
ONE WAY STREET Panel Discussion at University of Nevada, Reno

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University of Nevada, Reno

Department of Fine Arts

2nd March 2007

ONE WAY STEET Panel Discussion

To accompany the exhibition ONE WAY STREET, curated by Amanda Beech, Jaspar Joseph-Lester, and Matthew Poole a panel discussion was held to discuss the video works in the show, the architectural structures that were built to house the video works and the ongoing research of the Curating Video group.

Art works were exhibited by: Amanda Beech, Pierre Bismuth, Jaspar Joseph-Lester, and Roman Vasseur.

Amanda, Jaspar, and Matthew gave short papers and a mix of artists, art students and faculty staff participated in the discussion.

{tab= Introduction by Matthew Poole}

My name is Matthew Poole, and I am Course Director of the MA in Gallery Studies & Critical Curating at The University of Essex's Department of Art History & Theory.

I, along with Dr. Amanda Beech and Dr. Jaspar Joseph Lester, who are here beside me, am one of the co-curators of the current exhibition at The Sheppard Gallery, ONE WAY STREET. Amanda is Course Director of MA Critical Writing and Curatorial Practice at Chelsea College of Art, London, and Jaspar is Leader of MA Contemporary Art Curating, Sheffield Hallam University.

We're very pleased to have been invited to present this exhibition here at UNR, and we have a long list of 'thank you's, as we've been helped by so many of you, to get the exhibition together here in Reno.

So this is going to be a bit like the Oscars, but I promise not to cry.

Joseph DeLappe, Chair, Fine Arts Faculty, UNR

Marji Vechhio, Director, Sheppard Gallery, Reno

Kathy Woods, Gallery Assistant, Sheppard Gallery, Reno

The Technicians & Volunteers:

Brian, Rob, Casey, Kevin, ...

I'd also like to thank the sponsors of the exhibition for their generous support. These include from the UK, the British Council, University of Essex, and Sheffield Hallam University. There are of course, a number of key sponsors of the gallery programme to whom we are also very grateful.

We're each going to speak for about 10-15 mins, and we'll tell you a little about our respective backgrounds, our individual research and also how it relates to this exhibition project, as well as introducing some of the key themes that have informed and inspired our decision-making in the orchestration of this exhibition.

And then there will be time at the end for you to ask us any questions.

Behind me, scrolling through on the screen are some images of sculptures, designs, architectural installations and buildings, as well as some art works that have acted as points of reference for us in thinking about how we wanted the exhibition to operate.

Before I hand over to Amanda and Jaspar, who will talk in more detail about some of the questions and issues that the theme of this exhibition proposes and explores, I wanted to just very briefly introduce some of these ideas, and to explain a little bit about the other elements of the larger research project we have been working on together for the past 3 years, which has included a previous exhibition, EPISODE, which toured to London, Leeds and Miami in 2006, and which has led us to this point with ONE WAY STREET.

ONE WAY STREET will also tour to KX Gallery in Hamburg, Germany in October later this year.

We will be publishing a book that accompanies the project, which will contain critical essays on the subject of lens-based media, following the close of the tour of the exhibition.

This project has brought our individual research interests together, which have coalesced and developed through the three years that the project has been running for.

I'll let Amanda and Jaspar tell you about their research interests shortly, however, my own research interests as a curator and lecturer include investigating the relationship between ethics, politics and aesthetics, and specifically questions relating to authorship and authenticity in the rhetoric and performativity of exhibitions. That is to look at ethical questions in discussions regarding the pleasure and persuasive force that exhibition displays are able to deliver.

These questions have, for me, particular focus on contemporary art production, where the exhibition paradigm is based on creating powerful experiences rather than operating as a hermeneutic mechanism, as opposed to the interpretative model of exhibition organisation in museums for instance.

So to put it simply, in my work as a curator, I am interested in looking at what exhibitions 'do', rather than what they 'mean'. Or rather substituting what exhibition 'mean' for what they 'do'.

The core of the research project, and one of the central themes of this exhibition, and the EPISODE exhibition, has been to explore the significance of experiences of force and pleasure in lens-based images and architectural space.

We began with wanting to interrogate the nature of narrative as immanent to lens-based media, and to explore how architecture also delivers a similar experience of narrative. This narrative is one of piecing together disparate fragments of experience, which is analogous to the editing process of video and film-making.

Thus, as we describe in the press release, through the highly 'constructed' nature of both film/video and architectural space and the resultant experiential affect of both when fused, as they are here in ONE WAY STREET, we are interested in exploring a collapse of our categorising of the images as fact or fiction.

Rather than present a dialectical model that would aim to help define a distinction between these two qualities we have chosen to explore how these kinds of images and the highly fragmented architecture immerses us in what Walter Benjamin might term a state of ambivalence. That is ambi-valence [to be equally torn in two positive directions vigorously. In this case, in the Benjaminian sense, between distraction and criticality]. That is not to imply, by the use of the term 'ambivalence', any disinterest or uncertainty, but instead to explore our experiences of fact and fiction as coterminous, or coextensive – that is that they share the same scope, the same borders., and to investigate our investment in this. Thus you will see in the video works presented a range of filmic languages, ranging from the vernaculars of documentary realism to the dizzying extremes of MTV style fast-cut editing put to electronic music.

We have been interested in regarding these works as non-representational in the context of this exhibition. They deliver to us the force and pleasure of immersion as a state of experience, rather than proposing any content as symbolic or indexical sign.

It is in this way that we as the audience share the state of experience with the art works – the art works are experienced as action through sense perception. Therefore, you are enveloped [literally] by the exhibition. Your movements around the gallery have been carefully considered, and as such the choreography of your presence within the exhibition is included in the exhibition's construction.

Thus, as you'll see again in the press release, we describe how the violence of these experience problematises, yet at the same time invigorates, questions of how to create or generate meaning – a fundamental question for constructive critiques of liberal democracy.

So, now Jaspar will give his presentation, followed by Amanda, and then we'll take any questions at the end.

{tab=Amanda Beech presentation}

In terms of my art practice, I have always worked in a range of media from video, painting to sculpture and performance. Alongside this I have continued to write and publish essays and curate exhibitions. This has included publishing with the artists group Inventory, organising and speaking at a conference called on ART and Liberty at Tate Britain in October this year and speaking at various symposia and fora such as at the upcoming Venice Biennale.

Throughout this time I've been interested in examining the experience of justice and freedom in contemporary liberal democracy and the languages that achieve and describe it. What is key to this study is our understanding of subjective agency in the context of pluralism, neo-liberalism and relativism. In other words after the evacuation of a singular notion of law, justice or freedom in the form of God or one truth, we, as subjects, are faced with the multiplicity of choice, within a vast field of difference. This is the space where things that are considered to be stable and fixed such as concepts of law and also our ideals are now understood to be constructed unfixed and fluid. However what I'm most interested in is that despite this field of groundlessness and instability, we nevertheless form law, police our action, and sustain ideals that claim truth, make meaning and operate as something that we call ethics.

So for example, a key element of my research has been to reflect upon and reproduce the languages that we associate with freedom, autonomy and self assertion. Typically these are heroic languages where the subject takes on the power of law and the police. So, in my practice I have spent a lot of time working with the figure of the hero law maker law enforcer, such as Steven Segal and Arnold Swarchenegger, or crime shows such as CSI. These types of heroes are generic, normative and clichéd. They operate as universal standards of freedom, they give us a type, a representation of action as freedom. Commonly we can say that these universal languages are the opposite and are even detrimental to understanding our subjectivity, as rather than present a specific notion of what it is to be human, they give us a normative standard of humanity based on what appears to be a very limited description. However what I have thought through in my work is how these universalising languages actually produce subjectivity.

It is here where I focus my research on an examination of our contingency with these imaged ideals; how we produce and receive them when crucially, they are often hinged upon images of force. What is most significant here is that the subject embodies and lives out the law; and this is not only violent but it is also pleasurable. Here my work interrogates the rhetoric of force and its coextension: the force of rhetoric.

Turning to the exhibition One Way Street...

The term One way street implies directionality, unilateral power, velocity, inevitability and force. This is the force of a to b: the pushing through time and space, the mobility of subjects but also the force of the law that they operate within.

We can draw these conclusions whether we refer to benjmain's text One way Street or the term itself. If we look at the text in the briefest sense, we see a floating narrative that intermingles poetic writing with theoretical positioning, fictional narrative space with everyday meetings on benches, and architectural space becomes an unfixed dreamlike experience – the space of thought and imagination. What we can consider to be fact and fiction are now indistinct and the subject is thrown into this miasmatic experience of making meaning. So in many ways the text One Way Street introduces this very contradiction of freedom that I mentioned earlier: the notion of a mobile forceful subject, but also this field of open experience that one has to constitute oneself within.

And it is here where the subject navigates and shapes this difficult terrain of fiction to establish itself as the author of experience. Specifically, for me, this point of constructing meaning which is written as lived force became an interesting connection point between my existing research and this collaboration.

A further point to add to this is the question of democracy that is raised in the exhibition. When we consider the basic principles of democracy such as free speech, individual rights, tolerance, respect, egalitarianism and fairness, or the idea that we can all speak and be heard, we can understand that the exercising of free speech, the acting out of our own freedom is often in direct contraction to the principle of tolerance and mutual respect also championed by democracy. This of course goes back to my hero of democracy, the action hero who predicates freedom upon an aesthetics of violence.

Taking this theory of the paradox of democracy to the exhibition, we can also start to question the concept of what is the open, democratic, dialogical or egalitarian artwork. This notion of the artwork as open and democratic seems to be an established ideal in itself in western liberal democracy and remains to operate as the key factor in many contemporary theories of a liberal arts practice, say for example in Nicholas Bourriaud's Relational Aesthetics.

NB conviviality, modernist notion of art and life art becoming social praxis, space of discussion, free exchange, the setting of social relations, this is also echoed in Bordieu and haackes book free exchange.

It is this longstanding ideal (of arts openness) that I think that the show has an interest in questioning. The exhibition does this by choosing artworks that exercise some authority that seem in many ways to contest this ideal. In such case the works in the exhibition and the architecture that becomes part of their structure could be seen to operate in a non-dialogical sense. They do not seem to need an audience, or even at times ignore the audience or turn their back to it. This rhetoric of the non-dialogical, forceful and ideological space in the artworks is something that emphasises the social and theatrical space of the artwork. This is the space of democracy that we were interested in examining – where the issues of choosing between fact and fiction or the theatrical or the social space are no longer the critical question. Instead the show is interested in changing the focus of critical questioning away from knowledge to experience, this I believe draws us closer to the political question at stake here; that is how we produce our own subjectivity through these spaces that are mutually aesthetic and political.

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