Critical Practice and *Parade*: From 'Public' to 'Publics'? Or: How I learned to stop worrying about heterogeneity and love 'my' Public
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Introduction

What could be more satisfying than the sense of mutual understanding that comes from reciprocal openness with an other or others? Yet what could be more difficult to achieve than genuine openness? Why is openness   in both our personal and professional relations   more often the stuff of aspiration than realisation? Addressing these questions *vis-à-vis* organisational openness, this short paper speculates about openness and/as hospitality in shared cultural production based on my experience working with Critical Practice, an art research cluster tethered to Chelsea College of Art and Design (London, UK).

Bringing together artists, researchers, academics, and others, Critical Practice explores cultural production as situated in broader social, political, technological, and financial developments. Concerned in particular with art as always already *in* contemporary relations of production, Critical Practice takes its own organisational becoming as a legitimate subject of critical enquiry. We understand our self-organisation and self-governance as 'works in progress' that depend on co-authored decisions, experience, and intentionality. Since the cluster's founding in 2005, we have sought to facilitate our cultural production by following Open Organizational Guidelines.[1] This entails making all decisions, processes, and production accessible and public. We are committed to posting our agendas, minutes, budget, and decision-making processes online for public scrutiny.[2]

At stake in this approach is the conviction that using Open Organizational Guidelines can promote greater transparency and accountability in self-organisation and these are positive ideals. But what else does the openness of open organisations entail? More importantly for our discussion here, on whose or what terms is Critical Practice and its projects 'open' and to what ends?

In what follows, I revisit my presentation for *Transmission: Hospitality* (2010) and discuss *Parade*, a project facilitated by Critical Practice in May 2010. I draw out different types of hospitality to suggest how they opened up some aspects of the project in unexpected ways. Foregoing a conclusion, I offer a postscript instead. It explores the theory and practice of openness in Critical Practice with reference to Jacques Derrida's meditations on hospitality, while also seeking to describe and critique two procedures that structure the cluster in accordance with Open Organizational Guidelines. In doing so, this postscript aims to open up some tacit assumptions about openness that have powerfully shaped the cluster's approach to producing art collaboratively.

Figure 1. *Parade*, 21 23 May 2010, Chelsea College of Art and Design

Parade's **Public**

Parade was a three-day public project on the Rootstein Hopkins Parade Ground at Chelsea College of Art and Design (fig. 1). Taking its name from this site specificity, it occupied a structure built from some 4,300 milk crates that sprawled across the Parade Ground. This served as the platform where Critical Practice and a host of contributors explored the social, political, practical, and psychological dynamics of 'being in public' (fig. 2).

Figure 2. *The Market of Ideas* at *Parade*, 21 23 May 2010, Chelsea College of Art and Design

In my presentation for *Transmission: Hospitality*, I focused on *The Market of Ideas* as an example of the kind of events and their ethos of openness that structured *Parade*. A cross between an ancient bazaar and trade fair, *The Market* comprised some thirty-five stalls nestled in niches in the milk-crate structure. Here artists, designers, philosophers, sociologists, researchers, and others exchanged ideas with one another and the milling crowd. On the afternoon of 23 May 2010, the Parade Ground was transformed into an open market, where transactions took place through knowledge exchange. Anyone could attend and admission was gratis.

As the title of my presentation suggests, 'From "Public" to "Publics"? Or: How I learned to stop worrying about heterogeneity and love "my" Public', was concerned in particular with the publics aggregated through *The Market* or, rather, the lack thereof. Most of those who attended were already 'art worlders' to varying degrees. Of the approximate five hundred attendees, most were students, tutors, and administrators affiliated with Chelsea College and the University of the Arts London; artists and others with whom Critical Practice had worked in the past; and friends and families of the stallholders, with many being artists, curators, and other cultural practitioners. Although aggregating multiple publics was never *Parade's* central objective (the project was instead focused on 'being in public' through exercising the Parade Ground as a public space) the rough homogeneity of the public comprising *The Market* raised concerns around whether or not it really

constituted 'a public' at all.

Exploring this in my presentation, I argued that *Parade's Market of Ideas* surfaced unquestioned assumptions about how we understand 'a public' and by extension 'the public'. Is 'a public' any group of people assembled in public space? By contrast, is 'the public' determined by diversity (class, cultural, ideological difference)? Or does it depend on extreme relational difference: strangers may comprise the public but not friends? Is 'being in public' defined by the law and thus a judicial distinction? Is it really the binary of 'being in private'?

Because 'being in public' at *Parade* involved being socialised with other attendees as a public in ways associated with occupying public space led me to conclude the contributors and milling crowd at *The Market* unquestionably constituted 'a public'. Moreover, this occurred not despite the group's rough homogeneity but because of it. On the one hand, and following *The American Oxford English Dictionary*, those involved in *The Market* comprised 'a section of the community having a particular interest or connection: [an equivalent to] the reading public'.[3] *Parade* brought together a temporary community interested in 'being in public' and concerned with broader trends in privatisation. On the other hand, we might also speak of *'Parade's* public'. For in the same way the dictionary describes '(one's public) [as] the people who watch and are interested in an artist, writer, or performer: *some famous last words for my public*',[4] *Parade* attracted considerable involvement. The result being that several loosely knit networks coalesced through the project, with many of the participants working together on subsequent initiatives. This includes a collaboratively authored legacy publication for *Parade*, which will be published in 2011.

That hosting radically diverse publics was not an express objective of *Parade* does not, however, mean the project failed to engage multiple constituencies. Expanding the argument made in my presentation, I wish to suggest here that one way these constituencies interacted in the project was through what can be recognised in retrospect as their hospitalities (in the plural), which together made *Parade* possible. Again drawing upon the *New Oxford American Dictionary*, hospitality is defined as 'the friendly and generous reception of guests, visitors and strangers'.[5] So we need look no further than this source (supplemented with our own experience) to appreciate that hospitality entails accommodating   and thus being open to   various degrees of otherness. This makes it operative in all works of art as instances of human interaction, but explicitly so in participatory ones like *Parade* where this takes literal form.

An important way that Chelsea College of Art and Design hosted *Parade* relates to curricula integration. Dr. Ken Wilder, a member of Critical Practice and head of the MA in Interior and Spatial Design, recognised *Parade* as an opportunity to bring together these two college constituencies which have had little contact to date. Together the MA students and the researchers comprising Critical Practice constructed the milk-crate structure as a joint project. Each group hosted the needs, desires, and aspirations of the other with remarkable ease, making this one of the most effortless collaborations in the project overall.

If integrating *Parade* into the College's course structure was a key way that Chelsea College hosted the project, it was the generosity of another institution that made it possible on an international scale. With the help of Kuba Szreder, a Polish curator and member of Critical Practice, the cluster secured generous funds from the Adam Mickiewicz Institute. Critically, this money was given with the express purpose of integrating *Parade* into the POLSKA! YEAR, a season of events aimed at 'presenting the most interesting achievements of Polish culture to UK audiences'.[6] Hence *Parade* became an interface among international cultures, with a large contingent of Polish architects, artists, academics, and curators all contributing to the event.

Another significant hospitality at *Parade* occurred when stallholders hosted each other and the milling crowd in *The Market*. Instead of speaking about their art, scholarship, curating, etc., *The Market's* stall structure enabled practitioners to share their practice more directly, in the throes of production. While some modeled material processes, others, such as Ewa Majewska and her witchcraft project (fig. 3), shared more unusual techniques. Either way, sharing their practice in process enabled stallholders to host a more intimate and immediate understanding of their artwork and sensibilities.

Though not a constituency *per se*, a final and perhaps unlikely source of hospitality is worthy of brief mention here: the weather. It cannot be emphasised enough how vital the three days of sun were to the project, not only to attracting the milling crowd but also in fostering the jovial

atmosphere that pervaded *Parade*. Had it rained, as it is wont to do in London in May, *The Market* would have been a less hospitable context for knowledge exchange.

Figure 3. Ewa Majewska's witchcraft project for *The Market of Ideas*

It was in part my discussion of *Parade* with reference to Critical Practice as an open organisation that catalysed the generous and generative debate at *Transmission: Hospitality* around openness, both as an organising principle and political ideology. Several questions in particular were raised — what is organisational openness in Critical Practice? On what or whose terms is it open and to what ends?

With these questions in mind, the second part of this paper further considers the complexity of openness and/as hospitality *vis-à-vis* Critical Practice's self-organisation and self-governance as instances of the cluster's cultural production. Pushing beyond the members' shared belief that openness is good practice because it promotes transparency and accountability, it is important to recognise some of the challenges posed by putting this concept into practice. Openness may be an ideal that is highly valued in Critical Practice's organisational becoming. But because it is not so much a state of being as a process of representation, i.e. because openness is a set of attributes or markers agreed upon by the cluster's members in a specific time and space, the definition and practice of openness is always relative. Organisational openness cannot, therefore, be likened to a door or window, which is either open or closed. Because organisational openness is never absolute, it can never be opened up through critical reflection or critique with the certainty that is how it will remain. Instead, the critical practice of organisational openness must continuously attend to the constructed, evaluative, distributed, and shifting character of the concept *sui generis* — how it manifests in practice in particular.

Postscript

In *Of Hospitality* and *Foreigner Question*, Derrida considers hospitality as alternatively conditional or absolute. Both types, he contends, depend on (the) law.

Conditional hospitality rests on the laws of the land. Differentiating citizens from non-citizens, hosts and guests, these laws find social embodiment in mores, rights, duties, debts, traditions, obligations, assumptions, and other cultural expressions. In the case of domestic hospitality, the host's hosting unfolds through her interpretation and application of the law in her own home.

If the host and the cultural context determine the social contract that organises conditional hospitality, this authority, asserts Derrida, is reversed when hospitality is absolute. It is the guest who decides, who imposes her own terms on the host. Derrida describes this as follows:

> absolute hospitality requires that I open up my home that I give not only to the foreigner, but to the absolute, unknown, anonymous other, and that I give place to

them, that I let them come, and that I let them arrive, and take place in the place
I offer them, without asking them either reciprocity (entering into a pact) or even
their names.[7]

And the rules of the house as embodiments of the laws of the land? They are suspended, subordinated to the guest's needs and desires. Added to this, the host – her property and her self – are not only open to the guest. This openness is unconditional. Only when the host gives openly and without expectation of reciprocity can absolute hospitality be achieved.

Central to Derrida's discussion on these two types of hospitality is the paradox that stems from their incompatibility. On the one hand they oppose each other, albeit asymmetrically. The laws that govern conditional hospitality are subordinated to the law of absolute hospitality because the latter operates beyond all law. On the other hand, the impossibility of absolute hospitality means that in practice, conditional hospitality is the most we can ever hope to achieve. Does this then mean that we should forego aspirations of absolute hospitality and settle for the conditional variety as a pragmatic alternative? In asking this question, Derrida's meditations on hospitality invite us to think beyond reductive notions of guest and host, public and private, open and closed, either/or.

What insights does the paradox of (im)possible hospitality yield with regards to the ethos of openness in Critical Practice? To begin with, it highlights the tensions between the cluster's aspirations of openness and the realities of self-organisation, which depend on a structure. This structure may have many apertures, it may be porous, it may be receptive to new ideas and approaches. But it will still have boundaries and thresholds that differentiate it from the world beyond. Yet in the case of Critical Practice's open organisation, these limits are not always obvious to the cluster itself, especially in periods of rapid development and production when negotiating organisational openness gives way to other priorities. Alternatively, boundaries may be obvious but too unwieldy or insidious to address, making them even more problematic. Holding fast to the cluster's commitment to transparency, I wish to offer a few frank reflections on the impact of openness on Critical Practice's internal relations: specifically, how its self-organisation hosts it membership. Although the two examples here are particular to this context, they may well be familiar, especially to practitioners involved in what might be called the 'paradigm of openness' in contemporary cultural production. That is: culture catalysed in part through open source software development, Indymedia and initiatives like Wikileaks. Propelled by ideological openness, this paradigm seeks to promote greater transparency and accountability in the world at large.

Open Membership

For all its stated concern with openness, it is surprising that nowhere on the Open Organizations Project website (at least as far as I can see) is there a concentrated discussion on what makes this kind of organisational structure 'open'. Explicit references like the one to open membership in the Introduction to Open Organizational Guidelines are few and far between.[8] Perhaps this helps to explain why this specific instance of organisational openness figures so prominently in Critical Practice's own adoption and adaptation of the Guidelines.

Anyone can join an open organisation, so long as he or she abides by the organisation's charter (which is composed of aims and objectives in the case of Critical Practice) and has the necessary skills to engage and co-produce. Because the cluster seeks to accommodate practitioners with diverse sensibilities and expertise, the second part of this condition has not been an issue to date. In fact, the organisation has developed in response to its members' skills, with their respective interests also influencing the scope and range of the cluster's research.

That anyone can join Critical Practice is a more complex claim to make. For although true in theory, this is not actually the case. There are certain material characteristics that members must possess. These include, most notably, sufficient time and income to be able to dedicate themselves to work that although rewarding is highly involved and largely unpaid. Though degrees of commitment vary from member to member and with the ebb and flow of projects, meaningful engagement (at least in my experience) tends to involve great personal investment. This is not only because

decisions in Critical Practice are made through rough consensus, an approach that depends on rigorous debate that is often time and energy consuming. Nor is it because open organisations lack mechanisms for effectively distributing labour across the cluster. Members take on a variety of responsibilities with the understanding that although some work, such as administration, can be tedious and unfulfilling, it nevertheless must be done. Instead meaningful engagement tends to involve great personal investment because a sense of belonging to Critical Practice often accretes through regular and sustained contribution. To be sure, being able to travel with the cluster to facilitate projects overseas is not a membership proviso. But being unable to commit in this way and benefit from these extraordinary opportunities can lead to feelings of disconnection and even exclusion — however irrational these may be. Similarly, although Critical Practice is committed to posting its agendas, minutes, budget, and decision-making processes online, thus making them available to members absent due to work, family, and other life commitments, these documents fail to catch and disseminate the range of activity that happens 'off the page'. *Ad hoc* decisions made in the throes of production are often an instance of self-organisation that, as the expression goes, 'you had to be there' to understand. Though it is not, of course, imperative that all members attend all meetings or work on all projects, meaningful engagement is nevertheless dependent on personally embodying Critical Practice's self-organisation as it evolves in response to circumstances. These are often distributed beyond and between the cluster's official activities.

Selective Transparency and Interpersonal Mess

However ironic, the pursuit of openness itself can blind Critical Practice to aspects of its self-organisation that become closed or opaque as it struggles to achieve this impossible ideal. Returning to the cluster's commitment to post its agendas, minutes, budgets, etc., online, these documents are beholden to accurately representing their subjects in a manner that reflects the general views of those involved. But not everything is recorded here for the very reason these documents are posted for public review. There is tacit agreement that interpersonal conflict is best left 'off the page', the argument being this protects everyone involved. Yet for all its good intentions, this agreement can make it difficult to *ever* engage thorny social relations (personal power plays, personality conflicts, inconsiderate and offensive behaviour, etc.) in an open and transparent manner. The very practice of taking minutes at meetings conditions the kinds of discussions that can take place, namely those free of so-called 'personal issues'. This is true regardless of how relevant they may be to the agenda item at hand. Yet there are few other ways to address these issues — without, of course, removing them to informal or private channels of exchange, where organisational transparency and accountability have less reach. Because interpersonal messiness has little place in the archival processes that structure Critical Practice's self-organisation and official history, there is little place for it in the cluster anywhere. Resultantly, this messiness is usually purged, suppressed, or disappeared in some other way.

More could and should be said about the complex power dynamics at play in open organisations in general and Critical Practice in particular. To be sure, critiques of this abound, among them Jo Freeman's seminal article 'The Tyranny of Structurelessness',[9] published in 1970 and more recently, Jamie King's work on the impasse of political organisation in the age of 'openness'.[10] Based on my experience as a member of Critical Practice, I remain dubious that in and of themselves, Open Organizational Guidelines are the magic bullet for overcoming issues of representation that have plagued the political landscape since time immemorial. Yet this does not mean we should give up on openness altogether, for to do so in my view would be surrendering to growing trends in privatisation and unaccountability. Rather, the challenge as I see it is to continue innovating critical and creative forms of self-organisation while being as honest as possible about their effects, especially on those immediately involved. Hence my motivation for writing this paper about openness on/as hospitality in *Parade* and Critical Practice: that by being an open account, it might contribute to this process.

NOTES

1. Open Organizational Guidelines are available from *The Open Organizations Project* website <http://www.open-organizations.org/view/Main/IntroToOpenOrg> [accessed 3 December 2010]
2. For more information about the Critical Practice, please see our wiki: *Critical Practice* <http://criticalpracticechelsea.org> [accessed 3 December 2010]
3. *New American Oxford Dictionary* (Macintosh dictionary application).
4. *New American Oxford Dictionary.*
5. *New American Oxford Dictionary.*
6. POLSKA! YEAR website <http://www.polskayear.pl/en/> [accessed 3 December 2010].
7. Jacques Derrida (1997), *Of Hospitality: Anne Dufourmantelle invites Jacques Derrida to respond*, tr. by Rachel Bowlby, Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2000, p. 77.
8. Open Organizational Guidelines.
9. Jo Freeman. 'The Tyranny of Structuralessness' <http://flag.blackened.net/revolt/hist_texts/structurelessness.html> [accessed 4 January 2004].
10. Jamie King. 'The Packet Gang', *Node London Reader*, 2004 <http://publication.nodel.org/The-Packet-Gang> [accessed 4 January, 2011].