

Dawson Clutterbuck

C.E.R.A. (Community Environment Relevance Activities)

28 March – 25 April 2015

THE PHYSICS ROOM

CONTEMPORARY ART SPACE

Nicola Verdon in conversation with Dawson Clutterbuck

Dawson Clutterbuck was Artist in Residence at The Physics Room for March 2015. His subsequent exhibition C.E.R.A. (Community Environment Relevance Activities), like many of his projects, explored the relationship between ideas of community, institution and place, transplanting to The Physics Room the ethos and activities of a rural social space.

Nicola Verdon: Is The Physics Room residency the first you've taken part in? Why is context important for your work?

Dawson Clutterbuck: Yes, this is my first residency. It's been great to have the time and space to not only concentrate on making new work in the city where the exhibition will be shown, but also understand the gallery's surrounding context, the place and the issues people are dealing with as the city of Christchurch is rebuilding—all of which hopefully helps to ground the exhibition. I think it is important to get to know the people I collaborate with, to earn their trust and create a mutual respect before a project is developed.

NV: How do you conceive exhibitions—namely this C.E.R.A project?

DC: When I'm developing a new work, I am following a question or idea from a previous project that I feel needs further exploration or expansion. I generally spend a lot of time reading and looking through different archives, libraries and museums, as well as conducting field research with individuals or groups who participate in activities, or who are involved with local events that relate to the information and ideas I am interested in. In this case, I was interested in further developing a relationship with the local indoor bowling club who sadly lost a lot of their facilities due to earthquake and fire damage. This has since expanded to include other such groups—it's an ongoing process.

NV: In terms of your multidisciplinary practice and research, do you draw on artist models that are equally diverse?

DC: I look at artists and researchers from different disciplines that may relate to an idea or activity I am exploring. I think it is important to know both local and international artists who

have similar ideas or material outcomes as myself. Post object art of the 1970s and artists with post studio practices, such as Bas Jan Ader, Francis Alys, Alex Monteith, Santiago Sierra, Maddie Leach and Gillian Wearing, are all important sources for informing the art I want to make. More recently, my video documentation has progressed into short films, so I have been looking at artists that specifically explore film, such as Tacita Dean, and also early direct cinema directors, such as Albert Maysles. I also draw inspiration from the individuals or groups I'm working with. It is important in my collaborative projects to at times allow space for other people to influence the direction of the work.

Recently I have been reading material from Grant Kester about collaborative art practices and ideas of community in a global context, as well as Miwon Kwon's essays on site-specific art and locational identity. Richard Mulgan and Anne Salmond are of interest with regard to ideas of the different 'peoples' of Aotearoa New Zealand and the transition from biculturalism to a multicultural society. As are Bruno Haas and Hannah Arendt, namely for their thinking regarding institution, context and place.

NV: Ah yes! You've mentioned a point of interest for you is Haas' notion of 'weltverlust' (the 'loss of world' an object undergoes when extracted from its original context and placed within a gallery space/museum)¹. Haas also interestingly acknowledges the converse: that many works are made specifically for the gallery or museum setting and thus gain a 'home' in a sense. How has this interest in, and idea of, 'worldlessness' informed your approach to projects and exhibitions? Do you think distancing something from its original environment allows us to engage more critically, or perhaps more freely with it? How is this reflected in your current *C.E.R.A. (Community Environment Relevance Activities)* exhibition?

DC: My interest in Arendt and Haas was initially attached to the Duchampian idea of re-contextualising an object when placing it in a gallery. A museum and a contemporary gallery are very different institutions so I think it is extremely important to consider what is achieved or lost through removing things from their natural place in the world. You're effectively creating a hole. I agree that at times we can engage with something more critically when it is distanced from its original environment; its meaning can shift – especially if this process affords the space to be recognised and understood differently. For the *C.E.R.A.* exhibition, I am interested in transplanting some aspects of a rural social club or hall into an urban context, and exploring how, or even if, these aspects can be activated and critically engaged with in relation to Christchurch's current situation.

NV: Haas' focus on the gallery/museum setting and its impact upon the 'art work' draws parallels for me with the concerns of theorist Bruce Ferguson. In 'Exhibition Rhetorics: Material Speech and Utter Sense', Ferguson notes a significant lack of critical attention, despite how aware we are of its non-neutrality, afforded "the exhibition", itself as a medium in its own right.² He posits the exhibition as not only the core way in which we understand and engage "art works" but also as the simultaneous embodiment and expression of the ideologies of both the institution and artist it represents. As an artist who is concerned with the place of the artwork

¹ Haas, Bruno. "Introduction." In *Nachbau/Reconstruction*, Simon Starling. Essen: Steidl/Folkwang Museum, 2010.

² Ferguson, Bruce. "Exhibition Rhetorics: Material Speech and Utter Sense." In *Thinking About Exhibitions*, Reesa Greenberg, Bruce W Ferguson, Sandy Nairne (eds.), London: Routledge, 1996, pp. 176-190.

and the role of the institution, how consciously does your interest in these areas inform or affect your decision making process regarding making and installation?

DC: Rather than the work alone, often the exhibitions and performances I am most drawn to and continue to think about long after seeing the work, are because of the nature of the institution they take place in or because of the artist: their reasons for making art, their background, or their politics. For me, these things definitely effect the materialisation of my projects and inform how the installation will be presented to the public: whether viewers are given opportunity to participate, or if the work is attempting to de-stabilise their gallery experience. The manner in which I hope viewers engage with the ideas of each project is vital. For me, it is context that creates art.

NV: In a recent article you mentioned your interest in working collaboratively, at both an individual and group level, within specific communities as a means to realise art projects. I've witnessed this first hand (being involved earlier this year on your film project in the Hokianga), and this was certainly the case in your *Boom Bap, This Space, These t-shirts* exhibition at RM gallery in Auckland (2013) where you not only encouraged viewers to take the t-shirts home, but also hosted a karaoke night at Charlie's bar on Karangahape Road. What is it about working with people and establishing or maintaining a relationship that interests you? How does this approach liberate or perhaps limit your projects? Have you found this approach in an unfamiliar city (Christchurch) more difficult?

DC: The *Boom Bap, this space, these t-shirts* exhibition concentrated on expanding Rm Gallery out into the surrounding commercial landscape of Karangahape Road. I was interested in expanding notions of site-specificity shifting from a static to fluid state—here made up of a network of relations. The karaoke performance was a way to shift the viewership away from the gallery. I consider the duke box beats as a kind readymade material, which performers may personalise and/or alter depending on how and what they choose to perform. So this get-together karaoke night was a way to explore the space between artist and viewer, via the microphone that was being passed between the different karaoke-singers.

I am interested in working with people as a way of gaining knowledge and learning what it means to be-in-the-world here in the South Pacific. I am interested in developing an art practice where the idea of “creative labour” and working with people is a medium; where the process of a dialogical relationship can offer unforeseen outcomes when negotiated in the space between self and other. It can be quite frustrating and deflating when a project falls over due to individual circumstances changing, or someone not having the time to give to the project anymore, but I've realised this is something that comes with the territory. I try to have multiple projects running at all different stages so I have things to turn to when/if something falls through. It's important as an artist to be realistic about what you can achieve in each exhibition with the time and money you have. It was important for me to consider what I could realistically achieve in Christchurch and what would be a positive outcome for any of the local people or groups who helped to realise the publics events component of the exhibition. As I was only in Christchurch for a short time, it was a challenge to form and sustain relationships with such local groups. The Physics Room staff and volunteers were vital in establishing these connections to the local creative community and to others who may somehow be involved in the exhibition.

NV: *C.E.R.A.*, the title of your show, directly references a pre-existing acronym for Canterbury Earthquake Recovery Authority. What were your motivations for

appropriating this acronym? For me it may be read as an attempt to direct the focus from a larger body or organisation back to the very community it has perhaps failed to serve—or at least has received backlash from. Is this a fair reading?

DC: Yes, after reading through the C.E.R.A. website, it appeared their words were utilised as mere rhetoric. I wondered how in touch a government-led organisation that is based in Wellington could really be with the needs and wants of residents in Christchurch. Surely this distance between the people making decisions and the people who have to live, or make do with, these decisions is problematic. I wonder is there friction between the local council and C.E.R.A.? What Christchurch needed four years ago, may be not what the people want now, and I'm concerned with how or if C.E.R.A. is changing their initial plan for this city's future. For me, the social fabric established through community environments and related activities is vital to any town or city, and these need to be considered as much as, say, the physical buildings. My re-working of the original C.E.R.A. acronym to 'Community Environment Relevance Activities' reflects this.



NV: You recently took part in an anti-T.P.P.A march holding a sign with the re-worked acronym as the title of your upcoming C.E.R.A. show on it. What were your motivations for this? How did others respond?

DC: Artists making work around the ideologies of the institution or socially concerned work need to first have a political position. But I believe there is a difference between being a political artist and an artist who makes art politically. I thought I could do some "PR" for my upcoming exhibition at the TPPA march. While we walked and chanted "T.P.P.A... TAKING PEOPLE'S POWER AWAY" some people questioned why my sign didn't have T.P.P.A on it, and others said they liked the words I'd chosen. There were a lot of signs with the letters T.P.P.A incorporated that were asking for governmental transparency and drawing attention to the inevitable loss of

democracy and economic independence if we sign the Trans-Pacific Partnership Agreement—especially where foreign corporate entities could gain power to influence our quality of life. I carried my 'Community Environment Relevance Activities' sign in an attempt to draw attention to the things we have lost already within our own nation—especially this notion of democracy itself. It seems our current government is constantly pushing new legislation and economic deals through before we, the public, hear about it and have any chance of challenging or stopping it.

NV: Indeed! Focusing on your current show at The Physics Room, I'm interested in your decision to show film footage of Hokianga's A&P show alongside the sculptural elements—the bowling mat and the sports court lines. The A&P footage depicts a community event wholly important for, although not specific to, the Hokianga

community in the far north, whereas the other pieces are a direct product of your time in Christchurch. How does showing these two bodies of work together function? Are they shown concurrently to broaden the notion of community or to destabilise it? Is it a means to discuss the dichotomy of urban and rural community engagement/activity that is a known interest of yours?

DC: The conceptual basis for this project was conceived around my home community in Northland with a focus on the North Hokianga A&P Association and Community Hall as key locations where the economic and social sides of rural life mix. The aftermath of Rogernomics and Ruthanasia had a huge effect on rural life nationally, resulting in a lot of farmers being forced to walk from their land. Decades of minimal regional development across multiple governments has left the North Hokianga's infrastructure as it was in the 1990s, resulting in many people moving to urban centres for better education and employment opportunities. As such, the population is very small compared to when I grew up, and this has meant the inter-club sports nights and social club facilities, such as the A&P Hall, are largely inactive. I think there are similarities between this North Hokianga social climate and the current situation in Christchurch—an exodus of people, infrastructure feeling like it is stagnating, and the threat of social spaces, sports clubs and community groups becoming inactive.

In a wider sense, I'm interested in the way British settlers transplanted, via colonisation, activities such as pianos, horse racing, badminton, A&P Shows and indoor bowls amongst other things to Aotearoa New Zealand. I'm also interested in how a gallery opening can, in a similar way to a weekly sports club game or club meeting, instill a sense of normality and routine, and perhaps play a vital role in creating a feeling of commonality for those in Christchurch dealing with the disaster trauma. Throughout this residency I have been spending time with the St Paul's Indoor Bowling Association, often going along to their club nights as a means to engage with a local community group and spend time out of the studio. Through engaging with the local groups like this I am interested to see if “being in common” exists here, and to see the way different communities and groups, who may have been uprooted, have found new ways to stay connected—perhaps using alternative spaces to keep activities going. For me, pulling these different bodies of work together is a way to personally grasp a better understanding of “community” within the different contexts. I wanted to create an exhibition where one can attempt to understand the similarities and the dichotomy of community engagement both rurally and in a city. I don't think this project explicitly attempts to destabilise notions of community—the recent disasters have destabilised things here enough.

NV: A colleague once noted that “community” is perhaps one of the most misused words—especially in relation to art projects. What can we take community to mean here? What is it about “community” and community events that are of interest to you?

DC: Ambiguity. I feel like “community” is something we all know, but maybe our understanding of it is limited or context dependent at least. We may know what it is for us from our whakapapa, upbringing and/or the different activities we undertake to understand who we are and where we fit in society. But does this mean we understand what it is for other people from different cultures or locations? The issue of difference is key to any understanding of identity formation—collective or otherwise. Do we project our own ideas of community onto other groups/cultures therefore dismissing diversity? Because the notion of “community” is changing so much in relation to technology and globalisation, it is the part of the wider concept of “culture” that I want to learn and understand more. This current

exhibition, both in the A&P film that documents a rural community tied together via their connection to land, and in the Christchurch-based community groups I hope to collaborate with via the public programme, explores ideas of “being in common” or sharing some sort of experience or existence with others. Therefore the outcomes explore our interconnectivity as people. I don't feel like I can say what community means here—this depends on an individual's involvement in the art system and the level of participation they choose to have in my exhibition.

NV: At a recent panel discussion entitled ‘What Could an Exhibition be for its Publics’ (2013),³ Sarat Maharaj suggested that, “art is important for breaking out and engaging with the sensory and social world but that this engagement is hindered by institutional agendas and walls, both literal and metaphorical.” We’ve already discussed your interest in the effect of displacing an artwork by removing it from its world, but what of this notion in relation to your interest in working with and for the surrounding community? I guess I’m posing the same question to you here: What can *C.E.R.A.* be for its public(s)?

DC: My aims and intentions for *C.E.R.A.* are to explore such questions as: can the gallery space offer community groups, who may have lost their facilities, a space to reactivate lost activities? Can the gallery space provide a platform for community events to happen? Can a public(s) events programme during my exhibition effectively connect different people? Ultimately, I hope this exhibition encourages critical reflection on, and discussion of, the local socio-political situation here in Christchurch.

NV: You’ve mentioned utilising the residency period as a means to build up a relationship with the local indoor bowling club who lost a lot of their facilities due to earthquake and fire damage. This engagement not only afforded the opportunity to see how community groups have continued to survive despite being destabilised by the earthquake, but also provided an element of reciprocity and performativity. What has this active social element added to your exhibition at The Physics Room?

I find an outsider's perspective can at times provide a more incisive contribution to understanding the state of things. Working with the St Paul's Indoor Bowling Association raised the issue of other community or recreational groups having also lost their facilities, and I wondered if they too would be interested in using the gallery space during my exhibition as a way to re-activate these activities or just re-connect again. Like my Rm gallery project, *C.E.R.A.* looks to expand The Physics Room into the surrounding context as much as it also expands/diversifies gallery viewership. For me, the active social element positions this project in the history of collaborative art. I think community based art—in particular the nature of the interaction between artist and the community and the social merit of such projects—needs to be continually debated and re-examined. There is a fine line between people performing in the self contained walls of the gallery and performing or using a gallery to command critical reflection on what is happening socially and politically outside this space. Throughout *C.E.R.A.* the gallery space is open to all people, but depending on the activity taking place, not everyone may be involved. There are moments of inclusion but, through reflection and memory, the installation also brings about an awareness of the continued lack of shared spaces in Christchurch and the sense of isolation that comes with such activities being repressed.

³ Sarat Maharaj in the Panel Discussion: “What could an Exhibition be for its Public?”, Auckland Art Gallery Toi O Tamaki, 10 May 2013.

Tell me more about the wider public events component of your *C.E.R.A.* exhibition. What activities/ workshops are taking place?

Among other things the public events programme includes yoga classes, a reading group, an indoor bowling workshop, live music and life drawing classes. The inclusion of a public(s) events programme is a crucial part of my project, exploring shared spaces and the way one can engage with others through them. This active social element is also a means for me to position *C.E.R.A.* historically within the surrounding theory and discourse on collaborative art forms—especially as the variety of events *C.E.R.A.*'s public programme offers importantly aligns the exhibition with a number of different streams of collaborative art. For example, the live gigs offer a user-friendly component echoing Bourriaud's emphasis on reorienting artistic practice away from object-production and rather towards processes of inter-subjective exchange. Yoga, although a collective event here, is a very individual activity and may be quite an awkward thing to encounter as a viewer. Through engaging with the local political discourse the work constructs a differing set of positions for the viewer whose presence affects both the sculptural components in the gallery and socially interactive elements of the public events programme. If interested, one could engage with Chantal Mouffe's book *The Democratic Paradox* (2000), Nicholas Bourriaud's *Relational Aesthetics* (2002); Claire Bishop's subsequent critique of Bourriaud in *October* magazine⁴ and Liam Gillick's response to Bishop⁵ as key references in this ongoing collaborative conversation. But I also feel that the conversation has moved on and socially engaged practices are more integrated to contemporary practice.

What aspects of this project will you take into the next?

After my exhibition at The Physics Room, I'll have a screening of the same A&P film up north for those who both feature and helped to make it happen. I also have an ongoing film project in the Hokianga where I am documenting a good friend George as he restores a 34-foot modified mono hull boat. George is hopeful to get it in the tide soon, and I am looking forward to following him on this journey.

⁴ Bishop, Claire. "Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics". *October*, 110, Fall 2004, pp. 51–79.

⁵ Liam Gillick, 'Contingent Factors: A Response to Claire Bishop's "Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics"', *October*, 115, Winter 2006, pp. 95-107.



Dawson Clutterbuck is an Elam School of Fine Arts Graduate (MFA 2011) and co-founder of the Artist Run space 'Ferari' (2012- 2014). He currently lives and works in Auckland. Clutterbuck has exhibited around New Zealand, with recent exhibitions including: 'Te Tiriti-Treaty' at Kings Theatre in Kawakawa (2015); 'Between Land and Sea', Halsey Wharf Waterfront Auckland, Auckland CBD (2015); 'Ferari Boys', Pilot Space, Hamilton (2014); 'Boom Bap, this space, these t-shirts', Rm Gallery, Auckland (2013); 'Rangahaua', New Zealand Film Archive in Auckland (2013) and 'Square2', City Gallery, Wellington (2012). Clutterbuck's research based, often collaborative, art practice is a multidisciplinary one, encompassing live performance, film and sculpture. Through collaborating with individuals and community groups, Clutterbuck explores the concept of art as a process of reciprocal creative labour. His projects directly engage with the politics of shared spaces in specific locations and contemplate the relationship between ideas of community, institution and place.

Nicola Verdon recently completed her BA(Hons)/BFA(Hons) in Museums & Cultural Heritage at The University of Auckland and Elam School of Fine Arts. She was a co-founder of the project space 'PLAZA' and is currently a co-curator of both WINDOW gallery and the artist run initiative 'ROCKIES'.