CURATING WRONG PLACES... OR WHERE HAVE ALL THE PENGUINS GONE?

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Curating Subjects
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Berthold Lubetkin's 1930s penguin pool at London Zoo has been deserted by its inhabitants, in the interests of the penguins' strained muscles caused by the double helix structure. Potted plants, bark chippings, branches, murky water and pondweed have been substituted, effecting the site's transformation into an alligator pool. British archaeologist Andy Shapland remarks, "despite the best efforts of the Zoo keepers, this was a building in which 'penguiness' was produced."[1]

The rhetoric of 'place' has become the rallying cry for the curator of the international scattered-site exhibition or biennial. In 2004, the "International" component of the Liverpool Biennial professed to "address and empower place as having value", commissioning some 48 artists to produce new works for the city. That same year, Donostia-San Sebastian was conceived as "a privileged social site and catalytic trigger" for Manifesta 5, whilst this year the Gwangju Biennale purports to provide "an impetus to the city of Gwangju to be reborn as a geographical metaphor".[2] Most notable of recent placed-based curatorial assertions was Charles Esche and Vasif Kortun's opening gambit for the 9th Istanbul Biennial in 2005, in which they proposed "an exhibition structure that folds out of and reveals its context — the city of Istanbul", by commissioning artists to respond both to the "urban location and the imaginative charge that this city represents for the world".[3]

Esche and Kortun's biennial signalled a pervasive shift in curatorial practice away from, what Declan McGonagle has termed, "wide and shallow [engagement] rather than narrow and deep — sightseeing rather than insight".[4] Istanbul emerged through a discursive process of short-term residencies and projects, which sought to embed visiting artists and artworks within the city. It created intersections between local and international, and eschewed locations which might endorse a nostalgic or exotic view of the city. Furthermore, with the integration of critical platforms

1. Hicks, Dan. *"Days at the Zoo: Archaeological Perspectives on Context, Nostalgia and Site-Specificity."* 2005. Paper delivered at *The Wrong Place — Rethinking Context in Contemporary Art* Conference. Bristol. 5 February 2005
2. Biggs, Lewis and Declan McGonagle. "Foreword." *International 04*. Ed. Paul Domela. Liverpool: Liverpool Biennial, 2004; "Manifesta 5 Press Release." *Manifesta*. 29 March 2004. www.manifesta.es/eng/prensa/notasdeprensa/manifesta5launchesitsprogram.htm; "Gwangju Biennale Exhibition Concept." *E-Flux*. 8 August 2005. www.e-flux.com/displayshow.php?file=message_1123518772.txt>.
3. *Istanbul Biennial Press Release*. October 2004. www.iksv.org/bienal/bienal9/
4. McGonagle, Declan. "Terrible Beauty." *International 04*. Ed. Paul Domela. Liverpool: Liverpool Biennial, 2004.

within the resulting exhibition — comprising the now ubiquitous biennial reading zones, workshops, talks series and home-grown journals — the curators established active participation as a key component of the public manifestation of the biennial, not just part of the research process.

Esche and Kortun's concept can be seen as a retort to the accusation that biennials operate merely as stopovers on the international circuit for the frequent-flyer tribe of artists and art *cognoscenti;* that biennials have little or no lasting impact on the inhabitants or cultural life of their host cities. Instead the co-curators of Ístanbul posited engagement with the city as the primary motivating force for their exhibition (albeit still within the signifying system of the global art economy). Ístanbul, they maintained, "as a metaphor, as a prediction, as a lived reality, and an inspiration has many stories to tell and the Biennial will attempt to tap directly into this rich history and possibility."[5]

The predominance of 'place' as the subject for curatorial initiatives of this kind has emerged from the convergence of three commissioning models: the scattered-site international exhibition which preceded the recent swell of biennials, governed by the organising principle of place (from Tyne International and TSWA in the UK to Skulptur. Projekte Münster and the public art projects of Mary Jane Jacob in Charleston, Chicago and Atlanta); the research-based project programme (Locus+, Casco, Artangel) and the residency model with its concentration on engagement, process and encounter. Location seems to offer a suitably bounded space in which these commissioning models can come together and consequently meaning is produced through research-based projects and responsive programming in context. Over ten years ago, Bruce W. Ferguson, Reesa Greenberg and Sandy Nairne identified the harnessing of this curatorial strategy for a region's economic and political gain in their article "Mapping International Exhibitions",

> The locale of an exhibition is embraced in its title as a rhetorical manoeuvre to appropriate cultural status, the meanings and the myths that attend the collective imagination attached to the city, region or country named...[6]

5. "Exhibition Concept." 12 April 2006. www.iksv.org/bienal/bienal9/english/?Page=Concept>.

6. This article was originally published in *On taking a normal situation and retranslating it into overlapping and multiple readings of conditions past and present.* Antwerp: MuHKA, 1993: 135–152. A revised version was published in Harding, Anna. Curating: *The Contemporary Art Museum and Beyond.* London: Art & Design, 1997.

Since the mid 1990s, the context-specific international exhibition has become allied to urban regeneration and cultural tourism, whereby the cultural event becomes an ideal cipher for the meeting of international and local — hence any thematic title tends to be superseded by the city's name followed by the word 'biennial' or 'international' and in some cases, as in İstanbul, are one and the same. The dilemmas of cultural tourism versus criticality notwithstanding, the promotion of place as both subject and site for international exhibitions also runs the risk of subjugating art to a notion of place that is out-of-date.

Considering the progressive notions of place advanced by geographers such as Doreen Massey and David Harvey in the early 1990s, how can curators support artistic engagements with places which can be seen to be "constructed out of a particular constellation of social relations"?[7] If we subscribe to a notion of place as an intersection of social, economic and political relations, rather than a bounded geographic location, where and how does artistic engagement with the context of the exhibition start? How do such works coalesce to form a meaningful 'exhibition' for the biennial visitor when the experience of place itself is an event in progress? Does the emphasis on engagement lead to the privileging of process-based, participatory projects over materiality? And furthermore, how do context-specific projects and artworks become meaningful outside the signifying context of the exhibition?

To consider these questions, we might look to the etymology of the term 'curator' and speculate that the same duty of care borne by the custodian of the collection, governs the curator of the context-specific international exhibition. Their responsibilities might be (rather schematically) broken down into two primary objectives: (1) To support the artist to produce a process, project or work that responds to place as a mutable concept, with due consideration to the context of the group dynamic; that is true to the artist's practice, but which moves beyond a replication of previous work; that eventually may also operate outside the originating context; (2) To support and engender encounters — recruiting participants, engaging viewers, interlocutors and collaborators to experience the projects and works as autonomous significations within the logic of an exhibition; provoking opportunities for new understandings and responses to context and initiating potential outcomes beyond the event-exhibition.

7. Massey, Doreen. "A Global Sense of Place." *Reading Human Geography*. Eds. Trevor Barnes and Derek Gregory. London: Arnold, 1997: 315–325.

In contrast to the responsibilities of the curator-producer of the artist/concept-led solo project, the curator of the context-specific international exhibition has to engage with a progressive notion of place prior to the selection of artists. The components of the biennial — short-term residencies, research-based investigations, scattered sites and distribution mechanisms, interdisciplinary collaborations, urban interventions and critical platforms — ideally follow from a rigorous consideration of the basis of the invitation — place as an intersection of mapped location, urban mythology, power dynamics and social interaction.

One of the most useful and cogently argued new theorisations of place in relation to the commissioning and production of contemporary art is Miwon Kwon's *One Place After Another: Site-Specific Art and Locational Identity*. Kwon's study is particularly pertinent for a consideration of curatorial responsibility in place. She raises significant questions about the motivating factors for participatory projects, critiquing the essentialising of site and community in context-specific projects.

Kwon traces a genealogy of site-specificity through the 70s and 80s and suggests that, as artists and curators have become informed by a broader range of disciplines (including anthropology, sociology, literary criticism, psychology, natural and cultural histories, architecture and urbanism, political theory and philosophy), "so our understanding of site has shifted from a fixed, physical location to somewhere or something constituted through social, economic, cultural and political processes."[8] Given that the places of the biennial have been reconsidered as points of exchange and collision, remade through intersections of social, economic and political relations, it is not surprising that the predominant forms to emerge from these context-specific invitations are social, spatial and interdisciplinary.

Speculating on the impact of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's theories of deterritorialization and nomadism, Kwon argues that with increased pressure to conceive projects which engage locally but speak globally, comes a tendency to essentialize potential 'communities' and to confine art to a set agenda. Kwon's argument is developed through a critique of New Genre Public Art in the 1990s (in particular Culture in Action), referring explicitly to Hal Foster's critical examination of the "Artist as Ethnographer". Foster critiques the pseudo-anthropological

8. Kwon, Miwon. *One Place after Another: Site-Specific Art and Locational Identity*. Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 2002.

intent of engagements with the "ethnographic participant-observer" whereby, "the artist is typically an outsider who has the institutionally sanctioned authority to engage the locale in the production of their (self-) representation", and warns, "[s]uch mapping may thus confirm rather than contest the authority of mapper over site in a way that reduces the desired exchange of dialogical fieldwork".[9] Writing in the mid 1990s, Foster submits artists such as Clegg and Guttmann and curatorial projects such as Culture in Action, but we might well consider recent biennial projects such as Esko Männikkö's portraits of the residents of Altbridge Park in Liverpool (2004) or Bojan Šarčević's *Workers* Favourite Clothes Worn While S/he Worked', an experiment in Berlin which gauged the behaviour of workers on and off duty (2004). The consideration here is not simply how the artists and commissioning biennials may have delimited the participants, but also how the nature of the collaborative relationship may have been predetermined.

Kwon's rejoinder is to suggest that community-based art might be approached as a 'projective enterprise', rather than a descriptive one and that project should 'unsettle', 'activate' and 'raise questions'.[10] One might theorise the avant-garde struggle, she suggests, as a kind of spatial politics, "to pressure the definition and legitimation of art by locating it elsewhere, in places other than where it belongs".[11] Hence, the intention to uncover lost histories, to reveal what is unknown to a city's inhabitants, is essentially negated. Being situated, embedded, to feel that you belong or at least "know" a place is not necessarily of artistic merit. This aesthetics of the "wrong place" is close to the playful, psycho-geographical nature of the Situationist *dérive* and can be detected in recent biennial projects such as *The Office of Alternative Urban Planning* in San Sebastian during Manifesta 5 and Nedko Solakov's *Art & Life (In My Part of the World)* in Istanbul. These are interventionist gestures, remedial actions and shifts in the status quo, which resist the representative/documentary tendency.

Kwon's argument has been developed recently by London-based art critic Claire Bishop (without specific reference to the biennial) who has suggested that "the social turn in contemporary art has prompted

9. Foster, Hal. "The Artist as Ethnographer." *The Return of the Real.* Cambridge, Mass: MIT, 1996: 197
10. Kwon, Miwon. "Public Art and Urban Identities." *Public Art Strategies: Public Art and Public Space.* Ed. Cheryl Younger. New York: New York University, 1998: 168.
11. Kwon, Miwon. *One Place One Place after Another: Site-Specific Art and Locational Identity.* Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 2002: 165.

an ethical turn in art criticism". Citing Jeremy Deller and Phil Collins as exemplars, Bishop suggests:

> The best collaborative practices of the past ten years address the contradictory pull between autonomy and social intervention, and reflect on this antinomy both in the structure of the work and in the conditions of its reception.[12]

Grant H. Kester would argue that by pressing for work which resists (as Bishop suggests) "truthfulness and educational efficacy" in favour of "confronting darker, more painfully complicated considerations", we would miss the opportunity for art projects which engage in acts of solidarity. Kester argues for a dialogical or conversational art "which 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".[13]

Kester develops this argument and his response to Miwon Kwon's contribution in his book *Conversation Pieces: Community and Communication in Modern Art*. Here Kester suggests that perhaps artists can also work from a position of solidarity rather than simply as provocateurs, and that the effectiveness of this solidarity depends on their sensitivity to local political dynamics, histories and cultures and the possibility of a sustained relationship with participants.[14]

Thus, as participant, viewer, collaborator and client have become key roles for the audiences of the biennial, so the nature of engagement has become increasingly under scrutiny leading to a tension between the unsettling, provocative and interventionist and the complicit, strategic and collaborative. The unravelling of this debate in recent years (complicated somewhat by a pervasive misreading of Nicolas Bourriaud's *Relational Aesthetics* and the consequent confusion of 'relational' with 'social-engagement') has provided a platform for the critical appraisal of socially-engaged and participatory artworks in the context-specific biennial. Consequently, curatorial initiatives which seek to engender such interactions must begin to unpack the terminologies we use to distinguish one project from each other. For example, those artists who invite partici-

12. Bishop, Claire. "The Social Turn: Collaboration and its Discontents." *Artforum* February 2006: 178–183.
13. Kester, Grant, H. "Dialogical Aesthetics: A Critical Framework for Littoral Art." www.variant.randomstate.org/events_archive.html. 12 April 2006.
14. Kester, Grant. H. *Conversation Pieces: Community and Communication in Modern Art*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2004.

pation, often through a complicit engagement with their subject, but who essentially remain the signatories of their work (Thomas Hirschhorn, Phil Collins, Santiago Sierra), from those who those embed themselves within the social fabric of a city through intervention (Francis Alÿs, Minerva Cuevas, Roman Ondák), from those who work collaboratively effecting a kind of 'social sculpture' (Superflex, Wochenklassur). So, to speak of context as a metaphor, prediction and lived reality necessitates less an emphasis on the ethics of artistic engagement than on a differentiation between types of engagement and the potential for resonance in the resulting exhibition beyond metaphor, prediction or lived reality.

And this leads us to consider the question of 'quality and significance'. The un-stated aim of any curatorial endeavour is to produce a situation like no other. Every biennial proposition can be seen as a response to its peers and its precedents. Significance is judged against cultural, political and economic agendas — claims are made for audience figures, sustainability, consumer targets, graduate retention, economic benefit, the list goes on... But what if we judge the resulting exhibitions and projects against the stated aims to "address and empower place as having value", to conceive the city "as a privileged social site and catalytic trigger", "to respond both to the urban location and the imaginative charge that this city represents for the world", how do the works which result from these ambitious, complex and sophisticated curatorial methodologies and structures actually respond to place and do they result in significant and surprising encounters?

Looking at the critical responses to the Liverpool Biennial in 2004 and Ístanbul in 2005, it appears that Ístanbul emerged as a critical success — though attracted fewer numbers of people. Critics heralded the latter for its "articulation of pleasure and politics, a confident world view and unpretentious sense of local place", whilst responses to the Liverpool Biennial were tempered by the alleged degree of "parochialism and a repetitive riffing (or even an unreflective capitalization) on certain politically or culturally charged episodes from the city's history."[15] Though the exhibitions diverged from one another in selected sites and accompanying programmes, both were developed through a dialogue between local and international curators. Artists in the Liverpool International 04 were selected by four curator-researchers — Sabine Breitwieser, Yu Yeon

15. Polly Staple in *Frieze*. Issue 96. January — February, 2006: 113 and Tom Morton. "Liverpool Biennial 04." *Frieze*. Issue 87. November — December, 2004: 108

Kim, Cuauhtémoc Medina and Apinan Poshyananda — and supported to produce new artworks by a home team of curators at Tate Liverpool, FACT, Bluecoat and Open Eye Gallery; whilst Istanbul emerged from a dialogue between Eindhoven-based Esche and Istanbul-based Kortun.

What may distinguish critically-acclaimed biennials from the more quasi-anthropological is their capacity to allow projects to emerge over time in different guises in dialogue with existing works and contexts. If we were to consider some of the most significant art projects to respond to place of the past five years, among them Jeremy Deller's *The Battle of Orgreave* (2001), *When Faith Moves Mountains* (2002) by Francis Alÿs and Javier Tellez's *One Flew Over the Void* for Insite_05, we would see that they are multifaceted, temporary and durational; experiential and highly visual; interdisciplinary involving not only other art-forms, but other fields of knowledge and lastly, spectacularly engaging.[16] These projects effect a sense of the wrong place by shifting the status quo, by intervening in the bordered, prescribed spaces of location and consequently, when the films of all three projects have circulated through the art economy, these dislocations have been meaningful beyond the specifics of Lima, Orgreave and Tijuana / San Diego.

I remain somewhat suspicious about whether the international scattered site exhibition is the most appropriate context in which to consider place through the commissioning of new artworks. Recent history has shown that the curatorial emphasis on the city as research subject, interlocutor, social context and physical site may lead to exhibitions which are too interpretative, too quasi-anthropological in character. Most significant place-responsive or context-specific projects, whether they unsettle and provoke a sense of the wrong place or work collaboratively to effect social change, need flexible time-frames and tend to emerge from different kinds of motivation than a group exhibition rationale. That said the challenge to produce a situation in which such projects might occur in dialogue with one another, along with existing historical and contemporary works, in the context of the dynamic intersections of place, is still hard to resist.

16. *The Battle of Orgreave* was a re-enactment of one of the most violent confrontations of the miners' strike in 1984, which took place on 17 June 2001. Francis Alÿs, *Cuando la fé mueve montañas (When faith moves mountains)*, 2002, in collaboration with Cuauhtémoc Medina and Rafael Ortega, Lima. Peru took place on 11 April 2002. *One Flew Over the Void* a collaboration between Javier Tellez, the Baja California Mental Health Center in Mexico and human cannon ball David Smith took place in August 2005 as part of Insite_05. Smith was fired across the US-Mexican border — from Tijuana to a Border Field State Park in San Diego.