Reiterations: Notes on the Aesthetics of Post-studio Practice

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Iteration: Again: 13 Public Art Projects across Tasmania.

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Reiterations: Notes on the Aesthetics of Post-studio Practice
Marco Marcon

In discussing *Iteration:Again*, one is inevitably drawn to reflect – again – on the evolving nature of non-studio-based practices. What do we expect from them? What do they promise? What do they deliver? What kind of audience do they require or construct? Over 40 years have passed since Lucy Lippard and John Chandler kick-started this debate, and yet, after all this time, the question remains an issue for us. Postmodernism – remember it? – fooled us into believing that the reign of the white cube, and all that it stands for, was over. How far off the mark that was! Despite decades of aggressive and persuasive challenges to its domination, the Modernist paradigm keeps expanding, economically, institutionally and geographically turbo-charged by Neo-liberalism and globalisation. Wherever real power resides in the art world, the shadow of arch-conservative critic Hilton Kramer is never far off, albeit sometimes disguised under a thin layer of pluralist veneer.²

Yet, as projects like *Iteration:Again* remind us, efforts to rethink the meaning and function of works of art that transcend the confines of commodity fetishism, autonomous aesthetics and the gallery system, are continuing, albeit in forms different from in the past. ‘Temporary public art’ is one of the labels that has been attached to some of these new crops of practices. And as far as labels are concerned, this is a commendably straightforward one, telling you exactly what to expect without recourse to recondite metaphors or awkward circumlocutions. Its taxonomic clarity can be fully appreciated if one compares it to the definitional hand-wringing that always accompanies the naming of that type of socially engaged practice which, while related to temporary public art, we are still unsure whether to call relational, participatory, dialogical or any of the many other extant iterative monikers.

But niceties of terminology aside, the fundamental advantage of temporary public art is logistical. Compared to their permanent counterparts, these transient works are less expensive, less dependent on the approval of local authorities and less likely to attract the ire of the inevitable ‘concerned citizens’. Because of this, artists and curators can get away with experimental hijinks that would have been unthinkable had the works been commissioned to last. It is a way of making art that, to borrow Glenn Murcutt’s dictum on the aesthetic ideal of Australian architecture, ‘touches the earth lightly’. Of course, like other forms of experimental art, temporary public art also aims to bruise and tear the surface of ordinary experience; but they are bruises and tears that heal quickly. For one thing, they are often subject to a propensity to fade into the background, becoming random events that punctuate the flow of the everyday, and as a result barely register in our consciousness.

For this project David Cross commissioned artists to rework and re-present their projects in four stages, hence establishing iteration as the main rule of the game. This was a fertile curatorial conceit, potentially opening the way to all manner of restaging, *détournements, déjà vu* and temporal *doppelgängers*. Iteration relativises the work, turning it into a series of successive, partial manifestations or stages, each a facet of a whole that is never fully present. This could be seen as a
manifestation of what one may call the ‘ontological weakening’ of the work that characterises certain strands of contemporary art. Such weakening of the artwork’s essential mode of being occurred when art started to eschew the sensorial shock celebrated by High Modernism to favour temporally and spatially dispersed aesthetic experiences. Instead of the instantaneous encounter with the aural otherness of the finished masterpiece, these new practices offer an experience that relies on memory, narrative, associations and the onlooker’s ability to imaginatively and cognitively grasp a network of contextual relationships, such as – for example – the specific historical and social conditions or events into which the work intervenes.

Of course artworks have always depended on a context; they have always reflected their historical and social situations or made reference to previous and subsequent works by the same artist or school. They have also, with few notable exceptions such as Modernist abstraction, always represented a subject matter. But all of this – history, society, artistic precedents, subject matter – was thought to be extrinsic to the work; that is to say, a successful work was meant to transcend its external conditions by transforming them into fully resolved artistic expression. But works such as those featured in Iteration:Again are immanent in the world in which they intervene and from which they emerge. The world is not a catalogue of interesting subject matters to represent but both the medium and stage of artistic production, and because of this aesthetic/artistic intervention does not disappear in everyday life, it simply exists side by side with it, they cohabitate the same world in which they affect and reflect each other in different ways.

The artists’ responses to the curatorial brief varied greatly. In some cases the mode of encounter between audience and work was very tightly controlled. This was the case with Anthony Johnson’s exquisite Eclipse, a work that distilled repetition down to its purest essence. To experience the work the audience had to board a tourist coach which was then driven each Saturday afternoon for four weeks around the same inner-suburban block in North Hobart. There was no information on what one was to expect and nothing that would claim the observer’s attention. One vainly looked around for ‘art’ to show itself (it was a slightly uncomfortable time for those of us with a professional reputation to protect). The aesthetic MacGuffin became apparent when we started noticing how some of the humdrum micro-events that occurred along the way seemed to have happened in previous weeks, and were strangely happening again. There they were – the same woman walking the same dog, the same window cleaner wiping again the same spot of glass, the same cyclist turning the same corner, each re-enacting four times their staged everyday routines. The set-up had the flavour of a cinematic mise-en-scene that made you feel as if you were an extra in a re-enactment of the opening scene of François Truffaut’s Day for Night, or in some rather uneventful episode of the Twilight Zone.

Other artists opted for a much more open-ended approach that erased the separation between onlooker and participant. Paul O'Neill’s Our Day Will Come, for example, was an exercise in dialogical co-creation aimed at rethinking ideas underpinning art education. The artist created a temporary ‘art school’ which was housed in a transportable booth placed – literally and metaphorically – on the doorsteps of its institutional host, the Tasmanian School of Art at the University of Tasmania. This embryonic school-within-the-school ran a varied programme of para-educational activities, mainly based on loosely structured conversations open to anyone willing to join. The tone was both playful
and critical while being largely free from the confrontational overtone such a project would have assumed decades ago (Beuys’ Free International University comes to mind).

In some cases the public presence of the work was kept deliberately elusive, to the point of almost being reduced to conjecture or hearsay. Ruben Santiago’s *Long Drop of Water* was one such piece. Working mostly out of sight, within the almost windowless interior of Taroona’s Shot Tower, Santiago’s wove a subtle web of planted memories and displaced expectations that were addressed to both the traditional visitors to the site – a well-known local historical touristic attraction – and the specialist art crowd. The aim was seemingly to disrupt the codified historical narratives that frame the site’s cosy, and slightly sedated, ambience by introducing barely noticeable disruptions which opened the way to alternate and less comforting tales of environmental wreckage, economic exploitation and colonial oppression.

James Newitt and John Vella opted for a performative approach that theatricalised their public personae with gentle self-deprecating humour. Newitt’s idea was to temporarily secede from Tasmania/Australia by living offshore for several weeks on a floating raft complete with tent and fake palm tree, as if he were one of those bearded shipwreck survivors stranded on tiny islands who are favoured by cartoon artists the world over. Vella carried out a series of public actions that culminated in a kind of potlatch during which his previous works were cut to pieces and given away as souvenirs. Both projects hinged on the ability of the artists to present themselves as characters of quasi-mythical narratives in which they featured a self-mocking protagonists of quixotic feats of endurance or sacrifice.

The great diversity of responses to the curatorial brief reflects the almost limitless range of social, environmental and historical contexts that were potentially available to artists as sites of potential intervention. Each project inevitably required a rewriting, or at least a revision, of received rules of engagement between work and audience (although one has to question if the concept of ‘audience’ is still applicable to these types of projects). But one cannot make art in a institutional vacuum, so if artists operate out of designated and tangible institutional sites – such as the gallery, museum, the art school or the magazine – a virtual, invisible
institutional shell is still needed for the work to have meaning and value. For Miwon Kwon the intangible, but absolutely real and effective, institutional cocoon that underpins and legitimises the work of artists who intervene in a public context is the authorial function. As artists move from site to site, from community to community, they carry with them an invisible institutional shell – that is, the attributes and prerogative of the author – like a survival pack ready to be deployed when art is being made and art’s dues and prerogative need to be claimed. Hence when Ruben Santiago created a mock didactic video for Taroona’s Shot Tower he was asked to label it as a work of art lest visitors mistook it for a ‘real’ political statement. So, in the end, regardless of where it takes place or how it is conceived and planned, art can’t escape the privilege, and the curse, of its separateness. Art’s distance from what we insist on calling ‘life’ is of course essential to preserve its freedom to disrupt, or reinvent, our perceptual grasp of the historically and socially specific world in which we find ourselves thrown. But the question whether this is in itself enough, as Jacques Ranciere seems to argue, to also affect ‘real’ change is another matter.


2. The persistence of Modernist ideals of formalist connoisseurship is evident in Anne d’Harnoncourt’s reply to Hans Ulrich Obrist when asked what advice she would give to a young curator: ‘look and look and look, and then to look again, because nothing replaces looking … I am not being in Duchamp’s words “only retinal”, I don’t mean that. I mean to be with art’. Hans Ulrich Obrist (ed.), *A Brief History of Curating*, Zurich: JRP|Ringier, 2008. One wonders how this non-retinal looking and ‘being with art’ actually works, and also whether curators shouldn’t do a bit of thinking in addition to all this looking.


4. This anecdote on Clement Greenberg’s viewing habits encapsulates what was expected from the work: ‘The story goes that the great modernist critic Clement Greenberg had a rather special ritual when looking at a new artwork. He would stand in a darkened room with his eyes closed, turning his back to assistants hanging a picture on the wall and adjusting the light. When ready, Greenberg would turn around saying, “hit me.”’ Anna Bentkowska-Kafel, Trish Cashen, Hazel Gardiner (eds), *Digital Art History: A Subject in Transition*, Bristol: Intellect, 2005, p. 58.
