

29 November – 16 December 2006  
Enjoy Public Art Gallery,  
Wellington

# Every now & then

Louise Menzies *Oriental Bay's Carter Fountain, Loved and Exposed* • Ella Bella Moonshine Reed *untitled (twelve pieces, Enjoy, 147 Cuba St, Wellington)* • The Association of Collaboration

In 1973, three beehives were placed in a gallery space, connected to the outside world with a tube. Aside from investigating our social behavioural patterns through those of bees, David Mealing was commenting on the need for art to re-engage with communities and incorporate everyday social structures to retain relevancy.<sup>1</sup> These days, art frequently invites us to participate. As audiences, our roles are pivotal. However, the parameters for our involvement can be difficult to navigate, leading to perplexing or even frustrating situations. *Every Now, and Then* attempts to articulate some threads of conversation between contemporary relational practices.<sup>2</sup> Providing a critical platform for three local artists, the project discusses the different ways audiences, participants and collaborators engage within art practices.

Contemporary art has a rich history of critiquing art objects, institutions and the capitalist system these are aligned with. Considering the return to a more liberal socio-political milieu, the rise of globalisation, and the re-emergence of a tempered desire for social change, it is not surprising that 1970s post-object art remains a current source of interest for contemporary artists.<sup>3</sup>

This cluster of New Zealand-based seventies practitioners incorporated divergent aims and approaches but collectively challenged the notion of what art could be, the dominance of the modernist agenda in New Zealand, and spearheaded new roles for the artist and spectator. It is through the lens of David Mealing's particular ideology that *Every Now, and Then* seeks to examine traces of similarity and contrast between these practices.

Mealing was a radical advocate for social and cultural change. Often producing publications to accompany his performance and installation works, he elaborated on the concerns activated in his practice including unemployment, democracy, social injustice and the relevancy of art within a community. From 1969 to 1984, Mealing generated art projects that had an emphasis on re-engaging with society, often collaborating and incorporating existing forms of human interaction. However, after 1984 Mealing became convinced that working within institutional frameworks limited art's ability to affect social change, claiming art galleries were merely places of bourgeois culture. Departing from the art scene, he continued to work actively with local communities, presenting their stories through his

position as Curator of the Petone Settlers Museum.

The projects featured in *Every Now, and Then* draw many parallels to Mealing's early works. Louise Menzies, Ella Bella Moonshine Reed and The Association of Collaboration are interested in our social fabric and interactions. More specifically, they employ art as information to be disseminated, process is weighted more importantly than product, the institutional site is examined and various collaborative relationships are incorporated into the work. These traits are part of the legacy of the seventies, embedded now within contemporary practice, adapted and utilised for new means.

Reappropriating past strategies for today, it is when we try to align these practices with each other that the tonal shifts are made apparent. As a curatorial project, *Every Now, and Then* posits a certain self-reflexive criticality of contemporary projects as distinct from their more earnest historical precedents. Living in an age of scepticism, we are perhaps more aware of the failure inherent in any attempt at social improvement. The artists in *Every Now, and Then* certainly work with a social conscience but are more intent on investigating the constructs that house relational projects, delving into the social structures that

permeate the everyday. In reconstituting the social within the institutional framework they negotiate a place for themselves and engaging with a community is less an attempt to affect change than to interrogate our patterns of interaction.

Everyday, our social encounters reveal the dissonance underpinning society. However, as Claire Bishop has controversially argued, participatory projects often fail to reflect the complexity of relationships, and can ignore the elements of dissension and aggression that structure our world.<sup>4</sup> This can be seen as an overly generalised reading of relational projects but Bishop's argument does hint at the complexities surrounding attempts to structure artist/audience relationships. Rather than designing happy, harmonious projects, Menzies, Reed, and The Association of Collaboration develop and maintain social tension within their work, addressing the political aspects of communication that are often overlooked.

The increased popularity of process-based, participatory models in New Zealand echoes global trends. The term Relational Aesthetics<sup>5</sup> coined by French curator Nicolas Bourriaud to account for styles and intentions that some 1990s art practices

shared, has become a ubiquitous catchphrase. Applied generically, it fails to account for the different aims, approaches and discourse within socially engaged practices, and simplifies the criteria we attempt to evaluate works by. With the prevalence of projects that ask us to participate, the terms of engagement for these social encounters should be as varied as other types of relationships in our lives. Unless we are encouraged to consider relational projects individually, we are likely to follow prescribed patterns and miss their intent or experience altogether. Incorporating a range of participatory models, this exhibition offers the chance to evaluate and tease out the differences between these works as examples of relational practices.

Foregrounding these discussions is the difference between interaction and participation. The former denotes structures that invite involvement, where an experience is offered and the work enriched by audience engagement.<sup>6</sup> Participation however, can include a more dialogical approach where projects are developed in solidarity with participants or the feedback and inclusion of others directly effects how the work exists.<sup>7</sup> Often incorporating dialogue and exchange, artist, audience, institution and industry are all collaborators and the authorship of artworks can become murky territory. Adopting a more dialogical way of working

also invites the possibility for failure and dissension. Based on processes of negotiation, the artist's control is relinquished, allowing spontaneity, open-ended-ness and unpredictable outcomes.

Attempting to categorise how audiences are engaged or evaluate participatory practices involves contentious and unspecified criteria. The aesthetics of a situation are still highly considered, but the structure and consequences of audience engagement are also examined. In light of relational projects that cater to an entertainment industry or offer a convivial experience, it has been suggested that a measure for evaluation be the ability for a work to 'unsettle'.<sup>8</sup> After all, relational projects that make us uncomfortable or question our socio-political position are perhaps more reflective of and relevant to our lives.

Current research and discourse has outlined the growth of 'New Institutionalism' whereby attempts to remain responsive to artists as well as increased corporatisation have led institutions to embrace participatory, process-based practices and emulate or assimilate these into their systems.<sup>9</sup> Claire Doherty questions whether institutions can facilitate diverse participatory projects or if new prescriptive codes of behaviour are being generated, creating potentially alienating audience experiences. Unless participants are encouraged to engage uniquely with relational

works, their encounter will remain passive and only serve to further consolidate the perception of socially engaged practices as novelty.

Unlike Mealing who desired art and life to merge, the institutional framework remains critical for contemporary artists. Their practices though socially engaged are not social work. Framing them within a wider critical context allows projects to be considered, and creates the potential for works to provide social commentary.

The projects that feature in *Every Now, and Then* all display a strong social conscience, are based on acts of integrity and generosity, but invite us to form relationships that can only be interdependent. Through developing structures that allow for failure, discord, and complex relationships, and expecting varied forms of audience participation, they also encourage a reflection on the problems intrinsic to interactive models. *Every Now, and Then* knowingly offers a somewhat ambiguous gift. It is the prelude of a conversation that awaits your response.

Melanie Oliver, 2006

1. David Mealing, *Sting/Stung*, Te Tuhi, Pakuranga, 1973.

2. I use the term 'relational' to denote practices that incorporate inter-human relations and their social context. See Bourriard, Nicolas, *Relational Aesthetics*, France: Les presses du reel, 2002.

3. Events such as the 'Action Replay: Post-Object Art' exhibition that toured Artspace, Govett-Brewster Art Gallery and Auckland Art Gallery Toi O Tamaki in 1998/1999, the Robert McDougall Art Gallery exhibition 'Intervention' and accompanying symposium in 2000, chart the significance of post-object practices in recent times.

4. Bishop, Claire, 'Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics', *October*, no.110, Fall 2004, pp. 51-79.

5. Bourriard, Nicolas, *Relational Aesthetics*, France: Les presses du reel, 2002..

6. For example, directed performances, works that are activated by sensors or have a clearly delineated form for engagement.

7. Kester, Grant, *Conversation Pieces: Community and Communication in Modern Art*, California: University of California, 2004.

8. Kwon, Miwon, 'Public Art and Urban Identities', in *Public Art Strategies: Public Art and Public Space, 1998 American Photography Institute National Graduate Seminar Proceedings*, ed. Cheryl Younger, New York: New York University/ Tisch School of the Arts, 1998, p. 168

9. Doherty, Claire, 'New Institutionalism and the Exhibition as Situation', in *Protections. This is not an Exhibition*, Cologne: Buchhanlung Walther Konig, 2006.