

Round Table

Reading Exhibitions

Coordinated and edited by Natasha Conland

The purpose of this round table was to engage a range of curators, writers, and artists in the journal's focus on reading as it pertains to exhibition making. The question of "reading exhibitions" springs from discussions the editors have had about the relationship between the exhibition as a physical experience of artworks/objects in real space and the other formats in which an exhibition can be experienced, notably, the catalogue, reviews, etc. The role reading plays in creative, curatorial and critical practice is commonly taken for granted wherever it occurs. The direction of the round table asked participants to consider where there are consumers of exhibitions who do not see the exhibition space proper, and what this means for their reception. Can they be experienced from afar, mediated via the catalogue, or reconstructed via the magazine page? Do these formats extend, delimit or transform the exhibition? In the groundless space of a closed blog-site during a concentrated period participants imagined where reading is situated for today's exhibition makers and viewers. The topic of the round table is not about any particular exhibition. Indeed it asked us to reverse our expectations about the primacy of the exhibition over reading about it.

Natasha Conland, Monday, April 2, 2012. Perhaps I will start with the broadest question first – how does reading influence and affect the exhibition experience? With the abundance of written forms in circulation, is it timely to ask what the relationship might be between the exhibition as a physical experience, with one spatiotemporal dimension, and the exhibition as a written account? Given the volume of email news alone containing previews, reviews, exhibition notices, those who consume exhibitions through word and image alone must grossly outweigh those who experience them in their physical form. Therefore, what possibilities lie in the "read" exhibition? Can an exhibition be experienced solely from afar, as a written account may infer, and if so, what is lost or gained in that experience? How does the proliferation of written material around exhibitions change, add or transform the physical life of an exhibition or its viewing? Indeed, can we be "absorbed" in an exhibition through its written account?

Increasing desire, on the part of the art world generally, for fluid global interchange with a view to making exhibitions or commissions if not readable, then at least graspable, from afar. Through a nuanced combination of writing that builds a layered sense of what it is to viscerally experience the artwork, and carefully selected documentation, we are now attuned to locating ourselves in never to be seen exhibitions. This does not mean we experience the work, our understanding is guided by a framing of the artwork, particular readings and viewpoints, and photographs deemed iconic. This edited version can be highly evocative and precise in capturing a sense of the experiential, often by colouring in seemingly slight or mundane details, but it is still provisional. The care in which publications are constructed, for multiple viewpoints and multiple readings, and the space they create for the reader to engage and build a version of the exhibition through fragments is really the question.

Christina Barton. Yes, that said, rather than reception after or aside from the fact, in the form of the published record, there is also reading's relationship to conception: what is the relation of an exhibition to a prior text or body of knowledge? I pose this because I am currently working with a colleague to develop a show based on their PhD research. The challenge for them, having viewed but never curated a show before, is to shift from the construction of a linear argument, to the presentation of their subject as a fully spatialised experience.

In thinking this through I have been reminded of the freedom an exhibition poses; its looseness in comparison to the logic of the written pre-text or its documentary postscript. I am not proposing a binary in which one is favoured over the other; rather I'm struck by the relationality between the two. An exhibition wraps meaning around works of art in ways that are mobile, multi-dimensional, inchoate, implicit; it relies on actual, material, kinesthetic, encounter, while a pre-text gives this experience a specific logic, a rationale, a certain significance. While fixed in time and space, an exhibition is contingent both as an event (that takes place) and as an absence (having taken place). It creates for itself, I would argue, a certain independence from its textual accompaniments; even as its *raison d'être* might be a written precedent.

In discussion with my colleague, I've tried to explain how an exhibition might work. I've proposed that an argument can be embedded in the works themselves, that it emerges through their layout and juxtaposition and in relation to an architectural context, that meanings can extend laterally, bounce off things in a real space. I've suggested that less needs to be said, because the viewer has more cues for thinking their way into and through the content. An exhibition is about creating an impression, generating a feeling, its meaning creeps up on you.

I've also warned that however many directional cues a curator inserts (introductory signage, consecutive arrangement of works, labels that spell out

You only have to watch how people navigate a space they will pervasively start where you hopped they would finish, or they'll simply wander, taking in virtually nothing of the interpretative material. A show just isn't the same as a book.

I've also questioned the place of pleasure; arguing that an exhibition will "succeed" only if it offers a rich visual experience. I've tried to explain that it is not enough to select a work for evidentiary purposes; you can't use art simply to make a point; there is a difference between an artwork and a document, regardless of the fact that the archival fragment can seduce on the grounds of its status as a relic, its aura as artefact. Works of art as material objects have a power that comes into play when they are encountered for real. They can stop an argument in its tracks and take the discussion entirely elsewhere.

Being forced to explain this has led me to see that the exhibition and its texts are very different discursive terrains. Perhaps the relation between the two is less deterministic than one would suppose; perhaps in fact, one encodes a necessary critique of the other.

NC. In reference to David's comments, I'm interested that we have begun with a discussion of reading's adjectival meaning – its "legibility" – where writing is supposed to play a defining role. Then Tina, those oppositional qualities, the loose, lateral, kinaesthetic effects that you speak of are seldom evoked in the primary written documents for an exhibition, its announcement and calling card. Perhaps they could be, but you are right that there might not be a persuasive argument in the wording. On occasion curators have resisted the pressure to release artist names for as long as possible, precisely because they are believed to give an exhibition more legibility, or identity; the most recent example being Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev's DOCUMENTA (13).

Curators of exhibitions are often asked for the legible measure of their work: the "key messages", the artist's names, and increasingly textual citations. Certainly curators and their galleries, museums and exhibition venues, are often reliant upon pre-written texts to generate interest in an exhibition, yet any attempt to describe the space of the exhibition while it is yet to be fully formed, falls into fairly standard measures in most pre-view material. There are practical and methodological problems for writers of press releases and preview texts to convey what is or might be going on in the space of an exhibition, yet for many people this is the most they will read of an exhibition. Sometimes you will hear the murmur from afar – that X exhibition is sounding interesting, promising as a result. Yes, provisional, but some kind of die has been cast.

How are people inspired to visit exhibitions and become on-site audiences? Are they attracted to the clarity of an idea in written form, does it strike a chord, does it feel contemporaneous with their own thinking, or do they merely feel envious

– a limited, one-time-only experience of art, and therefore honouring its time-based or performative aspects. In the social space of art's reception "being there" matters for more than reasons of art alone, this we know, yet the expectations for an exhibition to shift spatial and aesthetic terrain are high. I am curious whether visitors, myself included, have ever imagined an exhibition space before it is experienced, or a work of art prior to viewing it. Could we dream of an exhibition that wasn't a composite of exhibitions we've already seen?

The roguish traits of exhibitions we will seldom admit to (publicly) as exhibition makers – wilful alliances, exploding injustices of representation even in size or scale, representation or resource – as they are distracting to its cogency. But these rough edges are part of the desired experience of being there, if only to measure where our expectations fall short. If, as it seems, the exhibition notice (a simple announcement of dates, title, place, contributors) is to be replaced by an ever extending preview of the ideas, intentions, reference points, alliances – what does this also say of our trust in the viewing public, and the implied fear for that space of native instability, where various peoples walk through art on location, at any given time, under any given conditions?

DC: The contextual information that you speak of, Natasha, (press releases, fliers, project launches etc) are certainly key devices in shaping and building expectations, and I agree they activate an assortment of associations, projections and aspirations so that the exhibition begins to form while we stand at the letterbox reading the invitation or skim read e-flux press release in-between student consultations.

Artists and curators are increasingly aware that there are real risks to leaving the marketing to the experts because of the way in which crucial flavours are imbued at the get-go that build very specific expectations. For Rirkrit Tiravanija's project, *Untitled, 2009 (Pay Attention)* for One Day Sculpture, the announcement card "was" the work, and sought to draw our attention to the increasingly narrow spaces between the marketing (announcing) of an exhibition and the artwork itself with. That project in particular spoke to the role supposedly "nebulous profiling" plays with how we come to frame and locate meanings before we even experience the work. By asking the recipient of the invitation card to pay attention to something (in this case to New Zealand's quirky orange pedestrian crossing signs), Tiravanija effectively and amusingly cut out the middleman thereby activating the work at the very moment we are made aware of it.

CB: I like that idea of an exhibition's "roguish traits"; I know well the surprise of seeing something in a space that was not "there" in the list of works or the conceptual schema, a twist or connection that adds to or skews the curatorial agenda. I also know from my own viewing experiences that what one takes from or makes of a show is often wayward, partial, personal. Reading reviews

of a large-scale Biennale. One can't help but be pleased when one's own estimation of a particular artist or work is confirmed by the reviewer, as if one has got it "right", but more often than not one senses a mismatch between one's own encounter and that of the accredited critic. Did I miss something, or is there an agenda already in play in those reference points to which you point?

Somewhere in this nexus one discerns the inevitable play between ideas, objects and meanings and the powerful forces that set out to control these. Reading in this sense is a layered exercise, a game of matching words to things as they are encountered in specific situations, in order to understand the curatorial point, and a sussing out of what else is at stake: canon formation, gamesmanship, market pressures, and so on. Ironically, it is the press release that often makes this double reading explicit. The catalogue will often present a discursive frame or extrapolating document, and be immensely useful for this, but its acknowledgements and credits also tell another story.

Terry Smith. *Hi Natasha... Sorry for not being able to get into the blog but a combination of factors (end of semester, bombs threats disrupting everything here in Pittsburgh, and the priority of finishing my book on curating) proved too much. As some small compensation I am offering the round table a reflective excerpt called from my upcoming book Thinking Contemporary Curating, to be published by DAP for Independent Curators International, New York, in October 2012:*

“...To exhibit is... to bring a selection of such existents... or newly created works of art, into a shared space (that may be a room, a site, a publication, a web portal, or an app) with the aim of demonstrating, primarily through the experiential accumulation of visual connections, a particular constellation of meaning that cannot be made known by any other means. To ‘read’ an exhibition, then, is to follow the lineaments of the proffered constellation until you grasp its meaning. Of course such meanings, once found, may be parsed in terms other than strictly exhibitionary: art critical, art historical; literary, philosophical, cultural; personal or idiosyncratic; ideological or programmatic – the list is long. But exhibitionary meaning (Walter Benjamin named one aspect of it ‘exhibition value,’ but now it is a larger idea) is quite specific because it is established and experienced in the space of an exhibition, actual or virtual (virtual includes memory).

“It follows that, broadly speaking, contemporary curating should aim to display some aspect of what it is, or was, or might be, to be contemporary as a matter of individual and collective experience. Thus there is a spatial, and phenomenological, horizon for contemporaneity within the exhibition: it is a discursive, epistemological, and dramaturgical space in which various kinds of temporality may be produced or shown to coexist. Enabling viewers to experience an understanding of contemporaneity in an exhibition setting (taking ‘exhibition’ in the broad sense just mentioned, and ‘setting’ to mean any

lent of making contemporaneity visible in the case of art, and of capturing it in writing for publication in the case of criticism and history ..."

... "Reading differently. Can we move beyond the idea that curators mainly give exhibitionary form to art historical and art critical ideas, and that it is these for which we should look in reading an exhibition? Is it not the case that curators have – for decades, at least, and perhaps longer (the history is only just beginning to be put in place) – shaped exhibitions around *curatorial* ideas, and that it is these to which we should attend when reading them? If so, what are these ideas, and is 'idea' the right word for them?"

"I begin from a bridging example. In her review of Performa II, entitled 'So Big, Performa Now Misses the Point,' *New York Times* critic Roberta Smith chastises director RoseLee Goldberg for not pushing hard enough at programming events that – in contrast to those that blur the boundaries between theatre and the visual arts in some vague or haphazard manner – fully exemplify and at the same time push at the boundaries of 'visual art performance.' This is an art critic holding a curator to account, demanding explicitly that her exhibition be a kind of argument about what is and what is not performance art, or, more specifically, what constitutes a particular kind of performance art that is implied by the term 'visual art performance.' Is this fair comment on a real shortfall within an enterprise that is essentially shared by both curator and critic, or an example of an art critic missing a curatorial point?"

Blair French. From the responses to date, I suspect that we generally concur in our understanding of "reading" as an act of making connections across and between elements, to convert sequences and patterns of symbols into meaning. Terry writes of "reading" an exhibition as an act of "follow[ing] the lineaments of the proffered constellation [of exhibits or existents]." I am struck by Tina's description of the gap between (even the overt and wilful clash of) a curatorial direction on how to read the exhibition (supplied both in textual formats but crucially also in spatial and visual design), and each individual "reading" of an exhibition through its direct encounter – those individuals who wander from intended end to beginning, or slope back and forth across the grammatical structure of the exhibition. This effectively reminds us that each act of reading, of interpretation, is from another perspective one of misreading, of misinterpretation.

David alludes to this differently in writing about the structure of the accompanying (or the stand-in?) publication – how it needs to incorporate multiple viewpoints and perspectives in order to enable an act of what I'll call connective or reconstructive reading in which each reader in effect assembles a version of the exhibition. This seems to me to be a model of a publication as exhibition rather than linear book, and one that is increasingly adopted for publications

accompanying or paralleling many exhibitions today. There is the Biennale guidebook that, like a travel guidebook, one skips back and forth with in, less idiosyncratic path already journeyed. Then there is the project "reader" that sets a social-political context for "reading" the exhibition without directing or engaging in that act of reading. All the guidebook-style publications lining my shelves are from exhibitions I have actually viewed, for the most part with the book in hand. They are maps of sorts, but also memory aids. They don't "read" the work for me, nor can I very effectively in retrospect read the work or exhibition as a whole through them. Indeed, to do so would be to read an entirely other exhibition given that so many of the images are only indicative of artists' practices, at least in the minds of curators or artists' agents who have supplied images prior to their creation within the exhibition in question.

The "readers", however, I collect more generally as an accumulating body of thought around contemporary art within its multitude of social and political specificities. I have many readers for projects I never physically viewed. They can function entirely independent of the occasion of the art project. In collective form then, they are a gathering of contemporary art readings generated by the occasion of exhibitions, but dependent on the work of art for perhaps nothing more than a set of foundational premises: a form to think from, around and only very occasionally at; a provocation to intervene within an already historical moment; and a situation that levers the resources necessary to give public form to this thinking (to produce the book).

However, if the reader provides an alternate – although now conventional – publication model to that of the catalogue, it is nevertheless generally produced within the productive sphere of the artist project/exhibition.

Helena Reekitt. Thinking about your remarks, it strikes me that the experience of learning about art and exhibitions through textual sources is of particular relevance to art audiences living at a distance from mainstream centres of art making and exhibition. This reminds me of how Sherrie Levine talks of discovering the modern masters through reproductions as an artist growing up in the American Midwest. Feeling several removes from the real thing – and experiencing three-dimensional art as a flat reproduction – filtered into her work in interesting ways. We see the mixture of envy, admiration and longing in her approach to mimicry.

Now we are in a very different culture of appropriation to that of Levine – what has been called the post-Internet era. As the artist/activist Artie Vierkant explained in 2010:

“...Post-Internet is defined as a result of the contemporary moment: inherently informed by ubiquitous authorship, the development of attention as currency,

Illibility and mutability of digital materials.

"In the Post-Internet climate, it is assumed that the work of art lies equally in the version of the object one would encounter at a gallery or museum, the images and other representations disseminated through the Internet and print publications, bootleg images of the object or its representations, and variations on any of these as edited and recontextualized by any other author... For objects after the Internet there can be no 'original copy'."

We recognise the attitude described by Vietkant in the work of artists like Seth Price and Ryan Trecartin – how they matter-of-factly embed the Internet's processes of sampling, circulation, distribution and repetition into their art. Price wrote about such approaches in his oft-quoted 2002 essay "Dispersion." More recently, in 2009, Hito Steyerl published "In Defence of the Poor Image," which considers "the copy in motion... the ghost of an image... the itinerant image... copied and pasted into other channels of distribution."

Steyerl's emphasis on the degradation of the image central to post-Internet culture is echoed in the wonderfully apocalyptic opening to artist Oliver Laric's *Vyversions*, which begins with a voiceover (it also exists in written form):

"Degradation followed display. Refined and emptied, the image was treated like the lowliest of things. Images were broken, burned, toppled, beheaded and hanged. They were spat, pissed and shit on, tossed into toilets, sewers, fountains, canals, rivers, rubble heaps, garbage dumps, pigsties and charnel houses, and lewdly handled in brothels and inns. Stone statues were used as cobblestones, keystones and infill, or were modified to represent something new."

In this context I find Tina's albeit eloquent and articulate discussion of making and visiting exhibitions somewhat nostalgic. Is there really "a difference between an artwork and a document", as Tina suggests? Doesn't that buy into rather old-fashioned ideas of artistic aura? Isn't the exhibition a format in which things that have not been defined as 'art' already can take on art-like qualities?

CB. My comments are partly driven by the fact that my most intense responses to exhibitions are when I am travelling and outside my own context and encountering things "for real". It is only then that I have the feeling I am gaining some tenuous hold of "what is going on". I also understand that we can never entirely embrace the "event", or be there in some unmediated, primary sense. Reading, scanning the internet, only go so far to ameliorating that sense of disconnect.

And I must admit, I enjoy looking in the bookshop after seeing the show almost as much, and my choice of souvenir, which book I buy, becomes a highly

charged decision: how heavy is it, how expensive, to what extent do I want to secure my memories of this moment by owning the accompanying document, does this book interest me in terms of my wider research interests? Such decisions are carefully weighed and add to the total experience. In "The Incunabulum and the Plastic Bag" Maria Fusco calls book buying of this kind the "distinct commercial sublimation of our relationship with the art object in a gallery context" and the "arbiter of meaningful participation" (in *A Manual for the 21st-Century Art Institution* (Whitechapel, 2009)).

HR. Yes, our habits of exhibition viewing are changing. Boris Groys, in "Comrades of Time," describes how "Contemporary spectators are spectators on the move; primarily, they are travellers. Contemporary *vita contemplativa* coincides with permanent active circulation. The act of contemplation itself functions today as a repetitive gesture that can not and does not lead to any result – to any conclusive and well-founded aesthetic judgement..."

Anja Isabel Schneider, one of my students at Goldsmiths, recently curated *Formes Breves, Asuttes, 25 / Formas Breves, Otrras, 25* for the Franck Lorraine and MARCO, Vigo. This group show including text-based art and art that mimicked forms of reading and of writing in order to explore the fragmentary, partial, interrupted and non-linear ways in which we read today. It seems that we read text on a screen very differently from that on a page, our eyes scanning to take in the whole rather than reading line-by-line.

CB. At this point, Kate, as an artist who has actively used both text and publications, I'd really like to know how you negotiate the reading experience? Does your work become a response to certain conditions of reception; to what extent can a work anticipate or undermine a reading implied by a curatorial brief?

Kate Newby. I think a lot how much to say, what is generous, or what is just overstating the fact in the reception of the work. Often I've enjoyed having less said about things, and fewer directives to point things out, because I've been constantly reminded and taught that the viewer is often smarter and more capable than I think they are. In various gallery or public spaces I get excited by the prospect of the viewer encountering and responding to the situations I create in their own way. Perhaps this means that a lot of people may miss things or not see it in it's fullest most described form, but from my experience when they do feel engaged this viewer comes up with surprising observations and responses.

Having said that, I do think it's important not be too oblique and to provide a necessary amount of cues for understanding the work. I think I navigate this by using a lot of things I see getting used in the world outside of the gallery in the work itself. An example of this might be seen in the concrete ramp I did recently for the Auckland Art Gallery, *I'm just like a pile of leaves* (2011). **It didn't feel**

occur to me to make a concrete floor, with the intention that it be walked over. It's present in our lives every day. But I would often watch people unsure as to whether they could walk on it. Some felt fine and seemed to have an immediate sense of what to do with it and would have no problem walking over the ramp as they would any other floor. Others just walked around it and looked from a distance. I wasn't sad when this happened, I was just interested in creating a situation where the viewer had to make a lot of decisions on their own about the work.

I think publications can be amazing for expanding the work, but I often try to push for a write up of the work that is loose. It is mostly a very different thing for me, the publication and the exhibition. A lot of times the work literally becomes something different in a photograph (sadly, sometimes this is better!). It seems like an interesting time to stretch out and use supporting material to speak to the core factors but often I like to do this through associated material, not direct images and texts.

I've been quite interested in a space here in New York called The Artist's Institute. They have a "season" of one artist at a time that runs for six months but with three changes of the work. At the moment it's Rosemarie Trockel. I've been going to film screenings there that she has chosen as significant for her. Nothing I have seen has spoken to her work in a direct way. This is what I like to happen in the accompanying publication to an exhibition, these are the things that make the work exciting and expansive.

BF. Kate's comment regarding the Rosemarie Trockel selected screenings provides an interesting example of how art institutions are trying to find increasingly dynamic ways of publicly recognising and presenting – almost performing – the complexity of the contexts that artists themselves perceive and build around their work, including through publication. There is of course the simple conveying of artist perspectives and opinions – through interviews with curators, educators and writers who filter these into formal writing, through public talks, or audio and video commentary in gallery spaces and online. But increasingly common are the artist-curated film programs, and artist-selected reading lists and reading groups, the published lists of what artists might be reading, watching or listening to. Some of this slips into personality profiling, a step-away from Sunday magazine supplement or in-flight airline magazine. But at the more sophisticated end of the spectrum, these approaches layer potential readings of and around work in a manner that simply cannot be achieved by a singular textual approach. Rather than using reading as a means to "make sense" of the work, they actually complicate encounters with and understandings of the work.

Of course, there's always the possibility that such contextualisation can appear incredibly obtuse and befuddling – or just too contrived and clever by half.

There is also the possibility that it becomes a stand-in for the research-based, intellectual, interpretive activity that is being squeezed out of writer/curator roles within a corporatised art world. However, it mostly seems to me to rehearse in public the non-linear, improvisational, bowerbird manner by which most artists draw from the world about them. Much like the rest of us. This is a very different way of "reading" the exhibition, or reading with the exhibition, but Kate is reflecting the value of the looseness and potentiality it can produce, at best in addition to, rather than in place of, more traditional writing and reading approaches.

HR. Kate, you mention how The Artist's Institute – a small space on the Lower East Side run by curator Antony Huberman under the auspices of Hunter College – attempts to create conditions for encounters with art outside written interpretation. As you say, they show a small number of works by one artist for longer than the usual exhibition run – they present just two shows a year – and provide multiple meetings and encounters around those works. In his 2007 polemic "I (Not) Love Information," Huberman writes: "Now more so than ever: the efficiency, quantity and immediacy of information and information-systems has placed art and the artistic gesture at risk of being identified, categorized, digested, cannibalized and made into information before it has a chance to begin being art. Curiosity is being castrated by information." Phallic imagery aside, an interesting quote, I think!

As a former Education Director for a New York museum and a Curator of Contemporary Art in a provincial US museum, Huberman probably has plenty of experience of having to explain what art or exhibitions are "about" – as Natasha puts it, to say what is going on before a show has even opened.

Huberman's defence of curatorial curiosity resists putting art at the service of meaning or content, celebrating a radical pedagogic approach that borrows and expands on current interest in Jacques Rancière's idea of the "ignorant schoolteacher".

KN. Referring to Huberman's quote I want to say I'm extremely interested to think about the push for art to be understood as efficiently as possible and how this is potentially not so helpful for the work. I guess it's an interesting challenge – this idea of information ripping around the art work so quickly and in many ways intended to help clarify things that it ends up telling the art work what it is before the work has had a chance to exist and wonder what it is for itself, or us for it. Is it about slowing things down, or speaking about them differently? In less fixed terms or just less terms?

Megan Tamati-Quennell. For me I have been enjoying writing that has an independence, connected to the exhibition, but laterally. It's not the kind of writing you can "read" an exhibition through, though. I am thinking of writing by people like Jimmie Durham, Cushla Parkowhal and Paul Chaat Smith, or

some resonance with exhibition or the artist, curator etc.

TS. [again from excerpt] ... "Exhibiting the Unanticipated. What about the uncertain, hoped for, or unanticipated consequence that arises from the fact that an exhibition is not fully realised until it is presented in a particular place and time? Unexpected connections present themselves when works are hung within sight of each other. The narrative of an exhibition changes, in subtle and sometimes major ways, when it is installed in another venue. Taking a risk on showing a work not yet complete, or one not fully known, can skew the impact of the whole. These are important aspects of many exhibitions: opportunities that the best curators take advantage of when it presents itself, and underscore for visitors. It is one of the factors that distinguish curating from art criticism and art history, although not of course from art itself.

"In the 1988 Australian Biennale, Nick Waterlow focused on the provincialism problem (a problem for white artists). He only partly anticipated the impact of The Aboriginal Memorial, an installation of 200 hollow log coffins painted by indigenous men from Ramingining, a small settlement in the Northern Territory. These were being made in the months before the exhibition, and had their first showing there. They amounted to a counter-memorial, an oblique but quite deliberate critique of the yearlong official celebrations of the Bicentennial of the settlement of the continent by British colonists. They evoked the subsequent suffering of the Aboriginal people, as well as affirming their persistence, not least through such flowerings of their visual culture. Added late in the planning via the intervention of Dion Mundine, an indigenous art adviser, shown in one of the Piers that extends out over Sydney Harbour, and mediated by a ceremony that the painters performed on opening night, The Aboriginal Memorial became, as Waterlow acknowledged, 'the single most important statement in the Biennale', highlighting his belief that 'for many artists, particularly in this century, the Aboriginal presence is the most civilizing and creatively challenging element in our world'. [Quoted from the Biennale catalogue] While this instance of curatorial openness to a crucial artistic manifestation of a key factor in contemporary life is at least documented, how many other moments of similar consequence have disappeared from the record because of the strange reluctance of curators to record the results of their labours?"

NC. Picking up on Terry's remarks on the "disappeared record" of an exhibition's unexpected effect, or "live" qualities, I want to draw into our discussion a reference to an example from contemporary New Zealand's art history whereby the official record (the catalogue), with text that pre-dated the exhibition's opening, came to powerfully influence readings of a milestone exhibition. It is 20 years since *Headlands: Thinking Through New Zealand Art* opened at the MCA, Sydney (March 1992). This was the inaugural exhibition at the MCA. It was staged to self-reflexively revise the notion of a regional perspective within an international

For many New Zealanders at least, this show was a cultural catalyst while its dissemination operated largely through the controversial catalogue that accompanied the exhibition, through review and reaction. The publication and published responses to the exhibition fractionalised the art community in New Zealand, particularly with respect to issues of cultural appropriation and resulted in the serious scaling back of a proposed tour of the exhibition. It continues to catalyse debate as de facto textbook for contemporary New Zealand art history. And yet, according to one of the curators of the exhibition, Robert Leonard, its relation to the show itself was self-consciously tenuous and provocative. As Blair's describes, it was perhaps closer to a "reader" than a catalogue.

I was struck recently in a conversation with Robert, when he referred to the "style" of the exhibition hang, how that itself had been an influential in setting new adjacencies outside historic associations of artists, in fact even perversely dislocating this history. I got the impression that the curators had deliberately created a pepper-potting of artistic style and influence in order to accentuate exhibition themes in what he now referred to as his now outmoded postmodern impulse. The conversation was late at night and we were both tired, but I got a better impression of the *Headlands* show than I'd ever had, by his comical reference to the process of toying with the nation's art history, with slides over a light-box, reorganising through the layout and the organisation of space.

What therefore remains of *Headlands* the event? The nature of this exhibition is now determined not only by the published record, its reception, and the ongoing discourse it generates, but surviving memories of the show itself.

This is but one local example and there are others internationally where the catalogue holds sway over the memory of its exhibition.

BF, I, too, never saw *Headlands*, and my experience of it was at even further distance as I was living in the UK at the time. Thus even my experience of the intense debate that the exhibition and particularly publication generated was at a significant remove. In what were to all intents and purposes pre-Internet days (and pre-online book purchasing days) my received impression of the exhibition was in the first instance formed through the few magazines and cuttings I was sent.

I returned to New Zealand at the very end of 1993 with fully formed preconceptions (subsequently exploded) regarding the catalogue as much as the exhibition. To a large extent the catalogue was *the* story, not so much a stand-in for the exhibition (and so I never carried the assumption of it being somehow appropriately or accurately representative of the exhibition) but the very occasion itself. And yet this occasion was re-read (interpreted) essentially through various media strands. This makes me think about how it might be not only the catalogue that

that as a body of text we read in order to establish our own points of connection between, agreement with and resistance to multiple perspectives and viewpoints.

Hotel (1990), is another exhibition from around the same time that exists similarly in my consciousness as an absolutely critical juncture in contemporary art in New Zealand. Again, my reading of its importance is based neither on experience of the physical exhibition nor a specific accompanying publication but via a plethora of received commentaries – some formal, many not – that historically come to mesh with its curatorial premise.

DC. Like Blair I did not see *Headlands* and was only vaguely aware of it in Melbourne at the time. I do however distinctly remember having a copy of the catalogue thrust into my hand almost upon entry to New Zealand in 2000. An artist friend (who was not in the show) saw it as something of an induction manual to contemporary New Zealand art. I was a little nonplussed by its canonical status at first but the quality of the work was certainly strong and surprisingly focused for a national survey where the pressures to show “the full buffet” was somehow resisted. The choice of artists and writers meant to locate key strands of New Zealand art was not diluted by an imperative for too much breadth which was an amazingly acute if controversial decision by the curatorial team. The essays certainly located a breadth of practices with some rigour and above all they felt quite confident and sharp, if a tad straightforwardly postmodern. Of course *Headlands* was highly partisan and only in subsequent years has it become apparent (for a recent arrival like me anyway) how many important artists missed their moment in the sun because they could not be accommodated in the limited suite of clusters and categories.

I always think of the René Block's Biennale of Sydney, *Ready-made Boomerang* (1990) as an example of a catalogue that was as big, literally and metaphorically, as the show. Those famous words “Art is Easy” plastered across the largest pink catalogue I had ever seen was quite something for an undergraduate student wondering how I was supposed to cart the thing back on the bus to Melbourne. On reading Block's introduction where he spoke about how at a Sydney Opera House concert quite late in the piece he made the decision to remove a large swag of the project, it was amusing to speculate how big the catalogue would have been if he had not had to face up to a significant budget shortfall. Not only did the catalogue speak to an enormous sense of confidence in Australian art at the time, it positioned Duchamp in a global context that included this region as at least a node within the bigger picture. I remember shards of the exhibition like seeing Broodthaers for the first time and great Manzoni but somehow the catalogue is right there front and centre as a work in itself with its full page plates, texts by Fluxus artists and Block's myth-making curatorial statement. Maybe it's just a detail but I rarely see the 1990 Biennale catalogue in second hand shops in Australia.

171-2 *I did see Headlands when it was exhibited in Wellington at the National Art Gallery. Having started at the National Art Gallery as an intern in 1990, by 1992 I was a trainee art curator guided by Tim Walker, the then Senior Art Curator and under Director Jenny Harper. The exhibition itself with its mix of works from Laurence Aberhart, Jeffery Harris, L. Budd, Derrick Cherry, Julian Dashper, Colin McCahon, Milan Mrkusich and Rita Angus amongst others made an impact on me, but perhaps more particularly, so did works like Nga Morehu by Shona Rapira Davies, Ralph Hotere and Bill Culbert's Pathway to the Sea, Aramona, Para Matchitt's Tungā Waka and Michael Parekowhai's work Everyone Will Live Quietly. From a Māori perspective Headlands was the first major contemporary art exhibition with a recognised bicultural perspective, including the curatorial involvement of Cliff Whiting, and contemporary taonga from the likes of Rangimarie Heret and Lyonel Grant. Here contemporary Māori art sat alongside modern and contemporary New Zealand art.*

While in retrospect the catalogue sits aside from the exhibition, it noticeably took that bicultural dimension further. This is marked by the interview with Cliff, who utilises concepts like Turangawaewae, which I saw as an attempt to ground the art work both in the New Zealand landscape and cultural location which had not been seen in other catalogues of New Zealand art to date. The chronology at the back of the catalogue charted significant moments, events, national figures and organisations in art, including Māori art. Then there was Rangī Panoho's essay. Rangī was arguably the first full-time contemporary Māori art curator in the country. While Ngahuia te Awēkotuku may have preceded him with her projects at the Walkato Museum of Art and History, he was certainly the first contemporary Māori art curator I knew. At the time, I don't think I completely understood the controversy that erupted over his essay "Maori: At the Centre, On 'The Margins,'" or the purportedly essentialist position he took in relation to artists Gordon Walters and Theo Schoon's work. I did wonder though how it happened, why there was no counter argument published in the catalogue to neutralise or provide another view. If the essay was so divisive and it was known it would be, why was it published...?

Ultimately for me the catalogue sat aside from the exhibition. It was not evocative or directly reflective of the exhibition. It is a reader that could be added to the exhibition experience, existing independently from the exhibition with enough depth and breadth to give you a sense of what *Headlands* attempted to achieve and provide an expanded experience of New Zealand art.

CB. Reading from one exhibition to another is also an important means to establish meaning and value. In comparison with *Distance Looks our Way*, an exhibition of contemporary New Zealand art that was also designed as an "export" show and which took place almost exactly at the same time, *Headlands* set out to address the nature of New Zealand art practice as it had evolved in the second half of the twentieth century, using artworks to posit arguments of

comparison to *Headlands*, its failure to tackle the larger issues that were shaping art in New Zealand relegated it, in my mind, to a minor status: a pleasing showcase pitched appropriately for an occasion where nations show off their wares, it offered a selection of "one-offs" that were unique because they hailed from somewhere. That *Headlands* remains hijacked by reactions to one of these curatorial propositions (the Walters's saga) was disappointing, but not without its lasting consequences. It also gave rise to one of the most vigorous debates this culture has ever had to contend with. *Headlands* mattered, I suppose, because it was discursively rich and it had a sense of its own historicity.

BF. The relationship of "outside" readings of an exhibition with its gradual dispersal into and as history is something we necessarily pay constant attention to at Artspace. We commission and publish critical reflections upon our own projects. These appear not alongside the exhibition project – as explanatory or promotional – but subsequent to it, distanced from it, with all that implies regarding a detached, independent perspective. They appear in our own periodical so we are, in effect, ensuring that the work triggers some form of textual rumination. The periodical is intended as something akin to the reader I mentioned earlier – here occasioned by the event but not in the sense of single, isolated projects but their accumulation into a program. We are, in a sense, attempting to produce an external reading context for our own program, with all the contradiction and compromise that such an endeavor necessarily entails.

Historically, this issue has been most concentrated through the example of the critical readers Artspace produced in response to each Biennale of Sydney from 1998 through to 2006. This was an initiative of my predecessor Nicholas Tsouras in response to a perceived absence of sustained critical discourse generated either by or in response to the Biennale. The idea as I understood it was to commission rapid response texts by a wide range of writers, subject them to minimal editorial intervention, do a basic in-house design, print, collate and staple bind and have these quite substantial but very simply produced publications out on the street within roughly a week of the Biennale opening. They were in effect intended as insertions back into the viewing experience of the Biennale, as provocations to the evolving discussions taking place in and around the exhibition. And in this regard they were, I believe, extremely important and highly successful. They called for writers to provide their first, almost off-the-cuff thoughts on the Biennale – to think aloud as if in a form of conversation. They were produced entirely independently of the mechanics of the Biennale itself (although Artspace was also an exhibiting venue for those Biennales), and yet for a relatively specialist audience they became a crucial element of the initial reading of the exhibitions. Their necessarily rudimentary production qualities emphasised their somewhat provisional quality, as did the frequently provocative commentary within. Inasmuch as they came to form part of the memory of

those Biennales it was a memory of the immediacy of the moment of gathering around and within the event in some discursive manner. Beyond that they could only ever be partial historical records of the exhibition form itself.

However in 2006 we decided to tie the Biennale critical reader more closely to our developing publication program by significantly increasing its production values. Writers still had the same brief regarding “thinking aloud” and turning critical responses around in a very short period of time, but the production process took longer so the book – as it turned out to be – became less of an insertion into the conversational and critical framework of the Biennale than an entry that appeared to stand outside and slightly after the event. It came to assume the guises of both historical record and critical summation of the Biennale – two roles it was never intended to fulfil. This gap between textual intention and the material form of the publication in effect produced a potential misreading of the book as authoritative account, with attendant dangers should it ever in fact come to “hold sway over the memory of its exhibition.”

NC. Blair, in the final words of your entry on the Biennale critical reader, you mention that, when the publication was formalised through higher print values and standard book production timelines it shifted into the territory of the “historical record”. I’m interested in whether these formal changes affected the writing style, or their sense of readership? In the early editions, both writer and reader are still literally in the room, whereas later, while they write during an exhibition it is for a reader no longer in the room.

BF. In many ways, the earlier critical readers embodied the approach and tone we would now associate with online writing, including the art blog. Texts were rapidly written, often informal in tone and pitched immediately back into the exhibition format as you note, rather than standing apart, but also with the intention (and effect) of dispersing that immediate response as widely as possible beyond the exhibition. They shared the temporal coordinates of the exhibition but an expanded territory of reader contact. These are all things we now associate with online platforms, and were beginning to do so certainly by 2006. Perhaps then the online realm necessitates a refinement of the printed form – a considered rationale for its presence. Put simply, there’s an implication that any text being granted a print format, however rudimentary, is necessarily being marked for a form of independent life and historical significance. And so a writer will most likely approach the text accordingly, however implicitly, even unconsciously that is done.

HR. From this discussion it’s clear that talking, as much as writing, determines an exhibition’s fate. Natasha’s example of *Headlands* seems like a good example. While it sounds like the exhibition catalogue played a key role in the show’s dissemination, it was the talk that it provoked that guaranteed its controversy and its ongoing impact. I think of similarly once-reviled but now influential

Biennale of 1993 (dubbed by Roberta Smith "the Reading While Standing Up Biennial"). Pascal Gleien terms the kind of talk, speculation, opinion-casting and gossip that fuels the art world as "the murmuring of the multitude."

As an aside, I also think it's interesting that we are conducting this conversation online – a format that I value for bringing together people in different places with zero carbon footprint, but that can be difficult in practice. It's challenging to read the tone and affect in online contributions. Some kinds of "reading" are better done face-to-face.

NC: OK, although there is no doubt more to be said in relation to *Headlands* and the interplay of lasting published accounts versus improvisational publications, I want to start a final conversation thread. This relates to the more challenging definitions of "greatness". I think we all have in mind someone we might consider a "great reader", but what are the characteristics of a great reader with respect to the exhibition-going experience, what are they doing and how are they behaving? How do you imagine this person operating – their behaviours even. This question relates not just to what they read, but also how, when, where etc? Are there attitudes and values that still apply to this question but need to be readdressed or considered? Lastly, for exhibition makers, or critics of exhibitions, who is your "reader" as opposed to viewer, or can they in fact be separable?

BF: They can be separated, even as they function within a single individual. This is a simplistic distinction, I know, but I think it has some merit. The ideal viewer is attuned to the moment of encounter with the exhibition and to the material detail of the work. The key subjects in this relationship are simply the work and the viewer at a particular time in a particular place. So the ideal viewer is one who gives the attention and the time to allow this relationship to unfold, to grow and shift. In some ways the act of viewing here takes place at a micro level. On the other hand, the ideal reader expands those subjects to include the potentially immense intellectual, cultural and historical sphere beyond the form of the work and/or exhibition itself. For me the reader acts to position the work and/or exhibition within these wider spheres – often speculatively. The reader makes arguments for and against its broader, particularly historical, significance. The reader summarises meaning, value and effect and sets these into play culturally. The reader takes in the big picture. They play a crucial role in opening work and/or exhibition out onto the world. It might be said that the ideal reader can only exist with or build upon the figure and activity of the ideal viewer. But then, there have been some extraordinary readers (or readings), or exhibitions, that have completely by-passed or even refuted their viewing.

MT-Q: I think they can be separate too. I am not sure who the ideal or great reader is, perhaps their characteristics change depending on the exhibition and

experience offered. For me when developing an exhibition those ideal readers are engaged in viewing the exhibition, but perhaps want to gain a different entry in to the work, the artist, the curatorial premise of the exhibition etc. The viewer who wants a level of detail or an expanded or broader context (intellectual, cultural or historical) as Blair outlines, that which cannot be gained solely through the act of viewing. An exhibition can be “read” from afar because of the writing created for it, the catalogue, blog or web text or other forms, but, I don’t think this way replaces the actual full experience of an exhibition. Writing provides additional or other experience but cannot reproduce the moment of being in a particular place at a particular time.

HR. “Great readers,” of course, need “great writers,” which raises a problem that many curators face today. As the institutional belief in ambitious scholarly exhibitions gives way to demands for spectacle, celebrity and event, curators often receive little time to read or research around their projects, let alone to develop their writing. Blair as you have already noted, there is a danger that the proliferation of alternative approaches to audience education and interaction become a “stand-in for the research-based, intellectual, interpretative activity that is being squeezed out of writer/curator roles within a corporatised art world.” In response to the erasure of curators’ time to read, write and reflect, some institutions – like the Artist’s Institute or the Showroom in London – are breaking away from gruelling exhibition schedules to redefine their focus on research, enquiry and participation.

NC. It seems then, that we are arguing to separate out not only the activities of viewing, and reading, but also their associated qualities of “action” and “reflection”. What I sense throughout the conversation is also some distinction attributed to the time necessary for these activities – that the exhibition allows for tangential, fluid time, as opposed to reading which cultivates linear, productive time – albeit with the possible interruption of web-based platforms which Helena argues allow a more discursive reading time.

To my detriment perhaps I often notice myself reading sideways, thinking of other things, “brainstorming” while reading the best of texts. I think many of us do this, and it is what makes us readers “inside” rather than “outside” our topic, it helps us inhabit not only the space of reading, but also our subject (the exhibition). Rather than reading utilising a space “outside” or distanced from the exhibition, I would argue that it is certainly a space independent from the exhibition. It has the potential to exercise your thinking in a way that is sometimes impossible under endurance viewing, or with “gallery legs”. Moments of consequence inevitably come from a union of these functions. We just cannot see everything, and while we can download and reap appropriate individual artworks at leisure, we cannot link them in to each other contemporaneously online as yet. Therefore, to “see” more, we rely on the conjunction of words, ours and others.