Reception: two subjects looking at one another

SHAW, Becky <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-6835-6044>

Published version

Copyright and re-use policy

Reception: Two Subjects looking at each other

In 2004 I took up an artist's residency at the University of Bath within the Department of Social and Policy Sciences (SPS). The art work produced was entitled *Reception* and is the vehicle here for a reflection upon art and collaboration. I chose this work partly because it established a working relationship and dialogue with the editors of this publication, but also because it's the work that most sharply raises the problem of the relationship between artist and 'others'- a matter that for me - does not seem to go away.

I often find myself characterised as an artist who collaborates. This is because I've spent time making work in response to environments, practices and professions, considered different to those of the realms of artists. When invited to write about collaboration, I began, and then stopped, suddenly questioning whether any of what I have produced could be considered collaborative. It is not simply that I doubt whether the work has been collaborative 'enough' to reach some quantity or quality of co-operation. Rather, I realised that work I have made asks questions of the relationship of artist and 'others', rather than seeking collaboration as an aim. With hindsight it seems that *Reception* engaged with a philosophical and practical problem that also will not go away- the knotty issue of subjectivity. It seems timely to explore this here, even though, I acknowledge, this must be a 'grand sweep', given the enormity of the subject and the required brevity of the text.

In *Reception*, the notion of visibility in a 'collaboration' is explored. The work was made in response to SPS, a collaboration with a group of specialists rather than one named individual. In response to spending time with academics, I wanted to consider the public front of intellectual pursuit. In this particular context I aimed to explore how academics create and sustain a kind of visibility, at the same time as examining how art and artists become visible. Of course I didn't know that this was what I wanted to do until I was there; feeling the problems, misunderstandings and expectations placed upon me; combined with those that I placed upon the social scientists.

The artwork was constructed in a foyer space, publicly accessible but not, until that date, converted to an art space; it was this reconfiguration that became *Reception*. This involved installing conventional gallery display equipment like boarding and spotlights, a hired reception desk, IKEA furniture, borrowed University plants, a commissioned pink neon sign saying *Reception*, and myself, in the persona of 'receptionist' to the artist in residence (also myself). Visitors who wished to meet 'the artist' had to make an appointment through 'the receptionist'. Through daily conversation with passing academics themes of discussion arose; including the place of beauty in art and academia, the need and definition of craftsmanship, and what it is we expect artists to contribute to society. The final work was a text, analysing the experiences of the receptionist in relationship to the work of SPS. The text was given to all who passed through the reception on the last day of the exhibition. Following *Reception* this space continued to be a gallery - but minus plants, reception desk, neon sign and receptionist.

Collaboration in context:

Emerging in the 1960s and 70s, amongst a variety of artistic strategies collaboration arose as a stratagem designed to dismantle the commodification of the art object and notions of individual skill, 'genius' and authority. Critical theorists and artists challenged historical models of practice where the artist was characterised as male, white, Western, and allegedly divorced from any concern with society. Numerous collaborative approaches sought to offer more inclusive models of the artist and to change the dynamic between art and its public.

In a nutshell, this artistic critique arose out of a diverse set of cultural discourses, practices and values, eventually known as postmodernism. In simultaneity, the confluence of social change and developments in critical theory generated a movement that could potentially discredit Western ideals of progress. One of the key problems identified by radical theorists (a gloss) was the centrality of the historic and subsequently universalised configuration of the 'individual', 'self' and emergent 'Subject'- the model of an individual agent that could potentially shape society. The Enlightenment Ideal was a universal figure who could apply rational thinking to analyse the world and transform society. However, in practice this degree of autonomy was only available to a small part of society (white, male, Western). Theorists like Derrida, Foucault and Lyotard criticised the Subject because its ideal was not available to all, and used this to imply then, that a universal conception of mankind was not possible. Their critiques were enormously influential, contributing to the significance of identity politics in the1970s, 80s and currently.

In his 2002 text, 'The Death of the Subject Explained', James Heartfield analyses these postmodern manoeuvres and identifies a case of 'throwing the baby out with the bathwater'. While agreeing that Subjectivity had not achieved its potential because it only belonged to the few, Heartfield claims that to deconstruct the principles of universality potentially generate a precarious situation. When notions of universality are dismantled, the consequence is an elevation of Self in place of the Subject. The idea of the Subject as a being capable of agency (acting and thinking with independence) together with other agents - becomes jeopardised, potentially leaving society with no vision of common needs or goals; the implication leading to a narrowing in expectation of what humanity may achieve[1].

Heartfield goes on to describe how, as part of the same cultural shift, Marxian intellectuals critiqued the specialisation of academic activity for its inability to capture the shape of society as a totality.

A contextualisation of the place of collaboration in art practice:

Within the impact of this theoretical shift in visual art, collaborative artistic practices like Artists Placement Group serve as a good example of commitment to de-specialisation. APG articulated the 1970s zeitgeist that artists' 'generalist' viewpoints might alter, for the good, the particularist perspective of society, particularly those of corporations. In general, the critical direction of collaboration was to establish communities and dissolve the perception of others as 'Other'[2].

Without the model of the Subject, Heartfield argues, there are no models to explain the potential dynamic of the individual within a society. Models that appear more egalitarian, as in identity politics or Habermas's 'intersubjective' theories elevate individual qualities over ideals of agency, so dissolving any possibility of the positive aspects of universality, and diminishing the potential for large scale societal change. Heartfield maps how, instead of subjectivity, we have 'ersatz' subjectivity in the form of the individual 'self - as seen in the rise of media celebritydom and preoccupation with consumption defined identity.

As it seems that the roots of some artistic collaborations lie in the critique of the Subject and the elevation of specific interest communities, artistic practices may offer potential sites to investigate subjectivity. While art is often assumed to explore the 'self' or the individual, could it not instead, be a place to experiment with the figure of the Subject? Perhaps it has always offered a place to 'test' constructs of Subjectivity.

Sites of reception and friction:

While being the receptionist, my daily encounters were laden with friction, and I was reminded of Allan Kaprow's perception of artistic practice as a means to touch the social 'meniscus' of other people[3]. Kaprow thought artists should push through accepted norms of social distance, considering that the space between people should be charged and active rather than polite. While in reception there were a number of academics who returned daily, either to 'catch me out' being 'the artist' instead of the 'receptionist', or to challenge aspects of the work. Some felt that the work was deliberately negative, denying the University beauty or relief from daily life. Others felt that the work was designed to trick or make fools of the staff - that it was about *'taking' rather than giving*[4], about making the University population the subjects of the work (*'am I in the picture today?'*[5]), or about avoiding responsibility by absenting the artist and making the receptionist speak for her. It seemed that the deliberate fronting of the character of the receptionist rankled University staff; testing their ideas and arguments and becoming actively engaged in debate about aesthetic and intellectual value. Instead of seeking common understanding as is often expected of collaboration, *Reception* framed arguments. This was not intended to be crudely divisive, but, rather offered a way of asserting the importance of a collision of views.

During the early stages of the residency, I spent time visiting academics in their offices, and attending meetings, lectures and seminars. Being an artist in an academic department, I was neither inside the department or outside of it; neither student or teacher. *Reception* turned into a vehicle to capture conflicting opinions about art. *Reception* did not intend to create enemies, or 'us' and 'thems', but the encounters it generated provided the grounds, or even a frame for the struggle towards Subjectivity. As Heartfield describes, Subjectivity is not a given, it is fought for through persuasion.

The act and metaphor of looking is particularly important to *Reception* - people encounter each other, possibly appraising (an/the/each) other. However, in the role of mediator as 'receptionist' and as the artist the power structure lay with me as author. Contrary to post-

colonial writing, in the situation of the 'collaboration resistant' artist, my purpose was not to dismantle the structure or to offer a power-free model, but to find the tools to articulate what is there already and to understand the way the individual shapes and is shaped by an encounter with others.

Into Visibility:

It seems that relations fraught with difference are central to *Reception*. I play the role of receptionist, surveying all who enter my/receptionist/artist space, while at the same time becoming the most visible port of call. In 'Becoming Public', Emma Hedditch analyses what it means to 'become visible' as an artist. She writes about the act of being in a public context and called artist:

what does it mean to be present at as many places as possible, just to meet the requirement of public appearance? Visibility, surely, is the necessary condition for any discursive relevance, for identification by this public. However, it is provided that a 'being involved' interlinks with the 'becoming visible' within the structures of mutual availability. And this is a matter of property distribution: Anyone who wants to be seen must be available to the community[6].

In some ways it is problematic to see visibility/appearance as related to Subjectivity, as it is more usually associated with promotion of the Self. Hedditch points out that through an awareness of the artist becoming visible, there must be a public - and therefore what could follow is possible implications for engagement with the constitution of type(s) of community. In contrast to the 1960s drive to dispel the individual in favour of commonality, it could be said that through this type of appearance, where one Subjectivity engages with others, a model based on agency is offered.

Kelly Large also scrutinises the way each party is perceived by the other, and how this can be made visible as part of the work. In the work *Me, Myself and I*[7] made at New Art Gallery Walsall, she turns the expectation of the artist's talk on its head by inviting a number of other artists to talk about her. The work explores how the artist appears in public, to a public; so shares much with *Reception*. While not strictly a 'collaboration', *Me, Myself and I* produces and explores many complex working relationships, some of which are fraught with difficulty concerning the pressure of representing an other. In a public interview she says of her working method with others:

so my self-deprecation, as I pick out my faults with humour, enables me to normalize or discharge a situation and so find where I 'fit' and where 'art' fits in each specific context. This is not a literal 'fitting in' which involves adapting oneself to the shape of another; it is rather that the attempt (and often failure) in finding a fit is a critical manoeuvre'.[8]

The search for whether art and the artist can 'fit' and the failure to do so is the content of the work that must be made visible rather than being a (usually hidden) by-product of collaboration. In the same text she also describes her initial response to a commission as being: *what can I do, what do they want me to do and what do I want to do?* In this triumvirate of demand, she deliberately takes on the expectations of others and examines

her relationship to them, a careful examination of where her own desires and those of others, fit together. The thoughtful process Large describes examines the very grounds of autonomy and the social forms that an individual, or an individual artist bangs against and is defined by.

Visibility demands recognition by others: to look and to be seen, so this aspiration to explore visibility must be social. However, the visibility that Large, Hedditch and *Reception* explore is also about what it is to form an individual identity in a context. By avoiding assumed models of collectivity and co-operation, is the only other available model of the individual a knee-jerk return to identity politics - is there nothing left of the ideal of the Subject? In her online text, Irit Rogoff, wrote about collaborations that try to look in detail at what happens within the process of collaboration, which can:

[Emphasize] a critical interrogation of the processes of production through artistic practice, the loss of the so-called autonomy of the work of art, and the subjugation of the heroic individual artist to the cultural embeddedness of the artwork.[9]

As Rogoff intimates, earlier collaborations have offered critiques of the cult of individualism and heroism attached to the idea of 'artist', answering this with the recognition that art is socially produced. However, for artists who have grown up with sequential critiques of individuality: the critique of the white male hero; self-sacrificial models of community practice, and then the packaged models of community in Relational Aesthetics, it seems there are limited models of individuality beyond a biographically driven narrative of Self.

It seems important that artists are given the space to examine what it means to reflect not just on commonality, but also the significance of individuality, to see if an exploration of something more than the Self is possible. It seems that both contrary to, and because of, its history, 'collaboration' provides fruitful grounds to inquire into the terms that attempt to capture subjectivity.

In conclusion, I want to return to an idea of mistaken identity and reflect on those artists who also look like they collaborate but are doing something else altogether. These artists get into close proximity with different professional fields so might easily be mistaken for sharing some of the political motives of earlier collaborative practices. These artists don't share many of the social or ethical imperatives of their ancestors, rather they inhabit a different political context where some of the previous reasons for collaboration are turned upside down.

It seems that contrary to ideals about community or commonality, I (and others) enter social contexts to work out what contemporary Subjectivity might be.

Bibliography
Jonathan Crary (2001) Techniques of the Observer. On Vision and Modernity in the Nineteenth Century, MIT, Massachusetts.
James Heartfield (2002) The 'Death of the Subject' Explained. Sheffield Hallam University,

Sheffield.

Allan Kaprow (2003) Essays on the Blurring of Art and Life. Ed Jeff Kelley. University of California Press, Berkeley and Los Angeles.

Kelly Large and Becky Shaw (2010) Please do not Confront me with my Failures, I have not Forgotten them. Transmission Chapbook. Artwords Press, London.

Karolin Meunier and Emma Hedditch (2007) *Appearing, Becoming Visible, Having a Public Face* in Coming to Have a Public Life: Is it Worth it? Emma Hedditch. Commissioned by Art Now Live, Tate Britain.

Irit Rogoff Production Lines. Collaborative Arts. http://collaboarts.org/?p=69. Accessed 03/08/2011

Susan Sontag (1961) *The Anthropologist as Hero*, in Against Interpretation: And Other Essays. Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, USA.

[1] J. Heartfield, *The 'Death of the Subject' Explained*, Sheffield Hallam University, Sheffield, 2002.

[2] wikipedia.org/wiki/Collaboration 3/8/2011

[3] A. Kaprow, *Essays on the Blurring of Art and Life*, J. Kelley (ed), University of California Press, Berkeley and Los Angeles, 2003.

[4] B. Shaw, *Reception* essay, hand distributed at University of Bath, 2004.

[5] B. Shaw, *Reception* essay, hand distributed at University of Bath, 2004.

[6] K. Meunier and E. Hedditch, *Appearing, Becoming Visible, Having a Public Face* in Coming to Have a Public Life: Is it Worth it? E. Hedditch (ed). Commissioned by Art Now Live, Tate Britain. 2007, p.5.

[7] K. Large, *Me, Myself and I*, New Art Gallery Walsall, 2008.

[8] K. Large and B. Shaw, *Please do not Confront me with my Failures, I have not Forgotten them*. Transmission Chapbook. Artwords Press, London, 2010.

[9] I. Rogoff *Production Lines. Collaborative Arts.* http://collaboarts.org/?p=69. Accessed 03/08/2011