

COLLECTIVITY AS “MUSE”: BEING PUBLIC WITHOUT A PARACHUTE

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In this paper I will speculate on the term *public* as an opportunity for performativities rather than as a space, state or polity. To do this I'll reflect upon a series of four site-specific installations I made for the *Jiggi School of Arts Hall* in Northern New South Wales. These works were made with a specific audience in mind: residents of the Jiggi Valley and their friends, who I began to imagine as my 'intimate audience'. In order to wonder about what might have been enacted within these works and what effects such enactments might produce in the world, I will try out Irit Rogoff's multi-inhabitations of criticality.¹ (2006)

SITUATING THE JIGGI SCHOOL OF ARTS HALL PROJECTS

Located in the Jiggi Valley, between Lismore and Nimbin, the Jiggi School of Arts Hall (Figure 1), is a focal point for community activities for two related communities: Jiggi and Georgica. Arriving in Georgica in 1995, I found this community to be proactive, concerned with sustainability and self-sufficiency and welcoming of newcomers. The one hundred year old hall is used by many groups for meetings, weddings, balls, parties, wakes, and for yoga, dance, craft and martial arts classes – many of which I've participated in or helped to organise.

This series of installations commenced in March 2008 with *libation*; *raft* and *kindle* followed in July and October; and *zephyr* completed the series in February 2009. (Figure 2) Each installation was focused on one of four 'elements': *libation* – water (Figures 3, 4, 5, 6); *raft* – earth (Figure 7, 8, 9, 10); *kindle* – fire (Figure 11,12,13,14); and *zephyr* - air (Figure 15,16, 17, 18, 19). I was drawn to the Jiggi Hall as a site for these works for two related reasons: firstly, it was a 'known' community space for me, and secondly I wanted to make works for an audience to whom I felt connected.

Over the last twenty years I have located my practice within accepted terminologies of *public space*, *installation*, *site-specificity* and *ephemerality*, and have previously theorised audiences for such works as *co-creators*. (Bracker 1995) However, I'm now at a point where these terminologies seem inadequate to appreciate an *intimate audience*.

¹ Rogoff's current research interests are 'audience participation in contemporary art spaces' *Goldsmith University of London*, 'Department of Visual Cultures – Professor Irit Rogoff', accessed 15 May 2009 <<http://www.gold.ac.uk/visual-cultures/i-rogooff/>>.

BEING PUBLIC WITHOUT A PARACHUTE

At a recent, international symposium in New Zealand titled 'Art, Time and Place', art interventions within public spaces were described as sets of 'highly unstable practices' performed within *off-sites* where artworks could be 'socially engaged, educational and more accessible to the public' (Rendall 2009).² I also noted the frequent use of *publics* rather than the singular term. However, while new terminologies might help to delineate curatorial practices focused outside museum and gallery settings, I was unsure of how such *publics* might be constituted or how their meaning making might be enacted.

If, as Rosalyn Deutsche (1998) suggested, being 'outside the museum' becomes the 'necessary, if not sufficient, condition of art's publicness', and the term *public* is accepted as having democratic connotations, then, "openness," "accessibility," "participation," "inclusion," and "accountability" to "the people" are implied. But how can these dynamics be worked with, without knowing something of the individuals who constitute *the people*? Is there a presumption, as Deutsche (1998) warned, that publicness was that space where something had already been settled, and therefore already known? An alternative view, articulated by philosopher Claude Leforte (in Deutsche 1988) was that publicness was a social space where 'the meaning and unity of the society is negotiated, constituted and put at risk'. While tensions between heterogeneity and homogeneity within a public sphere should be kept in mind, Christian Kravagna (1998) suggested that welcoming engagement and accessibility might only allow 'for the incorporation of "the social" in small bites that are aesthetically easily digestible, but do not require any further reflection'.

During the 1990s, art in a public, social sphere, was addressed by Suzanne Lacy and Arlene Raven and gave rise to new terminologies, including ' "New Genre Public Art"³ ... and "art in the public interest"' (Kravagna 1998) Lacy currently chairs the Master of Fine Arts Public Practice Program at Otis College of Art and Design in Los Angeles. Since the 1970s, she's collaborated with communities in the creation of installations and performances that, in her words, 'function as public hearings'. (Lacy 2009) This performative turn of phrase aligns her approach with Deutsche's (1998) suggestion that public space might be more productively imagined, as 'the performance of an operation' rather than as a location. When this temporality is recognized, public space becomes a place and time in which ongoing processes of constitution, negotiation and risking are possible.

² Part of the *One Day Sculpture* project.

³ for full explanation of this term see Suzanne Lacy, 1995, 'Debated Territory: Toward a Critical Language for Public Art' in S. Lacy (ed.), *Mapping the Terrain: New Genre Public Art*, Bay Press, Seattle Washington, pp. 171-192.

For Lacy (1993, p. 297), a number of shifts have occurred in theorizing artists use of public space: firstly, from the 'plunk theory' of public art to the 'chat-them-up-theory', where an audience 'buys into' the work, when their feedback was welcomed or where their 'existing environment' was recognized. A further move was when social processes were used to transform the public site of the work into a place (Lacy 1993, p. 301). While I'm drawn to the potential of this third move, my decision to use the Jiggi Hall was precisely because, for me, this 'site' was already a place. My ongoing participation in using and caring for our hall constituted place-making, allowing me to feel transformed from a landholder into a community member. Therefore, making works for a place in which I felt embedded, was an extension of a life I was already living.

Lacy suggested this third move provoked some transformation, made possible because both process and context – engagement and publicness – were treated as equally important aspects of working in a public sphere. But context, for Lacy (1993, p. 290) was more than a known physical or social location: it included 'how work is situated within *the life* of a community and society'.⁴ Although my motivation for this work was not focused upon transformation, I did desire to attend to *the lived-life* of my valley community through my artistic practice.

However, I was able to get my 'intimate audience' to buy into the work, and, over the year long project, to continue buying into it. But it is not as simple as that. An invitation from me, as a 'local', was a motivating factor for some people: a case of buying into MY work. For others, who do not regularly visit art galleries, or who hadn't seen my previous works, it may have been their preparedness to support local events, despite personal tastes or interests.

If this project can be understood through publicness, then it was for me, a case of *being public without a parachute*. This turn of phrase was suggested by Consuelo Velasco, program manager for Lacy's Laton Project, who warned against being 'a parachute artist going into a community to make changes' (in Emerling 2009).⁵ Using this phrase, I wish to conjure my embeddedness within my community, and hence, no need for a parachute.

Despite these alignments, I'm left to wonder how these works, designed to address an *intimate* audience, might be understood as public art – of one type or another - and how I might make meanings from the engagements generated. A productive move was to take up Lacy's articulation of context, as enactments within the life of a community. However, I see a danger here in 'a public' being conveniently replaced by 'a community', with recognition of a change of scale and little else. Usefully, Arlene Raven (1995, p. 163) suggested that community can be distinguished through a commonality which:

⁴ emphasis added.

⁵ This project's described at *Fresno State News*, 2009, 'Fresno State Students, alumni work on Laton art project', 11 March, accessed 15 May 2009 <<http://www.fresnostatenews.com/2009/03/LatonArtProject.htm>>.

... expresses each individual and finds a like pattern in the whole, one that may be inherited but is also chosen, and not only bonds individuals in a solidarity but also inspires a potent, propelling, and cooperative collectivity.

Keeping in mind Lefort's position of publicness and contestation, I would want to argue for a solidarity that is never fixed or stable, but that arises within the negotiated, risky processes of realising a common goal.

COLLECTIVITY AS MUSE

I'd now like to turn to collectivity as a way to think differently about publicness and art audiences. For Rogoff (2004), collectivity was emergent and performative, taking place as 'we arbitrarily gather to take part in different forms of cultural activity', and characterized by 'ongoing processes of low key participations' which 'produce new forms of mutuality'. Mutuality, or in Rogoff's (2004) words, a 'WE', might emerge that differs from accounts of audience and reception practices which privilege 'individual, private reflection as the ground from which meanings are made in relation to artworks'. Exploring this 'WE', she turns her attention away from familiar collectivities of the art world, namely:

WE the visitors to the museums and exhibitions

WE the lovers of art

WE charter citizens of the art world

WE critical theorists who pursue the hidden meanings and the covert agendas of both art works and of exhibiting institutions

WE who believe that contemporary art has a stake in cultural citizenship (Rogoff 2004).

Instead, Rogoff (2004) imagined audiences as producing meanings 'not simply through the subjectivities they project on art works' but also 'through relations with one another and through the temporality of the event of the exhibition'. My decision to deliver invitations only to those who lived in the valley, meant that many participants in the works knew each other already or had friends in common.⁶ Operating through a rhizomic logic, this *intimate* audience might be seen as enfolded within a multiplicity of connections within geographic and social dynamics (Taylor 1995). Moreover, when an intimate audience is constituted through temporalities of ongoing connectedness, meaning making itself might be extended beyond the life of the exhibitions. I observed and participated in this extended engagements when some of my intimate audience discussed the project at subsequent social and community events.

⁶ I arranged for our local postie Sonia, to deliver invitations to all houses on her mail run. As the invitation was also extended to friends of residents, I was not seeking to limit this audience, but to extend it through drawing upon a web of existing connections.

At each of the exhibition openings, I was struck by a sense of celebration, not only of the work, but also of being together in a particular place, which was in itself meaningful for us. In preparation for this conference, I asked those who had participated for some reflections upon their experiences. While I received comments about, and interpretations of the artworks, my respondents consistently emphasized the importance of place and mutuality:

... very Jiggi – organic, culturally connected, in OUR community space, for US... always, at the back of my mind, I was aware of my location – in the Jiggi Valley... loved the concept of the shows in the local hall... wonderful ... to experience the transformation of our hall... the familiarity of the space allowed me to feel more intimate with the work... especially interesting to have it 'tied' to our local environment / community... I simply liked the fact it was local, accessible... I very much appreciated the small community venue... none of the hushed and reverential behaviour and body language that conventional art galleries seem to trigger... a chance to feel comfortable just sitting and pondering – feeling unpressured and uninhibited... I felt very welcome there...

... an exercise in connecting ... bringing us together as part of the deal... provided me with other participants with whom I could easily connect to discuss the installation... there was an immediate connection with the audience because you were friends and neighbours... seemed that audience and artist were part of the art... they were community events... the fun of getting together for a party... the buzzing activity and communication between friends and acquaintances ... joy in discovering how [the work] had been created, transported and displayed and talked about them with friends and neighbours... people chatted, circled and discussed the artwork ... and engaged... in spirited conversation... sometimes we just sat together and watched – sharing silence... I believe people not only wished to support your work, but to foster your desire for community involvement, so that it wasn't a 'curiosity', but an interest and excitement to attend...⁷

While I appreciated these responses and felt that something significant had been generated, it has taken some time for me to value the 'WE' of the work as part of a critical discourse. Lacy (1993, p. 289) suggested that: 'Contemporary criticism has no means to evaluate the meaning attributed by participants or viewers to their experience, perhaps because this experience is not deemed relevant'. I also found it hard to imagine what it might mean to inhabit a critical stance when trying to frame my embeddedness in the 'WE' of my *intimate* audience.

⁷ From personal email correspondence in reply to my request for responses to participation in the works

INHABITING CRITICALITY

Currently, I am trying to follow Rogoff's (2006) example, by enacting a *turn* from my 'knowing' position of academic and artist, in order to inhabit places of 'potentiality and possibility'. She offered a useful perspective in her move from 'criticism' to 'critique' and then to 'criticality'.⁸ To summarise her position: criticism was understood as 'a form of finding fault ... exercising judgement according to a consensus of values'; critique was examining 'the underlying assumptions that allow something to appear as a convincing logic'; while criticality allowed operating 'from an uncertain ground of actual embeddedness' (Rogoff 2006). This last stance was for Rogoff (2006), a 'complex multi-inhabitation', shot through with risk and the acknowledgment of one's own limitations and it was approached by being *undone*, *without*, *unfitting* and *entangled*.

To conclude, I want to try out Rogoff's strategy in order to inhabit criticality in relation to this project.

Q. What needs to be undone?

A. My reliance on paradigms of epistemological agency in order to inhabit the awkwardness of not-yet knowing.

Q. What do I need to be without?

A. Relying upon a legitimating art historical narrative in favour of lived moments of partial recognition.

Q. How can I perform an 'unfitting'?

A. By giving up my desire for specificities of role, (me as artist, them as audience) in favour of 'a culture of singularity' in order to appreciate and be curious about performative moments of mutuality as meaningful in themselves.⁹

Q. How can I remain entangled?

A. By owning the messy condition that is silenced through easy divisions between art and life, artist and audience, production and reception, or making and theorising, so that, in Rogoff's words:

... we produce new subjects in the world ... and ... we have the wisdom and courage to argue for their legitimacy while avoiding the temptation to translate them, or apply them or separate them (2006).

⁸ Rogoff is not suggesting here that critique is abandoned in a move to criticality, but that a multi-inhabitation is possible.

⁹ Rogoff draws on Deleuze to speak of a 'culture of singularity (singular to a logic of its own organisation'.

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Figure 1



Figure 2



Figure 3



Figure 4



Figure 5



Figure 6



Figure 7



Figure 8



Figure 9



Figure 10

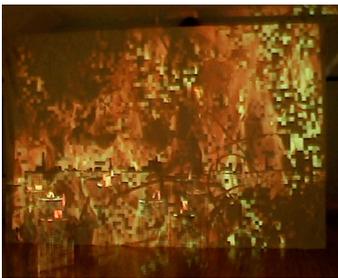


Figure 13



Figure 14



Figure 11



Figure 12

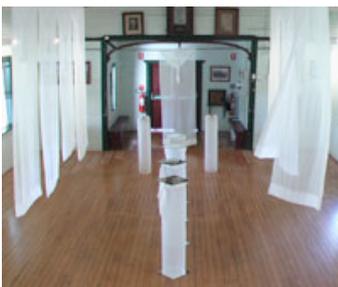


Figure 16



Figure 17



Figure 18

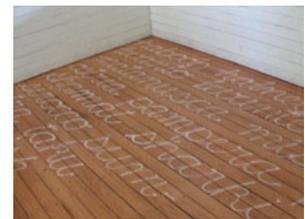


Figure 19