

Clubs project feedback sessions!

Background

CLUBfeedback is a service for cultural practitioners that provides a structured critical response to a presented work. Artists, writers, performers or curators are able to request feedback by approaching the co-ordinators, who then assemble a group of peers and experts to provide feedback. This 'service' has been facilitated by CLUBSproject in Melbourne since 2002.

The focus of these sessions is to explore, through conversation, the 'work' of an artwork: to investigate how an artwork functions, and how it operates within, and in relation to, its contexts. Attention is placed on relationships internal to the artwork, as well as those the artwork produces, including connections generated by the work in terms of conceptual, speculative, theoretical, imaginative, metaphoric, linguistic, political and social (etc) lines of inquiry. The aims of the session are to actively draw out these connections and extend them through intensive collective conversation.

The starting point for CLUBfeedback is the 'material evidence' of the work of art in its situation. The practitioner is not expected to provide an account of the work in the initial stages. Feedback is a service offered to the practitioner and it is an opportunity for them to listen, rather than having to defend or explain their work. In the final stages of the session, questions that have developed from the conversation are put to the practitioner and it is at this point that they join the conversation in its collective and extended sense.

It is an important principle of CLUBfeedback that the practitioner is not privileged as the singular or originary force of the work; rather, it establishes the *work as a productive force which has effects*. This is not in order to devalue the position or intent of the author, but to investigate how the work *works* as a material-conceptual reality. What becomes important is that no matter what the practitioner's intent, the work itself produces relations within the world and these have real effects. The practitioner is able to witness the way an audience encounters and engages with their work, and through conversation how they inquire into the work. This inquiring conversation can become invaluable in extending the understanding of an artwork for both the practitioner and other participants involved.

The greater aim of CLUBfeedback is to produce a space for encountering the work in which the artwork is allowed to frame *itself*, instead of this being determined solely on the basis of the authority of the author (or upon other authorizing modes). Asking the practitioner to join the conversation after others have had an opportunity to explore the work for

themselves, results in the artist being invited into a space of collective dialogue that has developed around and through the work in its field of discourse.

CLUBfeedback endeavors to develop a supportively critical dialogue that extends beyond critique or indifferent judgment. It opens a space in which the time of art's encounter is slowed to a duration in which other possibilities for investigation are unleashed. Rather than developing a definitive single account of the work in question, an aim of feedback is to generate an open-ended exploration based in diversity and difference in relation to the possibilities that have been opened, or generated by the potentialities of the artwork.

HOW TO: A MANUAL

Numbers

CLUBS has found that between 6 and 10 people are a productive number to work with for a feedback session as it allows a generous discussion between all involved. Any more tends to become unruly and makes it difficult to develop a conversation beyond a superficial level.

Constitution of the Feedback group

In consultation with the practitioner, the Facilitator invites people to attend the feedback session. The group usually includes the practitioner's immediate peers, the Facilitator, 1 or 2 others from the CLUBS committee, as well as specifically invited guests not necessarily known by the practitioner personally. Guests are usually people suggested by the practitioner or Facilitator who it is felt may contribute an interesting focus to the discussion. It is recommended that the feedback group include one 'non-artist' from a complimentary discipline or field of research, or someone with an informed interest in art in general.

Location

Feedback sessions *always* take place where the work is located – be that in a studio, exhibition context, outdoors etc. It's important to be present with the work and to have it visible as a constant reference for the discussion.

Time Required

The session takes about 1.5 to 2 hours, although the session generally extends to an informal discussion between the artist and the attendees at the conclusion of the session.



Record

CLUBSproject makes an effort to, and recommends, recording these sessions as we feel they are an invaluable resource not only for the practitioner but also for anyone interested in their practice or the discussion in general now or in the future. Some practitioners have also found it useful to take notes during the discussion of their work in order to respond later to particular observations or for their own record.

Process

Sessions commence with one person being asked to give an OBSERVATIONAL description of the artwork. The OBSERVATIONAL description of the artwork is as full an account as possible of what is materially present or activated by the artwork, including the situation of the work in its location, the nature of the location and other objects that may generally be considered external or incidental to the work (such as plinths or frames or wall labels). The OBSERVATIONAL description attempts to describe the work without recourse to language which assumes prior knowledge (such as describing an object as a sculpture or a painting, or referring to a space as a gallery) or that will influence subsequent responses to the work. The aim of this description is to focus attention on all aspects of the work particularly details that might be overlooked by a more cursory engagement. All other participants listen to

Feedback Session for Nick Mangan's *The Colony* at Gertrude Contemporary Art Spaces, September 2005. Session included Terri Bird, Nadine Christensen, Bianca Hester, Laresa Kosloff, Lou Hubbard, Nick Mangan, Andrew McQualter and Scott Mitchell.

this description and at its conclusion are asked if they think something has been overlooked or needs to be qualified.

Once it is agreed that the OBSERVATIONAL description of the work is complete participants are asked to provide a RESPONSE to the work from a more subjective perspective. It is often the case that the transition from the OBSERVATIONAL to the RESPONSIVE stage of the feedback session happens in the course of the conversation and the facilitator simply acknowledges that this has occurred. Initially it can be useful if the subjective comments respond to, or seek clarification of, the observational description. However, at this stage, in general, participants freely offer their observations and comments.

After considerable discussion it usually becomes apparent that most aspects of the artwork have been covered in the conversation, often leaving points of disagreement between participants or unresolved questions raised by the artwork. At this stage the facilitator asks for three or so questions to be framed individually or collectively, which are then put to the artist.

The practitioner is invited to respond to these questions and any other aspects of the discussion. A dialogue may or may not develop at this point between the participants and the practitioner.

Facilitator

The feedback session needs to be managed by someone who takes on the role of Facilitator. This person usually works with the practitioner to set up the session contacting all those participating. On the day it is his or her role to introduce everyone, outline the process and most importantly to manage the conversation.

Besides nominating someone to provide the Observational description the Facilitator's role is to ask questions of clarification following the Observational description and during the Responsive stage of the discussion. Often tentative remarks are made in relation to the artwork that when probed further open up interesting lines of conversation. The facilitator can also suggest connections or conflicts between the comments of various participants in order to push the conversation to further clarification.

It is the Facilitator's role to bring the conversation to a conclusion: initially, in order to frame the questions put to the practitioner that bring them into the conversation, and finally to wrap up the discussion when the conversation or the participants starts to run out of energy.

This manual is a working document developed by Terri Bird, Bianca Hester and Andrew McQualter on behalf of CLUBSproject, and has emerged from extended conversations since 2002. We regard this as an open-source text to be adopted and adapted in anyway! The process outlined above is one that has developed over time and has emerged from a particular interest in art-work as generative of a relational or contextual field.

CLUBSproject is an artist initiative that runs projects on and off site; ranging from publication production, forums, events, meetings, performances, actions, workshops, publication-archive, web-publishing, curatorial experiments and exhibitions. We are interested in facilitating diverse possibilities of art and related practices. We're focussed on experimenting with the way art comes about, is made public, experienced and mediated. We're interested in experimenting with the conditions of production and the relationships they have to organisational structures... and we're dedicated to the perpetually provisional!

We offer a site free of charge, which is above a disused pub in Fitzroy. The pub has recently been sold and as a consequence we've needed to find a new venue to run from. This new site will be above the Rob Roy Hotel, just down the road, and we'll move there in early 2006. Visit www.clubsproject.org.au for updates.

CLUBS is currently coordinated by Terri Bird, Nadine Christensen, Cate Consandine, Starlie Geikie, Christopher Hill, Bianca Hester, Marcus Keating, Laresa Kosloff, Lizzy Newman, Spiros Panigirakis and Michelle Ussher.