

The problems encountered by new project spaces

Inverting the Imperatives

by *Philippe Henry*

Alongside the established network of public cultural facilities, and intentionally departing from its preconceived ideas and manner of functioning, a number of artistic experiments have recently been taking place. In France, where for the most part the public sector (above all the national and local authorities) still have the upper hand, it is only over about the past ten years that this development has made any headway. Each of these artistic “project spaces”,¹ often having appropriated some industrial wasteland for their purposes, rests assured of its singularity. A boast that is belied by the recurrence of several elements. For instance, from the start, these undertakings have tended to lodge themselves in the gaps offered by the already established cultural infrastructure – notably the lack of sites for bringing creative processes to fruition and of venues for experiments in unfamiliar formats – or in spaces where public facilities are in short supply. Then, too, they unanimously reject the concept of the autonomy of art: instead of “art for art’s sake”, they seek to recreate stronger ties between a multiplicity of aspects touching upon not only artistic but also social, political and territorial dimensions.

Public policy in the matter purports to render art more democratic by – ever since Malraux – allowing the largest number of viewers to gain access to the world’s greatest works, born of the imagination of a privileged few. By contrast, the project spaces look to the perennially dominated current of cultural democracy, where greater consideration is granted to the creativity of each and all – much along the lines formerly upheld by the popular education movements. This approach demonstrates a will to include certain populations or specific territories as determining, component parts of the artistic process, and to pay tribute to artistic practices deriving from groups that are not linked to the art establishment. However, this “reversal of the tide” is taking place in an environment subject to massive changes, where innovation is above all a symptom of a society in upheaval. There is call to give human relations a new status, to take the time for a more sensitive approach, to reactivate certain dimensions thus far stifled or crushed by the dominant model of development. Creating art for the sheer pleasure of it is no longer the question. What matters is the urgent need to rebuild personal and social ties within a society increasingly subordinated to a reference system based exclusively upon market values. Such a concept of art targets greater integration, something that would in turn involve abandoning the ideological pride of place customarily granted to producer-creators – a ground rule of modern art ever since the Romantics. Enhancing the status of the aesthetic fare being offered – and experienced – by each and all should be accompanied by the new concept that today’s project spaces are seeking to define.

Unfortunately, we have come up with nothing more than simplistic and repetitive arguments vaunting the alleged value of interdisciplinary accomplishments, or the inescapable need for multicultural collaboration – when what is really needed is more serious deliberation with respect to the contemporary world’s irreducible pluralism and our fundamental incapacity to find a universally acceptable standard of taste. This leads to such questions as “What aesthetic events are people being given to experience?” or “What sort of assessments or judgements can those people make based on the cultural experience at their disposal?” Or again, “Beyond their simple variety, what seeds for new modes of living together do today’s artistic proposals contain?” Thus far, these questions remain far too open-ended, despite the fact that they concern the distinctive feature of what we would term as “artistic”, or the nature of the aesthetic experience of the largest number (and how such practices are co-generated). Abandoning a set linear approach – from the artist’s gesture to the work of art to the reaction of the viewer – means transferring our priorities to real-life experiences and to the multiplicity of judgements through which the value of artistic processes is built up.

The extreme diversity of contemporary lifestyles and approaches to art has spawned a decentralization, a shift of emphasis from the finished artwork to the process of producing it. Beyond the – again repetitive – argument itself, certain experiments are characterized above all by the extent to which they take into account all that goes on further up or down the line from the artistic process. Or the weight of the variously psychological, social, territorial or other factors linked to that process. Seen in this light, the production of artworks can be compared to the pragmatic articulation of a far

more complex, dynamic interaction. There is no longer an obsession with creating inspired pieces meant to be vital contributions to the patrimony of humanity. Rather, what has become essential is the multiplicity belonging to the artistic process and, by extension, to the means of organization and social life of which these processes are a part. It is in fact an entire system that enables aesthetic experiments to take place, while the works of art underpinning them find their status in turn enhanced. Here again, to adopt this view is to reject any centrally individualist and exclusively subjective approach to art. When the existence of a social dimension is taken into consideration from the start, the work of art itself is of only partial interest. Just as important is the invention of encounters with the public, increased awareness of the various manners of behaving and speaking different people have (with an eye to their transposition), and making use of pre-existing artistic elements to see what they look like once injected into a different context. All of which leads to reflection on the characteristics associated with the particular mode of socialization (which undeniably contains a subjective component) known as “artistic practices”. In what way do these recapture elements of the past, and in what way are they – or are they not – new?

Certainly, in their truly singular aspects, the project spaces end up deconstructing the most commonly defended ground rules of modern art. Conversely, these same principles are still very present in today’s artistic experiments, confirming how difficult it is to give birth to a new concept of art. Undoubtedly, one of the main problems is that of carrying out all the implications of the trend to generalize the democratization of this dimension of human activity.³ The obstacle is the “elitist” – albeit “élitaire pour tous” (elitist for all) as Antoine Vitez puts it – view taken until now by the art establishment and the public policies to which it is tied. Therefore, the effort required is enormous, and all the more so given the number of traps set by the demagogues and market hawks of the day. Ideally, the project spaces seek to achieve their social impact by a sort of contamination through proximity, so that everyone would be able to breathe and speak out more freely and throng in greater numbers to sites generously promoting social interaction. Hopefully, too, there would be new forms of action for the citizenry, and the reigning social game would no longer be based on the sort of market logic that tends to restrict rather than encourage the participation of the public authorities.

Which brings us to the heart of the concrete utopia envisioned by the project spaces. More solid than it was during the 1970s, that utopia is now based on the realization that, while necessary, the “desire for change” in itself is not enough. In the meantime, there has been a post-Fordist reaction. Today’s artists are less naive than yesterday’s, and they have also acquired new skills. Their intentions are less peremptory, their goals perhaps more modest. Nonetheless, their utopian views remain strong, being based on their faith in a democracy promising to afford more room for individual sensibility and creativity and to restore the human dimensions presently held in such contempt. Their actions have more tangible limits and are weighted down by local or concrete considerations. Nevertheless, the horizon remains wide open. Indeed, in the last analysis, they are highly ambitious, aiming at the invention of a more human, just and sensitive society. Given the emphasis on the individualism, subjectivism and autonomy of art on the one hand and, on the other, past government policy regulations in the matter, this seems altogether utopian. Utopian to seek to rebuild and develop, here and now and with the means currently at their disposal, ties that are at once symbolic and social, to strive to reallocate time and space on behalf of local considerations. Yet this is just what is at stake in these project spaces.

Naturally, there can be quite a gap between goals and concrete reality. The financial situation for the project spaces of our era remains touch-and-go, especially since these spaces depend directly on government funding (state aid, like various fairly substantial employment benefits to the young, is more frequently allocated by ministries other than the Ministry of Culture). No matter how greatly they aspire to be independent, their very nature and the ties they seek to create with various populations render these project spaces socio-economically vulnerable. The inherent tension between the establishing and to-be-established parties has sidelined some of these experiments to municipally administered cultural wastelands (a good number of wastelands have long since been acquired by the cities, which make them available – that is, rent them out – to different groups). One of the major problems is the tendency of the French political establishment to distrust initiatives undertaken by mere ordinary members of society. For the time being, given the power of the capitalist market’s industries and the exaggerated wariness of public collectivities, there is hardly room for a possible third sector to which nonmarket- oriented artistic activities could contribute. The crucial question here – as in other realms besides art – is how best to develop a third space in dire need of more numerous allies.⁴ Undoubtedly, it is the public collectivities that are in the best position to play this role, given the existence of yawning socio-economic disparities and the decrease – generated by capitalistic, purely financial forces – in symbolic modes of exchange. Nonetheless, we would do well to grant due consideration to the authentic artistic and socio-economic skills available through the project spaces. The latter are in a position to strengthen the “third estate” that so many of today’s social movements are so painfully seeking to render operative and less problematic.⁵ ■

Translated from the French by Margie Mounier

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His recent publications include: “Les espaces-projets artistiques. Une utopie concrète encore en friche”, *Théâtre / Public* no. 163, Jan.-Feb. 2002, pp. 60-71; “Nouvelles pratiques artistiques. Simple aménagement ou réelle mutation?”, *Théâtre / Public* no. 157, Jan.-Feb. 2001, pp. 63-72; “Théâtres de ville et compagnies théâtrales: des acteurs décisifs pour le développement démocratique des arts de la scène”, *Théâtre / Public* no. 153, May-June 2000, pp. 57-74.

¹A term that I suggest because I feel it comes closer to the aims of the cultural promoters of such experiences than the administrative term “intermediary sites” used for some time by the Ministry of Culture.

²For more information on this development in France, see, for instance, Philippe Urfalino, *L'invention de la politique culturelle, Documentation Française*, 1996, or Vincent Dubois, *La politique culturelle. Genèse d'une catégorie d'intervention publique*, Belin, 1999.

³In this connection, see, for instance, the chapter “La fin de l'utopie de l'art”, in Yves Michaud, *La crise de l'art contemporain*, Presses Universitaires de France, 5th ed., 1999, pp. 213 - 252. ⁴For an overview of these questions, see Jean-Louis Laville, Alain Caille, et al., *Association, démocratie et société civile*, La Découverte / MAUSS / CRIDA, 2001, 224 pp.

⁵For more details on the various aspects discussed, see in particular the two first references under “Recent publications” in the biographical note (*Théâtre/Public*, nos. 163 and 157).