

ANALYTICAL AND SYNTHETIC CABINISM

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"The subversive and critical function of contemporary art is now achieved in ... those temporary and nomadic constructions whereby the artist models and disseminates disconcerting situations."

[god is a lobster:2003: gun shop 2003]

There's a beer ad on TV at the moment, although it won't be there for long. A youngish man (late twenties/early thirties), white and British, hides himself in a shipping container recently arrived from Antigua. On discovery by security guards he smiles and willingly offers himself for deportation back "home". Now in an Antiguan beach bar, he meets two attractive females from Hong Kong. Next we see him entering a container recently arrived from Hong Kong. You can guess the rest.

In his proposal for the last resort [2002] Jakob Anckarsvärd writes, "For reasons of detecting refugee trafficking the customs x-ray containers. I'd like to project a drawing of how an x-ray of refugees look[s]."

What are the differences, and what the similarities, between a cabin and a container? The answers to this seemingly pointless question may, in fact, aid our understanding of some of the issues at stake in cabin exchange, issues concerning the relations between people, things, places, experience and mediation. We could think of this as trying to establish a general framework of 'meaning' within which each of the individual projects and proposals negotiates its own position. As a preliminary we could assert that a cabin is for people - a form of dwelling [sleep over: 2002], whereas a container is for things and stuff [mulch: 2003] - a form of storage. Both, however, suggest the idea of movement and transportation (a ship's cabin, an aircraft cabin: a shipping container, a freight container). Their physical dimensions and structures are frequently interchangeable. They can be hired for specific periods of time. They are transportable and can be situated almost anywhere. On the level of connotation, both suggest an element of threat and oppressiveness (dangerous forces must be "contained"; too much time cooped up in a confined space leads to cabin fever, etc.). The overlapping identities suggested by the cabin-container relationship tell us something about the world we inhabit, and thus intimate something about the contingent nature of our own identity formations [no lines: 2003]. We make things not only for themselves, but also for ourselves, and the kinds of person we can be depend to an extent on the nature of those things and the environment that they constitute. And everything here is mobile, mutable, protean and subject to metamorphosis. Rather than signaling a return to a magical, mythological state of infinite possibilities, however, this condition of impermanence and instability is the necessary expression of capital in its latest phase. If the things around us live under the law of constant potential change and mobility (restyling: multi-functionality: discontinuation and obsolescence), then so must we (restyling: multi-tasking: re-training and re-location). Change or die.

It is frequently called globalisation and it assumes many new forms in its erosion of traditional forms. Principally, however, it exhibits a pronounced tendency to convert all of lived reality into a transnational currency: the virtual form of the photographically derived image. All objects and relations are converted into the formulaic structures and non-differentiated surfaces of these infinitely reproducible images. Appearances are paramount and seemingly autonomous: there can be smoke without fire and fire without smoke [2002]. War must have a grainy quality; poverty

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thrives on high camera angles; love becomes sparkling eyes, smiling lips, regulation contours and proportions [fake love: 2003]; the art object becomes its own reproduced illustration in a book or magazine [the embassy: 2003]. All signs of production are to be erased [voice box: 2003]. There is to be no friction, no resistance, no impediment to the free flow of images, of information and, ultimately, of capital. [corporate identity parade: 2003. the second movement: 2003].

It does no harm to be reminded occasionally. The free passage of the image; the restrictions imposed upon the labour force [escapology: 2003]. The ubiquity of capital's complacent, happy face [smiley faces: 2002]; the tedious reality of repetitious work [Typewriters: 2002]. And the carcass of the shipping container, passively sharing in both the restless mobility of de-materialised images and the stubborn facticity of things [dead dog: 2003], in the global and the local [piper link: 2002], the abstract and the particular [the spirit inside], in the process and the commodity [the embassy: 2003], the market and the consumer [skip café: 2003], in the routes of desire [the cabin exchanged: 2003] and the locations of need [shoe shine: 2002]. Only connect [communication centre: 2003].

"The truth is that in philosophy and even elsewhere it is a question of finding the problem and consequently of positing it, even more than of solving it." (Henri Bergson, "The Creative Mind", 1946, quoted by Deleuze, p.15)

It is the early twenty-first century and art - as well as artists - need to find new ways of being and behaving. According to Nicolas Bourriaud, whose concept of relational aesthetics currently provides a critical benchmark for many, art must learn "to inhabit the world in a better way." Neither modernism nor so-called postmodernism provides an adequate model for such inhabitation under the conditions outlined above. Modernism's restrictive belief in the progressive necessity of self-reflexive examination (culminating in the artist-as-philosopher agonising over the question, "What is Art?") [le cabin: 2003] belongs to a world of stifling introversion. Postmodernism's apocalyptic conclusion that art's privileged position has been swept away by the flood of (mass media) 'representations' belongs to a world of debilitating doubt. How can art find a viable position in an inherited situation defined by self-obsession and prohibitive restrictions on the one hand, and by self-effacement and an 'anything goes' permissiveness on the other? How can it tread a path between the over-determined and the indeterminate?`

One strategic response to this problem seems to be a diversion of attention away from formal interrogation of the work/image itself in favour of investigations into the nature of the situation in which relations between work/image and viewer/participant are transacted. Needless to say, this entails a reconsideration and reconceptualisation not only of the situation itself, but also of its constituent elements: work/image, viewer/participant, and the nature of their relationship. In the words of Bourriaud, this has led to "an art taking as its theoretical horizon the realm of human interactions and its social context, rather than the assertion of an independent and private symbolic space..."

Let's consider just one of these elements, the situation. If there is a hierarchy among these contributory factors, it is probably the situation that dominates, for everything occurs, develops and assumes its identity and value within situations. As far as the self is concerned, situations either encourage or discourage certain modes of behaviour and certain attitudes. Situations have a more pronounced determining effect when they are largely beyond our control and we accept them as givens, and the contemporary city constitutes one such 'given' situation. We have little

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say as individuals when it comes to important decisions affecting urban policy and development: we do not possess the necessary professional, political or financial qualifications.

It would be foolish, of course, to claim that we have no say whatsoever. The siting of metal structures within the public spaces of the city sometimes causes annoyance and outcry - especially if these metal structures are given the name "art". In extreme cases, this outcry can lead to the removal and destruction of said metal structure. In an extraordinary historical episode Richard Serra's, *Tilted Arc*; installed in Federal Plaza, New York City in 1981, was removed after legal proceedings in 1989. According to the court, Serra's work constituted "purpresture", the unacceptable invasion of public space by private (i.e. the artist's) interests. It is an almost daily commonplace, however, to come across another kind of metal structure whilst moving through the city. Yet no one seems to complain about the siting of steel cabins and containers on our streets and pavements - probably because they are regarded as temporary and functional (and certainly not as art). And yet they will almost certainly be contributing to a longer term transformation of the city's physical fabric, economy and identity.

The building site is the spiritual home of the steel cabin, and a considerable number of urban building programmes these days (apart from routine maintenance of a decaying infrastructure of roads and services) concern conversion of existing structures, rather than construction of new ones. And a pronounced trend within such conversions is a change of the building's original function as a site more or less connected to production and distribution (factory, warehouse, bank, shop) into a site more or less connected to leisure and consumption (luxury accommodation, bar, club, coffee house, restaurant). Like the spots erupting on the skin of a chicken pox sufferer, the appearance of the steel cabin in the city is a symptom - a symptom of speculative capital at work. There can be no objection, it seems, when the steel container appears on the streets as a symptomatic representative of one form of private interest (that of entrepreneurs, investors, shareholders, etc.), but what might happen if it were to shelter another form of supposedly private interest, that of the artist?

I make a point of saying the "supposedly" private interest of the artist because this is a moot point, one advanced and developed in different ways by the various artists participating in cabin exchange. In an urban social situation where the division between public and private interests is blurred, human interactions are inflected accordingly. These days it is a commonplace to talk about that process whereby private commercial investment in the cities profoundly affects their character. The evidence is everywhere in the promotion of style over substance, image over content and surface over depth, resulting in an urban environment that increasingly encourages and facilitates the easy pleasures of consumerism at the expense of other forms of urban experience. This narrowing of the gap between the self-sacrifice demanded by earlier notions of the public good and the current climate of self-satisfaction fostered by private interest began some centuries ago. It was perhaps due to the claims advanced by philosophers such as Adam Smith in the later eighteenth century that private interest gradually came to be identified as the public good. Whatever the case, it now seems they are wedded in Glasgow's latest official promotional campaign for the city: "Scotland With Style." Thus does the city present itself as a kind of aesthetic abstraction: neither place nor 'thing', simply ambient style.

Paradoxically, it may be that as the situation constituted by the city mutates from an interactive system into some kind of unified, abstract aesthetic experience that appeals primarily to the eye (and thereby to the pocket), the work of art is moving in an opposite direction.

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"Unlike an object that is closed in on itself by the intervention of a style and a signature, present-day art shows that form only exists in the encounter and in the dynamic relationship enjoyed by an artistic proposition with other formations, artistic or otherwise."

Cabin exchange has started me thinking about these things. Its primary achievement, for me, then, is to be inventive in the sense offered above by Henri Bergson when he asserted that "the effort of invention consists most often in raising the problem, in creating the terms in which it will be stated." So far as I understand it, cabin exchange posits the alienating, abstracting effects of a globalised economy as the problem (evoked by the evasiveness entailed by the cabin-container associations). Simultaneously, it offers localised, concentrated social situations (the actual siting of the cabins-containers and the various events and exhibitions that occur at these precise locations) as the (inverse) "terms in which it will be stated." In other words, in this instance the problem comes to light, is made visible, by virtue of its being contradicted and opposed. It begins to stand out in relief when it is rubbed against the grain. Given that in its two years existence cabin exchange already comprises around 85 individual projects, the "terms" within which the "problem" have been stated vary widely, with greater and lesser degrees of self-consciousness. In fact, even though the terms may be available, if the problem has not been identified these terms may remain ineffective. Following Bergson, however, we should remember that it is the positing of the problem and its terms - rather than its solution - which is of primary importance. The important thing is to find the right problem. Questions of "true" and "false" do not only apply to solutions but, more importantly, also to problems. Some problems may be false problems, misleading, irrelevant and designed to keep us "in a kind of slavery". "True freedom lies in a power to decide, to constitute problems themselves. And this "semi-divine" power entails the disappearance of false problems as much as the creative upsurge of true ones."

This, of course, is my own understanding of cabin exchange. Nevertheless, if we accept this interpretation it invites further questions. If we think of cabin exchange as creating this "problem" stated in these "terms", we are still only considering its broad proposition. We are left to confront the issue noted above of how the various individual proposals address and articulate this general proposition. To use a broad analogy: if cabin exchange as an entirety were thought of as a language, what kinds of different utterances does it make possible? Alternatively, we could think of cabin exchange as a genus of problems within which various species of problems develop. The following is a first attempt at identifying certain broad categories of practice or types of work ('utterances'/species) within its enframing conceptual schema ('language'/genus). Like all such attempts it tends towards the arbitrary and the tendentious, and any value it may have perhaps appears at those points where it fails. It is also important to point out here that in recklessly suggesting, as I do, that a certain kind of work may posit false problems, this is not to make conventional aesthetic value judgements about that work. The relation between "true" problem and "good" work is not addressed here. If new situations produce new kinds of work (work that identifies new problems within that situation), then a new critical paradigm is also required to evaluate such work. I don't have anything to offer on that score. But here goes anyway...

1. There is a group of projects that tend to use the cabin as a conventional exhibition space (i.e. as a container for things). The works contained within the cabin exhibit the conventional characteristics of the traditional art object (paintings, drawings, sculptures, photographs, film, etc.), and the display of these objects draws reference from (relatively) conventional gallery practices. Such projects might include: heads up the sheep (2003); alexandra bay (2003); from newcastle to philadelphia (2002); lure (2002). Modifications of this basic model occur in slide show (2002) (which displaces the exhibition in the direction of the slide presentation) and

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A.L.G.C.O.C.A. (2002) (which offers a self-reflexive critique of the gallery/museum system). In such examples the relations between the cabin, its contents, its location and the audience/viewer are generally characterised by the principles of arbitrariness and juxtaposition. In many cases the work has not been specifically made for the cabin, the works could be installed in any of the variously sited cabins, and the act of viewing is principally solitary, reflective and non-participatory. The production of the exhibited works has also been completed before their installation. The problems created here (formal/aesthetic/bequeathed by tradition and convention) may be false. They are problems whose terms are derived from another historical and social situation.

2. The examples in this group share many of the features of those in Group 1, principally in their focus upon the work of art as a physical object of some kind. They differ, however, in that they encourage a greater degree of active participation from the viewer/audience. In this sense, the display and storage aspects of 'container' cede ground to the sociable aspects implied by notion of 'cabin'. This group would include projects such as: cave man (2003); chocolate paintings (2003); pixel curious: (2003); crockery 2003). Bird houses on a street (2003) is typical of those (frequent) examples that upset my attempt to categorise. On the one hand its painted bird boxes have an existence as gallery-based objects, yet they also serve as functional objects. Installed in an open cabin, they invite the 'participation' of birds, but this 'participation' is also offered as spectacle for the visitor. In cases such as the embassy (2003), and wall of unrecognised achievements (2003), the artists act as facilitators for ideas, suggestions and works of others.

The problems created here may also be false. The element of collaboration is insufficient to undermine the conventional status of the art object. In fact, the element of collaboration may serve to reinforce that status. The problem posited remains an "art" problem, as characterised in discussion of Group 1.

3. A certain cluster of projects may be identified in which a 'foregrounding' of the physical structure of the cabin is effected. These would include: taping of a taping of a taping (2003); paper and structure (2003); false ceiling (2003). Such examples could be thought of as examining the physical structure of the cabin itself as a type of sculptural art object. In the case of cabin as camera (2002), this interest in the (modified) cabin structure as 'image' is converted into a re-definition of the cabin as an image producing structure. Plaque (2003) ("This cabin was used in the 2003 cabin exchange") offers a particular example of a work in which the cabin itself becomes both subject and object of the work. With interactive graffiti (2002) there is an interest in the cabin-as-sculptural/art object, but this is augmented by an element of interactivity. In these works, the notion of 'container' (objects and things) is under scrutiny, but it does not give way to the notion of 'cabin' (people and processes).

Once again, these works may be predicated upon a false problem - false in this instance because of the fundamental acceptance of and insistence upon the identity of the work of art as a formally coherent object.

4. In this group of projects, emphasis is placed upon process and performance in preference to the exhibition of objects. The viewers/audience are nonetheless placed in the position of witnesses, rather than participants or collaborators. An emphasis on 'cabin' characteristics is to the fore here, but the nature of 'cabin-like' human occupancy is limited to more or less staged and regulated

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performances. Examples of this type of project might include: breakfast / meal for two (2003); gig (2003); high society (2003); le cabin (2003); exercises (2003); shit disko (2003); bob's box (2002); changing the rule (2002); keep myself warm in winter: (2003); situations will be set up (2003); pavement astronomer (2003); voice box (2003). The moon weekly (2003); typewriters (2003) and making machine (2003) differ slightly from the others listed here in that a form of physical artefact issues in each case from the process. In the case of chox in a box (2003) the role of the participants raises interesting questions: is this a 'closed', staged performance involving 'rehearsed' dancers with their own costumes and equipment, or an 'open', impromptu event with equal participation available to all?

The 'given' nature of the audience/performer relationship in these works would suggest that they fail to create a true problem and thereby posit a false problem. The terms of the problems posited here derive from the conventions of theatre, film and TV presentation, thus they not derived from their immediate situation.

5. Central to many of the projects in the previous group is a notion of sociability; eating, talking, dancing and music. The projects in this current group extend these interests but differ from those above to the extent that they involve a greater degree of interaction with the viewer/audience - often dispensing entirely with the distinction between performer and audience. Thus, whereas le cabin maintained a conventional performer/audience relation, rosa's cake club (2003) operated with a more fluid, open structure of exchange. Similarly, whilst breakfast / meal for two (2003) invited the passer-by to witness a meal being eaten, skip café (2003) offered the passer-by a meal. Some of the projects in this group (such as skip café) offered a what might loosely be called a service (saunabaari 2003; shoe shine: 2002; public interventions 2003; gun shop 2003; centre of the universe: 2002; communication centre: 2003; cabin exchanged: 2003; fortune teller 2003), whereas others offered a direct challenge (ping pong challenge 2003; shoot the freak: 2002; wrestling artists 2003; pie eating contest 2003). The remainder situated themselves within the general framework of sociability: dance off (2003); hey dj pump this party (2003); noise session (2002); the carni's fair (2002); all night pictiography (2002). The idea of more or less spontaneous, unregulated human occupancy suggested by the notion of 'cabin' is to the fore in these examples.

These works create true problems. Their terms are largely extemporised (not given) and derive from the immediate situation rather than from inherited tradition and convention. As such practices become more widespread, however, their truth-value of their posited problem becomes vulnerable.

6. I have tried to account, in one way or another, for all the cabin exchange projects for which there is documentation at the time of writing. I am left now with a small cluster of examples which I would broadly characterise as conceptual. They are proposals that are - unfortunately - never going to happen at all (bumming mathew barney 2003); not going to happen in quite the way they have been described in their proposal (insect battle drome 2003); or that happened in ways that were completely unexpected (danny don't jump: 2002). Their main interest, it might be said, lies in their documentation. In this respect they achieve an ambiguous relation to the cabin'container question, especially as it relates to issues arising from globalisation such as dematerialisation and deterritorialisation. In the same way that the material reality of labour and production is erased by the advertising image which depends upon this very reality, so the physical presence of the cabin becomes merely a pretext for these works. I cry at neighbours

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(2003) also fits in here somewhere - as it might also in the group concerned with the cabin as sculptural/art object. The question of our relation as consumers to the mass media, fame and celebrity (all central to the phenomenon of spectacularity that lies at the heart of global image culture) is also prominent in most of these works.

In refusing the limitations time, space and immediate social reality, these works identify a true problem they posit cabin exchange as the problem.

Despite having drawn up these tentative categories, many of the individual works sit slightly uncomfortably within their confines. It wouldn't surprise me to find disagreements both over the categories themselves and the allocation of projects to positions within those categories. The majority of works perhaps exhibit characteristics that would place them in more than one of the categories listed here. Several of the projects, in fact, are of interest precisely because they are almost impossible to categorise so simply. Cabin fever (2003), for example, combines the elements of process, sociability, exhibition and (in the eviction notice) self-referentiality in relation to the cabin as a physical structure and as a site. Similar observations could be made regarding the spirit within (2003), whose very 'failure' in terms of the mismatch between intention and end result makes it such an interesting case (exposing a 'problem'). The desire to explore spiritual states of mind through image and sound is thwarted by the unwelcome intrusion of immediate reality: imprisonment in the cabin by local neds, and a visit from the police.

There are doubtless many conclusions to be drawn from this provisional exercise in taxonomy. For my own part I would suggest that the model offered by cabin exchange offers the possibility to fulfill Bourriaud's call for "temporary and nomadic constructions whereby the artist models and disseminates disconcerting situations" and "an art taking as its theoretical horizon the realm of human interactions and its social context, rather than the assertion of an independent and private symbolic space" - yet it guarantees nothing. The sheer variety of events, performances, exhibitions and proposals generated by cabin exchange is indicative of the pluralistic state of contemporary art. Because of the unusual opportunities that it offers and because of the short-lived nature of these opportunities (no cabin occupation is to last more than 24 hours), it also often encourages the participants to work in ways very different from their usual practice. Nevertheless, in attempting to identify some broad groupings within this wide range of disparate activity it becomes possible to note certain tendencies. For example, the smallest group is perhaps that which contains those projects operating within fairly conventional notions of art production and art exhibition. On the other hand, the group containing the most number of projects is that which focuses upon interactive situations revolving around social situations. It is this kind of work that, according to Nicolas Bourriaud, has managed "to inhabit the world in a better way."

"Through little services rendered, the artists fill in the cracks in the social bond. [Thus artists might become] involved in the most menial of tasks (giving massages, cleaning shoes, working at a supermarket check-out, organising group meetings, etc.), driven by the anxiety caused by the feeling of uselessness. So through little gestures art is like... a set of tasks to be carried out beside or beneath the real economic system, so as to patiently re-stitch the relational fabric."

In terms of the question of true and false problems, it is noticeable that - according to my schema - the more a work tends towards the cabin end of the cabin-container spectrum, the more it seems to raise a true problem.

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I have attempted to raise and answer some questions here. Whether or not they are "true" or "false" questions, adequate or inadequate answers, is debatable. But what I have realised is that cabin exchange not only helps to inventively identify problems, it constitutes a creative problem in its own right.