

Inscribing the Temporal

[03/03]

Inscribing the temporal: to establish definitively in marks or language an object or event holding a particular relationship to time, or in time. In that inscription, effecting a shift from the moment or the ephemeral, to permanence and history; making a transcription into a language subtly different to the original manifestation, and in this sense, also a translation.

Inevitably, this process has widely divergent implications for the art institution, curator, audience, and artist; the calculation of what is gained, lost, or transformed, reckoned variously, perhaps, for 16Beaver Group, for other participating projects, for the Kunsthalle Exnergasse, and for its community. At the risk of replaying some well-worn arguments between alternative art practices and the institution, I think it is worth pointing out these varying points of view – although hopefully the discussion has moved forward to the extent that we are now able to characterise the relationships with greater nuance, as potentially collaborative rather than antagonistic, or – in the terms of the current debate – as symbiotic rather than purely parasitic.

It is quite possible that an action which the institution may regard as a straightforward matter of presentation – a temporal project preserved within its walls, given ongoing life and access to a new audience – could raise problematic issues of representation to an artist, the shift to an institutional context bringing about changes in reception and meaning amounting to a complete redefinition of the piece. The instinct to resist this museum-like function of the institution reflects a desire to evade the archaeological processes of archiving and documentation, being written into a history and read through a particular narrative framework, being defined by a pre-determined relationship with the audience, as "art in a gallery" – an object, rather than a process.

A subtler reading of this semantic re-construction would balance these potentially negative effects of institutionalisation with the positive of empowerment at achieving a place within a wider discourse. The challenge then for artists would be not to attempt reasserting control over the work's reception, but to allow those shifts to occur which transform any artwork when it is given over to an audience, while self-consciously selecting those strategies of inscription which would produce the most meaningful representation – for both the artist and the audience.

I propose to consider these conceptual issues by describing the process of the discussions within 16Beaver Group as to how to "inscribe" ourselves for this exhibition, how to represent what 16Beaver is or does. Beginning with an outline of the group's structure and what its particular temporal quality consists of, and then exploring the development of the strategies chosen.

What is 16Beaver? In essence, an informal collective of artists, writers, and curators, based in New York, utilising an open and participatory structure, with no official membership or hierarchy. Key activities are based around regular weekly meetings: reading together, presenting work, organising panel discussions and screenings. The collective is somewhat unconventional in that although it sometimes germinates collaborations through facilitating conversations between artists, and many of those involved with the group are interested in the potential of collaboration as an alternative practice, it does not exist to produce art. Instead, what 16Beaver produces is a space; a platform to think and to talk; a refuge from day jobs, from the commercial gallery scene; an "optimistic community" to support and produce art, with links to other communities of artists and activists; an alternative version of a New York artworld, determined by artists, not economics.

In one of our early meetings with New York curator Sara Reisman, she posed the question of whether what 16Beaver does is art; although no doubt others would disagree, my response was that it is not, but it is no less important because of that. The building of this kind of community is of immense value in itself, and even though it may aim to effect a transformation in social relations, it does not have the aesthetic meaning or intentionality of an artwork, and does not need to borrow that title to validate its purpose.

Not an artwork, then, nor a maker of artworks, nor a traditional gallery space. Therefore, applying the conventional tools of art documentation (texts, photographs, videos), would not really succeed in representing the group in any meaningful way. Instead, a representation of 16Beaver would require two distinct elements: sharing its open, participatory structure with an audience, while describing very precisely the spatial and temporal context which to a large extent circumscribes how it functions – its situation in the landscape of Lower Manhattan during a period of enormous change and intense political debate.

In fact, the temporal dimension of 16Beaver operates on a number of levels: first, many of the discussions and artist presentations show the influence of the current historical moment, being concerned with contemporary politics and aesthetic debates. Second, the group's core activities are based around a schedule of weekly and monthly events, marking a recurring temporal pattern of routine. Third, this cycle of routine also generates an ongoing sense of time, as threads from one discussion intersect with others to create unfolding dialogues, present as well as potential debates. There is an important distinction here between the temporal and the temporary: for although these dialogues may be fleeting, operating most effectively in the moment, their cumulative effect is to build a continuing conversation, the past evolving into the future. Constant in structure, but with each participant's engagement slightly altering the focus and dynamic.

The spatial context is similarly complex, moving from the local to the purely virtual. Most simply, 16 Beaver Street is the address of a small office building in Lower Manhattan, where since 1999 the group has occupied the 5th floor with half a dozen studios and a communal space for meetings and exhibitions. Set up and run by artists to be financially self-supporting, the studio rents cover the shared space without the need for outside grants. The site was chosen as a deliberate point of insertion into non-art world circuits, with the surrounding neighbourhood focused on finance and tourism, housing the New York Stock Exchange, Battery Park, and the World Trade Center site. In many ways, Lower Manhattan marks the historical core of the city, and offers rich economic and cultural exchanges usually inaccessible to alternative art spaces. Finally, beyond this immediate neighbourhood, 16Beaver email lists function as an extended platform for ideas and for posting information, articles, and open calls. In effect, 16Beaver Group operates as a number of overlapping communities, of studio tenants, meeting participants, and online networks.

Each of these contexts in space and time would necessarily feature in any effort at "inscribing the temporal" of 16Beaver. Equally importantly, the diverse aspects of its ethos: the idea of community, of platform and participation, of evolution and potentiality, of engagement with the social and political environment.

The first time the group addressed this issue of self-representation, for *AccessZone* at the Bronx Museum (September 2001), a straightforward archive of video and textual material was complemented by face-to-face exchanges between artists and audience. Not so much an exhibition as a one-day event bringing together various creative collectives, *AccessZone* was a natural extension of 16Beaver's interest in creating networks, and was structured around active engagement and dialogue rather than the mode of passive reception belonging to a conventional exhibition.

In many ways, the development of the project for *Inscribing the Temporal* presented greater challenges, requiring a conceptual shift to demonstrate the dynamics of community despite the physical separation of interlocutors, from Vienna to New York. The aim was to make the piece participatory for an audience, and

to replicate the fluctuating movements of dialogue, while avoiding a kind of documentation which would risk making 16Beaver something foreign to us: static, closed, definitive. Finally, it seemed necessary to work with the physicality of the exhibition space, creating object-based works to encourage the interaction of the viewer.

Working against a closed form of inscription, the project took shape as the fabrication of a 16Beaver anti-archive, utilising the metaphor of the souvenir – a throwaway substitute for professionalised art documentation, writing history through mendacious travellers' tales and questionable kitsch, foregrounding a personal rather than an official narrative. Photographed in an informal catalogue and on display in an interactive "information sandbox", these random keepsakes make present an idea of 16Beaver via a participatory, fluid structure which invites play and engagement (wish you were here ...).

Simultaneously, these souvenirs do carry messages about the life of 16Beaver in New York, 2003. Souvenirs of the habitual represent the mundane ephemera of our everyday environment: dead straight documentation of the view out the window, of the chairs we use from week to week. Souvenirs of resistance work to shift the context of found objects towards an alternative mythmaking: ubiquitous flags and ghostly twin towers writing new micro-histories of place. Fake souvenirs show re-enactments of events distorted by faulty memory: dioramas in snowglobes with tableaux of discussions and collaborations, souvenir t-shirts produced after the event. And finally, mixed amongst all these, things we actually used: copies of readings, videos screened.

In this way, the project examines how artists' discourses and debates are written and re-written, read and re-read within the frame of the art institution. Rather than approaching the history of alternative art practices through a definitive and linear narrative, the souvenir suggests the possibility of disruptions and contradictions – as well as continuities and repetitions – within these stories; offering demystification rather than canonisation.

Just as it is necessary for artists to understand the mechanics of the institution in order to negotiate a pathway through its expectations, they must also endeavour to make themselves understood within this context, in an active engagement with its representational discourses. Ideally, this process of discussion and exchange would replace the institution's characteristically "parasitic" assembling of decontextualised objects into a collection, with a more collaborative, less authoritative, mode. This balanced or "symbiotic" relationship has potentially far greater meaning for the institution, invited into the experience of the temporal project, and open to learning the advantages of its more dynamic qualities: flexible, engaging, shape-shifting. For the artist, rather than interpreting institutional dialogue as an unacceptable, one-sided compromise, it would be more productive to self-consciously make use of the opportunities it offers – visibility and accessibility to broader communities – while not necessarily abandoning the effort to articulate an alternative relationship between artist-art-audience to that drawn by the institution.

Ultimately, this question of "inscribing the temporal" does not concern the institution as such, but which audience to engage with, and on which terms. Perhaps, for certain temporal projects, disappearance may be the more appropriate strategy, in a practice working now inside, now outside, the institution. For the rest, the means and method of inscription must be negotiated with careful consideration, as marking the final stage of the artwork's production.

Inevitably, some part of the temporal will always evade inscription within the institution, as with 16Beaver's invitation to participate in its project, temporarily situated on the floor of the gallery space, but intended to initiate further dialogue to take place outside, afterwards. While this exhibition is finite, temporary, for 16Beaver the project is ongoing, with this manifestation operating as an experimental prototype for future development. Provisional, but full of potential; in this way "inside" can remain just as dynamic as "outside", inscription not the end, but another beginning.