

## **Seminar 2 A Critical Reflection**

**Anne Douglas**

### **Introduction**

The thematic area - *Power and Representation* emerged in our discussions with Suzanne Lacy as an issue that framed tensions within the Oakland projects<sup>i</sup> specifically, as well having relevance beyond Oakland. These tensions included the artist's role in relation to that of participants as well as the relationship of the artist and participants to hierarchies of value when the work became part of institutional frameworks such as a gallery exhibition. Seminar 2 was an opportunity to explore these issues from two perspectives - that of the artist (Suzanne) and that of the gallery director (Tom Trevor as director of Arnolfini with contributions from Francis McKee, as director of CCA, Glasgow).

Authority can be viewed as a relationship between those who lead and those who invest in or concede the leadership of others in recognition of their expertise or organisational position. At one point in the discussion it was noted that we tended to associate power as object, as *something* to accept or reject rather than a process we actively engage in constructing and developing. In this alternative reading, power can be the energy to negotiate authority in different ways and through different forms, energy channelled through different kinds of conduits. The recent curatorial work of Tom at the Arnolfini (such as *Recording Iraq April 2007*<sup>ii</sup>) and Suzanne within the Oakland projects (in particular *Expectations 1997*<sup>iii</sup>, the project at the heart of Seminar 2) reveal a shifting pattern of authority. In writing this reflection I felt the need to go back to first principles and to look at Kaprow's thinking in the 70s at the point in time when he offered a significant and articulate challenge to institutionalised forms of authority in art through the notion of the unartist. Kaprow defined the artist's emergence in public as a source of new energy (and power) in culture that mitigated against the entropy of the establishment. Tom Trevor and Francis McKee acknowledged this entropy within their own experiences of directing galleries and were actively seeking ways of radicalising their respective organisations.

Throughout our discussions in Seminar 2, I had a strong feeling that we were somehow successfully bringing *art as experience* to the foreground of the discussion (rather than focusing on the different agendas that drive opportunities for art to happen). The tendency in public art is to seek *justification* in relation to economic, political or social remits. While understanding the relationship of public art to these remits is crucially important, it is also important to remind ourselves of what art 'is' in a specific sense.

In part this foregrounding occurred in a very 'artlike' way. None of the key contributors were quite where the conventional discourse would have placed them. Suzanne was insistent on her right as an artist to work in galleries if she so chooses. (Many would view social engagement and gallery practice as mutually exclusive.) Tom equally insisted on the possibility of opening up the institution of the gallery as a social space of shared and dynamic meaning making. Francis valued the unique opportunity he had been given at CCA's point of collapse to redefine the gallery as a project space rather than an exhibition space, to explore and conceptualise the artist in a networked, digital, open source world.

So our key players framed degrees of uncertainty that kept us thinking.

## ***Educating the Un Artist (1971 & 2)<sup>iv</sup>***

Kaprow attributes entropy in the art establishment to the way the establishment tends to confirm its own value systems, practices and conventions. Kaprow implies that it is the nonartist who re-energizes our understanding of what art might be precisely because nonartists choose to operate outside the domain of the establishment.

Conversely, in order for their work to be considered as art, artists need to have their work acknowledged and discussed within institutional frameworks.

As an avant garde practice, nonart (or unart)<sup>v</sup> is different from antiart, such as Dada. Antiart disrupts established canons aggressively to provoke new aesthetic, ethical responses. Antiart displaces conventional practices. Nonart becomes *part of the function of the life world and the way that world can be experienced*. Kaprow explores occurrences in life that appear more *artlike* than art - the communication between Apollo 11 crew and Houston's Manned Spacecraft Centre, the brightly light and stainless steel gas stations of Vergas, the trance like movement of shoppers in a supermarket. When these moments capture the imagination of the artist, they present the possibility of becoming art. When the artist, through whatever means, draws public attention to such things, h/she frames the ambiguous and tenuous interplay between art and life and acts as an advocate of nonart.

Both nonart and antiart emerged in the exchange between Suzanne and Tom.

### **Power and Representation: the Artist's View**

Suzanne Lacy was a student and life long friend of Kaprow. She negotiates the reality of her practice in relation to two spheres of thought: feminism and the avant-garde (of Artaud, Beuys, the Situationists, Dada as well as Kaprow). She operates outside of conventional establishment practices while increasingly, seeking visibility within the museum and gallery system, addressing in her own way the institutional framework that Kaprow refers to as essential to being recognised as artist. In much of her work she intervenes *in life* for the purposes of change (a feminist agenda). She describes the Oakland projects as the furthest she could go to the (life/art) edge that Kaprow set her out on in 1972.

" When is it art and when is it life? Where do you go to the edge of that boundary? When does your work become a social process that is not art?"  
(Seminar 2 Morning session) ([link](#))

Each project within the Oakland suite has three elements: workshops/ open-ended exploration, followed by a performance/ a formal re-presentation to a wider constituency, followed by a symposium/a focused address by the participants to the political/policy sector. Grant Kester argues that the art in this work resides in the construction of dialogue throughout the process operating within a new interplay between aesthetics and ethics (see *Working in Public Seminar 1*).

*Expectations* is an intervention in the lives of young women who, as teenagers, become pregnant. Normally the consequence would have been to drop out of education. The young women were invited to think through, to notice and come to terms with the

changes in their bodies. Prior to the project, these changes had never been discussed or explored. Strangers would regularly touch the young women's bellies and pass comments, effectively objectifying them as means to affirm certain cultural stereotypes. Within the project, the young women were encouraged to read widely. They gradually extended their self analysis to think through relationships - with their families, the baby's fathers, public perception, the support structures available to them in health and education. They externalised and articulated their reflection through drawing, writing, video diaries and clay sculpture. They were supported in this process by artists and teachers. Child care and catering were provided. They elected to receive accreditation. The project at this stage of development offers a different cultural and social construction of teen pregnancy from the one prevalent in Oakland, establishing the means for different individuals to experience alternative possibilities as teenagers, teachers, health workers and artists.

Art is arguably one of several possible functions within this situation. The artist is positioned precisely not as *the authority* or specialist in the way that a pregnant teenager, health worker or teacher carries different degrees of authority over different aspects. (The teens frequently comment on Suzanne's lack of authority on the subject of child bearing.)

"(The young people) talked about many issues and in many I was certainly not the authority; nor was the system the authority". (Suzanne Lacy Morning Session)

The young women gave permission for their journey to become part of two gallery exhibitions at Capp Street and Garage galleries in Los Angeles. Capp Street is an important experimental space within the eye of the art world. The act of representation involved in creating a public installation out of the first phase marks an important transition. Suzanne worked closely with another experienced producer, Unique Holland supported by 15 other students in an internship. The teenagers contributed the materials of their learning in the form of drawings, video diaries and clay sculptures to the installation, effectively conceding authority to Suzanne to produce an event that would give a coherent, symbolic shape to the issues.

The installation was a series of playful reversals. The Capp Street gallery space is filled by a giant crib around which the passage of audience members is carefully controlled. They *squeezed* around this crib to an entry point at the back of the gallery that allowed them inside. En route the large scale drawings of the young teens were miniaturised. The scale change drew attention *into* the powerful imagery of childbirth and its issues. The reversal of the adult world into childhood implied by these scale reversals was paralleled with another. The inside of the crib took the form of a chaotic classroom in which the voice of the politician Pete Wilson, as the figure of conventional authority, was barely audible and out of sync with his image. The voices of the young women were conversely privileged.

In the first phase of *Expectations* power is shared across the participants who represent different areas of authority. In the second phase power is invested in the artist whose expertise and track record has given confidence. Where the first phase allows power to be free flowing, to move across conventional hierarchies and roles, the second phase becomes more planned and premeditated, more controlled in its modes of participation.

It is interesting to note that *Expectations* was the only one of the Oakland projects that inserted itself into the art world in the form of a gallery exhibition. All the other performance works, *Roof is on Fire*, *Code 33*, *No Blood No Foul*, took place in public space - a roof top parking lot or basketball pitch. Nonetheless what characterises all these works is the production of aesthetic/artistic formality within another more open-ended process of exploration<sup>vi</sup>. The performances interrupt the rhythm of everyday life in a distinctive way. They create a different tone and pace. They are differently constructed. These formal moments frame a paradox. Without structure and coherence, the artwork will not appear intelligible to an audience. Without the participation and exploratory content of the young women, there would be no artwork.

### **Power and Representation: the perspective of the Gallery Director**

#### **Institutional authority and entropy**

Tom Trevor echoed Francis McKee's opening remarks about the entropy of the art establishment. Both Tom and Francis as gallery directors saw social change as happening *outside of* the museum and gallery in the public sphere as Kaprow acknowledged over 35 years before.

Tom sensed that there was a tendency for the establishment to absorb work such as the Oakland projects and undermine its real value. Viewed conventionally, the gallery is something of a 'shiny palace', there to deliver the artist's monologue and educate people *into* the meaning of the work, where participatory modes of working are concerned with developing meaning *through* the experience of coming together.

"If you want people to have ownership of what you do, the best way is by them making the work, co-producing it, being involved with it". (Tom Trevor, evening session)

The institution's authority is sustained through powerful webs of signification in which art as a cultural form is based largely on the collection and the collectable. Suzanne herself remarks that the legacy of artists being profoundly linked to collections poses a significant challenge to her area of process based work. When socially engaged work enters 'the palace', Tom fears that there is a tendency to illustrate a pre-existing process rather than engage in genuine co-production of shared meaning.

In Seminar 2 Tom presented a radical re-conceptualisation of the gallery that sits alongside conventional exhibitions at Arnolfini. Part of the Arnolfini's provision is now given over to *Social Space*. The vision here is 'to shift from the idea of the gallery as a visitor attraction to something that is a series of platforms for different ways of making meaning' through opportunities to co-produce the work<sup>vii</sup>.

Tom's work as artist, curator and subsequently gallery director is concerned with notions of the My Body, in the sense that Valéry defined, as the substance of one's presence in the world. Suzanne and he share this starting point in their work, exemplified through an interest in radical forms of practice such as that of Artaud who as an artist sought to smash through pre-existing forms (of language and theatre) to get to touch life, to remake theatre.

Tom is also interested in the idea of meaning as a social act. Meaning is 'something we make together'. His work, like Suzanne's, frames the contradiction between the power of radical forms of representation to disrupt and unnerve conventions of art and the role of art in constructing opportunities for shared meaning making.

Tom's curatorial work, in particular the exhibition co-curated with Zoe Shearman *The Visible and the Invisible* in 1996<sup>viii</sup> worked with histories of representation in art, in which My Body was explored through siting works where different interpretations of My Body were presented in non art contexts. The artists included Louise Bourgeois, Doris Salcedo and Bruce Naumann among others. When he moved to Exeter to develop the Spacex projects, the context itself dominated as the focus of interest of the work. Exeter represents Middle England - a homogenised, uniform, idealised vision that denies its reality as a diverse, stratified culture. In deconstructing this complexity of representation/reality, Tom encountered more and more opportunities for the projects to become live processes that conceptualised 'home', drawing people - homeless groups, passers by - as participants in the work.

The Spacex projects rest on their conceptual clarity. They were not *dependent* upon participation for meaning to be made. This is different from Suzanne's Oakland projects that frame interdependency between the artist and participants. Nonetheless as this work evolved, Tom became more and more curious about the difference between representation as a process of conceptualisation/figuration and representation involving participation.

In becoming Director of Arnolfini, Tom acknowledges the need for the institution to re-educate itself in the terms of the un artist, to open up to its context. The conundrum posed by 'socially engaged' work is a catalyst, but not the only trigger, to this repositioning<sup>ix</sup>. Tom's wrestling with this issue is evident in a suite of new projects. *Port City*, September - November 2007, marks the 200th anniversary of the slave trade and Bristol's role within it, exploring changing patterns of trade and exchange<sup>x</sup>. Helen and Newton Harrison's multi sited Greenhouse Britain project in 2008<sup>xi</sup>, focuses on the implications of sea level rise in collaboration with the Knowle West Media Centre in the heart of a particular community that has already looked at these issues. All of these new projects aim to draw clear connections between Arnolfini as an 'art context' in relation to its 'local context'. The projects develop processes that are initiated by artists but are not artist centric. They are a means of accessing deeper issues through artists working with others.

Ed Carroll's observed

"One thing that comes out, I think particularly in Tom's presentation was a sense of power, not as a sense of "I have the power to..." but the sense of "I have the responsibility; I have ambitions; I have intentions". (Morning Session, Q&A)

### **Representation as 'showing figuratively' and as 'enactment'**

Drawing on Huizinga<sup>xii</sup>, Kaprow points to two distinctive representational modes in the visual arts: a 'showing figuratively' and 'enactment'. Both are ways in which we, as humans, copy or mimic the function and appearance of the world. Both are forms of play and not work. They do not contribute directly to the functioning of the world. 'Play' is also different from 'game' in being open ended in terms of outcome. We play for its own sake not for a purpose, whereas games are concerned with the outcome of winning and

losing. Play is an essential quality of art because it embodies and enacts intrinsic value. Without play we would consume our very existence and find no meaning in that consumption.

This differentiation between 'showing figuratively' and 'enactment' as representational forms appears to me to be crucial to understanding changes in art practice and their relations to power. 'Showing figuratively' is a way of the artist representing the world through the development of a form or concept as a discrete entity. Through 'enactment' we *reproduce* or *recreate* our assimilation of the world through a set of actions in which participation is essential. Huizinga aligns enactment with early rituals that functioned as the starting point to developing social order and social institutions.

We currently live in a world in which 'showing figuratively' has become tightly bound to acts of consumption, either through objects of art or through the media to the point that the quality of being there 'for its own sake' is difficult to disentangle from other forms of value - economic, political. We also live in a world in which there is very little ritual, where play increasingly becomes conflated with game and goal orientated, competitive practices. Perhaps it is in this gap that artists and curators are seeking to address through alternative practices that identify and exploit opportunities for participation in shared meaning making.

Suzanne's work in Oakland is a radical gesture in this direction throwing a ring of uncertainty around what is art and what is life in its three processes of exploration. Suzanne's work has led to some significant developments in new organisational forms in civic life. It is positioned carefully as part of the social realm within an ecology of relationships. The work does not directly provide solutions to civic problems but engages individuals in processes of participation that result in re -imagining the issues. This is close to Huizinga's notion of enactment.

Tom's work also introduces uncertainty into the notion of the museum/gallery as an institution 'driven by prestige, status and security'. He interjects ideas such as social change and social justice that drive new curatorial forms to challenge artists as well as museums. He echoes Kaprow in seeing these kinds of changes as a significant re-education of the whole sector

" I think we need to untangle the relationship between the artist and the art market; the museum and its relationship with the economy; and then, artists and their relationship on a very minute level with people and the community."  
(Morning session)

Suzanne, Tom and Francis are creative risk takers. Suzanne in her renewed interest in museums and galleries risks becoming absorbed by the very institution from which she measured her distance - a danger that Kaprow articulated for the unartist. Not to do so also engages the risk that her work may not be recognised as art by its institutional frameworks. Tom and Francis risk the institutional webs of relationships rejecting processes of re-conceptualisation. All three have established trajectories that take themselves from the security of commonly held ideas to each embracing another, more challenging arena for them as individuals. Their trajectories momentarily crossed within the event of Seminar 2. Before they diverge again, it is interesting to speculate about what new modalities of both representation and power might emerge as they respond to their perceptions of creative risk. What was refreshing about the discussion in Seminar 2

was that it did not discount the possibility that participatory forms of art could reinvent, reinvigorate museum and gallery practice and vice versa without eschewing the challenges that that might entail.

#### Footnote

As I was completing this reflection I turned on the radio to hear yet another commentary on the body in terms of genetic coding. I listened, sensitised to the possibility of the power of My Body, as the visceral and personal way in which we encounter the world, to create new ways for me to re-imagine being in the world. I thought that I was glad to have participated in this exchange and to have been able to think in this way.

---

<sup>i</sup> The Oakland projects were triggered by Suzanne noticing in the 90s that the (self and public) image of young people local to her Art School was predominantly negative. TV and the press mediated that negative image largely for political ends, creating a spiral of events by which the young themselves inhabited that negativity. Left to itself the ensuing tightening downward spiral would culminate in a complete breakdown between youth and the adult world.

Suzanne's ten year investment in the Oakland projects sought to invert the power relationship implicit in media manipulation by developing processes and spaces that would allow for a shared examination of institutionalised forms of power (the media and civic authorities) leading to a renegotiation, if not also a recovery, of power by the young people. The projects offered them and others (education officers, community leaders, civic authorities) the opportunity to deconstruct and critically think through how they related to each other as individuals in the everyday within processes that brought these individuals together face to face.

The interventions take the form of projects that are artist led and that adopt a pedagogical practice that is Freirean in character. Freire, working in Brazil in 50s, involved the oppressed peasant class in examining the conditions of their oppression. By analysing and understanding these conditions, the 'oppressed' would become empowered to negotiate alternatives. For the archive see

<http://www.suzannelacy.com/1990soakland.htm>

<sup>ii</sup> <http://www.arnolfini.org.uk/whatson/exhibition.php?id=22>

<sup>iii</sup> [http://www.suzannelacy.com/1990soakland\\_expectations.htm](http://www.suzannelacy.com/1990soakland_expectations.htm)

<sup>iv</sup> Kaprow, A.,2003, *Essays in the Blurring of Art and Life* University of California Press Berkeley

<sup>v</sup> Kaprow seems to use the terms 'nonart' and 'unart' interchangeably

<sup>vi</sup> Suzanne's projects in Oakland follow a sequence of three elements - workshops, installation/performance and symposium. In the instance of *Expectations* the symposium was an opportunity for the young women to engage dialogue with care providers, educators and policy makers moderated by Arnold Perkins, Director of Public Health in Alameda County with the specific aim of effecting policy changes. This third element effectively allows power relations to be actively re-negotiated in relation to policy and public practice. Significantly these are informed by real people and their day to day experiences.

<sup>vii</sup> I had in fact experienced one of the projects in Social Space in April 2007 - *Recording Iraq*. This exhibition was the public presentation of the Ken Stanton Archive that had followed the development over 3 years of an archive of materials assembled by a network of paid and voluntary contributors - civilians, photo journalists and amateur

---

operators of their day to day experiences of the war in Iraq. Michael Burke, the news broadcaster, had purchased satellite time from Reuters and made an open request for video recordings made on the ground during the first weeks of the war. He was interested in the possibility of this otherwise unusable material (as TV documentary) becoming accessible to the public. At Arnolfini, the Ken Stanton Archive (KSA) presented hours worth of unedited footage along with interviews with Burke describing the experiences and emotions of trying to make, gather and place such material in the public realm. KSA carefully judged how this was to be done with minimal intervention through editing to allow the public to make their own journey through the material. My own very short encounter with this work left a lasting impression. Normally news is revealed to us in ways that are pre-digested and in the privacy of one's own home or workplace. Here in public, in the company of other individuals, one was left to make one's own sense of the material, to make meaning from the resources, formally installed within the gallery space. The articulation of the space clearly articulated this intention with a light touch.

<sup>viii</sup> <http://213.161.73.222/easy/archive/project/76>

<sup>ix</sup> I have tried to avoid the terminology of socially engaged practice because this discourse has tended to set itself up as in opposition to gallery practice. For example In working with communities of different kinds, the work of On the Edge is often labelled as socially engaged and in being so some of its radical power as art is lost. In the first phase of this work (2001-4) we were seeking to open up new ways of working in the arts that were not dependent upon urban, metropolitan infrastructure and its mores. In developing alternatives we found (but did not consciously seek) rich interconnections between contemporary artists and areas of tradition in remote rural cultures. These traditions were the locus of change and the locus of meaning in remote rural communities. The important driver was that the art, whatever form it took, should be meaningful and also radical in its exploration. We created new work while simultaneously building the constituencies for whom that work had relevance. The process was intuitive and inductive rather than applied. We suspended belief about what kind of art was 'best' leaving ourselves open to many stylistic possibilities and determined this by developing shared critical thinking alongside the work.

<sup>x</sup> <http://www.arnolfini.org.uk/whatson/exhibition.php?id=35>

<sup>xi</sup> [www.greenhousebritain.net](http://www.greenhousebritain.net)

<sup>xii</sup> Huizinga, J., 1955, *Homo Ludens* Boston, Beacon