Should I Stay or Should I Go Now?

## Temporal Economies in Socially Engaged Arts Practice

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Duration is problematic because it is presented as a solution for art's social contradictions, whereas the only viable political solution must be to problematise time for art. If we are going to think politically about art, site, publics and time, we need to put the ideology of duration behind us. We have to stop keeping tabs on our own use of time. Let's think instead about delay, interruption, stages, flows of instantaneous performances of lingering documents, of temporary objects and permanent mementos, of repetition, echo and seriality and break with this binary opposition altogether. (Dave Beech)[1]

Should I stay or should I go now?
Should I stay or should I go now?
If I go there will be trouble
And if I stay it will be double… (The Clash)[2]

Introduction

Currently in its third year, Tania Bruguera's five-year 'Immigrant Movement International' project is conceived as an artist-led sociopolitical movement focusing on the political representation and conditions facing immigrants. The 1980s 'Docklands Community Poster Campaign' was a decade long collaboration between London-based artists Loraine Lesson and Pete Dunn with activist groups and residents' organizations mobilized against the gentrification of the London Docklands. At this year's Creative Time Summit, artist Laurie Jo Reynolds accepted the Leonore Annenberg Prize for Art and Social Change on behalf of and with some of her fellow 'Tamms Year Ten' campaigners. Begun in 2008 and characterized by Reynolds as 'Legislative Art', the campaign has this year achieved its primary mission: to close Tamms Maximum Security Prison in Illinois. Spanning from 2005 to 2009, Jeanne van Heeswijk's 'Blue House' was a multi-layered critical exploration of public space and planning legislation in the IJburg district of Amsterdam. Closer to home the 'X-PO' project, initiated by Clare-based artist Deirdre O'Mahony in 2007, serves as a critical response to the erosion of public space represented by the closure of the local post office in Killanaboy. Six years later, 'X-PO' continues to operate as a resource for interest groups under the management of local community members. In 2014 artist Fiona Whelan will mark her ten-year collaboration with the Rialto Youth Project in Dublin 8 with a publication reflecting on that collective body of work, which includes projects such as 'Policing Dialogues' and the current 'Natural History of Hope'.

These are but some of the many examples of ways in which artists are engaging in longer-term collaborations that explore notions of site, place, contested public space and broader sociopolitical issues, such as global migration and the eroding of individual identity by state apparatuses such as justice and policing. These long-term or durational practices operate at the interface between artistic and sociopolitical concerns. The very range and scope of such temporally extended practices would indicate that their use of time is not an aberrant or exceptional feature. Rather, in trying to achieve certain artistic or social or more overtly political outcomes, time becomes a necessary and valuable resource. But that is not to say that the investment of time is, of itself, any sufficient ethical gesture. Dave Beech's identification of a certain ideology of duration with its binary opposition between *short* and *long* is very fitting here. His prompting towards breaks and flows, delays and interruptions echoes the contingent nature of the complex organizational co-operations generated within the alliances of durational practice.
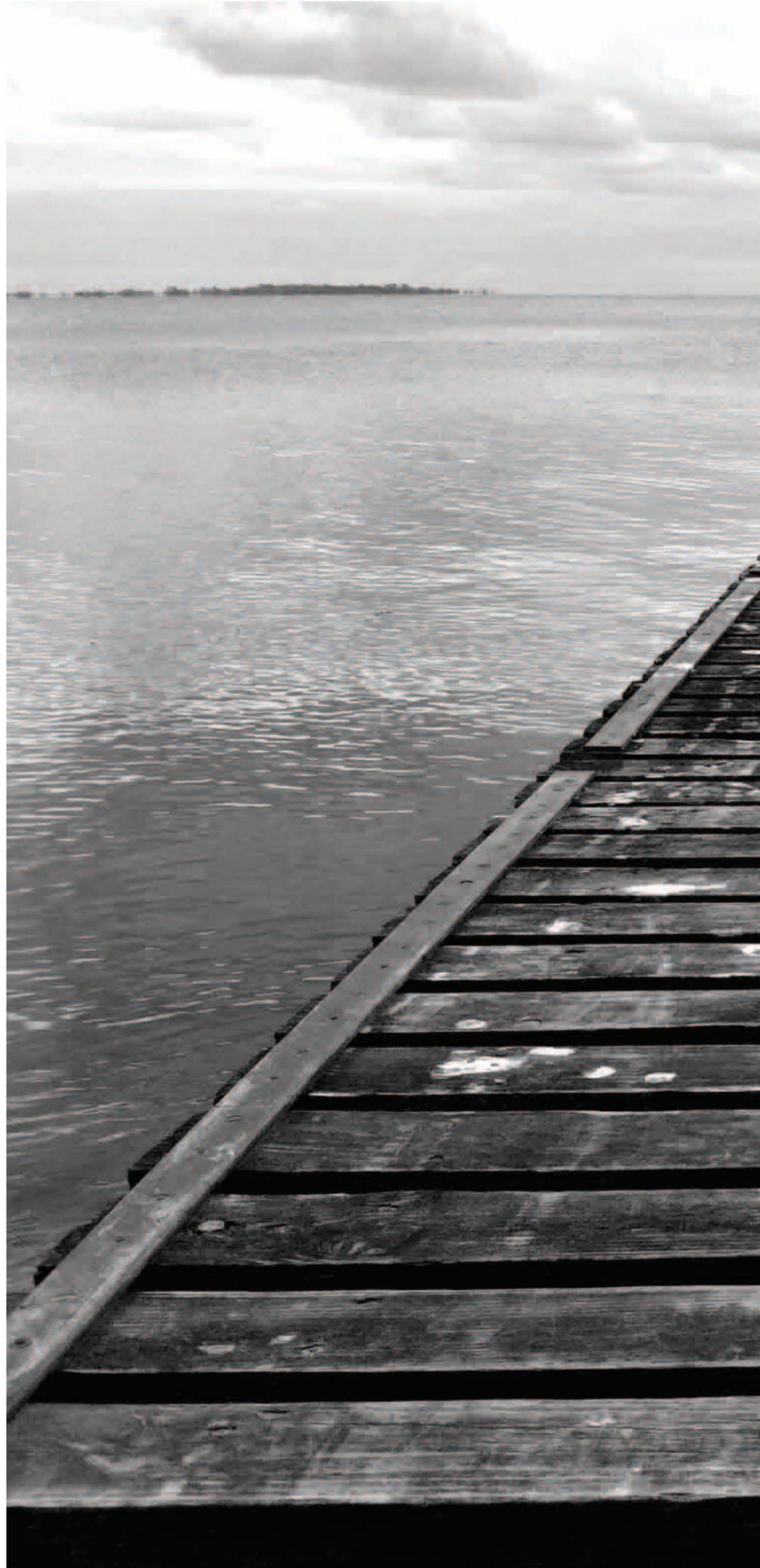
Stage: From Performing the Social, Series 2, 2013.
Photo: Ailbhe Murphy

Insider/Outsider Positions

Cross-sectoral alliances and artistic collaborations require time. Each of the projects mentioned above requires patience and tenacity in the face of these necessarily unstable platforms, made up of complex networks of conversations, negotiations, permissions, agreements, tensions and fractures**.**

> *I have learned how difficult it can be to create in collaboration with a community and to depend on that community's continued involvement for sustainability. It also involved all of us learning together how to take collective responsibility in order to make the information gathered operate significantly in the social and political context. These processes are always long and sometimes painful, as we have to learn about each other's ideas and different viewpoints.*[3]

Durational practices can indeed be hard and in that sense time is a necessary feature of the work more than it is an indulgence. But, as Dave Beech warns, the affirmation of duration is always an assault on that which it negates. We see this echoed in a certain virtuous characterization of situated practice over the seemingly fleeting and self-serving escapades of the nomadic internationalized figure of the artist. In addition, critical debates over longer-term practices identify the challenge of retaining artistic autonomy in the face of what many would see as the inevitable instrumentalization of practice over time: yet another binary opposition. But for some artists working within these highly complex institutional and organizational matrices, that binary opposition between artistic autonomy and instrumentalization has little critical traction. For Jeanne van Heeswijk, the position of the autonomous artist as outsider is no longer possible but neither is it particularly of interest. Speaking at the SKOR 2011 symposium entitled **'**Social Housing – Housing the Social', van Heeswijk questions her position as an artist in the context of shifting socio-cultural demographics as a result of global urbanization. She considers how she can be an "…instrument that makes the right to produce our daily environment a possibility." Within the complexity of the city where "…many neighbourhoods have become sites of contestation, into which different conditions of power are inscribed" she embraces being "…an instrument that works on self-organisation, collective ownership and new forms of sociabilit"[4]. In this she shares similar territory with Tania Bruguera who is re-inserting the notion of 'Useful Art' into the debates about contemporary art and socially engaged and/or politically motivated arts practice in particular. For Bruguera:

> *Useful art is a way of working with aesthetic experiences that focus on the implementation of art in society where art's function is no longer to be a space for 'signaling' problems, but the place from which to create the proposal and implementation of possible solutions.*[5]

The direct relation between proposal, action and solutions can be seen in the more direct action models of engaged arts practice. The focus around a single issue, such as in the Tamms Year Ten campaign, organizes collaborative relations in particular ways. No less powerfully than others, as we could see from their collective presentation at this year's Creative Time Summit, but differently to the emergent fragilities of an evolving arts collaboration. In the former, where the desired solution or result is explicit from the outset, time is measured in relation to how effective a series of direct actions can be. The less time it takes to achieve the goal the more effective the work has been. Whereas in the speculative relational network of an emerging arts collaboration, time is the primary resource, the more of it you have the better. Interestingly, out the other side of the collaboration, the use of time, like money, comes under review. The degree to which one's collaborators can be seen to have participated, evident in the extent of collective ownership of the project, becomes a measure of how the time is judged to have been well used or squandered. Time becomes part of the measurement device. It is to that territory of the creatively speculative relational network that I now wish to turn my attention.

Intentionality

> *In recent years durational work has become exemplary of a certain strain of discourse, which calls for an ethical foundation for the relationships developed between an artist and a community.*[6]

My own experience of long-term collaborations has taught me that the intentionality of the initial invitations, which are exchanged between artists, arts organizations, commissioning bodies and 'communities of place' at the outset of any long-term engagement is very important. The premise of such invitations, emerging as they do from a range of institutional and/or individual sources, are highly influential factors in determining the shape and future mediation of the collaborative work. In his analysis of community-based art practices Grant Kester makes some relevant observations about those points of entry for an artist. He points to a "denuded post structuralism,"[7] which considers that the artist's decision to cross over boundaries of class and cultural difference is in itself sufficiently liberating. In such a formulation the position of the artist tends to go unexamined. This view according to Kester ignores the fact that the direction of this cultural traffic is generally one-way: it tends to be the artist who has the financial and cultural resources to make those socio-cultural transgressions in the first place. However, Kester also cautions against what he calls the "…fetishisation of authenticity." In relation to the validity of the 'local' artist Kester asks: ".... on what basis is community membership ascribed when discursive violence occurs whenever one individual speaks for another, no matter how firmly he or she is anchored in a given collective"[8]. Miwon Kwon on the other hand draws attention to the essentializing tendencies within community-based art:

> *…the isolation of a single point of commonality to define a community – whether a genetic trait, a set of social concerns or a geographical territory – followed by an engineering of a 'partnership' with an artist who is presumed to share this point of commonality.*[9]

For Kwon it is "…the easy correspondence between their identity and particular issues that actually makes them *more* not less susceptible to appropriation by arts institutions or artists".

Post-colonial theorist Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's framing of the term "master words"[10] offers a useful reading of the discursive tensions which exist between the solidity of what Kester terms the politically coherent community and Kwon's insistence on the possibility of the more unstable, transient community generated by an artist's project. In recognition of how the lives of disempowered groups have been damaged by dominant systems of knowledge and representation, Spivak points to a problem which lies in the attempt to name and define particular histories**,** experiences and struggles of minority groups using "…abstract master words like the worker, the woman or the colonized". In his study of Spivak, Stephen Morton points to how she has observed that in political discourse the voice of the worker or the woman *…is often represented by a political proxy or an elected representative, who speaks on behalf of these constituencies. Such political discourses tend to represent these disempowered groups as if they were speaking collectively as a unified political subject.*[11]

But for Spivak, it is the dominant discourse which represents these groups that creates the effect of a coherent political identity rather than a transparent picture of the "…true worker, or the true woman". While this last point may seem to find a certain resonance with Kwon's critique of the essentializing nature of community arts practice, crucially Spivak points to the complicity of western intellectuals in silencing the voices of oppressed groups by speaking for them.

Voice and Feminist Ethnography

In considering the complexity of the relational networks in the context of durational practice, I have found a certain resonance within a feminist critique of ethnography. I wish to draw on aspects of those epistemic debates and preoccupations as a frame for considering some of the critical tensions within longer-term socially engaged arts practice.

The feminist critique of qualitative research brings into question the empathic insight of the researcher as an antidote to the objectivity and distance sought in the scientistic models of research. Qualitative inquiry theorist Patti Lather[12] raises deeper questions about ethnography's claims to the 'real' through its search for authenticity and the privileging of voice. She cautions against the romance of the speaking subject, listing a catalogue of empathetic ploys which privilege the authority of the voice such as: "…confessional tales, authorial self-revelation, multivoicedness and personal narrative which are all forms of representation which are meant to move ethnography away from scientism and the appropriation of others". Instead, she sets out to *…move away from the wish for heroism and rescue through some more adequate methodology and towards a learning that can tolerate its own failure of knowledge and the detour of not understanding.*[13]

There is a disconcerting challenge here for a certain heroic tendency within qualitative research that would seek to 'rescue voice'. Perhaps it is disconcerting because I recognize something of my own artistic motivations for the inclusion of community voices via longer-term collaborative processes. In light of a post-structuralist critique, the (heroic) work of inclusion of multiple voices *per se* is neither a sufficient rationale for the durational aspects of the work, nor is it a sufficient response for rescuing the field of collaborative arts from its own amnesiac tendencies. By that I mean the tendency to accentuate the positive in accounts of collaborative work. In their review of community-based arts, UK-based Newman, Curtis and Stephens found that: "...encounters with the creative arts are frequently described in terms closer to epiphany than to a simple learning experience"[14]. We need to move away from this discursive self-limitation within the field of collaborative practice in order to accommodate those points of tension and difference. One central question here is what are we trying to achieve with these durational collaborations? Are our long-term investments with people, place, publics and community about trying to ameliorate those points of tension and difference? Or do we seek a politics of difference such as that advocated by Iris Marion Young when she suggested that:

>…instead of community as the normative ideal of political emancipation that radicals should develop a politics of difference. A model of the unoppressive city offers an understanding of social relations without domination in which persons live together in relations of mediation among strangers with whom they are not in community.[15]

Should I Stay or Should I Go?

Is it not the case that in these various critiques and orientations that time, and duration in particular, is often invoked as the fundamental ethical gesture? That is to say that, within the temporal ecology of social practice, the durational investment has come to signify the means of identification and solidarity. As a reply to that eternal dilemma posed by The Clash, it suggests that to stay is to place practice on the right side of the ethics of engagement.

The ethics of engagement is also a central preoccupation of the research world. As I touched on earlier, within ethnography the move by feminist researchers towards identification and solidarity with their subjects and/or informants has been the subject of much critical debate. Feminist and post-colonial theorist Sara Ahmed has examined the relationship between strangers, embodiment and community[16]. She has argued that coming to know the other ethnographically, that is over time, is no guarantee against the epistemological acquisition of the subject**.** She writes that if anything, ethnography is an accumulative discourse. It is about getting closer to the subject in order to gain more knowledge. Ahmed cites Michael Agar's model of the ethnographer as "the professional stranger". The figure of the ethnographer as professional stranger maintains a distance, moving among those she/he is studying in order to document, write, explore and describe their territory. In her analysis, the professional stranger serves as a counterbalance to the impulse to "go native", dissolving difference through radical identification. This pull between going native or maintaining the persona of the professional stranger has some resonance with the subtle balance of presence and absence required for the artist in order to sustain agency in community situations in which *they* are the other**.** While the acquisitive mission of the ethnographer as professional stranger may sit uncomfortably with the embodied repertoire of engaged practice, it is a useful reference to hold. In particular, it comes into play when an artist is trying to hold a position relative to those most porous demarcation lines which exist between artistic processes and the broader social project in community-based practice.

There is also something familiar for me in Ahmed's descriptions of ethnographic efforts to stay and practise on the right side of the ethics of engagement. They bring together some resonant themes: efforts to define informants as co-authors, to move from traditional ethnographic objectivity to "...an informed intersubjectivity predicated on listening and collaboration"[17]. The postmodern ethnographic text is dialogical (Ahmed). The ethnographer is praised for listening well, for giving up his or her authority in the bestowing of co-authorship. However, despite claims for research informants becoming friends, and despite bestowing co-authorship: '…the ethnographic document still *returns home*'. Ethnographic writing has an institutional home to which it must return:

>The task of the ethnographer is hence not only to write about the strange, but to write about strange cultures for other ethnographers (it is their ear which must be the text's proper destination). The writing has an institutional home, so to speak and hence the writing of strangerness must return home.[18]

And so it is, when we consider our long-term investments as artists, we must remain vigilant to what it is we may be seeking to extract through our durational engagements. And whether or not, despite our collaborations over time, our situated practice, our declarations of co-authorship, at the end of the day the real destination for our work – its legitimizing home – is always elsewhere. It is here at the cusp of representation that socially engaged art practice must carve its own trace of the social. Our expanded repertoire of representative strategies are liberated from the precise circuits of distribution maintained within the closed arena of the academy. However, it requires us to be vigilant that these representational strategies do not themselves become appropriated within the new enthusiasms for inter-disciplinary alliances as the crisis of legitimation continues to erode and neutralize the notion of the academy as resistant. It is here, within these epistemological fissures, that we must forge alliances with the engaged, embodied seams of practice and activism connected as they are to a whole series of struggles to which we must find our own relations of solidarity.

(Endnotes)

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2   The Clash, *Should I Stay or Should I Go?* , Combat Rock, 1982.

3   Jeanne van Heeswijk, 'The Artist Will Have to Decide Whom to Serve' in: Erdemci, F., and Philips, A., (Eds.), *Actors, Agents and Attendants, Social Housing – Housing the Social: Art, Property and Spatial Justice*, Amsterdam: SKOR Foundation for Art and Public Domain and Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2011, p. 81. Available as a pdf from: [http://www.jeanneworks.net/files/esy/i_0021/SKOR_Social_Housing_Housing_the_Social_2012_EN.pdf]

4   Ibid. p. 78.

5   Tania Bruguera, 'Introduction on Useful Art' in *A conversation on Useful Art, Immigrant Movement International*, April 23, 2011. New York, Corona, Queens, United States, 2011. Available as a pdf from: [http://www.taniabruguera.com/cms/528-0-Introduction+on+Useful+Art.htm]

6   Dave Beech, Ibid. p.314.

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

8   Ibid. p.130.

9   Miwon Kwon, *One Place After Another: Site Specific Art and Locational Identity*, Cambridge Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2002.

10   Stephen Morton, *Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Routledge Critical Thinkers: Essential guides for literary studies*, London: Routledge, 2003. Available as a pdf from: [http://niazi.info/web_documents/gayatri_chakravorty_spivak__routledge_critical_thinkers__-_stephen_morton.pdf.]

11   Ibid. p.35.

12   Patti Lather, 'Against Empathy, Voice and Authenticity', in Jackson, Y. A., and Mazzei, A. L., (Eds.), *Voice in Qualitative Inquiry: Challenging conventional, interpretive, and critical conceptions in qualitative research*, London: Routledge, 2009, pp. 17-26.

13   Ibid. p.18.

14   Newman, T. Curtis, K. and Stephens, J, 'Do Community Arts-Based Projects Result in Social Gain?', Community Development Journal, 38 (4), 2003, pp. 310-322.

15   Iris Marion Young, 'The Ideal of Community and the Politics of Difference', in Social Theory and Practice, Vol.12, No.1 (Spring), 1986.

16   Sara Ahmed, *Strange Encounters, Embodied Others in Post-Coloniality*, London: Routledge, 2000.

17   Sally McBeth, "Myths of Objectivity and the Collaborative Process in Life History Research", in Caroline Brettell (Ed), *When They Read What We Write*: The Politics of Ethnography, Wetport, Connecticut, London, Bergin & Garvey, 1993, p.162.

18   Ahmed, Ibid. p.59.