

Empires, Ruins and Networks Conference

Globalisation is a hefty topic to tackle, and an intensive (and expensive) two-day conference full of international experts will only ever scratch the surface. However it's a handy catch-all to bring together a range of speakers to discuss timely concerns about the current state of contemporary art, its efficacy in the face of global turmoil and tension, and its ever-expanding forms and fields of activity. With a keynote lecture by Okwui Enwezor, the godhead of politically engaged art, *Empires, Ruins and Networks* drew artists, theorists, community activists, curators, students, bureaucrats and academics from around the country to, as one friend put it, 'build empires, get ruined, and network'. While, as with any conference, there was little in terms of closure and conclusions to be made, the broadness of its brief enabled a diversity of opinion, and a few insights; a (very selective) couple of which I'll discuss here.

Enwezor's presentation, drawing on Walter Benjamin's 1934 lecture 'The Author as Producer', questioned the current position of the artist, and the potential for political action via artistic production. He compared the present sociopolitical climate to Benjamin's 1930s, with endemic insecurity and instability across the globe; and lambasted the retreat from political engagement in the art of the conservative, market-driven 1990s. Enwezor's central argument was against the modernist figure of the artist as autonomous producer, presenting artist collectives as a radical alternative, splintering authorship and refiguring the nature of artistic work. Tracking back to the Russian Constructivists, the Paris Commune, the Situationists, and collective action in the era of AIDS, Enwezor noted that collectives tend to arise in times of crisis, and presented examples of current groups involved in activism – Raqs Media Collective in Delhi (www.sarai.net), Huit Facettes in Dakar, and Group Amos in the Congo. The 'peripheral' status of India and Africa in the history of Modernism is shifted by these groups, who, through self-determining, critically engaged social projects, challenge Western preconceptions of their cultures as victims awaiting rescue by the West.

While these are powerful examples, Enwezor's talk left little room for the art object or aesthetic experience – visual pleasure was dismissed as a function of bourgeois taste. It led to the question: where, then, does this leave non-collective practice and the institution in the West? Enwezor's argument was problematised by the next group of speakers, particularly Kendall Geers from South Africa and Lisa Reihana from New Zealand, whose presentation focused on her work with *marae* (Maori meeting places). As an already existing collective structure, the *marae* provides for Reihana a network to work from and within, a tradition that is challenged by her own position as a contemporary urban woman who doesn't speak Maori, and who breaks taboos through certain representations (including creating her own 'virtual *marae*' with digital technologies). Here the

collective is enmeshed with family, tradition and cultural identity, yet still subject to critique by the individual. Reihana's strongly localised stance, where the work may or may not be presented institutionally, was in stark contrast to that of Geers, an Afrikaner South African based in Brussels who also works solo and collectively (www.kendell-geers.net). Geers, while criticising the international art world as a microcosm of late capitalism, with all its market forces and hierarchies, subscribes to the notion of challenging the system from within – also championed by Felix Gonzalez-Torres – bringing what he called 'terrorealism' to the 'princes of capital' who frequent art museums and art fairs. One of Geers' interests is in working with the ethics of exhibition display, including placing electric fences and live explosives in the gallery. This immediately invited questions as to who the gatekeepers of the institutions are who have the power to allow certain artists and projects to enter its portals; and about the ability of postmodernism to absorb all resistance into its own sphere, often co-opted in the guise of fashionability, rendering it impotent. How this co-option can be resisted or slowed was difficult to establish.

The fashionability of cultural production can however have its benefits, particularly in its ability to reinvigorate moribund urban areas and economies, generating tourism and attracting the best and brightest, à la Richard Florida's 'creative class'. Eddie Berg's presentation on his FACT space in Liverpool (www.fact.co.uk) traced the decline of this once-mighty city of Empire into poverty and depression, which has been reversed to some extent by the development of a number of key initiatives – the establishment of FACT, the opening of the Tate Liverpool, and the launching of the Liverpool Biennial. However, the enormous burden of expectation placed upon culture to alleviate society's ills was noted by convener Nikos Papastergiadis, who described the opening of FACT's new space in early 2003, where the hopes and desires of a decimated port town rested on the slender shoulders of a new media exhibition space with a limited budget.

Papastergiadis, in his presentation, celebrated the ways that artists transform their environments, developing impoverished urban areas into vibrant and 'contemplative' locations, recovering objects and spaces from the dystopian, postindustrial landscape. However, as with Geers' concerns regarding resistant art ending up fashionable, he noted that these areas inevitably become gentrified, their initial low-cost accessibility soon becoming prohibitively exclusive, reserved for those who wish to share in the exoticism of bohemia without any of its real-life grit. Berg raised a similar concern, with his desire to retain the characteristic 'edginess' of Liverpool. No-one was quite sure how to avoid this problem.

Simryn Gill's presentation also drew on sites of decay, in this case the remnants of the colonial era and the



Asian economic miracle and subsequent collapse recorded in over 100 photographs of unfinished or abandoned buildings around Malaysia. With a ruined past and an unrealised future, these relics are merely 'standing still'. Providing an alternative image of architectural dystopia, where nature is swallowing up the buildings far quicker than artists or urban developers ever could, Gill's richly coloured slides, amongst the sea of data provided at the conference, by theorists and artists alike, were a powerful reminder of the efficacy of the *visual* in conveying complex information.

There seemed to be equal parts disillusionment and hope in the possibilities for political art and the institution/white cube as a site for cultural production. Enwezor stated that the institution is not a generator of meaning, and art is not transgressive; it is, however, always an ethical proposition that requires self-reflexivity on the part of artists and curators. Papastergiadis argued for the 'gallery as laboratory' model, an unfinished site that is not outside of politics and never autonomous, but a potential generator of meaning through social relationships. These arguments were thrown into relief by speakers such as Virginia Pérez-Rattón, a curator from Costa Rica, who provided a brief overview of Central America for those (I'd say most) of us who have limited knowledge of its histories and cultures, in particular the fight for cultural autonomy and the creation of viable institutions in the face of political instability and ongoing American interference. In another vein, Tony Birch, an Aboriginal academic from Melbourne University, provided an insightful deconstruction

Okwui Enwezor and Kendall Geers on the steps at ACMI Melbourne. Photograph courtesy of ACMI.

of the Ivan Sen film *Beneath Clouds*, in the light of the recent Redfern riots. Showing scenes from the film where Aboriginal boys are confronted by police and fight back, 'going through the motions' of their respective social roles, Birch described the riots as 'performative', in that they provided a platform for articulating rage and frustration where there are no other avenues available. Activism, like art, is a privilege.

Russell Storer is a curator at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney.

www.acmi.net.au/empires/