The whole world+the work:
questioning context through practice-
led research
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In an interview given to *The Art Newspaper* in September 2005, the artists Jake and Dinos Chapman outlined what they saw as an inverse relationship between the social contextualisation of art practice on the one hand, and its possibility for critical agency on the other:

We have a healthy disrespect for the dissemination of our work because we do not want to be burgeoning culturally; we do not want it to be a deciding feature in people's lives. We do not think that people should be compelled to look at art, and are fearful of how art has become synonymous with a form of social membership and how its potential for critical action is being eroded (Jake and Dinos Chapman: 2005)

In this interview, the Chapman brothers claim that a critical practice of art is dependent on the cultivation of a distance between art practice and the social world in which it circulates; they argue that if art is assumed as a badge of sociality and social being, and aligned with cultural foundationalism, its potential for introducing moments of critical difference into the current distribution of the visible and the sensible will be lost. The moment of critical difference that is being sought in this instance, can also be defined as a moment of aesthetic suspension, in which an art practice which is comprehended contextually, is also seen to be acting on or mobilising that context in a particular way. Acting on or intervening in the contextual relations of art is also a contribution to critical engagement with the social role of art and artists. This relationship between 'intervention' and 'subsumption' in aesthetic practice has been discussed by Jacques Rancière. In his *The Politics of Aesthetics* (Rancière 2004) Rancière claims that the aesthetic regime of the arts engenders a paradox, by basing its bid for autonomy on the absolute integration of art and its contexts:

The aesthetic asserts the absolute singularity of art, and, at the same time, destroys any pragmatic criterion for isolating this singularity. It simultaneously establishes the autonomy of art and the identity of its forms with the forms that life uses to shape itself (Rancière 2004: 23)

Rancière adds that this aesthetic state is both 'a pure moment of suspension, when form is experienced for itself' and 'the formation and education of a specific type of humanity'. The key emblem of this paradox, in which 'all of

humanity' is contained and held within a moment of aesthetic suspension, is the notion of 'the whole world' as it is used in art practice. 'The whole world' is both an autonomous, singular form, and a total affirmation of context. A recent piece by the artist Erwin Würm 'The Artist Who Swallowed The World' (Würm 2006), which depicts the artist with a hugely distended stomach, dramatises this paradox of 'suspended totality' in a comic manner, but does not take the issue much further. Practice-led research in Fine Art presents the opposite problem, since it has been largely determined by the moment of aesthetic subsumption of art to its contexts, and has tended to ignore the moment of aesthetic suspension or intervention into context. A piece which opens up the critical relationship between the suspension of context by aesthetic practice, and its simultaneous subsumption into context, is Martin Creed's neon text piece 'the whole world+the work=the whole world', which was initially installed on the façade of Tate Britain in 2000, and is now prominently displayed in the recent re-hang of Tate Modern's permanent collection. At first sight, Creed's neon construction seems to be a formula for dissolving art practice into sociality; it appears as a kind of craven anti-statement about art in which the aesthetic value of 'the work' is fully ceded to art's context, 'the world'. On the other hand, one could also say that Creed's piece exists as statement about art conducted through art, one in which 'the world', supposedly the ultimate context of art practice, exists merely as one of the conditions of the statement. This latter formulation, in which we ask what might be involved in using art to make a statement about something, brings us closest to the demands of a practice of research, investigation and understanding conducted through art. At doctoral level, for example, we are used to telling artist/researchers that their research project 'can't take on the world', and referring them to 'fields of inquiry' and 'areas of research' as the proper alternative. I think that instead, we should be telling them that practice-led research must *always* take on 'the world', as a figure which emblematises the paradoxes of context in aesthetic practice, and thus the direction of research undertaken by artists. In Creed's piece, this distorting effect seems to be strong enough to dissolve the artwork completely within its contexts; looked at from another direction, however, 'the world' is something mobilised and engaged by Creed's practice as an artist. In an interview with Corrina Durland in 2004, Creed stated that 'I want the whole world to be in my work' and also asserted that he disliked decisions because they implied a hierarchy of one thing over another (Durland 2004). Again, one can read these responses as a flag of surrender in which art gives itself over to context, or, conversely, as an effective means of displacing the position of context-as-ground, within a new register in which assumptions about the context of art practice are used as one element in the construction of art. Here we can note an overlooked but nonetheless distinct difference between practice-led research in fine art and interdisciplinary investigation in the humanities. While new modes of research in the humanities increasingly find new ways of including 'the work' of investigation within 'the whole world', they would not

normally regard the inclusion of 'the whole world' within the work of investigation as a reasonable course of action. In the approach to art through humanities (for example, in AHRC definitions of research practice) aesthetic subsumption is privileged, while aesthetic suspension is not. In fact, as new forms of interdisciplinary research in the humanities continue to invest in the notion of 'the whole world' as a sphere of sociality which grounds their investigations, the less likely it is that this notion of context can be displaced.

The ideal of sociality as the ultimate ground of research practice is further reinforced by policies that promote neo-utilitarian notions of knowledge transfer and the knowledge economy, within which academia, 'the creative industries' and citizens are all contained. As Terry Eagleton has commented recently 'If the bottom line was once divinity, it is now sociality, which envelops every phenomenon as persuasively as the Almighty used to do' (Eagleton 2006: 29). Eagleton also claims that at present, 'culture is the foundation impossible to dig beneath. You can't ask where it comes from, any more than you can ask that question about the holy spirit' (Ibid). A foundation you can't dig beneath, and which can't be the subject of your investigation, is the double whammy that confronts every researcher in the arts and humanities who is told that 'you can't take on the world'. Culture-as-sociality, the most all-encompassing context of research practice, is thereby rendered both sacred and taboo, all-pervasive yet untouchable. Yet Martin Creed's 'the whole world+the work=the whole world' at once accepts this taboo as a given of art practice and punctures it by using it to make art. It is important to point out, however, that while Creed's play with the suspension/subsumption paradox is all very well in principle, it presents methodological problems for scholars working in the humanities, because the leading edge of interdisciplinary practice is focused on a drive towards confirming sociality as the true ground and ultimate context of thought, representation and action. I have referred elsewhere to the dilemma this presents for a radical humanities scholars such as Slavoj Zizek, who take up arms against culturalism and sociality from within its own framework of meaning (Nobus and Quinn 2005: 177-179). This has led to curious 'fighting fire with fire' approaches such as Zizek's opposing the 'holy spirit' of cultural fundamentalism referred to by Eagleton using a materialist theology, as well as toying with, but not realising, the potential of the hoax to deliver a moment of culturalist and contextualist reason 'apprehended irrationally'. In Zizek's latest book *The Parallax View,* he advocates practices for dispelling the illusion that 'we can use the same language for phenomena which are mutually untranslatable and can only be grasped only in a kind of parallax view, constantly shifting perspective between two points between which no synthesis or mediation is possible' (Zizek 2006: 4). This is an explicit argument against the dominance of the triad of contextualism, culturalism and sociality. Zizek is also keen to emphasise that the proper form of critique must be a *practice* of 'confronting a universality with its

unbearable example' (Ibid: 13). Martin Creed's piece points out that the 'unbearable example' of aesthetic universality in art practice is the presentation of that universality itself as a finished form, in which the figure of 'the whole world' presents context in an impossible relationship to itself. Unfortunately, the methodological resources for this kind of practice in the humanities simply do not exist. There is no language of transposition and simultaneity of the kind that allows Creed to shift the orientation of 'the work' and 'the whole world' to each other. Moreover, all Creed has to do to obtain his own 'parallax view' of the contexts of art practice is to rely on a genealogy of strategies of negation and re-affirmation which are probably best summed up by Robert Rauschenberg's 'Erased de Kooning Drawing' of 1953. This is a work in which the act of negating art, and returning it to the undifferentiated ground that is flagged up in its title, can also be read as a device through which the contextual frameworks of understanding that are assumed to link art to the world, are melted down within the crucible of new art. However, the basic technical resource for the adoption of simultaneous presentation, that is, of 'the parallax view' in art and design research, can be located long before this, in works Jean-Léon Gérôme's painting 'Optician' of 1902, that depicts a monocled terrier dog labelled with the fragmented text O-PTI-CIEN, a pun on *au petit chien*, or 'at the sign of the little dog' (Quinn 2000: 65). Gérôme's painting, which was admired by Salvador Dali, was originally submitted to an exhibition of advertising signs by established artists. It nonetheless demonstrates the unsettling potential for a practice of simultaneity and 'parallax vision' that was to be more fully realised in the 'underlaying' of de Kooning with Rauschenberg, or the simultaneous suspension/affirmation of context in Creed.

This should not lead us into complacency, since Creed's piece presents us, in one and the same artwork, with both the dominance of the idea of 'the world' as the ground of art, and the suspension of this grounding within the aesthetic register. There is no reason to think that artists, artist researchers or art theorists are going to choose the latter option. There is every reason to suppose, in fact, that the governmental, institutional and intellectual alliances forged in the neo-utilitarian fantasy of 'the knowledge economy', means that it will be pragmatic for all of us to accept the sacred status of culture and sociality as the foundation of both art and research, while rendering it taboo and untouchable with reference to 'fields of inquiry'. Unfortunately, this strategy is guaranteed to assure the foundational status of sociality, whilst at the same time driving research activity further from the centres of power.

One way to approach this problem may be to critically examine the claims of advocates of culture-as-ground within thinking on art. In his book *Spatial Aesthetics*, Nikos Papastergiadis has provided a list of ten key characteristics of art-as-sociality, which he aligns with the 'Relational Aesthetics' of Nicolas

Bourriaud (Papastergiadis 2006: 198-199). It is worth quoting some of these ten commandments:

1: Art practice is defined through, not in advance, of collaboration.
2: Collaboration is the socialization of artistic practice.
8: Critique of the sovereign position of the artist in creative direction leads to a redistribution of social responsibility.
6: Artistic practice is inserted in the same time-space continuum of everyday life.
5: Mobilization of communicative networks extends and implicates both the local and transnational domains.

Papastergiadis offers us a sixties style dematerialisation of the artist, the art object and the studio, coupled with a new emphasis on sociality, collaboration and inter-human relationships. The implication is that research should take the form of a 'journey into context' from autonomous practices towards the multiplicity of the world. This is certainly the method that Papastergiadis proposes. He suggests a two stage approach in which firstly 'by connecting a work to its own contexts within art history, one appreciates the material presence of the work and establishes the degree of aesthetic innovation' (Ibid:2). When this is achieved, we relate the artwork to its social context - 'in this way the political relevance and cultural references can be identified in order to see how it participates in the broader field of power and knowledge' (Ibid). This is broadly similar to the standard visual culturalist approaches developed during the 1990s, with the difference that Papastergiadis is not dealing with the analysis of social and cultural formations, but an internet-age philosophy of pure communication – sociality rather than society, one might say. One reason why his approach to investigation does not differ much from that adopted by writers such as Bryson, Holly and Moxey in the 1990s, is that Papastergiadis' vision of art-as-sociality is less about research than it is about affirmation (Bryson et.al: 1994). If your intention is to provide description, analysis and evaluation of context for art practice that it is 'impossible to dig beneath', the language of research is subsumed within the language of affirmation. An example is provided by the following passage, which begins with a reference to 'methodology':

The methodology of a number of artists... highlights the role of collaboration. Collaboration reaches its most exquisite forms when the very boundary between art and life is blurred and displaced. For at this juncture, the practices of living not only offer a suitable subject to be represented in the work of art, but also a model for making art. When artists draw from the everyday, then the space between themselves and their subject begins to assume levels of intimacy and attachment that are fundamentally different to the more remote and oppositional stances of earlier phases of the avant-garde (Ibid: 173)

One could imagine this passage being applied approvingly to Martin Creed's 'the whole world+the work=the whole world'. However, in order to question the affirmation of sociality in art that Papastergiadis sees as pervasive within contemporary art, I have introduced a moment of difference, located in how I think that Creed positions 'the whole world' in his statement, as something which simultaneously contains the work of art and is contained by it. I don't think that the journey from the art work to its contexts that Papastergiadis proposes can assume this kind of simultaneity, this 'parallax view'. Creed's operation, like that of Rauschenberg, depends upon art and its contexts both existing as artificial and interchangeable elements of construction. Alain Badiou, speaking at a recent conference on drawing organised by Wimbledon School of Art, noted that the question of art was not 'to be or not be' but rather 'to be *and* not to be' (Badiou: 2006). Artworks, according to Badiou, are 'artificial things that exist', they are not 'the double of our lives'. The moment of suspension contained in this artificiality is also what lends them whatever political dimension they possess. These are conditions for art that that Creed's piece asserts as a positive value; Papastergiadis, on the other hand, offers a transition from the socio-cultural inauthenticity of the isolated artwork to the greater authenticity and higher reality of its contexts. He offers a teleological argument, in which art moves inexorably in one direction, towards its assimilation within what Eagleton calls 'society [as] the new ground of being.'

It is also worth mentioning that my moment of difference is unashamedly referred to one of the 'earlier phases of the avant-garde', in fact one so early that it didn't know it was avant-garde, namely Gérôme's 'O-PTI-CIAN' of 1902. Unlike Papastergiadis, I think that these early instances of the avant-garde are well worth mining for techniques and strategies appropriate to practice-led research in the present. The parallax vision of Gérôme is a rhetorical expression of the 'to be and not be' of Badiou, and both are related to the transposition of work and context, of 'the work' and 'the whole world' that I have located in Creed. The moment when 'the whole world' is placed under question through a technique of 'parallax vision', is a moment that researchers in fine art should feel able to take advantage of. This questioning of 'the whole world' is located at a critical juncture between the dissolution of research values in the affirmation of sociality-as-context, and the alienation of research in the retreat into 'fields of inquiry'. Both of these options ultimately accept the sacred and untouchable status of context. Neither the affirmation of sociality nor the simple retreat from it, offer a viable means of engaging with or mobilising the relation of art to 'the whole world' in the cause of research. On the other hand, a research project proceeding along 'Creedian' lines, would find a way to manage the relationship between the dominance of the current contexts for art, and the mobilisation of those contexts within a statement made through art. Such an approach would challenge the singularity of the ground of social being, with a methodology

predicated on the assumption that 'the whole world' could be a function of 'the work', and *vice versa*. The advantage for the art and design researcher is that introducing the possibility of the suspension of context as a viable means of pursuing an investigation, brings us closer to the identification of models and methodologies of context specific to aesthetic practice, rather than relying on ideas of context imported from elsewhere. There is no reason, of course, why these aesthetic-specific approaches to context cannot be taken up by other disciplines. For all types of research, an emphasis on the artificiality of context may offer the best challenge to its mythic and sacred status, and may also help to ensure that sociality does not become the only game in town.

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