

Public Programming? Pedagogical Practices in a Missing Europe

A Study Day at Middlesex University
Room C107, first floor, Main College Building
30 June 2016, 12.00 – 6.00 pm

Hosted by the Socially Engaged Practices Research Cluster
Chairs: Graeme Evans, Felicity Allen, Valerio del Baglivo.

Notes by Valeria Graziano

Introduction by Valeria Graziano (see separate essay).

Alana JENELIK, who works as an artist in the context of an Anthropology and Archaeology museum since 2009, spoke about the need of defining key tropes for the field and for imagining what museums could be like in the future. Among the definitions that would be important to share, she listed 'democracy' as particularly important, to be thought not as a mechanism for voting but as a key component of 'equality', or the freedom to be oneself, and 'pluralism', the agreement that is not necessary to agree. Such classical liberal values are jeopardised by the neo-liberal version of governance that permeates museum institutions at present. In neo-liberalism, the core principle becomes the "believe that markets are the most appropriate form for what needs to be provided in society". Since the 2000s, such view has increasingly gained traction, re-shaping artists' practices amongst broader social relations. While artists do not necessarily agree with this vision, they are often presented by only two choices: either populism, ensuring that a lot of audiences will come to see the work, or avant-gardism, where a few people will have the means, cultural or economical, to access the work. Jelinek was sceptical of the notion of the avant-garde and its effectiveness in today's context, reminding us of the military origin of the term and the presupposition of being in front of others that it entails. Rather than a new avant-garde, then, she is interested in processes that lead people to understand how they shape society whatever they do. By embodying our pluralism in public contexts, she explained, we have a chance of instantiate democracy, and this should be the duty of the arts. Art as a discipline, both as a professionalised field and as a subject that is taught, has to reclaim a language and key terms away from their neoliberal inflections, to strategically produce leverage. She addressed the importance of critiquing neoliberalism in the curriculum. The sector often reproduces the dichotomies set up by dominant discourse. Despite a widespread fantasy in the art field that the arts are open to anyone, the very framing of art as a discipline sets it up against non-disciplines. At the same time, if we proclaim that 'everyone is an artist' we risk losing the meaning of art as a practice. At the moment, rather than being a self-affiliation ('you are an artist if you identify as such'), the system is set up so that it is the

market or the state that decides. Therefore, Jelinek suggested we could perhaps change the notion of art as a 'discipline' with art as a 'politics'. In other words, to act under the name of 'art' opens up specific conditions for operating.

Ben CRANFIELD's presentation focused instead on 'how can we use archives to re-enforce the discourse of the institution?' In his beautifully written intervention he discussed the Utopia season at Somerset House, of which the project Storm was part, a project that asked 'what comes out of chaos?'

The notion of the fragment is important for Cranfield. At times, a fragment is 'elevated to truth', and collecting them allows us to perceive that each bears a piece of the truth. In reference to Derrida, the second point of the relation with the archive has to do with the importance of participation and access. Access alone in fact is not enough. Participation in the archive is linked with a manner of formation, both of the archive and of those who compose it. As a third point of his address, Cranfield focused on the role of the archive for maintain and creating cultural bonds. Building upon Chantal Mouffe's critique of direct democracy and exodus as the basics for an emancipatory politics, he stressed the ever-present role of the battle for hegemony. In this perspective, the archive becomes the shared place of reflection of a collectivity, through its 'exemplary' function – that is, to provide key tropes and instances of recollection for a shared memory. The archive thus becomes a way of talking about events without operating a cut between their content and their infrastructure.

Susan KELLY begun by addressing the phenomenon of 'knowledge economies' so central in public programming. Why, she asked, are artists reading Chantal Mouffe? Art is emerging as a space of free discourse, but this is not without contradictions. For instance, while discourse moves more centrally in the mechanisms of art institutions, universities are also beginning to stage their own public programmes as event lectures series. Who funds these things? The answer is either debt of students or financial capital. Yet, both of these forces are often kept apart from the institutional frameworks that host public programmes. What is needed to address such split condition are bottom-up processes of understanding how the institutions that host critical discourse operate. Kelly's example was the Participatory People's Tribunal, held at Goldsmiths University last September. In contrast to much public programmes, the topic of the event was the institution itself, explored in its various dimensions. Among the various subjects discussed on the day, there were a session of forensic accounting that revealed that $\frac{3}{4}$ of board members of the university are involved in property speculation and a session revealing the troubling severity of an expanding mental health crisis impacting students and staff. Reference points for the tribunal were consciousness-raising methodologies that find a new meaning and strength as counter techniques to the statistical data that are often the primary tools for institutional knowledge and enquiry. Kelly continued by addressing the contradiction between the proliferation of public programmes of debates and lectures on the one hand, and the ongoing attack to the humanities and the arts, and more broadly, cultures of the lect. 'Why are we loosing?' The problem, for Kelly, is a pedagogical one: while critical theory is circulating, its constituent powers get frozen, lost. Case in point, the most critical academics did not get

involved in the tribunal; many said they were too busy (writing critical books?). To prioritize one kind of work over another, however, is already a political act full of consequences. The current modality of practicing critical theory is leading us into what Colectivo Situaciones has framed as an 'impasse', where "socially constructed questions are proposed as 'themes' in front of which we have to position ourselves". In the words of Paolo Virno, such condition corresponds to a 'publicness without a public sphere'. Dependent on the wealth of the rich, on debt, on the free labour of those involved, critical discourses cannot find a form beyond the enclosed space in which it is produced, those 'post-democratic institutions' that Colin Crouch has described as 'shells' of the social democracies that once organised the public sphere. There is no point therefore in proliferating public programmes. If we believe that critical discourse is important, it is more important to work for de-alienating our work places. The Goldsmiths Participatory People's Tribunal has led to a Gold Paper, a set of proposals for changes in governance that is currently being discussed with the board of the university. Elsewhere, it is equally important to 'talk shop'. What could a museum activist be in this context?

Paul GOODWIN invited the reflection to expand its gaze beyond Europe in order to understand the EU context. Referencing the ongoing student protests in South Africa he asked what could be learned from them? As someone who in the past has tasked with a diversity remit at Tate Britain, he understands that cross-cultural preoccupations (ref. Walter Harris) stand at odds with a diversity agenda, which tend to be limited to a question of representation and identity. The "questions and topics coming from the microcosm that is the Caribbean region, for instance, did not just appear, but they are a critical imaginary in reaction to the experiment that was the Caribbean region." Pondering on how to speak to fascists, and how to react to the internal logics of a culture that is prone to patronizing celebrations, Goodwin proposed that the starting point has to do with the ways in which we allow the other to inhabit ourselves. Against 'NGO art', Goodwin proposed Eduard Glissant notion of 'opacity' as the 'right not to be understood'. Opacity is thus different from invisibility. It also stands against 'transparency' as the paradigm of western knowledge. In this respect, racism is a refusal of what one does not understand, and it is always a matter of power. In this respect, it is important to notice the tendency to differentiate between public programmers who put on events for the university educated members of the public, and the education officers who are called upon to cater for 'other' people. There are still many 'modes of nostalgia' operating in the field that need to be addressed and challenged.

Janna GRAHAM begun with a critique of the notion of 'platforms' as an operative metaphor through which art institutions conceive of their public role. A platform is a raised surface, literally, and while there is an ongoing critique of online platforms as capitalist entities facilitating a rentiere economy, less has been done to challenge the purported neutrality and benevolence of art platforms. Within this scenario, the figure of the theorist operates as a key component for the development of the institution as a critical brand. Such figure has crucially no commitment to the consequences of the ideas he speaks about. Public programming thus emerges as another name for the unequal division of labour

within institutions. To counter this, Graham proposed to reclaim other histories of adult education in order to reclaim public programming as a resource (after all, aren't institutions the spaces for the (re)production of resources?). What is at stake in radical public programming would be the production of a common that is impaired by hierarchies. And the first requirement for such an activity would be to be 'explicit about the contradictions we are inhabiting'.

Jason BOWMAN spoke about a project he was commissioned to do. 'Out in the City' in Manchester, with a collective of senior LGBT inhabitants. He opened by declaring that it is very difficult for artists to refuse commissions, and yet the terms are often pre-set by those who issue the invite. Including the very notion of 'reaching out', which he finds deeply problematic. The project was a reaction to the prevalent 'privatized notion of care', and an exploration of co-responsibility as a reaction to de-funding, alternative to the return to a notion of 'family', which the LGBT moment worked so hard to decentralise and denaturalise. The project also wanted to celebrate Manchester's LGBT scene as the biggest gay village in Europe, but at the same time a city that is the site of violence and gentrification. The commission was in the context of an exhibition about surrealism. Bowman started from a reflection of art as a 'post-public space' (Andrea Fraser): "I went to art school to learn how to be a gay man", he remarked. The project worked with archival material from a 1936 collective trial of 29 gay men based living near Manchester as a group. In the 30s aversion therapy was used (check). In order to bring someone to trial for homosexuality, they often raided the homes. The powder puff was often used as a piece of evidence. 1936 was also the year of BBC first broadcast (of the trial?). Bowman thus facilitated a collective archival research to find the statements of these men. The group found out that 2 members of the original commissioning board were part of the '36 trial. Also, Bowman worked with court artists 'as their work often carries a different ethic". The final work however was evicted from the surrealist exhibition, as it was evaluated offensive (check). Via 'programmatization', the museum killed the work through a technicality. Thus, the only mode available to the gay community is the celebratory one. The notion of the permissive society in this light only leads to the commercialised culture of the dark room, betraying the original stakes of the battle for legality, which also importantly conceived of minorities not as a numerical issue, but as one of power. In concluding, Bowman address the division between curating, education and events within art institutions, proposing that greater demands shall be placed upon these, particularly the demand for a participatory and democratic budget to allocate the resources to each of these functions is crucial. Minorities have to obtain a greater share of the available resources within institutions, and not become minor affiliates of the existing structures. Otherwise, even great results achieved by a collective project such as his will not impact the institution in any way.

Collective discussion

The second part of the day was set up as group discussions among all participants and speakers who were divided in three groups that later reported back to each other. Some of the issues that emerged during the discussion were:

- The problematic way in which institutions talk about 'targeting' audiences – what methodologies are used? Who counts as the 'public?' the work with specific constituencies is often driven by curatorial agendas, so that interpellation, while well meaning, remains little more than a gesture.
- How do we evaluate what we do as public programmers?
- Is public programming popular because it is cheaper than exhibition cycles? How much free labour goes on in this context, in exchange for visibility?
- The imperative of hosting 'visible' activities is becoming a point of pressure for cultural institutions – is it simply a matter of 'spectacle of participation'?
- None of the speakers chose to address the UK referendum results and the concomitant rise of anti intellectualism and xenophobia in relation to public programming and its plausible transformations in the near future. Why? Is it too soon? Are we in denial as a sector that the liberal premises of art funding are being eroded and delegitimised?
- The growing professionalization of the sector (museum education, curating, etc....) and public programming as one of the occasions where there is still a politics of remaining unprofessional.
- Until recently, for artists to be within and against the institution seemed like a viable critical stance to take, however after the neoliberal transformation of our institutions is this strategy still viable?
- Are our institutions resources to be protected and reclaimed, or are they too far gone?
- How can we expose where does critical thinking come from? Link it with concrete processes and situations and struggles also in terms of its accountability, both symbolic and material?
- What kind of training is needed to support artists who are able to engage with critical discourse and active with different constituencies, past 'gesturing' as a superficial kind of commitment?
- Notions of co-design and co-production very popular in other fields, could this be something to be further developed within art institutions and art making too?
- How else can we give value to what we do?