

Locating the Producers Durational Approaches to Public Art

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Introduction
Locating the
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Paul O'Neill &
Claire Doherty



The banal requirements of form necessitate what appears to be a beginning, but is purely incidental, or perhaps born of habit, repetition or trauma. We actually begin in a middle, in a muddle, perhaps a puddle, running across the street (...) the beginning and the end may very well represent the same location, a non place of (im)possibility, containing seeds for a radically alternative present, continually folding over itself and refracted through patterns, modulations and intensities: spasms and shifts divided by recurrences and undercurrent. ¹

Locating the Producers began as a curatorial dilemma which came gradually into focus during the first few years of Situations, a programme engaged in the production and critical analysis of artworks commissioned in response to specific local conditions since 2003. Our international lecture series and symposium on ‘Rethinking Context in Contemporary Art’ in the first two years of operation was conceived in recognition of the burgeoning field of context-specific curating and commissioning, as manifested in large-scale, international biennial exhibitions, public art regeneration initiatives and off-site gallery programmes; all of which were challenging the orthodoxy of site-specificity. If, historically, certain forms of permanent public art commissioning had been aligned to the production of *genius loci* or sense of place — as exemplified by Lucy Lippard’s response to the rootlessness of modern society in *The Lure of the Local: Senses of Place in a Multicentered Society* — we identified that emergent projects, such as Jeremy Deller’s *Battle of Orgreave* or Francis Alÿs’s *When Faith Moves Mountains*, exemplified a more dynamic understanding of place. We also found a parallel for this progressive sense of place in comparative disciplines such as human geography and contemporary archaeology.

There was clearly a disparity between the affirmation of place — as advocated in cultural policy documents, consultancy briefs for the commissioning of artworks within the context of regeneration, and, to some extent, in the curatorial rhetoric surrounding

place-based exhibitions and projects — and the productive, contemporary, lived experience of place proposed by geographers such as Doreen Massey and Tim Cresswell and archaeologists such as Mike Pearson and Michael Shanks.² In affirmative strategies and policies, place was being promoted as an existing, stable (perhaps historically embedded) entity to which artists were invited to respond, or as something which could be rebranded through commissioning whereby location (and consequently place-based artworks) would be aligned with cultural tourism. By contrast, in the academic sphere, place was increasingly being recognised as ‘a constellation of social relations, meeting and weaving together at a particular locus (...) which is extroverted, which includes a consciousness of its links with the wider world, which integrates in a positive way the global and the local’.³ And at the heart of this contradictory pull between a stable, knowable place and a state of flux, an event-in-process, was the curator-producer.

By 2006, the curator-producer had emerged as the linchpin in negotiations between artist and place. At the point at which this research project began,⁴ we could distinguish the twenty-first century curator-producer from the museum custodian by their active involvement in the production of the artwork; by their consideration of the need to work from an informed, embedded position, and the responsibility to account for considerable expenditure of public funds on artworks that must be locally relevant but also internationally significant. We recognised that experienced curator-producers were keen to avoid the pitfalls of the pseudo-ethnographic commissioning process outlined in Miwon Kwon’s influential book, *One Place After Another: Site-Specific Art and*

- 1 Stephen Shukaitis, *Imagined Machines: Autonomy and Self-Organization in the Revolutions of Everyday Life* (New York, Autonomedia, 2010), p. 9.
- 2 Mike Pearson and Michael Shanks, *Theatre/Archaeology* (London and New York, Routledge/Taylor & Francis, 2001).
- 3 Doreen Massey, ‘A Global Sense of Place’, *Reading Human Geography*, eds Trevor Barnes and Derek Gregory (London, Arnold, 1997), pp. 315-23.
- 4 This research project was initiated in response to a call for cross-collaborations between industry and education partners. The Great Western Research initiative provided funding for a three-year research fellowship led by Situations at the University of the West of England, Bristol, in partnership with Dartington College of Arts (which subsequently consolidated with University College Falmouth) and ProjectBase in Cornwall.

Locational Identity, while seeking the spark of the alchemical process through which a truly remarkable work or project might emerge that would resonate beyond the specifics of a given location.

Despite the importance of this creative role and the rise of post-graduate curatorial courses, we recognised that there was a considerable gap in methodological research on place-based commissioning. Until 2006, research had primarily been confined to the impact assessment of artistic projects and the nature of place specificity in socially-engaged practices. During the course of our preliminary research, we identified evidence of longer-term, durational and cumulative approaches being adopted by curator-producers, which might be considered as a corrective to the itinerant model of the curator/artist-nomad critiqued by Kwon.⁵ It was at this point that the consideration of time — and, more specifically, duration — became the focal point of the three-year research project which we hoped would lead to a provisional response to the disparity we had identified at the heart of context-specific, or place-bound, curatorial initiatives.

Duration

Writing in 1972, in his influential book *What Time is this Place?*, Kevin Lynch proposed the term ‘time-place’ as a substitute for place, implying a necessary shift beyond a primarily spatial coordinate and towards a temporal construct.⁶ Two decades later, Patricia C. Phillips argued that a more progressive public art must account for a re-consideration of time. She concluded her essay with the statement:

The temporary in public art is not about an absence of commitment or involvement, but about the intensification and enrichment of the conception of public. (...) A conceptualisation of the idea of time in public art is a prerequisite for a public life that enables inspired change.⁷

As Henri Bergson acknowledged in *The Creative Mind* in 1946, duration is not only a psychological experience — a transitory state of *becoming* — it is also the concrete evolution of creativity, a state of

being within time that surpasses itself in a manner that makes duration the very material of individual creative action. This idea of duration, and the transitory attribute of time as a means of structuring the fluctuating encounter with public space, has become a recurring motif in the search for a more profound understanding of place within public art — as that which is always hybrid and neither fixed nor clearly bounded to a location.

Locating the Producers: Durational Approaches to Public Art was itself devised as a durational research process, which would investigate how public art and its curation has begun to recognise the significance of engaging audiences and encouraging research-based outcomes that are responsive to their specific contexts, audiences and locations over time. We chose to focus specifically on five relevant European projects at different stages in their temporal development: *The Blue House* (Het Blauwe Huis), IJburg, the Netherlands (2004–2009); *Beyond*, Leidsche Rijn, the Netherlands (1999–2009); *Trekroner Art Plan*, Roskilde, Denmark (2001–present); *Creative Egremont*, Cumbria, UK (ongoing since 1999) and *Edgware Road Project*, London, UK (2009–2011).

The projects were selected according to the following criteria:

- each should demonstrate an individual commissioner’s investment in maintaining a committed, long-term, durational approach to commissioning contemporary art in a specific place, generating a public manifestation;
- each should have taken place since 2000;
- each should have had a commissioning process and outcome which lasts for more than 100 days (the standard time-span of an international large-scale exhibition);
- each should involve the engagement of local residents.

5 This development of the research began in 2007 on the appointment of Paul O’Neill as GWR Research Fellow at UWE and through discussion with Antonia Payne and Claire Doherty, the focus shifted from research across visual arts sectors to the specific concerns of durational commissioning.

6 Kevin Lynch, *What Time Is This Place?* (Cambridge, MA, MIT Press, 1972), p. 1.

7 Patricia C. Phillips, ‘Temporality and Public Art’, *Critical Issues in Public Art: Content, Context, and Controversy*, eds. Harriet F. Senie and Sally Webster (Washington and London, Smithsonian Institution Press, 1992), p. 304.

Led by Paul O'Neill, this research project involved extensive site visits, archival research, focus groups, programmed public events and semi-structured interviews through which the procedures and intentionality of the curator-producers were to be assessed against the main outcomes as they were understood by the commissioner, curator, artist, resident, participants and lead researcher.⁸ In particular, we were interested in asking how social forms of artistic co-production were developed for a specific place, situation or environment, allowing the artistic and curatorial objectives to unfold over time through diverse modes of both local and dispersed forms of participation. Each case study would examine multiple accounts of the commissioning process, which, in turn, would be cross-referenced with other accounts from within and across all the case studies. By bringing these case studies together here, along with complementary texts by participant-observers/speakers in the research project, such as Mick Wilson and Dave Beech, we hope to contribute to a deeper understanding of what is at stake in commissioning place-based artworks, to test out a new vocabulary to qualify curatorial methods and, potentially, to propose a set of recommendations for changes to public and cultural policy.

By choosing to represent each of the projects through a single case study written by the lead researcher, we must acknowledge the partiality of presenting the multi-dimensional and durational nature of each project in a single, digestible form. In recognition of the need to offer up a point of response for the curator-producers, all five projects were invited to contribute a 'an insert' to the book. The Blue House has provided a timeline of all the invitees, projects and events that took place at IJburg over its four-year duration, as a means of mapping a trajectory of how the project developed; Grizedale Arts has written a manifesto for the future; Kunstplan Trekroner has compiled images of one of the future outcomes of the project, in which local inhabitants have begun to realise their own interventions into the built environment; Edgware Road's curatorial team has invited artist, Susan Hefuna, to produce a series of postcards and Beyond has produced a CD Rom archiving ten years of activity. For the final chapter in this book, commissioners and curators were reunited to reflect on the impact of this process

on their projects, speaking back to the research by way of a conclusion to this publication.

As the title of this research suggests, *Locating the Producers* intentionally problematises the question of how such projects were initiated and sustained and by whom. In their survey of sustainable collaborative projects dedicated to social and environmental change, Clare Cumberlidge and Lucy Musgrave draw out some key shared principles, to suggest that such projects: propose renewal as a continuous, open-ended process; take a holistic, multidimensional approach to their designated situations; maximise resources — material, human and economic; use local distinctiveness as a starting point for a vision of the future; engage professionals to work outside their normal sphere of practice and share an awareness of symbolic value.

In recognition of the fact that durational approaches in specific places are, as Cumberlidge and Musgrave's study attests, not particularly unusual, we must emphasise that the purpose of this study was specifically to focus on the emergent aspects of commissioning that are common to projects which share a durational approach and, through a comparative study of each in-depth case study, determining whether aspects of these projects might help us to reconcile the contradictions of the place-based curatorial endeavour. We aim to show that a fundamental shift in thinking about the 'time', rather than simply the 'space' of public art commissioning is required to effect change at the level of policy.

Charismatic Agency

One of the most prevalent characteristics of commissioning practices that has emerged through our research is the significance to each project of charismatic agency, whereby a key element of an individual's curatorial practice is the visionary means they use to engage participants and visitors and to secure funding. In this way, while authorship of specific facets of the project — such as particular architectural interventions, residencies or texts — might be clearly attributed, ownership of the project as a whole invariably becomes shared.

⁸ The full archive of *Locating the Producers* may be accessed at the Situations office in Bristol, UK.

Another key aspect of all the projects under discussion is that they began with an individual's commitment to resisting a problem-solving or instrumental approach. Instead, there appears to be a prevalent belief in the need for public art to engage with its most immediate public constituencies through hospitality and the development of relationships built on trust, before decisions are made as to how to proceed. However, there is also recognition on behalf of the individual host, or instigator, that such processes might not always be convivial and that the conflicts, failures and differences inherent to each project often contribute to their critical success. All of the curator-producers acknowledge the importance of having political will behind them, whether they have been supported by a specific policy, local council or individual with a vision for public art in their region. In many cases, there are multiple charismatic agents at work during the commissioning process — from curators to artists and residents, to planners, city administrators, developers and those responsible for the framing of art's context or situation and its social and spatial reception.

Sociality and Participation

In his text for this book, on organised networks, Ned Rossiter offers a consideration of how commissioners employ their charismatic agency through 'networked models of sociality' to allow for co-habitational time. Here, the open-endedness of the process is employed as a means of resisting the instrumentalisation of art. Rossiter's text provides an example of how the commissioners employ a working method that considers the dynamic formulation of place whilst also prioritising the discursive, the processual and the relational as media in their own right. By prioritising sociality, engagement and presence, inter-subjectivity also becomes a primary medium of artistic and curatorial investigation.⁹ While much relational art of the 1990s intended a more socialised and collective form of immersive experience, the taking part in art as a social event is largely regarded as contributing to a merely metaphorical form of art's co-production, its meanings and its values. As Jacques Rancière writes of relational art, its intention is to create not only objects, but also situations and encounters that are not in opposi-

tion to the object but require the presence of the viewer.¹⁰ What the durational projects considered in this book suggest is that a consideration of sociality must surely extend to the nature of co-production in relation to time, as well as to space or place, if the nature of social engagement at the heart of the artistic or curatorial endeavour is truly to be understood.¹¹

Given that the sustainability of such projects necessarily relies upon the circulation of social capital and in turn, on a form of gift economy, one potential criticism of this model of sociality is that it may be susceptible to cronyism. But, from the evidence in this publication, we might argue that these projects rely upon committed, informed and involved temporary constituencies which gather around a particular durational project, and that this evidence must be considered in relation to the funding imperatives of public art in order to extend opportunities for *more* people to 'experience and shape the arts'.¹² The concept of participation is constantly being formed and reformed out of extant social processes, political contestations and external forces, but, from the case studies outlined here, we could conceive of participation as a form of civic practice. We could move away from an abstracted idea of participation — as event-based and experienced *en masse* — towards something ongoing, experienced individually, sometimes discordantly, which is enacted by us as citizens. In this sense, durational commissioning processes that employ co-productive and socially-engaged modes of operation move away from the spectacularised mode of social relations, defined by Guy Debord, in which shared experience is atomised and consumption is undertaken without agency to create a false togetherness. The significant conclusion for commissioning practice is that a durational approach to events and projects seems to allow for the formation, dispersal and reformation of temporary, active communities so as to avoid the pseudo-ethnographic

9 See Claire Bishop, 'The Social Turn: Collaborations and its Discontents', *Artforum* (February, 2006), pp. 178-79.

10 Jacques Rancière, 'Problems and Transformations in Critical Art', *Participation*, ed. Claire Bishop (Cambridge, MA, and London, MIT Press and Whitechapel, 2006), p. 90.

11 See Paul O'Neill, 'Three Stages in the Art of Public Participation: The Relational, Social and Durational', *Dérive*, (May-September, 2010), pp. 11-16.

12 Arts Council of England, *Great Art for Everyone*, November 2010.

parachuting of the curator or artist to work with a passive target group deprived of agency.

Added to this, a durational approach encourages subsidiary audiences to form, beyond the initial participants or co-producers, permitting others to receive the project anecdotally through the dispersion of the narrative of the project by its participants and lead commissioner/producer over time. In this way, all of the projects discussed in this book transcend their immediate relations — between time, place and their temporary constituent publics — to consider that what has happened will live on not only in the memory of those who took part and experienced it. Projects are translated and extended into the future, whether that is through artists' work or through residual resident initiatives that endure beyond the project lifetime or as something which is discussed in subsequent art discourses.

The Value of Duration

Duration has its own extrinsic values, such as temporality, mobility, agency, change or affect.¹³ Durational approaches to public art involve a process of being together for a period of time with some common objectives, to constitute a new mode of relational, conversational and participatory practice. There is a multiplicity of modes of interaction between people, which has a destabilising effect on the perception that there is an actual time and place in which to experience or participate in an event. This is most evident in the number of people contributing to these projects who are unaware exactly what they are taking part in and what the outcome is to be; their participation is not something that can be measured or evaluated in a clear way, especially when even the initiators of the projects are not fully aware of what has been done, who took part and what was achieved, because to do so in the process of the project's development would be to curb the possible spaces in which the unexpected could happen.

This is not to say that duration as long-termism is the *a priori* solution, but rather that duration aims to problematise the time component of art's engagement with publicness and civic responsibility. As Dave Beech indicates in his responsive essay in this book,

'Duration is problematic because it is presented as a solution for art's social contradictions, whereas the only viable political solution must be to problematise time for art'. Duration cannot, therefore, become the default that is employed as a solve-all solution.

Duration is not simply a corrective to short-termism, nor is a durational relationship to specific contexts particularly rare. We might conclude that there has been no great paradigm shift, no significant 'durational turn' as such. Rather, we can discern a shake-up of the temporal limits of extant models for curating public art, which must be conceived as part of a cumulative process. The significance of duration does not lie, therefore, in a single extended project, but rather in the relationship between projects in place across time. What is intriguing, however, is that, despite the fact that the value of the commissioned events and projects lies in their ability to cohere cumulatively, and therefore demand some kind of recognition, their potency for gathering temporary constituencies lies precisely in their ability to surprise and unsettle.

In considering the case studies outlined here, we might also conclude that a spatio-temporal constellation of artworks and projects over time might be the best possible solution to the exhaustion of the site-specific curatorial model.¹⁴ Durational projects accord to Edward Soja's notion of 'thirdspace',

13 For an introductory analysis on Bergsonisms, see Suzanne Guerlac, *Thinking in Time: An Introduction to Henri Bergson* (New York, Cornell University, 2006), pp. 1-13.

14 Elsewhere, Claire Doherty has suggested that exhibitions such as Skulptur Projekte Münster and the Folkestone Triennial can no longer be experienced as cohesive exhibitions of art in public space due to the multiple temporal and discursive modes in which artists are now working. There is room, however, for a model of curating in place over time which allows for a cumulative engagement between artists and specific places, which raises questions about the promotion and analysis of curatorial projects within the context of global cultural tourism. See Claire Doherty, 'Curating Wrong Places... or Where Have all the Penguins Gone?' *Curating Subjects*, ed. Paul O'Neill (Amsterdam and London, De Appel and Open Editions, 2007), pp. 100-108, and Jane Rendell, 'Constellations (or The Reassertion of Time into Critical Spatial Practice)', *One Day Sculpture*, eds. David Cross and Claire Doherty (Bielefeld, Kerber Verlag, 2009), pp. 19-22. For an overview of issues linked to the emergence of curatorial discourses during a period of proliferation of large-scale international exhibitions, see Paul O'Neill, 'The Curatorial Turn: From Practice to Discourse', *Issues in Curating Contemporary Art and Performance*, eds. Michèle Sedgwick (Bristol and Chicago, Intellect Books, 2007), pp. 13-28.

as Lived Space is portrayed as multi-sited and contradictory, oppressive and liberating, passionate and routine, knowable and unknowable. It is a space of radical openness, a site of resistance and struggle, a space of multiplicitous representations (...) It is a meeting ground, a site of hybridity.¹⁵

These projects (as thirdspaces) clearly produce place as it is practised and lived; they provide a space of interrelations, always in the process of being made and remade, not only materially but also socially.

Beyond Spectacle and Counter-Spectacle

During a 2007 symposium at Tate Modern entitled 'Rethinking Spectacle', Claire Bishop considered the denigration of the term 'spectacle', particularly through the writings of Hal Foster and Benjamin Buchloh and the ways in which process-based, socially engaged artworks have been proffered on the basis of counter-spectacle, as a solution to the atomisation of communities. One could consider the five projects under scrutiny here as being aligned with the counter-spectacular, in the sense that the immediate impact of events, works and projects is localised and not easily disseminated through iconic images beyond their immediate participatory context. One can certainly discern new operational orthodoxies in these practices as a kind of simulacrum of everyday activity — including local festivities, screenings, discussions, communal cooking and eating, designs for new meeting points and gathering places — all of which seek to activate moments of communal publicness.

But, as Rancière has warned, 'participation doesn't guarantee critical legitimacy',¹⁶ which has particular resonance within our event culture. Considering Bishop's 2006 assertion that, 'the best collaborative practices of the past ten years address the contradictory pull between autonomy and social intervention, and reflect on this antinomy both in the structure of the work and in the condi-

tions of its reception', one might discern varying degrees of antinomy within the projects under consideration here.¹⁷ But, interestingly, these projects may also be seen to embody the work of Bishop's critical nemesis, Grant Kester, in that the commissioners work from a position of solidarity rather than simply as provocateurs. As many of the curator-producers have suggested in relation to their sense of responsibility to community, the effectiveness of this solidarity depends on the commissioner's sensitivity to local political dynamics, histories and cultures and on the possibility of ongoing relationships.

These projects display an intentionally slowly-evolving discursive process that enables an exploration of the particularities of place in tune with the expressed needs of residents. This discovery is surely one of the primary outcomes of this research — that a participatory process does not necessarily mean consultation, but rather extended periods of time allow for a generative, rather than a fixed, outcome. Further consideration ought to be given to the issue of time as a method of de-spectacularisation, specifically how public time is more generally framed by these projects. In this way, a space of co-production could emerge out of an expectation for the unforeseen, the unexpected, the yet-to-come. If we are to think of participation as more than a closed, one-off relational or social interaction with art, duration must be considered as a temporal process of cohabitation, whereby time can contribute to something that is immeasurable, unquantifiable and unknowable from the outset. Therefore, participation can only be experienced durationally, as a lived difference that extends beyond a momentary engagement with art and with one another.

Endings

This book is not simply a call for longer-term projects or for the commissioning of temporary versus permanent artworks, but rather for the potential of short-term and durational projects to be realised as part of longer-term, cumulative engagements which

¹⁵ Edward Soja, 'Thirdspace: Expanding the Scope of the Geographical Imagination', *Human Geography Today*, eds. Doreen Massey, John Allen
¹⁶ Jacques Rancière, *On the Shores of Politics* (London, Verso, 2007), p. 61.
¹⁷ Claire Bishop, February 2006, op cit.

recognise the process through which small-scale, limited constituencies gather for a finite period of time around particular projects. This would require the rejection of the itinerancy and over-production that has characterised public art commissioning over the past ten years, in favour of embedded, committed practice for emerging curators, artists and commissioners, alongside funding and commissioning opportunities committed to longer lead-in times and fewer predetermined outcomes.

While diverse in their objectives and outputs, all the projects discussed in this book have presented a longer-term view of the ways in which commissioners, artists and curators can respond to a specific situation by considering art as a co-operative production process that is neither autonomous nor over-regulated. By taking account of participation with art, and in art, as an unfolding and longer-term accumulation of multiple positions, engagements and moments registered in what we account for as the artwork, we may be able to move beyond the individual participatory encounter of an eventful exhibition moment. This leads us to understand participation not as a relation or social encounter with artistic production, but as a socialised process necessary for art's production. Such a shift in the perception of participation must acknowledge the different duration-specific qualities of art as something driven by ideas of public time, rather than space, so that we can begin to understand the complexities of artistic co-production within the logic of succession, continuity and sustainability rather than discontinuity in a unitary time and place.

Durational projects could be considered as 'discursive exhibitions' that evolve over time, but, instead of prioritising the moment of display, or the event of exhibition, they allow for open-ended, accumulative processes of engagement.¹⁸ Such projects necessitate a shift in our consideration of the curator-producer from an individual focused on the unearthing or endorsement of an existing historical sense of place through the commissioning of autonomous, permanently sited artworks to a creative praxis characterised by complicit participation in the making of place through a series of cumulative and dispersed encounters over time.

¹⁸ See Bruce W. Ferguson and Milena M. Hoegsberg, 'Talking and Thinking about Biennials: The Potential of Discursivity', *The Biennial Reader*, eds. Jelena Filipovic et al. (Ostfildern, Hatje Cantz Verlag, 2010), pp. 361-375.