

Momentum International Art Conference

# Questioning the Social

ethics and aesthetics in contemporary art

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Social liability

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A mainstreaming seems to be going on concerning the artistic production of social space. In fact, the exhibition theme of the moment revolves around questions of art's active relation to its location in culture. Major European curator schools in Amsterdam and London are this spring producing exhibitions called Democracy! and Plan B, exhibitions whose subject matters deal with the ways "artists are increasingly interacting with the "stuff" of the world", as it says in the catalogue for Democracy!. Also the large biennials - Manifesta this summer, São Paulo next year, and not least Momentum, will in each their way trace the ramifications of the aesthetic in the social sphere, and vice versa.

The "social" interests of contemporary art are articulated along an axis of artistic strategies that in different ways are said to take place on the borderline of the art institution. Typically these strategies describe an involvement with corporate structures or with an activist ethos or aesthetic; with alternative economies and systems of distribution; and collaborative models and collective identities.

Now, the tradition of avantgarde art has aspired to a concrete form of cultural work in the public sphere - even if it has rarely performed that work. In connection with the present focus on artistic "productivism", different spheres are being, not necessarily transgressed, but they are being articulated simultaneously in ways which remove these articulations from a traditional artistic radicalism.

As with any other type of art it hardly makes sense to talk about any ultimate curatorial and artistic motivation for dealing with social sensibilities. Nor is it particularly productive to attempt a definition of ethics, aesthetics or the social from any institutional or social outside. I believe it makes more sense to establish as a starting point the intentionality of specific agents, to try to verify particular standards in a diversity of spaces.

You might say that artistic, critical and curatorial interest in the social sphere describes a current of re-socialisation after the emptying out of value that followed in the wake of postmodernism, while it takes into account the fleeting modes of the post-media, consumerist society. This looks and sounds like a return to some of the tenets of the '60s and the '70s. But whereas sociality up through the '60s and the '70s became increasingly governed by economical and political ideas, social space is now a notion that is vulnerable in its complexity, and governed by a lack of unifying principles. Many parallels can in this respect be drawn to artistic interests of the 60s and 70s, but one should proceed carefully to establish such a genealogy.

Back then, artists organised themselves collectively in more or less open opposition to society's institutions. And at art exhibitions and extra-institutional events, you could find off-set printing machines or graphic printing presses whose free availability signalled the liberation of the means of production in accordance with Marxist ideas. Obviously this meant that the focus was on the ideologically transparent freeing of suppressed energies and potentials in each individual. For instance, when the extra-academic initiative the Experimental Art School in the late 60s installed an open air graphic printing press at Kgs. Nytorv - a fashionable square in Copenhagen, it was a gesture that was meant to allow every passer-by to set free his or her own alienated creativity. In short, the youth revolts feeling of doing something because you are part of a greater movement, or doing something because it appeals to a greater movement, is now absolutely lost. The public sphere is drained, annulled. What artistic activity during the 90s have demonstrated is that the only possibility in relation to the public sphere is to act in limited pockets in social space - and thereby attempt to establish other economies.

A dynamic prefiguration of the social interests of current art, however, can be found in a project from 1968 by the Danish artist Palle Nielsen, that he did at the Moderna Museet in Stockholm: it is called Model for a Qualitative Society. Nielsen chose the Moderna Museet to be the framework for an expansion of what he had previously been practising in the form of community action in less privileged areas of Copenhagen: the construction of playgrounds. After a long period of persuasion and fundraising, Model for a Qualitative

Society, a playground in the museum, was built in October 1968 with the assistance of a group of local anti-Vietnam War activists. New walls and a Masonite floor were installed in the large hall, along with jungle gyms, a foam-rubber basin, swings, climbing ropes, and water chutes. Tools, paint, building materials and fabrics were at children's disposal during the entire course of the project to aid their creativity. The Royal Theatre donated a selection of period costumes to be used for dressing up, while Nielsen provided carnival masks in the spirit of the day: 100 of de Gaulle, 100 of Mao, and 100 of Lyndon B. Johnson. The noise level of the art project must be unparalleled in art history: loudspeaker stacks were placed in each corner of the exhibition space, and the young museum-goers operated turntables with a collection of LPs from every genre. The playground architecture embodied the project's aim: The white cube was transformed into an open area for protected play. All of Stockholm's kids were granted free entrance, but adults had to pay a 5 crowns admission. During its three week life, the Model received over 33,000 visitors, 20,000 of whom were children. It was important to Nielsen that the Model... took place in Moderna Museet – that the message that elitist art isn't everything was carried by a traditionally weighty institution. In the midst of the 60s' distrust of social institutions, the Model... accepted the patronage of the white cube from a propagandist viewpoint. What counted was that the museum could be seen as a resource for re-coding and re-territorialisation; that the museum space became malleable in relation to human activity. The playground subsumed the gallery space in a single gesture. But 'gesture' is usually predicated on the naughtiness of formal excess, something which doesn't gel with the lively, welcoming utility of the Model.... Or, as Brian O'Doherty states in his essay 'Inside the White Cube', a gesture 'is not art, perhaps, but art-like and thus has a meta-life around and about art'.

Even though the Model... filled an entire museum as a single unit, the protective white walls seemed ultimately disposable. In this respect, the museum walls were transparent, a membrane through which actual and metaphorical social value would be exchanged by osmosis. The walls were also mirrors that reflected the activity of the children and their creative identity. Nielsen's analysis of the white cube differs from many others in his emphasis on the project's direct impact on behaviour. 'There is no exhibition. This is only an art show because the children are playing inside an art museum. This is only an exhibition for those who are not playing. That is why we are calling it a model', stated the press release. In the context of the era's desire for revolutionary upheaval, the Model... was more an action than a demonstration, an engagement with the individuals and their relationship with the world. Nielsen considered political demonstration utterly lacking in fantasy, a means of protest which can only have negative effects. The more imaginative action of the Model... explored the idea that children's early social relations create the adult. Creativity and experiential contact were thus declared human priorities, 'the qualitative human being' defined as a social individual with a strong need for group relations and the necessity to work collaboratively as an alternative to authoritarian society. Thereby the Model... also short-circuited the ideology of the auteur that still persisted by that time. In many respects, the autonomy of the artistic sphere was in this period maintained in relation to the political/public sphere, because of the supposedly liberating and universally democratic potential of creative energies. Palle Nielsen and his crew of Vietnam activists, however, relegated creativity to the pedagogical realm: there is only hope for those under 5 years of age, the Model... seemed to say.

In our own historical moment the question is how the concept of art - with its subtle internal distinctions - in an active way can be connected with the commercialised and culturally orderly notion of social space - a space that seems to be endlessly open to investment. The internationalisation of capital, fast communication technologies, global media etc., and the way this global culture has appropriated a progressive language and an "avant-garde" dynamics often fool us into thinking that our time is an expansive cultural context. It is not. In other words: in the age of globalism capital is having a boundless field trip, it has developed into a total dimension with unlimited access, while culture is founded on very stable and orderly parameters. Art's homelessness is of another character, which is witnessed by the rather melancholic projects that have articulated the 90s art scene: soup distributions, the construction of living units, cinemas for the unemployed. Just like the notion of social space needs to be qualified, so does the

notion of art, in the confrontation with and in the deconstruction of the ideologies of the world and of the "art world".

If you articulate a critical, artistic practice in the perspective of external and internalised, societal norms you must also take into account real interaction and the specificity of relations in social space. Aesthetic agency becomes performative in the perspective of the total cultural situation.

Performative consciousness consists in an awareness of the fact that through your agency, or lack of it, something is added to the world. You can't choose not to perform. Poststructuralist thinkers like Jacques Derrida focused on the indeterminacy of performativity, and I think that rather than describing any social aesthetic as a direct reaction to this paradigm, it is more productive to acknowledge that there is also deconstructive moments at stake in social aesthetic strategies - but that this discussion is located elsewhere, and invested with other intensities than the text-based paradigm of post-structuralism. This means that if you want art to mess with the stability of categories you must also accept that the category and the institutional practices of visual art may end up being restrictive: you have to acknowledge and promote those transports that go on between different public spheres, without necessarily being able to maintain an overview of these processes.

Of course there is a risk that the fusion of social and aesthetic energies becomes a titbit for our social consciousness. Or becomes imbued with a celebration of itself, as has been the case with some projects of the 90s.

In 1998 in the Migros institute in Zürich, Rirkrit Tiravanija presented a solo show, *Das Soziale Kapital*. It featured a supermarket as an authorized readymade, put at the artist's disposal by the institute's sponsor, the Swiss supermarket chain Migros. Among fruit stalls, freezer compartments, and shelves stacked high with toilet paper, Tiravanija orchestrated highlights from the institute's collection (Hanne Darboven, Gilbert & George, Richard Long, Dan Flavin, and Thomas Schütte, among others). These supplemented an extensive presentation of Tiravanija's own works: leftovers from a Rirkrit meal, a beanbag reading environment, video projections, an unemployed person sewing Rirkrit feedbags, and a mechanics' workshop, where the artist's car was being taken care of. *Das Soziale Kapital* comprised an inventory of '90s formal strategies: real-life appropriation as well as art history supplements, process-oriented installation, social design, and so forth. Tiravanija posited the supermarket as an articulation of an art historical axis and an occasion to enact a certain formal virtuosity. Instead of casting the art institution's resources out into the public sphere, Tiravanija focused on discursive continuity in the aesthetic field as an insistence on cultural surplus and art as consumption. In *Das Soziale Kapital*, the social became emblematic, and signed by the artist. \* [Rirkrit slide "Playtime" MOMA 1997, Elizabeth Peyton]

To reserve a place for malaise is a strategy to avoid that art collapses as mere embellishment in institutional and public space. Discussions of art and social space have a tendency to become moralising, as in "society is behaving irresponsibly, therefore art should behave responsibly". This is a sort of unilateral cultural disarmament, and risks being an adoption of the intellectual convictions of the business world: that markets are democracy and that social conflict is dysfunction.

This is *Cruising Pavilion* (1998) \* by Michael Elmgreen and Ingar Dragset in the Marselisborg Forest, a pastoral location near Aarhus in Denmark. The local authorities' ban on outdoor sexual activity was negotiated by this public art work. The darkened white cube became a place for trysts, an adventurous architecture awaiting bodily traffic. Glory holes in the walls \* combined an openness to intruders with the voyeur's desire to hide and watch. *Cruising Pavilion* latches on to the logic of the Modernist white cube: white as a saint and dark as a predator.

There is also a boredom and an anonymity at stake in the pavilion: it is a social sculpture which acknowledges that manipulation - even violent manipulation - is a symptom of the need to create sites of enunciation for yourself in places that don't acknowledge you. Violence is the extreme conversion of an

order or an object, a stab at the wish for liberation. Space in Elmgreen and Dragset's work doesn't announce itself, it has to be brought out, challenged by the mundane presence of the activities that frame it; it begs you to perform. Rather: it makes you perform, because it analogises several types of behaviour. There is violence in walking the wrong way down a one-way street, and in spasms of libidinal activity; just as violence to begin with was an integral part of Modernist architecture's denigration of negative space, and its totalising schemes for organising social space. Gay culture has been forced to convert settings reserved for other purposes – toilets, parks – into social and intimate spaces, and Elmgreen and Dragset's work go with and against this grain of gay culture. While some of their environments solicit 'illegitimate' behaviour, others perform crackdowns on the functionality of queer coding. [vippe] paraphrase of David Hockney's springboard - in gay coding an allegory of taking a header into your sexuality, of coming out of the closet. But here the springboard is ineffective, dysfunctional, frozen.

In this way, queer space is being queered; the codes and routines that hold it together as a cultural arrangement are worn thin. This is in keeping with a process that implicitly questions what can be particularly 'gay' about any representation, when gay culture has gained relative access to the mainstream. This is shown to be the predicament of (sub)culture in general. To find yourself in Elmgreen and Dragset's displaced ambiances is to feel the pull of your identity, whether you are straight or gay. On a horizon of external intolerance and internal division, purpose and destiny are exaggerated and undermined at the same time. Space is fucked up because function is fucked up. 'What are you about?', the works seem to ask. 'What does your desire hang on to?' On one hand, there is the suggestion of a fading 'we' that refers to the loneliness of violently separated identities; on the other hand, the sense of a failure to condense things into a representational logic that can speak for the coherence and relevance of group identity. Space is collapsed via insertions that slice through the membranes of public, semi-public and mental spaces, destabilising their physical and ideological walls.

In his book *Mythologies*, the French thinker Roland Barthes wrote that "we are condemned for some time yet to speak excessively about reality". This means that as an analyst of myths, you could no longer be one with the myth-consumers; the analyst has an uneasy cerebral relation to the goings on of the world, being in society but not inside it, producing analyses of social space which are often anything but social: "...we constantly drift between the object and its demystification, powerless to render its wholeness. For if we penetrate the object, we liberate but destroy it; and if we acknowledge its full weight, we respect it, but restore it to a state which is still mystified".

In Elmgreen and Dragset's cruising pavilion, as in Palle Nielsen's model for a qualitative society, there exists a simultaneity of interests, which so to speak give up the comprehensive view of themselves. There is no ideological monomania or transparency here: some contemplate the pavilion as art, others use it for sex. In this way Elmgreen and Dragset's pavilion define the cultivation of new audiences. The pavilion seems to say that these new audiences can be quite specialised audiences, or they fall in two parties who each get what they respectively want. If Palle Nielsen used the white cube as a forum for the dynamics of the public sphere, then Elmgreen and Dragset place the white cube in the public sphere and allows it to mutate according to the logic of desire.

In the realm of "social aesthetic" activities we sometimes find the potential of interpreting via our agency and our manipulations of the world, where we can establish a simultaneity of aesthetic pleasure, interpretation, practice and critique. This means that sometimes our unfinished understanding of any given framework in the world is allowed to co-exist with the pleasure of manipulation of circumstance.

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