
Real Relationships

Sarah Browne reports on a public conversation with Grant Kester, presented held in Dublin in June 2007

Facilitated by City Arts, the 'In Conversation' event with Grant Kester at the Pearse Street Library, Dublin (9 June) (1) offered an opportunity to encounter and discuss the implications of Kester's research into evolving forms of collective and collaborative practice. Kester sees such practices as an emergent 'paradigm shift' in contemporary art, describing them as 'dialogical', as they propose the process of dialogue as aesthetic in and of itself. (2) At the talk he expanded on this idea by offering a kind of potted art history, moving from the stained glass of Notre Dame Cathedral to Baroque and Rococo periods, the work of Goya along with the development of modernism in the twentieth century. He used these examples to discuss the changing relationship of art with its audience – moving from a model of transmission in order to support the dominant forms of authority, (such as Church or State); to a model of dissent and the emergence of the individual artist personality. From setting the scene in this manner, Kester moved to his main focus, proposing the exhaustion of the modernist model of 'alienation', where the autonomous artwork communicates the unique revelation of the artist, and the style of address in relation to audience is intended to be 'correctional'.

Kester presented three case studies that he proposes as emblematic of the new paradigm where the autonomy of the art process is rethought through audience participation or involvement. Such socially-engaged practices have widely-spread roots, from temporary public projects in the US, to community arts, to diverse forms of cultural activism and the post-Greenbergian set of expanded practices that emerged from the sixties onwards. These three case studies were: The Park Fiction group in Hamburg, who occupied a piece of public land and designed a park in collaboration with local residents; Navjot Altaf, who made a series of alterations to public water and how it's accessed by young women in the Indian village of Bastar, India; and 8 Senegalese artists, Huit Facettes, who

organised a series of festivals and exchanges of craft skills between neighbouring villages previously in conflict in their home country.(3)

There is insufficient space in the scope of this article, nor was there in fact in Kester's presentation, to discuss each of these bodies of work in the necessary detail, especially as they deal with very particular local concerns and rely on a degree of situated knowledge developed over time.(4) Suffice to say that they shared a number of qualities that made them appropriate case studies for Kester's thesis—these include the participation of the 'audience' for the work, an emphasis on process and workshop-based activities, and a complex and deeply nuanced approach and understanding of the work's place and site of reception. Like most forms of community art, the artists and groups Kester is interested in typically receive their primary validation from the community or co-participants in question, rather than the international art world, and largely operate outside this circuit—though the case studies he addresses are global in scope.(5) These are all essentially "positive practices that are directed toward the world outside the gallery walls". The discussion of these case studies concluded Kester's presentation and opened the way for the audience conversation.

A number of issues quickly arose, namely the politics of funding and patronage; the language/rhetoric of 'collaboration'; the changing role of the artist and the need to build a new critical framework capable of discussing and evaluating these kinds of projects and practices.

The question of public versus private patronage is perhaps one of the most defining differences between art in Europe and America. Concerns over the politics of funding are particularly pertinent in relation to such cultural projects that are often socially 'useful', or seek benefits that allow them to be substituted for effective social policy (6). John

Mulloy proposed that artists are in danger of being used as ‘agents of the state’ due to state-sponsored per cent for art programmes. He gave the example of a €65,000 commission for Rossport, on the back of Shell’s controversial involvement in the area. Artist Jesse Jones articulated the need for artists to find ways of manoeuvring through these funding hoops, in order to find ways of operating through these state processes for ‘purposes of subversion rather than collusion’.

Related to the above was a recurring concern amongst the audience in relation to the potential for the language surrounding this kind of practice to be misleading or manipulative in its description and prescription of power relations. John Mulloy described how there could be a ‘sense of betrayal’ in collaboration, and further how the term ‘community’ could be used as a State-supervised prescription of difference. He referred in particular to the term ‘bridgehead space’, that treats any idea of community as enemy, or territory that needs to be conquered. He also contended that there is less grassroots involvement in community arts practice since the professionalisation of the sector. In response, Mannix Flynn proposed speaking of ‘citizens’ rather than ‘communities’, and highlighted the dangers of community arts practice being used as a tool to ‘soften up’ areas for speculation. The instrumental use of culture highlighted above goes hand-in-hand with a crafty use of language that can gloss over embedded problems or deny the need to address systemic social inequalities. Sandy Fitzgerald described the word *collaboration* as ‘a dangerous term’ now the community arts of the 60s, 70s, 80s have been brought in from the cold by the powers that be. He suggested we instead speak of the ‘real relationships’ that make up such a *collaboration*; where does collaboration slide into compromise or collusion?

Implicit in the discussion, though largely unexplored, was the need for a critical and self-reflexive position to be taken by artists involved in such projects – who can claim to speak ‘for’ a community? The case studies put forward by Kester ask what it might mean for an artist to surrender the security of self-expression for the risk of inter-subjective engagement and the possibility of a collective authorship. What are the ethics of such an exchange, especially since the artist typically is seen to operate from a different economic and cultural position from the group they are working

with — due to access to aesthetic expression (the power of representation), state funding, institutional sponsorship and so on?

Such work implies a dramatic shift from the textual paradigm of art criticism, the act of ‘decoding’ not really possible in this multi-dimensional practice extended in time. Kester described how this necessarily devalues a pleasure-based response, displacing the ‘intoxicating power’ of the critic or theorist to issue pronouncements from on high, and creating the need for a kind of criticism that is durational, and possibly collaborative in some way; much like the work itself. The principles of immersion, learning and reciprocity promoted by Kester in relation to the artwork would thus be similarly necessary for the critic. In his book *Conversation Pieces* Kester proposes a new critical framework based on Habermas’ idea of *discursive ethics*.⁽⁷⁾ Like Fitzgerald’s comment above, such an approach would demand the ethical analysis of the ‘real relationships’ that constitute any of these projects, rather than an evaluation of the formal appearance of physical objects.

Crucially, Kester also discussed a need to build a positive and affirmative framework for such criticism: ‘critical’ does not have to mean ‘negative’. However, good causes must be distinguished from good art; this was highlighted by audience members who described how in Ireland there is commonly a risk of overtly positive or affirmative support of work in community contexts *without* any kind of criticality. This directly feeds into the rather thorny issue of ‘quality’ that tends to haunt many community-based projects – which is tied to modernist ideas of worthy art being complex, difficult, and uncommunicative.

In reference to one of Kester’s case studies, Park Fiction, Aisling Prior of Breaking Ground questioned how the skills of the artists involved measured up to professionals working in landscape architecture. Kester defended their efforts based on the local knowledge that informed the building of the park, the ownership felt as a result, and how well-used the park is to this day. This possible slippage in ‘quality’ is directly related to these new forms of practice where the role of the artist is not that of a skilled craftsperson or maker. Rather the skills of the artists Kester is describing typically lie in negotiation, facilitation, research, relationship-building: artists can be ‘context providers’ rather than ‘content providers’. What this actually means

is not a slippage in quality, but a different way altogether of measuring and evaluating where this 'quality' lies.

The approach Kester takes to framing his argument is firmly rooted in an art historical context. The currency of modernism and community arts were given equal weight in this discussion, and there was a clear sense of legitimisation bestowed on the latter as a result.

There were also some 'useful gaps' between Kester and the audience, such as a possible fuzziness surrounding the intricacies of contemporary art theory, or the specifics of the Fatima Mansions Regeneration Project respectively. These gaps

operated less as barriers to dialogue and more as spaces where some room for active listening could open up. The idea of *discursive ethics* that Kester proposes is a very useful model for valuing and evaluating a wide range of democratic cultural practices. A very stimulating conversation opened up following Kester's presentation, aided no doubt by privileging new possibilities of 'the aesthetic' rather than simply 'the visual'. Such an open and egalitarian notion of the possibilities of art practice is provocative indeed, and may be more challenging for professionals within the circle of art to accept than those outside it.

Notes

1. *In Conversation: Grant Kester*, (9 June 2006) was presented by City Arts & Blue Drum, with the support of Dublin City public Libraries, NEAR fm & the Media Co-op
2. Kester, Grant, *Conversation Pieces: Community and Collaboration in Modern Art*, University of California Press, 2004, p.13. In his book Kester draws a clear distinction between these kind of dialogical practices and those that are collaborative in the sense of the shared production of paintings, sculptures, murals and so on.
3. More information on these projects, see: www.parkfiction.org;
http://www.greenmuseum.org/generic_content.php?ct_id=210;
<http://3r2n.cfa.cmu.edu/groundworks/statements/HuitFacettes.pdf>
4. Such ideas of 'connected knowledge' are recurrent themes in feminist epistemology – Jane Jacobs' classic critique of modernist urban planning, *The Life and Death of Great American Cities*, is an indicative example.
5. This is however changing, with artists such as Wochenklausur becoming an established group on the international museum circuit, and artists Huit Facettes being included in Documenta XI, 2002.
6. For an analysis of the instrumental use of culture by the UK government see Walker, Una, *Moving on from Opportunism*, *The Visual Artists' News Sheet*, July/August 2006.
7. Kester, 2004, p.109.