In his recent review of Alfredo Cramerotti’s Aesthetic Journalism: How to Inform Without Informing, critic Packer notes that the term ‘aesthetic journalism’ is “alternately deployed throughout the book”, recalling “the way that ‘Relational Aesthetics’ functions for Nicolas Bourriaud”. So it is used to both elaborate upon recent tendencies in art practice and, in a more polemical sense, to propose “a radical interaction yet unfilled”. This comparison is appropriate, not least because both authors are curators, but while Bourriaud assumes familiarity with a number of artists and artworks considered as key, and largely avoids in-depth discussion of his philosophical and theoretical reference points, Cramerotti is clearly writing for a somewhat more diverse readership, encompassing media students and practitioners as well as artists, curators and art critics. Each chapter of Aesthetic Journalism features questions for further reading, in addition to the comprehensive list of “references and niceties” at the back of the book, going so far as to contextualise major art events. So, for instance, Cramerotti introduces the “art exhibition taking place in Kassel over five years since 1955 […] an event that helped to shape an idea of art not as an autonomous field, but as a practice investigating (and reporting) the social and the political via aesthetics”.

As this reference to Documenta suggests, the notion of art practice – and the art exhibition – as an arena for social and political investigation is not new. Cramerotti identifies “early patterns of aesthetics” in the era of Enlightenment, before charting the rise of “art as social criticism” in the 1970s (exemplified by the work of Dan Graham, Hans Haake, Martha Rosler and the artists associated with Vangardi) and contemporary practices (citing works by Laura Horelli, Renzo Martens, Alfredo Jaar, The Atlas Group and others). Cramerotti argues, however, that the more self-consciously journalistic turn evident in recent decades can be understood as a response to the “aesthetic journalism” in traditional journalistic media. Before exploring the concept of aesthetic journalism further, it is interesting to note another aspect of Cramerotti’s approach that is highlighted by Packer. Aesthetic Journalism includes a list of approximately twenty exhibitions between 2002 and 2005, focusing on artists who work with “the document, the archive, the report and the documentary style”

including Documenta 11 and Manifesta 5 (2004), yet Cramerotti does not actually focus directly on curatorial practice. Despite this, it may be possible to infer his position through reference to his input as a member of the Chamber of Public Secrets (CPS), one of three curatorial collectives responsible for Manifesta 8, taking place from March 7 to July 12, 2010. The advance information for Manifesta 8 promised a “rethinking of art exhibition itself, with perceptions of temporality, – January 2005. Ostensibly concerned, like the exhibition itself, with perceptions of temporality, Rogoff’s essay actually focuses on location, artistic labour and the emergence of a mode of art practice “that informs in a seemingly factual way, but at a slight remove from reportage”.

Thesing ‘Aesthetic Journalism’ and the ‘Documentary Turn’

Cramerotti’s book is one of the first monographic studies dedicated to this identification of journalistic and documentary turns in contemporary art, but it follows a number of relatively recent anthologies exploring similar territory. They include another Intelligent publication of Truth or Dare: Art and Documentary (2007), edited by Gail Pearl and Cahl McLaughlin, featuring contributions from theorists Michael Renov and John Ellis, together with panel discussions and interviews with practitioners such as Trinh T. Minh-ha, Ann-Sofi Siden and Jane and Louise Wilson. A more direct emphasis on curatorial practice is apparent in The Greenroom: Reconsidering the Documentary and Contemporary Art, edited by Maria Lind and Hiro Sone (New York: Sternberg Press and Center for Curatorial Studies, Bard College, 2008). This compilation of new and republished texts includes ‘Documentary Vitré’ by Olav Nygard, framed as a response to criticism of Documenta 11.

These publications are preceded by an array of texts appearing in journals and catalogues. They include ‘The Where of Now’ by Iris Rogoff, a contribution to a book published by Tate on the occasion of the exhibition Time Zones: Recent Film and Video at Tate Modern in October 2004 – January 2005. Ostensibly concerned, like the exhibition itself, with perceptions of temporality, Rogoff’s essay actually focuses on location, artistic labour and the emergence of a mode of art practice “that informs in a seemingly factual way, but at a slight remove from reportage”. She finds evidence of this characteristic of exhibitions and goes on to cite a number of examples, such as a two-channel video work by Laura Horelli entitled Helsinki Shipyard/Port San Juan, 2002-2003, shown as Manifesta 5. This is one of a relatively small number of contemporary examples of aesthetic journalism (eight in total) discussed by Cramerotti and it also features in an essay on “documentary dislocations” in artists’ cinema, indicating the register of biennial exhibitions in (re)producing a common curatorial and critical vocabulary.

Although Cramerotti identifies historical precedents for the journalistic or documentary turn, his theorisation of aesthetic journalism derives much of its coherence from a critique of news media production and reception that seems particularly to apply to this present moment, and the inclusion of various projects requiring audience interaction. During the preview, members of all three collectives organised events, talks and tours, so that those attending were sometimes confused about whether they were artists rather than observers. As several commentators have noted, critics routinely occupy a role similar to that of the embedded journalist. The very organisations and institutions that are expected to critique. Perhaps more importantly, however, reviewers are also reliant on the networking opportunities offered by events such as the Manifesta professional preview, as a means to develop and maintain linkages in an era of increased competition. But this does not mean that a reviewer who follows the prescribed route, touring from venue to venue on the official bus, is prohibited from producing a critical response to an exhibition. Quite the opposite might be true. Because artists, critics and curators are capable of establishing and asserting self-consciously critical positions through an ongoing process of discursive production, which often involves the assertion of critical judgements (publicly or more informally) regarding events such as biennial exhibitions.

Curatorial Discursivity and Critical Reception

Although Cramerotti favours discussion of artworks over the analysis of exhibition-making, he is careful to speak of the position of the curator, and the conditions of reception for aesthetic journalism. He states: “Two aspects are equally important: for the author not to be forced to adapt to the speed of the news industry, and for the spectator not to be required to accept or refuse it on the spot. Come and go in front of a representation at one’s leisure”. In practice, however, the actual conditions of reception for an exhibition such as Manifesta 8 – particularly during the professional preview – bear little relation to this ideal. With previous editions, hundreds of artists, curators, critics and students attended the preview, which took place over four days. While the accreditation process was hampered by technical glitches, the actual experience was marked by a sense of inclusivity – no obvious VIP areas or parties with restricted access – and generosity, with free bus transport from one venue to the next. Yet the organisation of the exhibition at fourteen venues, spread across two cities (an hour apart) necessitated a very tightly-scheduled programme, so that hundreds of visitors arrived at each venue together. It was difficult to view many video installations in their entirety let alone “come and go in front of a representation at one’s leisure”. The advance information for Manifesta 8 signalled a strong thematic emphasis on curatorial discursivity. This was reflected in the selection of three curatorial collectives (the other two are Alexandria Contemporary Arts Forum and Art Monthly, is
significant problems with exhibition texts, venues concludes, however, that the Foundation largely one way of ensuring the attendance of visiting focus on curatorial collectivity. This could be suggests an economic imperative for the thematic innovation” and although she does not elaborate Foundation “has an interest in curatorial and information systems. So, for example, the curators state that they “attempted to redirect Manifesta into a new situation, namely, a mutual dependence of other discourses and ‘systems’ – in this case, information systems”.

This interest in systems was apparent in the development of projects across multiple platforms. In addition to organising exhibitions and projects at numerous sites in Murcia and Cartagena, CPS developed and commissioned works for print, TV, radio and the internet and two of the venues included media archives or hubs with access to documentation and contextualising material on the CPS website. But the website actually offered relatively little in terms of additional material during the preview, and development of projects across so many media platforms may have overstretched resources.

The practical problems cited by Gleadowe are significant, if only because they illustrate a possible blind spot within Cramerotti’s analysis. His endorsement of aesthetic journalism is partly founded, as I have suggested, on the assumption that artists have more time than journalists. He states; “time is what dictates the limits of present-day research and production. Artists do not have to work within the deadlines of traditional news production, but can ‘investigate’ [...]” At a slower pace to develop and maintain relationships with communities. Through the assistance of curators and an organisation such as Manifesta 8, artists have the means to infiltrate the public and private infrastructures and reveal new takes on past, contemporary and future issues”. As the case of Manifesta 8 demonstrates, however, both curators and artists can only move in this way if this ‘assistance’ is forthcoming. As Gleadowe implies, the repurposing of a relatively small number of buildings in Murcia and Cartagena for cultural and social use – part of the funding arrangement with the hosts, as problematised above – might have contributed to technical problems and delays. But this does not easily explain the situation at the two museum venues used by CPS, in which projected videos at times suffered from poor image quality. In fact one of the most effective works, AmnesiaLand by Stefanos Tsivopoulos, was devised in response to a site not previously used for contemporary art exhibition – the Casino in Cartagena. This was one of a relatively small number of works in ¿The Rest is History? to fulfill the potential of aesthetic journalism, as theorised by Cramerotti, through its fusion of fictional and documentary modes of address. In addition, while numerous contributions to Manifesta 8 employed a self-consciously ‘archival’ mode of engagement, AmnesiaLand was one of the few video installations to make effective use of – and clearly acknowledge – already existing archives.

Nostalgia for the Public Realm

So, to what extent does the CPS presentation at Manifesta 8 succeed in furthering the critique developed by Cramerotti in Aesthetic Journalism? In their primary contribution to the catalogue, CPS emphasise that they want to “search out and engender dialogues, placing them in the public realm, through the programming of media, film and documentary production, artistic research and aesthetic journalism”. CPS clearly conceptualise the public realm as aligned with, and dependent upon, diverse forms of cultural production and research. Yet there is also a sense that they are seeking to preserve – or perhaps reanimate – a relatively traditional mode of activity within the public sphere, aligned to specific forms of media production and consumption that are under threat, if not actually in decline; “we need printed journalism and broadcasts to help us make sense of the world around us. The amount of administrative, cultural, political and financial processes that occur during our average day cannot be digested in any other way”. From this perspective, ¿The Rest is History? might then be viewed partly as a nostalgic undertaking, particularly if nostalgia is understood as an acknowledgement of loss. It is too soon to know if CPS actually succeeded in expanding Manifesta’s discursive networks and information systems – the only credible way to determine this would be to undertake a formal study of its reception. In the absence of such a study, the critical response already offered by commentators such as Gleadowe might at least prompt greater self-reflection on the part of the Manifesta Foundation, so that it may perhaps persuade some artists, critics (and curators) to work differently from journalists.

Notes

3 Cramerotti, 84.
4 It is beyond the scope of this article to discuss distinctions between ‘journalistic’ and ‘documentary’ fields and modes of practice. But while documentary is often defined, following John Grierson, as the ‘poetic treatment of actuality’, journalism could be said to express a stronger truth claim, and has traditionally been more tightly regulated through professional organisations and codes.
5 Recent examples include John Douglas Miller, ‘Watching V Looking’, Art Monthly, October 2010, 7-10, and various contributions to Jane C南通b and Josephine Lanyon, eds., Ghosting: The Role of the Archive within Contemporary Artists’ Film and Video, (Bristol: Picture This, 2006).
7 Maeva Comnoll, The Place of Artists’ Cinema: Space, Sites and Screens, (Bristol and University of Chicago Press, 2009). Cramerotti’s research first came to my attention several months before the publication of Aesthetic Journalism, when I was introduced by Bristol-based artist Dalphne Wright to take part in a public discussion on her work in June 2009, which he organised as the curator of QUAD gallery in Derby, UK.
8 Cramerotti, 69.
9 Cramerotti, 104.
10 Cramerotti, 103.
11 Cramerotti, 30.
12 Cramerotti, 106.
13 I attended with a group of students on the MA in Visual Arts Practices (www.mvis.org) and my article is partly informed by class discussions, particularly with criticism students such as Joanne Laws, whose review of Manifesta 8 is forthcoming in Afterimage, January/ February 2011.
14 Evidently, it is possible to experience Manifesta outside the frame of the professional preview. When I reviewed the exhibition at Donostia-San Sebastian in 2004 it had already been open for several months and I moved from one venue to another at my own pace, relying upon public transport and directions from strangers as well as Manifesta maps and signage. See Maeva Comnoll, Nomads, Tourists and Territories: Manifesta and the Basque Country’ Afterimage: Journal of Media and Cultural Criticism, 52, 3/ November/ December 2004: 8-9.
17 Terzad González; The Man Who Stares at Media: Remote Viewing of the Chamber of Public Secrets’, also offers a critique of documentary production, artistic research and engagement with the public sphere, aligned to specific forms of media production and consumption that are under threat, if not actually in decline; “we need printed journalism and broadcasts to help us make sense of the world around us. The amount of administrative, cultural, political and financial processes that occur during our average day cannot be digested in any other way”. From this perspective, ¿The Rest is History? might then be viewed partly as a nostalgic undertaking, particularly if nostalgia is understood as an acknowledgement of loss. It is too soon to know if CPS actually succeeded in expanding Manifesta’s discursive networks and information systems – the only credible way to determine this would be to undertake a formal study of its reception. In the absence of such a study, the critical response already offered by commentators such as Gleadowe might at least prompt greater self-reflection on the part of the Manifesta Foundation, so that it may perhaps persuade some artists, critics (and curators) to work differently from journalists.