

Architectures of Community

words: *Laura McLeay-Ferris*

Despite frequent attempts to exorcise it once and for all, the walking ghost of Modernism has stalked art production for much of the last 70 years or so. More specifically, art has been almost pathologically obsessed with articulating a response to the utopian idealism perceived in an ill-defined and frequently-changing understanding of Modernism, viewed from the position of a postmodern, postcapitalist age. Recently artists appear to be working with communities in ways that manage to encompass both positions at once. Katerina Sedá and Pawel Althamer create ambitious work involving many participants who are neighbours to one another (rather than those who come together through a common interest, such as art) and who themselves become part of a display; meanwhile collectives and projects such as Mirza/Butler and CAMP build their work on the more ambivalent or compromised conditions that come with already belonging to a community or locale, in order to strengthen it. What links these artists is that they all attempt to use their practice to effect real change in communities, rather than simply to draw attention to an impossible ideal. And if there is an aesthetic, as well as a thematic, link between them, it lies in considerations of architecture and infrastructure, and the ways in which they can reinforce the connections between individuals, if only for discrete, fragile pockets of time.

This set of communitarian projects has emerged, on the one hand, from the so-called new institutionalism in curating, which has attempted to rethink the museum from the outside in and centralise participatory practice; and on the other from a reaction to the demands placed on art museums and galleries in countries such as the UK to 'outreach' and make art into something that serves a 'purpose'. The result of the latter, of course, is often work that is simply an unsatisfactory secondary servicing model to art exhibitions.

That said, the Serpentine Gallery's project the Centre for Possible Studies, on London's Edgware Road, will this year find itself a hub for projects that are primary rather than secondary, with a number of artists

working within the local context on a two-year basis (rather than the more common 'holiday romance' approach that sees artists breezing in and out again in a matter of months). Mumbai-based CAMP (Shaina Anand, Nida Ghouse, Hakimuddin Lilyawala and Ashok Sukumaran), a group who describe themselves not as a collective but as a 'workshop for gathering ideas', are among them. CAMP's *Wharfage*, at the 2009 Sharjah Biennial (where it was awarded a jury prize), examined trade between Sharjah and Somalia by printing ship manifests and texts based on interviews with sailors on the dhows that use the historic Sharjah Creek trade route. With an understanding of the creek as a Foucauldian heterotopia (an 'other place', of space and time, by which a particular civilisation understands itself), they created a radio station in the port for those who work on the waters, which resulted in music, dancing and conversation, but left the biennial audience to listen via headphones on the faraway rooftops of museums, taking the position of outsider. As well as being a project with benefits for a group bound by geography, it transformed Sharjah Creek into a synecdoche for multinational trade, taking into account the simultaneous existence of Somali pirates, free-trade economies and the exchange of Western goods from UAE (macaroni, cars, slippers) for charcoal from Somalia. In Edgware Road CAMP are investigating the history of a building that has housed (among other things) a newsreel cinema, an adult cinema and an Arabic nightclub, and then creating systems (such as newspapers and placemats) for distributing this knowledge.

At the nearby Showroom, Hiwa K., born in Iraq and based in Berlin, takes part next month in *Estrangement*, a collaboration (initiated by himself and Aneta Szylak) between the London not-for profit space and the Wyspa Institute in Gdansk, which seeks to explore the tensions between European culture and various iterations of the 'Orient'. In northwest London Hiwa K. will be bringing together an orchestra of musicians who practice on Edgware Road – an area in which many people from the Middle East live and work – to play the themes from classic

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Katerina Sedá

Born: Brno, **lives and works:** Brno and Prague

Over and Over, 2008, installation at Skulpturenpark, 5th Berlin Biennial for Contemporary Art, 2008.
Photo: Werner Linster. Courtesy the artist and Franco Soffiantino Gallery, Turin



Mirza Butler

Live and work: London

Tape Drawing, Karachi, The Museum of Non Participation, 2009, commissioned and produced by Artangel Interaction, London



Pawel Althamer

Born, lives and works: Warsaw

Common Task, Brasilia, 2009.
Courtesy the artist and Open Art Projects, Warsaw

Western movies, restaging a form of Wild West conflict, while Polish artist Joanna Rajkowska will be bringing rickshaws to the area, playing on the multileveled boundaries by which we distinguish East from West.

Also investigating the relationship of visual cultures in Britain and the Middle East, Mirza/Butler (Karen Mirza and Brad Butler, who also run artist space no.w.here) instigated an Artangel project, *The Museum of Non Participation*, last year. Based in London and Karachi, it sought to explore the relationship of artists to the societies they investigate, outside the ivory towers of galleries. In Karachi this nonparticipation took the form of a museum without walls: signs, shapes and images grafted onto the city as accompaniment to a series of popup events using alternative forms of distribution: for example, giving newspapers away as wrapping for takeaway food, so that people might participate without first realising that they are entering an art space. In London, Urdu lessons and talks were held in the back room of a Bethnal Green barbershop. That these projects manage to function as art (as opposed to other well-meaning public projects such as community gardens or language lessons) is due to the strong visual identity of the project in Karachi – which appears to stage all nearby events, art and nonart alike, as part of a predetermined narrative – but also stems from the breakdown in disciplines between art and other modes of cultural activity effected by a postmodern interdisciplinarity. If art can now encompass schools, communities, everything, then why not actual social change? But is it the artist's job to do such things? What, in essence, is art's work?

For several years Pawel Althamer has been examining precisely how the artist works in relation to society and to institutions, whether camping outside London's Frieze Art Fair in 2003 or working with a group of young artists to create a joint project at the Pompidou Centre, in Paris, demonstrating the ways in which they must subsume their individual identities and art practices for the sake of collective endeavour. Recently,

Althamer's focus has fallen on his own home – a large, brutal, concrete modernist structure in Bródno, Warsaw – and the community that lives there. Althamer's *Common Task* project, the most recent incarnation of which was displayed at Modern Art Oxford last year, involves a group of the block's residents dressing up in golden spacesuits and making visits to other communities, drawing attention to their alienness, and alienation, while paradoxically creating the impression of a tight community (of gold-laméd otherness). In a film of the group's trip to Mali, they explain where they come from to a local tribe by pointing to a concrete brick and explaining that this is a model of their home. When Althamer takes his neighbours to Brussels, Mali, Oxford and modernist Brasilia, among other places, on a golden plane, their movement documents the transition of Poland since the fall of the Berlin Wall, where a previous era spent dreaming of technological and social progress meets a reality that lacks the fantasy of that dream. The 'dreamland' that this work inhabits is something of a compromise.

It might come as no surprise that some of the most successful work focusing on community is made by artists who trace their origins to Eastern Europe, due to the fact that many countries which have experienced both communism and capitalism in recent years now have a physical and mental landscape that has traces of both. This clash between group and individual, ideals and practicalities, is ever-present in the work of Katerina Sedá, whose approach encapsulates some of the more ambivalent elements of working with groups, particularly small towns and villages. Sedá's best-known works are the ongoing ones that she has created with small Czech villages. In *There's Nothing There* (2003), for example, Sedá persuaded most of the inhabitants of Ponetovice to perform their everyday tasks – shopping, cleaning, eating – in coordinated sequence, bringing a sense of choreography and enchantment to the repetitive and humdrum. For *Over and Over*, seen at the 2008 Berlin Biennial, the artist travelled

Joanna Rajkowska

Born: Bydgoszcz. **lives and works:** Warsaw

Oxygenator, 2007. Photo: Marek Szczepanski



CAMP

Formed, Mumbai, 2007

Shishawa, 2009, Edgware Road, London. © Serpentine Gallery



with 40 residents from Líšeň to Berlin, only to confront them with a wall structure constructed from exact replicas of their own garden fences at home – which, since the influx of private capital, had been increasing in size and number. Encouraging them to scale this fence structure, erected on the site of the fallen Berlin Wall, she forced them to greet and help one another, but also to appraise how these new private fences had sprung up in relation to the fall of this larger ‘fence’.

In a more recent project, *The Spirit of Uhyst* (2009), shown at the Lyon Biennial in 2009, Sedá worked with inhabitants of the German town of Uhyst, getting them to collaborate on a drawing that would represent the ‘spirit/ghost’ of the town. Each resident was to add an element composed of a single line to the drawing. While proceedings began well, the inhabitants were soon defacing one another’s work – a church door, for example, was struck through to convey a structure unwelcome to homosexuals. The scribbled, tangled, colourful mess that the townspeople ended up with, the ‘ghost’ of Uhyst, was both an expression of unity and one of conflict – a place viewed by many eyes at once.

This drawing expresses a form of utopia that is not hegemonic or ‘ideal’ in the traditional sense, that allows for a space of conflict and multiple perspectives. This manages to partially reclaim a modernist dream alongside a difficult reality, of community and common tasks undertaken with conflicting ideas. A ghost/spirit still walks because it is still occasionally within grasp – echoing Jacques Rancière’s take on equality, as a power of ‘inconsistent, disintegrative and ever-replayed division’ which is unstable and fleeting (a point made by Bettina Funcke in *Pop or Populous*, 2009). For the moment this can only take place in elusive moments of enchantment, outside the mainstream, in villages, boats and barbershops, and, for now, just outside of the reaches of a more accessible concrete reality. But it may provide a model of messy, tangled potential for the future to come.