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Squaring Off: 7.9 Cubic Metres

ELIZA TAN AND JAMES CARRIGAN IN CONVERSATION

7.9 Cubic Meters, a project initiated by artist James Carrigan, functioned as a gallery-within-a-gallery from its inception in early 2009 to June 2010. Conceived as a sculptural insert, a socio-cultural experiment and collaborative work, it consisted of a 7.9m³ construct erected within its first larger host organisation, Stanley Picker Gallery, London.

Carrigan's parameters for the project were that a program for the space would be proposed by a curator, following which all exhibitions would be based on an open-call for submissions, and that the structure along with the documentation of its activities would in the end be returned to him as a fully formed artwork in and of itself.

Over 250 proposals were received from artists based in the UK and internationally. The participating artists were: Adam Knight, Alexandra Hughes, Matthew MacKisack, Tom Richards, Pierre d'Alancaisez & AK Dolven, David Berridge & Compulsive Holdings, Flávia Müller Medeiros, Trong G Nguyen, AK Dolven, Jeremy Millar, Sinta Tantra and Judy Freya Sibayan.

Curated by Eliza Tan, the program, consisted of 12 monthly exhibitions revolving around 4 indexical themes:

1. The nature of the 'White cube' – Space, Symbolism and Iconoclasm
2. Roles and relationships between artists and curators
3. Artists' positions in relation to image, spectacle and audience
4. Archival work and documentation

The following contains excerpts from a discussion between James Carrigan and Eliza Tan about the collaborative nature of the project.



Eliza: We started off at the very beginning of the project discussing how it was an attempt to explore the co-existence of different exhibition models, modes of production and reception. We were concerned about conditions of 'visibility' and 'invisibility', 'institutional opacity' and 'transparency', 'independent access' and 'organisational exclusion'.

The project was an attempt to draw an erasable blueprint of artistic positions and mapping an adaptive means of working from both within and outside of institutionalized practices. 7.9 Cubic Metres was also very much an on-going conversation about navigating one's own processes of production in relation to that of other participating producers.

You stated from the beginning that the 7.9 Cubic Metre space and the documents resulting from its active life would eventually be returned to yourself as an artwork in and of itself, with an intention of underscoring the social processes involved in producing art as the object of the entire project. This placed certain emphasis on the multiple-authorship involved in its production. Where, at what point, and with whom does this idea, the work of art, and this project begin or end?

I found myself constantly questioning the nature of the project throughout my involvement. On the one hand, I played along with what you had resolved 7.9 Cubic Metres to be from the outset. On the other, I was aware that the project was also an attempt to resist closure; the 7.9 cube itself served a utilitarian function as an object but was at the same time a symbolic gesture. In collaborating to realize 7.9 Cubic Metres, I chose a position of complicity rather than distance.

James: I guess that I would like to adopt the perspective that we simply hold ideas momentarily as they evolve, implying that there is no real start point as such. In relation to the project, if considered as a whole, it has a very dispersed authorship but can then be seen as a collection of parts where authorship is more easily assigned. In that sense, nothing exists without everything else.

When developing this project, I was very much drawn to the layers of authors involved, it can be tricky to decipher in this respect, but I found that I was drawn to being able to take a back seat, that the work didn't look like a work, it looks more real world. In one sense it took a lot of pressure off me as an artist, I passed a lot of the risk over to you as your curatorial agenda was pretty much what people saw first, that or the specific work on display at any given time. Aside from that, I think the project would be read aesthetically before the viewer would even begin to consider the gallery as an artists' project. Hmm, I guess here I am saying that I was hiding and tried to defer authorship, maybe I was curious to see if it could be possible for me to claim authorship!

The project has many layers for me; primarily it is a series of relationships, the everyday aspects of the work over the last year and a half or two years. I find it incredibly difficult to step back and just consider the work, I can never focus on one aspect, my mind races from one aspect to another and I can't pin anything down.

Your involvement in the project is so deep that you seem to race between several different positions, all of which are relevant and valid. It's interesting that you title this conversation "squaring off", I really don't think that you will achieve this, you are too close, and this is pretty key. Because the gallery is constructed as an artists' project, you have a heightened sense of your contribution and your relationships with the different elements of the work, I think you feel very much an author of the work because your involvement actively activates the subjects of the work...

Eliza: Ideas constantly evolve, as you've pointed out, and such evolution moves along a path dictated by how it's communicated and received. In some of our earliest conversations, you'd described 7.9 Cubic Metres as a reflexive attempt, a means of locating your own practice within a network of social relations. While the realization of the idea involved active feedback and participation from all collaborators, to what extent is 7.9 introspective? The idea was carried along, discussed and actualized by practitioners for practitioners. Many of the works exhibited within that tiny space were quiet, hardly offering any visual spectacle, while a work like Sinta Tantra's played on the idea of visual excess. In either case, these were responses by artists who were mutually interested in questioning the conditions of exhibition: What space? What institution? Whose call? How do I show what I make? What kind of opportunity is this? What are the critical parameters? How will my work be received in such a context?

While the content of the works shown is of interest to general audiences when framed pedagogically, the project's inherent concerns (or layers, as you put it) speak to those directly involved in making and showing art, and to critical audiences interested in reading the project as a sum, i.e 'initiated by James Carrigan', rather than as component parts, i.e individual exhibitions.

James: With curating, your frame is, in some respects, quite temporary, but possibly has the same validity as the artist's intention. If an interpretation can change, I wonder if the artist's intention is ever particularly important? In some respects, it is really down to the viewer to read a work, or to give it meaning, which of course instantly jumps back to the fact that the work is framed in the first instance. For me this difficulty to pin something down is a core aspect of 7.9. Can the work exist without the frame? And, what frames what?

Your point is great, it is difficult to understand where to position yourself in the reading of the work, is an individual show important or should I just consider the project as a whole? It is necessary that this is an active questioning. This switching between individual exhibitions and the overall work is a really important aspect of the conundrum at the heart of the project.

To what extent is the project introspective? This is tricky, it is wholly introspective, but it is simultaneously looking outwards and to the same extent! While developing the project it was important to achieve this duality; that 7.9 could be both a gallery and a work of art at the same time. I am quite relieved as your question suggests that I have achieved this.

I am thrilled that my project has a relevance to other artists. I know that to make a work of art takes a great deal of time and effort and to have so many people engage at that level is fantastic.

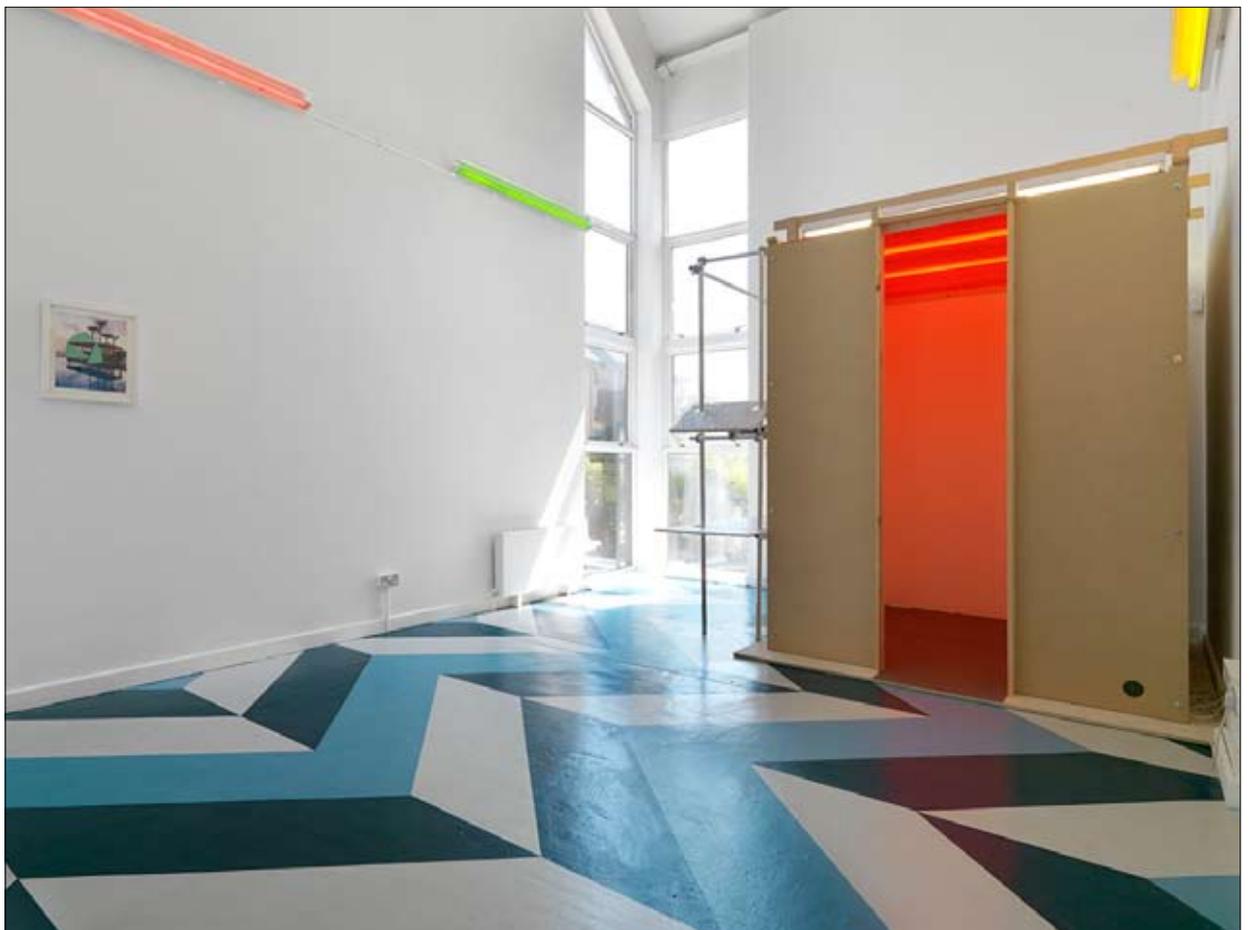
It is interesting that you suggest that work needs to be framed pedagogically for general audiences, and that this work is primarily of interest to those directly involved and critical audiences. I wonder how the general audiences would respond to the work if it were to be shown as part of a group show, or if it were situated within the main gallery space of an institution. I completely agree with your point, it is a bit of a frustration for me but I do hope that the future of the project allows me the opportunity to push this a bit further and to draw the general audiences a bit closer to the core themes.

I guess I should mention here that the project has been renamed The Commensal Gallery and that it will travel to a new institution every year....

The statement that begins with: "Ideas constantly evolve". Yes, I suppose you could say that it is introspective. But this subject is not intended to be of interest only once when framed pedagogically. I would like to think that the subject of the work, and in turn the work positioned within it can be of interest to the general viewing public. I think this is really a question of how transparent these issues are made by the respective artist.

When developing 7.9, I was conscious of how to construct the operational parameters of the work so that it would be intelligible to participating artists, curators, institutions and the viewing public as much as I was conscious of constructing the language of the object of the gallery itself. For me accessibility and transparency were pretty key. So, yeah, it is introspective but not opaque. At least I hope not.

7.9 Cubic Metres
"Sinta Tantra: Politics of Desire"
(installation shot). Image courtesy
of the artist.



Eliza: Let's look at an example. David Berridge's *Guess Work / Guest Work* explored exhibitions as semiotic spaces, a 'work' in itself authored by 'personal working lexicons' and platform to investigate the notion of mis-reading – in David's words "using it as a form of engagement both with curatorial history and my own practice." His presentation was accompanied by two 'Writing Exhibitions' workshops involving artists, fiction writers, theorists, architects and film-makers who got together to discuss the relationship between writing and exhibition making. The participant-producers were each other's audiences and critics, presenting short 5-15 minute, unrehearsed sequences of micro-exhibitions, performances and actions.

I think David's contribution was important in the way that it crucially mirrored questions on the shifting positions that authors and their audiences assume in the process of making meaning. While 'Guess Work / Guest Work', like *7.9 Cubic Metres as a whole*, was a collaborative effort which hinged upon the organic realization of a work by multiple reader-authors. Collaboration and multiple-authorship simultaneously entails ownership and individual intention.

This component, which was guest curated by Berridge is an example of how activities developed with and without me, even if I had written the curatorial framework which influenced the project's outcomes only to an extent and not in totality. Working backwards again, the curatorial agenda was implicitly guided by the project parameters you had described, where I had positioned myself in complicity with you.

James: The project is a collection of different aspects of art production and to me, it's more interesting to consider art via these aspects rather than considering art as a solitary activity. I want to activate every element in the production of a single work, and it is for this reason that I need to disperse authorship.

You mentioned hearing David out and not making interventions, when you consider that your curatorial agenda is what he responded to in the first place, your involvement is pretty significant already. I'm curious to know how important authorship is to you?

It seems that we had in part the same experience, "things happening with or without you". This is an interesting challenge to an "author", our roles are about framing something and not about making it. This opens up something quite interesting, and something that is critical to the project. I believe that art is not made by artists but rather by those that frame art. Without this framing, there is nothing. Without the entire world around art there is no art.

In this respect, when I think back to what I set up, I was conscious to mimic the traditional formalities of galleries so as to become as invisible as possible, I wonder if I am an author of anything?

Eliza: Yes, an artwork might not exist if it is never seen and framed by certain symbolic structures, the white cube, critical discourse, historical narratives and so on. Art, as you refer to it, in relation to you, doesn't exist in a vacuum, is not self-contained. Its realization is dependent on a series of physical, intellectual and social interactions and observations, and, in some cases, the failure to engage some of these relations. An idea and intention realized as an artistic gesture may also remain unseen until it subsequently surfaces through circulation, making its way into visible sight. Bruce Naumen's studio experiments were made in blindsight, in the privacy of his studio but filmed, edited and then shown in the museum. How do we trace the ontology of what we end up calling a work of art, its function, position and value within a wider culture? Practice is also as much about 'making' as it is about framing, even when the critical or non-critical consumption of the work by audiences, collectors, those who give the work a frame and a certain degree of purchase, remains an uncertainty.