Bilateral Blogging

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Abstract: In this discussion I consider the social and aesthetic functions of participatory visual art practice, with specific reference to my recent project "Bilateral Kellerberrin". Nicholas Bourriaud, in his book Relational Aesthetics, argues that the current era is characterised by the "reification" of social interactions. For Bourriaud, everyday interactions have become commodified and transformed into products which can be sold back to us. Bourriaud sees a role for contemporary visual art in resisting this commodification of everyday experience. He asserts that art is able to bloom in the gaps which are not controlled or mediated by commerce. Some art practices, then, can operate in the "interstices" of capital, creating the possibilities for interactions which, as he says, "elude the capitalist economic context by being removed from the law of profit." However, commentators such as Claire Bishop have countered that the kinds of publics who are able to access the "interstices" described by Bourriaud are limited to those who are already part of existing art gallery scenes. I want to extend upon Bishop's critique by considering how artists might harness social interactions beyond the gallery walls. Can art practice go beyond the limitation of the "clique-culture" of the gallery, and make new kinds of human relations possible on a broader scale? With specific reference to my project Bilateral Kellerberrin, I propose that a combination of face-to-face interaction and online blogging, framed as artmaking processes, can create participatory and performative situations which resist the illusion of a false "conviviality".

Keywords: Blogging, Practice-led Research, Participation, Conversation, Interactivity, Relational Aesthetics

NICOLAS BOURRIAUD, IN his book *Relational Aesthetics*, observes that in recent years, artists have increasingly been utilising social relations as both the form and content of their artwork. The artworks considered by Bourriaud in *Relational Aesthetics* encompass 'meetings, encounters, events, various types of collaboration between people, games, festivals, and places of conviviality' (Bourriaud, 2002, p.27). To consider social interaction and communication as artforms (indeed, to regard these as art *media* alongside painting, sculpture, or photography) requires a radical rethink, not only of the nature of the art object, but also the relationship between artist and audience. In this discussion I consider the potential of the blog as a tool for relational artmaking.[1] I present a case study from my own practice, in which blogging was used to focus attention on social interactions within a country town in Western Australia. The interactions which constitute the project, *Bilateral Kellerberrin*, occurred in the everyday spaces of the town of Kellerberrin, rather than being restricted to an art gallery context. I use *Bilateral Kellerberrin* to examine the unique aesthetic and ethical problems raised by art practices made up of dialogue and social exchange. I show that blogging, as an art practice, is well placed to integrate with the rhythms of everyday life, without requiring audience members to step inside an art-specific context.

In *Relational Aesthetics*, Bourriaud compares avant-garde art of the 1960s and 70s with its more recent counterparts. The earlier work, he writes, often embodied a revolutionary search for 'social utopias'. By contrast, recent social-interactions-as-art seek to create 'everyday micro-utopias' (Bourriaud, 2002, p.31). He writes: 'it seems more pressing to invent possible relations with our neighbours in the present than to bet on happier tomorrows' (Bourriaud, 2002, p.44). He uses the example of Rirkrit Tiravanija, who is well known for his installations incorporating hospitality and domestic environments as frameworks for social interaction. On one hand, the loss of the revolutionary project could be seen as something to be mourned, since it involves an acceptance of the pervasiveness of global capitalism. However, micro-utopian projects demonstrate an empowering desire to make pragmatic models of living in the here-and-now (wherever one may be) rather than constantly deferring to some unattainable future.

One key ethical and aesthetic problem for artists working relationally is to identify how to carry out projects so that they don't merely create an illusion of community and togetherness. Commentator Claire Bishop has questioned the political efficacy of the

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[1] 'A blog (short for "web log") is a web page that serves as a publically accessible personal journal (or log) for an individual. Blogs tend to be updated daily, providing an ongoing account of the beliefs, discoveries and personality of the author' (Coleman, 2005, p. 279). "To blog" is the act of creating a blog - thus the word "blog" refers to the making, and is simultaneously a record of the made thing. For an excellent technical introduction to blogs, as well as an account of how they operate as 'documentaries of the everyday,' see Miles, 2005.

micro-utopias described by Bourriaud, because of their failure to escape the social divisions created by art galleries.[2] In some of Tiravanija's projects, the institutional space is given over to a playful, temporary re-use, as a site for social interaction. This may serve to re-invigorate the gallery as a place of live encounter, but for Bishop, the utopian scope of such works is limited to *particular* audiences and social scenes (Bishop, 2004).

This idea, that art presentation and display structures can actually impede the utopian thrust of modern art practices, has antecedents in earlier critiques of the gallery system. John Dewey, in his 1934 book *Art as Experience,* strongly criticised the compartmentalisation of art within rarified spheres like galleries and theatres. Dewey argued that the consideration of art as a separate realm was a relatively recent phenomenon, particular to western culture. Considering this realm as a special place 'distinguished by its freedom, imagination, and pleasure' has the flow-on effect of sapping these qualities from ordinary life (Shusterman, 2001, p.102). Dewey, however, did not advocate abolishing cultural institutions. His aim was rather to highlight our prevailing tendency to prioritise physical, visible objects over the kinds of *experiences* that such objects facilitate in our lives. If we consider human aesthetic experience, rather than the formal study of objects, as a priority, then art galleries are only *one* among many sites in which it can take place.

Philosopher Richard Shusterman develops a useful genealogy of aesthetic experience in his essay 'The End of Aesthetic Experience'. Following Dewey, Shusterman calls for a broader definition of art than that afforded by our predominant understanding of objects within a gallery. Ironically, he argues that the conceptual push within modernist art (and art criticism) has had the effect of producing a sphere of art which has become divorced from human feeling and affect: that is, *anaesthetised*. For Shusterman, an art-going public in need of aesthetic experience has already taken its business elsewhere, to 'popular art, which has not yet learned to eschew the experiential goals of pleasure, affect and meaningful coherence, even if it often fails to achieve them' (Shusterman, 2000, p.32).

The notion that aesthetic experience is to be found (and created) outside what we usually regard as art-specific locations, clearly resonates in late twentieth century art practice. Claire Doherty's compilation *Contemporary Art: From Studio to Situation* describes recent projects which are embedded within a complex web of relations: 'a situation, a set of cir-

cumstances, geographical location, historical narrative, group of people or social agenda' (Doherty, 2004, p.9). In this paper I argue that artworks which draw attention to, and reflect upon, their own position within this complex web of relations might be well placed to go beyond the limitations of a compartmentalised art sphere. I consider the notion that micro-utopias created in art galleries might operate as a mode of resistance to the commodification of social interactions. I offer my project *Bilateral Kellerberrin* (2005) as a case study of interactive art occurring outside the confines of a gallery. *Bilateral Kellerberrin* utilised daily blogging, combined with face-to-face interactions within the ordinary spaces of a small town. Key to my argument is the idea that blogging presents an opportunity for socially oriented art projects to leave behind a trace of their own emergence over a period of time, and can also create space for a different kind of public interaction between individuals than that afforded by an art gallery setting.[3]

Relational Aesthetics and the Illusion of Togetherness

For Bourriaud, relational art carries out a valuable social function. The current era is characterised by the 'reification' of social interactions (Bourriaud, 2002, p.9). That is, these everyday interactions have become commodified and transformed into products which can be sold back to us. He writes:

> [A]nything that cannot be marketed will inevitably vanish. Before long, it will not be possible to maintain relationships between people outside these trading areas. […] The space of current relations is thus the space most severely affected by general reification. […] The social bond has turned into a standardized artifact (Bourriaud, 2002, p.9).

Examples of this phenomenon seem common in daily life. Sociologist Karla Erickson, for instance, argues that even something as personal as "care" has become a commodity, and the task of looking after children and elderly relatives has been transformed into a product to be sold on the market to excessively busy working adults (Erickson, 2005). The growing "safety industry" is another case. Social theorist Andy Blunden, in his article 'The Sum of All Fears,' identifies a growing and widespread fear that our existing social bonds will not prevent us from being swindled or hurt. Because of this fear, we consider replacing these social bonds with a product we can buy. He writes, 'instead of forging strong social ties

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[2] Not all of the projects discussed by Bourriaud take place within a gallery. For instance, he offers the work of Jens Haaning (*Turkish Jokes*, 1994), who broadcast Turkish jokes in a market square in Copenhagen, thus creating an instantaneous 'micro-community [...] made up of immigrants brought together by collective laughter' (Bourriaud, 2002, p.17).

[3] Blogging, of course, brings its own set of restrictions and limitations as to who can participate, as will be discussed below.

to protect ourselves from perceived threats, we purchase protection in the form of insurance' (Blunden, 2005, p.76).

For Bourriaud, artists producing social relations (rather than commodities for an art market) are resisting this process of commodification. He describes the possibilities that such practices carve out as occuring in the *interstices* of capital (Bourriaud, 2002, p.16). He borrows the term interstice from Marx, to denote places and methods of interaction which sidestep the profit motive thought to be inherent in all human trade. Interstice literally means the gap formed between two bodies. Thus in Bourriaud's formulation, artists who create opportunities for social interaction which elude the laws of profit are not rejecting the capitalist system outright, in order to invent a completely new way of living, but are flourishing in the small cracks and fissures afforded by capital.

Interactive situations in art museums - because they do not operate on the same profit/loss basis as contemporary commodified relations - thus might operate as an interstice in the globalised economy. When used as a site for relational art, the gallery becomes less a place to display and sell objects, and more a venue allowing time and space for other options: gift economies, skill exchanges, even simply the availability of space to meet where one is not obliged to buy something.

Bourriaud often cites Thai artist Rirkrit Tiravanija as a key example among artists working relationally. Tiravanija is best known for his hospitality installations, in which he prepares fresh food for gallery visitors. Sometimes he creates freestanding architectural constructions inside a gallery, which replicate the interior form of his or someone else's house, and he invites visitors to come and use the space for whatever purpose they wish. In *Untitled (Tomorrow Is Another Day)* (1996) 'people could use the kitchen to make food, wash themselves in his bathroom, sleep in the bedroom, or hang out and chat in the living room' (Bishop, 2004, p.57). Tiravanija thus transforms the work of art from a set of static objects, into a framework for interaction. For Tiravanija, the conditions of engagement within the art gallery shift from *contemplation* to *use* (Bishop, 2004, p.57).[4] His installations create miniaturised public spaces with their own schedule of events, inside the broader context of a host venue. In *Untitled (he promised)* 2002, he built a large steel and glass pavilion, and welcomed a myriad of public and private activities,

from avant-garde film screenings, massage and pilates, face painting for children, and panel discussions. The kind of use offered by Tiravanija's artworks might seem to be a community-building service, through the temporary availability of free space.

As artworks, such situations require activation by gallery visitors, in a way which can physically alter them. Thus Tiravanija asks his audience to go beyond creative interpretation and become collaborators in the making of the work.[5] As Claire Bishop has pointed out, 'the phrase "lots of people" regularly appears on [Tiravanija's] lists of materials' (Bishop, 2004, p.56). However, in her article 'Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics', Bishop wonders *who* these 'lots of people' might actually be. Contrary to one curator's assertion that Tiravanija's 'unique combination of art and life offer[s] an impressive experience of togetherness to everybody' (Kittelmann, 1996), Bishop argues that this 'everybody' actually constitutes a very small social network. She cites one Tiravanija exhibition from 1996, in which the artist served noodles to visitors of a New York gallery. Tiravanija has often incorporated the serving of free food to visitors as a 'means to allow a convivial relationship between audience and artist to develop' (Bishop, 2004, p.56). In a review of this show, art critic Jerry Saltz recalls visiting Tiravanija's makeshift eatery several times during its run. He spends time eating principally with art dealers, artists, and art lovers (Saltz, 1996, p.107). For Bishop, this is a problem, because although the work sets out to be an inclusive and open space unmediated by the controlling influence of capital, it ends up merely creating a kind of club for members of a pre-defined social grouping:

> Tiravanija's microtopia gives up on the idea of transformation in public culture and reduces its scope to the pleasures of a private group who identify with one another as gallery-goers. (Bishop, 2004, p.69)

Even more troubling is an account by artists Jay Koh and Stefan Roemer of the situation surrounding Tiravanija's *Untitled (Tomorrow Is Another Day)* in 1996. At the same time that the host institution (the Kolnischer Kunstverein) welcomed visitors to cook, eat, and hang out in his temporary, autonomous space-within-a-space, the police were breaking up a 'settlement of homeless people' outside the gallery

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[4] This apparent dichotomy between *use* and *contemplation* is somewhat problematic. Is contemplation never useful? Is the process of *using* a thing always pursued without reflective thought? It is rather the combination of action (use) and reflection (contemplation) within an integrated practice, which I will argue below is necessary for an artwork to situate itself ethically in the web of relations which it inhabits and creates.

[5] Duchamp's famous lecture *The Creative Act* made explicit the inherent creativity of the viewer: 'All in all, the creative act is not performed by the artist alone; the spectator brings the work in contact with the external world by deciphering and interpreting its inner qualification and thus adds his contribution to the creative act.' (Duchamp, 1959).

(Kester, 2004, p.105). Roemer was incensed at the hypocracy of this situation:

> They act as if they are being so generous in making this room available when they are really doing nothing at all. It is a meaningless statement [which] fits perfectly with the rhetoric of globalism, with its empty platitudes and its commitment to image over real change. (Kester, 2004, p.105)

The problem, here, lies not in the fact that the artist has created a convivial atmosphere (for this, too, is a vital and generous act in an increasingly competitive and career-focussed art world), but that this atmosphere may serve to lull the art-going public into a false sense of togetherness. Visitors to Tiravanija's installations might make new friends and feel good about breaking out of their atomised subjectivity, but the illusion that "all are welcome here" may serve merely to hide the antagonistic exchanges occuring within society more generally.

Drawing on Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe's *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics*, Bishop writes:

> a fully functioning democratic society is not one in which all antagonisms have disappeared, but one in which new political frontiers are constantly being drawn and brought into debate—in other words, a democratic society is one in which relations of conflict are *sustained*, not erased. (Bishop, 2004, p.66)

Hence, despite being, in Bourriaud's terms, interstices within the urban spaces of capitalism, Tiravanija's installations run the risk of creating only a symbolic model of democracy within the safety of the art gallery. Udo Kittelmann, who curated Tiravanija's project, *Untitled (Tomorrow Is Another Day)* (1996), in Cologne, wrote, 'Our fear that the art-living-space might be vandalized did not come true. . . . The art space lost its institutional function and finally turned into a free social space' (Kittelman, cited in Bishop, 2004, p.68). Free, that is, for anyone willing to first enter into the physical and psychic atmosphere created by the host museum. As Bishop writes, 'This may be a microtopia, but—like utopia—it is still predicated on the exclusion of those who hinder or prevent its realization' (Bishop, 2004, p.68). If John Dewey in 1934 feared that the retreat of art into institutional ghettos would result in the withdrawal of aesthetic qualities from everyday life, then Tiravanija's offer of democratic situations within art contexts might have a similar effect of compartmentalising freedom: of micro-modelling an ideal society within a gallery, while just outside

the gallery walls, that society is in the process of dismantling itself.

Clearly, Tiravanija's multifaceted art practice cannot be dismissed with a few anecdotal criticisms. Bishop's simplified account of the intention of his work - a 'means to allow a convivial relationship between audience and artist to develop' - is only *one* way we might interpret his gallery-based interaction-frameworks. Another might be to consider it within the avant-garde tendency to defamiliarise the ordinary, in which non-art objects (in this case, social interactions, domestic kitchens) are imported into the gallery and seen in a new light. In this case, the alienation of non-art audiences is not a failure of the artwork to live up to its proclaimed intention, but merely a (possibly unfortunate) consequence of the compartmentalised sphere of art in general. Bourriaud, in fact, contends that the sphere of art is 'neither more nor less alienated than what surrounds it', and far from oblivious to this fact, the artist sometimes 'reproduces or uses the very forms of our alienation' in the exhibition process (Bourriaud, 2004, p.48).

Of course, the drive to resist the alienating effect of capital is by no means unique to artists working within galleries. Economist Colin C. Williams has shown that contrary to the widespread perception that 'monetary relations have penetrated every nook and cranny of the world' (Williams, 2002, p.532), non-commodified relations still proliferate widely:

> ...even in the heartland of commodification – the advanced economies - there exist large alternative spaces of self-provisioning, non-monetised exchange and monetised exchange where the profit-motive is absent. (Williams, 2002, p.526).

In fact, according to Williams, the rise of these kinds of spaces and activities (including such non-art examples as car-boot sales, "DIY" home renovations, gift economies, bicycle repair workshops, and voluntary labour) might be seen as a backlash against the pervasive creep of commodification:

> a largely unintended effect of a highly individualised and marketised economy has been the intensification of social practices which systematically 'evade the edicts of exchange value and the logic of the market'. (Williams, 2002, p.537)

Williams suggests that spaces of resistance *already* flourish throughout society. When artists like Rirkrit Tiravanija create high-profile aestheticised versions of these ordinary spaces of resistance inside art galleries, they risk perpetuating the myth that the right and proper place for non-commodified exchange (and aesthetic experience), is a special architectural

space, rather than recognising that everyday life itself is riddled with such opportunities.

Bilateral Blogging

John Dewey's call, in *Art as Experience*, for a re-integration of aesthetic qualities with ordinary life, was not a luddite's lament for some imagined idyllic pre-modern lifestyle. Rather, many of his examples draw aesthetic experience from events taking place within the bustle of the industrialised city:

> …the fire-engine rushing by, the machines excavating enormous holes in the earth; […] how the tense grace of the ball-player infects the onlooking crowd; the zest of the spectator in poking the wood burning on the hearth and in watching the darting flames and crumbling coals. (Dewey, 1958, p.5)

In *Art as Experience*, Dewey's aim was to 'restore continuity' between the sanctity of the framed and refined world in which art resides, and the 'everyday events, doings, and sufferings that are universally recognised to constitute experience' (Dewey, 1958, p.3). Similarly, my project *Bilateral Kellerberrin* represents an attempt to create a framework for inter-action which integrates the ordinary events of a small town, and thus goes beyond the limited social networks which normally access art galleries. *Bilateral Kellerberrin* took place during April and May 2005. I was invited to spend two months in the town as artist in residence, by IASKA (International Art Space Kellerberrin Australia). IASKA regularly "imports" artists from around the world to spend time living and working in this rural community, which, numbering just 1000 inhabitants, is at a precarious point in its existence. The pressures of the global wheat and sheep market have made small-scale farming unfeasible, resulting in fewer, and larger, properties, increasing reliance on machinery over "manpower", and thus a dwindling population of workers and their families. This economic reorganisation of "human capital" has the predictable flow-on effect of reducing "social capital" - service and support industries, retail, health and educational facilities. These issues of great local concern helped shape the project I carried out in the town.

In Kellerberrin, I embarked on a rather simple daily exercise: each morning during my residency, I sat down and wrote, from memory, about the events of the previous day: who I met in the town, and what we said to each other. Social encounters and meetings took place by chance, in the real places of the town - the grocery store, the speedway, the street, the pub - and occasionally in private homes. These encounters were written up and posted online each day, as a kind of slightly delayed feedback mechanism. Through this process, the fragmentary episodes in the evolution of friendships, and the acquisition of information were (at least somewhat) transparent and traceable. *Bilateral Kellerberrin* thus showed how the generation of knowledge, and the establishment of social relationships, are ongoing processes in states of constant transformation.

To hang around the town, casually meeting locals and getting to know people, was, in itself, a key part of my artistic process. Framing these ordinary social interactions as an aesthetic activity represents an important development from experiments carried out by artists during the 1960s and 1970s[6]. *Bilateral Kellerberrin* attempted to bridge the gap between the traditional roles of audience and artist, offering shared responsibility to each participant in the conversation. By publishing the proceedings of these conversations each day on the internet, the project allowed the conversation-as-interactive-performance to be visible, developing into an archive of its own making. This online archive is itself not static, but remains open to addition, alteration and further discussion.

Could a hybrid project like *Bilateral Kellerberrin* become (in the terms of Laclau and Mouffe) an 'antagonistic' framework, able to sustain differing subjectivities? Instead of requiring potential participants to cross the threshold of an art gallery (and thus possess confidence in this social sphere as a prerequisite for participation) this project utilised two seemingly disparate strategies of interaction. The first type of interaction was physical. Conversation and dialogue took place within the normal sites of the town itself: the pub, the supermarket, the street, the sports field. These conversations, between myself and whoever I happened to encounter by chance or design, were not set aside from the normal rhythms of life. Instead, they grew from the seemingly natural shapes of mutual curiosity or suspicion, which occur when an "outsider" from the big city encounters a small-town "local". If we consider Rirkrit Tiravanija's sculptural installations within an art gallery as a framework for social interaction, then perhaps the presence of my own body in the town

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[6] For example, in Allan Kaprow's Happenings, and in his polemical writing, the aesthetic enframement of ordinary objects and actions is shown to be the work of what he terms the 'un-artist':

Sophistication of consciousness in the arts today (1969) is so great that it is hard not to assert as matters of fact: [...] that the random trancelike movements of shoppers in a supermarket are richer than anything done in modern dance [...] that lint under beds and the debris of industrial dumps are more engaging than the recent rash of exhibitions of scattered waste matter. (Kaprow, 1971, p.97)

of Kellerberrin could be thought of as an equivalent kind of framework - but without the need for an additional, specialised architectural construction. There was no need for people to feel comfortable with the spaces or conventions of art to be participants in the project.

The second type of interaction was textual. My memories of the dialogues were written up as narratives, which were then fed back in an online public sphere. This feedback took the form of a publically accessible website, as a blog. The cycle of physical encounter, and virtual feedback, was repeated each and every day during my stay in Kellerberrin. Importantly, this series of repeated encounters - my process of coming to terms with difference - is recorded *within* the blog. The blog-as-art project thus contains the "sound of its own making", resulting in a virtual snapshot – a core sample – of a coming into being of relationships in a small town.[7]

I would like to propose that this combination of physical and virtual interaction and feedback presents an alternative communicative channel to that mediated by the conventions of art gallery display. Unlike Tiravanija, I did not set up a host environment providing a supposedly "neutral" venue or a "free social space" for visitors to utilise. The use of ordinary sites of commerce and transit as the generative spaces for conversation-as-art-practice, in *Bilateral Kellerberrin*, acknowledges that these spaces *already* harbour rich possibilities for interaction. In a country town like Kellerberrin, conversations occur as and when people bump into each other in the course of carrying out their daily tasks. For instance, it is not unusual to chat for fifteen minutes or more in the vegetable aisle at the supermarket. Drivers will often stop their cars in the middle of the road to share the latest news through wound-down windows. The everyday context for the exchange of information means that this exchange takes place around the edges of other activities – or is, in fact, *mediated by* those activities. The following extract from the blog is one such example of a particular interaction (and its associated reflective insight) which took place as I walked around the town:

> The first thing that happened as I turned off Sewell St and into Rason, was a police car pulled up alongside me. [...] He asked if I needed a hand with anything (which I think was a euphemism for "ello ello ello!") - and said he'd noticed a new face…I explained that I was an artist in residence at IASKA, just having a look around town. [...] One thing that I have

noticed, in a small town, is that you can't really look without being seen. In a big city, you can wander around anonymously for hours checking out the place. But here in Keller, the only way to see the streets closely is to walk them, and to walk is to be seen by many sets of eyes. (Ihlein, 2005, 25 April)

Furthermore, the combination of physical interaction and virtual feedback is able to sustain different voices without requiring closure. In conversations that occur on the street, as well as in fragmentary blog entries, there is no pressure for any single particular exchange to reach a definitive conclusion, achieve consensus, or solve a problem. However, this does not mean that discussion is merely trivial or mundane. The residents of Kellerberrin often displayed great concern for the social, political and environmental problems that beset a small farming community within a globalised economy. The conversations documented by *Bilateral Kellerberrin* cover issues ranging from rural depopulation to religion; mulesing and live sheep export; land use and climate change; alcoholism and mental health. Many of these rural dilemmas are complex, generate widely differing opinions, and have no agreed solutions:

> Tim felt that not enough was taught in Australian schools about the importance of sheep and shearing in Australia's history. The country was built on the sheep's back, right? I felt a bit uncomfortable about this, especially since I'd been reading Jared Diamond's *Collapse*, where he says that the sheep is an incredibly destructive animal which fucks up land wherever it goes. David agreed, and said that the few attempts to set up kangaroo meat and leather export have faltered partly because of European resistance to farming an animal they regard as our national icon. This is a serious marketing problem, because 'roos are not as harmful to the land, and their meat and leather is of very high quality. (Ihlein, 2005, 1 May)

In such conversations, thoughts emerge unshaped, and are moulded in the telling; fragments from past conversations re-emerge to be played out again; and gossip is interwoven with personal philosophy. The blog, in its additive, fragmentary way, is an ideal medium for nurturing these emergent ideas. I argue that the ability to witness the development of knowledge via discourse in this way is just as important as the end product itself. Stephen Coleman in his

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[7] In 1961, Robert Morris exhibited *Box With the Sound of its Own Making* – a wooden box containing a speaker which replayed the measuring, sawing, and hammering which had gone on during its fabrication. In his *Box* Morris sandwiched physical history and the resulting art object in a crisp conceptual demonstration. However, *Bilateral Kellerberrin* suggests that Morris' example can be useful in wider social spheres, and not simply within art-specific contexts.

recent essay 'Blogs and the New Politics of Listening' agrees:

> [B]logs allow people – indeed expect them – to express incomplete thoughts. This terrain of intellectual evolution, vulnerability and search for confirmation or refutation from wider sources is in marked contrast to the crude certainties that dominate so much of political discourse. (Coleman, 2005, p.274)

Bridging Public and Private Spheres

As well as documenting 'incomplete thoughts' via daily writing, *Bilateral Kellerberrin* is an interactive artwork whose content is shaped through the participation of its readership. The technology of the blog enables comments and responses from readers, making the ideas expressed within the text dynamic and unstable, and subject to correction and addition. According to Adrian Miles, blogs do not stand alone, protecting the solidity of authoritative knowledge: '[A] blog is not thought of as an individual site, but as a *discursive event* [my italics] that participates in a collection of relations to other sites, and other people' (Miles, 2005). In this way, the participation of readers is essential in continuing the discussion, ensuring that it doesn't remain a monologue. During the course of my project in Kellerberrin, readers posted comments to correct factual errors I had made, to add details missing from my account, or to praise me for acute observations. For example, in response to my report on the local phenomenon of burning back the remains of the previous year's wheat crop ("burning the stubble"), Kit, a local farmer, responded firmly:

> You need to know that stubble burning is "BAD" the soil should always be covered to protect it from the elements. The stubble becomes organic carbon in the soil which the soil is very short of. The stubble retention conserves moisture and protects new seedlings from harsh conditions. Farmers burn because their machinery can't handle stubble, there are many ways to solve that and they burn for weed control, but there are ways to solve that too, so when I see a burnt paddock I feel sad. (Ihlein, 2005, 28 May)

Comment-feedback remains visible to future readers of a blog. In this way, comments leave themselves open to ongoing dialogue with other readers (including the blog's author). The kind of dialogue one has in these "virtual" circumstances is necessarily different to that which takes place in the town hall, the supermarket line, or while watching the football. The public sphere of the blog often (but by no means always) creates a particular etiquette, and encourages a particular discursive "tone of voice".[8] Coleman argues that blogs enable people to participate in public conversation in new ways. Those who might have been too embarrassed to stand up and state their case in front of others in the context of a physical encounter, may not baulk at expressing themselves online. He believes the subjectivity that online conversation enables presents an alternative for those intimidated by the standard democratic process of public meetings:

> [Blogging] provides a bridge between the private, subjective sphere of self-expression and the socially fragile civic sphere in which publics can form and act [...] By allowing people to both interact with others and remain as private individuals, blogs provide an important escape route from the 'if you don't come to the meeting, you don't have anything to say' mentality. (Coleman, 2005, p.274)

By bridging the 'private sphere of self-expression' and the 'socially fragile civic sphere,' as Coleman puts it, *Bilateral Kellerberrin* placed the everyday lives of the people of Kellerberrin (as well as my own) on the agenda. The medium of the blog was able to achieve this in a unique way. In our current system of representational democracy, Coleman writes, community consultation is rudimentary and tokenistic:

> Polititians are needed because of the dispersed, disaggregated character of the public, which only expresses itself as a collectivity through representation. [...] To represent [...] is to claim knowledge about what the represented need, want and value. The ways of obtaining such knowledge are crude. Politicians claim legitimacy through elections in which voters are asked to opt for a broad package of often disparate policies. (Coleman, 2005, p.279)

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[8] In *Bilateral Kellerberrin*, I noticed that the tone of voice of those who left comments was often similar to my own observational, reflective writing style. This phenomenon of "stylistic mimicry" seems consistent with the etiquette guidelines posted by Sarah Gilbert on her *cafemama* blog:
"An obvious overall guideline is to take your cue from the blog author, and other "guests." [...] Generally, if a blog is personal, and you are intruding, keep your comments friendly and supportive. They aren't asking for your critical viewpoint. On the other hand, political blogs or other blogs where a small group of people maintain a fast and fierce dialogue about current events would be a great place to voice your disagreement (with respect, of course), especially if you have a new, informed viewpoint. (Gilbert, 2003)

What *Bilateral Kellerberrin* achieves then, is the creation of a space where the individual voices of 'the represented' can begin to be heard, on their own terms. Our personalised voices do not vent hollowly into the bottom of beer mugs, nor do they gather conspiratorially in a falsely inclusive public sphere inside an art gallery. Instead, local and personal politics are sustained through the public narration of events occurring on particular occasions. In this way, a collaborative knowledge, as Coleman writes, 'emerges in fragmented, subjective, incomplete and contestable ways' (Coleman, 2005, p.279). Importantly, knowledge, generated through text, endures as an archive of its own emergence.

I am not suggesting that the medium of the blog is an all-inclusive solution to the crisis of participation in so-called representational politics. Like any medium, the blog places limitations on who can participate, what is able to be said, and how. One major pre-requisite of *Bilateral Kellerberrin* is a basic ability to to read and write in English. Computer literacy, and access to technology is another. Kellerberrin's aging population has a significant proportion of residents who do not even know how to click a mouse, let alone access the internet. As an imperfect answer to this restriction, I produced a hard copy printout of the blog, both as a portable pamphlet, and as a "paste-up" in the windows of the town gallery facing the main street. I also published excerpts of my daily blog entries in the town's fortnightly newsletter, *The Pipeline*. Obviously, compared with online participants, readers of these printed versions did not have the same facility to directly correspond with the artwork itself. But the physical presence of the text in the streets of Kellerberrin meant that readers could respond simply by bumping into me in those ordinary spaces – the same spaces in which the original "material" had been generated.

A Bilateral Framework for Aesthetic Experience

While the blog might seem to present a new tool for democratic engagement, it is important to remember that (at least in the case of *Bilateral Kellerberrin*) blogs rely on some very old fashioned aesthetic skills: the art of conversation, and the art of storytelling. Each of these ancient arts needs to be wielded with care in order to craft the ongoing 'discursive event' (Miles, 2005) of the blog-as-art. My special status as a visiting artist is one of the things which made the unique encounters documented within *Bilateral Kellerberrin* possible. Filtered through my written voice, and tempered by the corrections, alterations, and additions of my readership, a fragmented model of developing relationships within the town began to emerge, from the ground up. While it facilitated exchange and encouraged readers to speak up, the process I employed in the blog was just as much an attempt to honour the autonomy of *my own* speaking voice. Rather than play the role of a disinterested and detached anthropologist, my particular choice of words, and the rhythms of the narrative I deployed on a daily basis, were deliberately designed to create a compelling atmosphere which might encourage an ongoing readership.[9] Ordinary interactions in the streets of Kellerberrin were enhanced, and personal narratives reformulated, making the commonplace momentarily fascinating. Not only was the ordinary made extraordinary through this process, but by juxtaposing my quotidian experience (that of a white urban male artist) with that of the people in Kellerberrin (variously farmers, shopkeepers, labourers, schoolchildren etc.), the project also revealed the contingent and situated nature of what we take for granted as "the everyday". As theorist Simon During writes:

> [I]t is important to remember the obvious point that everyday life is not everywhere the same [...] doesn't it make a difference if one walks in Paris, down-town Detroit, Melbourne, Mexico City, or Hong Kong just for starters? And, in each of these places, does a woman have the same experience as a man, a gay as a straight, a young person as an old one? The everyday, too, is produced and experienced at the intersection of many fields by embodied individuals. (During, cited in Morris, 2004, p.691)

In *Bilateral Kellerberrin,* as well as in other projects, I have used the term "bilateral" due to its multiple associations: an agreement in which two parties take responsibility; an international trade or peace accord signed by two nations; or, more generally, the idea that any thing can have, literally, two sides. I find the two-ness of "bilateral" useful in immediately conjuring an atmosphere of relationship between myself as the initiator of the project, and any indi-

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[9] Particular "characters" popped up here and there throughout *Bilateral Kellerberrin*, like cameo appearances in a daily soap opera. The relative importance of any of these characters was of course uncertain in the overarching narrative (unlike the writer of a serial, I did not know what tomorrow would bring) and this uncertainty helped keep my readers coming back to find out what might happen next. One such reader (who read the hard copy printout of the blog) responded:

> I was compelled to read it. I actually half expected when I picked it up [...] that I might end up putting it down and not finishing it. There were lots of threads reappearing that kept me interested, especially keeping up with what was happening with the kids at Cunderdin School and the mystery of Geoff the taciturn postmaster. (Siciliano, 2007)

vidual "audience" member with whom I come into contact. This one-on-one (rather than one-to-many) relationship is the starting point in an attempt to be more specific about the amorphous subjects usually described in generalised terms by art criticism as viewers or audience, not to mention my own situated role as artist or author.

My project in Kellerberrin, particularly, established a bilateral framework for interaction in the following ways: First, by participating in, and writing about the events in a small town on a daily basis, I engaged in a kind of double portraiture - an extended coming-into-being through representation - not only of "the town" (as terrain and environment and as a collection of individuals), but also of myself (as both a literary persona and an embodied, socialising subject). Second, for readers of the blog, there was a constant awareness of the artist-author's cyclic, dual role: out and about in the town, engaging in conversation and discovery; and then retreating, hunched over a keyboard, to reflect textually on these experiences in the glow of the computer screen. Third, the interactions between my literary persona and blog readers who contributed comments, in the online, "disembodied" component of *Bilateral Kellerberrin,* created further opportunities for new engagements and interactions to be pursued by my "embodied self" in the town. This was possible because blog postings were updated daily, meaning that the moment of publication (the moment, that is, of engaging with "the public") was not deferred until the artwork was already complete. On the contrary, readers' contributions had the potential to significantly alter the direction of the project.

In *Bilateral Kellerberrin,* then, the online environment was not merely "virtual", but actually played a significant role in affecting events in the "real" world. As I am suggesting here, a bilateral framework for aesthetic experience is one in which emergent definitions of both "you" and "I" evolve through a process of communicative engagement. These engagements are seen to have aesthetic properties of their own, such as narrative rhythms and linguistic forms (both epistolary and bodily), and can induce affective responses in readers and participants.[10] In this sense, they possess many of the characteristics of traditional aesthetic experience, but have the added

dimension of being interwoven with daily life, rather than sequestered in a rarified art space. As such, they demand an increased sense of responsibility: an ethics which acknowledges the effect of art within the specific network of relations which constitute our lives.

Claire Bishop's criticism of Bourriaud's *Relational Aesthetics* - that it 'requires a unified subject as a prerequisite for community-as-togetherness', problematises the very idea of community itself (Bishop, 2005, p.79). Even in a town of only 1000 people, there are countless overlapping allegiances, and just as many dissenting models on how one's life might be lived. It would be ridiculous to presume that any single method of gathering and comparing these models could hope to accommodate them all. The very site-specific nature of *Bilateral Kellerberrin* raises some key questions. To what extent can my short residency in a small country town be used to generalise about communication in society more broadly? How might the dual process of face-to-face and online interaction function differently in a heavily populated urban, or suburban environment?[11] Another question arising from this discussion relates to the role of galleries and museums in society. I have suggested that some attempts by contemporary artists, such as Rirkrit Tiravanija, to reintroduce the "live" experience in the gallery environment have faltered because of (often unstated) social constraints on who can enter and "feel at home" in such spaces. However, this could be countered by considering gallery-based projects by artists such as Hans Haacke and the Border Art Workshop, who have been able to sustain a fruitful antagonism whilst simultaneously drawing attention to the the museum within its geographical, economic, and intellectual communities.[12]

For Bishop, art work, wherever it takes place, is more compelling when it 'acknowledges the limitations of what is possible as art [...] and subjects to scrutiny all easy claims for a transitive relationship between art and society' (Bishop, 2005, p.79). *Bilateral Kellerberrin,* I argue, utilised a method which allowed these limitations to come to the fore. The project set up a framework for social and aesthetic interaction which enabled documentation and reflection to occur in a co-emergent way. In generating and collecting individual stories from particular times

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[10] For instance, Damien, a reader of the blog, contributed the following after reading my story about Zed (a remarkable former schoolteacher who I met at the Kellerberrin pub):

Reading the yarn about [...] Zed made my heart swell up (really I could actually feel it as I was reading, kinda like being on an *"e"* but welling up and around and down, instead of all up like on "e") (Ihlein, 2005, 7 May).

[11] This is a question I pursued in my subsequent project carried out in the Sydney suburb of Petersham, *Bilateral Petersham*, April-May 2006, see <http://thesham.info>

[12] I have in mind projects by Haacke from the early 1970s (such as *Manet-PROJEKT 74,* 1974) which strongly rely on being located within a museum for their critical impact; and installations by the Border Art Workshop in San Diego in the early 1990s, some of which required the audience to submit their bodies to humiliating contortions (analogous to the border-crossing ordeals of illegal Mexican immigrants) in order to enter the gallery (Ollman, 1997, p. 37).

and places, *Bilateral Kellerberrin* allows them to sit alongside one another, making no attempt at a unified, or summary picture of the place. Blogs - like art galleries - are 'sites' and 'discursive events' (Miles, 2005) which come with their own (often unstated) entry requirements and protocols. However, the fragmentary, additive – and bilateral - nature of the blog as a tool of documentation and interaction is a useful alternative to gallery-based situations, in accommodating the ongoing rhythms of ordinary lived experience.

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