

OUTPOST

Mark Wilsher



From: Mark Wilsher (markwilsher@hotmail.com)
Sent: 22 January 2010 13:43:41
To: Ellie (ellie@norwichoutpost.org)
Cc: questions@norwichoutpost.org

Hi OUTPOST guys,

I have been thinking about what sort of an exhibition I'd like to do, and I think I want to make some alterations to the fabric of the gallery, putting elements that I take from the entrance foyer onto the gallery walls as little gestural sculptures and replacing them with bigger, fancier fittings. It's based on the idea of constructing a "win-win" scenario, where we all get something out of it (rather than you guys just spending money for me to put on a show) so that the gallery would benefit as well. The specific elements that I want to replace or work with would probably include

- Door handles on inside front doors
- Finger plates and steel kick plates on inner doors
- Cabin hooks, letterbox and a new estucheon for the external doors
- A new doormat
- Maybe a new toilet seat or a new kettle for the kitchen
- New external padlock for the gate
- Any money left over from the budget could be spent on some magazine subscriptions for the office, or maybe paying a utility bill

I'm going to put together a booklet to go with it with images, essay etc - we could put the interview in there as well. Also I'm happy to do a gallery talk and Carl said can we do another seminar for the fine art students which would be great as well. The talk would probably have to be on Monday 19th so there's enough time to get the catalogue done. Anyway, let me know what you think of all this.

The title for the show is going to be "The Yesable Proposition".

Cheers for now,
Mark



A gallery exhibition is a far from static thing. Paintings and sculptures might look finished and complete when presented in an empty room under the lights, but it would be better to think of them as temporarily frozen by your presence. It was the American sculptor Robert Morris who observed that artworks take the form of questions in the studio. They only seem like answers when you take them to the gallery. Audiences expect to be given answers, to be shown the results of what artists have been doing. It is very hard to present unfinished, unformed, open-ended work in an exhibition because the very act of giving it to the public tends to foreclose ambiguity. The other thing that audiences are often unaware of is the play of relationships between artist, gallery, community and its institutions. Each has its part to play and yet much of what occurs happens at an unspoken, somewhat intangible level. What needs to happen to make an artist suitable for an exhibition at this time, in this place? How does the audience feel about the reputation of a gallery? Do big regional funders like the Arts Council take much notice of the day-to-day activities of their offspring? How does the community of local artists feel about the exhibition? Questions and opinions flow around the space of the gallery creating an intangible sense of mood that is always changing in response to the slightest occurrence. The job of the successful gallery or artist is to influence this mood so that it flows in their direction, bringing with it support and, most importantly, belief.

Art galleries are public spaces. Not just in the sense that admission is free and anyone is welcome to wander in off the street, although both are true in this case. What defines public space today is not so much the existence of a physical place for meeting but a conducive space for discussion and debate to be heard. True publicness is generated and maintained through the endless flow of talk and opinion that



surrounds and to a certain extent even creates all aspects of human culture. Gallery exhibitions are another aspect of this ongoing conversation. Visual culture contributes to the world, saying new things or inventing new ways to say old things. It's all important.

This exhibition is one attempt to make visible the relationships between artist, audience, gallery, and funders because I think that these relationships are interesting. We all need each other. This set of dependencies normally runs along unnoticed behind the artwork. My project here seeks to throw attention back on to the idea of the gallery, and by redistributing the way the exhibition budget is spent, involve the demands and responsibilities of its funders as well. The idea is simple: to take what would normally be available to help stage an exhibition at the gallery and spend it instead on refurbishing the building and providing additional resources for the OUTPOST members. The old fixtures and fittings become material for new artworks in the gallery, and may go on to represent the space in future exhibitions at other venues. This is also partly motivated by a desire to support the gallery directly because I am a firm believer in grassroots artist-led activities like this. The subtle reallocation of funds is quietly subversive enough to satisfy my oppositional instincts, since it involves transgressing the specific proscriptions of Arts Council budgets and blurring the borders between various funds.

Of course it would be naïve to claim that this gesture is all about subverting the normal power relationships that operate between us in this situation. The artist still gets his exhibition; my name is still on the door. There is a long tradition of artists who work with the fabric of the gallery itself, sometimes shifting the office into the main space, sometimes moving themselves in with a sleeping bag and camping gear.



But my project isn't so much a critique of the institution of the art gallery as the result of wanting to investigate the taken-for-granted relationship of patronage that it offers to the artist by staging an exhibition.

Art that is based on relationships between people has become almost the new orthodoxy in the last fifteen years, especially in terms of public art, or what is often called (in an echo of New Labour's rhetoric of inclusion) 'socially-engaged practice'. But I believe that the specifics of these relationships are not often interrogated adequately. It seems to be enough to invoke the idea of dialogue in the belief that discussion is a panacea that enables everyone to have their say. There has been some criticism of the social turn in recent art because its ethical concerns seem to forbid any qualitative judgement. My recent work has used the idea of negotiation as a metaphor instead of dialogue, since negotiation deals with sometimes difficult relationships between parties who may be very unequal in their resources and very different in their intentions. This particular project is based on the negotiation theory principle of inventing wider options for mutual gain. Rather than assuming that there is a fixed pie that can only be divided up evenly or unevenly, I have tried to make an artwork that expands the benefits to both gallery and artist in the most tangible way. This is commonly known as a 'win-win' scenario. The gallery actually increases its resources from staging this exhibition, and the benefits of new fixtures and fittings will remain long after my project has officially been taken down. At the same time, I receive the benefits of having an exhibition here in the same way that anyone else would. The social and professional relationships made evident through sculptural gestures are the real content of this project. The scatter of objects in the gallery is just the result of paying attention to the flows of power and discourse that operate around an exhibition of this kind.









Interview

Ellie Morgan: By replacing and presenting elements of the gallery's make-up your show interrogates a chain of institutional relationships and a series of dependencies and communication. Have the re-presented elements become symbols of funding and discussion?

Mark Wilsher: Not just symbols exactly. But certainly they are being used to indicate the parameters of what's been permitted, or the extent to which you have trusted me. I think I would like to de-emphasise the role of the physical objects presented up on the wall (which are after all just one part of a larger set of tangible and intangible aspects that go together to make up the exhibition). I knew that I wanted to end up with something in the gallery, and these displaced bits and pieces seemed to do the job.

EM: You could have chosen more practical elements though, in a way you chose objects which were visually interesting or maybe imbued with something- the finger plates for example. You have spoken of these objects potentially travelling elsewhere to represent the show or OUTPOST as a space...

MW: I'm not averse to people reading them as imbued with history. That might be one way into thinking about the overall project for some sections of the audience, and I'm happy to provide some element of narrative or "content" that people feel comfortable with immediately. After all, if I have picked this set of visually interesting hardware because of how the parts look then it's likely that other people will find some purely aesthetic pleasure in them too. As for travelling elsewhere... I think it would work, although that would become a very different kind of exhibition.



EM: Although your recent research has focussed on the importance of antagonistic negotiation in the presentation of public art, your show was proposed as a 'win-win' scenario. Could you discuss how The Yesable Proposition relates to your proposition of negotiation over dialogue?

MW: The concept of negotiation is really contained within the concept of antagonism (or to use Chantal Mouffe's neologism 'agonism', meaning a kind of lesser friction). Dialogue is dependent on the idea of a pleasant situation where everyone is happy to talk and share their views. This might happen at a social event among equals but most of the time out in the world there are a lot of vested interests and subtle hierarchies going on. My recent work has been questioning the notion of dialogue as a panacea in contemporary art. Many artists who make work with other people or in the public realm will say that they are engaged in a process of dialogue, indeed it has become a kind of orthodoxy in the world of socially-engaged art in the last fifteen years or so. But I feel that this glosses over a whole load of issues.

I have been using negotiation theory borrowed from the world of business to set up a different kind of model. It offers a more detailed analysis of the processes and 'moves' that might take place within a relationship, especially where the two parties are unequal and they are both trying to push for their preferred outcome. Rather than the old idea of starting with high demands and conceding until you reach some sort of a midpoint, modern negotiation theory (specifically the branch labelled 'integrative') suggests that it is often possible to find agreements that both parties find satisfactory. Hence the concept of a win-win proposition that forms the basis for this project.



EM: So your show directly enters into the model you have set; your proposal directly uses integrative negotiation to explore the relationship between you, the artist, and OUTPOST, the gallery. Through this win-win model, are you indirectly engaging other groups in negotiation through the reallocation of funds, or do you see your actions as more of a commentary?

MW: Absolutely. It's typical of my broader working methods which often borrow or inhabit a way of operating, from which I can then produce a set of artworks that are shaped by that approach. It's a kind of meta-method... where I'm experimenting with different vocabularies and ways of being an artist. Right now it's all about negotiation and relationships, seeing if I am able to formalise those in any kind of constructive way. The result will be a real consequence of real relationships, something that really happened at a particular time and place rather than just me making it up.

As for antagonism, that's what led me to negotiation as I said before. People tend to read overtly confrontational content in an artist's work as antagonistic (think of Santiago Sierra for instance), but I would rather shift the place of conflict earlier on in the process and consequently it may not be so visible. All the research shows that less aggressive bargaining techniques get better overall results. It's better to keep the conversation going. In current discussion around agonistic art I think that a specific political theory has been confused with traditional models of avant-garde shock because they appear superficially similar. But that reading really doesn't stand up to scrutiny.

EM: The Yesable Proposition is the fourth project formed as part of your Phd. Do you think that undertaking a Phd has altered your methods and practice?

MW: When I was a student I used to move very quickly from one thing to another, never sticking with one approach for longer than a single piece. Then, about seven years ago I had a rethink of my practice and as a consequence began to produce work in series that allowed me to develop an idea in more depth and also release some of the pressure that can fall upon a singular statement. I guess the PhD has extended this trajectory even further as I have spent three years essentially elaborating one theoretical model, even though this has been manifested as four distinct projects. But I wouldn't say it has changed the essential way that I operate. There is a bit of a tendency in practice-led art research to make the work illustrate the theory, or else to become paralysed completely by anxiety, but hopefully I have managed to keep some rough edges and random elements to undermine a completely illustrative reading. At least I hope that is the case.

EM: I was wondering if you thought there was one object in OUTPOST which you wouldn't dare to replace, or that you think is irreplaceable?

MW: I wouldn't mess with the computer, that always leads to trouble. Mind you, the keyboard could really do with a clean.

EM: Be my guest.



MA Central Saint Martins
BA University of Westminster

Solo exhibitions

Unfinished Business Henry Moore Institute, Leeds 2008, & CHELSEA Space 2009 cat.
The History of Sculpture Chapman Gallery, Salford University 2005
King Rosy Wilde, London 2003
At the Scene of the Crime Alsager Gallery, Manchester Metropolitan University 2002
Things I have done & things I have seen other people do Virgin Megastore Gallery, London 2000

Selected group exhibitions

Father Figures: Responses to mid-century modernism Leeds Art Gallery 2009
100 Days: Speakers Corner Arnolfini, Bristol 2009
Down at the Bamboo Club Picture This, Spike Island, Bristol 2009
Wysing Contemporary: Performed Wysing Arts Centre, Cambridge 2009
Talk Show ICA, London 2009 cat.
A Staged Dissent RADAR at Loughborough University 2008
Drawing on Sculpture Leeds Art Gallery 2007 cat.
That's us / Wild combination Three Colts Gallery, London 2006
60th Anniversary Show Gimpel Fils, London 2006
After Art School London Gallery West 2006 cat.
EAST International Norwich Gallery 2005 cat.
MacDuff Interiors Jeffrey Charles Gallery, London 2004

Selected critical writing

Beyond Public Art Art Monthly no.331 Nov 2009
Plywood Utopias Art Monthly no.299 Sept 2006
Against Explanation Art Monthly no.286 May 2005
Judgement Call Art Monthly no.280 Oct 2004





