

Independent Collaborative Hospitality

Dave Beech

Avantgardism is no longer the war cry it used to be. I'm not one of those who have fallen for the sophistic argument that avantgardism has become conservative while conservatism has become the new avantgardism, but I have to admit that I don't know of any artists that I respect today who would call themselves avantgarde. Calling oneself an avantgardist in pluralist times, everyone knows, is a recipe for disaster. And yet the demands of the historical avantgarde for the reconciliation of art and society, for the negation of aesthetic distinction, for the politicization of culture, and so on, have neither been met nor superseded, despite the fact that they are continually neglected, denied, bullied and ridiculed. This is why the avantgarde continues to echo through the practices and debates of contemporary artists, radical cultural movements, artist-run organizations, independent curatorial projects and critical writing on art.

Let's begin, then, with a concept that is pivotal for avantgardism and has not entirely lost its appeal to the contemporary artist—this is independence. It is one of the great inspiring features of avantgardism that it struggled vigorously against the various institutions, traditions and conventions of the cultural establishment. Destruction, negation, revolt and rebellion aimed barbs at a solidified tyranny presided over by the great and the good, sweeping inherited practices aside in order to make way for new cultural forms and new social relations for art. Some of these avantgarde ambitions have dated, especially those which call for a brave new world based on modern, scientific principles. Nevertheless, independence is no naïve desideratum these days. Independence is not to be taken lightly or taken for granted; it is hard to conceive, hard to establish and even harder to sustain. Dealers, curators and collectors may have replaced Masters, Academicians and panels of judges, but contemporary artists are not thereby released from the needs of activism, setting up and



maintaining alternative networks, and continually reconfiguring the political relations of culture.

In the summer of 2003 Nick Crowe and Ian Rawlinson, two artists working out of Manchester, curated the biggest public art project the UK has ever known with a budget of £530. The exhibition, Artranspennine03 (known as ATP03, <http://nickcrowe.net/atp/console.html>), revived an institutionally top-heavy exhibition ATP98, which originally cost £3million and was organised primarily by curators at the Tate in Liverpool and the Henry Moore Institute in Leeds. Working on a shoe-string budget and curatorially hands-off, Crowe and Rawlinson effectively handed over the official blockbuster public exhibition to the artists. Independence is not brought about by rejecting previous practices—rather than go out of their way to distance themselves from ATP98, Crowe and Rawlinson stress their indebtedness to ATP98—the independence of ATP03 is won by occupying ATP98 differently. If avantgardism is to be salvaged from the postmodern caricature of oedipal protest, then we need to develop a conception of artistic independence on such models as ATP03, as occupying contested spaces differently.

Consider artist-run spaces. It is clear that a number of artist-run spaces are set up for no other reason than to catch the attention of the market and art's large public institutions in the spirit of entrepreneurial enterprise. Such spaces may be funded and run as independent concerns, but they are in no way ideologically or culturally independent. A stronger brand of independence would entail some substantial divergence from business-as-usual. In fact, we could even go so far as to say that spaces which fail to promote this stronger brand of

independence are not artist-run spaces at all; the artists involved are agents for those that they address. Independence in art and culture, therefore, means contesting art and culture. If artists are to contest culture, then one of the key aspects of the culture that they must contest is the category of the artist. Artist-run spaces contest the established role of the artist (displacing the artist from the studio, for one thing) as well as clearing intellectual and physical space for occupying culture differently. This is independence.

Towards the end of 2003 Sparwasser HQ (www.sparwasserhq.de), an artist run space in Berlin, invited 50 artist run spaces worldwide to contribute their 'favourite' video for Old Habits Die Hard. The project had an informality about it that nevertheless dovetailed with a serious and genuine commitment to an international community of independent art projects. Ambition, informality and hospitality combine to establish a form of cultural independence that sets its own agenda. What's more, the suggested criterion for selecting the video, that it be your 'favourite', was a precise subversion of professional practice in which artists and curators select works in order to gain cultural capital. Small potatoes, perhaps, but these are the ways in which independent practices manufacture their independence.

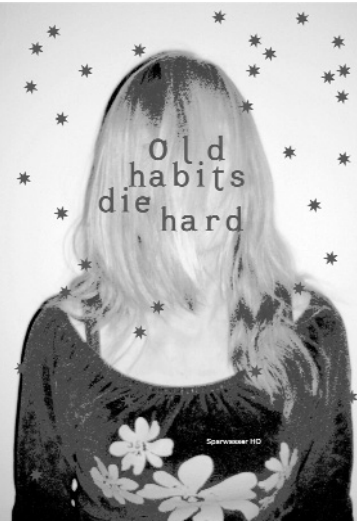
Independence in art is not given, but has to be won by distinguishing between contesting the cultural field on the one hand and practices of adapting oneself to the existing culture and its institutions on the other. Establishing a physical distance from the existing institutions is not a sure-fire strategy for attaining independence. Physical distance often turns out to be a



red-herring, failing to guarantee that the space will be independent in the fuller sense. This is why art's existing institutions can be re-used independently if they are treated as contested spaces. Artists and curators can gain independence by virtue of doing something else in the art's established spaces. The first condition of art's independence is not art's isolation but its re-occupation of the cultural field, whether in setting up alternative spaces or by doing alternative things in existing spaces.

Nicolas Bourriaud's little book Postproduction does not match the emphasis on cultural contestation and collaborative independence that is so conspicuous in the networks and projects of the new socially oriented artists. True, Bourriaud argues that "art can be a form of using the world", but when it comes to the details, Bourriaud converts these social events back into those of an encounter "between the artist and the one who comes to view the work". His new artist is a 'semionaut' (the DJ, the programmer, the web surfer), whose 'collaborations' with the social world are reduced to exchanges of signs. When he speaks of how the semionaut "activates the history" of appropriated material, Bourriaud is referring to the generation of new meanings. And because he places his hope in the liberatory effects of semiotic play, he takes his position in direct opposition to the avantgardist, framing this opposition thus: the avantgardist asked "what can we make that is new?" while the semionaut begins with the motto, "how can we make do with what we have?" I think the new socially oriented artists are closer to the avantgarde than this, with a question that goes beyond Bourriaud's semiotic play: how we can make what we have do something else?

ATP03 and Old Habits Die Hard emphasise an aspect of contemporary independent art at odds with Bourriaud's conceptualisation of the semionaut. The semionaut is an individual who, in Bourriaud's account, is in opposition to others. In particular, the semionaut is hostile to the obsolete producers on whom the semionaut's appropriational practice depends. Of course, this opposition can be redescribed in collaborative terms. The DJ and the socially oriented artist acts in a spirit of hospitality rather than hostility. While hospitality can contain its own forms of hostility—when inclusion is nothing but a positive spin on the neutralisation of opposition, for instance—there can be a tenderness to hospitality that is worth encouraging. As a genre of social interaction, hospitality is more promising, ethically, as a



model for an artist run space than, say, entrepreneurialism or semiotic play. Collaborative independence, involving hospitalities within hospitalities, is a form of independence that does not delude itself that autonomy (self-determination) is equivalent to isolation (the myth of the self-created self) The 'self' of 'self-determination' is understood, within collaborative independence, to be co-produced with others. That is, the self of self-determination is not self-sufficient. And thus, the independence in collaborative independence is necessarily based on the individual's utter dependence on others.

We are not semionauts; we are, if anything, socionauts. Socially oriented artists do not demonstrate any inclination today to reduce social encounters to semiotic encounters. At the same time, such social encounters are not typically those between an artist and a viewer mediated by the object that is made by the former for the visual pleasure of the latter. If the contemporary artist contests culture by, among other things, contesting the role of the artist, then it follows that the contemporary artist contest culture by contesting the modes of attention of the viewer (the artist's traditional collaborator). In fact, contemporary artists seem to be in the process of converting the viewer into a doer, an active participator in the events and actions set up by the socionaut. In this sense, the contemporary artist in the first decade of the 21st century has in common with the avantgardist in the first part of the 20th century a vital commitment: the merging of art and life as a critique of the isolation of art from everything else. If the avantgarde's sense of breaking new ground gave them a social superiority complex, the current crop of socially oriented artists are avantgarde only insofar as they share the political programme of the avantgarde, not their social position at the head of culture. Avantgardism was always independent but now it has become independent collaborative hospitality.

www.dave.beech.clara.net