Dialogical Aesthetics: A Critical Framework For Littoral Art

Grant Kester

There is pressure through the public funding system for the arts in the UK to create at least the allusion of engaging a broader demographic of the population. The reasoning for this is explained away as public funding shifts to an indirect yet local and media promoted form of taxation through the Lottery, so Government wishes to see—as much for its own PR as continuing Lottery sales—a publicly visible correlation between where the income is generated and on what it is being spent—‘good causes’. This can be seen to be having not dissimilar conservative repercussions on what receives public funding as happened with the National Endowment for the Arts in the U.S. One outcome has been the supporting of art that adheres to promoting and cultivating ‘Social Inclusion’. This has placed the emphasis on artistic engagement as educational, or pedagogic, in a way that attests to inclusion within society as an integrated whole. At least superficially, this is exposing a shift in the terms of engagement between artists and what were traditionally regarded as audiences, to a more therapeutic or correctional interaction with an underscored group of people.

However, expectations and shifts in artistic practice are not a ‘given’ with legislative changes to government funding priorities, but performative. If a shift is to occur at the point of social engagement then it does not ‘happen’ coercively or in isolation but as a direct effect of an informed choice shift in formations of artistic practice in partnership with the people with which they work.

Within socially engaged approaches to arts practices there are widely differing dispositions, from what can be seen to be broadly in line with the Government’s agenda—uni-directional activity of cultivating what are effectively better ‘citizens’ / consumers where ‘collaboration’ is largely symbolic—to attempts at aniquality of engagement, where art is seen as ‘a medium for discussion with social reality’, as artist Jay Koh puts it.

One description of the latter has been ‘Littoral’ practice. “Littoral—adj. or on the shore. —n. a region lying along the shore.” From its description it can be taken to express a point of complimentary meeting, an inbetween space.

The UK Government’s take and emphasis on ‘self help’ programmes has generated much scepticism with regard to socially engaged art practices. While there may have been many managerial conferences, effectively bolstering the position the Government is adopting, there has been little to no indepth and critical discussion.

One conference that was established to address issues of socially engaged practice was Critical Sites: Issues in Critical Art Practice and Pedagogy held in the Institute of Art, Design and Technology, Dun Laoghaire, Co. Dublin, September ‘98, organised by Critical Access and Littoral in Ireland. At the conference Grant Kester, assistant professor of contemporary art history and theory at Arizona State University, delivered a paper: Socially Engaged Practice— Dialogical Aesthetics: A Critical Framework For Littoral Art.

To raise and debate some of the related issues Variant is hosting an on-line forum on Socially Engaged Practice, commencing with the launch of this issue. Given his commitment and work done to date in these areas, to initiate this dialogue we asked Grant Kester to re-present his paper from the conference.

The Socially Engaged Art Practice on-line forum—held in collaboration with the Environmental Art Department of Glasgow School of Art—is at:

http://sepf.listbot.com/

This includes an archive of all messages, available to all list members, you can subscribe (at no cost) to the list also from the above site.

Grant Kester’s paper Socially Engaged Practice— Dialogical Aesthetics: A Critical Framework For Littoral Art is also available as a downloadable PDF file at the Variant site:

www.ndirect.co.uk/~variant/

If you do not have access to e-mail but wish to respond to Grant Kester’s paper, or any issues related to socially engaged practice, please post them to:

Variant, 1a Shamrock Street, Glasgow, G4 9JZ

The resulting exchanges will be subsequently documented at the Variant site and are intended to appear as a dedicated supplement within the ensuing issue, Variant #10 (Spring/Summer 2000).
I. Defining Littoral Art

In this paper I'm going to outline a framework for the critical analysis of “Littoral” or engaged art practices. I start with two related caveats. First, my analysis is based primarily on work that I am familiar with in the US and the UK. Thus, it is very much a selective framework. And second, even within this geographically limited context it is focused on a single aspect of these works which I feel is of particular importance. Given the time and space limitations there will be a number of complex questions which I will be unable to elaborate sufficiently and others which I will be forced to bypass altogether. I begin with the assumption that Littoral projects make very different demands on the practitioner than do typical gallery or museum-based art works and that they challenge on many levels the normative assumptions of conventional art works. By the same token I would contend that Littoralist art requires the development of a new critical framework and a new aesthetic paradigm. There are aspects of Littoralist practice that simply can't be grasped as relevant (or in some cases identified at all) by conventional art critical methodologies.

Mainstream art criticism is organized around two key elements. First, it is primarily concerned with the formal appearance of physical objects, which are understood to possess an immanent meaning. These meanings are then actualized as the object comes into contact with a viewer. The object here remains the primary carrier of aesthetic significance, whether in terms of a formal analysis or in terms of a speculative phenomenology that attempts to re-construct a postulated viewer's interactions with it. Second, the judgments produced through the critic's interaction with the physical object are authorized by the writer's individual, pleasure-based response. In The Scandal of Pleasure the American critic Wendy Steiner argues that the primary organizing principle of criticism should be “subjective preference” or what she terms the “I like” response. When contemporary critics confront Littoral projects they often lack the analytic tools necessary to understand the work on its own terms and instead simply project onto it a formal, pleasure-based methodology that is entirely inappropriate. The results are not surprising. Littoral works are criticized for being “unesthetic” or are attacked for needlessly suppressing “visual gratification”. Because the critic is unable to gain any sensory stimulation or fails to find the material in the work personally engaging it is dismissed as “failed” art. This was the reaction of a number of U.S. critics to the most recent Dokumenta exhibition. Ken Johnson of Art in America coined the term “post-retinal” to describe much of the work in the show. Although Johnson intended this term as a mild pejorative, I feel it is quite useful in capturing the ways in which many Littoral projects challenge the tendency of contemporary visual art to function primarily on the level of sensation. The reliance of contemporary criticism on the writer's personal response also has the effect of treating subjectivity as an unquestioned, a priori principle, rather than recognizing the extent to which the critic’s “personal” taste is structured by forms of identification and power based on class, race, gender and sexuality. I would argue that the critic has a responsibility to interrogate their own individuality, to ask how their identity functions in relationship to other subjects and other social formations.

1. The Problem of Definition and Indeterminance

The concept of a Littoral criticism is important because it forces upon us the question of what Littoral “art” might be, which in turn requires that we differentiate Littoral art from other kinds of art (or other forms of cultural politics or activism for that matter). I know that for myself most of these differences have remained relatively intuitive or unconscious. The act of criticism requires that we make these intuitive judgments more concrete and subject them to some conceptual elaboration. The positive dimension of this activity is that it can deepen our understanding of what makes Littoral art effective. The negative dimension is that it can lead to a hardening of categorical definitions and distinctions. This brings us to a central question. There is a long tradition of defining modernist art through its difference from dominant cultural forms. Thus, Clive Bell and Roger Fry defined avant-garde painting (and in particular, Postimpressionism) through its active suppression of representation, which they associated with the populist realism of Victorian genre painting. Greenberg, of course, contrasted authentic art with vulgar “kitsch”. In the 1970s critic Michael Fried differentiated the truly avant-garde art of Anthony Caro and Frank Stella from the inauthentic “Literalist” art of Donald Judd or Robert Smithson, based on its resistance to “theater”. That is, Caro’s work was judged to be superior because it refused to incorporate formal cues that would acknowledge the presence of a viewer. This resistance to fixity can be traced to the function of the aesthetic in early modern philosophy as a force that is intended to absorb antagonisms created elsewhere in society. Typically, as in the writings of Schiller, the aesthetic is conceived of as therapeutic; its job is to ameliorate the fragmenting effects of a market-driven society. This compensatory function needs to be understood within the context of liberalism. The aesthetic provides us with a unique power to comprehend and represent the totality of forces operating within society, and to envision more progressive or
humane alternatives, but this epistemological insight is always joined with the requirement that the artist must never attempt to realize these alternatives through direct action. The "poet," according to Schiller, possesses a sovereign right only in the limitless domain of the imagination. In a parallel manner, for Hegel, in The Philosophy of Right, the "aesthetic state" can comprehend the delineation of its rights; but it is prevented from intervening in the ostensibly "natural" operations of the market. The resulting social tensions (poverty, a growing gap between rich and poor, a repressive discipline) will be relieved, rather, by the expansion of the market and by the colonization of what he terms "backward" lands. These as yet unnamed colonies are defined, like the aesthetic imagination itself, as potentially boundless and conceptually indeterminate. For Kant the destructive impact of social stratification will be healed by the unfettered circulation of commerce and knowledge (or "books and money"), leading to the gradual diffusion of a spirit of harmonious Enlightenment. The aesthetic can thus be understood as one of several technical mechanisms that were developed within liberalism to simultaneously regulate the threat posed by systematic forms of critique and to compensate for the emergent effects of the emergent capitalist system. It must remain highly elastic and unregulated, precisely because it is being called upon to absorb a potentially infinite range of divisive social effects.

Under the influence of late nineteenth-century critics such as Robert Vischer and Heinrich Wölfflin, this principle of indeterminateness was transferred from a general condition of aesthetic knowledge to a trait primarily associated with the experience of artworks. Specifically, the capacity of the modernist work to continually complicate or modify its own formal condition became an expression of its refusal of determinant boundaries. Critics like Bell, Fry, and Greenberg then endowed this idea of formal innovation with the specific motivation that modernist art must constantly transform itself to avoid co-optation by popular culture. This principle of indeterminateness remains with us today in the concept of the work that refuses the economic exchange of commerce and knowledge (or "books and money") and, in a parallel manner, for Hegel, in the philosophical novel. The condition of this degraded cultural form is then seen as entirely exhausting the possibilities of a populist art, thus forcing the artist to withdraw completely from the field of discursive engagement.

What I am calling an "anti-discursive" tradition in the modern avant-garde is defined by two seemingly opposed moments. The first, which I have described elsewhere as an "orthopedic" aesthetic, seeks to aggressively transform the viewer's consciousness (implicitly defined as flawed or flawed) through an overwhelming encounter with the work of art. This perspective is more accurately described as counter-discursive in that it argues that the work of art has the ability to operate on the viewer through a specific anti-discursive, somatic power. Examples would include the "alienation" effect of the 1930s Russian Constructivist avant-garde and Barnett Newman's concept of a "shock" of critical awareness produced through the "dialectical" juxtaposition of images. Although ambivalently positioned relative to discursive forms of knowledge, these approaches provide an important framework for thinking through a communicative aesthetic model. The positive recognition that everyday language is always already ideologically and politically reactionary yearning after "unity" and the misguided attempt to reconcile art and society on a mythical "organic whole".

Of course Lyotard's fears of a universalizing discourse are well-founded. One does not have to look very far in the current cultural landscape to find concrete examples, such as recent attempts at the teaching of Spanish in California public schools (Proposition 227) under the guise of a resurgent one-language American that attempts to define American identity through the negotiation of the complex cultures that actually constitute that country today. Clearly, any model of discourse or cultural identity that is founded on the violent suppression of difference is oppressive. At the same time that the vehemently anti-discursive tradition within the modernist avant-garde has led to another kind of negation of an oppositional tradition, a neo-Kantian lineage of formalist art criticism, I would argue that we can draw very different lessons about the meaning of modern aesthetics. The concept of the aesthetic that emerged in the work of philosophers such as Kant, Schiller, Shaftesbury, and Hutcheson was centered on the relationship between the individual (defined by sense-based or somatic knowledge) and the social. This relationship was constructed through concepts such as "taste" (which marks the fortuitous harmony between the individual and the social), or a more objective standard of judgment. This work was only nominally concerned with the form of the art object per se. A primary term of reference was the concept of a sensus communis or Gemeinsinn, a common sense or knowledge that marked a horizon of shared communicative engagement. This opens up within a whole area of debate in contemporary theory between Habermas, Foucault and Lyotard, among others. Lyotard goes so far as to link the concept of discourse and communicability in art with what he ominously terms a "call to order" and the cultures of fascism and Stalinism. Habermas' claim that art might expand from "questions of taste" to the exploration of "living historical situations" is linked for Lyotard with a naive, nostalgic and politically reactionary yearning after "unity" and the misguided attempt to reconcile art and society on a mythical "organic whole".

4. Implications for the Analysis of Art

I now want to outline three related components of a discursive or literary approach. I

1. Interdisciplinarity

First, Littoral art is interdisciplinary. It operates "between" discourses (art and activism, for example) and between institutions (the gallery and the community center or the housing block). This is
opposed to traditional art that operates within both the discursive presuppositions and the institutional sites of the "art world" and art audiences and that is, moreover, often even further defined by identification with a specific medium. Ian Hunter of Projects Environment uses the term "interface" practices which I understand in two ways—first, the interface between practitioners and the individual or group and second the interface that is created in Littoral works across disciplinary routines or bodies of knowledge. This relates to the argument that the formation of disciplinary knowledge is both an empowering and a limiting activity, and that breakthroughs occur in the disciplinary interstices, while consolidation occurs within the disciplines themselves.

Along with this interdisciplinarity comes the need to learn as much as possible about the ways in which meaning is produced in and through these other contexts. This interdisciplinarity, the ability to draw on analytic resources from other areas such as critical theory, social history or environmental science, and the ability to work through alternative institutional sites, allows Littoral art to develop a systematic critique that can be actualized through specific political or social struggles. The Littoral artist, by "interfacing" with existing sites of political and cultural resistance can challenge the disabling political quietism of liberal aesthetics.

2. Multiple registers of meaning vs. formal immanence

In Littoral art the "meaning" of a given work is not centered in the physical locus of the object, or in the imaginative capacity of the single viewer. Rather, it is dispersed through multiple registers. These include a spatial-temporal register, in which the work "means" differently in different locations and times, as opposed to the immanence that is characteristic of modernist formalism. The work today produces multiple levels of information at a given time and space as it interacts with a myriad of other discursive systems (existing belief systems, ideologies, the psychological make-up of particular viewers or participants, etc.). There is thus no single "work" to be judged in a Littoralist criticism. This is what differentiates Littoral criticism from conventional art criticism. The "work" is constituted as an ensemble of effects and forces, which operate in numerous registers of signification and discursive interaction.

3. Dialogical indeterminacy vs. formal indeterminacy

The recognition that Littoral works operate on multiple levels of meaning doesn't imply that meaning is entirely indeterminate, however. It can be clearly analyzed at specific points, and this capacity to ascertain meaning effects among particular viewers or co-participants is an important part of the process of dialogical "feedback" (e.g., Stephen Willats projects with housing estate residents). Rather, the principle of indeterminacy is both an empowering and a limiting activity, and that breakthroughs occur in the disciplinary interstices, while consolidation occurs within the disciplines themselves.

The "interface" includes more than just the "conversation" that takes place between practitioners and their co-participants. It also encompasses the broader discursive context within which a given Littoral project occurs. For example, relevant public policies and debates, corporate ideologies, images and narratives promulgated by the mass media and numerous other sites which structure the political and social world (e.g., realizing that a specific work is capable of producing, and which are susceptible to being transformed by the work in turn. Two related tendencies in contemporary cultural politics are particularly clear: the first is the growing privatization of social life, linked with a corollary embrace of the individual as the primary locus of political and cultural authority. The second is the resistance to both theoretical and systematic forms of analysis. These tendencies, although differentially articulated, operate across a broad spectrum of cultural and political positions.

1. Individualism/ Privatization

In the U.S. we are witnessing the widespread privatization of those domains of social life which were based on the ideals (if not always the reality) of a shared community: public education, public health, and a willingness to sacrifice some portion of one's self-interest for the benefit of others. What might be termed the re-regression of American life is occurring at numerous points: public education is being replaced by a system of selective "voucher" schools which often violate the separation of church and state; fortified "gated communities" are proliferating among the wealthy as a way to simultaneously express class privilege (and paranoia) and to opt out of shared municipal services; with declining state and federal monies "public" universities are becoming research factories for major corporations; under the Republican congress industry lobbyists are being invited to re-write federal and state regulatory legislation intended to protect the public from their own companies; and forms of collectively-financed health care and social services are under attack by proposals to restrict benefits to those least likely to need them.

Everywhere we see a retreat into privatized enclaves along with a refusal to acknowledge the relationship between economic privilege and consumption patterns here and lack of resources and opportunity elsewhere. The withdrawal from a public conmmittment to holistic forms of care or provision is justified by the claim that they are inherently flawed. But rather than recognizing the problems experienced by, for example, urban high schools, as a result of an interconnection of social and economic forces (declining tax bases due to white flight, lack of job opportunities as a result of a deliberate program of industrial disinvestment leading to the proliferation of a drug-based economy, etc.) their problems are attributed entirely to the failure of the poor as individuals; their lack of moral fiber and personal initiative. The implication is clear: the only effective public policies are those that function to transform the (failed) individual; to provide them with a work ethic and a capacity for self-sacrifice.

2. Anti-Systematic

The second, and related, tendency I noted was an opposition to systematic forms of analysis. Conservatives in the U.S. have undertaken a concerted effort to discredit any form of political analysis that seeks to explain poverty or criminality as the result of economic and social inequality. This has involved in turn the adoption of a tri- umphalistic view of recent American history. This view the last few decades have seen the domination of all forms of organized racism, classism or sexism in America such that women, the poor and working class, and people of color have no impediments whatsoever to landing a fair and open way with economically privileged white men in what Diane D’Souza calls the “foot race” of modern life. Having realized this liberal ideal through past political struggles over civil rights, society is now understood to be composed of free individuals whose success or failure is attributable to their personal efforts. If, in this meritocratic utopia, white upper-class men still seem to dominate the most powerful positions in corporate and political life then this is attributed to the fact that society continues to systematically impede or limit the opportunities of women, the poor, or people of color. Rather, we must seek some internal cause such as a willingness to sacrifice one's self-interest rather than the social. Thus we have the pseudo-science of the Bell Curve attributing a genetic inferiority to blacks, and conservative attacks on the immorality of the poor. I suspect that there are rough corollaries for these views in the UK today as well.

In place of flawed public institutions we find conservatives championing private philanthropy in which members of the upper class choose to disperse some portion of their accumulated wealth as a reflection of their own humanity and moral excellence. Social programs are to be viewed as a form of noble obligation rather than as a collective recognition of inequalities that operate elsewhere in the social order. The reason we can't disclose that the causes of poverty in personal failure. In line with the roots of early reform in Evangelical Christianity, the act of dispensing charity is itself intended to facilitate the moral transcendence of the giver, to demonstrate their own capacity to reach across the boundaries of class and race privilege on the basis of some putatively universal spiritual essence which they are able to recognize and activate through their elevated capacity for empathetic identification.

There have been numerous books published during the last several years (e.g., Marvin Olasky’s The Tragedy of American Compassion) in which conservatives argue that the real problem in the U.S. today is a lack of moral character among individuals, and that existing social problems can best be solved not by the state, but by the efforts of private individuals and organizations that develop programs focused on building the character of the poor.

3. Relationship to Art

In this brief outline I’ve discussed the conservative world view in terms of a systemic or holistic form (as opposed to a reductionist construction of the subject as a radically autonomous individual whose desires must be either impeded (as a middle-class consumer) or rigorously policed (as a working-class producer). In general terms both the anti-systematic or "naturalism" and the rampant individualism of conserva- tive thinking seek to detach a given subject, event or condition from its imbeddedness within a network of causial factors; to abstract the individual, as a product of social forces and discursive interrela-

Two interconnected tendencies in contemporary art critical discourse are of particular relevance here—the widespread interest in the role of visual pleasure in aesthetic experience and the consequent attack on theoretical or systematic analyses of art. These tendencies first emerged as a reaction to the perceived didacticism and theoretical excess of 1980’s postmodernism. For critics in the U.S. such as Mark van Proyen and David Hickey “theory” marks a retreat from the unique and singular way of thinking about the world that is characteristic of the artist. Theory is abstract and distanced; art is immediate and experiential. The iron heel of mind-driven theory has attempted to squash the subtle but necessary truth that the artist has a proprietary authority. Here mind and body, domineering and a spiritualized intuition are juxtaposed in classic binary fashion. The assertion of “beauty” and personal...
pleasure as the only legitimate basis of an art experience and the reaction against “theory” (which is seen as contaminating the purity of that experience) coalesce around the troubled figure of the “individual”. The artist (as an exemplary individual) becomes the final bunkered outpost of resistant subjectivity against a whole array of “objective” and abstract cognitive forces. The somatic or sensual experience that they register through their works is understood as having an inherently progressive political power, constituting a pre-social domain of personal autonomy and self-expression.

The “individual” marks an important point of congruence with the conservative views I’ve already outlined. The concept of the (bourgeois) individual constructed in conservative discourse bears a striking resemblance to conventional notions of the artist,virulently resisting any threat to the autonomy of personal expression or desire. This is not to say that any artistic position on individual autonomy is necessarily conservative. Further, it is clearly the case that the individual body and the right of expression mark an important domain of political struggle today. But the politics of the individual are not necessarily given; they have to be established in and through specific contexts—a process that requires some form of analytic thinking.

The attack on theory in the arts is part of a more general reaction against analytic systems of thought that has been taken up across a range of cultural sites. The political implications of the anti-theory stance are particularly evident in recent debates in left journals such as Littoral art is no longer centered on the physical object but is spread out in and through specific contexts—a process that requires some form of analytic thinking.

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III. Littoral Practice—Dialogical Aesthetics

If, as I am suggesting, the evaluative framework for Littoral art is no longer centered on the physical object then what is the new locus of judgment? I would contend that it can be found in the condition and character of dialogical exchange itself. I would define this as a pragmatic form of criticism to the extent that it is concerned with the specific effects produced by these exchanges in a given context. At the same time, it retains a nominal teleological orientation in that it preserves some concept of an ideal discursive process that can act as a benchmark against which to evaluate actual projects. It is necessary to consider two conditions that are specific to the subject position of the contemporary “artist” and which bear directly on the artist’s capacity for discursive engagement.

The first condition is ideological—the tendency of artists to identify themselves with a highly individualized concept of personal autonomy on the one hand, and with the capacity to transcend self through the a priori knowledge on the other. The result is an often problematic mixture of traits: a failure to engage in critical self-reflection (due to the belief that one’s individuality constitutes a reductive, pre-ideological enclave) combined with the perceived authority to heedlessly transgress boundaries of class, race, and privilege, and to engage in discursive acts “on behalf of” any number of disenchanted “others”. The potential correspondence between this view and the concepts of privatized philanthropy that I outlined earlier is clear. The corollary to the philanthropic middle-class subject who is able to make contact with, and spiritually “improve”, the racial or class Other is found in the long tradition of regarding the artist or intellectual as a transcultural agent whose self-consciousness as a self-avowed “avant-garde”, Coleridge’s “Clerisy”, and more recently, descriptions of the artist as a Shamanistic healer which engage in a problematic projection of archaic notions of “tribal” spirituality onto a society that is highly stratified, even if not especially within the arts. To the extent that Littoral projects involve this kind of cross-cultural or cross-class negotiation (and when they do it is almost always the case that the transgression is moving from a position of greater to lesser privilege), this will remain a persistent area of tension.

The second condition that poses a challenge to discursivity is institutional and logistical. It is what we might call the problem of itinerary. Discourse, and the trust necessary for discursive interaction and identification, grow out of a sustained relationship in time and space, the co-participation in specific measurable existence. But the nature of contemporary art patronage and production mitigates against this kind of sustained commitment. Artists have to earn a living which may require regular re-location due to teaching or other jobs, foundation grants are often oriented around singular projects over a fixed time frame, and the art institutions that provide support for Littoral work are accustomed to inviting a practitioner in from “the outside” for a limited period of time. Many of the mechanisms of engaged arts patronage function to reinforce the view of a given “community” or constituency as an instrumentalized and fictively monolithic entity to be “serviced” by the visiting artist. The British artist Stephen Willats has negotiated the problem of itinerary by returning to the same sites, often tower blocks, over a period of several years. Another solution is found in arts organizations that build ongoing relationships with, specific neighborhoods, as in the East Bay Institute for Urban Arts in Oakland, California.

1. Discursive Determinism

Turning from the condition of the artist to the concept of discourse itself I would identify two areas of critical analysis. The first relates to the problem of discursive determination—that is, the replacement of a vulgar Marxist concept of economic determinism by the equally reductive belief that “discourse” or dialogue in and of itself has the power to radically transform social relations. This is problematic for two reasons. First, because it overlooks the manifest differential in power rela-
László Hudák

This bread-beating man shows that there are people in this life—because the bread itself, man is bread as well—so there are people who still have value. You see he took this bread out, he beat it and he increased its value. In the same way there are people who at some stage, will take us out of the bin (because we are in a bin, we are thrown out of society), and they’re going to take us out and increase our value.

Péter Vásárhelyi

I am like a bin. However you don’t have to move me out from a bin. There’s a pair of glasses beside the bin. Now, if I see a bin and I see a pair of glasses then I am trying to solve something. To here or to here. The glasses symbolize the meaning, the bin, this is the lifting device. There is a poster in front of me which is advertising glasses, I’ve got bad eyesight, there is a bin beside it. Now, if I think about whether to choose the bin or the glasses, so I should look optimistically to the future, to choose the bin? I have two possibilities. I would choose the glasses in this case.

Dezső Pawicska

It was pretty tricky really, because first of all you had to ask everybody for permission but afterwards the person still had to look natural. Luckily they know me. I just said that they should do everything as normal and I’ll photograph them in the meantime and that not that many people are going to know me. I just said that they should do everything as normal and I’ll photograph their pictures. Dominic Hikspo/Mikklos Erhardt http://www.cc.hu/collection/homeless/

The Soját Szemmel/Inside out project began in July 1997. Between then and February 1998, around 40 homeless people living in Budapest were given simple colour disposable cameras and invited to take photographs of whatever they felt was important or interesting in their everyday experience, in the knowledge that their pictures would later be viewed publicly. The participants were approached on a fairly random basis in the city’s metro stations and homeless shelters. Afterwards, we recorded an interview with each photographer about their pictures. Dominic Hikspo/Mikklos Erhardt

not. Yet, the problems of universality notwithstanding, we must retain some concept of an inter-subjective common ground that would allow for the possibility of shared discourse, and that would allow the problematic difference between themselves and their co-participants.

At the same time, empathy is susceptible to a kind of ethical manipulation (e.g., Burke and Lessing) in which the very act of empathetic identification is used to negate the specific identity of the other subject. It is simple not that the case that “we” are all “the same”—we are all differentially positioned relative to material, cultural, and economic interests. And, historically, it is precisely in these cross of kind of empathy” or “empathy” most often. Empathy can become an excuse to deny our own privilege and the real differences between ourselves and others, and to subject them instead to an instrumentalized aestheticization. It is notable that in philosophical terms empathy has been constructed as non-discursive relationship. In Lessing’s Laocoon essay he defines empathy in pain through the restrained silence of Laocoon himself, even as he is attacked by poisonous snakes. The empathized subject is not expected to answer back, only to bear the marks of their suffering and to thereby elicit our emotive identification. Moreover, empathy is the product of distance, which guarantees that we cannot be “existentially implicated in the tragic event”. Thus both Lessing and Burke associate empathy with pity and with a quasi-pleasurable aesthetic response. I’m reminded here of a friend who worked developing art-based therapy in an Alzheimer’s care facility. After some time she grew to be rather unpopular with the regular caregivers who resented what they saw as her tenden- cies to romanticize dementia as liberating the creative child within. There is of course a long history of artists tortured by the desire to “do good” or be useful. Van Gogh’s transition from Evangelical minister to the miners of Belgium, where he even began to physically mimic their impoverished lifestyle, to painting scenes of peasant culture is exemplary of the tendency to treat the other as a material to be converted by the well-intentioned artist, or as a “representation” or resource.

In this point somewhat clearer relative to Littoral practice I want to briefly revisit a project that I discussed in some detail at the Salford Littoral conference in 1994. The project is called Soul Shadows: Urban Myths and was produced by an artist from New Orleans named Dawn Dedeaux in 1993. It began as part of an “art in the prisons” program in Louisiana and eventually mushroomed into a travelling multi-media installation with sculptural elements, multiple video monitors, fabricated rooms, large photo-based images, a sound track and so on. In this form it toured from New Orleans to a number of major cities including Baltimore and Los Angeles. The project was subject to some criticism, especially by American African writers, because it presented ideological images of black subjects, a cracked dealt dealer and gang leader named Wayne Hardy, half dressed, holding a gun and a shield and spear, a vessel. Although there are many “voices” in the installation, in fact a cacophony of audio and video tapes ran constantly, the dominant narrative “voice” of the piece was that of a woman who had tried and orchestrated the project with some minimal “collaboration” from Wayne Hardy regarding the staging of his life size portraits. Dedeaux sought to help white viewers “empathize” with the positions faced by young black men, at the same time that she hoped the piece would act as a kind of moral prophylactic for young black men who came to see it, who would presumably mend their ways after witnessing the contrivance expressed by a number of imprisoned figures.

Dedeaux, who is from a white, upper-class New
Orleans family, spoke of the project as a way to overcome her fear of young black men after being mugged in the French quarter. The young black men she worked with thus served as the vehicle for a kind of immersion therapy that allowed her to transcend her own painfully self-conscious whiteness. At the same time, Dedeaux’s project positioned her subjects as ciphers of black criminality based on the false assumptions and prejudices that informed prison and of discussions about their crimes by failing to locate their relentlessly foregrounded “criminality” in the broader context of the current urban political climate. She worked with poor and working class black communities who live in prison circulate widely in U.S. culture and their interpretation is heavily influenced by a broad network of preconceptions largely generated by conservative policies on race and crime, but they constituted one of the most significant discursive interfaces for this project and, assuming that she didn’t find herself in agreement with them, she should have devised some mechanism through which to assimilate the self-image of her project to these views.

Since this project was widely covered several years ago there have been two interesting addenda. First, the effects, Paul Hardy, was arrested for the murder of a police witness and, in order to build its case against him the FBI raided Dedeaux’s studio, seizing interviews and videotapes. These images, which Dedeaux had collected and catalogued in her studio, are not simply a representational resource, they are in a very real way linked to the lives of her subjects, with immediate and profound consequences. The second addendum is provided by Dedeaux herself, who presented a mocking “self-portrait” (Self-Portrait. Rome) in a 1997 issue of the journal Art Papers which featured her in smiling black-face make-up with the phrase “Do You Like Me Better Now?” written on the palm of her hand. It is probably safe to assume that this image was intended as a response to those critics (possibly including myself) who raised questions about the position she took in her previous work. She seems to be suggesting here that the only reason she was criticized was because she was white. Of course Dedeaux’s easy accommodation to conservative racial stereotypes and racial poverty is not simply a matter of her race. At the same time, if she was black herself it is unlikely that the experience of being mugged would have made her feel enough like a person to display a piece that is so problematically related to questions of difference, access, and majority. Dedeaux’s whiteness is not simply a question of skin color but of her imaginative orientation to racial identity and Otherness itself. While her class and racial background and her resulting isolation relative to poor and working class black communities might predict her accommodation to stereotypes, it is not a given that she would not have been aware of the fact that it was perceived as a provocation is hardly surprising. This makes Dedeaux’s citation of the work in her image all the more questionable. Dedeaux displays an almost instinctive affinity for conservative views on race. Here she transforms Hammons’ image, which was intended as an indictment of the suppressed racism of the Democratic party, into a caustic lamentation on the effects of reverse racism, in which she portrays herself as the oppressed victim of mean-spirited critics who attacked her solely on the basis of her skin color.

3. Critical Pedagogy and the Politically Coherent Community

As I have suggested, the antithesis between empathy and negation can be at least partially resolved by a move towards a discursive ethos which conceives of the artist primarily as a collaborator in dialogue rather than an expressive agent. Here the artist’s identity is tested and transformed by intersubjective experience, rather than being fortified against it. The “artist” occupies a socially constructed position of privileged subjectivity, reinforced by institutional sponsorship and deeply imbedded cultural connotations. It is the achievement of Littoral practitioners to work to mitigate the effects of these associations as much as possible, to open up and equilibrate the process of dialogical exchange. This process is most easily facilitated in those cases in which the artist collaborates with a politically coherent community, that is, a community or collectivity that has, through its own internal processes, achieved some degree of coherence, and a sense of its political interests, and is able to enter into a discursive collaboration with, or more equal footing. This is perhaps the most effective way in which to avoid the problems posed by the “salvage” paradigm in which the artist takes on the task of “improving” the implicitly flawed subject. My intention here is not to ideologically appropriate “community” per se. As I have written elsewhere, any process of community formation is based on some degree of violence and negation of (those individual characteristics that are seen as extraneous to a given community’s common values or ideals). Further, it is by no means a commonplace to define “community” as an ongoing process, rather than a fixed and closed entity. But my question here is less theoretical than strategic, what role does the artist, as a singularly privileged cultural figure, play relative to this process? It is precisely the belief that the artist can somehow “create” community through the imposition of aesthetic norms or relate to a given social or cultural collective from a transcendent or aesthetically autonomous position, which I would want to question.

Although artists can clearly function as co-participants in the formation of specific communities, they are also limited by the historical moment in which they live, and the extent to which existing social and political circumstances favor or preclude this formation. An exemplary case in this regard would be Peter Dunn and Loraine Leeson’s work during the 1980s with the Docklands Community Poster Project in which they developed in direct consultation and collaboration with tenants actions group, local councils and so on. This work was produced during a period of widespread political mobilization in reaction to Thatcherite programs for economic “redevelopment” that posed a serious threat to poor and working class neighborhoods in East London. This period also coincided, fortuitously, with the development of extremely innovative forms of arts patronage through the Greater London Council. The fact that the larger battle against Docklands development failed is less relevant here than the fact that the structural conditions for activist cultural practices existed at the time that made it possible for Dunn and Leeson to produce works through a process of ongoing collaborative dialogue with a wide range of community groups.

Unfortunately the last fifteen years have seen a drastic change in activist politics in the U.S. and England. The refusal of governments to recognize the active need for social change and the cultural re-circulation of an art context without taking that into account has meant that many activists have moved away from projects that they see as making a significant contribution to the current political moment. It is possible, if not probable, to survive as an artist working primarily through grassroots political organizations. Increasingly artists are forced to develop strategic relationships with ancillary institutions such as public schools, prisons, and economic redevelopment agencies. Obviously these institutions are inevitably positioned relative to the collective interests of poor or working class communities. Specifically, they function by defining community members through regulatory categories such as “at risk youth”, “drug addicts”, or “the homeless” which implicate the artist in a highly problematic chain of associations about their culpability as political and cultural agents.

A typical example of this tendency is seen in J im Hubbard’s peripatetic Shooting Back project, which began in 1988 with ex-UPI photographer Hubbard working with homeless children in the Washington, D.C. area to “document their lived experience as a means of personal empowerment.” The project has been transported into a variety of other sites, including, in 1994, the Shooting Back From the Reservation project, which began in 1988 with ex-UPI photographer Hubbard working with homeless children in the Washington, D.C. area to “document their lived experience as a means of personal empowerment.” The project has been transported into a variety of other sites, including, in 1994, the Shooting Back From the Reservation project, which began in 1988 with ex-UPI photographer Hubbard working with homeless children in the Washington, D.C. area to “document their lived experience as a means of personal empowerment.”
menting the world around them.

It is necessary to bear in mind here the increasingly conflictive role played by the public school system in the U.S. as a training ground for service sector and low-level technology employers. In northern Idaho, where I lived for the last two years, plans are under way to eliminate world history, geography, reading and even computer classes from the high school curriculum so that students can have more “flexibility for career-oriented electives.” According to curriculum director Hazel Bauman, “What we are hearing from businesses and industry is that the large majority of kids who do not get baccalaureate degrees need to come out of high school with a good basis in technical skills.” A plan currently being developed by the Coeur d’Alene Chamber of Commerce involving local public school teachers spend their summer vacations working as “interns” at local businesses, like fast food restaurants and mines, in order to help them understand what these businesses need in students. According to band teacher Kevin Cope, “We’re getting our students ready to go out and work for these corporations. We need to know what to teach them.”

The Shooting Back project takes for granted the fatalistic political horizons of current conservative rhetoric—arguing that the best that can be hoped is to give Native American children the “self-esteem” needed to stay sober and get to McDonalds on time in the morning. Clearly there is nothing wrong with teaching children how to use a camera. But why can’t these technical skills be joined with some form of pedagogy which would help to encourage the formation of a critical consciousness of their situation within the current political economy? One of the most important characteristics of the aesthetic lies in its power to critically comprehend a cultural or social totality, and to think beyond its limitations. There is no sense of this kind of vision in Hubbard’s project—no sense that he is conscious of working in and through an ideological apparatus that is precisely intended to circumvent the formation of a collective political identity among young Native Americans. Hubbard’s decision to work with children is justified on the basis that they represent the “future” of Native American culture, but children are also far less likely to challenge Hubbard’s own presuppositions regarding the nature of poverty. Children are typically selected by artists such as Dedeaux and Hubbard because their own poverty. Children are typically selected by artists such as Dedeaux and Hubbard because the present themselves as more malleable subjects, less resistant to the impress of the artists’ transactive power. This is why it is hard to have a relationship that is likely to encourage any significant discursive equity or exchange.

We see this same failure of self-reflection in the recent downturn of the “Arts’ American Canvas” report which attempts to insulate the NEA from future conservative attack by aligning it with programs designed to improve the poor and working class. In some of the more unintentionally amusing passages in the report Richard Deasy, director of the “Goals 2000 Arts Education Partnership”, evokes the image of a rigid, uniform standard that isn’t afraid to roll up its shirt sleeves and get things done. Deasy calls for an art based on “mastery” and “substantive, disciplined study.” This “muscular” art can produce America’s disadvantaged with the “self-disciplined study.” This “muscular” art can produce a people’s art that is precisely intended to circumvent the ability to think beyond or outside of the existing, constrained horizons of neo-liberal discourse which takes global capitalism, economic inequality, an individualized moral economy, “sustainable” levels of environmental destruction and so on as given conditions. When compared to the political climate of the 1960s this represents a deplorably impoverished range of options—the “end of ideology” realpolitik of NAFTA and the IMF. The demise of the USSR and the Berlin Wall is widely taken as a justification to dismiss any form of systematic critique as inherently “Stalinist.” Yet I would contend that this is precisely where the transgressive powers of Littoral practice and of a dialogical aesthetic, are most needed today.

Notes
2 There are a few exceptions here, including writings by Carol Becker, Hal Foster, Suzi Gablik, Suzanne Lacy and Lucy Lippard, among others.
4 “From War to Art” (Washington Post, January 6, 1998). Deasy makes a virtue out of low voter turn-outs and the media’s failure to report on domestic policy (in favor of stories such as Princess Diana’s death and the “little girl in Texas” who fell into a well), which he attributes to the fact that “lots of people are happy” and thus don’t really care about government anymore. Although poverty, ignorance and pathology still exist (the latter perhaps being a reference to arguments about the depraved or criminalized poor), the majority of A mericans are using their newfound happiness to “read, listen to music and look at pictures.” He cites as evidence the presence of “enthusiastic crowds” at a recent R ichard Diebenkorn exhibition at the Whitney, praising Diebenkorn’s “beautiful, sane, and rhythmic” paintings.
6 The institutional expression of this ethos is found in the privileged legal status granted to private corporations in the U.S. as “fictive individuals”, which was first established by railroad monopolies in an 1886 Supreme Court decision (Santa Clara County vs. Southern Pacific Railroad).
7 See “Art and Objecthood” in Michael Fried, The Scandal of Pleasure: Art in an Age of Fundamentalism, pp.5-11.
13 According to David Dillion in the June 1994 issue of Planning, one-third of all new communities being built in Southern California, Phoenix, Florida and the suburbs of Washington, D.C. are “gated.” A long with the gates come surveillance cameras, infrared sensors, guard dogs, private police patrols and even barbed wire. These communities frequently privatize many of the functions previously performed by a local or municipal governments, such as trash collection, the provision of utilities, and even education.
14 For a particularly egregious example of this see a recent op-ed piece by James K. Galasen a “fellow” at the Conservative American Enterprise Institute. In “From War to A” (Washington Post, January 6, 1998), Galasen makes a virtue out of low voter turn-outs and the media’s failure to report on domestic policy (in favor of stories such as Princess Diana’s death and the “little girl in Texas” who fell into a well), which he attributes to the fact that “lots of people are happy” and thus don’t really care about government anymore. Although poverty, ignorance and pathology still exist (the latter perhaps being a reference to arguments about the depraved or criminalized poor), the majority of A mericans are using their newfound happiness to “read, listen to music and look at pictures.” He cites as evidence the presence of “enthusiastic crowds” at a recent R ichard Diebenkorn exhibition at the Whitney, praising Diebenkorn’s “beautiful, sane, and rhythmic” paintings.
19 See the “Rhetorical Questions” essay cited above (note 9).