

Invisible cities and primed spectators

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Abstract

This essay discusses the extraordinary travelling exhibition mounted by Alan Alborough as Standard Bank Young Artist of 2000. Reviewing its interaction with the artworld's museum and art systems, an attempt is also made to interpret Alborough's work in terms of a scenic worldview framework.

Opsomming

Hierdie essay bespreek die buitengewone reistoonstelling aangebied deur die Allen Alborough, die Standard Bank Jong Kunstenaar van 2000. Die interaksie daarvan met die museum-en kunssisteme van die kunstewêreld word bespreek. 'n Posing word ook aangewend om Alborough se werk in terme van 'n sceniese wêreldbeskoulike raamwerk te interpreteer.

Contemplating these essential landscapes, Kublai reflected on the invisible order that sustains cities, on the rules that decreed how they rise, take shape and prosper, adapting themselves to the seasons, and then how they sadden and fall in ruins. At times he thought he was on the verge of discovering a coherent, harmonious system underlying the infinite deformities and discords, but no model could stand up to the comparison with the game of chess. Perhaps, instead of racking one's brains to suggest with the ivory pieces' scant help visions which were anyway destined to oblivion, it would suffice to play a game according to the rules, and to consider each successive state of the board as one of the countless forms that the system of forms assembles and destroys (Calvino 1974: 97).

I visited the Alan Alborough website¹ before the exhibition opened in Bloemfontein. The digital images resonated with imagery half-remembered from recently reading Marco Polo's descriptions for Kublai Khan of fantastic cities in Italo Calvi-

no's novel *Invisible cities*, in particular the poignant passage on p. 69:

'Memory's images, once they are fixed in words, are erased,' Polo said. 'Perhaps I am afraid of losing Venice all at once, if I speak of it. Or perhaps, speaking of other cities, I have already lost it, little by little.'

This involuntary cue hinted that Alborough's work might somehow be related to a recent research topic — the so-called scenic tradition in art.² Reading some of the other essays on this exhibition, I was struck by the fact that they seem to reveal more about their respective authors than about their putative subject. Thus my submission that this exhibition in a singular way foregrounds the role of what might be called the "primed spectator".

Alan Alborough's installation, notably its conceptual framework, may at first sight appear unfamiliar to art public members who are accustomed to the usual exhibition format — the conventional display of independent works of art in functional gallery spaces. Yet this thoughtful installation corresponds with certain trends shared among a number of experimental projects of the past century — including Marcel Duchamp's industrial readymades, process art and conceptual art, site-specific installations and multimedia presentations.

I start with some general observations regarding the repercussions of these developments.

Visual artists are constantly exploring and testing the prospects and limits implicit in their uniquely modern role as exhibition artists³ — the task of engaging and working with

the embodied eyes, imagination, memories, expectations, commitments and hearts of spectators, situated within discursive and social frameworks that are systematically distorted by reigning ideological powers. Thus the idea of canonic masterpieces has been fragmented into constellations of pieces on display and in reproduction;⁴ the permanence and closure of *objets d'art* have shifted towards dynamic *opera aperta* and aleatory processes in temporally dislocated display actions;⁵ even the most finished and autonomous works of art are now being disseminated in the rhetorical mode of installations and digital displays.⁶

Concurrently, the nature of the museum as public exhibition space,⁷ the formats of museum displays⁸ as well as the meaning of "musealization"⁹ were subject to progressive mutation — from a secular temple of the muses to the typical white cell's experimental aesthetic space, to its current status as but one of several links in a chain of multimedia information networks. The art public's share grew and spectators' critical contribution increased in step with these developments. Generally, our role has shifted from that of silent admirers, to that of detectives and analysts decyphering often hidden or unconscious intentions, motives or desires, to that of full-fledged co-creators, the artists' real partners or adversaries in the joint imaginative project of co-operative and situated meaning generation.¹⁰

Travelling exhibitions traditionally consist of a collection of mounted, framed and numbered works of art, documented in printed and illustrated catalogues, and exposed to admirers and critics from local art publics by means of a series of museum displays. The basic framework here is archival. Objects created at certain moments in the past are curatorially selected, secured, researched, displayed and packaged with ready-made interpretations and critical commentaries for an audience

composed largely of passive consumers. The ostensive curatorial purpose is to let the works of art speak for themselves. In effect, however, the most significant participants, the artists and spectators, find themselves relegated to the sidelines, in a submissive position, being dominated by curators and museums, both as institutional frame and as the silent and illuminated exhibition spaces reverberating with the canonizing voice of curatorial authority.¹¹

Allen Alborough exchanged this established frame and practice with an alternative conceptual framework — namely the notion of the gradual unfolding of a new multimedia phenomenon, the emergent meaning of a series of calculated scenes and cultural events with an expanding body of participants. This exhibition does not merely tour as a body of works transported between seven cities. The components in the installation themselves have the procedural structure of a journey that will be completed only once the end of the tour programme has been reached. In each of the cities, at each station along the itinerary, the installation is reassembled to create a different scene. Each time the artist also initiates a set of corrosive processes in the coils on the rectangular pieces, and the resultant traces and brownish stains of each exhibition are preserved in the used coils affixed to the seven capsules and displayed on sheets hung on the walls.

Crucial to Allen Alborough's concept is the assumption that the gallery spaces of the museum circuit may be replaced by any darkened interior. Even more fundamental is the assumption that artist and art public together may take command of the curatorial function.¹² The role the artist assumes is akin to that of a *factotem* who co-ordinates the construction, transportation, installation and corroding of the pieces as well as the management of the expanding archival website. He orchestrates an open process of spectator engagement in

order to prompt visitors into active participation, transforming their roles from that of passive viewers into self-consciously performing actors, constantly aware of being players in a system of surveillance which registers their reactions and degrees of participation. Simultaneously, the exhibition spaces are converted into sites for dramatic contests between clashing actor roles. However, apart from the audience hum during openings and the sounds of scratching pens and clattering keyboard, the rest is silence. The arena of the battle has been removed into heterotopian cyberspace, the domain that Régis Debray characterized as the "logosphere".¹³

The spectators are given the opportunity of adding their own responses to the project — both to the installation in the gallery and to the cloud of words surrounding the pieces and their digital images — and thus of joining a veritable choir of voices. The single institutional voice of curatorial authority is replaced by a multiplicity of participant voices. This phenomenon may be compared with Bahktinian *heteroglosia*, with the following reservations:

- first, the deep-rooted intractability of the illusive and imaginative kernel of visual responses escapes direct translation into verbal discourse;¹⁴
- secondly, the wild revelry of carnivalization at the basis of Bahktinian *heteroglosia* is firmly bridled and directed towards a contrasting orientation by the hygienic materials, clean-cut forms and intricate linear patterns of Alborough's installation and website.

The database of verbal comments thus comprises sedimented traces of writing, "sanitized" as it were by the transfer into cyberspace. It represents merely a collection of clues about the visitors' real embodied responses in adapting themselves to the installation's distinct metaphorical orientation. We have to deduce the

imaginary contents of the project by means of deductive processes, by speculating on the project's enduring value, on what will remain, beyond the installation and website machinery.

Instead of the usual printed catalogue as a record of an exhibition, visitors have the address of the artist's website. A computer is a crucial part of the installation, offering access to the labyrinthine electronic archive of the exhibition, the artist and his earlier work. Visitors are able to visit the scenes and view the digital images from the preceding stations of the tour and also to read the essays, critical commentaries and spectator responses from Grahamstown, Port Elizabeth, Pietermaritzburg and Durban, Bloemfontein, Cape Town and Johannesburg. Together with anybody who could not physically attend any of the exhibitions but who does have electronic access to the website, members of the art public are invited to add their own comments that will become part of the exhibition archive.

The exhibition does not comprise the usual collection of artworks on display. It is in fact difficult to conceive or to speak here of a truly finished or completed work of art — except in the mediated sense that eventually the "whole" (the history of the project on arrival at its final destination in Johannesburg) will exist in an indefinite mode, as a kind of nebulous scenic constellation.¹⁵ At the final destination it may be described as a multimedia artworld event that stretched the institutional museum framework; and also as a network of solicited human contacts made available on a relatively permanent website, a supplemental archive completed and ready for the next stage in a metaphorical journey — its nomadic afterlife in cyberspace.

Central to the project is its conceptual scope, especially the difficult task of tracing its imaginary profile, exploring the imaginative reach of its complex implications — at first hand, in the presence of the

installation, during several revisitings, and subsequently recalling the exhibition in memory and following its unfolding fate on the website.

Though orchestrator and webmaster of these contingent events, the artist does not openly direct or personally dominate prospective viewers and participants from the art public. We are in fact indispensable as his co-workers. In addition to many opportunities for us built into the installation itself, he specifically invites us to claim a share in the creative curatorial role. He does not prescribe our part in the project, nor does he attempt to control, programme or manipulate the responses of prospective viewers.

Solicited as aleatory performance, our subjective reactions, unpredictable input and creative interplay with the installation are nonetheless conceived as integral to the project's eventual outcome. However, to the degree that the installation's emergent system qualities reveal themselves, the spectators' liberating experience of participation is replaced by a rising and discomforting awareness of the project's power of surveillance and control. Spectators who elect to not adapt themselves to the conditions on offer have to resort to deliberate countering measures.

The pieces consist of common industrial products of plastic, often modular in nature — the typically iterative, multi-purpose, consumable or disposable, replacable or recyclable tissue of our culture and industrial environment. Components from this system of objects¹⁶ — pallets, tiles, sheets, rods, links, ties, strips, isolators, reflectors, syringes, clips, pegs, wires, nails, batteries — are mounted in complex constructions, installed in such a way that the clinical textures, neutral colours and modular patterns of repetition acquire an unexpected *Aura*, extracted in part from the museum environment's scenic values.

The scale of the pieces is carefully calculated to engage us bodily as

sculpture. Had they been smaller they would take on the appearance of miniaturized clockwork mechanisms; had they been larger the effect of the installation would be intimidating. As it is, the scale and layout accommodate human dimensions. Readily surveyed, the installation facilitates a process of easy adaptation on our part.

The constellation of pieces could be described as "devices of contingency". They function in a playful manner, like Rubik's cube constructs or crossword puzzles — ostensibly without the standard verbal clues, though these proliferate on the accompanying website as the exhibition approaches its final destination. Spectators may fill the openings in any fanciful way, projecting meanings on the pieces according to their own wishes or inclinations, private aversions or fears. The process is unquestionably arbitrary, yet one is made aware that the pieces are composed systematically from iterated elements, constructed as co-ordinated patterns and processes, in effect creating a playful model of interrelated and multi-levelled order.

While spectators reflect on the choice of materials, the mounting of components, the illumination of pieces from within, the spatial layout of the installation, especially the guided corrosion processes, the installation begins to reveal itself or, in other words, become receptive to our meaning projections. As a multiplicity of possible meanings accrue, it begins to take on the appearance of an operating system, perhaps a machine involving typical sources and transformations of energy with as yet undetermined products and by-products. The functional purpose of the system ultimately remains unknown, since the corrosive stains do not aspire to images with a special status. Nevertheless, being conditioned at institutional level by museum habits, we are primed to search for the intentions of culturally purposeful objects, and to persist in this quest,

despite all obstacles and any resistance.¹⁷

The destination may be concealed, as in a labyrinth, yet the pervasive effect of integration and co-ordination conveys to the viewer the suggestive presence of metaphorical relations between the manifold patterns and processes. The awareness of related or parallel orders in diverse dimensions becomes the basis for further conjectures. The implication is not that one has to discover a single pattern, a basic blueprint, a masterplan or a hidden code. Rather we are invited to elaborate and embroider the key metaphorical model of patterns, processes and transformation co-ordinated synchronically at various levels. The distant that is made proximate, the invisible that is made visible by the installation seems to be a kind of cosmic metaphor — perhaps a world model that assumes the presence of parallel patterns, processes and orders in nature and culture, environment and history, matter and spirit, site and system, humanity and machine, body and soul, individual and society, home and city.

The unique manner in which all of this is presented as an installation with an electronic archive is a novel invention by Allen Alborough. Yet the fundamental faith in an emergent harmonious order manifesting itself in any arbitrary transformation is an ancient legacy, still vital for recent positions, such as Gödel's incompleteness axiom, Heisenberg's uncertainty principle and Einstein's theory of relativity. The enduring master-metaphor of co-original parallel patternings has a distinguished history.

The narrative of this history includes the work of numerous artists in the scenic tradition — including *vedute* painters like Piranesi, Canaletto, Guardi or Bellotto; futurists and constructivists like Delaunay, Severini, El Lissitzky, Moholy-Nagy, Schlemmer or Escher as well as a number of contemporary science-fiction utopists. This basic metaphor

also governs the thought of philosophers like Spinoza or Leibniz, developed further by the modern exponents of systems-theory like Von Bertalanffy — from the founders of cybernetics to the manic web surfers in the virtual worlds of cyberspace.

Albert Einstein is probably this tradition's most renowned figure. I propose that his celebrated statement that God does not gamble might well serve as a fitting motto for Allen Alborough's installation.

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Notes

- 1 <<http://www.alanalborough.co.za>>, accessible also as link in the September 2000 edition of *ARTTHROB* <<http://www.artthrob.co.za>>. Readers are invited to visit the website to follow the exhibition's mutations along its itinerary and especially to access the magnificently archived images from the seven sites.
- 2 Cf. Van den Berg 1996, 1997, 1998 & 1999.
- 3 Cf. Bättschmann 1997 for a history of this category's mutations in the modern art system.
- 4 Cf. Fisher 1991, Belting & Kemper 2000.
- 5 Cf. Preziosi 1994 & 1996.
- 6 Cf. Belting 1998 for an analysis of the historical fate of the "invisible masterpiece"; also Hofmann 1998 on the repression of multi-embedded and imbricated art forms during the modern era as a consequence of absolutist ideals regarding visual art as "pure" and "autonomous".
- 7 Cf. O'Doherty 1986 & Duncan 1995.

8 Cf. Carrier 1987 & Alpers 1991.

9 Cf. Zacharias 1990.

10 Cf. Vattimo 1997.

11 Cf. Bal 1996.

12 Cf. Groys 1994.

13 Cf. Debray 1995, 1999 & 2000.

14 Cf. Elkins 1997 & 1998.

15 Probably due to the installation's atmospheric effects (astutely parasiting on the secular sacred potential of museum interiors), I succumb once again to the temptation of picking up the cloud metaphor — adding to the “cloud of words”, “choir of voices” or “cloud of witnesses”. — prompted by Umberto Eco's description of the “content nebula” of symbols that is crucial to his conception of *structura assenta* and *opera aperta* (cf. Eco 1968 & 1989): “According to a typology of sign production ... there is an actualization of the symbolic mode when, through as process of *invention*, a textual element could ne interpreted as a mere *imprint*, or a *replica*, or a *stylization* is produced. But it can also be identified, by a sudden process of recognition, as the *projection*, by *ratio difficilis*, of a content nebula” (Eco 1984: 162).

16 Cf. Baudrillard 1996.

17 Cf. Baxandall 1991.