

This is the Gallery and the Gallery is Many Things
Eastside Projects, Birmingham
27th September – 22nd November 2008

Set in the re-branded regeneration zone 'Eastside', Eastside Projects (ESP) is "an artist-run space as public gallery and incubator of new ideas for the city of Birmingham and beyond." ⁱ

'This is the Gallery and the Gallery is Many Things', was an ambitious, inaugural project designed to make a big impact on the Birmingham art scene, which had suffered recently from funding-related closures of three other artist-run spaces. The show featured a surprisingly broad range of more than twenty artists, from 2006 Turner Prize nominee Mark Titchner to emerging Birmingham artist Joseph Hallam, and featured other well respected artists such as Lawrence Weiner, and Liam Gillick.

The design of the show was indexed to three historical exhibitions; El Lissitzky's 'Abstract Cabinet' (1926/1930) at the International Kunstausstellung Dresden & Hannover Museum, the 'Peter Nadin Gallery' (1978-79), by Peter Nadin, Christopher d'Arcangelo and Nick Lawson, and the Bart de Baere curated 'This is the Show and the Show is Many Things' (1994), at Museum van Hedendaagse Kunst, Ghent.

The show -which developed over a period of nine weeks, with new artists adding work and affecting the show's existing pieces during that period- was described by the show's curator, and director of Eastside Projects, Gavin Wade, as "complex and difficult to grasp in one place... you can never really take in the exhibition at once" ⁱⁱ.

This process of cross-pollination between the artists' contributions, at times, activated different aspects of the pieces in the show.

This did not always benefit the works exhibited; one video simply didn't work when confronted by Spartacus Chetwynd & Marte Eknaes' installation of lights and metal sculptural objects, and was later substituted by another moving-image piece.

However, in the case of Titchner's 'Methane For Light (Funding By Alternative Means)' (2008), the work not only had a presence in the gallery -a 'portaloo' with texts gaffa-taped to the outside- but also an extended life in the gallery's ongoing desire to explore alternative sources of sustainable power and funding for the venture.

At the launch event, I overheard one patron claim that the gallery was already five years out of date. This criticism was to me a little harsh, but was probably a reference to the debate initiated by Nicolas Bourriaud's 2002 collection of essays 'Relational Aesthetics' (and perhaps referring to the inclusion of Liam Gillick in the show ⁱⁱⁱ), in which he puts forward specific artists whose practices aimed to 'produce relations', between the work (or artist) and its audience. This is often read as if he is demarcating a particular generation or school of artists, but personally I think the idea of a radically relational mode of aesthetics, as a critical framework for considering contemporary practice, seems unlikely to go 'out of date' any time soon.

Despite works being labelled as singular pieces by mainly individual artists, this show blended and blurred authorial distinctions. Wade's appropriation of the form of the evolving, curated show encouraged a reconsideration of that form, and the way the individual works were affected in a series

of reconfigurations of the show encouraged what Gilles Deleuze would call ‘counter-actualisations’ of the work; each encounter with the work was different from the last because the context had been altered. This meant focusing on specific encounters with the works that were particular to those activating them.

There is an extra dimension to Eastside Projects; the venue itself is a work in progress. Closer consideration of the show’s contextual material revealed that several of the works listed as part of the show were also described as being part of the ongoing development of the space as a project in its own right, curated by ‘Support Structure’ (a collaboration between curator Wade and architect Celine Condorelli). The venue’s door handles, made by Matthew Harrison and titled ‘Willkommen. Bienvenue. Welcome. C’mon in’. (2008), are beautifully assembled objects, made from 22 types of wood with fixings. Heather & Ivan Morison’s ‘Pleasure Island’ (2007-8), previously shown in the Welsh pavilion at the Venice Biennale, is now ESP’s office space, whilst the other structures internal to the venue, such as studios and entrance desk, are all works by Support Structure.

It is possible, therefore, to view Eastside Projects as a curated work itself, and it will be interesting to see how the space evolves and future shows relate to this ongoing project.

<http://www.eastsideprojects.org>

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ⁱ <http://eastsideprojects.org>

ⁱⁱ Video interview at <http://www.nowpublic.com/culture/exclusive-interview-artist-curator-gavin-wade-0>

ⁱⁱⁱ Gillick was one of the featured artists in Bourriaud’s book