

Looking for the Skip, Love?

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This article presents some thoughts on the engagement of publics with contemporary art based on three recent experiences: 1. association with the Hoard collective in Birstall, Leeds, UK; 2. research at the Hallen für Neue Kunst, Schaffhausen, Switzerland; and 3. a symposium on Touch in Didsbury, Manchester, UK. For the purpose of this particular compare and contrast exercise I will explore and localise the ongoing problem of the inside/outside dichotomy inherent in public versus private debates in the contemporary art sphere.

Hoard: Towards an Archaeology of the Artist's Mind



In February 2012, along with nine other contemporary artists, I joined Hoard — a collaboration organised by the Departure Foundation, a charity which promotes contemporary practice in the UK by 'providing unique contexts for exhibitions and events in a wide range of interesting places.'¹ A huge empty warehouse was chosen to house 'a group of artists hoarding objects and artefacts relating to their practice: finished artworks, props, curiosities, documents, traces, plans, remnants.'² These objects were to become 'the starting point for new works and performances,' and the space, slowly filling up with items, 'a physical realisation of the minds of the artists.'³ The project was due to run for a year, and the plan in terms of public engagement was to open every two months 'for viewings of this ongoing process of transformation.'⁴

My only encounter with a non-Hoarder during the time I was involved occurred as I searched for

Unit 20 of Norquest Industrial Estate (Birstall, Leeds) in a car visibly crammed full of the work's residue. A member of the public in overalls approached my car while I tried to work out the industrial estate signpost and helpfully asked, 'looking for the skip, love?' A load of old rubbish is what he saw, but that is exactly what it was until, arguably, through collaborative experiment, it would become part of a contemporary art process. Why were we, the artists, there? For the space. Who wanted to look? Really, only us. We wanted to interact with other artists, sharing the peripheries of our work spread out across an enormous concrete floor, in order to expand our practice further in a non-gallery context. Very few people came to the two public viewings that did take place, other than the artists and their friends. In fact, upon reflection, one might question whether the openings were really public at all: The venue was relatively difficult to reach but the space was high-impact. The work was also somewhat inaccessible but was direct from the workplaces of practising contemporary artists. So, why should external publics be interested? A descendant of the shows that grew up in industrial estates during the 1980s, Hoard had inherited the awkward, hermetic gene:

Artists put together their own exhibitions in buildings once used as warehouses or factories, side-stepping both the temporarily defunct apparatus of the private galleries and the public sector, which was not yet ready for what they had to say. These 'alternative' shows could be very stimulating environments in which to see art, though the excitement of them was bound up with an implicit elitism. Typically, to go to one meant travelling to some unfamiliar part of London, and might involve walking through an industrial estate (an unusual experience for most art-world types)...⁵

Although different publics might now be more familiar with the industrial venue, we will never escape the fact that an interesting, secluded non-gallery space can only heighten the sense of exclusion. Viewings for publics are often put in place arbitrarily. Why do people need to see the more experimental work (work that is openly tried out, discussed and developed within a project space outside the studio), and who is going to do the explaining? If research is about pushing our own enquiries privately, without concerning ourselves with the question of the viewer, then why worry about how the contents of our project spaces are shown publicly? Or is the question more about the stage at which publics should step in? Does an earlier viewing, showing the work-in-progress, lead to further interest and engagement with contemporary art and deepen that which already exists? Does it expand individuals' own ways of seeing, thinking and feeling? And how do we keep it authentic and meaningful, ensuring that publics have a rewarding experience or understand that there is a lot more to it than, as in my case, a load of rubbish? Do we need to work harder at showing and explaining how we are working, rather than how we have worked?⁶

'Hallowed' Hallen

During the three days I spent looking at the Robert Ryman paintings on the fourth floor of the Hallen für Neue Kunst, a private art gallery in Schaffhausen, Switzerland (May 2013), for research into touch, I saw very few people come and go.⁷ An enormous white converted textile factory in a relatively unknown small fairy-tale town on the Rhine, the Hallen holds impressive monuments of contemporary art by Bruce Nauman, Mario Merz, Sol LeWitt, Carl Andre, Joseph Beuys, Robert Mangold and Jannis Kounellis as well as Robert Ryman.⁸ As a private museum run by an individual collector, which only opens for a few hours at the weekend, the Hallen sustains a sense of privilege. The fact that it took a long time to negotiate an extra day to carry out the

Notes

1. Departure Foundation: Supporting and Promoting Contemporary Art: <http://www.departurefoundation.com/About.html> Accessed 17 July 2013.
2. Ibid.
3. Ibid.
4. Ibid.
5. Julian Stallabrass, *High Art Lite*. London: Verso, 1999. 49–51.
6. Visual Intelligences, Lancaster University: <http://www.visualintelligences.com/creative-practice.html> Accessed 17 July 2013
7. The visit to the Hallen für Neue Kunst was to gather information in the field for a current practice-led Masters by Research project investigating touch in the contemporary art process. I spent three days in close engagement with the Robert Ryman installation on the fourth floor of the Hallen, collecting both objective and subjective recordings. This information has since been brought back to the studio and work has been made in response. For more about this organisation, see http://www.modern-art.ch/en/enHallen_fr_Neue_Kunst Accessed 17 July 2013.
8. According to a Hallen gallery guide, Joseph Beuys convinced Urs Rausmüller to buy the textile factory and turn it into a contemporary art museum in the early 1980s. There is a large permanent Beuys installation in the Hallen: 'Less than two years before his death, Beuys combined his complex work, *Das Kapital Raum* 1970–1977, with one room in the Hallen, erected especially for Beuys and his work by Urs Rausmüller. The two-storeyed installation has the importance of an artistic legacy:' <http://www.saatchigallery.com> Accessed 22 October 2013

9. As Thomas McEvilley (1986) puts it: "The eternity suggested in our exhibition spaces is ostensibly that of artistic posterity, of undying beauty, of the masterpiece. But in fact it is a specific sensibility, with specific limitations and conditionings, that is so glorified. By suggesting eternal ratification of a certain sensibility, the white cube suggests the eternal ratification of the claims of the caste or group sharing that sensibility. As a ritual place of meeting for members of that caste or group, it censors out the world of social variation, promoting a sense of the sole reality of its own point of view and, consequently, its endurance of eternal rightness. Seen thus, the endurance of a certain power structure is the end of which the sympathetic magic of the white cube is devised." See his introduction to Brian O'Doherty, *Inside the White Cube: The Ideology of the Gallery Space*. London, Berkeley, Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1999. 9.

10. The Didsbury Arts Festival (DAF) is a primarily craft-based and musical/theatrical festival, but the organisers encouraged my involvement as a contemporary artist.

research only heightened this sense of privileged access. Why should the Hallen preserve this aura? Money. One of the rare sightings of visitors on the fourth floor involved a small group's engagement with the work of Ryman. Each person carried a black collapsible chair (so insistent against the white and held so carefully) and moved silently from place to place within the large installation of paintings under the instruction of Andrea Keppler, the museum's Head of Education. At each stopping point the members of the group settled into their chairs in quiet contemplation, all ears to the preacher more than eyes to the work. Evidence of engagement seemed deep and meaningful: Keppler took her time, the group sat and listened while a John Cage extract was played, and the whole event lasted approximately three hours. The Hallen calls these events the Sunday Matinéés and they are most definitely theatrical affairs. The tickets are within the region of £50 each, depending on the size of the group, and generally seemed to be paid for by an older, wealthier crowd. Despite this privileged approach to access, I was allowed to carry out research in the Hallen for three days free of charge. As such a member of the public as the paying theatregoers, I was granted time and space to engage for free only because I sat within the context of a university-plus-funding-award capacity. The Hallen set-up is a product of Raussmüller's vision to house (mostly) large works that respond particularly to space and ever-changing natural light. The work is open in that publics can walk among the exhibits and find them free from cordons or glazing, but the sense is somewhat revered. While this type of temple-like environment, dependent on fee-paying guests, limits an engagement open to all (restricted opening hours, talks that cost money, a venue away from the main hubs), the opportunity for individual experiences of the work is second to none — but only if you want to see those particular works by those particular artists, and only if you know they're there. Individual experience with the work is fundamental, and fragile. Often it is all that is needed. So let those who can pay enjoy the teaching if they crave it (and subsequently fund the space), and allow those who can't just to stop and let the work do its job.

Do publics really need help in order to 'see'? A pre-booked visit to the 'hallowed' Hallen is just as rare as a stumble upon a dusty Hoard opening. The former employs the teaching of privileged publics as its key source of income, while the latter could do nothing but teach artists about their own practices. In other words, neither gets many visitors, but for very different reasons. While its existence off the radar in terms of its venue and experimentation was essential to its function, the isolation of Hoard meant the exclusion of publics.⁹ The private confines of both the Hallen and Hoard become ever more apparent as their publics drift in as silent ghosts or do not appear at all.

Touch Symposium, Didsbury

On 28 June 2013 in The Parsonage Trust, Didsbury, I organised a trial symposium on Touch, set up as part of the Didsbury Arts Festival (DAF). While the call for papers was posted on various artists' network pages and advertised through social media, the event was not locally publicised beyond the DAF organisers' marketing material. Only the five speakers were present, including me, one presenter who participated via Skype, and one MA student who had travelled all the way from Bournemouth to be there. While the Touch symposium stood out in terms of being the only obviously contemporary art event in the whole DAF programme,¹⁰ there was no evidence of interest on the day from the broader public. This particular example thus illustrates the divide. The fact that Touch stood out as 'different' was possibly detrimental, and the gap between public arts festival structure and individual artists' experience yawned from empty seats.

Carole Kirk, one of the artist–researchers who answered my call for papers, explores the public’s openness/unwillingness to touch her installations following her explicit invitation to do so.

It all boils down to: ‘Why should I go? What’s in it for me? What can I see? What is truly interesting? Do I believe in this?’ Which is the most accessible and/or engaging: a Hoard visit, a Hallen talk or a Touch symposium? The answer is none of the above. Despite the impact and sense of revelation offered by the Hoard exhibit of private studio innards across an enormous bare concrete floor, the work was hard to get to in every sense. A Hallen talk could only reach a limited number of guests ‘in the know’, while the installations offered the privilege of close engagement with the work to anyone able to get to the gallery within certain times at a weekend. Although the Touch symposium benefitted those artists that attended and spoke, greater publicity would be required for any future contemporary art event set up within the structure of a music-/crafts-based arts festival such as the DAF if public engagement were to be a serious objective. Each experience offered extremely limited opportunities in terms of public involvement (mainly due to a combination of restricted location and lack of targeted outreach), but in each case the chance for the individual’s close engagement with the work was considerable. While publics are now less intentionally distanced from the work in terms of their actual interaction with it (touch is invited in many exhibition spaces, and the use of data art installation relies on a participant, for example), the timing, advertisement and location of the draw-in must similarly work to close gaps. While discussing how artists can draw publics in, we must always return to the individual, for it is the individual’s meaningful experience with the work that is real and lasting. The question is, do we need to help the individual to do this, and, if so, when and how? What’s really in it for them? For me, the ‘skip’ comment has been one of the most useful pieces of feedback I have ever received.