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Paul O'Neill / An Observer's Response / The Wrong Place: Rethinking Context in Contemporary Art

Paul O'Neill is a curator, artist and writer. He is interested in addressing the systems of interpretation that are involved in making sense of the world around us, as much as he is concerned with the compulsions that lead to interpretation and meaning itself. His practice takes the form of curatorial projects, art-making, writing or lectures. He was Gallery Curator at londonprintstudio Gallery between 2001-2003, where he curated shows such as *Private Views, Frictions, A Timely Place...*, *Phil Collins' Jumble Sale* and *All That is Solid*. He is Artistic Director of *MultiplesX*, an organisation that commissions and supports curated exhibitions of artists' editions, which he set up in 1997 and exhibited at spaces such as the ICA, London; Temple Bar Gallery, Dublin; Ormeau Baths, Belfast and The Lowry, Manchester. O'Neill has curated over 40 exhibitions and projects that recently include: *Tonight* at Studio Voltaire, in London; *Coalesce: With All Due Intent* at Model and Niland Art Gallery, Sligo and *Are We There Yet?* at Glassbox in Paris. As an artist, he has exhibited internationally, including Zacheta Gallery of Contemporary Art, Warsaw; The Irish Museum of Modern Art; Villa Arson, Nice; South London Gallery and Cell, London; Project and Temple Bar Gallery, Dublin. Currently he is a PhD scholar at Middlesex University, researching histories of curating as a critical and professional practice. He is currently working on two publications about contemporary curatorial issues and has just written a series of articles in *Art Monthly* (issues 272, 275) exploring curatorial practice. He writes regularly for many journals and magazines including *CIRCA, Everything, Art Monthly, the Future and Space & Culture Journal*.

1 / Responsive Consensus: I want to think somewhere outside or on the periphery of this event as a form of response and look at contingencies and absence as a series of questions instead of answers. Ultimately, I see my role somewhere between impartiality and individual responsiveness: a kind of 'pre- and

post-' observing subjective participant who has been asked to be somewhere between You, Them, Us and Me.

So was The Wrong Place conference any good? Was the last Venice Biennale any good? Was Documenta any good? This is the wrong question often asked at an incorrect time. It seems to me that certain collective experiences within the public context of cultural events become ameliorated or consented over time and there is a tendency to seek some sort of general consensus.

The term 'consensus' came up a number of times in the conference and I think consensus has a lot more to do with forgetfulness and things that we forget in the terms of our engaged experience. Maybe the moments of our lunchtime conversations or the arguments that you've had in the pub, or when you have been out late at night, clubbing or at breakfast, or in the bathroom are the incidental moments of revelation, realisation or dissent. These are genuine contingent moments which somehow always end up getting lost in the translated experiences of the collective.

I think that such collective events like conferences, or biennales are very good at doing that – making us forget. So the real question of consensus is one of closure rather than disclosure, which suggests for me more a kind of a closing down than an opening up of potential for critical discourse or change and it's about arriving at destinations – to use a travel metaphor – rather than a re-presentation of individual experiences of mutual or distinct responses which could potentially be open to contingencies and I mean contingencies like the fragmented contingent memory of a single idea, or of a momentary event: such as watching the contributors sweating furiously under the lights or the experience of listening to a parachuting demonstration, or (for me) one of the most poignant moments occurred after Okwui Enwezor mentioned the term 'geo-politics' for the first time, he sipped from his large bottle of Evian water and as

you can see Evian is not distributed here at the Bristol Zoo – so I thought that was quite an interesting contingent moment, open to over-reading.

2 / Amnesia and a Certain Absence:

I think the word 'consensus' is also to do with the production of absence through a kind of amelioration and generalisation. I could go through a list of the various things I thought were absent in people's presentations particularly where certain generalisations remain unstable. Though I'm into generalisations, there were certain obvious closures that were discomfiting for me. Two examples would be: one of the central ideas in Okwui's presentation was that there was a transformation of artistic production in the nineties that moved away from the dominant ontological condition derived from Modernity's totalitarianism. Instead, art began to explore site and place as themes with an emphasis on site as a space of contested histories that transcended the specifics of physical site. Okwui suggested that this may have been a response to the art market of the 1980s and the dominance of neo-expressionism in the U.S. The fact that art collectives such as General Idea, Group Material, Guerrilla Girls and the most politicised end of 'Institutional Critique' in works by Fred Wilson, Renee Green, Hans Haacke were occurring parallel to the market-driven expansion of neo-expressionist painting in New York in the 1980s would suggest that this shift was not as clear-cut as Okwui suggested. You might consider that the nineties in the UK was also dominated by its own form of neo-expressionism in the work of the yBAs, that their dominant aesthetic was a critical attitude towards the market-driven economy and an individual artistic activity that was ego-centred, or you might also consider the rise of what Nicolas Bourriaud has called 'Relational Aesthetics' in Europe which was more of an alternative to the yBA aesthetic than it was a response to American Neo-Expressionism.

I was also struck by the suspicious absence of any reference to Heterotopia as an example of a 'wrong place' that has become representative of a kind of place that through its very cultural displacement, produces its own sense of location in the world over time? This is notable during both this conference and the writings of Miwon Kiwon. According to Michel Foucault, Heterotopia is a 'counter-site' in which, "all the other real sites that can be found within culture, are simultaneously represented, contested and inverted." Heterotopia is "capable of juxtaposing in a single real space several sites that are in themselves incompatible." For example, psychiatric hospitals, queer spaces, the Chinese Quarter. These places are heterotopic spaces of privilege, difference, deviation and displacement. They exist in the world whilst remaining marginalised, enclosed and protected from the rest of dominant culture, but it is within these zones of 'otherness', 'unhomeliness' or 'being out of place' that they find their sense of place in the world. For example, the type of heterotopia represented in the work: *Untitled, 1991* by Felix Gonzalez Torres (slide). This oversized, overly intimate, and private image of the bed of a queer couple sits amongst the public world of visual commerce, urban architecture and global economics. It is a representational space that rejects the prioritisation of the capitalist-gaze, so dominant within both the modern city and post-modern urban culture, and instead embraces the other non-ocularcentric senses such as touch, smell, absence, homo-sexual intimacy, and the comfort of sleep.

3 / The Exhibition as Autonomous space:

The next point I want to make is about the autonomous object and I think that in many ways for me the global or international exhibition has become the new autonomous-object of our times. We compare them to each other. I think this is particularly true in relation to biennales and large-scale international art events, which, lest we forget, was the reasoning behind many of the initial questions

that were asked or set out in the advance information for this conference. It seems that the very question of the viability of context-specific art works operating within a biennale situation has been suspiciously missing from our discussion, and maybe we need to ask again: Is this the place to show the kind of work that is context/site-specific or participant-specific when the emptied-out version of the artwork becomes just another part of the exhibition as autonomous space separated from the specific cultural, social and political context of its location. Such exhibitions use the idea of the public as a fixed and immutable body. They incorporate the public into their own objectiveness, where the subject becomes interchangeable at any moment and where the predominant idea of a subject is repeated through a series of prescribed eventful performances.

It seems to me that various strategies have been used within the biennale or the large-scale art exhibition, so that it has become the autonomous object somehow separated away from the social/cultural/traditional conditions. Exhibitions are the hierarchical structures that produce teleological dynamics. There are particular general forms of communication. They are also texts that make private intentions public as part of the political economy of culture, particularly the temporary art exhibition that has become the principle medium in the distribution or reception of art. It is the principle agency in the debates and criticism around any aspect of visual culture. Exhibitions - of a temporary or international nature - are political tools for keeping things as they are - they are modern ritual settings that uphold identities (artistic, national, subcultural, international, gender or race specific, avant-garde, regional and global). Each should be understood as institutional utterances within the larger cultural industry.

When Tony Bennett wrote a text called "The Exhibitionary Complex" (*New Formations*, 4 (1988), pp. 73-102), he wrote primarily about the rise of power structures within museums,

institutions and the great nineteenth century exhibitions. He suggested that between the late nineteenth century and the early twentieth century was the moment at which the whole world became an exhibition. The 'exhibitionary complex' is Bennett's all-encompassing concept for the formation of modern subjectivity, where self-regulation is achieved through social control and the gaze as the most significant part of the civilising process. Occularcentricism and self-observation produced a subject as an integral part of the visualisation of the modern self and as a main part of that which is being exhibited. Museums, world exhibitions, the panorama, the panopticon, anthropological photography, the department store etc. all used visual mechanisms where the world began to be represented as a framed visual display laid out for the spectator. As Heidegger famously described the reconfiguring of the world through this human perspective as a founding act of modernity, an era he called "the age of the world as picture". I actually think we have taken the next inevitable step, which is to produce a tendency particular to large-scale exhibitions whereby the exhibition itself represents itself as the whole world in miniature.

The exhibition's ritual of maintaining a given set of power relations is particularly true of large survey exhibitions which tend to incorporate anachronistic elements whilst recuperating dissent as part of the totality of the overall event. In this respect, John Miller writes: They produce a "cycle of raised expectations and quick disillusionment" which is both predictable and overdetermined. Miller argues that the mega-exhibition is an ideological institution. It is a question of reification of the social relations between artworks and spectator. As the explicit purpose of these shows is to offer a comprehensive survey of artworks on a demographic basis, it treats the terms of discourse as pre-determined, rather than, "transformed in the course of art production and therefore subject to contradiction and conflict". According to

Miller, a critique of these exhibitions on the basis of curatorial choices made within the established framework would be to ignore the ideology underpinning such institutions as Documenta, or even the art industry as a whole. Miller suggests that exhibitions such as Documenta (or any mega-exhibition such as an international biennale) treat and address audiences as a concrete social constituency, where artworks are relegated to mere raw material within the 'total artwork' of the exhibition which privileges the curator's subjectivity, and naturalizes the exhibition and its outcome as an organic inevitability within the art organisation's institutional framework, producing an illusion of curatorial inspiration and genius.

I think that Miller was also highlighting the discourse around the rise of the curator and a critique of the ways in which certain curators back certain artists. But Miller suggests that we should actually look at the institutions themselves, like Documenta and Venice that inscribe a kind of formulaic participation for artists, critics and curators. (See www.recirca.com/backissues/c97/critics.shtml for more details of a project in response to the Venice Biennale.)

4 / Not Answers: All projects, which aim to be discursive and use public forum as a platform for discussion on the role of art and criticism within an institutional framework, should not result in solutions. Instead of closing down exploration in the form of agreed outcomes, they should both begin and end with a series of investigative questions. The differences between these two sets of questions, that is to say, the questions asked at the outset and those asked post-event, are essential. These are a list of questions that I have been thinking about over the last few days, perhaps even over a longer period, but which were amplified by my experience of this conference:

- How 'useful' can any project be in a given context? I use the term usefulness here in a sense that one of the functions of art is the

potential outcomes of its work and the 'usefulness' of the activity employed, and not the mere 'making' of art. Culture needs artists with their own ways of doing things more than it needs the things that they make. It needs the artists for what they are, rather than what they do. It is in this sense that artists are the producers of culture rather than of discrete artefacts that characterise this culture.

- Is there a system, or form of enablement, that can be used as a creative strategy to produce an opening out, rather than a closing down of one's own 'usefulness' in any given context?
- How can failure be incorporated and made visible as a disruptive ingredient within the overall structure and conceptual framework of any cultural project?
- How can 'lots of people' continue to be involved after the 'event' aspect of this project? Where do we go from here, what happens next?
- Exhibitions have become *the* primary medium through which most art becomes known. Exhibitions (particularly those of a large, global, international, biennale scale) are the main medium through which contemporary art is seen, experienced and historicised. Given the ever increasing number of biennale-style mega-exhibitions, and the apparent lack of any discourse surrounding its efficacy, has 'the exhibition' itself become the new autonomous object of study, and if so, shall we not be asking questions about whether or not the large-scale exhibition is the 'Wrong Place' to produce and experience art, in particular art produced in a specific social, geographical and cultural context?
- What could we be doing right now instead of looking for solutions?
- What do artists, critics and curators do when they are not making work in the form of a production?

- What is the difference between making work and not making work?
- What are we doing as cultural producers when we are not making?
- Can a discursive critical-framework continue to mutate after the event?
- Are curated site-specific or context-specific projects over-interpretive and over-interpreted?
- There has been a significant move over the last ten to fifteen years away from the notion of site-specific or place-centred art practice as a phenomenological activity that was associated with artists such as Richard Serra, to the more ephemeral approach to site-specific art as event-oriented, where the site is fixed but only for the duration of the work e.g. certain works by Mark Dion, Martha Rosler, Carey Young and Andrea Fraser. But there is also a different notion of sited place now associated with predominantly mobile and intertextually coordinated, multiply located, and flexible discursive fields of global operations as seen in some diverse art practices such as that of Rirkrit Tiravanija, Phil Collins, or Emily Jacir. Is there not a problem with such a notion of a mobile practice, in that, although it acknowledges site or place as an open, unfixed constellation and porous to contingencies and change, there is purposefully a type of uncertainty, ambiguity and instability which are posited as progressive? But does not this model of a transitory and mobile practice which produces open meaning and interpretation end up producing a kind of itinerant, nomadic art practice, where politics as much as site may be interchangeable and where most significantly the artists/and their supporting curators spend more time on the plane than participating in some kind of production of a potentially, meaningful long-term exchange? Is this the 'Easyjet Syndrome'?
- Is being in the wrong place, a 'getting lost' activity or is 'getting lost' really a good thing?
- Are context-specific artworks something to be looked at or looked after?
- Can a project be used/useful after its representation as a 'temporal event'?
- Are all cultural projects strategic?
- Is strategy strategic?
- Can site or context specific art be taught within an educational context?
- -Are art exhibitions (in whatever form they take) a representation of community?
- Do art institutions produce or enable the formation of community?
- Is a 'community' self-organised or 'post-produced'?
- How useful are questions in themselves?
- Can exhibitions (in whatever form they take) be self-critical?
- How can we make the differences between self-reflexivity and self-critique more apparent?
- Was my participation in this event pre-scribed, activated or performed?
- Can I measure the expectation of the invitation to take part on behalf of the inviter against my actual participation as the invitee?

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