

## Summary and Reflection Seminar 3: Quality and Imperfection

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### Perceptions of quality: Quality as use value v inherent character

In embarking on *Working in Public*, we started out with an implicit assumption that criteria for judging quality in art in the gallery and museum were widely understood and broadly agreed, whereas quality of art in the public sphere was less well understood. The work of the series therefore set out to create a new level of thinking that would allow art in public to account for its value (not least in relation to significant investment in terms of public funding).

In experiencing the seminar series and the diversity of positions represented, a new horizon (as Simon Sheikh might put it) has emerged. The focus has shifted towards understanding 'quality' in a different sense - quality as inherent character explored through its interplay with context - artistic, social, cultural and political.<sup>i</sup>

To focus on *criteria* for judging quality is to evoke a use or exchange value - What is art for? What is it worth to us (in equivalent monetary terms)? Focusing on quality in the sense of 'inherent nature' raises a different question 'What *is* art? And 'What is art in relation to other ways of being in the world?' What are the (aesthetic and ethical) implications of practising one way or another?

When Suzanne Lacy asks of the Oakland projects - 'When does this work spill over into becoming life?', when Grant Kester investigates art projects that propose alternative value systems to those of neoliberalism, or when Simon Sheikh articulates the role of art in terms of constructing diverse publics, they are not constructing an economic justification for art - its use value. They are testing the thresholds that they each perceive between art and other forms of conceptualising and experiencing the world. It is striking in each case how radical these thresholds are.

By extending our horizon from use value to symbolic experience, the discussion has shifted away from justifying one artistic approach over another. The latter operates within *an assumption of art* rather than an articulation of art as a practice and its place in the world. It also locks the discourse narrowly into alternative styles of making- gallery *or* public, allowing the one to be easily dismissed by the other. (Currently in Scotland and further afield this is where most of the heated debate in art is situated.)

I would argue that the real challenge lies in much bigger stakes - of art refinding its place in the world. It is a world in which communication technologies are fluid and shape the everyday in powerful ways. It is a world of significant cultural differences, not least deepening economic discrepancies between the very rich and the very poor. Globally we are increasingly challenged by our relationship with the world. David Haley<sup>ii</sup> argues that this is manifest in the significant discourse on climate change (our relationship with the environment) and the discourse on cultural diversity (our relationship with other cultures). We have reached a point in human history that demands that we listen and reflect on the implications of different systems of value; cultural, social and economic. That was the starting point in a particular context of the Oakland series - observing young people and hearing the alarm calls of a breakdown between youth and the adult world.

The *Working in Public* discussion has engaged in an open ended exploration of dynamic and radical forms of creativity and their power to create meaning. In so doing it has seriously questioned the intellectual basis for a current hierarchy of values - (such as 'art in museums and galleries is more authentically art than art in the public sphere that is compromised by other agendas').<sup>iii</sup>

Seminar 2 questioned whether we can ever *assume* value in either place - gallery or non gallery. It placed emphasis on continually exercising criticality and gaining a thorough understanding of

the power at work in acts of representation (whether in or outside of conventional institutional contexts) and of understanding where authority really lies.

### **A practice led inquiry based on first principles**

One of the leitmotifs of research in *On the Edge* has been the notion of 'suspending belief'. Art or creativity is often referred to as an act of faith, a kind of chancing one's arm in response to deep intuition (in Perkins' sense of intuition as compressed learning/knowledge). Suspending belief is different. It takes the stance that we actually know very little about what we experience until we revisit experience and return to first principles.

By 'suspending belief' I would like to trace how the new horizon that I discuss in this introduction has emerged. There are pressure points within Suzanne Lacy's articulation of the Oakland work that amount to contradictory perceptions of quality and imperfection. These pressure points prompt different but complimentary theoretical positions, one focused in art history and aesthetics (Grant Kester) and the other in the relationship of art to notions of public (Simon Sheikh).

The pressure points are perhaps best evidenced within Suzanne's own position on aesthetics.

"What I mean by perfect is that aesthetic sense that it 'works'. Sometimes that happens. It is rare. More often it does not work. If I use my own criteria of this sort of inner-sense of aesthetic competency or completion or wholeness, then most of my work does not really measure up to my interior gauge of what aesthetic quality is. Perfection is not the right word. In fact, the aesthetic operates on many, many dimensions from the visual to the relational or negotiable to the political. In which one of those spheres, or in what way are we going to assess a work's excellence or quality?" Seminar 3 am

Suzanne acknowledges aesthetics in two senses - a formal 'wholeness' as well as 'relational'. In making art, these different senses frequently clash.

### **What are first principles of Quality and Imperfection?**

Art in the institution of the gallery reaches its public or audience after the artist has authored a piece of work. The gallery audience is a group of individuals already sensitised and accustomed to a set of rules of engagement. The economic, cultural and political forces that shape the context of that experience - the gallery system, are implicit unless the artist as author chooses to bring these to the foreground.

In contrast, art in the public sphere is shaped in response to political, social, contextual forces in an explicit way. Rules of engagement are not pre-established but evolve as part of the creation of the work. This places the artist in a different relation to authorship and 'audience' or 'public'. These variables influence the way that artists work, the way that the work is experienced as well as how quality is judged and by whom.

"Most of the politics of this work are collaboratively framed. They do not just start as 'I have a brilliant insight into this problem and I do my work'. What happens is - 'I have an observation. I become curious. I bring my background to the picture and simply begin as we would do in this room. We would start talking and then the talking circles get wider and you even get referred to people who fundamentally disagree with you'. Suzanne Lacy Sem 3 morning session

Established forms of art making are well rehearsed protocols, elegant, controlled and 'perfect' in their own terms of reference. However, Francis McKee (Seminar 2) described museums and galleries as 'quaint and strange' in the light of a changing landscape in which art is proliferating within a new economy in the art world. Speaking of the changes to CCA as an art institution he comments

'Reconsidering everything leads us to reinvent ourselves in some way because I think there is a niche that we have in the new world, but it is a different niche, and we need to think it through". (Seminar 2 evening session).

Public art is open to contingent factors outside of the aesthetic control of the artist. It is by its very nature 'imperfect' in the sense of not being completely within the formal control of the artist, because it operates in relation to multiple, possibly conflicting terms of reference. These can go to the point of questioning the identity of the work as art.

"I wanted to bring this project (*No Blood, No Foul*) up today in connection with this notion of imperfection because, of all this series, this is the one work that people have had a hard time seeing as an artwork." Suzanne Lacy Sem 3 morning session

Suzanne Lacy's Oakland projects clearly demonstrate art operating in relation to public agenda issues: youth, race and issues of youth such as education, health and relationships - issues that most affect a particular social grouping in their every day life. In relation to the Oakland work, Suzanne questions where the 'work of art' is located and how it shifts and transforms at certain points in the process into no longer being art, to becoming a social process. To reinstate the work's specific 'artlike' character, Suzanne consciously punctuates her longterm involvement in the Oakland community with performance works, creating points of hiatus that represent the work back to a wider constituency as a symbolic experience. (Many projects in Scotland and many of the examples discussed recently by Grant do not have this kind of formal hiatus). She insists upon her aesthetic control as artist at these points. while also acknowledging the dependency of the work on its participants.

"We had removed the glass from a giant window up above the entire parking structure and I was standing up there in the wind, looking down several floors at the Free Mumia<sup>iv</sup> protesters. They were just about to blow an entire three-years' worth of work, and I thought, 'Ha! That is really interesting, isn't it?' It was a sort of bemusement – a disinterested bemusement on the inevitability of imperfection in this work and its complexities." Suzanne Lacy Seminar 3 morning session

Mumia Abu-Jamal is a Pennsylvania journalist who exposed police violence against communities. He has been on death row since 1982. Suzanne gave the *Free Mumia* protestors an opportunity to participate in *Code 33* as a platform for their protest. Instead they chose to disrupt the event by exploiting the presence of the media to draw attention to their movement and away from the performance.

The narrative of the *Free Mumia* protestors at *Code 33* describes the potential of contingent factors to disrupt, even destroy the symbolic intention of an artwork. The way that Suzanne tells the story exposes the push and pull of control and judgement that exercises an artist working in the public sphere within symbolic systems that compete and contradict. Her personal response- "a disinterested bemusement on the inevitability of imperfection" articulates the way in which she clearly sees a tension between artistic control and public freedom, both qualities that she seeks in the work but that may also destroy the work's reason for being as art.

Suzanne is also curious to understand how her work might address mainstream gallery/ museum culture appropriately and powerfully. She is interested in confronting the contradictions and potent issues that arise in bringing these two systems of value together. In the discussion in Seminar 2 she says

"It is not hard to go into a gallery and figure out some of the visual strategies being employed now. Imagine a pregnant teenager with a very large belly talking about the kind of information I have access to on a very big television monitor in a very dark room. That

*works*. It is also massively exploitative and I would not do that. But I have seen artists that do that, and maybe even do it (*probably* even do it) with the permission of the massively pregnant teenager. I would not do it because I think there are issues of body, and whose body, that are both political and aesthetic." Seminar 2 morning session.

### **A different aesthetics**

Grant suggests that in the visual art world we are currently working with two quite different notions of aesthetics. Within art objects, we are working with a notion of art as 'text', where 'objects' are invested in as the carriers of meaning. The role of audience is to interpret what is said. These 'texts' are located as objects of value within institutions.

The avant garde can and does from time to time smash through conventions, displacing by breaking the linguistic and aesthetic codes of the establishment. These movements and counter movements only make sense if they take place within a frame of reference (such as the gallery) that give these codes meaning in the first place. One frame creates the catalyst to a counterpoint in an endless agonistic cycle.

Grant establishes a different aesthetic for public work. In working directly in society some artists develop spaces of experience that stand outside of either politics or religion. This is different from an aesthetics based on 'text' and interpretation in engaging experiences of *meaning making* that are specific to context, inhabited by and shared between artist and interlocutor. They are haptic, physical and discursive.

Grant's thinking resonates with aspects of Kaprow's notion of the unartist - the artist reaching beyond the gallery /institution into life itself, of creating spaces (mental and imaginary as well as social) that exist for their own sake. Drawing on Huizinga and the notion of play being 'for its own sake', Kaprow conceives these spaces as in some sense 'ritual spaces' that articulate a particular moment in which meaning is 'grasped'. These rehearse what later might take organisational form. Grant, however, is specifically interested in forms of art that critique the fundamental paradigms that shape existing organisational forms and that model alternatives. He suggests that artists in this area of work do so through a set of procedures that are not recognisable by canonical forms of art making

"For my purposes, a lot of the work I am looking at now, negotiates with the impact of neo-liberalism, whether it is the impact of neo-liberalism on local economies or the impact of neo-liberalism on the operations of NGOs in the so-called developing world and the way that then reads off of and impacts the local and situational strategies of artists and groups working in particular contexts." Grant Kester Seminar 3 Morning Session

Park Fiction supported a process of urban regeneration in the area of the Hafenstrasse in Hamburg that inverted the aesthetic values of modernist aesthetic purity, developing extemporised spaces that directly address the ways and values in which the space is *actually* inhabited - dog walking, skate boarding, an interest in kitsch.

Grant positions his judgment of quality in art by examining practices that challenge by extending our focus of vision to embrace fundamental questions about how we organise ourselves in the world. Grant's analysis of recent case studies (Superflex and Park Fiction) emphasise the social/political critical stance of these practices that are deliberately aesthetically ambiguous in terms of their visuality but have the potential to be transformational in terms of habitual ways of thinking and operating.

Suzanne, Grant and Simon share this political interest in the relationship of art to society but come at it from different positions.

## Dematerialising the artwork in the development of new publics

Suzanne asks of Simon

"There is a professional situation that we also operate in as artists (i.e. beyond the personal) and so, the question is, how do we evaluate this work and thereby begin to create an aesthetic framework or an aesthetic idea or, is that even a relevant question any more? Is that just a generational question? Is that something that I grew up with but that may not be as pertinent?"

Simon Sheikh responds

"I would actually say that the discussion of whether this basketball game (*No Blood, No Foul*) is a work of art or not, is completely irrelevant to me because those boundaries are so dissolved and *anything* can be a work of art. I think we just have to accept that as an historical situation."

Suzanne Lacy & Simon Sheikh Seminar 3 am

### Viewed as part of the changing nature of the public sphere

In Seminar 3 Simon Sheikh opened up a trajectory of thinking that enabled us to see the artist/public relationship as part of a dynamic re-conceptualisation of the public sphere. Simon challenges Habermas' notion of a single public sphere that is the locus of a rational discourse. He views public as in reality housing many diverse positions constituted through differences of gender, race, economic circumstances and levels of education leading to the potential for a diversity of publics that have value in their own right and that are fluid, that may cross into private space such as the home. We need to embrace and accept this diversity without attempting to rationalise or unify it.

Dominant publics generate counter publics that mimic these dominant forms but to very different ends. Gay cruising in public parks does not involve any change in 'park' as a place but alters its usage.

Public art engages a vigorous debate from the moment of its idea through to its inception where gallery art is discussed only once it is completed. This engagement /participation in the potential of an artwork is a source of real energy in terms of the artwork's power to construct a public as part of the work's own emergence. As public art has increasingly developed in this way, it has become less and less material.

The making of a public is in fact the imagining of a world. Any work of art needs to start with its public, imagine a public in order to produce a world around it- a horizon. We re-imagine the world when we are no longer satisfied with what it gives us. All social institutions are the outcome of imagining and then instituting that imaginary as a social construction - even money.

In thinking this through in relation to new forms and languages of art making, we have to consider art as one mode of address among others. We need to consider who is the 'speaking subject', who is being addressed and in relation to what systems of values is this configuration (speaker, addressee and context). So for example, in making a film we can ask about the formal properties of film, of how one sequence follows another but we can go further and ask, who is involved and why, what are the relations between people in making the work and what are the politics of the work's distribution. By pushing this threshold from the aesthetics of formal construction to the politics of making, we are in fact talking about the politics of aesthetics. This places attention on the political meaning of certain judgements. It is more than poetics.

Simon advocates that critical attention should scrutinise what horizon is being imagined through art and the hidden forces that shape it - who is included and who is excluded. Who has the power

to de-represent, to remove ideas? What is real about our world and what is imaginary? At what point does the imaginary become in some sense real?

"How does an artwork relate itself to the delimitations of its horizon or the horizon of a current political hegemony at any given point? What will that tell us of the work? How can we then use our understanding to work within?"

Simon showed us a film by the video artist, Katya Sander depicting a far horizon within an anonymous landscape and characters who manifest a lack of imagination, a lack of curiosity about their surroundings. He suggests that this symbolises the idea of a silent majority in a disturbing way. The film is constructed. Actors draw on real interview material. He explains that the film becomes a metaphor for an idea of *vox populi*, but one that lacks imagination.

This observation resonates with Tom Trevor's Home series, Spacex that set out to challenge the homogeneity implicit in the idea of Middle England (Seminar 2).

## Conclusions

Is the artworld now struggling to accommodate challenges of cultural change? The myth of the avant garde suggests that art prefigures, anticipates or at least resonates actual change before the public imagination has caught up. The question is important because art is arguably crucial to sensing how we are in the world. Non artists have as much say in shaping the art of any one moment in time as artists.

Sander's film seems to demonstrate that the theory - the potential to create imaginary horizons and to institute that imaginary, is far greater than we as ordinary people, as 'public' have grasped. Suzanne Lacy's practice (taken as a whole and not just as a series of performance works) demonstrates the potential of art as a transformational process more than an affirmative process (the representation of life as it is). Suzanne's practice does not create change directly but creates the conditions for a public in a particular context to re-imagine itself.

Does this insistence on formal quality and degrees of authorship contained by the performance as work of art, undermine the full implications of a transformative practice and the inevitability of imperfection? To trace the potential of transformation, we need to see that practice as a whole process, as Grant argues, at its micro and macro levels and as a social, political, cultural endeavour. In being emergent and open to interaction, arguably the very qualities that define it, this practice is imperfect. Alternatively, does Suzanne's insistence on aesthetic form firmly anchor the work in art, creating moments of clarity in the messiness of life that are unequivocally symbolic and not real?

In becoming drawn to the museum and gallery, does Suzanne offer a challenge to that sector to extend its horizons, its own imaginary of what an artist could be, or what the relationship between artist, 'public' and context could be in any one moment? What myths or preconceptions of art might we have to abandon in the process of developing this kind of feedback loop? Is it the case as Simon suggests that now *anything* can be art? Or Are new forms of art making emerging that are capable of developing real insight in a complex world?<sup>v</sup>

Across the *Working in Public* series I believe that we have recovered energy in terms of the role of the artist in the public sphere, its potential and its complexity. This new energy has in part come through an in depth exposure to a particular and significant body of work, Suzanne's practice as well as new theory and curatorial practices. Kaprow stressed the importance of feedback in two directions, feeding back through the institution of art for the purposes of the work' recognition as art, and feeding back with participants to understand the different viewpoints -that of the artist and the interlocutor in order to learn.

These theoretical or artistic positions suggest that perfection in the sense of resolved statement/object/noun is not important. They suggest an open endedness of process as verb with the potential for the unexpected.

This new energy also comes through the act of participation itself - the importance of being an active part of a discourse that has drawn together a complex set of positions: artist, administrator, theorist, curator as well as interlocutor of art and of bringing one's own experience to that discourse to learn from and through others.

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<sup>i</sup> Svendsen, L. 2005 *A Philosophy of Boredom* Reaktion Books

<sup>ii</sup> David Haley is an artist and ecologist, research fellow at MIRIAD (Manchester Institute for Research and Innovation in **Art** and Design)

<sup>iii</sup> Grant Kester's response to this cliché is to argue that gallery/museum practice, has been sequestered, protected from the degree of scrutiny that public art is subjected to.

<sup>iv</sup> In Seminar 1, Grant drew on two edgy examples of artworks, Superflex and the Biogas project and Park Fiction's regeneration of the Hafenstrasse. The practice of Superflex marks an absence of any conventional notion of formal aesthetics. We appraise this work as art through the way that Superflex themselves locate their work within a discourse by drawing contemporary critics into an evaluation at a conceptual level. It is almost as if we are left to decide whether we accept the works as art/ not art.