

Unstable Institutional Memory: 10 Years at the Blue Oyster

Ali Bramwell

History is something we usually understand as a progression and this particular history is no different. The Blue Oyster has an institutional memory that is both administrative and social in structure, and each of these takes a distinctive form. The most obvious institutional idea of memory rests in administrative details, but, despite the best of intentions, the Blue Oyster's records are patchy. Some periods are documented well and others less so. Images from the earliest shows, when they exist at all, are scattered. Social memory is held in the continuity of shared experience. However, no single person has stayed with the gallery for the entire decade of operation or seen every single show. Hence, the balance of social memory is held in the recollections and reminiscences of people who were there at the time and then passed them on to others who care enough to hear them. Myth-making is part of the slippage; exhibitions become stories to be retold. Both of these forms of memory are somewhat inadequate in this case. Elisions, errors, and lacunae have crept in when systemic continuity has faltered from time to time. Hence, from the outset this curatorial project is one of recovered or reconstituted history, sitting in the space between memory and actuality.

Several people searched laboriously and diligently through old files and records to piece together a continuous exhibition time line for the Blue Oyster Gallery. Over 1,000 artists included in over 270 different projects have been staged over 10 years. What does this list of names, dates, and events impart? Ostensibly, this list is only useful to the person who was there, as a placeholder or a prompt. This kind of administrative knowledge functions primarily as a mnemonic. Nevertheless, there is something profoundly soothing about a progression that begins somewhere and ends somewhere with a predictable and reliable rhythm. Origin is identified and due credit is given.

At the same time that dates and facts were being cross-checked, stories were being solicited, and social memory tickled into activation. Key people were asked about the identities of other key people to create a web of recollection or social mapping, a kind of democratic census-taking about who and what should be considered noteworthy from the last 10 years.

One particular artist seems to mark the beginning of the Blue Oyster in the mind of many. It was not the very first project but has frequently surfaced as the earliest significant memory during the conversations threading through this process of institutional recollection. Over a six-week period in 1999, the visiting UK artist Richard Crow produced a series of site-specific works and installations in forgotten and decayed places. Cumulatively, these works became a progression of experiences whereby

the artist led a group of people on an adventure that celebrated the artistic potential of urban debris, which was presented as is (grimy, of course) or simply arranged with an opportunistic aesthetic pleasure and playfulness. Crow mined the processes of rot and decay as artistic materials and simultaneously generated genuine communal engagement. He found spectacularly gothic sites to activate, climbing into and excavating hidden cavities and crawlspaces and taking us all with him. In the attic of one of Dunedin's oldest buildings, he held a midnight supper for an invited few, defining degrees of separation from the artist. The net effect of this activity was myth-making on a lasting scale. A cocktail of novelty, pleasure, and just enough delicious Edgar Allan Poe atmospheric frissons blended to create enjoyable stories that continue to be told in the right company. While in residence, Crow also collaborated with the Dunedin artist Michael Morley (legendary in his own right) on a sound work that utilized found sound and organised cacophony produced with various mundane and discarded objects. Now that the underground labyrinths are all sealed again, the sound recoding *Mr White* and a few documentary images are the only remaining concrete evidence.

Despite the lack of physical reminders, projects like Richard Crow's appear to be remembered more clearly than others, in part due to anecdotal repetition. On reflection, it is not surprising that the things we enjoyed doing together are also what we choose to talk about when reminiscing. The work embedded itself snugly and warmly into cultural memory by inviting participation. It also contributed almost accidentally to the creation of Blue Oyster's early support community in a way that many more recently staged relational and dialogic projects self-consciously aspire to but seldom achieve.

A conversational approach to building our very specific art history yields a mixed set of results, arguably based on residual good feeling more than critical depth or intellectual complexity. A notion of accessibility is at stake, as is the converse. The art moments that leave a perplexed and thoughtful silence in their wake are equally important but far less likely to emerge in the warm glow of nostalgia.

If Crow's work created community around shared activity and provided a sense of adventure, then Hannah Beehre's installation work (2001) invited both of these things and simultaneously deferred them. Beehre designed an almost recognisable (analogue) game space coding the gallery as a site governed by half-understood rules of engagement. The set was inviting yet frustrating. It deployed a light and cheery pop aesthetic with bold clean primary colours and non-threatening geometries to set up an enigmatic sports ground with unfathomable rules of play. The floor was marked in territorial zones that recalled a variety of familiar court based ball sports, without actually resembling any one in particular. These zones were apparently already set up for play, with the game pieces ready for use. The function of these game pieces was completely obscure, as was the object of the proposed contest. The idea of interaction prevailed over its actuality. Confronted with a



Hannah Beehre, 2001, invitation

situation where you are apparently supposed to have organised fun, the formality of the work served as a subtle barrier to actual play. This orderliness created a kind of social self-consciousness, akin to arriving to a beautifully laid dinner service and not being invited to sit at the table. Alongside the light and slick design aesthetic is a sense of arriving at a private club, where other people play according to rules to which you are not privy.

Steve Carr's performance work *The Steve Carr Experience* (2000) was an excruciating investigation into male identity and self-image. Many of Carr's works around this time assumed and explored different personae with a disarming and unsettling mixture of arrogance, sincerity, and camp irony. In my recollection of this particular performance, the persona arrived into the room with several items: a ghetto blaster, towel, exercise apparatus, and a bottle of oil. He was wearing a 1980s shiny blue nylon leisure suit and a terry headband reminiscent of Richard Simmons. He removed his jacket and liberally oiled his pale and slightly flabby arms chest and shoulders, cutting a few body-builder poses and preening, as if he were alone. Once ready, he turned on his tape to play "Eye of the Tiger" at high volume, assumed a position on the floor, and performed a series of jack-knife press-ups with a wheel, pushing the wheel out in front of him, extending his body flat, and then pulling back up. He struggled to repeat these actions for the length of the song track, starting quite strongly but tiring quickly. He pushed himself very hard, his body shaking with effort, and movements becoming slower and more visibly strained until he eventually failed. The intense effort expended radically altered the self-aggrandising,



Hannah Beehre, 2001, installation view

vain, and absurd persona initially encountered. By the end, the audience was witnessing something deeply private about self-doubt and a biting anxiety about not being good enough. The audience, who at first laughed openly, fell silent as the stress in his body became more obvious as pain. By the finish, viewers felt voyeuristic and perhaps even strangely ashamed.

This performance was recorded on video. Unfortunately, the quality was poor. Carr has made a new version of the work, capturing the re-enacted event in film with much higher production values. The artist has reworked his intentions for this performance, and the result is set against our memory of the original event. The presentation of the new film as a stand-in for our official memory foregrounds longstanding issues related to the documentation of time-based work. With even greater perceptual distance than usual occurring between the documentary record and live experience, years passed between the first iteration and this new and altered version recreated with the benefit of hindsight. For those who were present to see the original performance this new document will very likely overwrite or even completely replace the first memory, now quite distant and probably inaccurate.

An unacknowledged ideal of inclusion lurks behind an approach seeking to re-construct a progressive historical account as the sum of community recollection. One of the most pressing philosophical arguments to occur in this institution over the years concerns how artists' works are selected or rejected for exhibition. This issue has a social dimension and repercussion; a cooperative model is not easily compatible with a system that also seeks conceptual rigor and strives to promote quality standard. Some kind of balance is required.

In late 1999, Julian Dashper was responsible for the enigmatic work *CV Performance*. The visitors arrived at the gallery to see the show apparently still being installed. Following the artist's instructions, Steve Carr (the gallery director) waited until after the exhibition officially opened and then took about twenty minutes attempting to install twenty sheets of apparently blank A4 paper as carefully gridded and level as possible on uneven walls. The paper, half black and half standard office white, was not actually

blank but was imprinted with the artist's curriculum vitae. *White on White* was a normal printout of the curriculum vitae but was installed facing the wall and thus remained illegible. *Black on Black* was printed with black ink on black paper, so it was also illegible. This installation engages with institutional critique, by inserting evidence of the professional credibility of the artist literally, in the form of his ten page curriculum vitae, as a substitute for content more easily recognisable as art.

It is often assumed that only young artists who are unable to get better bookings will show in an "artist run" space. As an established artist, Dashper had numerous other potential exhibition venues, but with characteristic professional generosity he chose to work at the Blue Oyster. In this context, the display of a well-known contemporary artist's curriculum vitae on the walls of an artist-run project space so new that the paint was barely dry served as an ironic acknowledgment of a genuine imbalance in the professional relationship between artist and gallery. A wry commentary on institutional selection processes more generally can also be inferred; perhaps even a tongue-in-cheek criticism of ubiquitous curatorial method that is sometimes known as "cherry picking," where programming decisions are mainly based on the track record of an artist rather than consideration of the merit and relevance of specific ideas and work.

In 2003, by which time the gallery was more established and considerably more confident about turning away artists, a situation arose that critiqued the same aspects of programming challenged by *CV Performance*. The gallery received an anonymous proposal that included a provocation: the gallery would have to make a decision regarding the exhibition proposal based solely upon its own merit, as no CV information would be provided. The proposal was accepted. *The Hawthorne Experiment* (2005) took the form of a multimedia installation that examined the identity and autonomy of the individual in institutional settings and touched upon failed bureaucratic methods of encouraging both productivity in the workplace and public obedience. One of two video channels included in this installation featured an animation of telephone book listings being systematically blacked out. Visitors were invited to fill out a form if they wanted to be struck from the public record, or if they wanted to have someone else erased in a form of potentially violent bureaucratic mischief. The artist or artists involved in *The Hawthorne Experiment* never attempted to take credit for this work, and the authorship remains anonymous to this day. Extreme measures were taken to avoid identification during gallery negotiations and installation. This functioned as a kind of *quid pro quo* with the gallery in exchange for the weight given to an idea without a recognisable personality brand attached. The permanent elision of identity was and remains a vital part of this project.

With her project *New Walls* (2000) Australian artist Margaret Roberts took institutional critique to a different teleology than that taken by Dashper and *The Hawthorne Experiment*. Here the gallery was altered architecturally,



Steve Carr, *The Steve Carr Experience*, from *A Night Performance*, 2001

with a major structural intervention that profoundly changed an airy and open space by walling off a large rhomboid area in the centre of the exhibition space. The newly activated space destabilised short-term spatial memory and existing patterns of social interaction. The four pillars that usually dominated the room were completely hidden and became oddly difficult to recall, while the outer borders of the gallery space were newly exaggerated as each change of wall direction was emphasised. With the accessible space altered into a series of roughly triangular open areas linked by narrow tapering passages, the experience of moving around in the room became an alternating sensation of compression and expansion. Negotiating the usually spacious room became a claustrophobic experience as the narrowed access ways caused a bottleneck effect that inhibited people from moving freely. Rough aggregations of people formed in the corners. Visually isolated from each other, these groups created a kind of provisional social map in the process. *New Walls* foregrounded the physical and social experience of negotiating the gallery and instigated a phenomenological study of audience behaviour in the space. The institution of the Blue Oyster Gallery is understood in concrete terms that can be interrogated; literally as a building and also as the specific group of people who constitute a gallery's main function; of generating art experiences.

New Walls was an explicitly site-specific work, drawing on and creating mathematical relations to the room within which it was built. As such, it can only be remade or relocated as an algorithm. This concept transposed into a new space would inevitably yield different relations both socially and spatially. Direct experience would be required to discover to how and to what degree these relations are altered.

The works discussed here by Hannah Beehre, Steve Carr, Richard Crow & Michael Morley, Julian Dashper, the anonymous artists responsible for *The Hawthorne Experiment*, and Margaret Roberts form the basis of the exhibition *Unstable Institutional Memory: 10 Years at the Blue Oyster*. Each generates different modes of institutional engagement and processes of recollection (as a set of interactions and negotiations, as a set of shared experiences, and as a site where propositions and assumptions are tested). The participating artists have all been asked to reprise their original works in some negotiated way. We look back in full knowledge that a return to the same starting point is impossible in every case.



Anonymous, *Hawthorne Experiment*, 2005

From Old New Borrowed Blue: 10 Years at the Blue Oyster (2009)
the full publication is available for download from www.blueoyster.org.nz