

SITUATIONS

Social Work, Social Sculpture

Claire Doherty

First Published in: Supermanual: a user's guide (Liverpool: FACT, 2000)

In a recent series of polemical articles for the U.K. journal *Art Monthly*, the artist and writer JJ Charlesworth addressed the significant increase in the profile of participatory and socially engaged art practice. He warned of the “ensuing subordination of artistic freedom to the needs of a supposed community”, characterising the government’s PAT 10 report as a Faustian Pact via which creativity would be harnessed for the primary purpose of social regeneration.¹ Though perhaps the most tenacious, Charlesworth’s is by no means the only voice of dissent to align the augmentation of a socially engaged practice with Blair’s socially inclusive liberalism – a so-called ‘Art of the Third Way’.²

As a consequence of the re-mapping of the visual arts landscape in the U.K., motivated by unprecedented investment in its cultural infrastructure and matched by exceptional growth in the public profile of living artists, the autonomy of art in relation to audience has become a fiercely contested site of debate. Implicit in the critical responses to a range of new public institutions from Tate Modern to regional new-builds such as the New Art Gallery, Walsall and The Lowry is the association of ‘accessibility’ with a devaluation of the role of the artist in a so-called audience-led culture. The widespread integration of education within visual arts programming has led, according to certain critics, to a crisis of social remedy over content. Such accusations emerge from a London-centric parochialism which fails to recognise the sophistication of debates around engagement, particularly in evidence through the constituencies of umbrella organisations such as engage, but more importantly through the interdisciplinary, participatory nature of artistic practice itself. All the same, the cover of *Art Monthly* in May 2000 was adorned by Charlesworth’s sketched motif - a strident, clasped fist arising from the ‘muscle’ of a gallery façade (which bore more than a passing resemblance to Caruso St. John’s New Art Gallery in Walsall.) - entitled, *THE FIGHT (for audience orientated, context based, socially-inclusive, ethically correct art practice) CONTINUES!*

Within this charged forum of artistic and curatorial debate, the recent propensity of exhibitions devoted to politically or socially engaged work have been bracketed by critics such as Jonathan Jones and Charlesworth under the rubric of ‘impotent empowerment’.³ Participation is dismissed as a mere prosthetic for political activism rather than a valuable process of art conception, production and reception in its own right. Whilst such appraisals draw attention to the de-politicisation of culture at the end of the 20th century, rightly questioning the role of visual art and artists within that context, they do so at the expense of an engagement with the nature of process-based work itself – a field of practice complex in its manifestations and diverse in its pedagogy.

Thus, whilst there is much to say about *why* the utopian projects of an artists’ collective such as Superflex need to exist in a post-socialist world, an investigation into *how* they come to exist as art is just as, if not more, useful. By what criteria do we judge whether such work is effective as art? Might an analysis of historical precedents assist in an evaluation of the ways in which Superchannel operates? And what, after all, is gained through a dialogical or discursive process of artistic

engagement rather than the legitimated product-driven process of the contemporary art economy?

The critical resistance to art as process or participation emerges out of a historical polarisation of the art world between community art (broadly defined by a decentralisation of authorship, and strategic collective activity) and gallery art (characterised by its promotion of the individual artist's career and an obfuscation of process).⁴ Such a simplification has masked the complexities of a field in which physical and conceptual boundaries of art making have been blurred for some decades.

In the 60s, through the anarchic actions of the Situationists, Berlin Dada and Fluxus happenings, the street became the physical space for transient social interaction. It was an in-between 'no place' in which production and reception of art combined to rupture the status quo.

In 1969 Victor Burgin wrote of Situationist Aesthetics, "In its less hermetic manifestations art as message, as 'softwear' [sic], consists of sets of conditions...according to which particular concepts may be demonstrated. This is to say aesthetic systems are designed, capable of generating objects, rather than individual objects themselves."⁵ Whilst this focus on systematic process saw the blurring of art and life (Allan Kaprow), the dematerialisation of the object (Lucy Lippard) and the integration of audience into process, it was the network of cellular art collectives of the 70s and 80s that developed radical, political objectives for participatory activity. Groups such as *General Idea*, *Group Material* and *Ant Farm* in the US and *Free Form*, *Magic Lantern* and *The Art of Change* in the UK developed out of social movements such as feminism, queer politics, multiculturalism and civil rights. Decision-making processes were grounded in a non-hierarchical structure of membership. Actions were strategic, project based and bore the organic make-up of campaign activity. Knowledge, skills and resources were pooled and coalitions formed with individuals and organisations. Art, in this context, whilst often fluid, performative and inclusive, had a clear agenda – change.

In a history of the 70s and 80s community art movement in the U.K., Owen Kelly posits the lack of communication and coordinated solidarity at the root of the downfall of the movement's critical reputation. "Local gains remained local", he maintains.⁶ As the groups reached critical mass, distribution and direct process became increasingly difficult, leading to splintering into sub-groups and committees. *Further The New Activities Committee Report (1973)*, commissioned and published by the Arts Council of Great Britain to investigate this new area of practice, excluded the more radical elements, profiling work with disadvantaged 'target groups'. As funding priorities began to dictate agendas and the 'sweat equity' of the collective was harnessed for institutionalised social welfare, the line between socially directed, funding-led creative activity and a critical and experimental artistic practice was drawn.

A distinction thus arises between strategic artistic activity and what Jurgen Habermas describes as 'communicative action', where "social interactions are coordinated not through the egocentric calculations of success of every individual but through the co-operative achievements of understanding among participants."⁷ This process, distinguished from the problem-solving tendencies of certain collective activity, was originally most succinctly defined by Joseph Beuys.

Beuys proposed a notion of Soziale Plastik (social sculpture) as an interdisciplinary and participatory process in which thought, speech and discussion could be core 'materials'. His assertion that "Everyone is an artist" indicated that every person should be responsible for the shaping of a democratic, sustainable social order. Social sculpture, he proposed, would "lift the aesthetic from its confines within a specific sphere or media, relocating it within a collective, imaginative work-space in which we can see, re-think and reshape our lives in tune with our creative potential."⁸

This definition of social sculpture offers a terminology through which to consider the collaborative and interdisciplinary activity, which developed during the 80s to re-emerge in the 90s as collective cultural action sanctioned in countless biennial contexts and notably in Catherine David's *Documenta X*. Artists groups such as *Oreste* (Italy), *Wochenklasur* (Austria), *Co-operations* (Luxembourg), *Ala Plastica* (Argentina) and *Critical Art Ensemble* (U.S.) have used communicative action to develop a series of interventionist projects which allow participants to shape their own agendas. These collectives are characterised by the anonymity of their members in contrast to the practice of artists such as Stephen Willats and Suzanne Lacy, who, though responsible for sustained developments within this area of practice, remain recognised authors.

The dialogical processes employed by these collectives have most recently been discussed under the banner of 'littoral art' by academics Grant Kester and Bruce Barber. "*Littoral art*", Kester proposes, "is a discursive aesthetic based on the possibility of a dialogical relationship that breaks down the conventional distinction between artist, art work and audience – a relationship that allows the viewer to 'speak back' to the artist in certain ways, and in which this reply becomes in effect a part of the work itself".⁹ This quite clearly distinguishes collective littoral practice from an agenda driven strategic cultural action.

Pitfalls still remain for those participating in 'social sculpture' or 'littoral art', however, in the guise of colonialism. In his essay 'The Artist as Ethnographer', Hal Foster warns that participants are necessarily defined by their habitation of 'elsewhere', acting as the 'other' to the 'ideological patron' of the artist collective. Further, even if such condescending patronage is avoided through genuine collective decision-making and shared responsibility, how much of this activity is sustainable and to what end? If participating global art economy, how does the nomadic collective address the problem of itinerancy?

Superchannel occurs as an on-going experiment in social sculpture at a critical moment in the analysis of this field of practice. It shares the disruptive characteristics of situationist aesthetics and the utopian sentiments of 70s collective activism, whilst being relinquished from geographical or temporal limits or any predetermined objectives. As a manifestation of direct democracy, it bears a close resemblance to the community radio stations of the 1980s in particular *Frequènce Libré*, Felix Guattari's free radio station which was licenced to broadcast across Paris until 1985.¹⁰ In this case, far from encouraging audience participation, the theoretical elitism of the Deleuze and Guattari discouraged many people from becoming involved.¹¹ Guattari discouraged certain contributions, often vetting material before broadcast. As Saul Albert indicates, in a recent contribution to *Nettime*, community radio stations were based upon on "a broadcast infrastructure derived from a defunct hierarchical military command structure."¹²

Superchannel's use of streaming media thus relinquishes content from a single authorial command. The internet, whilst rapidly employed for commercial interests, still allows for a directly democratic model of dissemination. What marks *Superchannel* as an act of art-making as process then, is not the content nor the form but the original intervention of the collective – Superflex – who through their absence allow for social sculpture in action.

Saul Albert suggests the model of *Open Source Software Programming* (OSS) as a model for collective art practice that is highly pertinent to a discussion of *Superchannel* and more widely social sculpture in the 21st century. *Open Source* is a term originally used to describe an engineering principle for the development of software through recurrent and cyclical transformation by different users. Through the internet, OS now constitutes what Albert calls a "complex gift economy of programmers that is inspiring a burgeoning sociology". The participants and audience for OS software have a vested interest in the success of the project. In contrast to many of the community art models of the 70s and 80s, *Superchannel* works on the OS principle in which peer evaluation occurs as part of the process. As Albert proposes, "the traditional filtering mechanisms of the art gift economy, such as journalism and commercial gallery scouts become irrelevant to the formation of a reputation value." *Superchannel* thus by-passes the dichotomy of community art/gallery art by existing within an interdisciplinary field in which the users don't care whether or not it is art. Further the broadcasting mode of production allows for revision and duplication as an integral part of the process, hence evaluation is built integral to the production of broadcasts.

The nomadic behaviour of Superflex is irrelevant to the project. *Superchannel* exists as an autonomous, self-critical, self-generating process occupying an undefined space of communicative action. Whilst the project certainly addresses the social and political realities of Coronation Court, its content veers away from an agenda-specific content. Thus artistic freedom is guaranteed – but not just for the artist – privileged arbiter of artistic value – but for everyone.

End Notes

¹ PAT 10 is the DCMS Social Exclusion Unit Policy Action Team 10 report which focuses on how "the arts and sport can help address neighbourhood renewal by improving communities' performance on the four key indicators of...health, crime, employment [and] education." JJ Charlesworth, 'The Art of the Third Way', *Art Monthly*, November 2000, No.241, p. 7-10. See also Charlesworth's 'Mayday! May Day!', *Art Monthly*, May 2000, No.236, p.13-16 and 'May Day: Communities and Communication', *Art Monthly*, June 1999, No. 227, p.44-46.

² Matthew Higgs, curator of *Protest and Survive* and co-curator of *The British Art Show 5* and Julian Stallabrass, author of *High Art Lite: British Art in the 1990s* are just two of the critics who have contextualised such work in light of recent political promotion of a socially inclusive cultural policy.

³ *Protest and Survive*, *Live in Your Head* (Whitechapel Art Gallery), *May Day* (The Photographers' Gallery) and the student curated exhibition *Democracy!* (Royal College of Art) are, for JJ Charlesworth, indicators of the compensatory role ascribed to art in light of the lack of "democratic vitality in the world outside." "Those practices that offer models of democratic and consensual participation do so in the actual context of social atomisation and political disengagement", he declares. Charlesworth, 'May Day! May Day!', p.16 See also Jonathan Jones, *Protest and Survive*, *The Guardian*.

⁴ Particularly in the U.K. and U.S. The publication *Out of Here: Creative Collaborations Beyond the Gallery*, Ikon Gallery, 1997 provides an analysis this dichotomy in the form of Anna Harding's introductory essay 'Participatory art and the Gallery', pp.11-23.

⁵ Victor Burgin, 'Situationist Aesthetics', *Studio International*, vol. 178, no.915, October 1969, pp.118-21 quoted in Charles Harrison and Paul Wood (eds.), *Art in Theory 1900-1990: An Anthology of Changing Ideas*, Blackwell, Oxford, 1992, p.883.

⁶ Owen Kelly, *Community Art and the State*, Comedia, London, 1984, p.19

⁷ See Bruce Barber, *Littorialist Art Practice and Communicative Action* at <http://www.banffcentre.ab.ca/WPG/nmsc/squat/giving.art.htm> originally published as *The Art of Giving* published in *Fuse Magazine*, volume 19, no. 2, Winter 1996

⁸ See *Social Sculpture Research Unit* at Oxford Brookes University at www.brookes.ac.uk/schools/apm/social_sculpture

⁹ Kester's paper, 'Dialogical Aesthetics: A Critical Framework for Littoral Art', was delivered at the *Critical Sites: Issues in Critical Art Practice and Pedagogy* conference held at the Institute of Art, Design and Technology, Dun Laoghaire, Co. Dublin in September 1998 and now forms the basis of a *Socially Engaged Practice Forum* on-line and a continuing series of responses in the print and on-line versions of *Variant*.

¹⁰ See Annick Cojean and Frank Eskenazi, *FM: la folle histoire des radios libres*, Grasset, Paris, 1986

¹¹ See Richard Barbrook, *The Holy Fools*, *metamute*, issue 11

¹² Saul Albert, *Open Source Tactics for Collective Art Practice* at <http://www.nettime.org> February 1999

© Claire Doherty and FACT. Published by Situations at the University of the West of England, Bristol, 2007.

The person using this transcription online may view, reproduce or store copies of this paper providing the information is only for their individual use, and is not used for commercial purposes. Any copies of this paper, in whole or in part, must include the copyright notice above and the customary bibliographic citation, including author, attribution, date, article title and the URL www.situations.org.uk.

The views expressed in this paper are not necessarily those of the Publisher.