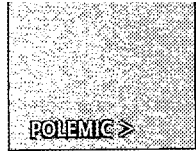


Plywood Utopias

Mark Wilsher



AN OVERT AND UNASHAMED INSTRUMENTALISATION OF GOVERNMENT FUNDING FOR THE ARTS, together with the rhetoric of 'widening participation' and an opportunistic chasing of the public purse by artists, have conspired together to produce a recent art of politics-lite in Britain:

an art that always seeks to 'find new audiences'; to engage with 'local people' (ie ethnic minorities); to uncover, document and record the voices and stories of those populations trampled by industry, displaced by developers and all but ignored by their politicians. Now the galleries and remaining public spaces of our cities are being filled with a babble of oral histories, an illegible kaleidoscope of disposable camera photography, thousands of initiatives all hoping to engage and empower. This great whirlwind of workshops and outreach projects has provided a meaningful economy for many artists, happy to scrape a living and with the added bonus of institutional validation by reflection. It may not be possible to show your own work at the museum but by running a kids' project you can associate your name with it, gain access to the spaces by proxy and bask a little in the glow.

This grass-roots economy has operated for several decades. What's unique today is that, mirroring the exponential growth of interchangeably anonymous education projects, the top end of the art market has also been colonised by relational, participatory pieces that make great play of being 'socially engaged'. So much so that it sometimes seems as if art is being valued purely on ethical grounds above all others. The artists' role as author is usually ostentatiously downplayed – at the same time increasing their stock as speaker, visionary thinker, culturepreneur (see 'Art Futures', Simon Ford & Anthony Davies in *AM223*). Like a backhanded compliment, this art takes back from the artist as much as it ostensibly gives. Allan Kaprow famously asked if an artist should be a man of the world. But the type of accumulation of cultural capital that he railed against, building up your own unique brand that can subsequently be traded for sales, work, employment, is now so common as to be unremarkable. It's just the way things are. It doesn't have to be like this. I would make a case for Jeremy Deller & Alan Kane's *Folk Archive* project being one of the most beautifully conceived social artworks of recent times. The touring version is simply huge in its scope, genuinely fascinating to a non-specialist audience in the way that only authentically strange local museums can be, and at the same time utterly contemporary as a conceptually sound framing mechanism within the art world. It is all the more laudable because the artists have successfully hidden themselves behind the archival structure and documentary camera lens. Everything temporarily on display within the archive would have happened

anyway without Deller & Kane knowing about it. There is no need to stage an event or to construct a pseudo-public place where reality can happen for the benefit of a gallery audience. Because guess what? Reality is already happening – out there.

There is something wrong when less well-conceived projects turn the spaces between people into just so much raw material. Situations and events are orchestrated with the express desire of allowing 'the public' or at least the audience free reign to interact, order and reorder as they desire. Hal Foster has written recently that sometimes 'radical politics are ascribed to the art by a shaky analogy between an open-work and an inclusive society, as if a desultory form might evoke a democratic community, or a non-hierarchical installation predict an egalitarian world'. Nevertheless the results are often festive, celebratory occasions. Music is played, drinks are served, kids run amok and people go home smiling, satisfied that art has once again proved itself capable of accommodating 'everyday life'. The private view has at last replaced the artwork. And it is invariably the invited audience of friends, colleagues and hangers-on who self-consciously participate. Ironically, in these situations it is only those educated to degree level in fine art who feel comfortable enough to join in.

The real public is left outside on the street doubly excluded: by the apparatus of the institution as well as the sights and sounds of a party to which they have literally not been invited. Had anyone bothered to ask this massive potential audience what it is that they wanted to see in a gallery they might be surprised by the answers. Probably not the plywood utopias and avant-garde playrooms supposedly being staged for their benefit. But rather simply traditional, sometimes conservative art. Something to look at and something to think about. Too often there is a not so subtle hierarchy in place that maintains and even reinforces power relations. At a recent seminar for Camberwell Arts Festival under the title of 'Carte Blanche: listening to (art & the conversational drift)', artist Maria Moreira described a party held at a private house in Brazil. In the main room facing onto the street was music and dancing, food laid out to welcome guests, and anyone and everyone was permitted to attend. Working your way deeper into the house, the rooms become progressively less public, permitted only to friends and family, until only those initiated into this particular religious sect are finally granted access to the inner sanctum. In the context of her practice Moreira intends this metaphor to generate spaces of conviviality and conversation – the classic 'relational' art of such discussion. But the model can be read in both directions, defining a closed space of privilege as a Derridian supplement to this openness.

When artists attempt to stage a picnic, arm-wrestling competition or hip-hop DJ battle, the aim is usually to shed the constraints of art world discourse and segue imperceptibly into real life. But in fact this fetishisation of the 'real' only has the effect of reinforcing art's privileged sphere and is a symptom of its urge to colonise every aspect of normal experience. Notice, too, how more often than not it is grass-roots working-class cultural practices that are embraced as examples of the real. Rather than forging a genuine bond, this is classic passive-aggressive 'othering' in action. Picnics, arm-wrestlers and DJs are perfectly capable of organising themselves without your or anybody else's helpful 'intervention'. □

MARK WILSHER is an artist and a curator.