenta exhibition. The objective is not simply to evaluate the exhibition but to trace and to comment on discursive practice itself in relation to art and culture. Its execution will be, in equal measure, an encouragement and a test of networking amongst cultural publishers and, like Mag.net also, a measure of the politics of craft involved in mapping material cultures onto digital shadows.

[1] Kevin Murray, *âThe Plinth in the Age of Digital Reproductionâ*, <http://www.craftculture.org/archive/kmurray2.htm> [accessed 14 June 2006]

[2] Andreas Broeckmann, *âThe Beauty of printing and the Glory of Networkingâ* in *The Mag.net Reader*, eds. Miren Eraso, Alessandro Ludovico & Slavo Krekovic, 2006: pp. 6-15, p.11

[3] Victor W. Pickard, 'United Yet Autonomous: Indymedia and the Struggle to Sustain a Radical Democratic Network', *Media, Culture and Society* Vol.28 No.3 (May 2006) pp315-36.

[4] Miren Eraso, 'What Are We Doing Here?' in *The Mag.net Reader*, pp52-7.

The Work of Media Art in the Age of Digital Reproduction,  
Street Level Photoworks, April 28-29, Centre for Contemporary Arts (CCA):  
<http://www.streetlevelphotoworks.org/diary/diary406/symposium/symposium0406.html>

## Get Real! Art, Regeneration, and Resistance

By Laura L. Sullivan

Curatorial duo B&B's 'Real Estate: Art in a Changing City' at the ICA this summer promised to target public art's integral involvement within the urban regeneration process and question how such art could be tactically deployed to resist its instrumentalisation. Laura L. Sullivan ventured some of her temporal capital to see what lessons could be learnt

An exhibition with rotating curators and London-linked themes, the ICA's 'London in Six Easy Steps' ran from 16 August - 25 September 2005. The second week's show, 'Real Estate: Art in a Changing City', curated by B&B (Sarah Carrington and Sophie Hope), focused on London land use, property development, and the relationship between art and 'regeneration' efforts. The extensive gallery exhibition was accompanied by a programme of films, talks, performances, and related outdoor activities in London.

My appetite whetted from recently devouring *If You Lived Here: The City in Art, Theory, and Social Activism*, Brian Wallis's edited collection about Martha Rosler's late '80s project on homelessness in New York City, I was looking forward to 'Real Estate'. B&B's show usefully brought the art-regen coupling much needed public attention (and also seemed to be the only 'easy step' of the ICA's six to take an explicitly politicised approach to London). However, inspired by the Wallis anthology to expect political-economic contextualisations, I was disappointed when these were mostly lacking, even in the two related events I attended on Olympic Mega-Projects and 'Real Estate Agents'.

[IMAGE]

**Image: People's Armada to Parliament, DCCP, 1984-86**

For Real Estate, B&B filled the ICA's lower gallery, showcasing seventeen projects in a variety of media; photographs, slides, film & video, newsprint, and maps were featured, as well as wall-displayed textual descriptions of experimental art. Roman Vasseur's garland announcing 'An End to Culture Assaults' greeted the viewer, setting the somewhat confrontational tone of the collection. A library-like wooden table in the centre of the room provided seated viewing of videos, as well as a bookshelf chock-full of relevant texts (including the Wallis book), producing a nook that encouraged the audience to settle in and thoroughly explore the assembled material. A slideshow and selected enlarged photographs documented Polly Braden and David Company's *Adventures in the Valley*, an ongoing project exploring changes in the Lea Valley, due to be radically changed by the impending Olympics.

**Disconnected and Decontextualised**

I appreciated the breadth of the exhibited work, yet in the end found the lack of coherence frustrating. Without much of an overall context in which to situate the texts, it was difficult to relate them to one another, or to the overall trajectory of 'Real Estate', perhaps because the terrain was framed in fairly imprecise terms by B&B, who offered the following introduction in the exhibition's accompanying booklet:

'Real Estate' focuses on the use and ownership of land in London, which shifts with the city's changing realities. In a London preparing for the 2012 Olympics and threatened with terrorist attacks, streets and open spaces are commercially managed, regulated by new legislation and surveyed by four million surveillance cameras ([www.liberty-human-rights.org.uk](http://www.liberty-human-rights.org.uk)). Meanwhile Government policy emphasises the potential of culturally led regeneration to transform the city and artists become accidental property developers through processes of gentrification and a hunger for 'creativity' within lifestyle housing. In 'Real Estate', this appropriation offers starting points from which to play, disrupt and intervene in the city.

The connections between such themes and some of the exhibited texts were evident (for example, videos made by residents of the Silwood Estate in Southwark), but the relationship of other showcased work to these ideas was tenuous at best. For instance, *Black Spot* by Phil Coy addressed the recent capability of digital satellite photography to produce a model of the earth's surface. In 'Real Estate', *Black Spot* was represented by a photograph of 'a vain attempt to replace a single pixel' of this model of earth as well as by a large wheelbarrow containing five rolls of black polythene – presumably the material used to create the 'black spot' in the image.[1] The purpose of the piece is elaborated in annoyingly vague terms: Part of 'a series of prototypes that use basic analogue means to interfere with this homogenised model of the earth', *Black Spot* 'is also an attempt at negation, and an attempt to draw a line between the earth and the sky. Like a world defined by its obsession with property it is both a claim and a curse'. Huh?? While I am all for critiquing and subverting cartographic enterprises that contribute to an agenda of social control through homogenised representations, I do not see how this endeavour speaks to the concerns about the appropriation of cultural producers and products by development efforts that B B referenced in their introductory remarks.

The exhibition's problematic framing evident in B&B's explanatory remarks is also reflected in its title. 'Real Estate: Art in a Changing City' implies an imbalanced view of the art-city dualism, where the former is essentialised, and only the latter changes. By replicating a transhistorical notion of art and presenting art as something external to the (evolving) city, B&B not only missed the opportunity to help us conceive of a dialectical relationship between 'art' and 'city' – seeing these as mutually implicated terms, imbricated in one another – they also advanced an image of artists as occupying a privileged position outside of the messiness of the 'city's changing realities' and, paradoxically, at the same time having little power to influence the direction of these changes. If 'artists become accidental property developers' through regeneration processes, for B&B, they can only 'play, disrupt and intervene in the city' only in ways that are not very subversive or influential (introductory blurb, as quoted above).

[IMAGE]

### **Image: Land for Local People, contextualisation material, DCCP, 1981-1990**

Given its underlying framework, unsurprisingly remnants of traditional gallery habits of presentation crept into 'Real Estate', epitomised to the greatest degree by displaying Anna Best & Jules Mylius's 1994 video *Roads for Prosperity and Progress* in a completely insipid wooden box with a little door that opened onto the video monitor. I watched numerous people do what I did: approach the box, open the door, view the start of the video, wait for something interesting to happen, and give up on the

whole thing after a few minutes.

Another of the works, *Common Star*, simply left me totally perplexed. The nature of the animated object depicted in 3D on a computer monitor was not illuminated by its description: 'An object exists above St. James's Park, Whitehall and Trafalgar Square, measuring approximately 1400m long, 1100 wide and 1000m high. While appearing static, the object is in fact moving along a path that will take it across London over the next 17 years.' No better idea about this 'object' was conveyed by the collection of letters in the accompanying binder. Addressed to prominent politicians and business people, the letters each described the 'location' of the 'object' in relation to their offices and the like. Maybe if I'd attended the artist, Jon Fawcett's walk around the area 'taking in the best views of the entity', I'd have a better idea of the point of this work – not to mention how it relates to the expressed themes of 'Real Estate' – instead of finding it pretentious and frustrating.

### **The Gallery Exhibition's Highlights**

In contrast, *Local Heroes*, which documents both a development effort and a corresponding artist-activist response through drawings and verbal textual explanations on a section of the gallery wall, was fascinating. Produced in 1997 by public works, aka Torange Khonsari, the project investigated possibilities of reclaiming public space from a commercial development in Vauxhall by mobilising aspects of planning law. As the notebook accompanying the piece explained, Khonsari wanted to take advantage of the English Heritage Law which specifies that structures attached or added to listed structures also become listed, and the 'rule of light' which provided 'the tools with which [they] could create physical gaps in the new development for light entry to proposed underground spaces and claim the gaps as public realm'. Khonsari produced architectural diagrams that show these proposed public spaces (designated V1-V3) overlaid onto the original commercial plans for the site.

The sweet narrator of Lottie Child's short video *Urban Street Training* (2004) is a young boy, Callum Dublin, the 'trainer' who rather hilariously demonstrates various poses one can adopt using the city's physical spaces, such as the 'Swinging Pig's Tail'. By conveying the childlike sense of wonder and vision frequently displaced by the rigid, confined ways of seeing and moving that cultural imperatives of growing up dictate, the video whimsically shows us the expanded possibilities of movement within our urban environment.

Another historical effort to bridge art and activism in resisting development was *Vauxhall Pleasure*, a one-day event organised by Anna Best and Paul Whitty that protested about pollution and traffic. Amy Plant's broadsheet with the same name was simultaneously inspirational, playful, and informative, yet Best and Whitty's sound installation was less successful. The annoying quality of the operatic songs booming into the gallery was not mitigated by reading that they were from recordings of the Vauxhall event in which 'Fifty singers performed transformations of the songs of Thomas Arne (one-time composer-in-residence at the Pleasure Gardens) to the passing traffic'.

Roman Vasseur's recent *Murder as a Fine Art (The Ritualised Death of the International Mural Artist)* was another stimulating piece in which the artist responded to the painting of a mural on his East London estate by drawing up an elaborate plan for a community ritual in which the commissioned artist (substitutable with the commissioner, curator, or project manager) is killed. The drawings and narratives on the gallery wall and printed handout correlate the area's 18th century crimes and community responses with Vasseur's satirical outline of present day counterparts.

As much of my own digital art practise and intellectual interest concerns text-image juxtapositions, I was predisposed to appreciate most the photographic murals from the Docklands Community Poster Project (DCPP) by Peter Dunn and Lorraine Leeson (the latter's interview by C4 also displayed on video), last exhibited at the ICA in the 1980s. These posters brilliantly combine text, including statistics, with provocative visuals.

[IMAGE]

### **Image: Big Money Is Moving Back In, DCCP, 1981-1990**

An early image in the 1981-1990 series shows the consultation documents being thrown in the bin, the question 'What's going on behind our backs?' in large type, and a list of current activist efforts. Another, boldly captioned 'Big money is moving in' displays an image of a businessman holding wads of cash and states in small print:

Docklands boroughs' unemployment – 80,000  
planned public housing scrapped – 5, 000  
housing waiting lists:  
Tower Hamlets – 9500  
Southwark – 9000  
Newham – 6700

This list of revealing stats is concluded with a direct address of the viewer: 'If you had £10 for each person on the waiting lists you might just be able to buy a penthouse flat in St. John's Wharf', a calculation that brings home the disparity of wealth this development will only exacerbate. The Docklands posters' meticulous design and their evolution in response to the public's voiced concerns about the developers' actions made them visually and politically very effective.

### **Sampling the External Events**

The regeneration of the Docklands also featured in a film screened at the evening Olympics evening. Produced before the announcement of the successful bid, the documentary *All that Glitters* by Naomi Rodriguez explores what might happen if the Olympics come to London. Cross cutting between interviews concerning the Docklands developments of the 1980s, and those concerned with Olympic effects on East London, the film successfully implies that past trends in the Docklands – an erosion of public spaces, including those for young people; skyrocketing property prices; total disregard for the working class; increased unemployment; the proliferation of luxury housing, shops, and businesses with the concomitant destruction of their non-luxury counterparts – are likely to be repeated in Stratford and the Lea Valley. The broken promises for the locals, including dockworkers, in the Docklands highlight the hollowness of the almost identical pro-Olympic claims and promises.

*The Bid*, a film by Parmijit Singh, covers other, equally important aspects of the pre-bid struggles between locals and the government-led Olympics cheerleaders. It features interviews with some of the 450 members of the Clays Lane housing co-operative, who are due to be evicted when their land is used for new stadiums, and provides many factual corrections to the celebratory descriptions of Olympic-led regeneration produced by mainstream media and government documents. Amongst these is the astonishing revelation that the London Development Corporation plans to transfer £2.5 million of co-op money to the Peabody Trust, where it will then be off-limits to co-op members. The views of angry business people, ecologists, and local authorities are also aired in this documentary, which in total presents a scathing indictment on the destruction that will be wrought by the London Olympics as currently planned.

I attended one other session on the final afternoon of the exhibition. Presumably, the session's title, 'Real Estate Agents', was intended to pun on 'agents', as in also 'agents of (social) change'. The curators asked participants to address four questions:

- \*Why is art used in areas of regeneration?
- \*What is art perceived to do or achieve in order to 'change' an area?
- \*How do artists negotiate their roles as agents in redevelopments?
- \*What is the assumed role of the artist to establish better relations between communities?

These questions disappointingly narrowed the scope of the 'social change' potentially conjured by the day's title, and I was even more chagrined to see them ignored by most of the presenters. Again, my highlight was Lorraine Leeson's presentation, a narrated history of the Docklands' activism with a slideshow tour of related images, including photographs of the Joint Dockland Action Group's stunning 'people's armadas to parliament', yearly processions of protesting barges on the river that involved over 1,000 people at one point.

### **Artists and Audience Not Always Considered**

However, for all the facts I gleaned from attending 'Real Estate', I came away ultimately feeling that the lack of contextualisation that I experienced in the gallery characterised the whole enterprise. The exhibition itself was presented at a remove, starting with the way that the ICA's locatedness was not questioned, but taken for granted, with the curators neglecting to acknowledge that the ICA itself is a *social space*. There was no way for me to view and consume this exhibit (and some of its adjacent programme of events) and *not* be aware of the privileged position of the ICA itself. The 'production of space' was in operation there as well, where the ICA's occasional tendencies to place aesthetics over other values, 'cool' over substance, were abundantly in evidence. This tendency was continued by the ICA's decision to prioritise trendy gallery design over usability and comfort, particularly in the upper gallery where the talks and screenings were held.

'Real Estate' was, to some extent, infected by a similar miscalculation and abstraction of audience, and, at times, a similar elitism produced by the substitution of flashy texts or artists for those of more (political) substance. While I didn't expect any kind of lengthy or thorough critique of the ICA as a social space, I was disconcerted by the lack of any kind of reflexivity. In general, socioeconomic forces and institutions were identified but not always critiqued, and the overall project, viewer and institution were not situated within the exhibition's own parameters. A lost opportunity? Or impossible in a one-week gig?

An artist friend was especially upset that attributions for the works were missing from the cluttered gallery walls and space, and I concede that such an arrangement contributed – whether consciously or not – to the sense of the exhibition's promotion of B&B's authority and power at the expense of the artists, who remained anonymous to viewers unwilling to consult the exhibition's accompanying texts. (A related complaint concerned artist compensation – I'm still unclear if artists were paid or not, but at least one I spoke with donated her artworks and services for free.)

After an initial, rather harried foray into the exhibition, it soon became clear that the show would be impossible to navigate without the aid of the accompanying booklet. I went into the small wooden hut and just saw a collection of numerous art event advertisements scattered all around. I didn't 'get it', as many of the events promoted by these posters and pamphlets were entirely unrelated to property/regen. When I returned to properly explore the gallery, I consulted the room map and booklet to discover that the hut piece was a 'Memorial – Archive of Diorama Arts Centre', part of Shezad Dawood's *The Killing of Crazy Horse, Performance Strategies 9 (ii)*. A monitor near the hut showed a video of Dawood's performance that 're-stag[ed] the assassination of the Native American chief Crazy Horse at

the soon to be extinct Diorama Arts Centre'. This revelation blew me away, as I've attended many wonderful events at the centre, which has been the home of the Gay Men's Chorus, Survivors' Poetry, film festivals and theatre collectives, and scores of other crucially important art programmes. The hut and adjacent video spoke to a critical example of the destructive tendencies of the prioritisation of profitable real estate developments. As the booklet recounts,

The building with its histories and studios is due to be demolished by property consortium British Land to be replaced by office space (bringing with it corporate commissions from the likes of Michael Craig-Martin and Sarah Morris). By situating the performance at this location, Dawood makes a link between land disputes at the time of Crazy Horse's killing, in relation to the US government's attempts to force the Native American onto the 'reservation', and current disputes over accessibility and cultural provision in the city.

### **Neglect of Systemic Perspectives**

I experienced a similar sense of gratitude for important issues being raised coupled with a dissatisfaction with their elaboration in the satellite events I attended, where, again, systemic perspectives that took into account political economy were missing. In the Sunday session about art(ist)-regen relationships, I hoped for acknowledgment or extension of a theoretical context informed by systemic, anti-capitalist critique, yet my questions along these lines were not very successful.

Artists Peter Hames and James Levack presented a project in development that will take place on the big pillars crossing the river that remain from an old bridge near the Blackfriar's Bridge and the Tate Modern. With another artist, they came up with the idea of having white refugee tents placed on each pillar. Currently they are negotiating to obtain the proper permissions from two local councils, the coast guard, and an environmental agency; raising the funding; and searching for people who can do the needed marine engineering. Given the terrain of this most recent artistic attempt – as refugees will presumably be living on these pillars, there will be much potential to illuminate issues around immigration – I asked Hames Levack to elaborate on their politics. Peter Hames said their politics come from the need to engage people and groups around the spaces they use for their artworks, a reply which seemed to reflect their liberal perspective and elide the more pressing dynamics inevitably tied to their practise; for example the increasing abandonment or destruction of public/social spaces (from playgrounds to parks, community and youth centres), or the increased production and marginalisation of homeless populations resulting from factors such as sky-high property prices, the outsourcing of service sector and industrialised jobs, and the closure of many shelters. Very well intentioned and clearly passionate about opening up art production, distribution, and consumption to typically excluded groups of people, Hames and Levack nonetheless replicate what many of the artists in Real Estate demonstrate: a lack of systemic perspective regarding the role of capital in the movement and destruction of both people and property and the situatedness of 'social' artists within this nexus.

Even more frustrating was my exchange with some members of the following panel, which was opened with a description of Andy Hewitt and Mel Jordan's *Three Functions* (produced in various locales and formats):

- 1 The economic function of public art is to increase the value of private property.
- 2 The social function of public art is to subject us to civic behaviour.
- 3 The aesthetic function of public art is to codify social distinctions as natural ones.

Along with Dave Beech, Hewitt and Jordan contributed Function 4, *The function of public art for regeneration is to sex up the control of the underclasses*, which was displayed on a billboard at 193 Homerton Street, E9, from 15-29 August and reproduced as a large photograph in the exhibition gallery (as well as on take-home postcards).

The exhibition booklet's blurb accompanying their 'Function' was a rare gesture towards more explicit economic dynamics:

[This text work] is [ . . . ] concerned with the way in which culture-led urban regeneration is advocated within regeneration strategies. Regeneration aims to change the 'mindset' and 'behaviour' of residents, to improve their effectiveness in creating capital and growth in order to reduce what is seen as a dependency on state provision. Whereas the need for change in terms of social justice and parity is necessary, the methods and motivation of these cultural policies, particularly the roles assigned to art and culture within them, need to be examined.

In the artists' presentation, Dave Beech addressed the theoretical context of their 'Functions', saying they situate art within the social totality, politicising by opening within the social structure a hermeneutics of suspicion. Recalling the functionalism of Malinowski and Giddens, Beech drew an analogy between those anthropological-sociological approaches to societies and those examining the human body. 'If we detotalise the heart from the body, we won't understand the body,' Beech said, emphasising the same dangers in separating art from society. He acknowledged that in viewing individuals as complicit with social functions we should not neglect to consider individual forms or experiences of resistance. In their view, art does not only function 'for power', but also against it.

Mel Jordan explained that they had intentionally placed their billboard with Real Estate's 'Function' in East London because it is the site of the future Olympics and part of the overall trend of the 'branding' of cities. They lament the way that contemporary public artists are given briefs to consider particular issues such as social cohesion and education, so that commissioned public art is tied to the agenda of public-private redevelopment, and thereby participates in the hollow arguments made in its favour, such as the claims it provides economic growth, increases 'competitiveness' and the like. Art, in this way, provides the undertone for the dominant discourse of democratisation, according to Jordan, while masking the real beneficiaries of economic and symbolic capital. Public art, in short, legitimises capitalism in a UK system which, they emphasise, is coming to resemble more closely the U.S., where 40% of people are secure, 30% are subjected to a controlled lifestyle, and the remaining 30% are the controlled underclasses.

In the lively q-and-a for the whole afternoon session, B&B curator Sophie Hope rightly questioned Hewitt, Jordan, and Beech, asking just who are these 'underclasses' referenced in their presentation as well as their Function billboard; she wasn't really answered. My impression was that Hope herself had become more politicised as the exhibition progressed, so that on this last day she was thinking more concretely about class issues, prompting her question – but this is only my impression. While in part I would have liked such questions to have preceded the exhibition and informed its context and choice of texts more concretely and thoroughly, at the same time I was heartened to see some political horizons expanded (including the curators' own) by parts of their programme.

### **Possibilities For Resistance?**

Provocatively, much of the q-and-a revolved around the question of resistance Beech had initially invoked. I mentioned Beech's claim that the artists wanted their *Functions* to provide motivation for resistance, but raised concern about his examples. First, Beech had imagined an artist saying 'I'm not going to make art that does that' after having been alerted to art's problematic functions as specified in their works. He had then drawn a parallel with someone seeing the nuclear family's role as a function of/for private property and then deciding to not participate in family systems or life. When I asked him for examples of non-individualistic resistance, he initially seemed quite defensive, asking how his examples were 'individualistic'. After I explained, he then took a more Foucauldian tack, arguing that 'Power isn't just in particular, for example, government structures; it infiltrates everything.' 'We can't

just resist where we think power is,' he insisted, saying we have to look at 'all the ways we serve the *functions* of capital', trying to make change on all levels, including acknowledging and changing our complicity. When Roman Vasseur, the other panelist, pushed Beech – 'Is *all* knowledge empowering?' – he answered affirmatively. Feeling misunderstood and typically frustrated with the Foucauldian 'knowledge=power' line, I pressed on, saying I agree we need to move beyond just changing structures and acknowledge complicity, but pointing out that their presentations provoked explorations of other forms of change, for example the elimination of private property. Jordan explained that they hope by looking at functions to reveal the way that capitalism uses culture, and they believe that changing how we understand culture/art will suggest how we change capitalism. At this point I was thinking *Yeesss, and how??* but I knew enough to relent. Now I see that what was underneath my frustration was the exhibition's overall problematic conceptualisation of resistance. Frequently elided, when the topic of resistance was raised, it was, as in the exchange just cited, either superficially addressed – as if its mere mention was enough – or it was dismissed with a depressing fatalism.

I trace this neglect of questions of resistance not only to the exhibition's focus on past and present dynamics at the expense of future possibilities, but also to the general malaise amongst much of the left, including progressively inclined artists. What can we do, as artists and activists and hybrids thereof, to participate in resistance related to regeneration and property relations here in London? This question – and its responses – need to be viewed in the context of current possibilities of resistance more generally. The social forums and affiliated movements insist that 'Another World Is Possible', but debates abound about how to go about making that 'other world' (and about what the nature of this 'other world' will be). Yet we cannot have these debates properly unless we first agree that social change of some revolutionary variety is possible. As she described the work of the DCCP and co-ordinated efforts of many groups in that struggle, Leeson declared that we couldn't work in the same ways now. She said that the cut-and-dry, 'us' and 'them' perspectives are inappropriate, now that we have a Labour government with no socialism. She ascribes the failure of the Docklands activists to the fact that the hoped for Labour government didn't materialise at the time, claiming that a change of national government would have been the only way to have stopped the Docklands' developers. From such an angle, people believe that the lack of Old Labour governance, the weakness of trade unions, and the absence of a mass 'base' in the grassroots and working class renders the type of activism seen during the '80s around the Docklands plans obsolete, if not impossible.[2] Additionally, the despair and sense of futility of such a stance is accompanied by the presumption that urban 'development' of this type is inevitable (and unstoppable).

In the wake of the massive recounting of the oppressive (and depressing) dynamics of Olympics developments pre- and post-bid revealed by the session's documentaries and discussion, at the end one questioner timidly asked, 'What can we do?', and one of the curators pointed her to the [noolympics2012 Website](#), sidestepping the more detailed response the question warranted. A few days later, Leeson said that her experiences with the Docklands efforts led her to shift from being 'only reactive' to proposing 'alternative strategies'. Her current work with CSpace involves having her students at UEL do art projects, such as photography and video, about areas of regeneration that affect them personally. Another project is a Website where hundreds of children from all over the world have created a planet called Volco.

A different strategy was also considered in an interesting strand of the discussion of resistance that last day: the idea of an artist joining a planning committee. Dave Beech pointed out such a move could speak to the ideology that art is a superior form of counter culture; Roman Vasseur emphasised that in this sense, it is a way of sidestepping politics. Beech said that if he was ever on a planning committee, he'd disavow his identity/role as 'artist' and stop doing art outside, because, in his experience, the designation of 'artist' is a constraint because others then have particular expectations of you. Another audience member disagreed with that tactic, contending that disavowing one's status as an artist on the

planning committee would only be useful if later one moved *back into* the space of ‘artist’ and used what you had gained in the political arena. Leeson closed the exchange by emphasising the importance of strategy. She explained that because she described the Volco project as a tool for ‘education’, she received £95K for the project, predicting that the figure would’ve dropped to £3K if she had used the term ‘art’ instead.

### **Concerns About the Bottom Line**

And this issue of *funding* is fundamentally related to the fatalism and despair that I encountered regarding resistance in this session. Hames and Levack correctly read their audience when they followed their presentation by offering to address what we were most curious about: how they sustain their practise financially. ‘What you really want to know,’ Hames proposed, ‘is how we make money’; copious murmurs of assent followed. (The upshot: after primarily exploring and utilising corporate sponsorship, which they found difficult to find and to match to the concerns of their projects, they instead separated out a commercial wing, called HL Creates, that draws upon the extensive contacts and experience in putting on large-scale events gained during their initial years of putting on art events in public spaces.) I sensed an all-too-familiar underlying anxiety amongst the practitioners in the room that afternoon, the worry that there are no viable ways to make a living as a progressively inclined (public) artist. Similarly, in this light Leeson’s claim that an undertaking such as the DCCP would be impossible now because of the nature of the government in power has everything to do with the differences in funding opportunities as a result. Although Thatcher was in power when the DCCP existed, socialist-leaning local structures played pivotal counterbalancing roles. As Leeson explained, not only was the Joint Docklands Action Group funded by the Tower Hamlets Arts Council, they also received funding from the Greater London Council (GLC), overseen by Ken Livingstone. GLC subcommittees were characterised by provocative debates and included an ethnic arts committee and a community arts committee, the latter of which had £1million a year to spend on community arts (this last statistic communicated by Leeson with astonishment, as if such a sum for these types of activities is now unthinkable).

There is no doubt that the drying up of such funding streams has had an effect on the production and quantity of radical public art projects. As revealed in the closing notes pasted onto the gallery wall, *Local Heroes* was a casualty of these recent trends, suffering a parallel fate to the DCCP and other efforts to resist regeneration in southeast London:

Although the development is still not entirely complete, the 1 million square feet mixed-use scheme comprising of [*sic*] offices, apartments, hotel, health and fitness, and retail and restaurant accommodation is well underway.

In 1998 due to a lack of further commissioning bodies the project came to a halt and remained theoretical as more research needed to be done on the condition of the tunnels and intense community participation projects.

Just as with the Docklands, the proposed development went ahead as planned, and the artist-activist efforts of resistance were not only thwarted but stopped, as funding was withdrawn. The conclusions and future plans of the *Local Heroes* artists are nonetheless revealing:

[W]e strongly believe that [the project] can still continue and retain its ambitions in creating the informal Museum and the Active public spaces V1, V2 and V3 within Brunswick House which is being transformed into an Antique shop called Lassco. As part of this work a proposal letter will be sent to both English Heritage and Lassco and request for a public[-]private partnership. The new proposal will also be presented to Vauxhall community forum to gauge the level of interest by the new communities.

My reading of this is that after being asked to resurrect the Local Heroes piece by Real Estate, the only way the artist(s) could imagine proceeding was through a PPP. I cannot help but see this articulation as a reflection of the pervasive idea that with any socially motivated endeavour involvement of private enterprise is essential or, at the very least, inevitable, a naturalisation promoted by both the Labour government and neoliberal media.

If the current phase of the composition of the welfare state – this entrenched promotion of privatisation as the cure-all for every social need – is accepted by left-oriented artists, then how we conceptualise social change and the nature of resistance efforts is indeed greatly compromised (or completely effaced, as was the case for much of Real Estate). I am not claiming that working with corporate sponsors in public art efforts or having private investment in some art schemes that are aimed specifically at social benefits are always untenable options. Rather, I am arguing that without engaging in more explicit theorisation of neoliberal political economic dynamics, and art's role within them, these options will be chosen unthinkingly, not only with the detrimental effect that others will be unconsidered, but also with the reinforcement that there simply *are no other choices*, which is, of course, exactly the ideology of dominant government and media these days.

### **The Purpose(s) of Socially Engaged Art**

Martha Rosler describes two types of film and video as used in her project. Some videos use 'the interview format' to allow 'the unheard to speak about their lives', while 'rallying tapes' are those which 'inform[. . .] people about others who are fighting or have fought successfully to save or improve their homes and provid[e] a set of steps to follow' (37). Many of the texts showcased in 'Real Estate', including films and videos, serve the informative purposes Rosler outlines, yet do not offer the additional plans of action. The question is: can we no longer 'rally'? It is true *The Bid* and *All that Glitters* do show some people's struggles in relation to London's quest to host the Olympics, but we don't get any sense of *how* they worked, and certainly no blueprint to follow now that the bid has been accepted. Perhaps these are part of the current genre of documentary that has capitulated to the despair that is so pervasive right now. The evidence in 'Real Estate' implies that activist art, such as documentary, can inform us of the views and difficulties of people usually marginalised or silenced but cannot be used to *organise*.

Socially directed art – revolutionary art, if you will – should both inform (counter misinformation and provide information neglected by dominant accounts) *and* help us to strategise (offer plans of action). The systemic perspective missing from 'Real Estate' is essential for the production of the most effective art along these lines. A systemic understanding of the workings of capitalism on both the macro and micro levels can help us in our interpretations of dominant discourse and in our creation of art that responds to it. Moreover, a consideration of what's wrong with current configurations of political economy as well as what we want to build alternatively enables more successful strategies for organising, which also need to inform the consumption and production of radical art.

Instead of only presenting theoretical works on a bookshelf for exhibition viewers to peruse, the curators could have brought some of these texts' systemically oriented theorisations into their framing of the array of texts and talks they gathered. For example, two such highly relevant theoretical points highlighted in *If You Lived Here* speak to the dynamics of political economy involved in recent trends of regeneration:

Following David Harvey, Rosalyn Deutsche underscores 'the central contradiction of capitalist urbanization', that is, 'between the social character of the land and its private ownership and control as a commodity':

As a collective resource, land fulfills needs that facilitate individual profit-seeking activities as well as social needs that surpass those of individual capitalists. Capital's social needs in relation to land include, for one, the use of land to maintain and reproduce a labour force through the provision of housing and services; such requirements are distinct from the demand of real estate capital to exploit land as a commodity for direct profit. (57)

Is there a potential wedge to be driven between these competing tendencies?

A second point from the Wallis anthology that would've added political context to the texts and discussions of 'Real Estate' comes from radical geographer Neil Smith, who explains that 'Gentrification [. . .] involves the reinvestment of capital, but actually all the problems of gentrification begin with the disinvestment of capital' ('Housing' 111). This hidden *disinvestment* that precedes, and is used to justify, regeneration efforts needs to be exposed and challenged, including by activist-inclined artists. Clearly the 'decrepit' buildings and 'empty' land on planned Olympics sites in London are products of these very deliberate disinvestment strategies.

Bishopsgate

**Image: Dougie at Bishopsgate, Risk Conference, Lottie Child, 2005**

Instead of such concrete ideas, in 'Real Estate' we got vague notions of political economy. Any exploration of land and property in London should seriously investigate the city's central role in finance capital and how it relates to the real estate market. (In this regard, the London Plan was a gaping aporia in the exhibition.) The one attempt in this direction did not do this connection justice. Lottie Child's video *Climbing Club: Subverting the City* (2004) was accompanied by a handout 'Guide to Risk in the City', which 'equates physical with financial risk' and provides 'risk and reward curves [. . .] for climbing on major financial institutions produced with risk analyst Navin Reddy'. We are invited to climb on buildings such as the Midland Bank and Lloyds so as to take risks 'with socially unconventional behaviour' and with 'confronting one's fears', and to reap rewards that are 'social, physical, emotional, [and] psychological'. However, although the project cleverly sends up the language and logic of the market and points our attention to the physical environment of the City, ultimately it substitutes individual reconfiguration and emotional experience for any larger changes to socio-economic structures and operations. Filled with many artworks that only loosely addressed the city's physical spaces and presentations that often glossed systemic dynamics, 'Real Estate' substituted flash for substance and left me unfulfilled by its naive politics.

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## URLs

B&B

<http://welcomebb.org.uk>

ICA

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*Common Star*  
<http://www.jonfawcett.com>

Anna Best & Paul Whitty  
<http://www.vauxhallpleasure.org.uk>

Lorraine Leeson:  
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<http://www.volco.org>

Archive of the DCCP:  
[http://www.cspace.org.uk/cspace/archive/docklands/dock\\_arch.htm](http://www.cspace.org.uk/cspace/archive/docklands/dock_arch.htm)  
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## **FOOTNOTES**

[1] Unless otherwise specified, all quotations are from the booklet accompanying the gallery exhibition.

[2] Hearing these expressions of displaced faith in government/electoral politics reminded me of an exchange following a presentation by Douglas Crimp in the late 1990s. After the artist, activist, and writer gave a talk at the University of Florida, one of my Media Studies students asked him why the group he helped found, the Aids Coalition to Unleash Power (ACT UP), folded in the early 90s. Crimp's explanation was telling: he asserted that because the group had mistakenly framed its enemy, initially focusing on Reagan and then Bush Sr. and their draconian AIDS policies, they didn't know what to do when an apparently more benevolent/progressive government came along (i.e., Clinton). Lacking a systemic framework that would have located the dynamics they wanted to change within the emerging neoliberal regime of capitalism, the organisation disbanded soon after Clinton's election. It seems to me the opposite but equally misplaced reliance on government by activists occurs here, as evidenced by the view of DCCP's Leeson.

Politicians are to be engaged with, addressed, critiqued, used, etc when appropriate, but they are neither the 'enemy' nor the 'saviours' – by focusing on them, one ignores the larger systemic dynamics at work in individual instances, whether concerning medical policy or property development.

# Context is the New Pretext

By Finn Smith

Behind the book's attempts to discuss a loose tendency in current art practice, Finn Smith detects in *Contemporary Art from Studio to Situation* an effort to homogenise and reduce to a market friendly genre art that takes social relations as its subject and material. This discursive homogenisation abounds even while this recent publication, edited by Claire Doherty, insists on the fragmentary effects of art's committed engagement with context and communities

Cover Image: Contemporary Art from Studio to Situation

I enjoyed reading this book by treating it as a pleasant compendium of short stories. I'm not keen on the title though: *Contemporary Art from Studio to Situation*. Making a distinction between studio and situation seems curious. If contemporary artists are attempting a shift from traditional studio based practice because they believe it to be tantamount to confinement in an ivory tower (as suggested by the inclusion/appropriation in this anthology of Daniel Buren's essay 'The Function of the Studio') then they are assuming that they have considerable power to turn alternative private or public areas into more accessible space. In straying from the traditional studio (whatever that might be) surely itinerant artists appropriate and mutate situations into surrogate studios. Or at least this occurs when residues of work and documentation produced in situation simultaneously (or at a later date) become the dominant point of access to the work. Surely studio is situation, or more accurately situation is studio. In fact, not only studio, because with biennial and institutional backing the sites are transformed into temporary galleries that are safe to visit and if you can't visit at least you can buy the book or see the DVD.

The publication *Contemporary Art from Studio to Situation* is derived from transcripts of a lecture series that took place between October 2003 and March 2004. It also includes 'additional existing and newly commissioned material and an introduction to the field of enquiry'.[1] It is a facet of the *Situations* project coordinated by the University of West England, in partnership with Arnolfini, which claims:

*Situations* is a programme of activity devised to investigate the significance of context in the commissioning and production of contemporary art works.[2]

The *Situations* 'programme' consists of lectures, print publications, a website, a DVD archive, and commissioned artists' projects. In 'investigating', the book invariably promotes as well. Or more specifically, it promotes a selection of artists and curators. There is no shortage of name-dropping and a substantial biographies section to conclude the text ensures the reader gets a dose of the cult of the individual. To complain about this (however tempting it may be) is to complain about the society in which the practitioners find themselves and would entail forgetting what the book has the capacity to do. This is neither a book about the death of the author, nor a random collage of projects. It is a book well and truly of an art world and the illustration of specific works clearly paves the way for a very active agenda:

*Situations* seeks to create a distinctive network of debates and projects, radiating from its Bristol base across the south-west region, nationally and internationally, informing the ways in which art is commissioned and made.[3]

We are told that 'what distinguishes situated practices in this publication from the historical premise of site-specificity is the convergence of three key factors'.[4] The first 'factor' is the claim that the work demonstrates 'an emphasis on experience as a state of flux which acknowledges place as a shifting and

fragmented entity’.[5] This may be the case with the nomadic works but in being located by texts such as this, (along with a combination of documentation, videos, books, publications and a lecture series), projects and performances are given clear definition.

The second ‘factor’ involves reference to Nicolas Bourriaud’s Relational Aesthetics to explain how ‘a new vocabulary has emerged, “one analagous to Minimal Art and that takes the socius as its base”’.[6] ‘New vocabulary’? Perhaps not, but the artist can now enjoy the role of host/hostess and play the part of a celebrity events coordinator that does much more than tinker behind the scenes. We are also nonchalantly told that such works operate ‘to elude alienation, the division of labour and the commodification of space which characterises our new “network society”’.[7] This grand statement could be taken as offensively trivialising. Exactly whose ‘alienation’, ‘labour’ and what ‘space’ is of course not specified. The fact that the availability of ‘context’ as canvas for artists to aestheticise relational experiments is predicated on political and economic stability and others’ exploitation and alienation in a global context is barely mentioned. Discussion of alienation in these genre-promoting terms is inherently alienating, and to claim that products of art industries can function to elude such processes is little more than a marketing ploy. Instigating social interaction by employing the tools of western art systems is alienating to vast populaces (and arguably necessarily so for it to maintain its privileged status as art). It is this possibility and assurance of alienation that allows the book and my essay to exist as commodities within art communities. The artists depicted in this book in all likelihood are not individually claiming to be offering salvation in the face of decaying communities and diminished possibilities for political representation and social interaction, but the book certainly hints at it. In the essay ‘Berlin Letter about Relational Aesthetics’, Bourriaud states:

...this work implies the constitution of temporary subject groups, or micro-communities, the modelling of alternative modes of sociality and the appropriation of industrial production and economic structures.[8]

How fun that must be for the artists, curators, patrons and audience that have the luxury to enjoy the implied ‘alternative modes’. This book is clearly not advocating the hijacking of art to expose the horrors of capitalism. It appears to be promoting the hijacking of tertiary industry to serve art. Many of the sociable performance projects are recorded and turned into video works (or anthologies) and sold to particular groups anyway. What the promotion of ‘factor’ 2’s ‘new vocabulary’ may do is give the artists, curators and audience a roughly hewn purpose and chance to find each other.

Third ‘factor’:

cultural experience has become recognised as a primary component of urban regeneration, so the roles of artists have become redefined as mediators, creative thinkers and agitators, leading to increased opportunities for longer-term engagement between an artist and a given group of people, design process or situation.[9]

This sounds ominously like a housing developer’s handbook. It is a reminder that much of the work depicted in this publication can also be appropriate for the rather sinister task of sweetening the bitter taste of gentrification. Where is the evidence that this leads to increased opportunities for long-term engagement and what is actually meant by ‘engagement’ and ‘long-term’? Why should ‘long-term’ be positive? Isn’t this the same as an invading force consolidating power? The ‘artist’, defined as such, has and always will be a tool to establish and maintain particular power relations. Whether you are happy with this depends on the type of relationships created and your position within them. Is it a good thing for artists to try frantically to leave a legacy to a community they have attempted to infiltrate, create or imagine?

These three key 'factor' generalisations are strangely contradicted in an attempt to sidestep debate about how this particular branch of contemporary art practice should be defined, when the statement is made that the book does:

not approach 'context' as purely a discreet category of public art discourse, nor is it concerned with 'contextual practice' as an artistic genre. Rather it is concerned with 'context' as an impetus, hindrance, inspiration and research subject for the process of making art.[10]

Despite this disclaimer, the fact remains that this anthology presents a range of individual works, texts and projects within the cosy confines of a single cover, suggesting a catch-all genre and relationships that might otherwise not be observed. The common denominator of the work, as hindered or inspired by 'context', is a particularly vague way of dealing with the issues surrounding the creation of art in a non-traditional studio environment. Evidently 'context' allows the editors to conveniently collate a range of works including gallery based, nomadic projects and site-specific works that might fascinate their readership. Interestingly the discussion of the context of the internet as inspiration or hindrance to 'contemporary' artists working with relational practice is limited in this text. Still, the individual texts and artists' anecdotes are interesting, entertaining and fun but I can't help thinking that the possibility of unknowingly stumbling across one of the projects in 'context' might prove the most interesting in any case.

'Relational Aesthetics', 'community', 'context', 'participation', 'interactivity' etc will keep me here grumbling for days. So...rather than add to the name dropping and dissecting the individual artists' projects and conversations I feel like concentrating on the structure of this book and the position it takes. The anthology is divided into tidy sections: 'Critical Context', 'In Conversation' and 'Case Studies'. The 'Critical Context' section begins with an introduction from the editor and is sub-divided into the convenient headings: 'The groundwork', 'The engagement process', and 'The exhibition and curator'. Despite having claimed to avoid the analysis of a specific genre, the book's very structure and textbook style segmentation contradicts this, hinting at a preferred typical mode of practice. In the section headed 'The groundwork' the editor looks at the research process and the way in which artists pave the way for the realisation of projects:

All artists and collectives here maintain that their status as artists allows them to circumnavigate predictability.[11]

But are their efforts at producing spontaneous projects really unhampered by funding, safety regulations, the law etc? For a book discussing context as a hindrance to work there is little mention of the inconveniences to artists set in place by planning regulations, businesses, funders and curators. It is also claimed in the introduction that the artists get round the role of outsider and 'ethnographer' by introducing themselves through conversation and researching the overlooked'. [12] I would be interested to know how one can select the 'overlooked' and there seems to be a growing tendency to accept that as long as conversation and debate result (as, of course, 'acts of collaboration') then at least something has been achieved, irrespective of its nature. 'Conversations' however can be dominated by one party and decidedly one sided.

The mention of critical research and the role it plays in working in context seems strangely sparse in the book as a whole. My worry is that it could seem as if merely describing a place, having a chat with the locals and documenting a project afterwards constitutes valuable research. I would like to know why and to whom research is important. Is it really just to placate the locals/gallery goers? The title 'The groundwork' almost suggests that artists make sure the site is suitable (safe) for their project by testing the response to their introductions via conversation and if they don't receive in response a sustained angry attack or get chased off, research can begin.

The book's accompanying blurb ensures that we know that this 'anthology provides an overview of this increasingly significant (and contested) field of art practice'. [13] By iterating that this is a contested field, the book can act as a compendium of specific works with a kind of safety net: if the reader were to criticise its short-comings then that's all part and parcel of the genre because after all there is no definitive genre (and quite rightly so). It's just that this doesn't quite fit with a book that presents 'tendencies' of situated practices as 'strategies'. [14]

Methods for producing art world commodities evolve according to economic, political and social circumstances. As this book evinces, artists have in recent times been able to wander around manufacturing (art) communities, instigating discussion and playing about with 'context' to suit their desires or allay their concerns. A lot of the characters in this book are sociable artists making sociable works. The desire to do that is understandable. The desire to do that and make a living doing so is even more understandable. If reading about artists and curators engaging in such activities is something you find interesting or entertaining then you might like this book, it might give you something to talk about. Art is here...I'm not too sure I want it...but in writing this I don't seem to be able to let go.

- [1] *Contemporary Art from Studio to Situation*, London: Black Dog Publishing, (2004) Preface by Caroline Collier Director of Arnolfini and Professor Paul Gough, University of the West of England
- [2] Ibid, Preface
- [3] Ibid, Preface
- [4] Ibid, p.10, Claire Doherty
- [5] Ibid
- [6] Claire Doherty, Ibid, and quote from Nicolas Bourriaud 'Berlin Letter about Relational Aesthetics'
- [7] Ibid
- [8] Ibid, p. 49 quote from Nicolas Bourriaud, 'Berlin Letter about Relational Aesthetics'
- [9] Ibid, p. 10
- [10] Ibid, p. 7
- [11] Ibid, p. 11
- [12] Ibid
- [13] Ibid, Back Cover
- [14] Ibid, p 10

<http://www.situations.org.uk>

*Contemporary Art from Studio to Situation*, edited by Claire Doherty, Black Dog Publishing, 2004

(Maybe in response we could do with someone writing The Function of the Essay).

Interesting articles that deal with these issues more eloquently than I do:

Hal Foster's article Arty Party, London Review of Books, Volume 25, No.23 4/12/2003

'Art is Like Cancer', Roger Taylor interviewed by Stewart Home, Mute 28

<http://www.metamute.org/en/Art-Is-Like-Cancer>

## **workshop**

a view of auto-italia south east london y espacio en bcn