

Artist-curator Gavin Wade on authorship, curating at Eastside Projects and the post-industrial city interviewed by Michael Birchall and Nkule Mabaso

Michael Birchall/Nkule Mabaso: This issue of *On Curating* discusses the role of authorship in the practice of artists and curators. I'd like to start by talking about the merging of the role of the artist and curator, which you first outlines in a text, *Artist + Curator* = (2000). Here you identified a selection of artists who were committed to expanding their practice into the realm of curatorship in parallel with their tendency to act as artists. Would you agree with Paul O'Neil's statement that exhibitions by artists-curators (such as yourself) are now a distinctive model of curating?¹

Gavin Wade: I wrote a text last year called 'The 5 Acts of Art'² where I propose that art is exhibition, that art is not exhibited but that art exhibits, that exhibition is a fundamental function of being human, and the fundamental process of art. The artist-curator position builds on this 'truth' to produce art that is necessary. I agree there are a number of distinctive approaches to this now and that the artist-curator models have impacted on all other exhibition making to precipitate an awareness that art exhibits. But it is not the dominant form of exhibition still, and the belief that art is exhibited persists to much dullness! The artist is a primary producer of art. The curator is a secondary producer.

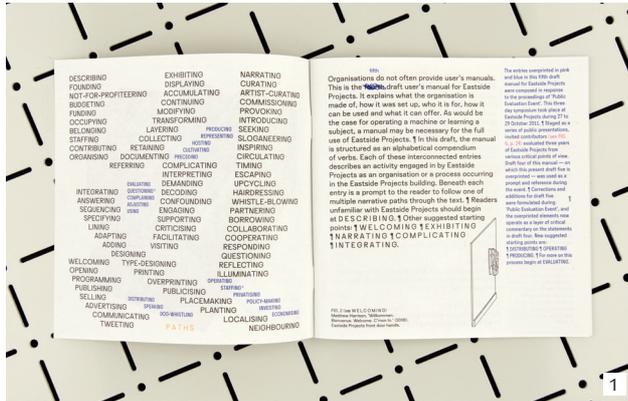
MB/MN: In 2008 you founded Eastside Projects in Birmingham in collaboration with artists Ruth Claxton, Simon and Tom Boor, designer James Langdon and architect Celine Condorelli. Eastside was conceived as an "artist run space as public gallery and

incubator of ideas and forms". How has Eastside evolved since it was initially founded? Could it be said that Eastside is a collaborative-curatorial platform as there is a team of co-collaborators?

GW: In language terms it has developed from 'an artist run space as public gallery and incubator of ideas and forms' to 'an exhibition space with many differences' via being 'an artist-run space, a public gallery for the city of Birmingham and the world', and 'a place formed through cumulative processes of collaboration — the coming together of many people's ideas to form the unique conditions of the gallery'. As Eastside Projects evolves and develops the way we describe ourselves develops also. To say otherwise how it has evolved will always be to do this same descriptive simplification of what the space and organisation is.

We believe it is urgent to provide a space that responds to today's most vital artistic practices. If the art of today is complex and challenging then the places that we conceive for experiencing it should be equally so. So it is really the gallery and what happens here and is distributed from the gallery that is the answer to your question 'how has it developed?' To tackle this question we produced a Draft Manual to 'explain' how to use Eastside Projects and we continue to do so. The manual is a way of questioning the idea of interpretation as much as the use of art. Each definition could have a more detailed definition so the 'what' of Eastside Projects would be further defined as 'a free, public space that is being

imagined and organised by artists. We commission and present experimental contemporary art exhibitions, and propose ways in which art may be useful to society. EP is a questioning structure that in turn produces more questions and also, of course, possible answers. Our ambition is to incorporate the methodologies of art-making at all scales and functions of the organisation.'



This is from our 5th Draft Manual, and we are working on our 6th at the moment. The new version is a children's book

At the start we borrowed from the Peter Nadin gallery's 1979 statement and said "We have joined together to execute functional constructions and to alter or refurbish existing structures as a means of surviving in a capitalist society.' I think this statement still stands. We don't call ourselves a 'collaborative curatorial platform' but it may apply. There are many, many aspects of collaboration and that is a key ethos of the organisation, to be open to the potential of collaboration and to allow that to be expressed not hidden. I like the phrase 'we have joined together' to do things. We join in many ways. I lead the production of Eastside Projects and collaborate with all the others and there are times when collaborations occur between others and not me, but not as often, although we would like that to happen more! The gallery has moments of focus where it is an artwork. My ambition is that the gallery is an artwork, not a curatorial platform. Artwork is the primary goal.

MB/MN: Following on from the previous question, in this collaborative model you have established, how are your fellow collaborators part of the curatorial decisions?

GW: The first exhibition, *This is the Gallery and the Gallery is Many Things*, set up an idea of an evolving space, as development and evolution as a

function of art. This has developed into a series of exhibitions that examine the functions of art, and the construction of a gallery or a public sphere through these functions. These have been *Sculpture Show* and *Abstract Cabinet Show* in 2009, *Curtain Show* and *Book Show* in 2010, *Narrative Show* in 2011, *Painting Show* in 2012, and *Puppet Show* in 2013 with *Trade Show* later this year. A number of these are curated with the other directors Celine Condorelli for *Curtain Show*, Ruth Claxton for *Sculpture Show* and James Langdon for *Book Show*. Celine and Tom Bloor curated *Puppet Show* with me supporting that process, then *Painting Show* and *Trade Show* are co-curated with other artists, Sophie von Hellerman for *Painting Show* and Kathrin Böhm for *Trade Show*. As well as this Ruth Claxton works closely with me on the overall programme as Associate Director, and co-curating Caroline Achaintre, Sara Barker, Alice Channer last year for example. Then the Second Gallery programme works with a wide range of people inputting from the other Directors to Elinor Morgan who is ESP Programmer at the gallery to other artist groups such as Kunstverein Schwerte or Form/Content.

We try to learn from processes and be open to ways of working and allow space for other groups and models to affect what we are, to alter us a public sphere.

MB/MN: Many artist-curators, curators and artists began their careers in artist run spaces; initially these spaces were established as an alternative to museums and galleries. In recent years Project Spaces have become part of the established art system and have been incorporated into large-scale exhibitions and biennials. How do you maintain an artist-run-centre model, without become a "mainstream" institution?

GW: The artist-run space is not a stop-gap. This was the first sentence I wrote in the very first text as I started the manifesto for Eastside Projects. I want the artist-run space to become the main thing. I don't really have any fear of that. I wanted to ask why isn't the artist-run space a career, an ambition. I think it should be. Not a stage in becoming an artist as it has been historically. There are many good things about how the artist-run space has existed but I saw this idea that it was a stop-gap as a weakness if they all do that. I wanted to make one that wasn't a stop-gap! But I doubt if it would become 'mainstream' as that would require that in the main people would want to engage a questioning, complex, and,

likely, difficult situation to experience art. But then, as you say, biennials can be pretty complex, difficult beasts when they get it right! I see absorption of our principles into other situations as a success and we respond accordingly.

MB/MN: How has your practice as an artist-curator developed since you began working at Eastside?

GW: Perhaps it has further contemplated, utilised and incorporated aspects of being a leader, a politician, and a manager. Eastside Projects allowed me to focus on series, iterative and cumulative processes in even more powerful ways I hope, than I was able to do as a roving artist-curator previous to 2008. It has also allowed a situation where all of the skills, approaches, networks and intuitive impulses that I have as an artist-curator could be supported in a more sustained way to allow an on going research visible to others in the field. It limits the number of other projects in other contexts that I am able to do, but then that was the point, to create new conditions, to create context, a new universe of a kind. I feel Eastside Projects continues to be the most ambitious project of my career. It is a dream project.

MB/MN: Within your practice, as an artist-curator, you use a specific methodology in the exhibitions you curate. During this process, how do you – as an artist-curator – maintain a clear authorial voice? Perhaps you could talk about the recent Mike Nelson exhibition in relation to this question.

GW: I'm ok with not maintaining a clear authorial voice but being affected by others voices. In fact I'm more than ok with it, I desire it. For *Puppet Show* I feel completely affected by the voices of Heather & Ivan Morison and Celine and Tom's thoughts on what the role of the puppet is. It's quite liberating to speak from another point of view, to use another voice. Collaboration allows that, encourages that. Working with Mike Nelson is a conscious choice to work with an artist not known to collaborate but who deals with context in very sophisticated ways. With Nelson's M6 made for Eastside Projects, curated by me, you experience an artwork by Mike Nelson where he alters and incorporates Eastside Projects into his artwork. Nelson decided to take away many of the long term artworks in the space and in effect replace them with a large twelve metre by twelve metre shot blasted concrete plinth ten centimetres tall and weighing thirty six tonnes! Nelson's alteration to our space becomes our reality and

Puppet Show sits on Nelson's stage now. M6 was in no way a work by me. It was not necessary for it to be. My choice as an artist-curator has been over the past 17 years to work in many different ways with many different people in many different contexts but I hope within the pragmatic utopian direction and impulses I take there is a consistency of attack and production of what art can be. Clarity of authorial voice is probably not the mission. I would suggest that clear authorial distinction is a red herring set up by the art world institutions of the past of which artists were of course implicit. I think those distinctions can be dismantled now.



MB/MN: It is my understanding that elements from previous installation(s) – or ephemera – are left behind for the next artist to work with. Could you perhaps elaborate on how this functions; are all the artists you invite satisfied with traces from previous artists? How is this part of your practice as an artist?

GW: We were immediately interested in the gallery as a cumulative environment, a space to be constructed over time; we weren't going to make something that would just be ready to go and stay that way forever. Our alteration to the space could only be the beginning, getting the right trajectory going. As Peter Nadin said 'Walls don't stay as walls, things happen to them, things are put on them. So why not let the thing evolve, let it continue, and see what happens?'³ In most galleries so much importance is put on creating a hallowed space for the next exhibition, making a force field of protection around the gallery that distinguishes it from the rest of the world. It's a funny thing to change a space only to make a protected environment for the next person to come along—it seems incredibly perverse and I realised if you do that continuously, you just get gallery fatigue, you begin to understand too much what that gallery is made of and the place no longer

has any meaning. The question for us was whether there is also a fatigue of endless possibilities, of change and transformation. El Lissitzky speaks of an equilibrium that you might try to achieve in exhibition making, and the idea of the long term artworks in the gallery is a questioning of this notion of an equilibrium of art, a flux of forces that are all related.

I suppose the space also acts as a growing archive of its own production and evolution. There was an interesting point for me in *Curtain Show* and the installing of Tacita Dean's work, *Darmstadter Werkblock*, when her assistant could not understand why the wall was the way it was. The wall was constructed of fragments of Joanne Tatham and Tom O'Sullivan's artwork — *Does your contemplation of the situation fuck with the flow of circulation*, and DJ Simpson's wallpaper work — *Disc 001 Real Grey* from *Abstract Cabinet Show*, and it was difficult to explain how while being the remainder of an artwork, it was also part of the gallery and the existing conditions that we wanted Tacita's film to work within. Once it was clear that there was a congruent relationship between the space and the subject matter in Tacita's own film of the relationship between Joseph Beuys's work and the space it existed within, he was happy with it, and didn't even want to paint over other areas we thought could be fixed up! People seem to need to create a difference between what is considered artwork and what is not, as if the gallery context itself was not work and could be ignored. As if something like our gallery office, *Pleasure Island* by Heather & Ivan Morison, was something you could ignore, while of course it is in every single one of our exhibitions. It is difficult to explain until people come to Eastside Projects; the space just makes sense when you are part of it. Perhaps this is because it is so far from a white cube, and all the layers of the making of the space are apparent and overlaid, making it too complex to read from a distance.

Every artist has a different response and sometimes they remove things, respond, adapt, add to, demand or just accept. It is a negotiation and some of those negotiations become artworks, some don't. Some bits of the building become sites where art exhibits new properties some don't.

MB/MN: In 2012 you were invited to be part of "City States", as part of the Liverpool Biennial. This particular part of the programme took place in a former Royal Mail sorting office and featured several cities, including Wellington, Lisbon, Oslo and Hong

Kong. As you were invited to represent Birmingham – in relation to the theme of hospitality – how did you select work to best exemplify this broad theme?



GW: I was personally invited by Sally Tallant (Director of the Liverpool Biennial) to produce a Birmingham section of City States but very late on in the process of the Biennial coming together. I wasn't asked to represent Birmingham, I took it on myself and with my fellow cultural leaders in Birmingham to do that. We do want to represent the city and to hopefully transform the city through those representations. Saying that, this was a fairly simple set up with no resources from the Biennial to make anything happen content wise. I put the idea to the We Are Eastside consortium that we are part of, we were part of establishing it in 2008, and the group decided this was a good situation to present something and to work together. The group consisted of Eastside Projects, Ikon Gallery, Grand Union, Capsule, Fierce Festival and Flat Pack Festival. It's a dynamic grouping of focussed people from very different types of organisations, and we all participated in a Cultural Leadership Programme together in 2010-11. I coordinated the project and each organisation contributed and selected a work by an artist they had worked with for the overall project. The title, *The Magic City*, came from an artwork by BAZ an artist collective here in Birmingham where they are proposing to remake a large sign from Birmingham Alabama that welcomes people to the city with the words, BIRMINGHAM THE MAGIC CITY.

We included a work by David Rowan, an artist who had had won the ESP commission for the Second Gallery earlier in the year and had made a very strong film work, filming underground in the Digbeth area where the gallery is based. ESP (Extra Special People) is our associate members programme and so the chance to present a work by a Birming-

ham artist that we had already invested in made a lot of sense. The variety of works was strong with a collection of Grind Core fanzine material presented by Capsule attracting a lot of attention. In a way it was a light project, done in quite a fun way but each organisations ethos and function could be seen through the works included. It was also a quick attempt to pull together some energy to show how we could do so much more given time and resources and generated some very useful conversations city wide for how the city should be prepared to take advantage of the networks that we have available to us. In this case the city couldn't respond to fund such an opportunity given the timeframe but others were, Birmingham City University, Visit Birmingham and others were able to contribute small amounts to support the project and each organisation chipped in a small amount. The publication part was useful to have. The exhibition part was quite compromised and basically based on turning up and making the best of the situation. But there was a good spirit and a very nice invitation from the Biennial team.

In terms of the theme we *exemplified* it through our collaboration as a cultural consortium but apart from that I don't think we responded to the theme at all. It didn't really seem to be the point! In many ways it was more politics than art production but I think that was pretty clear really and we used humour to make that point.

MB/MN: Both Liverpool and Birmingham were once heavily industrialised, this led to their economic successes. Since the 1990s biennials have appeared across the world in post-industrial cities, taking advantage of the range of empty warehouses and factories to display contemporary art. As a cultural producer how do you consider the implications for curating exhibitions in these post-industrial contexts?

GW: Currently James Langdon and I are working on the new Draft Users Manual and James had been developing an idea to change the coat of arms and motto of Birmingham City. It appears to be quite unknown, weirdly, that on the coat of arms of Birmingham there are two figures, called supporters, one is an engineer and one is an artist. I think this is really quite significant. My city has an artist on its coat of arms. Maybe a lot of coats of arms have artists on but I never knew that before James proposed it. James has proposed, in relation to what we do as Eastside Projects and how we are useful to the city, that the motto of Birmingham is updated from FORWARD to LAYERED. The idea of layering and not

removing what has come before completely but instead building on what was there before, upcycling, rethinking, adapting and working within and around is essential here in Birmingham as the previous idea of FORWARD has failed to produce the right conditions for a successful city. We think that LAYERED will provide the way for the city to be successful now and this idea of LAYERED makes sense so much for post-industrial contexts. We must build on the conditions that are there and make new conditions out of them, engineer and artist hand in hand. Our next goals are to develop this layering on a larger scale perhaps, to prove how art can work beyond post-industrialised regeneration, to develop Eastside Projects further and continue to produce art in a way that makes the city work better.

Notes

1 O'Neil, P. (2012) *The Culture of Curating and the Curating of Culture(s)*, pg. 105

2 To be published in the forthcoming, Gavin Wade, *UPCYCLE THIS BOOK*, 2013, Sternberg.

3 Céline Condorelli and Peter Nadin, conversation at Nadin's home in Lower Manhattan, July 12, 2009.

Caption

1 Eastside Projects User's Manual Draft 5, Page 1, edited by James Langdon 2012 published by Eastside Projects.

2 Mike Nelson, M6, 2013, Blown-out tyres on shot blasted concrete, altered gallery.

3 Foreground: Tacita Dean, Darmstädter Werkblock 2007, 16mm colour film, optical sound, 18 minutes, continuous loop. Background: Joanne Tatham & Tom O'Sullivan / DJ Simpson. Adapted scenery (Eastside Projects) 2009. Painted and wallpapered MDF panels reused to construct gallery walls.

4 Heather & Ivan Morison, You Stay Away From Me. You Hear. 2013 Billboard poster on Billboard Facade of Eastside Projects.



Gavin Wade is Director of Eastside Projects, Birmingham, an artist-curator and publisher of *Strategic Questions*. In 2010 he received the Paul Hamlyn Foundation Breakthrough Fund Award for exceptional cultural entrepreneurs. He has curated solo exhibitions with Gunilla Klingberg, Mike Nelson, Yangjiang Group, William Pope.L, Dan Graham, Carey Young, Liam Gillick, Joanne Tatham & Tom O'Sullivan, Nathan Coley and Bas Jan Ader. Curated projects include: 'Painting Show' (2011-12), Eastside Projects; *Public Structures*, Guang Zhou Triennial, China (2005); and 'In the Midst of Things', Bournville (1999). Books include *UPCYCLE THIS BOOK* (2013) Sternberg; *Has Man A Function In Universe? Book Works* (2008); and *The Interruptors: A Non-Simultaneous Novel*, Article Press (2005).