

Looking back to the future

Gerrie van Noord

A couple of months before this publication was put to bed, I received an excited – or, what I maybe interpreted more as agitated – email from one of the artists who participated in *The Invisible Generation*. He asked to be sent some copies, seeing as the book was out now. It seemed to have caused him some anxiety, and the tone of his email echoed a feeling of having been left out, and therefore not being ‘up to date’. There was even a slight sense of him being cross about the fact he hadn’t been contacted about the layout in relation to his projects and that he wasn’t aware of ‘what was going on’. In short, he wasn’t ‘there’, where he should be, holding a copy and being able to engage with its contents and how his projects had been captured and represented.

Of course I’m exaggerating here. Nevertheless, a bit piqued by his being piqued, I responded that it was nowhere near out, or even near going to press, and asked him where he got that nonsense from. The response came almost immediately, and he referred me to *The Invisible Generation*’s Wikipedia page. And lo and behold, there it was. It wasn’t even a simple announcement about the impending publication date; I was personally being quoted from said publication’s page 8. Not long after, the Wikipedia page was altered, and the quote removed, putting a moment in the future back in its rightful place, rather than in that moment’s present here and now.

But I did get what the artist in question was on about, as we all seem to have this irrepressible urge of always wanting to be there, at the right moment, in the right place. Although contemporary technology allows us the projection of seemingly being able to be omnipresent, in our early-twenty-first-century physical reality it is still impossible to actually be in multiple times and spaces at the same time. We still need mechanical means to move our bodies from one place to another. And while they are often perfectly able to transport us to where we really need to or want to be, it’s all down to careful planning and the use of timetables, not to the powers of the mind or other otherworldly forces of energy. In our day-to-day existence we realise we can’t always be ‘there’, as ‘there’ can be literally anywhere, certainly in today’s ever-expanding art world, and we can’t be everywhere at the same time.

But let’s pretend we can be where we cannot, and think about where and how ideas can meet potential audiences. As meeting an audience, whichever and wherever, is inherent to all the efforts of making artistic ideas manifest. Not wanting to go into theories of perception and notions of ‘without the viewer / reader / listener the work is not complete’, there is something to say for looking more closely at the moment of encounter, or rather, the potential moments of encounter.

One of the questions that then come up is where we mentally and practically locate a work. Is it in the actual physical manifestation, enactment or embodiment? Is it in the original thought when it first appeared and that is subsequently honed into something that could be made tangible, visible, experience-able in what the artist thinks is an adequate or feasible manner? Or is it in the moment when someone actually engages with the idea through its manifestation, in whatever form, and at whatever moment in the cycle?

Extrapolating from there, could the memory, the resonance, the residue, not have something to say too and possibly stand in for any of the other, previous or subsequent – whole or partial – manifestations? Or, to go to the other end of the scale, can the original thought written down in words be as powerful, or even more so, as its execution? Can a rewind and replay – even in another format, an enactment or re-enactment, not have the same, or similar at least, weight? Or could it be that our curiosity, and potential for engagement is further tickled in the slippages between them. Because isn’t it in the slippage, and our subsequent interpretation of what meaning we think can gauge there, that someone else’s idea is imbued with an agency that speaks to us personally and directly, to take William Burroughs’ lead.

If anything, it may be useful to question where we expect to put ourselves – conditioned or not – as audience, as readers, listeners, onlookers, experiencers, and what we think we ‘need’ to get our ‘experience kick’. Aren’t we selling the artists, their ideas and their works, as well as ourselves short if we hold on to the notion we can only fulfill our desire for a ‘proper’ experience if we manage to be in what we perceive the right moment and the right place? Isn’t there any value in the notion that that experience, or multiple, similar experiences could be gained in different ways, and, in principle, here and there and everywhere?

Pondering on this all made me think of Kurt Vonnegut. In his novels, and in *Timequake* in particular, parallel universes and different eras, some more familiar to our early-twenty-first century minds than others, mix and mingle without making much of a fuss about it while more or less playing tag with each other. And he's not the only one who has tried to entertain that notion. However flawed the execution of the film *Inception* may be according to some, it taps exactly into this realm, or rather realms. The sheer idea of different speeds, layers and concepts of time, and the ability to move between them – and thus live, relive and re-experience the same, or similar moments, time and again – is also the basis of Iain Banks' latest novel, *Transition*, in which the main protagonists are literally able to transition – or flit, as he calls it – from one place and time to another.

Somehow these stories, rich in plot and twists and turns, seem to play exactly on our often felt sense of anxiety and disappointment that comes over us when we feel we haven't managed to be in the right place at the right moment. Just like the artist I referred to earlier, we all want to be there for that event, that show, that screening, that performance, that experience or that encounter – and we are all familiar with the pang we feel when we realise that something has been and gone forever, and we won't get another chance. Not wanting to live from regret to regret, we end up endlessly chasing our tail, and, in doing so, there is a risk we never actually engage with the experience we seem to want so much; we may end up hardly ever really experiencing the experience. Which is all the more reason to seriously consider – if for the moment only mentally – the notion of the experience possibly being available to us in different ways, in different times, in different places.

Vonnegut's and Banks' narratives offer us the consolation of a world, or worlds, in which it is in principle possible to always be there, or at least have the opportunity – and the choice – as well as the skills, or means, or simply the option of being able to ride the wave of fluke and happenstance to do so. Embracing the notion of multiple potential worthwhile encounters would allow us to worry less about needing to be there at the right moment. It could give us the chance to imagine ourselves experiencing in a way that relieves us from that pressure, and to engage with artists' ideas at different moments, in different ways, in different places, but doing it wholeheartedly. Vonnegut seems to have somehow gone there before us, when he stated 'nothing in this world is ever final – no one ever ends – we keep on bouncing back and forth in time, we go on and on ad infinitum'.

Lost in translation

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Whether one likes Haruki Murakami's books doesn't matter here. What does is how the way in which his original words in Japanese are conveyed in another language can have a huge impact on our level of enjoyment in the simple act of reading his texts. Having read several of his titles published some time in the 1990s, translated by two different people into English, I couldn't help but notice my two greatly divergent experiences. The first came across as much more factual, and possibly closer to what the original text actually said, but lacked the flow and fluency of the other. But it was exactly this fluency in the second that made me appreciate the storyline much more than that in the other book. It was clear that this much more enjoyable translation contained shifts and shuffles in sentence order, and the odd embellishment here and there. Although they removed it further from the original in an absolute sense, they added greatly to the comprehensibility of the narrative, and in some cases gave helpful details for the understanding of situations in a completely different frame of reference than my own.

When talking about art and publications – and for the sake of argument, let's focus on the physical world of catalogues and books here – we are by default talking about acts of translation and mediation. To try and unpick this further, let's start with the most straightforward. When it comes to ideas that are captured in words at their moment of inception, we face similar issues as Murakami's translators. How much can we edit? How much can and should, or shouldn't, we try and improve on the structure of sentences and narratives? Is adding words and phrases that we think help clarify the original artists' intentions permissible at all? And where do we draw the line to make sure we don't entirely lose the original author's voice? When we move away from the verbal to the static, two-dimensional visual, we're also still pretty comfortable.

After several centuries of technological advances in the quality of print reproduction, we're aware that a reproduction is not the same as the original. And after decades of art historians waxing lyrical about the fact that the reproduced and mediated can never replace the experience of standing in front of the actual artwork, technology has advanced to such an extent and is so widely available that different kinds of access to works of art can in reality offer us many more, if different, kinds of experiences in relation to the same work. The novelty will no doubt wear off, and – equally without doubt – be superseded by even more spectacular possibilities in the future, but Google's recent pairing up with a range of world-renowned museums, delivers us exactly that: access to details and a look behind the scenes of artworks that only curators and conservators could ever dream of until recently, and that offer experiences which standing in front of the works themselves would never even be able to give us.

What is much more challenging is the question of mediation of events, performances, actions and interventions that somehow have, or have had, a physical manifestation in place and time, beyond the three-dimensional within the framework of something that is to all intents and purposes still a two-dimensional platform. Descriptions in words and still images on the printed page of something that played itself out in time and space have a tendency to become snap-shots, to freeze time, and to make us perceive something as having happened in the past, in a moment that has gone forever. The notion of time passing, sound resonating, movement unfolding and a narrative developing, let alone something assuming agency, all too often seems to dissipate. And all too often what we see and what tries to capture the unfolding event, obscures, or literally obliterates the finer nuances of the core ideas embedded in the work.

No matter how brilliant the photographs or other visual representations and references, they have a tendency to merely focus on what things looked like. As many artists' practices encompass so much more, or have consciously moved away from the purely visual, it is worth wondering why many publications still tend to focus on the formal and aesthetic manifestation of their ideas. Often the translation of the underlying concepts, concerns, research, questions and exploration that is inherent, and that could be far more important to many artists' thinking, is still paid short shrift.

I think there is a huge potential for developing publications that take in the complexity of artistic intention and that veer away from the idea of representation of work and that is more aimed at conveying a sense of process, a rolling out, an unfolding of artistic thinking. Done well, it would give us access to a wider range of material and we would become more associatively connected to the actual work.

So what I am arguing for is a shift. And the crux here lies in a shift in our awareness of what we're trying to get close to and what we're trying to translate and mediate and how. Where we tend to go astray is the notion that we can somehow condense and capture the spectrum, and the evolutionary nature of artistic thinking and practice in a singular act. If we want to more proactively and consciously try and get to a point at which there is at least the potential to engage with the breadth of ideas behind what we see or read, we may have to let go of that singularity. That may lead to publications that are in themselves less straightforward, that may in their conceptualisation and design require more multi-layered approaches that don't necessarily neatly represent. Rather than as full stops and endpoints, they could become part of an ongoing evolving narrative, that rather than erasing reveals the interesting slippages and fertile gaps and cracks – in which the most interesting ideas often reside – that otherwise would get lost in translation.

Right here, right now: relative simultaneity

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Enjoying a live music performance seems in our perception to sit on a fairly equal footing with listening to the same music captured on vinyl or a CD. While the latter are in essence forms of mediation of something that once happened in real time, we understand the live and the mediated as different manifestations of one and the same creative process. We seem to be able to wholeheartedly embrace the experience of the real and the mediated as natural extensions of each other, allowing the record or CD and the live event to sit happily side-by-side. In our perception there doesn't seem to be an issue of hierarchy, or a sense of being less, or a coming after of the mediated versus the so-called real.

The same can hardly be said about the way in which art is mediated. What we encounter as an equally tangible format as the CD or a record rarely goes beyond the obligatory catalogue. Some contain great reflections by gifted writers and theoreticians and attempt to contribute to critical discourse about the work. Others focus on particular groupings and formats of presentation of the work, seemingly more concerned with the curatorial concept underpinning the project they accompany, often relegating the artwork and its mediation to mere illustration. Others simply give an impression via brief descriptions and some images, with, if we're lucky, just enough detail to give some inkling about the work, rather than merely the context in which it was presented. What most of them have in common though is a sense of them coming 'after' the event. Invariably they seem to function as mementos, as tokens by which to remember what once was. By default they are always something different than the real event, but a different different than in a live concert versus vinyl or CD comparison.

I wonder: could publications take on a similar position? Is it possible for publications to elevate themselves, so they no longer function as half-hearted translations of artistic practices into another medium or language that can be read or looked at another moment in time? Is it possible for them to have a currency of simultaneity, not necessarily literally in time, but in perception, in status, like the record has to the live performance? Is it possible for them to somehow take on a shape and form that is no longer perceived as subservient to, but that simply is just as much, albeit different, part of one and the same real deal?

Contemplating this, what immediately springs to mind is Seth Siegelaub and Jack Wendler's *Xerox Book* (1968). Rather than something that followed a project that happened in a specific time and place, the artists invited were offered 25 pages on which to execute a site-specific project, the site being the publication and the work to play itself out on the page. This seminal project was followed by *July–August* (1970), also conceived by Siegelaub. This time, the platform was a magazine, for which six critics were invited to take responsibility for the 'curation' of eight pages. They in turn invited artists to – again – use the page as the site for intervention and the platform on which their work unfolded itself. Although these projects seem utterly simple with several decades of hindsight, what's interesting is that in their simplicity they questioned the common codes surrounding the presentation of artworks and the position of the context, the artist, the curator and the viewer, and how these interact and engage with each other.

The project *Do It* (1993) expands on this blurring of roles and responsibilities, as well as the potential to embed agency as an integral element of what the project entails. *Do it* is based on the undercurrents in both Bertrand Lavier's and Christian Boltanski's practice, who co-wrote the 'script' for the project together with Hans Ulrich Obrist. Lavier's enquiry into effects of translation of artworks as they move in and out of various permutations of languages is married here to Boltanski's notion of (re)interpretation as an artistic principle. Using instructions written by a range of well-known artists that can be realised wherever and whenever, *Do it* expands on the potential of interpretation and re-interpretation. Each realisation of *Do it* thus becomes an act and activity in time and space. Following on from – or maybe more accurately, intertwining – Burroughs' and Siegelaub's tropes, the traditional boundaries between author, artist, curator, audience and actor and agency are not just blurred, but almost entirely obliterated.

What *Xerox Book*, *July-August* and *Do it* all have in common is that they are explicitly NOT catalogues: by their very nature they carry no references to works that once were and moments of enactment that happened some time in the past. They are different configurations of the conflation of

site, idea and execution, and the possibility to act upon or react to the intention of their agency positions them, albeit in different ways, in a perpetual here and now. Place and time have become fluid elements in a potential that can be repeated endlessly as in their cases the idea, the site and the execution and where and how we encounter them are almost inextricably linked. Of course not all artworks do or can exist in that way and we cannot negate or do away with all the work that manifests itself in modes different than action, engagement and agency. But it is worth exploring if we can come closer to that directness, where idea, execution and mediation are at least more considered than is so often the case.

What is most exciting about art is when something sparks the moment we encounter it, something that has a sense of urgency, immediacy and agency, that gives us the feeling we almost become collaborators or accomplices. What I'm after is trying to find ways of mediation that give us the potential to be more than passive observers of residues and mementos, and where a similar sense of agency and connection can occur. In an ideal scenario that would allow us to be like the wasp in relation to Deleuze's orchid: where one becomes an extension of the other at the moment of encounter, but where both manifest their distinctness prior to and after.