

*Situations*

*Curating Post-Nation Symposium*

*Rethinking the survey exhibition for the Biennial Age*

*15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> September 2006*

*Arnolfini Bristol*

*Review/comment*

*Steve Dutton*

The Biennial age is the age of the illusion of free flowing global movement of thought and capital when the success of an artist could be measured in airmiles.

Subsequently the premise of the Britishness of the British Art show might seem particularly anachronistic. Travelling from Sheffield to Bristol's Arnolfini recently to attend Situations' "Curating post-nation Symposium; Re-thinking the survey exhibition for the Biennial Age" is small beer compared to the nomadic exploits of so many artists and curators, yet my return trip, diverted as it was through the small towns of mid Wales and north west England on a 6 hr sequence of small train journeys was a sharp reminder that a sense of locality still matters to many.

At the symposium itself the suggestion from BAS6 curators Alex Farquharson and Andrea Schlieker that it was the spirit of internationalism which informed many of the curatorial decisions proved once again that it would be a mistake to suggest the debates, issues and arguments which haunt the frustratingly inflexible relationships between what might be termed the 'local' and the 'international' art scenes in this country (whatever shifting territory or boundary that might signify) have been laid to rest. That the curators approached the vision of a British Art Show as signifying all that was international about British Art and the comment that people might come to the exhibition in the regions and see that "this was what contemporary art looked like" might sound frustratingly familiar to many artists and curators who choose to live and work outside of London.

Both curators somewhat sheepishly confessed that they would much rather have got rid of the 'British' tag all together. There was a strange sense of denial about this, a sense that this was a refusal to talk about the idea of Britishness on the grounds that firstly, it simply got in the way of curating a good show (which it was), and secondly, that it was somehow old hat and slightly bad taste. The surprising suggestion that the appearance of so much hybridisation was a sign of a new internationalism, and that

the curators were “looking for wormholes between the forms”<sup>1</sup> was surely partly missing the point. What about looking for wormholes between ideologies?

This symposium signalled a recognition that, at least when it comes to a survey show such as this, it is not that the debate is alive or dead, but that it maintains its existence in state of paralysis and endless repetition. In much contemporary art discourse, the conflicts and tensions between issues of locality, nationality and internationality are batted back and forth ad infinitum. Attempts to address the issues from within a local perspective are often, by their very nature, hidden, and attempts to address them via various international platforms are often seen as colonising, patronising, self serving, simply naïve or even disastrous<sup>2</sup>. It is a stalemate, fixated and often uncritical. If we are to believe in the possibility of change, which of course is the biggest question of all, then something may have to give.

It was the purpose of this symposium to open into this territory, “to interrogate the model of the survey show” and its title, “Curating –Post Nation”, was deliberately provocative. Claire Doherty, moderating the proceedings, clearly made the point that the intention was to ask tough questions about this tough subject, to break this sense of stasis and up the ante.

By the end of the two days some movement had indeed taken place. There had been flickers of life, especially in the presentation by Neil Mulholland in which he seemed to some extent to posit the possibility of the parochial, suggesting that in the absence of the now defunct dominant paradigm between a political left and right, a lot of global art is deeply illustrative and that the local needs to be discovered. Stating that there was no clear space where the national can be discussed, he appeared to quietly critique some of the curatorial decisions of BAS6.

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<sup>1</sup> Alex Farquharson coined this phrase during his presentation

<sup>2</sup> On the related issue of the role of contemporary art in contested regions and the cancellation of Manifesta 6 Martin Herbert asks, “What new shapes may art and artistic events have to assume in order to be more than a transient, easily applied, easily removed, sticking plaster?”. “School’s Out”, *frieze*, issue 101, Sept. 2006, p.37. Also of interest may be “Avon Calling”, edited by Eddie Chambers which specifically addresses the arrival the BAS6 in Bristol via texts from Eddie Chambers, Richard Hylton, Laura Mansfield, Karen Di Franco, Kwong Lee and Lizi Sanchez. Available from Spike Island. ISBN 0-9545498-4-8

Such is the fear of appearing to have parochial leanings lurking in the shadows of my own international ambitions and practice that the relief I felt on hearing this brought forth a sigh that was probably heard in Cardiff. It was a relief also to hear Chrissie Iles speak passionately about much art being frankly boring and homogenised, “like milk from a supermarket,” and despite her protestations to the contrary it was hard not to consider her remarks as a comment on some of the work in BAS6. Perversely, a certain kind of familiar international art is in itself frequently localised in style and content and limited in vision in a manner that some might say was deeply parochial.

Hans-Ulrich Obrist’s hallucinatory and performative video presentation was peppered with choice phrases and ideas concerning the “irreversibility of the effects of globalisation” and the “polyphony of micro situations” but his image and words gradually merged together in an increasingly yellowing and jaundiced electronic mush that was somehow symbolic of the whole subject; the spectacle of the exhausted and nomadic artist/curator dissolving into a mirage of sandy coloured digital light. There was a moment, as the sound of his voice and image was merging into space, that we were all becoming one, disappearing into communal fluorescence where everything was becoming everything else.

Or maybe I was dropping off.

Nina Montmann’s suggestion that the local is opaque and that it is in this capacity that it may be interesting begs the question as to who finds the interest and to what ends? The opacity of the local may simply be ‘real’ in a way that a homogenised international contemporary art practice is not and as such it is this ‘reality’ which is annexed and ultimately colonised by an insatiable and insecure art practice in a bid for authenticity.

Ultimately I’m left with the same questions I had before I entered the Arnolfini but ringing slightly clearer. Is it possible, desirable or even necessary for localised strands or zones of quality contemporary art practice to be sustainable yet risk complete invisibility to the more economically and culturally powerful mega-zones of the international art world? If so, more importantly, is it in anyone’s best interest for this to be the case?

Answers on a postcard please.

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*Transcripts of selected presentations and discussions will be available online in autumn 2006 and on the Situations web-site at [www.situations.org.uk](http://www.situations.org.uk).*