Paul O'Neill

Slow-prototype as Forms of Attentiveness and Escape

Slow-prototype is a deceptively simple curatorial project that took place in summer 2012 at Scottish Sculpture Workshop (SSW), in the small Aberdeenshire town of Lumsden. SSW curator, Nuno Sacramento, established a triangular relationship between a local craftsperson, Gavin Smith, an artist, Daniel Seiple, from Berlin, and me as the invited writer. In this way, three people who had never met before were brought together to share time talking, listening, eating, drinking, walking and working, whilst questioning each other's practice in some way. They were to be attentive to one another and to those around them, including the many other artisans, artists and publics passing through the centre, who were also present as casual public observers throughout the process.

The artist and artisan were invited to make a work together, with neither of them acting as the leading producer, commissioner or author and the intention that there would be a constant interchange of perceived roles. One of the main outcomes was *Can't See the Trees for the Wood* (2012). Currently sited in the grounds of Smith's home, this is comprised of off-cuts of wood, collected over many years of his artisanal practice, horizontally arranged in the form of a house-like structure.

While the writer's brief was open and ambiguous, the invitation to produce this text was underwritten by an understanding that it would engage with the process of production, ask questions, follow and respond to what happened in some way. Rather than focusing on what was realised during this project, I would like to consider *Slow-prototype* as a recent hybrid curatorial initiative in which the concepts of attentiveness and escape form two prisms through which it can be understood.

Attentiveness

In 1902, the Viennese art historian, Alois Riegl, applied an understanding of attentiveness to the dynamics of sixteenth century Dutch group portraiture, whereby the individuals represented in, say, a painting by Frans Hals would be as attentive to each other as they were to the viewer. For Riegl, a group portrait was 'neither an expanded version of an individual portrait nor, so to speak, a mechanical collection of individual portraits in one picture or representational image: rather it [was] a representation of a free association of autonomous, independent individuals'.[i] According to Riegl, attentiveness inhibited other means of unification between the figures represented in a group portrait, ruling out the possibility that those being portrayed were restricted to a common action or emotion.

Within this concept of attentiveness, Riegl highlighted how there are always two forms of coherence. Firstly, there is an 'internal coherence' between those being portrayed within the picture, portrait or artwork, which preserves the qualities of likeness of each depicted subject. Secondly, there is an 'external coherence', which depends upon the individuals within the group being attentive to those around them. Beyond this, Riegl was able to demonstrate how, when internal coherence diminished

within Dutch sixteenth century group portraits, it could be compensated for by augmenting its external coherence. In other words, a group portrait could be made to cohere by implicitly including the spectator – which, for Riegl, was partly achieved through the outward gaze of the figures depicted.

In this sense, attentiveness is achieved through an equal consideration of the dynamics of compositional arrangement and the psychological exchanges within the group being portrayed. It is also achieved through narrative devices, established within the picture, which provide links among the individuals within the portrait and between them and the viewer outside. With *Slow-prototype*, the group was asked to consider and account for the immediate publics in and around SSW, who completed the work in some way. The concept of attentiveness can thus be applied to the project as a contemporary group portrait in which equal and simultaneous 'attention' was given by the participants to each other and to their surrounding rural environment. Internal cohesion was achieved through mutual attentiveness between the three protagonists within the group, and external coherence was encouraged in relation to their surroundings and the world outside the group. In this way, reciprocity was created, through inter-relationships, that was both internal and external to the group of players, actors, actions and spectators.

As a curatorial project, *Slow-prototype* encouraged three people to intersect with each other, in a sense that was characterised by the self-conscious enactment of degrees of 'attentiveness' between all those involved. There was an insistence that the internal dynamics of the working group should attend to each other as much as to their immediate relationship to outside world. Each participant in the project was invited to respect each other's position, to be watchful, vigilant, and alert to each other's differences, with all the connotations of courtesy and kindness that might entail a unitary form of co-production and civic interaction.

Slow-prototype proposes a multiplicity of identities that shift around whilst questioning how to contribute towards the work-as-multiple self-image. As a curatorial initiative, it presents a type of socialised group portrait as an expression of some kind of image of kinship, of hospitality. Three practitioners became simultaneously hosts and guests to each other, as much as they played their part within a semi-autonomous co-operative curatorial labour, thus providing a space of contact through the many interactions taking place in the processes of production – all of which contribute to the dispersed form of the resultant work through different modes of engagement. Frames of social and human interaction are put in place, to enable the discursive and material production of art. The result was a cumulative process of semi-public co-operation, whereby ideas of publicness, hospitality and citizenship had both imaginative and tangible potential.

Escape

The idea of escape releases us from something. It fits with our need to at least imagine ourselves differently, elsewhere.[ii] Linked to a sense of failure and disappointment with the world, the concept of escape may be perceived as an act of release from something, somewhere or someone, accompanied by

the wish to be transformed. It is a word that makes us grateful. It makes it possible for us to imagine an alternative. The phenomenon of escape is bound up in our earliest experiences of play – from hide-and-seek, to blind man's buff, to kiss chase – in which there is an innate tension between the desire to be caught and to get away. In this sense, the skill, when hiding, is to make it interesting to be found rather than trying to avoid detection altogether. The game fails if the hider disappears or the seeker gives up. Everyone is reassuringly found in the end; no one, in fact, escapes.[iii] There is a psychology of tentative escapology, whereby the practice of avoidance is the condition of preparation, a waiting to be eventually revealed.

In artistic terms, the concept of escape is best embodied in the Readymade, which brings about an object's extraction *from* the world, its temporary removal and its re-conceptualisation, leading to an adjustment of its value *in* the world. The role of the Readymade – as that which is adopted from already existing things in the world – proffers an update on the figure of the artist-as-escapologist that is more Houdini than Bas Jan Ader. In the case of *Slow-prototype*, the artist escapes his normative practice to become the craftsman and vice versa. This is just one of the multiple exchanges of function, as they both move between their shifting roles as thinkers, makers, labourers, professionals, amateurs, hosts and guests.

Escapology provides a sense of melancholic transportation. The co-operative nature of *Stack* engages in a double game, a shifting to-and-fro of associations. Within the enforced co-operative dynamics of *Slow-prototype*, the locus of this end-work hides in many places, things, actions and times at once, almost getting lost but always wanting to be found. As a latter-day incarnation of the Readymade, there is a withdrawal of the notion of artistic value as a stable form of individual expression, embodied in material practice. The resultant end-work thus manifests itself as a rejection of the mimetic capacity of both Seiple and Smith to reflect social life through their own hand. Based on an understanding of post-autonomous production as the foundation of art after Duchamp, we can see that there is a *process* of production, in which the delegation of non-artistic labour to others is aligned with the artist's intention. The artwork becomes a site of potential escape for all concerned. It is representative of what John Roberts has identified as a collapse of the division 'between intellectual labour and manual labour as the basis for the future dissolution of art into social praxis' that began with the early avant-garde.[iv] Productive labour and immaterial labour dissolve into the artist's co-productive practice, so that art can extend itself beyond alienated aestheticism. Here, the notion of escape is opened up at the point of artistic production, with the 'dispersal of the artist's hand into forms of heteronymous labour' enabling a dissolution as much as a displacement of the artist from the centre of their authorship.[v]

There is a radical disjunction after the Readymade, a dissolution of traditional forms in which art invites both productive and non-productive labour into its realm as a means of reflecting upon the conditions of both art *and* labour within capitalist relations.[vi] The assimilation of the artisan into the artist and vice versa is a transformation of the alienated character of both. Although this seems to imply a rejection of authorship in the traditional sense, there is a diffusion, rather than a refusal, of

authorship; something is being made – through instruction, construction, invention, rule setting and breaking, alteration and deception – for, although there are multiple actors and agencies at work in the project, which eventually make up the work, social relations become dissolved into multiple forms of fragmented citizenship. But, in the end, the artisan and the artist will eventually return to their previous roles, although perhaps transformed, in some way, by the co-operative experience.

As I have said, we can, therefore, escape, in an act of release or liberation from something, somewhere or someone, from this place and this time, for a moment, which will always be accompanied by some kind of wish to be transformed, but we cannot escape from ourselves. We can become abstracted, we can get out of it, off our heads if we like, out of the game, but not out of our heads or out of ourselves. Escape is always a space of returning, coming back, coming down, no matter how immersive the experience of getting lost, no matter how high, how removed from the here and now, the act of escape always brings us back to the pre-immersive space, back to where we were, only with the sound of a din ringing in our ears.

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[i] Alois Riegl, cited in Margaret Iverson's *Alois Riegl: Art History and Theory* (Cambridge, MASS.: The MIT Press, 1993), p. 100.

[ii] Adam Phillips, *Houdini's Box: On the Arts of Escape* (London: Faber & Faber, 2001), p. 157.

[iii] See Mark Hutchinson's essay, 'An Art of Escape', accessed at http://www.markhutchinson.org/writing/writing%20art%20of%20escape.html and Phillips, op cit.

[iv] John Roberts, *The Intangibilities of Form* (London and New York: Verso, 2007), pp. 2-3.

[v] Ibid.

[vi] Ibid.