

The In-Between: Constructing Situations of Interpretation

Biography:

James Newitt was born in Hobart in 1981, after graduating with a bachelor of fine arts with honours in 2003 he received an Australian Post-Graduate Award, enabling him to study towards a PhD at the Tasmanian School of Art. James has previously exhibited in Young Designer's Month 2003, 2004 and 2005, the Devonport Regional Gallery, the Long Gallery, the Plimsoll Gallery, INFLIGHT art and the Perth Institute for Contemporary Art.

James has worked on commissions for the Hobart City Council, the Henry Jones IXL Redevelopment, the Royal Tasmanian Botanical Gardens and has completed numerous public art commission both individually and collaboratively throughout Tasmania.

James lectures in visual communication at the Tasmanian School of Art, and is currently chair of INFLIGHT art, Southern Tasmania's only artist run initiative.

INTRODUCTION:

To begin I would like to examine how the artist operates today? In what ways are artists responding to the social, political and geographical situations that they are inextricably linked. What means of production, distribution and circulation are artists employing to develop their practices?

There has been much discussion recently about contemporary art's movement away from representation of the image and production of the object, into the construction and documentation of situations which can be experienced, lived in and interpreted. Since Nicholas Bourriaud's text on *Relational Aesthetics*, debate about contemporary art's social and political function has received renewed focus and attention. Descriptions of artists' activities and practices have evolved from the notion of 'object maker' to 'service provider' (Doherty, 2004a, p.9) - especially in relation to art constructed for public events such as the numerous biennales and other contemporary art festivals around the world. These 'service providers', who often work externally to the traditional gallery context, have shifted previous questions, which motivated investigation concerned with the definition of 'what is art?', to concepts concerning 'where and when does art begin and end?' The intention underlying much of this activity is to engage the viewer as an active participant in the situation; the viewer is encouraged to piece the elements together, fill in

the gaps and enter into the scenario as a protagonist; thus shifting their position from that of 'beholder' of the image to interpreter of the scenario. To quote Nicolas Bourriaud, 'the exhibition becomes one big film set (a "film without a camera", as Philippe Parreno put it), a set in which we can mount our own sequence of meanings.' (Bourriaud, 2004a, p.46)

In artist practices that disregard the object or image as a finality or as a self contained reality, the framework of reference is broadened from that of a singular formal focus, to a multi-faceted perspective, which equally focuses on context, artwork and viewer. In this interaction the common thread, 'experience' activates exchange between the three, seemingly separate entities. Paul Arden (1999, p.12) defines the notion of experience as something that, '...can be concentrated into one phenomenological principle: *the practical, theoretical and cognitive trying out of reality.*' The artist is ultimately intending to construct an 'experience' for the viewer through means such as participation, immersion, narrative and scale. This construction of experience does not mean that the artist is prescribing a pathway of interaction or interpretation; instead he or she constructs a framework or structure through which the viewer can navigate, negotiate with and piece together their own reality. External factors relating to the context in which the work is installed extend the experience beyond the act of solely engaging with the artwork as an isolated object; the experience of actually occupying the site in which the work exists can act as a hindrance or extension of the meaning of the work. Finally, the viewer contributes to the layers of experience by inevitably bringing their own subjective interpretation to the artwork or situation; subjectivities such as memory, beliefs and knowledge all contribute to the experience of the work.

WE'RE ALL INVITED, BUT WHERE'S THE ART?

How can this notion of an image or artwork which derives its meaning, not from its representation but from the context in which it exists or to which it is linked and the viewer's participation with it, be illustrated? There are numerous artists working in relational practices where context and participation with the work is of primary importance. For some the relationships are overemphasised and forced, for others the fragility between the relationships strengthen the work.



Figure 1 Pierre Huyghe, *Rue Longvic*, from, *Pierre Huyghe*, monograph, Skira, Italy, 2004



Figure 2 Pierre Huyghe, *Little Story*, from, *Pierre Huyghe*, monograph, Skira, Italy, 2004

An example of this fragile relationship was realised by the French artist Pierre Huyghe in a self-initiated project installed in public space. Huyghe scouted Paris for vacant billboard sites; he selected a number of these, rented the billboards and then hired amateur actors to enact an improvisation of the activity which would be likely to happen in these sites. After shooting the acted scenarios in 35mm film and enlarging the images to the appropriate scale, Huyghe played with spaces devoted to marketing and media advertising by installing his images of enacted

scenarios within the very places from which they were taken. Reflecting on the project, Huyghe (2004, p.164) remarks that,

‘When you enter into the show you become an extra yourself. You can be the viewer of the poster and compare it with the reality being played out nearby, with the context of the image in which people move, just as you can unknowingly become an extra in the scene, or even, more rarely, you can become its agent – an actor.’



Figure 3 Pierre Huyghe, *Little Story*, from, *Pierre Huyghe*, monograph, Skira, Italy, 2004



Figure 4 Pierre Huyghe, *Little Story*, from, *Pierre Huyghe*, monograph, Skira, Italy, 2004

This project was initiated by Huyghe independently from any particular art event or associated activity - therefore there were no cues for the viewer as to how they should interpret these billboards which seemed to advertise reality. Were they the product of a significant art project or some sort of subversive marketing activity, promoting or branding the place through human interactions? These questions extend the experience of the work beyond the initial gimmick of reflecting an immediate reality onto itself.



Figure 5 Pierre Huyghe, *Chantier Barbès-Rochechouart*, from, *Pierre Huyghe*, monograph, Skira, Italy, 2004

From this temporary intervention, we are left with the interesting question - what exactly remains as the artwork? Is the work intended to be recognised as a semi-permanent gesture, only relevant to its place and time of existence and activated by the passing of the people in reality? Or, does the work actually exist as the documentation of the event, as a photographic record of Huyghe's intervention, that may be sold as an edition through the gallery system?

These questions surrounding the constitution of the actual 'work of art' have direct connection to community engagement with the work, and approaches to art education. The project may involve community activity, but the actual 'work' itself could exist as an editioned video. Working in a sculptural practice, may include the production of photographic and video documentation as permanent examples of temporary sculptural interventions.



Figure 6 Francis Alÿs, *When Faith Moves Mountains*, 2002



Figure 7 Francis Alÿs, *When Faith Moves Mountains*, 2002

Resulting from an invitation to participate in the third Ibero-American Biennale of Lima, Belgian artist Francis Alÿs initiated a monumental community gesture which now only exists in the form of postcards (which could be distributed far beyond the context of the Biennale and Peru,) and a three channel video installation (which was subsequently purchased by the Guggenheim Museum in New York) (Doherty, 2004b, p.8). Alÿs responded to the social, political, environmental and economic instability he witnessed in Peru by working as a director to orchestrate *When Faith Moves Mountains* (2002). In his project Alÿs organised 500 people to line a huge sand dune near Lima, each person used a shovel to dig a mass of sand and throw it in front of them, effectively shifting a mountainous sand dune by a couple of feet. Alÿs speaks of the situation that inspired the work:

‘There were clashes on the street and the resistance movement strengthened. It was a desperate situation, and I felt that it called for an epic response, at once futile and heroic, absurd and urgent. Insinuating a social allegory into those circumstances seemed to me more fitting than engaging in some sculptural exercise.’ (Alÿs, 2002, p.148)

Alÿs distances his gesture from other projects associated with Land Art, as its significance remains in the transitory moment of the event and its subsequent re-telling, and not in the actual modification of the place. The project’s meaning is now contained in the movement and transmission of its representation, whether through oral history, post cards, or video documentation. The fact that Alÿs describes his own project as ‘at once futile and heroic’ demonstrates his foresight of the process, especially in terms of the distribution and circulation of the ‘memory’ of the event. Alÿs has seen beyond the few hours in which the actual activity of shovelling sand took place, the gesture itself is just the beginning of the story, the full body of the project will take form through the recounts and re-telling of the impossible event of when a group of people moved a 600 meter long mountain of sand. Alÿs’ ultimate intention is to have created a moment of local history, an addition to Peruvian mythology (Alÿs, 2002, p.148), this is an intention which, for the moment, can only be speculated.



Figure 8 Jeremy Deller, *The Battle of Orgreave*, 2001



Figure 9 Jeremy Deller, *The Battle of Orgreave*, 2001

Alÿs' project resembles a similar situation to Jeremy Deller's *The Battle of Orgreave* (2001), where Deller negotiated and directed a re-enactment of the violent clash in 1984 between mineworkers and police. For this project, which is also recognised as an epic event, Deller set the framework for the re-enactment to happen, negotiated with external parties (such as historians, re-enactment societies, Artangel and film crew) and then allowed the project to take its own form.

Deller remarked that for him, 'the best moment is when you are surprised by what someone can do to your ideas, though I'm sure many artists would be offended if someone deviated from what they expected.' (Deller and Doherty, 2004, p.94) The project subsequently exists as a documentary of the event which has been shown in galleries and on television throughout the world.

Nicolas Bourriaud (2004b, p.44) justified the artists interest in participation and experience by stating that, '... an artist invents new ways of swimming, he or she does not spend time sitting on the shore deconstructing the wakes of the boats, as if it were somehow possible to step outside human society.'



Figure 10 Rirkrit Tiravanija, *Untitled 1992 (Free)*, 1992, from *Artforum*, Summer 2005



Figure 11 Rirkrit Tiravanija, *Tomorrow is Another Fine Day*, 2004, from *Artforum*, Summer 2005

All of these examples of art projects which respond to, or revolve around, an 'event' are presented to the secondary viewer - the gallery visitor - as an image or video which allows them to witness the retelling of the situation. An example of this is Aly's 3 channel DVD installation of 'When Faith Moves Mountains', where the retellings of that event can be somewhat monumental in itself.

Artists working as directors, mediators or 'hosts' where the primary intention behind their work is participation and exchange, face numerous, re-emerging challenges. Maintaining engagement with subsequent viewers after the event or outside of the context of the original intervention can be difficult. An example of this challenge is especially relevant to Rirkrit Tiravanija's practice, where he is now world renowned for creating social interaction through everyday activities such as eating, talking, playing music, etc. As well as creating social situations in public space, Tiravanija also uses the gallery as a framework to house many of his performative interventions. His activities are dependent on the time and place of their action to hold any real meaning or

engagement with the viewer. In a recent review in *Frieze* magazine of a retrospective of Tiravanija's work, Dan Fox (2005b, p.74) identified that: 'Tiravanija's work is so dependent on people, places and a certain moment in time, that it was never going to suit the average museum retrospective format.' Fox (2005c, p.75) observed that entering one of Tiravanija's installations, accompanied by a gallery guide and viewing the space after the food had been eaten, the instruments played or the conversation wound up, was like '...being told about a great party you missed.'

PLACED OR DISPLACED?

As I have exemplified, many of these artists who are dealing with notions of place and community, are not interested in modes of representation. Places are seen as transitory spaces, where social, political and economic activities, which happen within, or pass through them, render their meaning. The practices of these artists engage with site, but the engagement is a fluid relationship which interacts with, and evolves into other sites and projects. I have only recently come to understand the significance and interpretive power of the passing action and present moment in specific relation to the interpretation of place. My background (having studied and worked in the graphic design field) was focused on the presentation of information. Later as my interests developed into focusing on interpretive design, and interpretation of place, I grappled with notions and contradictions of 'interpreting place' and 'branding place'.



Figure 12 Henry Jones IXL site, Hobart



Figure 13 *Conserve: the IXL Redevelopment, 2003*

One particular project dealt with the redevelopment of a historically significant site in Hobart; the old Henry Jones IXL jam factory was recently developed into a luxury hotel and commercial space. The relationships I drew between the project and the site were grounded in historic events and after a while I felt the project began to acquire a whiff of nostalgia. Furthermore, collaboration with the redevelopment's architect, developers and tenants, reduced the opportunity for critical interpretation, instead favouring experiences which aided in the construction of a 'branded place'; as Bruce Mau (2000, p.61) noted, 'Every city is now in the business of not only making itself, but also marketing itself.'



Figure 14 *Untitled, 2003*

I did feel there were some strong aspects of the project though. A major element of my research was to collect and interconnect oral history and personal narratives from various people who had been involved with the site, especially when it was a factory. I also collected marks and personal notes from material such as old time sheets from within the site (before development) and began to weave these into various commercial and non-commercial projects. I understood that even if these marks were to exist in the site, their meaning would be drastically shifted by the new, slick, commercial context and activity of the place. Effectively I was able to bring the hidden stories and marks from within the site and subtly place them on the exterior, even on structures such as commercial signage, thus softly subverting the premise of the signage as a means of advertisement.

Using this experience as a departure, some of my more recent projects, although still very much focused on subjective and individualistic interpretation of place, investigated how to 'tell' places today, the current relationships that occur within them and how new relationships and experiences can be constructed. Historical perspective may provide a foundation or departure point for these interpretations, but I am conscious of the potential for history with a capital 'H' to

act as an anchor in the construction of narratives and interpretive interventions, weighing projects down with facts, past events and diluting subjectivity. Miwon Kwon observes that:

'Qualities of permanence, continuity, certainty and groundedness (physical and otherwise) are thought to be artistically retrograde, thus politically suspect in this context. By contrast, uncertainty, instability, ambiguity and impermanence are taken as desired attributes of a vanguard, politically progressive, artistic practice.' (Kwon, 2004a, p.31)

The 'context' Kwon referred to in her quote relates to the fragile balance between *fluidity of meaning* and *fluidity of identities and subjectivities* (Kwon, 2004b, pp.30-31). There is a certain taboo around an artist's practice which is bound to a particular site or situation (as I began to feel with the IXL Redevelopment project), that the work holds little relevance outside of its specific context. The opposite side of this is the artist as a nomadic traveller, lost in this fluidity, dabbling with different places and situations but never really being 'in place' or fully engaged with the context in which they are responding. I feel that the balance lies in the production of fragile, poetic work, which has a *fluidity of meaning* and may hold deep resonance with the viewer outside of the context of its production, but is the result of in-depth engagement with a place or situation.



Figure 15 Arberg Bay, 2004, DVD still



Figure 16 *Arberg Bay*, 2004, DVD still



Figure 17 *Arberg Bay*, 2004, DVD still



Figure 18 *Arberg Bay*, 2004, DVD still

To finish I will briefly mention two recent works where I reacted to certain economic, political and social situations in Tasmania: one relating to waterfront development, the other to a journey through the West Coast. By introducing a fictional perspective into these interpretations, I have been able to propose ideas and scenarios which are more open, temporary, subjective and negotiable, extending beyond the presentation of factual events.

Arberg Bay (2004) is a video, based on reality which tells the story of a group of young surfers who travel through the West Coast of Tasmania looking for a particular area of coastline. This video is based on numerous conversations I have had with friends during similar trips on this part of the coast. Beyond the blandness of everyday talk, I saw these conversations as being telling and emotive responses to particular places, communities and memories. They never reach a particular conclusion, but the video provides an alternative perspective on a place which is either promoted as being a 'relic of the past' (either through convict history or ghost mining towns) or a place for a quick-fix wilderness experience.



Figure 19 *Projected Conversations*, 2005, DVD still



Figure 20 *Projected Conversations*, 2005, installation view



Figure 21 *Projected Conversations*, 2005, installation view

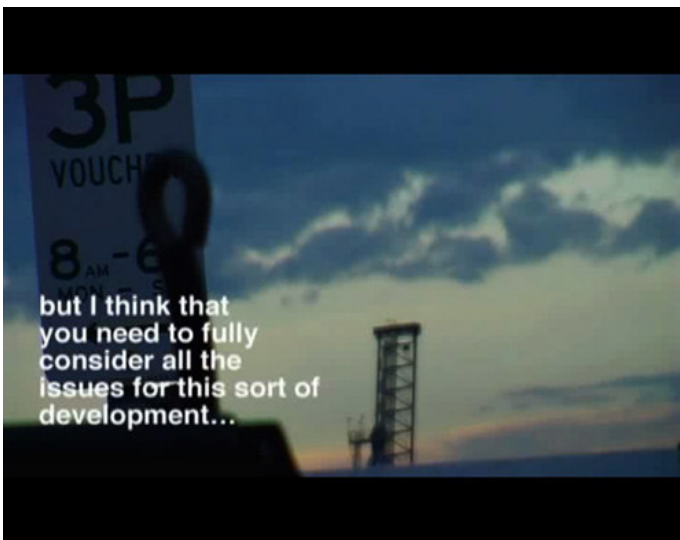


Figure 22 *Projected Conversations*, 2005, DVD still

Projected Conversations (2005) was a video installation in public space. After constructing character profiles for a developer and an idealistic architect, I wrote a script for an interaction that would take place in a private meeting room in Hobart (although it could easily be any other city in the world). Superimposed over fleeting images of a city as seen through reflections on the glass of its buildings, scrolling text describes how this conversation would unfold. Reaching no resolution, the imaginary characters are scripted to argue about culture versus commerce, architectural integrity and the 'bottom line'. The significance of the video's presentation *in situ* was that the viewer read the video as they passed through the public square - inevitably partaking in the conversation. The site in which it was projected also extended its meaning. The video was

shown in a large, empty building which previously housed a sort of Antarctic theme park, it was sold only a month before the installation, so the viewer was left to wonder whether this was actually a conversation that had recently taken place.

These works are by no means definitive projects. I see them as small steps along the way. For me they reflect an important movement in my practice away from the representation of place and concept of construction of identity, towards a fluid, malleable manipulation of the frames of reference; a manipulation that may only exist as a proposal or suggestion (through means such as video). Ultimately my aim is for these projects to become more ambitious, more fragile and to be able to produce independent modes of operation which can be experienced, interpreted and used.

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