

Grant Kester:

Collaborative Art and the Limits of Criticism



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WITH THE EXPONENTIAL GROWTH OF COLLABORATIVE AND DIALOGICAL ART PRACTICES OVER THE PAST DECADE WE BEGIN TO SEE SOMETHING LIKE A CRISIS IN CONTEMPORARY ART CRITICISM, AS CONVENTIONALLY TRAINED HISTORIANS AND CRITICS STRUGGLE TO COME TO TERMS WITH A FORM OF ARTISTIC PRODUCTION WHICH CHALLENGES MANY OF THEIR NORMATIVE ASSUMPTIONS ABOUT THE WORK OF ART.

In conventional art practice the act of production is distinct and clearly separate from the subsequent reception of the work by viewers, during which the artist is typically not present. The critic's task in this case often entails a speculative, quasi-philosophical engagement with the propositions presented by the artist through a given work. These propositions are not meant to be 'tested' per se, but rather, are offered in the form of hypothetical statements about the world, embodied in physical and spatial form. In addition, the work of art, whether an object or an event, has a clearly demarcated beginning and end, and its form remains fixed at the moment of its initial conceptualisation by the artist. In dialogical art practices production and reception co-occur, and reception itself is re-fashioned as a mode of production. As a result, the moment of reception is not hidden or unavailable to the artist, or the critic. Moreover, the experience of reception extends over time, through an exchange in which the responses of the collaborators result in subsequent transformations in the form of the work as initially presented.

This work requires new models of reception capable of addressing the actual, rather than the hypothetical, experience of participants in a given project, with a particular awareness of the parameters of agency and affect. What is the relationship between language, utterance, physical gesture and movement in these encounters? This would also necessitate an analysis of the gathering together and disaggregation of bodies within a given project, and the ways in which these varying proximities inflect the meaning of the work and the consciousness of the participants. And this requires, in turn, new research methodologies in which the critic inhabits the site of practice for an extended period

of time, paying special attention to the discursive, haptic and social conditions of space, and the temporal rhythms of the processes that unfold there. A second set of concerns has to do with the perceived spatial and temporal limits of the work of art. Conventional object-based practices are clearly finite; they exist for a fixed period time (the duration of an exhibition or commission, for example), and then end. Moreover, the spatial field for such practices is also, generally, fixed (the space of the gallery, for example, or a series of discrete stations or sites organised through the commissioning process). Because the boundaries of the work are finite, and often pre-determined by the particular limitations of a given exhibition space or venue, the critic can easily enough identify the “object” of analysis.

Dialogical practices, on the other hand, can unfold over weeks, months and even years, and their spatial contours or boundaries typically fluctuate, expand and contract over time. As a result, this work confronts the critic with a very different set of questions. When does the work “begin” and when does it “end”? What are the boundaries of the field

within which it operates, and how were they determined? At the most basic level, can we even agree as to what constitutes the object of criticism? Because we are dealing with an unfolding process, rather than, or in addition to, a discrete image, object or event defined by set limits of space (the walls of a gallery) or time (the duration of a performance or commission), these questions become decisive in the analysis of the work. The unfinalisable quality of dialogical production requires us to understand the bounded-ness of the field of practice, and how these boundaries have been produced, modified and challenged. This would include an analysis of the artist or art collective’s entry into, and departure from, the field itself, as well as the decisions that led them to define a given social context as a field of practice in the first place.

This work also requires a very different understanding of duration in aesthetic experience. Time, in the conventions

of avant-garde artistic production, is always synchronic; new insight is transmitted to the viewer through a singular and a-temporal moment of shocked recognition. This model of reception assumes a viewer who is operating under the enforced thrall of an ideological system, which can only be broken by a countervailing moment of homeopathic violence. As a result, there is no understanding of receptive time beyond the moment of disruption itself. With dialogical art practices temporality is both extensive and irregular, marked by a series of incremental subdivisions within the larger, unfolding rhythm of a given work. As a result, it’s necessary to develop a system of diachronic analysis and notation that can encompass the project as a whole in it’s movement through moments of conflict and resolution, focusing on the productive tension between closure and disclosure, resistance and accommodation.

“I BELIEVE THERE HAS BEEN
A GRADUAL DRIFT AWAY
FROM CLOSER ENGAGEMENT
WITH THE MATERIALITY OF
ART PRACTICE”

I want to present a set of three observations regarding the position of the critic relative to dialogical and collaborative art practices. The first concerns the status of “theory”. I believe there has been a gradual drift away from closer engagement with the materiality of art practice as a result of the often-programmatic manner in which theory has been applied by many critics and historians. Too often critics use theory simply to provide intellectual validation for relatively unremarkable concepts or ideas that are already widely accepted within our discursive field, and which add little to our understanding of a particular project or work. I’d advocate here for a more reciprocal understanding of the relationship between theory and practice in art criticism. I’d like to see the theorist treated as a genuine interlocutor in the unfolding of a given work, rather than a gray (or perhaps more accurately, white) eminence. In this scenario theory can bring insight, but it can also be challenged in turn, perhaps by the very experience of practice itself. The second observation concerns the issue of reception. I want to encourage critics of this work to remain open to the possibility that a given project will enact forms of reception

that don't conform to existing models, which are typically based on the individual viewer's experience of a static or fixed object. This open-ness is all the more necessary in the case of dialogical works in which the processes set in motion by a given project can't be anticipated in advance by the artist, and which may move in directions quite different from those implicit in the original organisation of a piece.

Finally, I want to note that dialogical practices suggest a very different understanding of the relationship between consciousness and action. It is a commonplace to criticize social art practices for sacrificing an authentically "aesthetic" (albeit hazily defined) experience to a reductive concept of political efficacy. But all modernist art, even that which most violently rejects any demand for utility, is functional, whether as a protest against the very utilitarianism of modern society, or as a repository of specific quasi-spiritual values that are associated with an intellectual or creative resistance to capitalism. The operative question is, how, and at what scale, this efficacy is enacted. In the conventional view art can retain its cultural authority only so long as it operates through the incremental transformation of a single consciousness, in confrontation with a work of art. Once we attempt to extend this process (to make it "social" as it were), to understand the aesthetic as a form of knowledge that can be communicable within and among a larger collective, or in relationship to a set of institutions, rather than a single, sovereign consciousness, the autonomy of the aesthetic is endangered. This is why we so often see theorists imposing a firewall between the experience of the individual viewer and any subsequent ("practical" and therefore non-aesthetic) action in the world, which might be informed by this encounter in some way. Aesthetic experience, understood in these terms, is essentially monological. It seems to me that both of these constraints are being challenged by new forms of social art practice, in which we find a commitment to a broader, social articulation of aesthetic experience, and an interest in the creative, transversal relationship between consciousness and action in the world.

Grant Kester 2013

IN SHORT... WHAT WE'VE BEEN UP TO:

In the last couple of months we have:

Hosted a fantastic session as part of IETM; Launched From Context To Exhibition at the LAB; Hosted workshops by Peggy Shaw and Lois Weaver; Managed Round One of the Artist in the Community Scheme; Completed a literature review with UCLAN university; Distributed a Europe wide survey for artists, worked with artist Jesse Jones on her Launch for The Prosperity Project; Commissioned Grant Kester to do an essay for the redesigned Create News; Managed a commissioning process for Cowper Care; Chaired panel session on collaborative arts at IMMA; Hosted an artist in residence, photographer Stephen King.

The European Learning Network Symposium and Artists' Needs

The ELN Symposium is part of Create's commitment to partnership and the further development of learning needs for collaborative artists. The data from the Artists Needs Survey will be on the Create website in coming months and this will help shape our upcoming programme of Continuing Professional Development workshops.

New Benefits with Membership of Create

Members can now avail of reduced cost insurance); apply for a health plan from HSF; a discount on health insurance from Aviva; a range of discounts at arts venues around the country; access to short term 'hot desks' in the Create office at Curved Street.

Full details at www.create-ireland.ie



create national development
agency for collaborative arts

WELCOME TO CREATE NEWS

This is the fourteenth edition of Create News. Create News is published twice yearly in May and October and in occasional digital format. It is sent free of charge, features a guest writer and offers the latest information on Create events and services.

If you do not wish to receive further editions, please write or email us at info@create-ireland.ie. You will automatically receive copies unless you ask us to remove your details from the list.

If you would like to receive a personal copy of Create News please email info@create-ireland.ie and include details of name, address and postcode.

Create

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CREATE DEBATE:

Visual Artists Ireland's **GETTOGETHER 2013**

A day of networking, sharing and information provision

Date: 28 June

Venue: National College of Art and Design, Thomas St, Dublin

As part of VAI's **GETTOGETHER 2013**, Create has curated a series of contributions focussing on artists whose collaborations have inspired them, through the artistic process, to engage in environmental and socio-political arenas.

We are asking the presented artists to reflect on the motivations behind their work, to elaborate on the processes they undertake and to consider their work and its role in relation to broader discussions around art and society and the role of the artist in civic life.

The sessions will involve a 30 minute presentation of work followed by a question and answers session/discussion facilitated by Katherine Atkinson from Create.

11-1

Socio-Political context Presentation and discussion
with Seamus Nolan and Katherine Atkinson

11- 11.30

Seamus Nolan Artist Presentation - 10th President of Ireland

11-1

Discussion and in- conversation by Katherine Atkinson

Lunch

*Environmental context: Presentation and discussion
with Sean Taylor and Katherine Atkinson*

2 pm -2.30

Sean Taylor Artist Presentation Amhrán na mBeach Softday
(Mikael Fernstrom & Sean Taylor)

2.30-4pm

Discussion and in-conversation by Katherine Atkinson

Booking through VAI website

The Artist in the Community Scheme Bursary Award 2013: Arts and Cultural Diversity

The Artist in the Community Scheme Bursary Award 2013: Arts and Cultural Diversity aims to support individual professional artists in any artform working in the field of arts and cultural diversity. This is the fourth year that the Arts Council has provided a €10,000 Bursary Award as part of the Artist in the Community Scheme. The Bursary's purpose is to support and nurture professional collaborative arts practice in a series of different social and community contexts. The Bursary Award of €10,000 provides the selected artist with the time and resources to reflect, research and reconsider art practice realised in a variety of contexts. The Award is managed by Create . Create also managed for Arts Council the research into arts and cultural diversity policy in 2009/10. The deadline for the Award will be in October. Information on how to apply will be on the Create website in August.

CREATE DEBATE: The Many Modes of Collaboration Create in partnership with Cork Midsummer Festival

Date: 22 June Venue: Cork Arts Theatre

Time: 10–1pm Tickets: Free

Create in partnership with Cork Midsummer Festival is delighted to programme a morning of discussion on the different modes of collaboration and the ways in which artists make work with and about communities. Collaborative arts practice is an ever changing and contingent practice which defies categorisation. This discussion will feature contributions by Festival artists Rimini Protokoll, Mammalian Diving Reflex, Una McKeivitt and Mark Storor, creator of last year's Festival highlight **Hungry Tea**, and will showcase a range of contemporary processes and approaches. The morning will also involve a performance lecture of the Collaborative Arts Performance Pack, a professional development resource for the creation of theatre making rooted in collaborative processes, launched by Create in 2012.

Artist in the Community Scheme First Round 2013 Research and Development Award

Artist; Community/Context; Artform; Location

Nell Regan; NALA (literacy group + communities) & National Print Museum; community of interest; literature; Dublin.

Sarah Lincoln; Ardmore Youth Group; community of interest; visual arts; Waterford.

Pauline O'Connell; The Sports/Community Field Committee; Castlewarren; community of interest; visual arts; Kilkenny.

Toma Sharon McCullin; LinC (lesbians in Cork); community context; visual arts Cork.

Project Realisation:

Community; Artist; Project title; Context; Artform; Location.

Able Women; Ceara Conway; Visible Lives; cultural diversity; context; Galway.

(Ceara received an R&D with mentoring award under the AIC Scheme last year to work with Fiona Whelan as her mentor).

Panel:

Dylan Tighe, theatremaker; Caitriona O'Reilly, Arts Officer, Cavan County Arts Office; Maeve Mulrennan, visual artist & curator; Galway Arts Centre. Observers: Sheila Gorman, Officer, Arts Participation, Arts Council; Davide Terlingo, Head of Dance, Arts Council.

