

## Awkward Relations

Neil Mulholland

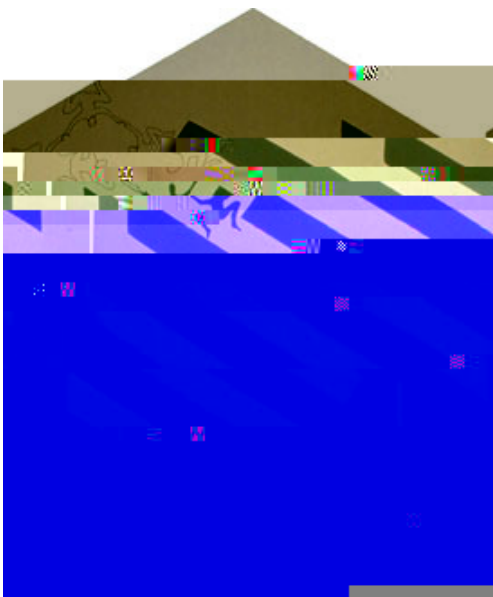


Fig.1  
Keith Farquhar,  
John Lewis Partnership, 2000  
Courtesy of the artist

1. UK DJ

Yeah, I'd say all their work was informed by a crushingly naïve political viewpoint that could only have been nurtured in the bubble of an art school. I think the misfortune of that kind of art is that it's politically imbecilic, and on an intellectual level they're still living off the arguments of the Frankfurt school –

order information is central to Bourriaud's vision of the artist as a facilitator rather than a 'maker', a DJ

connotations that can carry.'

Tuffnel's III Communication: Advances in Travel and Communication (Dundee Contemporary Arts 2003) and Simon Pope's touring exhibition Art for Networks (2003). Such exhibitions fit neatly with the themes of major international Biennales such as the 2002 Gwangju Biennale in South Korea, the 2002 Documenta, Ulrich Obrist, Molly Nesbitt and Rirkrit Tiravanija's Utopia Station Poster Project at the 2003 Venice Biennale, and Ute Meta Bauer's 2004 Berlin Biennale.

With increasing regularity the global community are now spoon-fed a staple fare of biennales structured around a restricted range of culturally invested portfolios inherited from 1980s critical postmodernism and 1990s theories of globalisation: the economy, the environment, utopia, gender, technology and urbanism. The desire to build bigger exhibitions (both in terms of their global conceptual 'relevance' and in their physical stature) aids globalist strategies of cultural recuperation and the growth of brandscaping art companies, rendering the 'product' largely meaningless and culturally monotonous. Of course, brandscaping played a central role in the construction and export of 'British art' in the 1990s, so much so that it such embarrassingly oversimplistic imaginaries arjGD'mB1)2GjG4Gz' BP2PPPPD'1990sB))29j1N',BRP2PPPPD' BP2PP1j1'sB))2



furniture found in much gallery-based relational art, in Liam Gillick's 'scaled-down models of communicational situations' and in the ubiquitous discursive 'platforms' rolled out at Biennales around the world. Of course, such structures are primarily functional and not intended to be viewed for their formal qualities. However, there is a clear sculptural hangover in the tendency for many Eurocuros to employ artists, designers and architects to design exhibitions and platforms as Gesamtkunstwerk. Given that form is supposedly subordinate to function in such exhibitions, it's little surprise to find that, more often than not, a stripped-down Shaker-style neo-modernism is the style of choice.

Neo-modernism is but one stylistic genre of the new formalism. Far richer in formal allusion than the work of Gillick, the lyrical qualities of the works in *Early One Morning* at least allowed other critical relationships to emerge if the viewer allowed them to. The process of compelling conviction is presented



Farquhar, again living in Edinburgh, correspondingly has culled for his working process the phrase 'blindcraft', 'setting up an idiosyncratic faith system after noticing that the bed I was sleeping in in my rented flat was made by the local blind who's centralised factory outlet sells to the public under that name.' A form of self-legitimizing consciousness, such art can only really be appreciated by those involved intimately with its production and reception. It encourages cultural commitment, mitigates larger audiences and, for a while, provided few points of access for curators needing to fulfil educational programmes.

The cultural potential of this work has been mired by its historicist packaging as a 'new formalism', allowing the work to be overpowered by sycophantic artfans inspired by quasi-mystical proclamations of autonomy. Thanks to Early One Morning



has necessitated working to very strict deadlines, tightly packaged 'site-specific' briefs, and increasingly demanding and escalating orders from a global marketplace of galleries and biennales. In this sense, it is difficult to see any punitive 'escape' from the post-industrial globalised world of work. Lambie's predicament is far from unique. On the contrary; whether or not they adhere to the false dichotomies of 'new formalism' or 'new functionalism', today's global artists keep up with the world's future cultural needs by embracing the just in time delivery system. In so doing, the values of speed, disposability and instant gratification become their awkward relations.

## Notes

1. Film director Ben Lewis interviewed about his television documentary *Art Safari – Relational Art: Is It An Ism?* for the BBC4 website [www.bbc.co.uk/bbcfour/documentaries/features/art-safari1-int.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/bbcfour/documentaries/features/art-safari1-int.shtml), July 2004.
2. Mackintosh quoted in Michael Stanley, 'The Mid-life Crisis and Artist-led Initiatives', *Artist's Newsletter*, p.11. Parker, currently living in New York, now co-directs *Floating IP* in Ancoats with artist Dave Beech while Mackintosh now directs *All Year Round Club* in Cheetham Hill.
3. Iwona Blazwick, 'New British Sculpture in the 21st Century', *Early One Morning*, Whitechapel Art Gallery, London, 2002, p.28.
4. 'Making statements' is eminently compatible with the pressing need to justify art practice in terms of social inclusion, allowing art to be displayed under the New Labour auspices of 'education, education, education'.
5. Jim Lambie specifically rejected the more systematic research-based practices learned while studying at Glasgow School of Art's Environmental Art Department in favour of a much more playful, performative approach to making his work. 'Many things were occurring to me throughout the installation [of *Kebabylon* at Inverlieth House, Edinburgh]. I began the week not really knowing how much or how little would go into the show, and many of the works came together or appeared because of the space itself; an important factor

12. Paul O'Kane, 'Early One Morning', *Third Text*, vol.17, no.1, March 2003, p.107.

13. *Ibid.*

14. For example, *Strategies Against Architecture 2*, Contemporary Art Centre, Vilnius, Lithuania (2002); *Non Places*, Frankfurter Kunstverein, Frankfurt (2002) and *Anarchitecture*, de Appel, Amsterdam (1999). Nick Evans notes that this is a well tested strategy related

32. Gemma de Cruz, 'British Beauty: Formalism Making Good', *Flash Art*, January/February 2000, p.89.
33. 'Awkward authenticity' could be described as art that seeks to circumvent the well-rehearsed deconstructive devices of much postmodern art while retaining a knowing sense of the inescapable cultural consequences of such theories. If awkwardly authentic artists evoke the irrational from the position of knowing observers, they do not remain too distant from their subject matter. Common to much awkwardly authentic work is the realisation that the parameters of art are mythical themselves. In a sense, they work to render these processes of mythification concrete without destroying the integrity of the processes themselves.
34. This is not to claim a 'Glaswegian' or 'Scottishness' for these artists, but to point out that the specific relations of production and distribution in Glasgow favoured lo-fi, music orientated practices in the later half of the 1990s. While this stemmed from the dominance of artist-led activities in the city, it was greatly bolstered by the music-centred aesthetics of The Modern Institute in the later 1990s.
35. For a sense of this see Sarah Lowndes' *Social Sculpture: Art, Performance and Music in Glasgow. A Social History of Independent Practice, Exhibitions and Events since 1971*, StopStop, 2004.
36. Webb interviewed by Blazwick 2002, p.157.
37. J. J. Charlesworth, 'Not Neo but New', *Art Monthly*, no.259, September 2002, p.11.
38. The incorporation of sound into Webb's work and the use of AV in Afrassiabi's installations further confounds Charlesworth's reading.
39. Blazwick 2002, p.28.
40. Alex Pollard in *Presence*, Fruitmarket Gallery, Edinburgh, 2002, p.59.
41. Keith Farquhar in conversation with the author, September 2004.
42. O'Kane 2003, p.108.
43. *Ibid.*
44. Evans 2002, p.36.
45. The success of The Modern Institute's Jim Lambie has in turn spawned a wave of artist immigration to Glasgow of what have been described by Glasgow artist Robert Johnston as 'Lamabies', opportunist artists who naively see Glasgow as their stepping stone to instant commercial success.
46. Bourriaud 2002, 'Glossary', p.113.
47. 'All works of art produce a model of sociability, which transposes reality or might be conveyed in it. So there is a question we are entitled to ask in front of any aesthetic production: "Does this work permit me to enter into dialogue?"', in Bourriaud 2002, p.109.

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