

Aesthetic Journalism in Practice

Manifesta 8 and the Chamber of Public Secrets

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In his recent review of Alfredo Cramerotti's *Aesthetic Journalism: How to Inform Without Informing*, Matt Packer notes that the term 'aesthetic journalism' is "alternately deployed throughout the book", recalling "the way that 'Relational Aesthetics' functions for Nicolas Bourriaud".¹ So it is used both to elaborate upon recent tendencies in art practice and, in a more polemical sense, to propose "a radical interaction yet unfulfilled". This comparison is appropriate, not least because both authors are curators, but while Bourriaud assumes familiarity with a number of artists and artworks considered as key, and largely avoids in-depth discussion of his philosophical and theoretical reference points, Cramerotti is clearly writing for a somewhat more diverse readership, encompassing media students and practitioners as well as artists, curators and art critics. Each chapter of *Aesthetic Journalism* features suggestions for further reading, in addition to the comprehensive list of "references and niceties" at the back of the book, going so far as to contextualise major art events. So, for example, Documenta is introduced as "an exhibition taking place in Kassel ever five years since 1955 [...] an event that helped to shape an idea of art not as an autonomous field, but as a practice investigating (and reporting) the social and the political via aesthetics".²

As this reference to Documenta suggests, the notion of art practice – and the art exhibition – as an arena for social and political investigation is not new. Cramerotti identifies "early patterns of aesthetic journalism" in the eras of Reformation and Enlightenment, before charting the rise of "art as social criticism" in the 1970s (exemplified by the work of Dan Graham, Hans Haacke, Martha Rosler and the artists associated with Vanguardia) and contemporary practices (citing works by Laura Horelli, Renzo Martens, Alfredo Jaar, The Atlas Group/Walid Raad, among others). Cramerotti argues, however, that the more self-consciously journalistic turn evident in recent decades can be partly understood as a response to a crisis in traditional journalistic media. Before exploring the concept of aesthetic journalism further, it is interesting to note another aspect of Cramerotti's approach that is highlighted by Packer. *Aesthetic Journalism* includes a list of approximately twenty exhibitions between 2002 and 2005, focusing on artists who work with "the document, the archive, the report and the documentary style"³, including Documenta 11 and Manifesta 5 (2004), yet Cramerotti does not actually focus directly on curatorial practice. Despite this, it may be possible to infer his position through reference to his input as a member of the Chamber of Public Secrets (CPS), one of three curatorial collectives responsible for Manifesta 8, taking place from October 7, 2010 to January 9, 2011 in the region of Murcia, southern Spain.

Theorising 'Aesthetic Journalism' and the 'Documentary Turn'

Cramerotti's book is one of the first monographic studies dedicated to this identification of journalistic and documentary turns in contemporary art⁴, but it follows a number of relatively recent anthologies exploring similar territory. They include another Intellect publication, *Truth or Dare: Art and Documentary* (2007), edited by Gail Pearce and Cahal McLaughlin, featuring contributions from theorists Michael Renov and John Ellis, together with panel discussions and interviews with practitioners such as Trinh T. Minh-ha, Ann-Sofi Siden and Jane and Louise Wilson. A more direct emphasis on curatorial practice is apparent in *The Greenroom:*

Reconsidering the Documentary and Contemporary Art, edited by Maria Lind and Hito Steyerl (New York: Sternberg Press and Center for Curatorial Studies, Bard College, 2008). This compilation of new and republished texts includes 'Documentary/Vérité' by Okwui Enwezor, framed as a response to criticism of Documenta 11.

These publications are preceded by an array of texts appearing in journals and catalogues.⁵ They include 'The Where of Now' by Irit Rogoff, a contribution to a book published by Tate on the occasion of the exhibition *Time Zones: Recent Film and Video* at Tate Modern in October 2004 – January 2005. Ostensibly concerned, like the exhibition itself, with perceptions of temporality, Rogoff's essay actually focuses on location, artistic labour and the emergence of a mode of art practice "that informs in a seemingly factual way, but at a slight remove from reportage."⁶ She finds evidence of this shift in a series of exhibitions and goes on to cite a number of examples, such as a two-channel video work by Laura Horelli entitled *Helsinki Shipyard/Port San Juan, 2002-2003*, shown at Manifesta 5. This is one of a relatively small number of contemporary examples of aesthetic journalism (eight in total) discussed by Cramerotti and it also features in my own discussion of "documentary dislocations" in artists' cinema⁷, indicating the register of biennial exhibitions in (re)producing a common curatorial and critical vocabulary.

Although Cramerotti identifies historical precedents for the journalistic or documentary turn, his theorisation of aesthetic journalism derives much of its coherence from a critique of news media production and reception that seems particular to the present curatorial moment. At one point he proposes that this mode of artistic practice can offer a point of orientation within an overwhelming "flux of information"⁸, and later makes reference to "the current trend of event reporting" that offers "no space for critical distance".⁹ According to Cramerotti, art and journalism are characterised by different temporalities of research, production and reception, with artists typically working at a slower pace than news media producers. He also notes proximities between art practice and fiction, stating that "while journalism reports, and fiction reveals, aesthetic journalism does both".¹⁰

The slower pace of artistic production and the questioning of truth claims through the exploration of fiction create the potential for critical reflection, at least in theory:

"The problem we have today is that a lot of journalistic art merely attempts to disseminate information in a way that is allegedly neutral; an artist is not better at producing a more transparent picture of the real than a journalist. What the artist can do better, instead, is to construct a self-reflective medium, which 'coaches' its viewers to ask relevant questions by themselves, instead of accepting (or refusing *tout court*) representations as they are proposed."¹¹

It is interesting to note the use of the term 'medium' here – perhaps Cramerotti may be referring to the fact that text, video and photography are employed both by journalists and many of the artists cited in *Aesthetic Journalism*. But it is impossible to conceptualise the 'medium' of aesthetic journalism without reference to the discursive and narrative contexts within which artworks are experienced. This is because the self-reflexivity that Cramerotti highlights as a potential property of this type of art practice is located (at least partly) at the point of reception, linked to the conditions of exhibition and circulation that differentiate contemporary art from print, online or TV news.

Curatorial Discursivity and Critical Reception

Although Cramerotti favours discussion of artworks over the analysis of exhibition-making, he is careful to specify the optimum conditions of reception for aesthetic journalism. He states; "Two aspects are equally important: for the author not 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".¹² In practice, however, the actual conditions of reception for an exhibition such as Manifesta 8 – particularly during the professional preview – bear little relation to this ideal. As with previous editions, hundreds of artists, curators, critics and students attended the preview, which took place over four days.¹³ While the accreditation process was hampered by technical glitches, the actual experience was marked by a sense of inclusivity – no obvious VIP areas or parties with restricted access – and generosity, with free bus transport from one venue to the next. Yet the organisation of the exhibition at fourteen venues, spread across two cities (an hour apart) necessitated a very tightly-scheduled programme, so that hundreds of visitors arrived at each venue together. It was difficult to view many video installations in their entirety let alone "come and go in front of a representation at one's leisure".¹⁴

The advance information for Manifesta 8 signalled a strong thematic emphasis on curatorial discursivity. This was apparent both in the selection of three curatorial collectives (the other two are Alexandria Contemporary Arts Forum and tranzit.org) and the inclusion of various projects requiring audience interaction. During the preview, members of all three collectives organised events, talks and tours, so that those attending were sometimes constituted as participants, rather than observers. As several commentators have noted, critics routinely occupy a role similar to that of the embedded journalist¹⁵, not least because in practical terms art reviewers often depend, for access, information and even resources, on the very organisations and institutions that they are expected to critique. Perhaps more importantly, however, reviewers are also reliant on the networking opportunities offered by events such as the Manifesta professional preview, as a means to develop and maintain linkages in an era of increased competition. But this does not mean that a reviewer who follows the prescribed route, touring from venue to venue on the official bus, is prohibited from producing a critical response to an exhibition. Quite the opposite *might* in fact be true, because artists, curators and critics are capable of establishing and asserting self-consciously critical positions through an ongoing process of discursive production, which often involves the assertion of critical judgements (publicly or more informally) regarding events such as biennial exhibitions.

Teresa Gleadowe's review of Manifesta 8, one of two accounts published in *Art Monthly*, is particularly interesting in this regard because of its shift of critical focus towards the economic and political accountability of the Manifesta Foundation. Gleadowe emphasises that "Manifesta occupies a very particular place in the landscape of biennales brought into being in the past two decades [...] Launched in the early 1990s as a roving art event to be hosted in different cities around Europe, it evolved as a response to the political and economic changes brought about by the end of the Soviet Union and the consequent moves to European integration." Noting that "Manifesta has a more than usually



explicit agenda”, she goes on to point out that “its press material fosters the expectation that the financial contribution it seeks from its hosts – said to be 3.3m – will be amply recompensed in income from cultural tourism and in international positioning”.¹⁶ Gleadowe also states that the Foundation “has an interest in curatorial innovation” and although she does not elaborate on this point, the context of her discussion suggests an economic imperative for the thematic focus on curatorial collectivity. This could be one way of ensuring the attendance of visiting professionals, whose presence is presumably essential to “international positioning”. She concludes, however, that the Foundation largely failed to offer the appropriate curatorial and editorial support for Manifesta 8, leading to significant problems with exhibition texts, venues and installation.

CPS at Manifesta 8

Turning to the CPS catalogue contributions, Tirdad Zolghadr’s essay, ‘The Man Who Stares at Media: Remote Viewing of the Chamber of Public Secrets’, also offers a critique of the Manifesta project. Unlike Gleadowe, who pointedly cites facts and figures, Zolghadr adopts a self-consciously speculative position, describing himself as a “remote viewer” with limited knowledge of Murcia and also of CPS (whose activities he has encountered mainly through their website and publications). As though anticipating the extinction of Manifesta, he describes it as “belumbering the continent like a mammoth on the icy tundra. Now loudly laying claim to neighboring land masses in complete, sweet oblivion to the colonial connotations its appetites imply”.¹⁷ This critique is then developed through reference to journalism, as Zolghadr notes the longstanding complicity of journalists with colonial enterprise, citing Nietzsche on the arrogance of nineteenth century journalism: “the newspaper steps into the place of culture, and he who, even as a scholar, wishes to voice any claim for education, must avail himself of this viscous stratum of communication which cements the seams between all forms of life [...] In the newspaper the peculiar educational aims of the present culminate, just as the journalist, the servant of the moment, has stepped into the place of the genius.”¹⁸

Zolghadr welcomes the interrogation of journalism that is potentially offered by CPS, in terms of its relation to the Manifesta project, but the task he seems to envisage is distinct from that undertaken by Cramerotti in *Aesthetic Journalism*. Zolghadr not only challenges the European tradition in which journalism is posited as “the conscience of civil society”, but also identifies Manifesta as an extension of this model. By contrast, Cramerotti seems – at least in part – to lament a decline in contemporary journalistic standards resources, while implicitly valorising an earlier era.

With ‘¿The Rest is History?’, CPS aim to contest the limits of the Manifesta project, primarily through the embrace of new media and information systems. So, for example, the

curators state that they “attempted to redirect Manifesta into a new situation, namely, a mutual dependence of other discourses and ‘systems’ – in this case, information systems”.¹⁹ This interest in systems was apparent in the development of projects across multiple platforms. In addition to organising exhibitions and projects at numerous sites in Murcia and Cartagena, CPS developed and commissioned works for print, TV, radio and the internet and two of the venues included media archives or hubs with access to documentation and contextualising material on the CPS website. But the website actually offered relatively little in terms of additional material during the preview, and development of projects across so many media platforms may have overstretched resources.²⁰

The practical problems cited by Gleadowe are significant, if only because they illustrate a possible blind spot within Cramerotti’s analysis. His endorsement of aesthetic journalism is partly founded, as I have suggested, on the assumption that artists have more time than journalists. He states; “time is what dictates the limits of present-day researching and reporting. Artists do not have to work within the deadlines of traditional news production, but can ‘investigate’ [...] At a slower pace to develop meaningful relationships with communities. Through the assistance of curators and an organisation such as Manifesta 8, artists have the means to infiltrate the public and private infrastructures and reveal new takes on past, contemporary and future issues”. As the case of Manifesta 8 demonstrates, however, both curators and artists can only work in this way if this ‘assistance’ is forthcoming.

As Gleadowe implies, the repurposing of a number of buildings in Murcia and Cartagena for cultural and social use – part of the funding arrangement with the hosts, as problematised above – might have contributed to technical problems and delays. But this does not easily explain the situation at the two museum venues used by CPS, in which projected videos at times suffered from poor image quality. In fact one of the most effective works, *AmnesiaLand* by Stefanos Tsivopolous, was devised in response to a site not previously used for contemporary art exhibition – the Casino in Cartagena. This was one of a relatively small number of works in ‘¿The Rest is History?’ to fulfil the potential of aesthetic journalism, as theorised by Cramerotti, through its fusion of fictional and documentary modes of address. In addition, while numerous contributions to Manifesta 8 employed a self-consciously ‘archival’ mode of display, *AmnesiaLand* was one of the few video installations to make effective use of – and clearly acknowledge – already existing archives.

Nostalgia for the Public Realm

So, to what extent does the CPS presentation at Manifesta 8 success in furthering the critique developed by Cramerotti in *Aesthetic Journalism*? In their primary contribution to the catalogue, CPS emphasise that they want to “search out and engender dialogues, placing them in the public realm, through the practices of media, film and documentary production, artistic research and aesthetic journalism”.²¹ CPS clearly conceptualise the public realm as aligned with, and dependent upon, diverse forms of cultural production and research. Yet there is also a sense that they are seeking to preserve – or perhaps reanimate – a relatively traditional model of the public sphere, aligned to specific forms of media production and consumption that are under threat, if not actually in decline;

“we need printed journalism and broadcasts to help us make sense of the world around us. The amount of administrative, cultural, political and financial processes that occur during our average day cannot be digested in any other way.”²²

From this perspective, ‘¿The Rest is History?’ might then be viewed partly as a nostalgic undertaking, particularly if nostalgia is understood

as an acknowledgement of loss. **It is too soon to know if CPS actually succeeded in expanding Manifesta’s discursive networks and information systems – the only credible way to determine this would be to undertake a formal study of its reception.** In the absence of such a study, the critical response already offered by commentators such as Gleadowe might at least prompt greater self-reflection on the part of the Manifesta Foundation, so that it may perhaps support (some) artists, critics (and curators) to work differently from journalists.

Notes

- 1 Matt Packer, ‘Book Review: Aesthetic Journalism: How to Inform Without Informing’, *Photography & Culture* Vol 3, Issue 3, November 2010, 364.
- 2 Alfredo Cramerotti, *Aesthetic Journalism: How to Inform Without Informing*, (Bristol and Chicago: Intellect and Chicago University Press, 2009) 30.
- 3 Cramerotti, 84.
- 4 It is beyond the scope of this article to discuss distinctions between ‘journalistic’ and ‘documentary’ fields and modes of practice. But while documentary is often defined, following John Grierson, as the ‘poetic treatment of actuality’, journalism could be said to assert a stronger truth claim, and has traditionally been more tightly regulated through professional organisations and codes.
- 5 Recent examples include John Douglas Millar, ‘Watching V Looking’, *Art Monthly*, October 2010, 7-10, and various contributions to Jane Connarty and Josephine Lanyon, eds., *Ghosting: The Role of the Archive within Contemporary Artists’ Film and Video*, (Bristol: Picture This, 2006).
- 6 Irit Rogoff, ‘The Where of Now’, *Time Zones: Recent Film and Video*, eds. Jessica Morgan and Gregor Muir (London: Tate, 2004) 85. Emphasis in original.
- 7 Maeve Connolly, *The Place of Artists’ Cinema: Space, Site and Screen*, (Bristol and Chicago: Intellect and University of Chicago Press, 2009). Cramerotti’s research first came to my attention several months before the publication of *Aesthetic Journalism*, when I was invited by Bristol-based artist Daphne Wright to take part in a public discussion on her work in June 2009, which he organised as the curator of QUAD gallery in Derby, UK.
- 8 Cramerotti, 69.
- 9 Cramerotti, 104.
- 10 Cramerotti, 103.
- 11 Cramerotti, 30.
- 12 Cramerotti, 106.
- 13 I attended with a group of students on the MA in Visual Arts Practices (www.mavis.is) and my article is partly informed by class discussions, particularly with criticism students such as Joanne Laws, whose review of Manifesta 8 is forthcoming in *Afterimage*, January/February 2011.
- 14 Evidently, it is possible to experience Manifesta outside the frame of the professional preview. When I reviewed the exhibition at Donostia-San Sebastian in 2004 it had already been open for several months and I moved from one venue to another at my own pace, relying upon public transport and directions from strangers as well as Manifesta maps and signage. See Maeve Connolly, ‘Nomads, Tourists and Territories: Manifesta and the Basque Country’ *Afterimage: Journal of Media and Cultural Criticism*, 32.3, November/December 2004: 8-9
- 15 Chris Fite-Wassilak, ‘The Hope for an Open Wound’ *CIRCA* 131, November 2010. http://www.recirca.com/cgi-bin/mysql/show_item.cgi?post_id=5264&type=Issue131&ps=publish
- 16 Teresa Gleadowe, ‘Manifesta 8’, *Art Monthly* 341, November 2010, 22-23.
- 17 Tirdad Zolghadr, ‘The Man Who Stares at Media: Remote Viewing of the Chamber of Public Secrets’, *Manifesta 8*, (Milan: Silvana Editoriale Spa, 2010) 153.
- 18 Zolghadr, 155.
- 19 CPS, ‘¿The Rest is History?’, *Manifesta 8*, (Milan: Silvana Editoriale Spa, 2010) 127.
- 20 There is a possible parallel here with the situation of ‘old media’ producers (such as public service broadcasters, for example) struggling to provide content across multiple platforms.
- 21 CPS, 128-129.
- 22 CPS, 133.