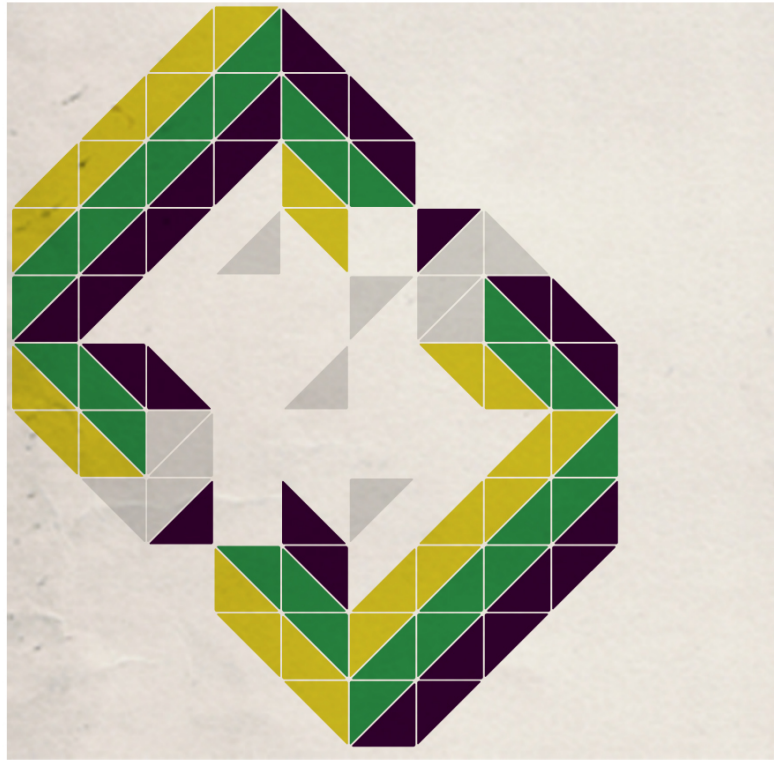


V2_PPRESENTS
BLOWUP READER #2

Every Artist, a Journalist



BLOWUP



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Blowup is a series of events and exhibitions that explore contemporary questions from multiple viewpoints. Blowup zooms in on ideas, bringing into focus clear pictures of how art, design, philosophy, and technology are transforming our lives -- or reinforcing the status quo.



Introduction: Every Artist, A Journalist

MICHELLE KASPRZAK

This e-Book, the second in the series of Blowup Readers released by V2_, explores the phenomenon of artists working in documentary and journalistic forms, and what this crossover between art and journalism creates.

About V2_:

V2_, Institute for the Unstable Media, founded in 1981, is an interdisciplinary center for art and media technology in Rotterdam (the Netherlands). V2_ conducts research at the interface of art, technology and society. V2_ presents, produces, archives and publishes about art made with new technologies and encourages the debate on these issues. V2_ offers a platform where artists, scientists, developers of software and hardware, researchers and theorists from various disciplines can share their findings. Art and culture play an essential role in the social embedding of and attitude towards technological developments, and V2_ creates a context in which technological issues are explored through critical reflection and practice-oriented research.

About Blowup:

Blowup, launched in 2011, is a series of events and exhibitions that explore contemporary questions from multiple viewpoints. Blowup zooms in on ideas, bringing into focus clear pictures of how art, design, philosophy, and technology are transforming our lives -- or reinforcing the status quo.

Each Blowup event will provide a deeper understanding of a theme relevant to this moment in time. Some events will ask you to be hands-on, and some will involve just listening or looking. No two events will be the same: Blowup events mix artists and theoreticians; mix formats; challenge assumptions; and take risks. Investigating topics ranging from art for animals to speculative designs for future objects, each Blowup will surprise and inform.



Alongside each event, a Blowup Reader exploring the theme with texts from a wide range of sources will be released in e-Book format.

Blowup is curated by Michelle Kasprzak.

Blowup: Every Artist, A Journalist:

Speakers included Alfredo Cramerotti (IT/UK), Gair Dunlop (UK), and Lino Hellings (NL). In addition to the talks by the three guest speakers, the EU premiere screening of Gair Dunlop's dual-projection film *Atom Town: Life After Technology* was held, and visitors were able to interact with P.A.P.A. imagery through a commissioned interface by Rotterdam-based designers NotDef. A specially-designed cocktail was available at the bar.

The event occurred on August 25, 2011 and was streamed live. Archived footage of the event will be made available at <http://live.v2.nl>

Notes from the Curator:

In this, the second edition of the Blowup Reader series, each of our participating speakers is represented along with two additional texts. The Reader begins with an excerpt from Alfredo Cramerotti's book, *Aesthetic Journalism*, followed by an essay by Ken Hollings delving into the history of the Dounreay Fast Reactor, which is the subject matter in Gair Dunlop's latest work. A text I have written, written deliberately in newspaper journalism style, gives context about the beginnings of Lino Hellings' Participating Artists Press Agency project. Also included in this Reader is a key text about truth, reality, and the 'documentary turn' in art by Mark Nash, and from the V2_ archive, a text by Alexei Shulgin, exploring fundamentals of how we communicate and manipulate with art.

While in the final stages of preparing this Reader, by chance I came upon an essay entitled 'A Brief History of American Documentary Video' by Deirdre Boyle. In this essay she states: 'The 1960s was an auspicious time for the debut of portable video. The role of the artist as individualist and alienated hero was being eclipsed by a resurgence of interest in the artist's social responsibility, and as art became socially and politically engaged, the distinctions between art and communication blurred. At first there were few distinctions between video artists and activists, and nearly everyone made documentary tapes.' I found these statements very revealing. Here we are in 2011, with the notion of 'portable video' taken to an extreme as lenses are



embedded in every mobile phone. Naturally in the intervening years there have been points where social and political engagement in art has waned, making the blurring between art and communication that Boyle mentions less of an issue. At this point in time, with the rapidity of technological advancement making image making easier than ever before, we are still presented with issues of the boundaries around notions of art, and what role documentary making plays in the art world and the world at large. The texts in this Reader, and the presentations at the Blowup event, serve to illuminate where we are now, some fifty years after Nam June Paik bought a Porapak and Chris Burden made video art expressly for TV.

Enjoy this Reader and the archived footage of the public presentations that were part of this programme, at www.v2.nl. I hope to welcome you at the next Blowup event, The Era of Objects, with Julian Bleecker, Alexandra Deschamps-Sonsino, and Anab Jain, on September 29 2011 at V2_.

Michelle Kasprzak
Curator, V2_ Institute for the Unstable Media

Rotterdam, 24/08/2011



Aesthetic Journalism: Acts of Witnessing, Practices of Participation

BY ALFREDO CRAMEROTTI

Aesthetic Journalism: Acts of Witnessing, Practices of Participation

The relationship between journalism and art is a difficult territory to chart. What I call aesthetic journalism involves artistic practices in the form of investigation of social, cultural or political circumstances. Its research outcomes take shape in the art context, rather than through media channels. ... Press and broadcast news are realms in which our concept of truth takes form. Visual art, on the other hand, is increasingly present in the communication of urgencies; hence, the hypotheses ... about the idea of truth shifting from the sphere of news media to the territory of art, moving out from the private realm (of the object, the person who produces or consumes it, the meaning carried through the object) to enter the public sphere (the issue at stake, the process undertaken, the distribution of knowledge). This attitude sets a new 'horizon' of sense, bringing the matter outside the established traditions of formalism (for art) and reporting (for journalism). Albert Einstein reportedly stated that we cannot solve our problems at the same level of thinking that generated them. With art and journalism, if we open up and re-think our conception of traditional information formats, allowing imagination and open-endedness, we might perceive things in ways we remain unaware of. In this sense, while journalism reports, and fiction reveals, aesthetic journalism does both.

In aesthetically approaching events in contemporary life, what appears to be real, true or verifiable cannot be detached from the system of representation adopted. ... What can we initiate with elements of reality brought into art? Is a witness account - which involves time and participation - a viable substitute for a reporting position? A witnessing experience is centred on the issue of time. Art is one of the few realms in which time is still a negotiable term. ... The fundamental difference between a journalistic work that 'reports' and one that 'witnesses', is in the approach of the producer to the mode of a revelation that exposes and represents facts without anesthetizing them. This line of thought makes evident the paradox of mainstream journalism covering complex issues with twenty-second soundbites, in order to make them digestible for an audience.



In an ideal system of representation, the spectator adds subjective meaning to the images and sounds proposed, and in this way overcomes the immediacy of the report (the bodily impression created by the senses). ... The viewer grasps a fragment of things and from there builds upon this, engaging their own perception, producing little actions, being aware of the impulses that provoke them, not imposed from the outside, but generated from within. In our daily digest of representations via TV and newspapers, however, this does not happen: the current trend of event reporting is problematic because it renders no space for critical distance. This concern is no new thing for media critique, yet is vaguely perceived when it comes to journalistic art. More than ever, we need a witness attitude in art, for it might inspire a witness attitude in journalism: a kind of knowledge looking beyond what is immediately visible, a latency, so to speak, an imaginative reading of what is not directly accessible to the senses. Witnessing is not reporting: it implies a plurality of points of view, and the passage of time, which is not permissible in the current media news environment. Artists and art institutions, instead, can produce works over a span of months rather than minutes, and can adapt their agenda (because they have time) to the witness approach. This way, it creates the time to add idea upon idea, returning in several steps to the same subject, and allowing the space to think, digest and re-work what has been the object of investigation. ...

Cultural producers could 'use' the passage of time by applying an attentive eye to current and manifest aspects of the matter analysed, but also to the historical background that produced it, to what is concealed to the eye and to its possible or imaginary development. To pursue an aesthetic approach in a journalistic representation can reveal aspects of reality otherwise buried beneath real-time coverage of occurrences. ... It takes time to decide how to (and if to) relate to all aspects of a situation and the people and stories told in the work. It takes also time to assess what could be true or false, right or wrong, and ultimately to decide where one - as a viewer - stands in relation to ethical and aesthetic issues. ...

It is a matter of adding knowledge, linking what we already know with what we do not know and putting the new in sequence with other knowledge. Two aspects are equally important: for the author not to be forced to adapt to the speed of the news industry, and for the spectator not to be required to accept or refuse it on the spot. Come and go in front of a representation at one's leisure, be irreverent to the format of the reproduction of things, take time to make sense of what is presented - all these opportunities must be kept alive in artistic practice, to eventually expand back into traditional journalism and other news formats. ... **De facto**, the journalist is an



artist, despite the completely different timeframe in which they work. In these terms, aesthetic journalism is a given fact, not a supposition. It just needs to be timed.

The representation of objects and situations from many angles, on the same canvas or in a film scene, introduced the elements of time passing, which became a fundamental element of our age: the (often controversial) principle of simultaneity, which goes beyond its time-element. The World Wide Web and real-time transmission depend on this principle of organization, in which it is not the simultaneity with the real that is important, nor its speed rate, but the development of an 'essence' of reality that works at the level of imagination. This idea of simultaneity, and of the participation of the final user in the production of meaning, was further theorized at the beginning of the 1960s. **The Poetics of the Open Works** by Eco provides not only the general idea of 'performativity' by the reader, which results in the completion of the work by the gaze of the spectator; it gives also the theoretical framework for the use of documentary, reportage and lecture in artistic practice. In a passage of the essay, Eco gives the example of the dictionary:

'Now, a dictionary clearly presents us with thousands upon thousands of words which we could freely use to compose poetry, essays on physics, anonymous letters, or grocery lists. In this sense the dictionary is clearly open to the reconstitution of its raw material in any way that the manipulator wishes. But this does not make it a 'work'. The 'openness' and dynamism of an artistic work consists in factors which make it susceptible to a whole range of interpretations.'" (Eco 1979: 62-3).

For Eco, these factors are the mechanisms of interaction set by the artists during the creation process, and by the audience during the reception process, in a mutual exchange that gives meaning to the work. The interpretation is to be understood as a productive process: reading a text, or watching a video, means essentially to produce another text or video. This combination of point of view is what we call interactivity. ... What counts is the position of perennial re-work, research and reading of things, avoiding what we could call 'the statement of reality'; it requires us to suspend our notion of 'the experienced' as something fixed and immutable. This attitude does not create fiction, but changes the mode of reading a work. ... This goes hand in hand with the disappearance of art as a distinct autonomous and coded (with specific media and tools) practice, and with the idea of interactivity explored above. The facts themselves are artworks, precisely because they are processes. ... What we are is attributed by others; what we see, by ourselves. That is also why I call this new mode of journalism 'aesthetic': it happens when we take facts as artworks and



artworks as aesthetic facts. ... In fact, to ground the idea of 'reality' in its reception rather than its representation is one way to retain the ability to build our own 'truth claim' for what is represented, instead of the material making such claims for itself.

Could aesthetic journalism be the next 'horizon' of meaning? I do not know, and cannot claim such a thing. What I have done, rather, is to sketch an articulation of the relationship between artistic and information activities; not to construct a theory, but to instigate responses; not to freeze art into concepts, but to find possible ways of working. ... Hence, in my view, the necessity to expand access to aesthetic journalism by acting upon both art and journalism, broadening their respective practice to the point of including other formats as agents of change. Potentially, the term 'media worker' could be used not only for journalists, TV or internet producers (the so-called content providers) but also for artists, performers, storytellers and poets. Producers who include in their work possibilities such as the use of imagination, open-ended meaning and the individual interpretation of documents can expand fruitfully the journalistic attitude. Aesthetic journalism works by combining documents and imagination: the necessity of the former and the desire of the latter, since desirability is almost an antidote to the often senseless accumulation of information. This would counter the attempt to be objective at all costs, and would not discard creativity in favor of neutrality. It is useful to remember that creating fiction does not mean telling fancy stories; it means undoing the connections between things, signs and images which constitute what we intend as reality. ... Whether or not this aesthetic approach will be the essential feature of our understanding of the world, only time will tell. In any case, it could provoke a state, or perhaps more a process, of 'sustained curiosity', and in turn change me, as user of information, through an attempt to comprehend what I am curious about and therefore unaware of. I see aesthetic journalism as an instrument with which to render sharper and more persistent my curiosity, and make more visible the contours of reality.

Excerpt from Alfredo Cramerotti, *Aesthetic Journalism: How to Inform without Informing*. Bristol and Chicago: Intellect, 2009.



Temporary Storage

NOTES ON THE DOUNREAY FAST REACTOR, CITADEL OF THE FUTURE –
BY KEN HOLLINGS

1.

Even by the most optimistic estimates, the decommissioning of the Dounreay nuclear facility will not be completed until 2994 at the earliest; still subject to review it might even take as long as 2336 before the surrounding fields and coastline will become available once more for development. Having recently struggled from the twentieth century into the twenty-first, we can perhaps appreciate the effects of such a transition being repeated a further three times before Dounreay ceases to be anything other than a protracted timeline. Restoration of the site has so far uncovered a Bronze Age cairn, a manmade stone-covered mound used for the storage of human remains. It had been broken into and emptied at some point in its history, the robbers leaving behind them a solitary piece of worked flint. The excavated cairn is destined to form part of a subsoil repository for radioactive waste from that other great excavated cairn: the demolished reactor itself. While the modern world's flint flakes wait patiently for archaeologists from the distant future to discover them, the entire area becomes transformed into a time capsule that preserves nothing except the space it occupies: a presence that slowly erases itself over the centuries.

2.

A theme park dedicated to a disaster that must never happen, Dounreay has no real future and probably never did. Since the middle of the nineteenth century, international trade fairs and universal expositions have traditionally offered temporary storage for the world of tomorrow before also becoming its final resting place; for a brief period, visitors can wander as carefree tourists in a future that is both briefly glimpsed and carefully controlled. Dounreay, however, remains fixed in a landscape capable only of decay. Invisible yet exerting a powerful influence, its presence is best detected through the behaviour of those who have shaped their lives around it: the way fingers form themselves blindly around the handle of a cup in order to hold it steady.



Due to the ideological pressures of the Cold War, under whose influence the Dounreay Nuclear Facility came into being, atomic science became equated with alchemy. Both represent hermetically controlled operations that subtly and radically transform nature, thereby unleashing occult powers that remain hidden in all but their effect, whether socially, culturally or materially. The temporary storage of radioactive materials profoundly disturbs the entire landscape: it becomes reworked. 'The atomic pile, an essential instrument for the manufacture of the bomb,' wrote Louis Pauwels and Jacques Bergier in 1960, exposing the perceived gap between scientific method and alchemical practice, 'was actually 'a geometrical arrangement of highly purified substances". As Fulcanelli had stated, this instrument used neither electricity nor a vacuum technique.' Atomic reactors supply the archaeological sites of the future; but this has nothing to do with notions of progress.

When an event has a half-life, everyone becomes a visitor. The atomic pile, however, lies at the centre of a theme park that must inevitably be deserted, so long as the prospect of disaster continues to hang over it. Just as the dynamiting of the Pruitt-Igoe housing project in 1972 was thought to mark the death of modernism as a social aesthetic, so the decommissioning of Dounreay indicates the end of modernism as a strategic cultural deployment of the Cold War. Its alchemic counterpart can still be found in the chaotic postmodern landscape stretching along the north coast of Caithness in the Scottish Highlands, waiting to be decontaminated.

3.

The public information films designed to promote science and technology during the Cold War explain little about their supposed subject while revealing everything about themselves; they can only distract with wiring diagrams, equations scrawled in white chalk on blackboards, illuminated displays and flickering readouts. Their very indecipherability is the intended message; technology is hard to assimilate – in the end all you can do is accommodate it. At the same time Cold War architecture, together with the strategies that informed it, transformed home into an enemy territory: secure and defended to the point where it became unwelcoming to everyone but a select few. 'It's what they call a security area,' remarks a character in *Quatermass II* regarding the secret government research plant recently established at Winerton Flats on the English coast. To make way for it an entire village has been demolished, while the workers required to build the facility are forced to inhabit prefabricated barracks on a 'new build' estate, watched over by sullen patrols of armed guards. First aired



by the BBC in 1955, Nigel Neale's second television series to feature British rocket scientist Bernard Quatermass takes place in a society overrun by civil and military authority. The effects are pervasive but also subtle; a ministry official refers to the changes taking place around him manifesting themselves as 'a face in the corridor, petty mysteries, an overheard phrase, altered routines'. Protective suits, respirators and rubber gloves are all indications that the environment itself is changing: the clicking of the Geiger counter becomes the signifier of Cold War modernity.

The secret hidden inside the pressurized steel domes at Winterton Flats turns out to be a huge alien life form; writhing around in its own highly poisonous atmosphere, this shapeless multicellular being intends to invade and colonize the earth, except that it can never quite escape the same containment that restrains and controls everyone else in this new technological regime. Instead it remains trapped inside the tanks, ducts and pipes of the Shell Haven refinery on the Thames Estuary, which supplied exterior shots for both the BBC version of Quatermass II and its remake by Hammer films in 1957. In between the two productions came *X the Unknown*, another radioactive Cold War drama from Hammer in which yet another shapeless multicellular being draws energy from the reactor at the 'Lochmouth Atomic Energy' establishment in Scotland. The movie was originally to have been directed by Joseph Losey, but his black-listed status in Hollywood as a suspected communist sympathizer made this problematic.

4.

Losey ended up making *The Damned* for Hammer instead. Filmed in 1961 but not released in the UK until 1963, the movie depicts British society in a state of nuclear containment. Teddy boys prowl the seaside town of Weymouth, searching for unwary tourists to beat up and rob, while military patrols encircle a government research base built inside the neighbouring cliffs. 'Your security men have the imagination of prison wardens,' one scientist complains from deep within the secret compound. Screened off from the public behind barbed wire, chain-link fences, armed guards, concrete posts and intruder alarms, the Edgecliff facility is home to a generation of radioactive children. The offspring of contaminated mothers, they are impervious to the harmful effects of radiation and, as such, represent Britain's last line of defence when nuclear war begins – as it must surely do. 'I live with one fact,' declares Bernard, the project director. 'A power has been released that will melt these stones. We must be ready when the time comes.' Cut off from all contact



with the outside world, surrounded by video monitors, tape recorders and modernist furniture, the children are not so sure of their destiny. 'You are always talking about 'when the time comes";' one of them complains impatiently to Bernard via closed-circuit TV. 'What we want to know is: when does the time come?'

The children constitute a nuclear core, eager to escape into the outside world – it will be a disaster when they do. Nothing can prevent this from happening, however. Bernard is certain of it. The fallout unleashed by global nuclear war will unlock all the doors of the Edgecliff bunker, setting the children free. 'We're in a huge spaceship and we are going to a star,' one child explains of their protracted confinement. 'They're teaching us the history of Earth so we can build a civilization when we get there. It's going to be a long, long trip, and by the time we get there, our teachers will be dead.' As above, so below: disasters come down to us from the stars, linking alchemy with nuclear physics in the most sinister manner. Planning for disaster also means playing with chance and probability, which only makes sense when more than one outcome is at stake. To create a policy out of something is to maintain a distance from it – to be separated from it by intention. We can only glimpse this destructive relationship through a glass darkly, as a reflection or a projected image. The unseen presence of the atomic pile reveals itself through a heightened series of precautions: the prospect of looking directly upon it doesn't simply destroy us. It cancels us out: renders us less than nothing.

5.

Postmodernism is one more indication of how fragmented our understanding of the present condition has become: as such it reveals itself as just another form of modernism. The domes, sealed chambers and temporary storage tanks left over from the Cold War nuclear regime give shape to another, more chaotic school of modernism: one that demands closer examination. At the time of writing the crisis level at Fukushima is the same as that for Chernobyl. Contamination along the coast continues to rise alarmingly, while the wind that once blew the reactor's vented radiation plumes out to sea is now carrying them back to the mainland again.

Ken Hollings
London, March – April 2011



The Making of P.A.P.A.

BY MICHELLE KASPRZAK

‘We were like a farmer’s family,’ Lino Hellings tells me as I sit in her Amsterdam studio. She’s telling me about Dogtroep, the theatre group she was a core member of from the time the group started in 1975, until 1992. The group became well-known for a particular style of visual theatre, mostly wordless, and mostly in public spaces. Lino describes Dogtroep as a ‘travelling workshop’, a descriptor that seems apt not just for Dogtroep but for the projects she led or has been involved with in the following years. The farmer’s family work ethic was combined with a bottom up, process-oriented way of working that continues to mark Lino’s practice right up to the present day, including her work leading the Participating Artists Press Agency (P.A.P.A.). Flipping through a book covering the work of Dogtroep the importance of the visual dimension of this performance group becomes clear -- each image is striking and composed, though it is just documentation. ‘My working method is unchanged, but society has changed’, Lino says. It’s true, I think, reflecting on P.A.P.A. and how it works.

But we’re not talking about P.A.P.A. just yet. I’m still interested in finding out more about what the projects that came before: how they worked and where they came from. There is a stack of books on the table that reflect the range of influences on these projects: A book documenting the Fotoaktion group; Essays on the Blurring between Art and Life by Allan Kaprow; The Art of Taking a Walk by Anke Gleber; Non-places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity by Marc Augé. I pick the books up and flip through as Lino continues to describe the transition from Dogtroep to later works. An initial cover design for a forthcoming book about P.A.P.A. sits next to this stack of books on the table. This design concept is a photo of stacks like the one in front of me on the floor of Lino’s studio, along with piles of notes and printed emails and other files. It is an attractive mess, and though the piles are representative of so much work, as a photo they could also be anyone’s pile of paperwork and books to file. I am reminded of something Allan Kaprow wrote: ‘The line between art and life should be kept as fluid, and perhaps indistinct, as possible.’ Here the line is indeed liquid. Everyday paperwork becomes part of the process, and the artistic process is disguised as everyday paperwork.



A young man running phone batteries charging services in Sabo-Yaba, Lagos. There is the saying 'every disappointment can be a blessing'. This could rather be the case of the phone batteries services business that dots over the city. This is because a lot of phone users are unable to charge their phone batteries due to erratic power supply and have to patronise the services charge in order to power their phones, as telecommunication is intergral for survival in the city. Sabo means a settlement place for visitors. As such it is populated with migrant sfrom nothern Nigeria. — By Andrew Esiebo



The Mohakhali Flyover, acts as a bus station, an open air market. An intercity train heads towards a station near the international airport. Dhaka Bangladesh — by Shahidul Alam.



After Dogtroep, in the early nineties, the power of the World Wide Web was making itself known and here Lino saw a creative opportunity. She asked herself how ‘...we can transform ‘the virtual’ back into ‘the physical world’ in a refreshing way.” One project she described to me stands out for its ingenuity in this regard. A project entitled ‘The School with the Most Windows’ involved Lino working with children at a school, where she asked them to look again at their surroundings, drawing the entire school. Once this mammoth task was completed, the drawings were uploaded to a website to create a 3D walk-through of the school online. Different drawing styles mesh together, and the result is a charming and highly personal portrait of this place.

The changes in governance of public space over the years have significantly altered the conditions in which artists can use it. An increasingly litigious society means that working in public was no longer open to Dogtroep’s free-wheeling antics but about getting health and safety waivers. As Lino put it, commissioners often wanted ‘vandalism proof, maintenance-free” artwork. This oppressive air sparked a re-evaluation on Lino’s part, thinking about where else she could apply elasticity and flexibility in a creative process, while remaining free of the white cube gallery context. As her stories of failed or abandoned public art projects were told, the importance of the process became clear: ‘that’s where my heart lies, in the process, the research” Lino says.

The first parts of Lino’s response to these unfavourable conditions came at the Internationale Fotomanifestatie Noorderlicht 2006 when Lino first set eyes on the work of Drik, a photo agency based in Dhaka, Bangladesh. Drik (which means ‘vision’ in Sanskrit) is a photo agency representing the ‘majority world” and is a direct challenge to ‘Western media hegemony.” They also make beautiful images. I recalled the beauty of the images of Dogtroep’s work as Lino told the story of her initial interactions with Drik. She wrote a letter to the director of Drik asking if they would take her on as an artist in residence. At first there was no reply, but a second email resulted in the invitation to go to Bangladesh. ‘How does Drik work, what can I learn?” Lino wondered. ‘Curiosity is my motor.”

The seed for the Errorist movement, which was the project that would evolve into P.A.P.A., was planted in Bangladesh. The concept of this movement was simple: everyone should be free to make mistakes and look a bit foolish if it means you might reach out and learn something about someone else. The idea that the right to make

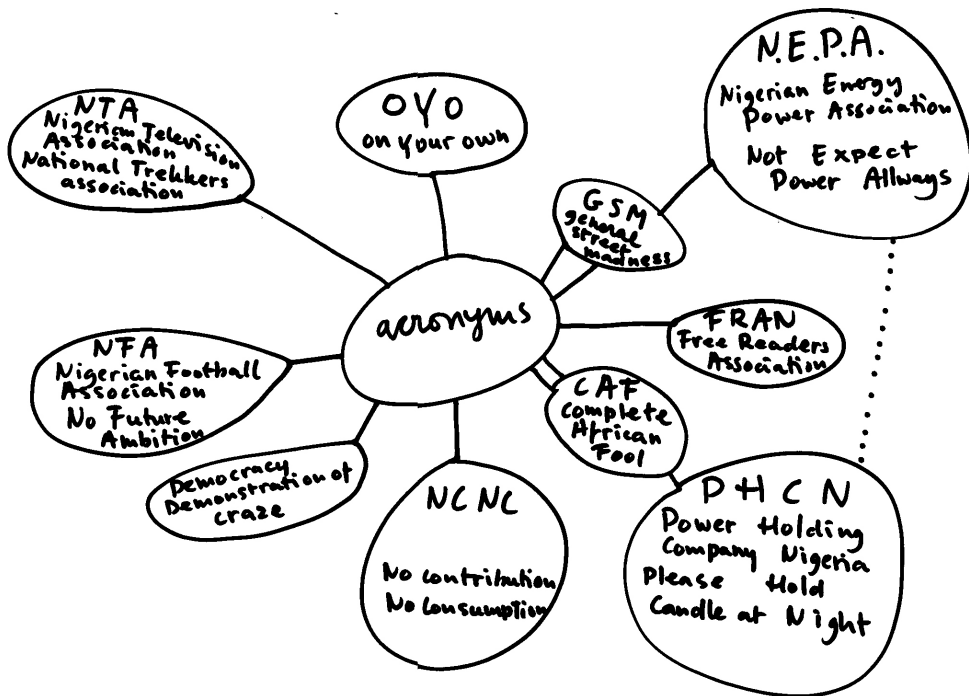
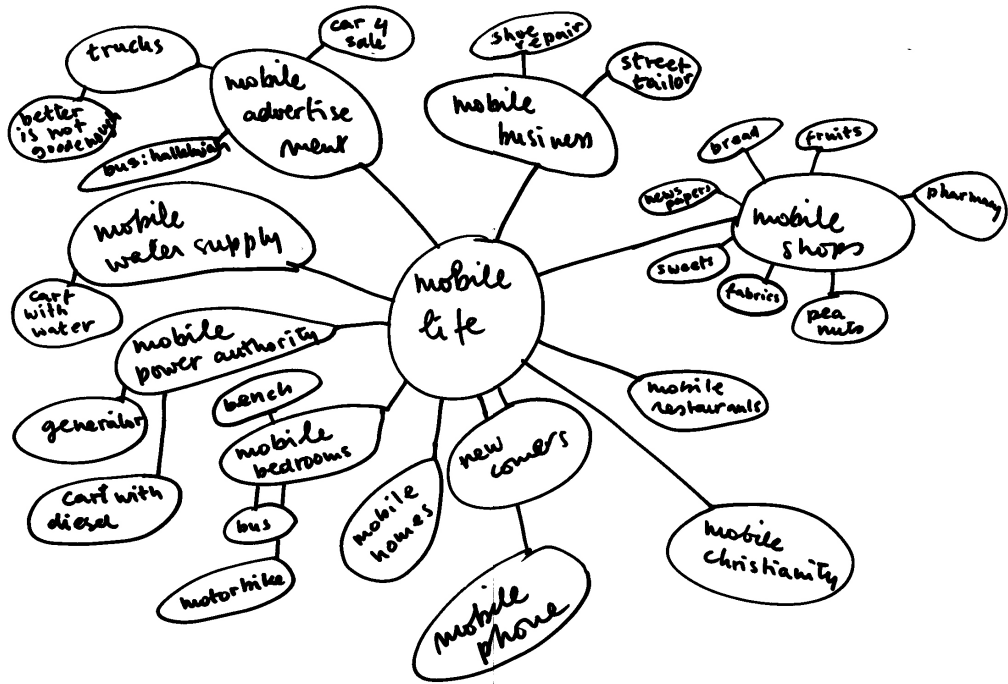


mistakes is a human right resonated with people. This light-hearted movement posited that mistakes indicate risk which indicates openness – radical openness. ‘I made it a mission to make contact,’ Lino said and then described how when she was in Bangladesh and asking if she could take pictures, people laugh and smile, they clearly enjoyed it. Once, in a car, she flipped the LCD screen of the camera around to show the people she was photographing outside the car, and this simple, uncommon gesture made the action of taking someone’s photo more of a conversation.

Lino wondered if she could read public space in another culture, and in a way that is not about pity or parachuting in as an expert. She found that the kind of reading public space that she was exploring in her first trip to Bangladesh and with the Errorist movement was of value in terms of trying to understand the set binaries of our world: poor and rich, good guys and bad guys. ‘It’s a slippery area, you don’t want to be inhuman and make it into an abstract thing. On one side, I’m an artist, I don’t want to change the world, I’m not a social worker.’ Later on in our discussion she also acknowledges that ‘making research available to people is a method of empowerment.’ Clear parallels with Dogtroep and the School with the Most Windows are visible in the working methods: research-by-doing, and having the people in the process, as co-authors.

So why create a news agency? Lino quotes a report from a contact at BBC News: ‘News is what someone, somewhere decides that it is’ and she goes on to explain that ‘it is impossible to provide a simple definition or formula for news. It comes down to a judgement as to what is important or interesting to a particular audience.’ Described in this manner, the allure of news as a framing device is apparent: everyone understands what it is, and everyone is also hard pressed to come up with a true definition, making it the ultimate flexible container.

Drik was also a powerful example of what was possible in the press agency model, and that example combined with other advice being given at the time were strong influences. The 1st P.A.P.A. lab was in Sept. 2009, and Lino had come into contact with an advertising agency that wanted to help. They told her the name ‘Errorist’ was not good, and advised her to create an artistic press agency from the beginning. The advertising people came up with the P.A.P.A. name, built the first website, and developed the first logo. Advice and guidance flowed freely, especially in these early days.



Diagrams from Lagos — by Lino Hellings.



Lino has resisted the urge to insert ‘big ideas’ and managed to just keep it simple. Her role is as a kind of film director, using a fractal model of working, where an observer zooming in and out of the process finds P.A.P.A. photographers using the same methods and finding links between disparate places all over the world. Her process is public, but not democratic. The photographers she works with in each P.A.P.A. lab receive instruction, but also have to be able to write, and work independently. When Lino is there she shows the method, which can be summed up in a single sentence -- picture whatever catches your eye. Though the project director, she doesn’t interrupt or correct people, and she doesn’t have to: the rules are so clear and simple that operating within them is less like being behind fence and more like positioning within a frame. Indeed, Shahidul Alam from Drik commented that he had never before worked with such an open brief, though he also comments that ‘freedom is very strict.’

The sections on the front page of the P.A.P.A. website give you a sense of its wide range of influences: ‘Skinny Jeans’, ‘He Is Probably Drunk’, ‘Lonely’, ‘Business Woman’, ‘Dove’, ‘Luck Out’, ‘Attorney General’s Office’. Or as the P.A.P.A. website explains: ‘The keywords are the gold of P.A.P.A. They are ‘generating categories’, ‘new frames of mind’ that enable the public (general as well as professional) to create ideas in their head.’

The mission statement of P.A.P.A. has shifted over the years. Initially, it was described as ‘a network of artists and correspondents that creates news by taking action’ and that the correspondents ‘report on a selected number of world scripts’ that ‘everybody in the world takes part in.’ Later this mission changed, and P.A.P.A. was called ‘an internationally curated network of artist-correspondents’, with an emphasis on its nomadic nature and how it emerges in a temporary fashion in places around the globe. Around this time P.A.P.A. was also described as ‘an instrument for world mapping gently fixing even the most stubborn pieces into a meaningful pattern.’ Now, bearing the traces of experiences from P.A.P.A. projects in Lagos, Sao Paulo, Rotterdam, and most recently in Bishkek, P.A.P.A. is ‘an institute for artistic research’ and explicitly stakes its interdisciplinary claim on ‘art, city development, politics and the news industry.’

The P.A.P.A. working method and concept inspires a lot of people, who have at various points directly offered to share in shaping its future. So far, these direct overtures have been resisted. At first P.A.P.A. existed as a system with Lino at the head of it, giving it shape, but now it is perhaps ready to open up. Satisfied with the shape



it has right now, for the first time Lino is now able to listen to other people's visions and ideas for P.A.P.A. What's the future of P.A.P.A. then? Lino wonders if I have any ideas. I lean forward, and say 'Well, ...' but don't have an immediate answer. Tinkering with the future of something so beautifully simple and that works so well is an imposing task.



Reality in the Age of Aesthetics

BY MARK NASH

What does it mean when artists create scenarios that rely on existing social realities, or when they actively enter a social realm in order to generate works of art?

[see website for photo](#)

Isaac Julien, Western Union Series No. 8 (Sculpture for the New Millenium) (2007)

'The fiction of the aesthetic age defined models for connecting the presentation of facts and forms of intelligibility that blurred the border between the logic of facts and the logic of fiction ... Writing history and writing stories come under the same regime of truth.'

Jacques Rancière¹

Much has been written, some of it by me, on the 'documentary turn' in contemporary art. We can trace this development back both to major international exhibitions such as documenta 11 in 2002 (of which I was a co-curator) and to exhibitions focusing more specifically on artists' work with moving images, such as 'Experiments with Truth', which I curated at the Fabric Workshop and Museum in Philadelphia in 2004–5. Exhibitions such as these sought, among other things, to explore a range of artistic practices that, in one way or another, attempted a connection with social and political reality. Current shows such as 'Come and Go: Fiction and Reality' at the Gulbenkian Foundation, Lisbon, and 'The Cinema Effect: Illusion, Reality, and the Moving Image, Part 1: Dreams; Part 2: Realisms', at the Hirshhorn Museum, Washington D.C., are evidence of the continuing resonance of these issues.

This issue of frieze seeks to explore artists' increasing involvement with documentary by invoking the notion of artistic agency as one in which the artist, in one way or another, crosses back and forth between the domains of reality and fiction. Rather than being faced with a choice, the artist solves the problem of this relationship through his or her activity of 'border crossing'. 'What does it mean', asked the editors in their brief to me for this piece, 'when an artist creates a scenario that partly relies on existing social

1 Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics*, Continuum, London, 2006, p.38



realities, or when they actively enter that social reality to generate work?' For frieze the question of fiction is bracketed off, so that one can attend to the notion of artistic engagement. This is quite a complex issue, given the way that, as Rancière suggests in the opening quotation, the boundaries between reality and fiction are increasingly blurred.

It is certainly true that there is no longer any mileage to be gained from the opposition between fiction and reality. Decades of post-Structural philosophizing (for example, Jean Baudrillard's notion of simulacrum) have inured us to the argument that it no longer makes sense to try and distinguish between reality and its representation. At the same time documentary has become a means of attempting to re-establish a relationship to reality. The pertinent question, perhaps, is what kind of social, political or personal reality is being proposed.

In 1921 Roman Jakobson pointed to a central feature of any discussion of realism: avant-gardes were forever breaking with the established codes of realism – to which the conservatives held as a rule – in the name of a greater realism which their art provided.² Realism, in other words, needed constant renewal. In current discussions, artists' work with documentary has the potential to inject a new realism into contemporary art. Many artists embrace the documentary form because they see it as the latest technique for the renewal of aesthetic language. I am interested in this, but also in the potential that the form still has to reinvigorate the social dimension of art.³

In my catalogue essay for 'Experiments with Truth' I wrote: 'Documentary, however loosely we understand the word, has become almost a privileged form of communication in recent years, providing a meta-discourse that guarantees the truth of our political, social and cultural life.'⁴In the essay I attempted to provide a historical context for our current debates and discussions of documentary:

'Two formative but politically opposed notions have informed key debates and practices since the 1930s. On the one hand is the notion of documentary film to educate

2 Roman Jakobson, 'On Realism in Art', *Readings in Russian Poetics*, ed. Ladislav Matejka and Krystyna Pomorska, Cambridge, Mass., 1962

3 This debate takes us back to the animated discussions of the 19th century in which the more socially committed realism was pitted against individualist Romanticism, both movements born from the social upheavals of the French Revolution and industrialization.

4 Mark Nash, 'Experiments with Truth: The Documentary Turn', in Mark Nash, *Experiments with Truth*, Fabric Workshop and Museum, Philadelphia, 2004



and inform a mass audience on the duties, responsibilities and occasional pleasures of citizenship. This model was developed by John Grierson and embodied in John Reith's founding charter for the BBC. On the other hand is the model, inspired by the political avant-garde in Soviet Russia, that sought to use images as a vehicle for social and political change, such as the imagistic factography of a Dziga Vertov or the more traditional humanist challenge of a Joris Ivens.'

Two roles, then, for a documentary aesthetic: one a liberal, Fabian idea of furthering education within the existing social order, to reveal a more or less objective reality; the other, inspired by the then relatively recent events in the Soviet Union and elsewhere, which involved the necessity of more radical social transformation. Indeed Sergei Tretyakov developed a different term, 'factography', to describe this transformational aesthetic.⁵ These two different understandings of the function and role of documentary continue to influence our use of the word today and, indirectly, the way artists embrace and/or critique the form.

Tanya Barson's exhibition 'Making History: Art and Documentary in Britain from 1929 to Now' at Tate Liverpool in 2006 was particularly good at exploring the history of the dialogue between artists and the development of the documentary form in the UK. 'The traditional dichotomy between art and documentary', Barson argues, 'can be considered a false dichotomy.' Hers was the first exhibition to situate the work of contemporary artists in a historical context, to put the Euston Road School (the subject of the current Tate exhibition), for example, up against contemporary art and photography (Isaac Julien, Richard Billingham) and to tease out the lineages of committed art continued in the work of Rita Donagh and Richard Hamilton.⁶

The notion of artistic agency in which artists and critics make claims for work as forms of political and social engagement can be traced back through the early 20th-century debates referred to above. When in the late 1960s Jean-Luc Godard (together with J.P. Gorin) wanted to make films as a form of social struggle, he named his group the Dziga Vertov Group, referring back to the passionate debates in the Soviet Union in the 1920s on the relationship between art and politics, documentary

5 See 'Soviet Factography', October 118, Autumn 2006

6 The exhibition would have been strengthened by the inclusion of work by British Surrealist painters and filmmakers.



and fiction.⁷ There are many other instances of artists and filmmakers seeking some form of guarantee for their aesthetic strategy in historic examples. As Barson's exhibition demonstrated, films produced within the 1980s' black workshop movement, such as Black Audio Film Collective's *Handsworth Songs* (1986), relied heavily on the earlier tradition of British documentary and neo-realist fiction.

Documentary was ostensibly about the realities that could not be represented in fiction. Paradoxically, however, it always involved some fictional element, if only to help it more faithfully refer back to a particular social and political reality. (For example Ivens' use of reconstruction to present police evicting striking miners in *Misère au Borinage* (Misery at Borinage, 1933). The postwar developments of neo-realism and *cinéma vérité* took the documentary aesthetic into fiction in such a way that it is now difficult to make such hard and fast distinctions. Two recent multi-screen installations by Julien illustrate the point that the most interesting work these days occurs on the borderline between fiction, documentary, reality and fantasy. *Fantôme Afrique* (2005) combines a range of cinematic references (in particular to the neo-realism of Vittorio de Sica's 1948 *Bicycle Thieves*, which was so influential to the vocabulary of post-independence African cinema) with its fantasy shots and footage of everyday life in a contemporary West African city (Ouagadougou). *Western Union: Small Boats* (2007) mixes reconstruction of migrant journeys across the Mediterranean from North Africa featuring the actuality of the boats themselves, piled on top of one another as if in a graveyard, with complex sequences in which some of the travellers are rescued and taken into the Baroque palace where Luchino Visconti filmed *The Leopard* (1963). What is also important about this approach is that the artist does not abrogate an aura of political agency, although of course the work has a political dimension.

In the preface to his essay 'documenta 11: Documentary and the 'Reality Effect'' Okwui Enwezor raises the question of 'how to read the disfigured tradition of the documentary as it converges with a surprisingly conservative notion of the disinterestedness of art in its relation with social life'.⁸ When we curated documenta 11 the aim was to explore a variety of artistic and social practices that questioned this disinterestedness. Although we did not make much of it at the time, we could have looked further back at debates in Western art from the late 18th century and traced

7 Including Godard's *British Sounds* (1970), which includes the quotation from Vertov: 'The film drama is the opium of the people ... down with bourgeois fairy-tale scenarios ... long live life as it is!'

8 Okwui Enwezor, in Nash, *op. cit.*



a series of avant-garde positions concerned in one way or another with making contact with, or representing, political and social reality – 19th-century realism being the most evident and most enduring. Of course, a notion of ‘art for art’s sake’, promoting an art grounded in an aestheticism based on this separation, can also be traced back to the same period.

The question really arises as to why we are still having these same discussions today. My own view is that we are living out the legacy of the cultural cold war, during which the CIA intervened to promote Abstract Expressionism (in particular, Jackson Pollock and Mark Rothko) against a realism of politically committed European artists (such as Pablo Picasso). And while this story is now relatively well known, there has been no serious reckoning as to the necessity of rewriting the history of postwar art from Clement Greenberg to Conceptualism until the dissent of the late 1960s broke with this conservative trajectory.⁹

The fact that many artists working today continue to question this notion of the disinterestedness of contemporary art is encouraging. To my mind one of the most important achievements of documenta 11 was to bind critics of so-called ‘political’ art into the debate.¹⁰ Yes, visitors to that exhibition were presented with artists whose work involved social action: the Huit Facettes collective staging art workshops in rural areas of Senegal; documentary cinema including Ulrike Ottinger’s *South East Passage* (2002), tracing the new borders in south-east Europe created by the eastward expansion of the European Union; Allan Sekula’s installation *Fish Story* (2002), which exposes the working conditions and political economy of the global shipping network; and so on. But there were many more artists whose work operated in another register completely. Crucially this documenta insisted that in order to communicate effectively, indeed in order to function as art, all the work had to function aesthetically: that is, be well installed and presented.¹¹

It is conventional wisdom to see artists as double agents crossing back and forth between art and society. But in our increasingly mediated world, where it can be argued that social processes have an aesthetic dimension, it is much more difficult to

9 For example, Serge Guilbaut, *How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1983

10 So-called because Abstract Expressionism was also political, tied in, often without the artists’ knowledge, to an ideological struggle against ‘actually existing’ socialism.

11 documenta 12, in 2007, took another tack on these issues foregrounding presentation, installation and the aesthetic.



locate areas of personal and social life that are unaffected by art. The question is not about artists entering into social reality, since they are already in it, but about their making choices that involve commitment and which do not always lead to market success and the Turner Prize.

Artists can feel empowered by the projects they embark on, but to my mind this notion of agency is often no more than an enabling fiction or fantasy. I choose these words deliberately, since I would argue that it is only when an artist comes up against the limits of her or his practice that the work becomes truly interesting. Once involved in the messy business of engagement, activism and social change, matters quite rightly get out of hand and develop a social dimension.

There were several such projects in the 2007 Sharjah Biennial. A work by the collective e-Xplo and Ayreen Anastas struck me both by its enthusiasm and its naivety in this regard. A series of sound-pieces were sited around a working-class area of Sharjah, and visitors were invited to search for recordings of songs from different regions back in India. I was impressed at the fearlessness with which this group attempted to connect the world of migrant labourers in the Gulf to that of the Biennial. The main beneficiaries of the project, however, seemed to be the artists themselves, who were discovering something about the complexity of social life in the Emirates and, as all travellers do, more about themselves than about the place they were visiting.

Few artists are willing to consider the complex moral and ethical lessons to be learnt from contemporary anthropology about the politics of these engagements and the necessity to reverse the ethnographic gaze, empowering the other ('reverse anthropology', in the words of Jean Rouch). I am also always struck by how the 'author's name', to use Michel Foucault's term, continues to be of primary significance in the art world, even when the projects are realized with the help and collaboration of others. Many such artistic projects continue to be ethnographic in their implicit opposition of artist versus Other.¹² At heart this is still a Romantic notion, and such works have moved much less than they would like from the Orientalism of, say, Eugène Delacroix.

Of course, there are always exceptions. For example, Emily Jacir's installation *Where We Come From* (2001–3), in which Jacir acted as an agent for Palestinians unable

12 Cf. Hal Foster, 'The Artist as Ethnographer', *The Return of the Real*, MIT Press, Cambridge, Mass., 1995



to move around their territory. The simple question she asked participants was: 'If I could do something for you, anywhere in Palestine, that you yourselves are unable to do, what would it be?' The request, in English and Arabic, and her narrative and photographic documentation of her actions – which included delivering letters, registering cars and performing acts of mourning for citizens deprived of that liberty – form a series of panels that comprise the work. Of course, the project depended on Jacir's exceptional status as a Palestinian with a US passport, an irony not lost on the artist or the viewer. The model of agency here is very simple: not (yet another) intervention on the wall, but the necessity of human intervention to complete the most simple of everyday actions, as well as assisting in the more complex ones such as memorializing. Works like this raise questions about agency and change in a very direct way. *Where We Come From* taught me more about the reality of everyday life in Palestine than almost any other work about the area.¹³

A more complex example is Jeremy Deller's *Battle of Orgreave* project (2001), which involved a recreation of one of the key battles between miners, their supporters and the police during the 1984 British miners' strike. The performance was filmed by Mike Figgis as *The Battle of Orgreave: Jeremy Deller* (2001). This film of the reconstruction was presented as part of the widely exhibited *The Battle of Orgreave Archive (An Injury to One is an Injury to All)* (2004). The project is about popular memory and counter-history, about re-engaging with history from a working-class perspective. The archive is a museological exhibit complete with a timeline, documentary photographs, posters (including those from the Lesbian and Gays Support the Miners group), song sheets and a miner's jacket covered with decal slogans. A plenitude of artefacts, they are reminiscences of a struggle that has all but faded - the Tower Colliery in Hirwaun in the Rhondda Valley, bought by Welsh miners with their redundancy payments, closed as I was writing this essay. The importance of Deller's work is that it encourages these memories to resurface while asking questions about the history and legacy of that struggle today. The artist's agency here, such as it is, involves presenting us with the possibilities of alternative memories and histories. The distance and detachment of the presentation highlight the fact that these political struggles in the 1980s represented a real historical defeat. The Figgis film I find confusing since it proposes an equivalence between the reconstruction and the original event; I feel Deller's project is strongest when the differences and difficulties are highlighted.

13 Part of Fareed Armaly's far more ambitious *From To* (documenta 11, 2002)



Artists often take an indirect route when engaging with issues that have an important political dimension. The idea of commitment can be uncool. Instead, the increasingly conventional aesthetic is minimalist, refusing to tell you what to think about what you are seeing. Rather, you have to make up your own mind, based on a very fragmentary mosaic (in linguistic terms there is no meta-discourse).

The position Steve McQueen adopts in his installation and film *Gravesend* (2007), along with the several recent documentary films and television programmes about the Congo, is illustrative here. Much of the political instability in the eastern Congo is caused by illegal mining by militias from neighbouring countries: Uganda, Burundi and Rwanda. As we know from these documentaries (and it is their use of the framing voice-over which enables this to happen), 50 years ago Belgian companies mining for gold, uranium and copper were behind the secessionist move in another part of the Congo, Katanga, which precipitated the crisis that in turn led to prime minister Patrice Lumumba's murder in 1961 (in which both the CIA and the Belgians were complicit).

Faced with such a unstable and complex history, *Gravesend* takes, as Hamza Walker notes, an 'unapologetically abstract approach'.¹⁴ How can an artist deal with such overwhelming subject matter without finding an approach that can allegorically invoke a wider set of issues and without getting lost in them?

Thierry Michel in his recent documentary *Congo River* (2005) takes the opposite tack. The film charts a journey up the river (with the destruction of infrastructure in the country, travelling by boat is one of the only ways to get around). However, these boats are more like crowded waiting rooms: people huddle together in makeshift shelters on board deck as the boat makes a dangerous passage that can take months. Michel uses this journey as a way of presenting the abject level to which everyday life has been reduced. The viewer is thus caught up in an emotionally cathartic experience in which she or he feels (and this is the downside of Aristotelian catharsis) that they have experienced and understood something of what it is to live in the Congo. McQueen refuses that aesthetic. From footage of miners working in the forest in the eastern Congo together with a few key close-ups (hands breaking rock) he abstracts images with which to construct his installation, which connects this world of bare survival to the more abstract one of high-tech communication (the mobile phones for which these black bodies are mining the rare mineral coltan)

14 Hamza Walker, 'The Grand Scheme of Things', in an essay for McQueen's 2007 exhibition at the Renaissance Society of the University of Chicago



and the blood-red sunset over the River Thames from which Joseph Conrad's Marlow sets off to explore the 'heart of darkness'.

Both artists visited the Congo, but they created very different projects. I am interested in McQueen's abstract, emblematic aesthetic for a number of reasons. It is perhaps the dominant way contemporary artists manage their relationship to the real world when they are working with the moving image – and for good reason. The codes of documentary realism and the development of documentary (sub-) genres mean that footage shot on location is anything but neutral. It is just as coded as the most constructed of Hollywood films or the most abstract of animations: in fact, one might read the role of the animated river that courses through the work as an attempt to use a very abstract convention to convey a concept that the installation, in its attention to close-up and detail, cannot deal with. McQueen's work, unlike that of Michel, involves a series of deliberate shifts of register not unlike those of Soviet montage cinema, where the disruption of the edits forces the viewer to ask what kinds of connection are being made or whether it is possible to make any.

However, there is a paradoxical underside to this 21st-century return to documentary – if such it is – namely, that of the evacuation of signification from the signifieds of documentary practice such that it becomes, in the words of more than one artist practitioner, 'simply' art, losing any connection to a social referent. If the drawback of Michel's work is the confusing emotionality that comes with its adoption of a narrative form, that of McQueen's is that its aesthetic is too withholding. Although some viewers may be sent elsewhere to decode the enigmas it sets up, others are only too happy to accept these enigmas as 'art' or to read this minimalist approach as giving them access to a totality that is really only suggested. While McQueen uses the language of Deconstructionist film, Michel conveys more of the horror, and accordingly, one could argue, his is the more avant-garde project.

At the opposite end of the spectrum, perhaps, we could discuss Artur Zmijewski's *Powtórzenie* (Repetition, 2005). This film is based on an experiment at Stanford University Department of Psychology in 1971, designed to explore how prisons construct personality. Male students were kidnapped and held in a specially constructed gaol for up to five days before the experiment was ended prematurely. As one of the organizers subsequently reflected, it only took five days for all the features of prisoner abuse that were revealed in the recent Abu Ghraib scandal to emerge.

Zmijewski filmed a re-enactment of this experiment, but with rather different rules: all the participants were paid volunteers and were allowed to leave the prison, al-



though if they chose to do so, they would forfeit their fee for participating. Similar patterns of pathological and violent masculine behaviour emerged, which became even more complicated when guards and prisoners reversed roles (which did not happen in the original experiment). As with the original experiment, Zmijewski demonstrated how people's behaviour is conditioned – a situation not too dissimilar to behavioural studies of rats and mice in cages.

Zmijewski's film is not a scientific experiment; rather, it's a performance that resurrects an original, to insist that in the former Eastern Europe, at least, there are other solidarities at work. In his project the group decides to dissolve the experiment. The work takes a stand against a certain ideology of personality, indeed implicitly against an atomistic capitalism in favour of a more collective approach. It bears comparison with Catherine Sullivan's film *Ice Floes of Franz Joseph Land* (2003), in which the artist creates a re-enactment of takes the Chechen rebels' three-day siege of Moscow's Dubrovka theatre in October 2002 as its point of departure in which around (the final number is disputed) 200 people died, including 129 theatre-goers who had been held hostage. These kinds of project bear resemblance to extreme sports – the aim being to produce shock, awe and perhaps fear, pity and terror in ways that art in recent years has eschewed, even if it is the staple of mainstream entertainment narrative.

For Milica Tomic's video *Reading Capital* (2004) the artist asked art collectors to read from Karl Marx's *Das Kapital* (1867). As the exhibition documentation states: 'Several of the area's most successful capitalists read from Marx's seminal critique of the very system that gave them success. The resulting video presents the voices speaking passages into the camera while seated in a space of their choosing (home, office).' I like the piece, but for opposite reasons to those outlined above. These collectors are not, in their own minds, capitalists, if such a general designation makes sense today. Indeed, they have separated themselves from the world of capital by creating trusts and foundations and getting heavily involved in philanthropy. They lead comfortable lives to which many would aspire. The work explores this contradiction of having money but apparently not being possessed by it. These so-called capitalists are, or appear to be, nice people: they don't take themselves too seriously – indeed they have agreed to appear in a humorous video. If you think about it (although I am not sure this is in the work), Tomic's piece might enable you to see something of the impersonality of capital. Capital is indifferent to people, and the humanism of the piece could be perceived as foregrounding this. Indeed one might read some of the dynamics of the global art market, particularly in the USA, as a wish to return to an older form of accumulation that is visual.



Tomic's work sets up a lure – the reference to Das Kapital purporting to give us some insight into the workings of capital, which in fact it does, though perhaps not exactly as intended. The Zmijewski and Sullivan pieces operate slightly differently: they invoke reality as a fetish – the representation presents itself as reality (rather than remake) and, instead of a critical distance or reflection on the limited scope for action that the project allows both viewer and artist, promises a more direct (but impossible) connection.

These works are interesting because of the ambivalent way they both evoke the possibility of art participating in and providing an understanding of contemporary realities and social change, and at the same time carefully insist on the impossibility of this project. Hence the enduring paradox of what happens when aesthetic positions become substituted for their referent – reality becomes a fetish and perhaps just another commodity.

MARK NASH

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From the V2_ archives

ART, POWER, AND COMMUNICATION
BY ALEXEI SHULGIN

(Some simple thoughts without any wish to make them more profound)

I intentionally wrote this paper directly in English which I am not good in and I know that what I am going to say may sound rather declarative, generalised and clumsy. But the only alternative to this I see is to say nothing. In all other cases multitude of possible interpretations and associations will wash out those grains of sense I am almost hopelessly trying to find and bring out.

How one can dare to use words trying to explain something? Isn't it obvious now as never before that words fail to describe anything? Let's be honest - words now are nothing but just another medium for an artist.

1. The mechanics of repressive social institutes requires certain level of stability. People, that those institutes are basing their power on, brainwashed by them want to have certain past, present and future. They have some possessions to lose. They need stability to keep those values, that in fact are imposed to them.

But -

Past does not exist, because it can be easily re-written. Describing the past, writing history writers are trying to possess it, to obtain power on it, and through it - power on the present - using people's desire to have some certain (or uncertain) past to identify themselves. Not everybody is satisfied with the past, that's why each new past maintained by historians-seducers attracts people's attention: will I (my family, my country, my gender, my race) look better in the light of the brand-new past?

Same with future - it does not exist either, every new future proposed is just another attempt to take the power.

But present does not exist for majority of people either. They are living through it basing their movements on false and imposed pictures of the past and future they have. They don't communicate.



2. What theory? Yes, you can make brilliant logical conclusions, but what about their starting points, what about axioms? Aren't they completely uncertain and uncomprovable?

3. Talking about art we always imply art forms in which this art exists. Art forms that are approved and regulated by rotten art institutions. Even underground art always refers itself to established one. Art, artistic activity as we know it now, is a result of a will for communication, suppressed by power social structures. Only art based on the idea of representation has become possible under those circumstances.

Computer brought out some alternative - 'media art' that has immediately become a synonym for 'experimental art' from the point of view of high art society. Looking at very popular media art form such as 'interactive installation' I always wonder how people (viewers) are excited about this new way of manipulation on them. It seems that manipulation is the only form of communication they know and can appreciate. They are happily following very few options given to them by artists: press left or right button, jump or sit. Their manipulators artists feel that and are using seduces of newest technologies (future now!) to involve people in their pseudo-interactive games obviously based on banal will for power. But what nice words you can hear around it: interaction, interface for self-expression, artificial intelligence, communication even. So, emergence of media art is characterised by transition from representation to manipulation.

But manipulation is more communicative than representation. With the coming of Net some-thing new, shyly calling itself net.art is emerging, now trying to define itself and experiencing its difference from other forms of creative activity. The problems of current period of net.art as I see them are deeply rooted in a social determination of the notions 'art' and 'artist'. Will we be able to overcome our egos and give up obsolete ideas of representation and manipulation? Will we jump headlong into realm of pure communication? Will we call ourselves 'artists' any-more?

Net.art means communication means present.

4. Artists! Try to forget the very word and notion 'art'. Forget those silly fetishes - artefacts that are imposed to you by suppressive system you were obliged to refer your creative activity to.

Theorists! Stop pretending that you are not artists. Your will to obtain power on people seducing them with intellectual speculations is very obvious (though under-



standable). But realm of pure and genuine communication is much more appealing and is becoming very possible nowadays.

Media artists! Stop manipulate people with your fake 'interactive media installations' and 'intelligent interfaces'! You are very close to the idea of communication, closer than artists and theorists! Just get rid of your ambitions and don't regard people as idiots, unable for creative communication. Today you can find those that can affiliate you on equal level. If you want of course.

5. Question: How to turn very natural will for power into artistic tool instead of banal use of it for obtaining the power itself?

Answers:

- a. Forget about past and future, because they don't exist, concentrate on present that can't be described and therefore possessed by anybody.
- b. Change your occupation just before you became well-known in your sphere, and before the movement you are in starts to create its own history. Then, when you start something else as a beginner, your will for power and for recognition will give you strong creative impulse.
- c. Don't be dependent on medium you are working with - this will help you to easily give it up.

Don't become a Master.



COLOPHON

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V2_ is an interdisciplinary center for art and media technology in Rotterdam (the Netherlands). V2_'s activities include organizing presentations, exhibitions and workshops, research and development of artworks in its own media lab, distributing artworks through its agency, publishing in the field of art and media technology, and developing an online archive.

BLOWUP

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Texts by Duplex. Texts by Alfredo Cramerotti, Ken Hollings, Michelle Kasprzak, Mark Nash, Alexei Shulgin.

▪ **Aesthetic Journalism: Acts of Witnessing, Practices of Participation** is an excerpt from the book **Aesthetic Journalism: How to Inform without Informing.**

Bristol and Chicago: Intellect, 2009. Excerpt also published in German/English in Die Redner, ed., Kunst der Demokratie - Das Handbuch, Saarbruecken: 2011

▪ **Reality in the Age of Aesthetics** originally published in Issue 114, April 2008 of Frieze Magazine (frieze.com)

▪ **Temporary Storage** originally commissioned to accompany the launch of Gair Dunlop's film, **Atom Town: Life After Technology**