

Expand/Contract: A Case Study

Paula Silva

PhD Candidate, Tasmanian School of Art, University of Tasmania

The Case Study and Its Context

The PhD research project is contextualised within the field of curatorship of art presented outside the art museum and gallery. The research investigates mechanisms of mediation between art and audiences, when art is presented outside the art museum and gallery. These include exhibition design, interpretation material, documentation and engagement with audiences, activities traditionally carried out by the curator.

When speaking of art that is presented outside the art museum and gallery, I speak of artworks that are presented outside specific buildings which are recognised as 'containers of art'. These buildings are recognised as such because they are the materialisation of a set of conventions that are put in place to distinguish specific objects from an everyday context, and thus attributing these objects the status of 'artwork' (Buren, 1975, pp.124-25). Art that is presented outside the museum/gallery building may also exist under some of the same conventions, such as interpretation material, publications and signs which identify and determine a space or place as a 'container' or 'site' of art. In both situations, inside or outside the building, the main purpose for having these conventions is to mediate the encounter between art and public. For the purpose of this discussion I will name these conventions 'mechanisms of mediation'.

In the case study *Expand/Contract* mechanisms of mediation (e.g. location and signage) were reduced to a minimum to highlight the focus of the investigation, which explored the encounter between art and audience in an unmediated environment. The mediation mechanisms eliminated in this case study were: formal exhibition space location, exhibition space identification signage, formal/celebratory event marking the beginning of the exhibition period – opening, exhibition design, artworks identification and interpretation signage and the catalogue.

Expand/Contract was an event and exhibition that temporarily placed artists and artworks within daily life alongside everyday events. Over four consecutive weeks, four artists occupied a retail space in Hobart's Cat & Fiddle Arcade with objects and sometimes the artists' physical presence, but also with 'living works' (Johnstone,

2008, p.48). *Expand/Contract* was about the discursive, disperse, non-unified nature of the experience. Artworks 'happened' as each artist occupied the space for a one-week period, generating four different experiences.

The chosen location in Hobart's CBD, is a space charged with everyday connotations, a space that belongs to the everyday landscape and which use value the public recognises. During *Expand/Contract* there were no specific characteristics like banners, labels or signs identifying and determining this space as a 'container of art'.



Figure 1: Exhibition location: Cat & Fiddle Arcade, Hobart

The appropriation of the shop space started subtly with Judith Abell's interference with the shopping centre visitors' expectations. Each evening, when shops were closed and corridors were empty, the artist started working. Gradually, she added new elements to a display that each morning seemed to promise the imminent opening of a shop. When finally, after a full week, as passersby were trying to understand and place this retail space, called *(work) shop*, the shop disappeared, giving way to an arrangement resembling an office.



Figure 2: *(work) shop*, installation by Judith Abell. Duration: Friday, 23rd October – Friday, 30th October 2009



Figure 3: *(work) shop*, installation by Judith Abell. Duration: Friday, 23rd October – Friday, 30th October 2009

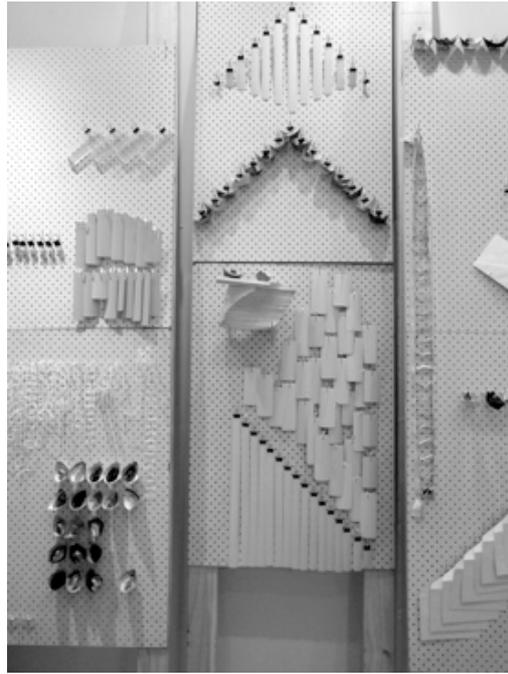


Figure 4: *(work) shop*, installation by Judith Abell. Duration: Friday, 23rd October – Friday, 30th October 2009



Figure 5: *(work) shop*, installation by Judith Abell. Duration: Friday, 23rd October – Friday, 30th October 2009

During the subsequent week, this 'office' was Tristan Stowards's work place. He designed *Every Day in Every Way I am Getting Better & Better*, a self-improvement program that he performed in the shop space from 9am to 5pm every day of the week, resembling TV reality shows that now are part of the performative spectacle (Lütticken, 2005, pp.174-75).



Figure 6: *Every Day In Every Way I Am Getting Better & Better*, performance by Tristan Stowards. Duration: Friday, 31st October – Friday, 6th November 2009



Figure 7: *Every Day In Every Way I Am Getting Better & Better*, performance by Tristan Stowards. Duration: Friday, 31st October – Friday, 6th November 2009



Figure 8: *Every Day In Every Way I Am Getting Better & Better*, performance by Tristan Stowards. Duration: Friday, 31st October – Friday, 6th November 2009



Figure 9: *Every Day In Every Way I Am Getting Better & Better*, performance by Tristan Stowards. Duration: Friday, 31st October – Friday, 6th November 2009

In the third week another new use was given to the shop space. Inaccessible to the public, but viewable through a large window, the space was occupied by a jumble of pieces of furniture, tennis balls, computer and inflatable mattresses. At a first glance, it seemed that the space had become a storage room; a repository of objects that in contrast with the frenzied activity of the shopping centre, resembled a capsule where time had stopped. During the following days it was noticeable, however, that an event was taking place. Some objects had been pushed away, slightly changed position, more tennis balls had appeared and the inflatable mattresses were inflating. On the wall, inside, but visible from the outside, a schedule of actions was displayed. *7/56/480/21800*, designed by Anthony Johnson, was an apparatus that, when activated, materialised the motion of time, apparently held in an empty shop space.



Figure 10: *7/56/480/21800*, installation by Anthony Johnson. Duration: Friday, 7th November – Friday, 13th November 2009



Figure 11: 7/56/480/21800, installation by Anthony Johnson. Duration: Friday, 7th November – Friday, 13th November 2009



Figure 12: 7/56/480/21800, installation by Anthony Johnson. Duration: Friday, 7th November – Friday, 13th November 2009



Figure 13: 7/56/480/21800, installation by Anthony Johnson. Duration: Friday, 7th November – Friday, 13th November 2009

During the fourth and final week, *The City Writes It Self*, by Astra Howard, materialised the motion and transmutation of the city and the ‘everyday’, prompted by our actions and experiences. During this week the shop became a discursive place. Firstly Astra printed quotes by famous urban theorists on the walls of the shop. These described the city as a space inhabited and constructed by human action and interaction. Then, gradually, sentences – short accounts of the encounters the artist had with people in the streets of Hobart – appeared ‘floating’ against the printed background, revealing that every individual experience, in becoming part of the city, participates in the writing of the city itself.



Figure 14: *The City Writes It Self*, action research and installation by Astra Howard. Duration: Friday, 14th November – Friday, 20th November 2009



Figure 15: *The City Writes It Self*, action research and installation by Astra Howard. Duration: Friday, 14th November – Friday, 20th November 2009



Figure 16: *The City Writes It Self*, action research and installation by Astra Howard. Duration: Friday, 14th November – Friday, 20th November 2009

By placing artists and artworks within daily life alongside everyday events, *Expand/Contract* also became part of the city and added another series of stories to its fabric.

From Object to Event

The traditional understanding of 'art exhibition' is: a spatial construction in which a collection of artworks is displayed. An artwork is extracted from its original context and inserted into the context of the exhibition where elements such as the display's design and lighting, contract and limit artworks into ascribed aesthetic meanings and values. This process frames the artwork as an autonomous entity, preserving it within a commoditised and fetishised form (Buren, 1975, pp.124-25).

Andrea Fraser (2005, p.57) identifies four strategies of resistance practiced by artists since the 1960s. These gave rise to several transformations both in art practice and artworks, which in turn gave rise to transformations in modes of art presentation. The strategies identified by Fraser (2005, p.57) are:

[1] Counter hegemonic practices of cultural and community-based activism ... against institution and market - AWC [Art Workers Coalition] and other groups; ... [2& 3] strategies of resistance directed at art – art practice and artistic products. They include conceptual art's dematerialisation of the art object in language and in action and the temporalisation of artworks in specific times and spaces in what came to be called post-studio practices; and [4] a set of strategies, represented by institutional critique, emerged as a combination of these three.

There are numerous examples of artworks to illustrate these transformations, but for the purpose of this discussion I will refer to Vito Acconci's work (Taylor and Bloomer, 2002, p.20) *Room Piece (Room situation: a situation using a room)* from 1970. Like other conceptual artworks, this work exists in a discursive form in the description of the actions. During three weekends, the movable contents of one room of Acconci's apartment were relocated to an art gallery. Every time the artist needed something, he would walk eight blocks to go and get it from the gallery and bring it back home where he used it. When the object was not needed anymore, he would return it to the gallery. This is a seminal work in Acconci's practice, which is widely known to focus on the dynamics between the private and public realms. For the artwork *Room Piece* to exist, the objects in the private realm of the apartment have to enter materially in the public realm of the street. The artwork does not exist if it does not exist outside each viewer's private realm. The artwork is the actual process of relocating the objects between gallery and apartment. In Vito Acconci's work, conceptual art's 'art as idea', becomes 'art as process'.

Acconci not only proposed the artwork as process, he also placed the process outside of the gallery introducing art practice and presentation into a new domain: the public sphere. Dave Beech (2009, p.3) notes that 'for Habermas the public sphere is not public because of its spaces, but because of its activities'. He also notes that 'as Ken Hirshkop explains, to become public means to be put on stage rather than to assume the podium'. Beech concludes that 'the public is not a spatial concept but a performative one'.

I refer now to Roman Ondak's work *Good Feelings In Good Times* (2003) as an example of situational and relational practices initiated in the 1990s. In this work Ondak asks actors to stage a queue at a certain location in the public space, during a certain period, after which the actors end the staging and the queue disappears.

Mick Wilson (2009, p.23) speaks of the event as ‘something that passes into being and passes out of being again without resolving into a discrete “thingly” object as such’. An event is therefore something immaterial and temporal. While Acconci’s action to relocate the objects between the apartment and the gallery was the process that translated the artist’s ideas of dynamics between the private and the public realms, Ondack’s staged queue is the event that, when encountered by the audience, translates ideas of the transitory and temporal nature of the public realm.

Contemporary practices of art as event expand on the dematerialisation of the object and adopt the notion of the ‘event’ as a valid artistic medium in order to engage with the discourse and translate ideas about the public domain.

Space as the Materialisation of an Idea

Art events that happen in the public realm happen alongside numerous other events of the everyday. Therefore, to acquire the status of artworks, events need to be legitimised within art’s institutional framework.

The legitimisation of Ondak’s artificially generated queues is made through mechanisms of mediation such as the publication or exhibition of the work/event’s documentation, either in art-specialised media or in the traditional spaces of art presentation – the art museum and art gallery (Lütticken, 2005, p.37).

The differentiation between the moment of ‘presentation’ and the moment of ‘representation’ of the performative artwork has been delineated in the work of theorists such as Peggy Phelan and Erika Fischer-Lichte (Lütticken, 2005, p.170). For the purpose of this discussion, I will consider the moment of ‘presentation’ to be the moment when the artwork as event happens in the public domain, and will consider the moment of ‘representation’ as the moment when the artwork as event is represented through its documentation within the traditional exhibition format. In this last moment the exhibition functions as a settlement of the dispersed, unstable nature of the artworks that use the ‘event’ as their medium. However, exhibitions of an event’s documentation can also function as ‘sterilisation’ because the event’s performance and resonance is interrupted by the inevitably partial representation of only of some of the work’s aspects.

‘Space as Praxis’, by Roselee Goldberg (1975, pp.130-35) offers a venue to think of the exhibition as a space where ‘presentation’ and ‘representation’ can happen simultaneously. In this seminal article, Goldberg, based in the notion of space

developed by art theory and practice (renaissance to minimalism), explores the ways in which this notion was challenged by conceptual art. Quoting Lawrence Weiner: 'Anything that exists has a certain space around it; even an idea exists within a space' and Robert Barry: 'Maybe we are just dealing with a space that is different from the space that one experiences when confronting a traditional object', Goldberg introduces the notion of space, not as optical or physical, but as the materialisation of an idea. She writes:

... if we think of the ways in which much conceptual art and performance work are presented, it is clear that performance implies a different kind, *ie* quantity, of space for its execution. Space becomes the medium for practice and actual experience ... in this way recent art is to be looked at not only as the "dematerialisation of the art object" as it has been described by Lucy Lippard, but inversely as the materialisation of the art concept.

To illustrate Goldberg's notion of space as the materialisation of an idea, I will focus on the performance work by Chris Burden (2007, pp.61-2) *White Light/White Heat* presented at Ronald Feldman Gallery, New York in 1975. Burden announced that throughout the duration of the exhibition, he would be lying on a platform that he built into a corner of the gallery. The platform, resembling a minimalist sculpture, was installed as an open shelf, which did not enclose the artist. However, due to the platform's position 10 feet above the floor, the public could not see if Burden was in fact lying on the platform. The platform marks the space of Burden's presence. However, because the physical presence of the artist was actually not tangible, the platform marks instead the space of the idea of the artist's presence. Once encountering the platform, the audience experiences the materialisation of the idea of the artist's presence. In this 1975 work, the encounter between the work and the audience was as critical as it is now with ephemeral contemporary art works that use 'event' as medium.

The Exhibition as 'Power Field'

In the publication documenting the public art event 'One Day Sculpture' presented in 2009, Martin Patrick (2009, pp.41-2) writes about the encounter:

...temporary, ephemeral and non-categorisable artworks gain their form and meaning via the encounter and intersection with their viewing public. This act of encounter is a manifold act of becoming: the viewer aware and cognisant of the work's presence as, meanwhile, the work becomes itself, takes shape, materialises.

Acconci (1972, pp.71-2) uses Kurt Lewin's notion of 'power field' to describe the space originated by the intersection and interaction between the space of the artist and the space of the audience.

[Kurt Lewin talks about] ... interaction between regions. The first is locomotion, the second communication, in which an arm of region A extends to region B so that there's an overlap, and the third is power field, in which a circle or oval develops from region A to cover region B. So power field would be the most inclusive. When I refer to power field, I don't mean so much as a way of controlling other people in a space, as to affect them ...

Exhibitions are a space specifically constructed to stage the encounter between the artwork and the audience. The traditional exhibition format is a spatial organisation of physical objects and other tangible artworks in the physical space of the art museum or art gallery. According to Goldberg's (1975, p.130-35) description of space as the materialisation of ideas, exhibition can also be a spatial organisation of ideas being materialised. In this sense, the space constructed to stage the encounter between artwork and audience – exhibition – does not necessarily have to be optical or physical. It can be understood instead has a 'power field', as a region that includes the space of each artwork, the space of intersection between the several artworks that are part of the same exhibition, the space of the audience and the space of intersection and interaction between the audience and the artworks.

Expand/Contract was a curatorial experiment that attempted to initiate this investigation through curatorial practice. Although still presented in a physical space, by reducing the mediation mechanisms to a minimum, the case study attempted to dilute the status of the events as artworks during their placement alongside events of the everyday. However, the series of events happening inside the shop space failed to correlate to any expectation from the visitor to the shopping centre creating a region, a zone that affected the routine of the audience.¹ Finally the curatorial experiment succeeded in affecting the audience's routine, not with the representation of the events performed, but by the presentation of the events themselves.

Conclusion

When thinking of exhibitions of art as an event, one must not forget that the event as medium was adopted by artists in order to engage with the discourse of and translate ideas about the public domain. Therefore, exhibitions of art as event should be

¹ Regular and occasional visitors to the shopping centre were questioned by the researcher about the events that had been happening inside the shop space. Faced with the difficulty to classify the events, interviews responded that it must be art.

thought as spatial organisations of artworks beyond the constraints of the physical space of the art museum and gallery. But when artworks as events are presented within the everyday context, alongside other everyday events, it is necessary to put in place some kind of framework that legitimises events as artworks. Currently, the traditional exhibition format is one vehicle of legitimisation. However, artworks as events have to assume other configurations, such as documentation, to be compatible with the traditional exhibition format's requirements.

By presenting four consecutive artworks as one week's events, the case study *Expand/Contract* practiced exhibition as the space of materialisation of ideas. Also, by reducing traditional mechanisms of mediation to a minimum, it investigated the encounter between artworks and audience and allowed the exhibition to be understood as a 'power field'.

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