

5 Questions for Contemporary Practice with Ben Kinmont

by Thom Donovan | Nov 21, 2011

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Moveable type no Documenta - Printing in Kassel. Courtesy Ben Kinmont.

This past month, I encountered Ben Kinmont's work for the first time, appropriately enough at the Fales special collection in New York University's Bobst library. Walking through the double doors at the entrance to the collection, I could not help but notice the signage for his retrospective of works made from the late 80s until the present, *Prospectus*, hand-drawn with guidelines still in place on the wall. At the entrance to the library were also glass cases containing a catalogue for the retrospective, a form of lead type for letterpress printing, and a series of broadsides made for the occasion of specific works by the artist.

It was not until another visit to Fales that I would get to take in the breadth and sophistication of Kinmont's projects, which take on a range of issues related to art historical politics, and which confront various practices and ideas undergirding contemporary art. Walking down a long corridor, I read a series of broadsides made by Kinmont via his Antinomian Press. Many of these broadsides featured information about rare books having to do with 18th and 19th century French gastronomy, social etiquette, and agriculture. Another broadside contained information about artists who in the course of their careers explored different professions and forms of work. Among these artists was Lygia Clark, who eventually

developed a psychoanalytic practice based on her performance works. A number of other artists including Ravi Puusemp, Hans de Vries, Laurie Parsons, Mierle Ladermann Ukeles, and Jon Hendricks were featured for their various excursions into politics, farming, social work, business, activism and other professional fields normally independent from visual art.

TOWARDS A DEFINITION OF PROJECT ART

- Project art considers value structures outside of the art historical discourse.
- Project art involves the public and the artist in a dialogue that primarily occurs outside of the art world.
- Project art often involves artist and non-artist collaborations.
- Project art often requires research into the space in which the project is occurring.
- In project art the community influences the content and structure of the project as the project takes place in the community.
- Project art changes in response to particular environments and situations.
- Project art usually occurs on the street, on the move, or in your home and only rarely in exhibition spaces.
- Project art is often defined by its duration and interaction with others and is not limited by physical dimensions.
- Project art is often ephemeral or transitory.
- Project art often encompasses activities that are normally considered tangential to or in the service of the art-making process – e.g. the phone call, the letter, the research, the conversation, & the failed attempt.
- Project art does not set out to create an art object to be sold and resold.
- Project art uses social structures to achieve relationships that are often unattainable in other art mediums.

ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS IN PROJECT ART

- Project art should carefully consider the context in which the project is occurring.
- When participants are involved in a project the participants' needs should also be considered.
- Projects should not harm participants physically or mentally.
- Projects should minimize personal risks and hazards to collaborators, the public, and the environment.
- The artist's intent and actions in a project should not contradict the known will of the participants.
- Information given to participants should be accurate.
- Participants should be treated with dignity and artists should try to express appreciation for the participation and contribution of the participants.
- Projects should respect confidentiality and privacy where applicable.
- When funds are changing hands in the project, establish a bookkeeping strategy ahead of time, open or closed, with clearly defined guidelines for allocation of funds and profits generated.
- Be clear with participants as to what can and cannot be provided as part of a project.
- Explain to participants how their material and contributions might be used afterwards – e.g. in a publication, archive, exhibition, or website – and obtain consent where necessary.
- When the abovementioned material is being used, make an effort to help the participant understand how their contribution will be viewed, understood, and used.
- When projects involve production and authorship, be clear with yourself and the participants about where the authorship lies.
- Honor commitments made through a project and don't make commitments that can't be fulfilled.
- When conducting a project that is engaged with a participant, whether long or short term, think ahead to how to end the project.
- Try to be aware of the long-term consequences of the project, if any.
- In cases of dispute, attempt to resolve the problem through dialogue before resorting to legal action.
- Do not abuse your authority as artist of the project.



The broadsides, I would learn, point to a crucial moment in Kinmont’s career, where in order to support his family the artist founded an antiquarian book dealership. Kinmont, like the artists featured in the aforementioned broadside, is an artist who practices what he calls “becoming something else.” His work foregrounds the fact that artists’ careers are often defined by hiatuses, as well as by excursions into other disciplines and cultural fields. Enframing art production with other labor practices, Kinmont reveals the multi-disciplinary nature of the typical subject in a post-Fordist society. The confusion between these boundaries often acts as his preferred aesthetic material, such as in a series of performances wherein he contracts to wash dishes for a certain duration, or other works in which he approaches others in order to offer them his services.

Fundamental to Kinmont’s body of work is a looming ethic of the art project and the social contract. Kinmont addresses the ethics of what he calls “project art” through a broadside in which he lays out what he feels are the grounds for inducing others—strangers, or a community of which one simply does not recognize themselves to be a part—to participate in one’s art practice. This ethics is tested repeatedly throughout the artist’s work, particularly in a work he made at Documenta in 2002 with the aid of a portable office (backpack, printer, paper, laptop). In *Moveable type no Documenta*, Kinmont held interviews with residents of Kassel, Germany (where Documenta takes place), in which he asked them about “what was meaningful in their lives and if they could and should think about that thing as art.” The result is a compelling portrait/ethnographic survey of how art is valued and defined by people who normally don’t attend an international art biennial, even one in their own town.



Moveable type no Documenta - Blue flyer on wall - Kassel. Courtesy Ben Kinmont.

In another “project art” work, *The Digger dug* (begun in 2004), Kinmont discusses with professional social workers and art students “how it is possible to help others through an art practice and how a move outside of the institution might benefit or complicate that effort.” Contemporary with much of the recent art work devoted to service, Kinmont draws his participants/collaborators/students into a debate about the ethics underpinning such works, which are ever complicated by how the artist is positioned towards a certain set of subjects, the people who they would ostensibly like to help. As a social worker/friend tells Kinmont, “nobody participating in a project would want to be ‘authored’ by another, no matter what the purpose,” noting as well, “the difficulty of most artists to have a meaningful effect on others due to the brevity of most artists’ commitment to a given social cause.”

Kinmont’s work poses a number of questions crucial to art historical discourses of the past decade. What is the role of the artist in society, and how are aesthetic practices transected by other forms of cultural production? What do we consider the work of art when the artist’s labor is determined by a complex of cultural, social, and economic factors? Where do labor, life, and art fuse, and to what extent is this possible fusion problematized by social, cultural, and economic dilemmas? Another important question Kinmont’s work poses concerns the place of the archive in the individual artists’ work and within the realm of disparate social practices. At Fales one could open a number of archival boxes with primary and secondary documents from art works produced by Kinmont. In the catalogue accompanying the Fales retrospective, individual entries extend the artist’s archive into print indicating which works should be reproduced, as if to anticipate the archival and moral dilemmas of reenactment.

In a video interview project devoted to the remembrance of the conceptual artist Christopher d’Arcangelo, recently at Artists Space, Kinmont points out the artist’s contributions to a discourse about institutional critique, in the course of the interview recognizing how their practices differ. As Kinmont explains, the central difference between his work and d’Arcangelo’s appears through his desire to explore new spaces where the relations that he would want to model can take shape. Life work and art work become fused around sensibility, style, and custom, especially through a series of works involving the preparation of multiple-course meals for paying participants. Drawing upon his professional interest in gastronomic literature, but also an artist’s tradition of culinary processes (Gordon Matta-Clark’s and Carol Goodden’s FOOD restaurant, for instance), Kinmont uses artists’ recipes to prepare an “exhibition” in the mouth. His most recent version of the piece will take place at the Performa 11 biennial this month, where Kinmont will serve a six-course meal to participants. His efforts will be supported by friends and colleagues who make their living as chefs and restaurant proprietors.



I will wash your dirty dishes at someone's home. Courtesy Ben Kinmont.

1. What is your background as an artist and how does this background inform and motivate your practice?

I grew up around artists and their families in Northern California in the 1960s and 70s. My dad is a conceptual artist, and at the time the San Francisco art scene was very small, with lots of kids running around, and usually the moms keeping track of everything. Dad was producing poetic, hand-made objects out of plastic, wax, and wood, and autobiographical

photographic works which were taken by my mother with her Rolleiflex camera. At the time she was photographing his actions as well as the family and when not watching us kids, she was either in the darkroom, studying herbal medicine, or meditating. Her photographs with my father were of situations he decided upon and set up, but I feel that the photographs were somehow collaborations between the two of them and her photographic activity was the place where she had her “voice” outside of raising us kids.

Dad always had a studio in the house, was teaching, and by the beginning of the 1970s he was making sculpture with road kill and just beginning to make watercolors. But he also, intermittently during the 1960s and 70s, made work about members of the family, and I think that this created a very special, even if ambiguous, relationship amongst us over issues of content, authorship, and representation. And, in addition to the usual complications of the relationship between father and son, there was his relation to art and art history, and what I viewed as a problematic notion of the artist as visionary, this modernist notion of the artist as someone who can stand alone and without responsibility to others, to us. I think that this art-family up-bringing ultimately led to ambivalence in me about art in general and a desire to understand and appreciate values being created outside of art.

2. Do you feel there a need for the work that you are doing given the larger field of visual art and the ways that aesthetic practices may be able to shape public space, civic responsibility, and political action? Why or why not?

As I have moved from one medium to another, or one subject to another, I have always done so due to a feeling of urgency. There are some issues that are being very well covered by other artists, and better than I could ever approach them. But then there are others, especially as pertain to work in non-institutional space, that have yet to be really developed. Some of these issues concern how and where we locate the “art” in the work; understanding for whom the work is being made; and the ethics around working with people not from the art world. For example, how do we understand authorship and representation in these situations? Should we remain within the art discourse as we make work outside of institutions? Why and why not? Or, shall we just allow ourselves to become something else? These are some of the issues I’ve been working on in collaboration with cultural anthropologist Laurel George.

At one point, in the late 1990s, I had to decide whether to continue participating in the art world or to become an antiquarian book dealer who devoted 100% of his time to working with rare books. I decided to continue as an artist *and* bookseller. I stayed in both worlds because I realized that I was from the art world, that its history was my point of reference, and that its community was something to which I felt responsible, even if I was disappointed in it somehow. But to try and go on, I had to focus on connections to things outside of the art world, whether they were notions of social responsibility or exchanges with other disciplines. I was trying to broaden the range of what could be considered art and to open it up to questions from new audiences and participants. The art world was not enough on its own.



Moveable type no Documenta printing and distribution in exhibition space - SFAI.
Courtesy. Courtesy Ben Kinmont.

3. Are there other projects, people, and/or things that have inspired your work? Please describe.

Precedents, whether they are people or experiences, are the reference points from which one creates value. In our relationship to this value, we are both indebted and contributory, we are involved in a type of exchange. With that in mind, for my practice there are many people and experiences that have informed what I do, and hope to do in the future. Beyond my family and the situation I grew up in, my list would contain: Joseph Beuys; Robert Filliou; Mierle Ladermann-Ukeles; Lee Lozano; Chris D'Arcangelo; On Kawara; Ian Wilson; Paula Hayes; Joseph Grigely; my brother Seth who is also an artist; my students in France and California; my undergraduate course work in American studies with its interest in sub-cultures, its application of the social sciences to historiography, and its interdisciplinary approach; a paper I once wrote on William James; studies in England of mid-17th century radical literature; my mother's Zen Buddhism; friendships and discussions with Florence Bonnefous and Sebastien Pluot; time spent with early printed books, ephemera, and manuscripts; time spent in libraries and with librarians; and the people I've met along the way in my projects.

4. What have been your favorite projects to work on and why?

The more closely I look at my projects, the more fluid they seem. I once wrote "It is only when looking at the part that the whole is seen to be moving" and although I wasn't thinking of the projects specifically at the time, it is a good description of how they function. Somehow through their specificity they are able to reveal something larger that is happening. Yet, this specificity changes over time. What was particular in 1990 is not necessarily what I see in the work now. So, in so far as a "favorite" is connected to what I find meaningful, my favorite work changes.

I suppose I usually like most what I'm working on at the time, though the opportunity to set up the traveling show "Prospectus" has given me the chance to reconsider some earlier projects, and in some cases reactivate them, and in so doing I have seen new elements that I very much like. For example, the ability of the "I need you" project to reflect the moment of its activation; this project is from 1992 and had lain dormant until it was reactivated with students in Amsterdam recently. Or the generative ability of "The Digger dug" and the way in which it seems to continually produce new publications. This project focuses on project art, ethics, and the possibility of helping others in an art practice. When "Prospectus" was in Paris (April, 2011) this project produced two new publications and this month it is the focus of a workshop with NYU graduate students that will result in another publication and a presentation as part of Performa 11. I began "The Digger dug" in 2004 during a conversation with a social worker over the idea of authorship when helping others; at the time, I never imagined that it would become what it has become.



Archival materials at Prospectus. Courtesy Ben Kinmont.

5. What projects would you like to work on in the future? What directions do you imagine taking your work in?

I'm currently thinking about a couple of different areas. One is to see if it would be possible to present my ideas to a wider audience through existing systems of distribution, whether this is television, a movie, or a book which has a wide readership. For example, I am beginning to work on a documentary film with SFMOMA as a development out of the "On becoming something else" project. This is a reactivation of the work which began in Paris in 2009 and this film will be part of the traveling show "Prospectus" when it comes to San Francisco. It may also develop into a course for public school students in the Bay Area.

But then, on the other hand, I also have this desire to be able to work alone and in private. This is probably instigated by the survey show "Prospectus." I'm realizing that there are a number of past pieces and projects that I had either forgotten or never had the chance to fully develop. To take these works further and better understand them, I would like to have a studio and private space in which to work, something I haven't had for more than fifteen years. As a person who is usually associated with "a post-studio" practice, I find this sort of funny.