

EXPANDED PRACTICE AND CURATION: FOUR POSITIONS

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Abstract: This paper is a synopsis of four positions each with a basis in a particular conceptual outlook. The purpose of the first three positions is to consider a small variety of art practices and their use of curation. Position one can be understood through a description of the practices involved in a performance by the author in 2002. Position 2 is understood through the works of Joseph Beuys, an artist who factures a large range of patterns of connectedness which includes using various elements of his work to bring many of the connections into view. Rather than simply stating this, the section reviews one of many of the sculptures by Beuys displayed in the Royal Academy rotunda in 1985, one of three curated by Beuys in the months before his death in January 1986. Position 3 begins a discussion of the art works of Mona Hatoum and Cornelia Parker displayed in the last twelve months.

Key Words: Expanded practice; curation; Fisher; Beuys; Hatoum; Parker; aesthetic function of art;



Position one

VOLESPIN was performed by Allen Fisher at Froebel College, Roehampton University in May 2002 using a curatorial practice. The first part of the performance involved Fisher facturing drawings of the audience in a sequence of four drawing sheets. The second part involved the same performer reading from scripts of poetry and then improvising from a play-back of the reading. Both parts of the performance were recorded on video-tape.² The preparations and performance were curated by Allen Fisher with the assistance of Mark Riley. Most of the audience were artists, poets, dancers and musicians working outside of Roehampton, some of the audience were staff and students from Roehampton's art, philosophy and drama departments.

Allen Fisher's work with publishing, performance and *Fluxus* in England in the late 1960s and early 1970s developed through the 1970s into a complex that included the facture of paintings and poetry in tow with art history and theory. All of these activities and practices involved audiences and curation. The earlier interactions involving performance developed in England of the 1970s to include or overlap with various activities in different practices, from theatre and dance to poetry and exhibitions. During the later 1970s much performance activity in the UK became codified and was given academic standing through publications such as *Performance* and *PS* magazines and subsequently given distinction by *Performance Research Journal*. However, many of these performance activities, like *Fluxus* and Allen Fisher's performances, like many of the happenings and *aktions* that preceded them, were kept separate from published, funded and academic preferences.

A brief view into the facture of the *VOLESPIN* 2002 performance may contribute to recognising those elements in the work that involved curation, that is to say that involved dealing with the viability for and planning-through of three features of curatorial work before the occasion. These features may be summarised in terms of attentions: to the

audience, to the venue, to the materials needed for the performance.

As a performer Fisher had a reliance on four small coterie, the members of which overlapped. Mailing lists would typically include linguistically-innovative poets, improvising musicians, conceptual artists and painters and academics involved in literature, philosophy and theatre. In 2002 Fisher was working in the art department at Roehampton and he decided that the site could provide a venue and the frisson needed to make a new performance viable.

The first feature of curation was to inform the potential audience of the event and then to provide a route from the public road once they arrived. It was then to provide a clear entrance, an accommodating and conducive entrance space and a clear provision for participating as an audience in the performance. The second feature was to find a viable venue and that was implicitly provided by the foyer of the Lulham art block and one of the drawing studios. The foyer led directly through a windowed door to a drawing studio full of easels, drawing boards and chairs. The third feature was the material requirement which had partly been provided for by the *in situ* drawing furniture.

The audience was not casual but invited, either directly by personal email or postal notice, or by having read an advertisement in the coterie journals involved or by announcements and paper-hand-outs at other performance activities. The audience arriving at the larger site from the public access would already know of the event and would be arriving in search of specific directional notices. Those of the audience already on site as staff, post-graduate students or mature students would already be aware of the location of the venue. Simple instructions to visitors would suffice in terms of arrival by public transport or by car or on foot from Barnes station. Directional signs from each of the four entrances could be a simple matter of brief displays.

The Lulham entrance would clearly state the name of the event and invite visitors in. In the foyer would be a vitrine displaying a small range of animal traps and poetry books by Allen Fisher. On the wall would be displayed a couple of larger animal traps and a small range of paintings and

² Published on DVD by Root & Branch.



drawings by Fisher directly relating to the theme of 'traps'. In the centre of the back wall a table with a row of empty glasses and bottles of wines and juices, all provided by the host. The sound from speakers in the foyer was the sound of a voice reading from a book about animal trapping.

The entrance door to the performance space was left open for access before the performance began. The space would be divided into two, diagonally, by a large blue nylon rope pulled across from one corner to the other at about four feet high and held along its span by the backs of four drawing easels. Audience members entering the door would be unwilling to duck under the rope, it was assumed, and would rather choose to take a seat from the rows of chairs on the left of their view of the studio. The right hand triangle of the studio included much of the unused furniture but more specifically housed four easels with drawing boards, each with a pinned-up sheet of white cartridge paper. The easels were equally spaced out along the blue rope border, positioned so that the performer could stand at any of the easels and boards and facture drawings of the audience. Loud-speakers in the studio perpetuated the sound of the foyer of a voice reading from a book about animal trapping. To the side of each easel, a tall stool with a collection of graphite pencils and charcoal. The tape of the reading voice would be timed to conclude at the beginning of the performance. The tape would then continue with the amplified sound of charcoal drawing on hard cartridge paper. This recording would also be timed to mark the end of the first half of the performance.

The second half of the performance would require making a recording from the performer reading poetry derived from research into trapping. This recording would then be played back through earphones to the performer, for the performer to repeat from without a script – or rather in lieu of a script – and to improvise when the pace of the recorded reading was too quick to keep up with. The performance would need a tape recorder set up with a rapid replay. The underlying intent is to trip-up the performer and make slippage inevitable.

That appears to be a summary of the curatorial work for the performance. There was no introduction. The timings were cued by the

simple device of the changing sounds from one mode to the next. The performer, at the end of part one, would simply invite the audience into the foyer for a further drink, and would announce at the beginning of the second part that they were starting to perform again.

The different aspects of this performance, involved in arrangements and curation, are partly the result of interaction with the work of other artists as a viewer and art historian; that is in terms of aesthetic reception. Retrospectively there are positive examples from Joseph Beuys. Further, it would then be worth noting the work of other artists who subsequently provide new attentions contemporary with, but not necessarily cognisant of, Fisher's own practice.

Position 2.

Over the past forty-five years Fisher has been engaged in an artistic practice that involves articulation of aesthetic function as a pattern of connectedness. An artistic practice that has contributed to his approaches is that of Joseph Beuys.

In the work of Joseph Beuys, Fisher recognised connections to archaic ideas of transformation. However he articulated and coherently focused these through a recognition of various rhetorical devices from early Altaic art and more recent Modernist practice, and thus enhanced the production of meaning for the viewer. Attention will now be paid to Beuys' curatorial strategies over a long period (from as early as 1948 and as recent as 1985) along with the connections brought together by the artist himself in 1985, in the Royal Academy's rotunda.³

Beuys' sculpture *Tram Stop: monument to the future* in the rotunda show drew from a range of connectedness and allusion to modern history, ancient times and mythological Europe. The sculpture consists of many iron elements. The dominating feature of these has been cast from a seven metre, seventeenth-century culverin, with

³ Royal Academy of Arts (1985) *German Art in the Twentieth Century: Painting and Sculpture 1905-1985*. London.

the form of a dragon's mouth at its open end, into which has been inserted a cylindrical neck with an iron head. The other elements comprise the cast tops of four mortar bombs, a tramline and a set of metal rods.

In its original setting in Venice, the cannon with bust was displayed vertically and surrounded by the cylindrical bomb tops. Next to it a hole had been drilled in the floor down into the Venice lagoon. Into this hole the rods were used to connect the water to the gallery floor, so that the top, angled rod acted as a 'key' to facilitate this. Rubble from the drilling was piled up next to these elements. The Royal Academy show (like that in New York in 1979) provided a relic of this display, because the vertical column has been laid horizontally across two of the bomb tops, and the rods had been left on the floor.

Each element in the sculpture contributes to the overall work. But what is of more importance in terms of curation is that the work itself juxtaposes and is enriched by the other sculptures by Beuys in the rotunda. To arrive at an understanding of the work it is necessary to understand these elements and how they contribute to the larger meaning of Beuys's exhibits.

The first approach to the subject is biographical. At the age of five Beuys waited for the tram near Sternberg in Kleves, at a site that provided an axis from which radiating avenues were added to create a network of order. The original monument of the cupid, sited here in this axis, comprised the culverin and mortar bomb tops that Beuys has used to cast part of his own monument. In the original monument, an armoured Eros projected from the cannon's mouth; this has been 'replaced' with a cast from a mould made by Beuys of a Roman martial head, such as that of Mars in the Vatican, and a Celtic head similar in its mouth design to that of the Tanagergee idol in Ireland. The despair of the mouth recalls gestures found in Quattrocento Italian art such as Fra Angelico's *The Last Judgment* as well as such sculpture as that of a damned soul on the cathedral at Orvieto and a tribal war head in Leningrad. The stance of the head and neck may also be associated with the Celtic figure from Ralaghan. Putting these elements together provides the initial meaning.

Tram Stop is a symbol of the contemporary human condition. What was once armoured Eros is now the image of war and despair. Its European condition is a complex of Celtic ancestry and military colonisers in the mouth of archaic weaponry linked by image and meaning to the dragon and by historical occasion to Beuys's childhood. But this only deals with the prominent elements. To the side of the cannon runs the tramline that connects the contemporary condition to Beuys's past in Kleve but also connects in its curve the ground below with the above. This shamanistic stratification is elaborated by the rods that connect the water to the earth and, in its original display, the horizontal with the ascending and descending.

In its new display as relic, the overall suggestion is that these shamanistic potentials have changed their significance. The work becomes a 'monument to the future' as warning out of suffering but now also as hope in its new link to the sculpture *Lightning* that hangs behind it, and directly links to the vulnerable and protective male principle of the sculpture *Pt Co Fe* in the rotunda as well as the sculpture *Mountain King*, and contrasts with the female *Pythia Sibylla*.

The installation in the Royal Academy rotunda is a mixture of mythologies common to Beuys' artistic project. As his drawings, early Christian iconographic sculpture and work subsequent to 1947 confirm, he discovers shamanistic elements in a plural world: in the traditions of Celtic and Christian peoples and in Greek mythology, as well as in work of James Joyce and Marcel Duchamp.

Beuys' contribution to art is considerable, but that is highly contingent on the quality of aesthetic reception. The viability of these reciprocal positions is further clarified by the curatorial feature of Beuys' facture. As art Beuys' work is reliant on the clarity of the patterns of connectedness in his work, this clarity is only possible in Beuys' work through the organised activity of his curating. All viable artefacts that lead to efficacious and significant aesthetic reception rely on the combination of patterns of connectedness and imperfect fit.

In Beuys' work the meaning could extend to include social ideas and the psyche. Imagine the self, not in a sentimental and conventional state of clarity, but in a perpetual state of construction



from an aesthetic and thus ethical dilemma. Patterns of connectedness between action and stasis are communicated here, between construction of the self and the local community, and then between the self and the State and in support of sustained resilience against the State's monstrous machine. This is of course the aesthetics of an imperfect fit and would thus encourage visiting the artefact again.

In Fisher's performance-work the opportunity to revisit the performance is clearly not possible. What is provided is the means to begin comprehension of the pattern of connectedness through the poetry and the two-dimensional paintings. This interaction can be enhanced by the recording of the performance, but the development of the aesthetic function requires an engaged reception.

Position 3.

Subsequent to *VOLESPIN*, Fisher has shown engagement with many artists involved in artistic practices that articulate aesthetic function as a pattern of connectedness. Two examples, one from Mona Hatoum and one from Cornelia Parker, may suffice to begin comprehension of this engagement.

Both artists exhibited comparatively new work in 2016, Hatoum at the Tate in London and Parker at the Whitworth in Manchester. They provided Fisher with the opportunity to engage with their art proprioceptively in a context impossible through written documents and catalogues. Both artists curate or participate in the curation of their most important works in the best manner of practice evident since early approaches to this practice were demonstrated by the Constructivists and Dada artists in the early twentieth century and by *Fluxus* and a few conceptual artists in the 1960s. This practice was then considerably and immediately developed by Joseph Beuys from 1962-1985 and during the 1980s by Jessica Stockholder and others, contemporary with Hatoum and Parker.

Hatoum's *Homebound*, 2000, is a tableau of furniture and objects arranged behind a barrier, a horizontal array of 25 equally-measured, taut steel wires. The tableau is an arrangement of domestic objects including a table, chairs, a cot

and a bed, metal toys, kitchen utensils, lights, a birdcage, coat hangers on a rack and two columns of audio speakers. The metal parts of all of the objects are interconnected by wires and the wires are connected to a generator operated by a computer. The computer has been programmed to send surges of electricity over a planned sequence in such a way as to cause the lights to come on brightly or then dim and to cause a drone or amplified buzz to increase and vary in volume or subside. This evokes the idea that the wires may be alive or not, about to become live or not. The arrangement of the objects is both concise and disorderly; some of the objects are new and some are old. The pattern of connectedness provided by the installation combines menace with anxiety, unexpected interruption of danger with memory. There are no obvious signals of conciliation or prospection. The allusion to domestic existence is immediately made dangerous and life threatening. The viewer is required to recede.

This arrangement needs the artist to set it up, at least in the first occasion, and then requires mapping for subsequent installations. The work is now part of the Rennie Collection in Vancouver and as such has probably lost its need for future curatorial input. The curatorial input thus shifts to the viewer's reception. If this art is to continue its efficacy it requires an informed proprioceptive interaction. The initial curatorial attention of Hatoum to *Homebound* has encouraged the viability for that.

Cornelia Parker's work *Thirty Pieces of Silver*, in her 2016 show, and incidentally twelve or more of her other room-scaled artworks, puts curatorial staff on a learning curve, in need of her support, or at least until others, through Parker's mentoring, can provide an informed curatorial decision. This is particularly the case because the viewer's attendance affects the aesthetic reception. Put simply, *Thirty Pieces of Silver* consists of pressed silver-plated objects hung by groups of individual vertical wires and suspended in distributed exactness across the ceiling in such a way as to bring about a surface of flattened metal floating twelve or less inches from the floor in suspension from the ceiling. The 'surface' of these flattened objects spreads across the room like a magical carpet that viewers can

walk around the edge of and as they do so their displacement of the air encourages a current and the magical carpet, metal surface, shimmers.

This shimmering effect was given a sense of poignancy. In the year following the creation of *Thirty Pieces of Silver*, Parker factured *Matter and What it Means*. For this work Parker used flattened coins, run over by a train, and hung them from the ceiling in such a way as to form the impression of two horizontal human figures in states of rest over flat shadowed images, also factured in coins, of the figures on the floor. In this case also, as the viewer entered the area of installation, the figures moved in the shifting air giving the impression that the viewing of the 'bodies' disturbed their rest, disturbed their deathly peace.

These installations and the many that use a similar device of suspended forms, require very specialist expertise developed by the artist's facture and as part of her facture. This curatorial dimension of the installation-facture develops considerably as the works are moved and reinstalled. In the recent exhibition of Cornelia Parker's work at the Whitworth Art Gallery, Manchester, in 2016, two of the works from 2005, *Composition with Horns (Double Flat)* and *Rosshartch (Accidental 1)*, and *Cold Dark Matter: An Exploded View* from 1991, were on loan to the show from, respectively, the Caldic Collectie in Wassener (in The Netherlands), from the private collection of M. Pollard and from the Tate collection. In each case the expertise in planning for, and subsequent effective treatment of the hanging, was curated with the artist. In all cases the viewer's reception, their proprioceptive engagement, was a necessary part of the aesthetic efficacy, but in each case also, the effectivity of the aesthetic experience was contingent on the curatorial skills of the artist and the gallery team.

In any art, aesthetic efficacy is intimately linked to aesthetic facture and reception. In the positive cases discussed in this paper, in the work of Joseph Beuys, Mona Hatoum and Cornelia Parker, as well as the work of Fisher, the curatorial skill is a necessary part of the aesthetic facture. It thus becomes obvious that such facture needs to include the availability of documents to facilitate planned-for installation that can be used by workers other than the artist, in the artist's absence, to facilitate

the aesthetic experience. That idea could vary from artwork to artwork.

In lieu of a conclusion

Curatorial practice by both practitioner and facilitator continues to insist on a necessary debate. It is a debate about the ethical position of the artist's work in relation to aesthetic function and in relation to a number of other functions that different audiences and occasions demand. It continues to be the case that the most effective curatorial practice is made possible through the direct activity of the artist-practitioner or, as will continue to be the case, a good understanding, in the absence of the artist, of what that activity would have been. It is fundamental to clarify how curating takes place as an expanded practice in a dialogue with the original artistic process.

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