

# ONE DAY SCULPTURE

A NEW ZEALAND-WIDE SERIES OF TEMPORARY PUBLIC ARTWORKS

## SANDY SAMPSON CONSIDERING AN AESTHETICS OF GENEROSITY: ARTIST IN THE WORLD

It became apparent in the writing of this paper that it required a sub title, thus: Artist in the World. I will reference the work of Maurice Mauss and Lewis Hyde repeatedly as they each dealt extensively with the complex topic of generosity in terms of The Gift.<sup>1</sup> There will be three interconnected considerations woven throughout this paper; first the nature of an “unannounced work”, secondly how do we assess it, and finally as a subtext through out, an illustration and questioning of the dominant assumption that art is separate from life.

An unannounced work is an art act that in part or whole happens outside of the gallery or museum in public space where there is no institutional barrier or imposed threshold to encountering it. In addition and importantly it is situated in a place where it might be happened upon unexpectedly and requires others to complete it. An unannounced work can and often does crossover with, social practice, dialogical art, and

even relational aesthetics. In fact even as I attempt to make a definition I am aware that all these categories are applied after the fact, they are not static or complete. And in fact this resistance to categorization can be seen as an indication of their vitality and relevance. Criteria for assessing these types of work are likewise in flux. In exploring examples of works that could be said to fall in and around these “categories” - we locate points of commonality that are not adequately addressed in current critical discourse. One point of intersection in the works we will look at in this paper is generosity. If generosity in all its complexity is a component of many new works, it should also be a criteria considered in their assessment.<sup>2</sup>

Unannounced work is inherently performative collaborative and time based. Accumulated articulations of lines defining and crossing between active and passive contribution to a work randomly encountered become drawn and erased individually by each person engaging (or not) with the work. This ambiguity of role and its illusory resolution at each encounter become components of the work’s product, thus ensuring that no one can ever “consume” the work in its entirety.

Lucky Dragons is mainly a collaborative duo comprised of Luke Fischbeck and Sarah Rara, however they consider everyone who participates with them as part of their collaborative community. Lucky Dragons use music and group events to create “temporary communities” and explore strategies for extending agency. Their “Make a Baby” project is a good representation of their work

Participants pick up a carrier signal... By touching other participants on the skin the signal is transferred ... as a direct result of minute variations in the quality of touch from gently brushing to fully grasping. ... each individual's slightest touch registers a shift in the sound and the image created, and yet, through the intricacies of multiple points of combination and modulation, the overall sensation of the piece is of group identity. ... the guiding criteria of the project are scalability (easily used by both very large and very small groups), self-sustained operation (no need for centralized control), and intuition (easy to learn, and to teach).<sup>(Lucky Dragons)</sup>

Requiring the engagement of others for completion makes obvious the collaborative nature of an unannounced work once it is offered to the public. But what about before that, what is the relationship between the artist and patron? When Lucky Dragons are invited to bring “Make a Baby” to a host location, (often a music venue) a large number of the audience can be expected not to know what the project consists of, but the inviting patron will have a general idea and know roughly what to expect. In this example the relationship between patron and artists is not complicated by negotiation of expectations, however it does illustrate a mutual willingness to let go of control.

There are other examples where the mutually assumed impossibility for either artist or patron/funder to tightly control the context or accurately predict the product of a

work results in exposure of commonly held worldviews. As independent curator, critic and author Mary Jane Jacobs says of Bik Van der Pol, “It is...because they give it (their art) with clear intention informed by a ‘continuous optimism and trust in the function of art as a catalyst for change’ that manifold reciprocal effects are set in motion.”<sup>(Jacob 1)</sup> An invitation to Bik Van der Pol such as the commission for their ONE DAY SCULPTURE project reveals at the very least understanding and respect for the artists’ position, and at most total alignment and desire to contribute to social change via the vehicle the artists provide.

Inviting an artist to create a new open public project and lending support, whether monetary, logistical or both is at base an invitation to collaborate and evidences trust in a set of compatible beliefs, a shared letting go of expectations. Artist Andrea Zittel selects and invites artists once a year to High Desert Test Sites in the California dessert to do a project. The only constraints are dates, place (Joshua Tree and surrounding lands) and the budget she can offer them. Last fall the HDTS was held in conjunction with the California Biennial. Andrea Zittel invited artist Yosua Okon from Mexico City to come make a work.

Yoshua’s project “White Russians” was described in the catalogue as “a collaboration with the Aikin family of Wonder Valley. The visit to their home not only emphasizes the gaze of the spectator or art-goer, but also reverts it: the family looks back.” White Russians as it turned out was referring to the drinks being served by the host family and not their ethnicity. The project consisted of the Aiken family opening their house to friends and art tourists and serving White Russians. There was a “spontaneous” family disagreement performed about once an hour. In between these performances people drank White Russians and talked. Andrea Zittel made herself available to Okon as he developed his project, freely sharing her knowledge of the local community and how he might best meet families to work with. He emphasized that she was completely supportive and exercised no editorial control.

Collaboration between commissioner/patron and artist is not always this seamless. Artist Harrell Fletcher was invited to make a project for Houston’s Diverse Works 2002. Fletcher wanted to work with a local grade school to create a project “Summerhill Days”<sup>3</sup> where for one day, seminars would be offered by faculty, staff and students sharing information and workshops on topics of personal interest. Students and family members would be free to go to as many or as few as they chose. Students might opt to spend the entire day at recess. Working remotely, Fletcher relied on local logistical support from Diverse Works to realize “Summerhill Days.” Ultimately it was the lack of this support that atrophied the project. The relationship continued with a certain amount of collaborative compromise when Fletcher produced “The Sound We Make Together” in 2003. Fletcher invited various groups, including a Baptist choir, a yoga class, and a dog-training group into the gallery to do what they normally do outside of a gallery setting. I cannot speak to Diverse Works passivity in the first instance, it may simply be that they did not have the time to facilitate within the broader community, or they might not have felt comfortable giving up control in this instance.

The relationship between artist and patron when making a new work requires collaboration. As with any collaboration this means granting trust. This is especially true for an unannounced work. Once a project is taken out of a predefined art context and launched into the public the illusion of control vanishes in direct proportion to the sharing of authorship and agency it is designed to invite.

When I asked Yoshua Okon what his feelings are about collaboration in participatory art, he said, “participation is one of our ethical responsibilities in life” and “art is about sharing communication.”<sup>(Okon)</sup> He feels that the audience shares responsibility for making the art generally and in the case of “White Russians” at HDTs specifically, everyone involved was an equal author of the project.

A criticism of many participatory works is that instead of sharing authorship and agency they in fact allow the artist to co-opt and exploit the audience’s contribution, in some cases even victimizing the audience. Some of the responses to “White Russians” echo this point of view.<sup>4</sup>

“...attendees were invited into the home of local residents to drink White Russians and subsequently be accosted by a melodramatic performance of stereotypical redneck behavior. It was culturally insensitive, and the deliberately uncomfortable atmosphere of the performance was overshadowed by the inherently uncomfortable social situation. Had the piece focused on a cultural meeting between the local so-called "rednecks" and the art crowd, facilitated by the artist as cultural conduit, it may have been quite interesting” (Bugaj)

Or another more sensitive critique:

"White Russians" ... had a strangely unfriendly vibe ... The locals were welcoming but the Angelenos seemed to have brought their bad attitudes with them. The whole project felt condescending to the rural types who were the hosts, as if we city folk were being invited into their homes to laugh at their unsophistication.”<sup>(Vikram)</sup>

I participated in “White Russians” and my experience varied wildly from these reports, none the less I suggest that these are valid considerations and point to possible strategies for evaluating works. These criticisms are rooted in a more traditional aesthetic as they position the artist as the ultimate relevant agent and pass judgment on a presumed and finite intent. How do we assess an open collaboration that cannot be fully known or consumed, and how do we engage funders as collaborators if the results are unquantifiable? Perhaps this question mirrors the problem, as it is framed with an assumed bias towards that which is quantifiable.<sup>5</sup> We need new frames, or perhaps anti frames of reference for engagement with an unannounced practice.

Sharing of authorship, agency and relinquishing control inherent to any unannounced project (sanctioned or otherwise) point to the issue of generosity.

Generosity is not a discrete moment of giving a gift. Rather it is an un-measurable gesture opening a circuit that can only be advanced by a corresponding willingness to engage. By this I mean that any offer of generosity is also a request for another party or parties to enter into a relationship of undefined obligation

When I asked writer and curator Hamza Walker to comment on the topic of generosity in public works, he astutely pointed out that one could not consider the topic without considering the nature of public space.<sup>(Walker)</sup> This raises an important question; Is the artist one member of the public with equal access to public space, or is the artist granted special access because of her/his status as artist?<sup>6</sup> If we assume (as I do) that the artist is a member of the public, then partaking of public space in an extraordinary manner suggests an undefined,<sup>7</sup> yet extraordinary obligation on the part of the artist to the community. In this case the work would be in part the artist's responsive gesture to the community they are a part of rather than a passing on or bestowing of an artistic gift granted the artist by some unknown source as suggested by Hyde. If we assume that the artist is a member of the public community, and the project initiated is part of an ongoing exchange then the question of art world reputation gain as benefitting the artist comes into play. This is particularly relevant to an unannounced work, as one could argue that a participant entering an art venue has knowingly self selected and understands the context and potential consequence of participation. The same cannot be assumed of someone encountering an unannounced public work. The question of reputation gain bifurcates almost immediately into two more basic considerations. First is the question of documentation, how is the story of an event framed, and how is that distributed? Second the question itself implies that an artist gaining in reputation somehow takes something away from participants, and that art world reputation gain has inherent value for all involved. Perhaps a more relevant question would be, has the artist designed a project open to satisfying varying motivations of participants who choose to engage, and give them power to influence what happens both during and after their participation? This last question really gets to the crux of an aesthetics of generosity. Collaboration is not the same thing as cooperation, an ideal collaboration allows all involved to benefit, but not necessarily in the same way.

A recent panel at the SFMoMA discussed the topic of the artist's responsibility in participatory art.<sup>(SFMOMA)</sup> There were largely three questions expressed, first was the responsibility of artist as sensitive agent for social justice, second the potential interference with the artist's responsibility to control the aesthetics of a project because of public participation, and lastly the artist's contribution to his/her community via artistic skills and creative thinking. The last question was to me the most interesting as it assumes that the artist is operating within a community. I view unannounced participatory works as having the potential to integrate artistic thinking into "the real world" and foster at least temporary micro communities.

As illustrated by both Mauss and Hyde in their Books of the same name, a gift must be consumed, not hoarded, and keep moving in order to remain vital.<sup>(8)</sup> The vitality maintained by a gift's continuum has more to do with the extension of relationships than

the form of the gift. I posit that a physical object, or constructed situation is best understood as a vessel for meaning, or a catalyst for inter/action.<sup>(9)</sup> Artist Harrell Fletcher and his wife, Artist Wendy Red Star were given a rug ordered from a U.S. home wares company online. When it came a duplicate rug also showed up even though no one was charged for it. They decided rather than return it to the company it was ordered from they would instead try to find the factory it was made in and redistribute the wealth (the cost the rug was sold for in the US, \$1,500) After a full year of research, Fletcher and Red Star found the town where the rug was made and toured the factory where it was likely made with assistance from Ashish Mahajan, who works at the media arts center Sarai. They met Sandeep who has been making this type of rug for the past five years. They spent time with him where he lives and gave him the money.

Diverse Works in Houston along with another arts organization funded the trip and bought the duplicate rug, which will be shared and exhibited along with a video documentary of the project made by Fletcher and Red Star. Generosity is not a closed system, nor is it necessarily warm and cuddly. There are infinite varieties of giving ranging from tough love to enablement. Curators and theorists Kate Fowle and Lars Bang Larsen in their essay “Lunch Hour” explain that generosity in art can have a specific and politically subversive intent.<sup>10</sup>

If we look for aesthetics in engagement with experience rather than the formal or material aspects of an object or situation we come closer to a possible definition of an aesthetics of generosity. This way of thinking about aesthetics is certainly not new, Umberto Eco’s writing on Open Art, or Emanuel Kant’s comparison of beauty’s limitation with the boundlessness of the sublime, both serve as conceptual stepping stones.<sup>11</sup> An aesthetics of generosity might be said to focus on what occurs in the space opened up between an art catalyst and its actors.<sup>12</sup> Thus the assessment of the artist’s role in a project might be based on how effective she or he is in opening up a space to be acted in and how well received is the invitation to act. The quality of engagement and feelings of agency experienced by the public based on the design of a project are inherently unquantifiable. However we can see signs, Sarah Rara reports that on several occasions when Lucky Dragons has performed “Make a Baby” participants have approached her wanting to teach her how to work the instrument she invented.<sup>(Rara)</sup> The artist becoming invisible in this case is an indication that agency was successfully shared. If we assume that the quality of an individual’s experience in a situation/space opened by an artist (perhaps in collaboration with a patron) is an integral part of a project, how do we honor the individual’s contribution? And further how do we acknowledge what the participant brought with them to the experience?

Can we? Where does this leave the critic, the commissioner, the artist or any one else that has a vested interest in assessing a project? If one were to apply an aesthetics of generosity as I provisionally suggest it, there would be no place for judgment without engagement. The critic would be compelled to engage with the project in order to speak about it authoritatively. In fact the critic’s assessment would be authoritative only in direct proportion to that engagement. Critics would be critiquing their own experiences

as collaborators. Judgment would become another layer of collaboration, and potentially an extension of the project. In this scenario the critic also becomes “author or agent”, first primary, and then opening up a space for others who did not experience a project to create dialogues about it in other times and venues.<sup>14</sup> At the end of the day, it maybe useful to consider an aesthetics of generosity, by way of noting its absence. But to do so we must simultaneously embrace the paradox of introducing a criteria for the valuation of works whose value is located in their resistance to categorization.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup>Even as I am indebted to the thinking of both men on the topic at hand I want to make clear that I am not suggesting an aesthetics of generosity that considers itself in direct relation to their thought, rather I am partaking of the groundwork they have laid to contextualize (sometimes via agreement and sometimes as counterpoint) my own thinking on the subject of generosity in a public practice.

<sup>2</sup> Generosity is a gesture that defies measurement, it is visible only in its subjectively experienced consequence. In the case studies presented by Mauss he shows that often what is perceived as “freely given” is in fact culturally coerced, which also points to the complex nature of generosity. Mauss, Marcel. *The Gift*. Halls, W.D. 2nd. New York: W.W. Norton and Co., 1990.

<sup>3</sup>Summerhill School was founded in 1921 by A. S. Neill. It is currently located in Suffolk, England and is widely considered to be the original alternative ‘free’ school.

<sup>4</sup> See this review of the SFMoMA exhibition “Participatory Art: 1950 to Now”  
DeCarlo, Tessa. “Who’s in Charge.” *The Brooklyn Rail*. Dec. 26 Dec 2008.  
<<http://www.brooklynrail.org/2008/12/artseen/the-art-of-participation-1950-to-now>>.

<sup>5</sup> Lewis Hyde explains that it is commodification that quantifies a gift, thus changing its nature. Hyde, Lewis. *The Gift*. New York: Random House Inc., 1983.

<sup>6</sup> This question becomes encumbered with complexity when considered in the light of institutionally sanctioned vs. independently executed works, as it opens up questions of common use, permitting, and institutional privilege. These are all important topics, but not within the scope of this paper.

## Notes continued

<sup>7</sup> The word “undefined” triggers the inclusion of some thinking by A David Napier expressed in his book “Foreign Bodies” Napier suggests that the concept of “objectivity” embodied in definition is a largely a western cultural construct, one in which definition implies freedom, and un-definition falls outside of dialogue.

<sup>8</sup> Whereas both Mauss and Hyde acknowledge the transferring of the gift as fundamental, Mauss gives puts the power of the exchange in the status granted the individual via adherence to indigenous tradition, and Hyde largely locates power with in the regenerative cycle of creativity expressed, and more generally the gift's power to define community.

<sup>9</sup> See: Napier, A. David. *\_Foreign Bodies: Performance, Art, and Symbolic Anthropology\_*. London: University of California Press, Ltd., 1992. chapter four "Environment for An Animated Memory"

<sup>10</sup> See LUNCH HOUR for an interesting take on gift art as a subversion of the capitalist ethos. Fowles, Kate and Lars Bang Larson. *LUNCH HOUR. : Art, Community, Administered Space, and Unproductive Activity \_what we want is free\_*. Purves, Ted. New York: State University of New York Press, Albany, 2005. 17-26.

<sup>11</sup> Both Eco and Kant point to the value of what might be best described as the dynamic 'text' catalyzed by the static "work." Eco, Umberto. *The Poetics of the Open Work. \_Participation\_*. Bishop, Clair. *Documents of Contemporary Art*. Cambridge MA: White Chapel and MIT Press, 2006. 25-39.

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Notes continued

<sup>12</sup> Mary Jane Jacob gives a wonderful literal illustration of this idea in her essay "Cultural Gifting."



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## Image list

- 1 Lucky Dragons "Make a Baby" event documentation
- 2 High Desert Test Sites, web identity
- 3 "White Russians" event documentation
- 4 Diverse Works, web identity
- 5 "The Sound We Make Together" event documentation
- 5 "White Russians" event documentation
- 6 "White Russians" event documentation
- 7 Fletcher and Red Stars Rug
- 8 Sandeep where he lives

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