

Bosigran Arts: A vision?

I began thinking about what I would like to see happen and quickly moved to questioning why I wanted any of these things to happen, what the context for any of these things was and what the purpose of it all was. My thoughts moved from an ongoing and general consideration of what it is to be an artist and making meaning within post modern societies to a discussion of site-specificity.

I suppose fairly predictably I have explored the question of what my vision is philosophically and theoretically, starting from the position of questioning what it is to have a vision for a project. In so doing I have written with a sense of doubt about the availability of evident solutions to the problems I seem to return to over and over again in my research around hierarchies of knowledge and the paradoxes of place. I wonder whether there is really any purpose to having written it or to ask others to engage with it. One can but try.

What is it to have a vision?

To have a vision of a possible future, to have a vision of a possible situation to arrive at, one must have a kind of hope or an ideology that shapes what the future envisaged would be like.

So in a sense when we talk about our visions for the project we are talking about what we believe in. Belief is important because it has been the force that has driven the creation of knowledge in modern history through the vehicles of the metanarratives of progress, social justice, and within them their political and religious manifestations the ideologies of Christianity, Marxism, Fascism and Liberalism.

Belief is currently being exhausted, it is taking refuge in the media and in leisure activities, belief has gone on holiday. Where is the material to be found to re-inject credibility into the mechanisms of exchange? The use of the relics of religiosity, the use of our history of our culture to link our increasingly conservative and reactionary present to our more heterogeneous past functions on the hypothesis that belief remains attached to its objects and that by preserving the object one preserves the faith.

This leads us to our own involvement with the culture and heritage industries. Society needs to mine heritage to regain credibility and the

arts provide the potential to do this. The arts have always been used to sanction and to bolster the paradigm at the heart of each era. Artists are the instruments of the search for meaning, for a certainty, for belonging, for a sense of shared values. This is complex territory.

It is probably needless to say that my ideology is somewhere towards a resistance to art being used to prop up the systems that have lost their authority and that people no longer believe in. I feel it is important to bear in mind the unintentional support offered to the system by traditional theory, by traditional knowledge in terms of the ease of its incorporation into the machine of society, Lyotard wrote about this:

"Traditional theory is always in danger of being incorporated into the programming of the social whole as a simple tool for the optimization of its performance; this is because its desire for a unitary and totalizing truth lends itself to the unitary and totalizing practice of the system's managers. 'Critical' theory, based on a principle of dualism and wary of syntheses and reconciliations should be in a position to avoid this fate."

(12: 2005)

To some degree it is an inevitable consequence of postmodernism that how things have been is felt to be insufficient, that the answers we have had fail as we abandon mass consensus and ideology. The question I am interested in is what replaces the old values, what can come to the fore to replace what we have believed in and the process by which we have arrived at those beliefs? How can we avoid the use of our work to perpetuate failed totalizing discourses, I'm afraid the answers lie in the grey areas, in subjectivities and in refusing to make statements of fact. This is at odds with how we have understood knowledge as consistent, as stable and irrefutable. We have to re-think how we think to allow for paradox and duality as in quantum theory, or chaos mathematics if we are to avoid being valued through our 'performativity' or by how efficiently we function within the system of exchange without any ethical conditions attached to that performance.

So my musings about the implications of having a vision for a project have brought me up against the failure of totalising discourses and the resultant crisis of belief in postmodern societies; and to consider what kinds of knowledge should be sought out and how they might be

achieved. This leads me onto the strategic importance of counterpublics.

The Artist As Public Intellectual: Counter Publics

The Artist is a specific public figure that is conceived of in different ways and is placed and given a function by a specific society. It is from this position that I am considering the question of the context an artist operates within and what strategies can be used in the pursuit of new kinds of knowledge that take into account the crisis of meaning that I have been describing.

The artist as a public intellectual is of course what Michel Foucault was discussing when he wrote about the 'author function' in his essay 'What is an author?' in his essay he analyses the figure of the author, which can be read as a problematisation of both Walter Benjamin's politically charged description of the author as producer and Barthes' equally polemic essay "The Death Of The Author". Rather than focusing on transforming the author Foucault instead describes the author as a specific function, that of invention and intervention in discourse. According to Foucault the author-function classifies the text or the work. This means that any potential reconfigurations of that function also require reconfigurations of the discursive institutions surrounding it. So Benjamin's author questioning the relations of production and Barthes' deepening of cultural democracy through 'the death of the author' and the 'birth of the reader' are attempts at reconfiguring the function of the author. This reconfiguration was to take place through new modes of address, which would in turn configure new modes of receivership or spectatorship in the sense that a mode of address is always an imaginary stranger relationality, an attempt at developing an audience. So if we are to understand the artist as a public intellectual we also have to understand how a potential public is constructed and reconfigured through the historical and ongoing placement of the artist in their public arena. In other words we must consider how the audience's experience of an artists work is constructed through the institutions around the art, so in this case the national trust, the exchange, the arts council etc.

We are part of the cultural industry; the audience are now cultural consumers. Within the cultural industry the notion of the 'public' is replaced by the notion of the 'market', implying commodity exchange and consumption as modes of access and interaction. This means that the expectation of a rational, critical response is replaced by the notion

of entertainment as communication, as the mechanism of social control and as the producer of subjectivities. The established spaces of representation are likewise replaced by markets, town squares become shopping centres and museums become interactive tourist attractions. Due to the central significance of the market to the current configuration of the institutions of discourse we must attune our understanding of the artist in relation, and think about reconfiguring the artist as a critical rational individual, as a public intellectual. We must understand that artists produce publics through their modes of address and through the establishment of platforms or counter publics.

Counter publics can be understood as particular parallel formations where oppositional discourses and practices can emerge and be nurtured. Counter publics have many of the same characteristics as dominant publics, existing as a specific discourse and/or in a specific location and involving reflexivity. Counter publics therefore exist in relation to as well as in opposition to other publics. The notion of self-organisation is most often an oppositional term, and is a credible one, but it does not in itself constitute a counter public. The counter public entails a conscious mirroring of the modalities of a normal public in an effort to address other subjects and imaginaries.

What we can do to articulate for ourselves, to form counter publics to address other subjectivities requires more rather than less thinking about culture and politics, about locality and globalism, between particularity and universality, public spaces and activist strategies. It requires an ongoing negotiation, translation and articulation between interested agents. It is necessary to establish networks, to compare and mediate practices as well as theories.

The Local

My discussion of the importance of counter publics in providing spaces to address marginalised concerns brings us to a consideration of the importance of local activity in addressing global concerns, in the pursuit of new knowledge that allows for subjectivities. Discussing the local also allows us to earth these critical concerns within a discussion of site specificity and our particular context Bosigran.

The creation of counter publics to gather information into marginalised subjectivities and types of information and knowledge is of critical importance because theory has always privileged written information and quantitative data over tacit and experiential information. The importance of the particularities of the locale become evident when

considering the need to work with difference within an approach to gathering information that is operable within postmodern society.

Lyotard discusses the importance of the gathering of local information in the process he calls paralogy, he defines paralogy in these terms:

"Consensus has become an outmoded and suspect value. But justice is as a value is neither outmoded nor suspect. We must thus arrive at an idea and practice of justice that is not linked to that of consensus. A recognition of the heteromorphous nature of language games is a first step in that direction. This obviously implies a renunciation of terror, which assumes that they are isomorphic and tries to make them so. The second step is the principle that any consensus on the rules defining a game and the "moves" playable within it must be local, in other words, agreed on by its present players and subject to eventual cancellation. The orientation then favours a multiplicity of finite meta - arguments, by which I mean argumentation that concerns metaprescriptives and is limited in space and time." (66:2005)

Lyotard is arguing for the pursuit of knowledge being conducted within society through the creation of temporary groupings of individuals within a locality within which a multiplicity of voices are heard. He is also suggesting that the information gathered would not be definitive allowing the nature of thought to continue to evolve.

The 'lure of the local' as Lippard coined it is a double edged sword, on one hand it seems to offer a solution to the loss of belief in metanarratives, through allowing us to engage with the specific, with individuals within temporary autonomous zones on the other hand it opens up a complex discussion of the tension between the consideration of abstract space and the consideration of the local as an antidote to the alienation and fragmentation in contemporary life. Modernist progress brought with it the homogenisation of places and the erasure of cultural differences; it is not surprising that the efforts to retrieve difference are aligned to reconnecting to the uniqueness of places and in establishing authenticity of meaning, memory, history, and identity as a differential function of places. This differential function of place is the attraction of site specificity.

In Lippard's analysis the rapacious growth of capitalism has subsumed the distinctions of local differences and the particularity of places are continually being commodified to better accommodate the expansion of capitalism via the creation of non places, this in turn exacerbates

our sense of placelessness. Kwons analysis of Lippard warns us against nostalgia when considering the local, a return to non-urban, intimate exchanges and to a commitment to being in a place in the longterm:

"Lippard seems unable to resist the nostalgic impulse. In the end, the task of a progressive oppositional cultural practice is conceived as a retrieval and resuscitation of a lost sense of place. Her project implicitly calls for a slower, more sedentary mode of existence."
(2004:159)

The problem is that this return is too appealing, not only to us individually but to the machinery of capitalism itself. And this brings us to the paradox of place, to the dialectical nature of the relationship between the creation of non-places and the production of the particularities of place. The production of difference is itself a fundamental activity of capitalism necessary for its continuous expansion. Because of this, 'nomadism' as discussed by Deleuze and Guattari has been championed as offering a way to understand site as predominantly intertextually coordinated, multiply located, discursive field of operation. This conceptual shift has allowed us to understand meaning as open but in the process this has become aligned with an international itinerant lifestyle. This too fails due to the strain emotional and physical placed upon the artist or curator who continually operates on the international circuit of exhibitions, biennales and seminars, or as Kwon puts it:

"To embrace such conditions is to leave oneself vulnerable to new terrors and dangers. At least we have to acknowledge this vulnerability." (2004:160)

This model also fails because participation is again dependent on being privileged. The way forward lies neither in being rooted or transitory, instead of reductive dichotomies we need to consider the parallel deployment of contradictory approaches.

Summary

So basically there are no easy answers.

There is a crisis of meaning within post-modern societies; we can no longer look to the ideologies that have provided social glue over the ages. Instead we have to look to each other as peers within the practice of parology on a local level as Lyotard describes it to pursue

new knowledge beyond the limitations of totalising discourses. The question for artists, for all of us is to consider what role we can play in forming new knowledge. The consideration of place as producing difference paradoxically offers hope to combat the homogenising conquest of capitalism and at the same time provides the 'other', the difference that capitalism then fetishises and focuses upon. We cannot think our way through this maze by resorting to the dichotomies of site specificity or nomadism as approaches to conducting our enquiry into site and new knowledge; we must tread our own paths delicately through the critical quagmire.

Bibliography

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