

THROWING VOICES: THE COMMODIFICATION OF CULTURE, FROM ART BIENNIALS TO CELEBRITY

Common Culture

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This paper presents discussions around both the socio-political and cultural acts of 'speaking for' and 'speaking through' others and how Common Culture, as an artist's group, create dialogues around this through their practice in relation to the specific contexts in which their artworks are produced.

***The New El Dorado* and the context of the art biennial.**

The New El Dorado is a single screen video work commissioned for Manifesta 8 by the curatorial collective Alexandria Contemporary Arts Forum (ACAF). The full title for this edition of Manifesta was: *The European Biennial of Contemporary Art; region of Murcia (Spain) in dialogue with Northern Africa*. "as a direct consequence of geopolitical issues in the region where it took place" (Manifesta.org, 2010). We were alerted, at the very outset, that the Manifesta Foundation's ambitions for the Biennial extended to encouraging artists to initiate dialogue with the culture and politics of the host region of Murcia, and engage in "*dialogue with Northern Africa*" - which we took to understand as a vague invitation to explore Europe's complex relationship with Africa. As three white British artists our validity to speak about either the host region or its relationship to another cultural and political region was certainly questionable and problematic. Whilst flattered to be invited, participation in a project so confidently committed to the instrumentalization of art immediately raised questions as to whether we should, or even could participate in such an enterprise. As Linda Alcoff (2003, p. 5) states "Is the discursive practice of speaking for others ever a valid practice, and, if so, what are the criteria for validity?"

In *The New El Dorado* we utilise the principle that there are inherent problems in speaking for others to create a dialogue around a tendency, ever-present in artworks made in the context of this type of biennial, to do so. For us it was important that we made apparent our own ventriloquism, by making this manifest within the script; the language can be located within the cultural and social identity of the artists and that of the participants involved in the project. This presented itself as a humorous schism between the people speaking (and language we are hearing) and the ability to locate the dialogue within an awkwardly different context. We worked with actors from the region (and just outside), a 'local' film crew, and an interpreter (a Chilean Swede translating between English and Spanish cultures and languages). Between the availability of our own cultural position, and playful nature of the engagement with regional voices, we hoped to create a more convincing dialogue, or as Alcoff would describe, "rituals of speaking". At the same time, we acknowledged the potentially tokenistic nature of 'engaging with others' as a valid position with which to understand, experience or speak in relation to the lives of others. The dialogue in the script is littered with references to these 'tokens of engagement' to alert the audience to the awkwardness of our own specific position as outsiders to the cultural situation in which we had been parachuted into. This also offers reflection, hopefully critically, on the power relations at work in the instrumentalisation of art evident in biennials like Manifesta. We were keen to find a formal representation for this awkwardness and displacement by setting the scene in a nightclub, with the characters dressed in clothes redolent of the early 1970s, ventriloquising theoretical prose that reflected on cultural tourism and their own (and our) unease of being in such a context. Citing/siting theoretical discourse in a noisy nightclub/party setting created a collision integral to the comic effect of the work. This is further underscored by the use of repetition and distraction; the use of theoretical jargon about cultural tourism playing with the tensions in the use of language related to power.

What we could bring to the dialogue with some validity was an exploration of cultural consumption; a phenomenon that we were familiar with as consumers and producers. The echoes of the privileged context of the historical "Grand Tour" in relation to this were an early point of departure. We also felt comfortable in discussing the tensions between this type of activity and its closely associated companion of tourism, to which of course it belongs. As a consequence of our own social and cultural backgrounds and the economic and cultural effects of tourism associated with the nearby city of Alicante, we were able to pivot a dialogue about class and taste; between the nature of tourism associated with Alicante and that of Manifesta. The Manifesta Foundation promotes itself as a mobile international organisation adept at delivering artistic interventions in areas identified as culturally underdeveloped. Regions and cities across Europe vie to host an edition of Manifesta, and for the privilege, pay a substantial fee to do so. The pay off, for the host region, is an orchestrated stimulation of its cultural eco-system, prestigious international media visibility, prompting high-end cultural tourism that results in a gain for the local economy. We were intrigued by this spectacular act of ventriloquism at work in the exchange between the region and the foundation, whereby cold economics is masked as hot cultural enrichment.

Vent and the commodification of culture.

Vent is a three-screen video installation, commissioned by mac, Birmingham, for the solo exhibition Common Culture Cabaret, which examines popular culture's obsessive fascination with the excesses and indulgences of 'celebrity'. The work dissects the mechanics of the ventriloquist routine, and redeploys them as a means to critique the popular televisual spectacle of celebrity confession, to comically unravel the absurdly narcissistic and confessional nature of celebrity culture and highlight the in-authenticities of the entertainment industry.

The dialogue, appropriated from UK and US celebrity confession television programmes, makes apparent the interchangeability of both the content of the narrative and process by which it is translated into entertainment. To further extend the enquiry into throwing voices (as a political act), an impressionist cycles through a range of celebrity voices. The impressions, dissociated with the content of the material, explore self-commodification as a mechanism to exchange apparent personal distress for economic benefit. For us (Common Culture), appropriation, and the use of the ready-made, constitute an act of ventriloquism, enabling us to speak through others via objects, cultural rituals and contexts. The use of the ready-made also creates an anchor point within a reality that we, and a range of audiences are familiar with, one that is often highly seductive and alluring and rooted in the practices and forms of popular consumption. This popular register brings with it forms of 'reading' and knowledge production that can be toyed with to examine what people know or think they know.

Significantly, the act of ventriloquism is itself deconstructed and displaced; the dummy and the vent are separated, each occupying their own screen and, although placed in the conventional close proximity to each other for 'viewing' the act, the audience's response is depicted as mechanistic, and out of sync with the act. As the gallery audience inhabit a space centrally between the three screens, they are encouraged to occupy a more critical role to that of their televised equivalent.

How can we define the confessional celebrity act? The act itself, the television or magazine interview, is the process by which a misdemeanour, or series of misdemeanours, becomes manifest as capital to be exchanged. What is presented as an insight into, or construction of, an authentic identity is a voice being thrown, towards a new commodifiable identity. The power relationship between the commodity, the television show or magazine, and the audience is made manifest by this manipulation. This can be seen to operate in a similar manner to the

process described by Marx and Engels (Marx, 1848, p. 15), by which personal worth is resolved into exchange value and “marketable authenticity”, where the appearance of ‘truth’ evidences where the flattening of value exists as an intrinsic component of late capitalism. A pantomime villain has its place in this ritual.

The celebrity encounter, as depicted in the televised confession, could be suggested to already operate as the ventriloquist and dummy. The interviewer, in the role of the ‘vent’, enables the celebrity to construct their alternate identity through a process of facilitation. The relationship between the two protagonists is a constructed act, it is rehearsed and agreed upon like any celebrity interview. The interviewer sets up the answer as a vent would do for its dummy. But the celebrity confessing is itself its own dummy through which a new identity is being formed. The whole event is a type of echo-chamber in which they are forging and confirming their own identity: a forgery of their own narrative. “The pragmatics of forgery relies on our being able to distinguish ontologically between truth and lie” (Bernard, 2003, p.15).

What is implied in *The New El Dorado* is made explicit in *Vent*. This, therefore, allows for an investigation into the wider contexts of ventriloquism, from the disassociated voice, the political associations of throwing voices (or the mediation of the voice) and the mania of binary extremes within the psychological conditions of late capitalism (Connor, 2000, Fisher, 2009). In the context of Biennial practices, therefore, where artists from different parts of the world accumulate, *The New El Dorado* created a position to narrate an encounter between the specific characteristics of a place and the culture of others. It responded to conventions in Biennial practices related to the local and the global, discussing inherent problems with current models of socially engaged practices. The work utilises a script written from an explicitly British context delivered through actors from the regions of Murcia and Valencia. The tensions that arise from this, and the analysis of cultural engagement within it, raise issues around the alienating process of speaking for others. The direct use of the ventriloquist act creates a mechanism to reveal and critique the processes by which ‘celebrity’ is nourished and maintained as a lucrative excess of the entertainment industry. Allowing for the deconstruction of the components to form an unsettling experience, the alienating process of the cycle of repetitive mass consumption is exposed and made available for critique.

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