

Publishing Rooms, 2016
Conversation between
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Q1

Tom:

I was wondering whether I could start by asking you about the exhibition title 'Publishing Rooms'. As I understand there will be no 'enclosed' sub-spaces created inside the gallery, so the term 'Rooms' seems to suggest non-physical spaces and environments created by the 'exhibits'. Could you expand a little on this?

Iain:

Yeah, the Rooms become events in the exhibition space, loosely referencing the different areas in a traditional publishing house - the picture editor's desk, the typesetting room, the darkroom, etc.

We like the idea of these different events being part of a single, branded communication - just like a newspaper - but distributed in ways relevant to modern media.

Andrew:

Also the events taking place outside the exhibition space. They all come under the umbrella of the Publishing Rooms. And further still the Instagram, YouTube, emailers, and so on can all be seen as Rooms.

And in the naming, the balance of familiarity and novelty is something that we work with a lot. The notion of a publishing room might be familiar to people coming to the show, and so we can build on that familiarity and perhaps convey the novelty more easily.

And as a side note, our great grandfather took a printing press from the UK to India at the beginning of last century and set up a publishing house in Allahabad and printed some of Rudyard Kipling's first texts. It's good to be doing our small version of this 100 years later.

Q2

Tom:

In the press release, 'zine culture' and 'selfies' appear in the same sentence. Is connecting the self-publishers of the late 1970's with the selfie-publishers of 2016 too big a leap?

Iain:

Taking a selfie isn't necessarily punk but it's still someone thinking they need to get something out there, which is what we're trying to look at with Publishing Rooms. But it is a big leap because in 2016 almost everyone is doing it, usually with less urgent things to say - I liked what Simon Armitage said when asked about whether he would be a poet if poetry was mainstream, and replied a quick 'no', because he got into poetry precisely because it was on the edges. So it's interesting to think how a punk zine-founder would have used instagram.

Andrew:

But does punk necessarily represent 'zine culture'? I would suggest that 'zine culture has been around since any publication, like blowing pigment over your hand in a cave 35K years ago with your mates. And one of my main reference for 'zine culture comes from my years living in Istanbul where there is a fierce secular upholding of the act of publication. There was a magazine someone told me about that existed in the 80's which was put together by schizophrenics serving to highlight the disease and provide a forum and come together as a group. One article each issue was from a man who everyone knew because he crawled on hands and knees the length of Istiklal street (bombed last week....) collecting dead cigarettes. And for the magazine he would profile them. 57 Marlboro lights - 2 unsmoked, 3 non-Turkish, etc..

We've been discussing in the studio about the fanzine being a framework for producing with the tools that you have to hand. A lot of the publishing that we like comes from stripped back tools. Would I.D. magazine have taken off if instead of the photocopied and stapled first issues they had access to a full on printing press and repro? Probably not. They would have become lost in the possibilities.

Q3

Tom:

Showing 'non-artists' (by that I mean individuals/collectives who don't define themselves solely as artists - feel free to challenge me on that lol) in art galleries is not necessarily a new thing in contemporary art/creative history, but it still feels an extremely important strategy in terms of not only challenging the expectations and 'roles' of exhibitions, but also challenging and expanding the organisational context behind the programme. Could you expand a little on your experience of working across different contexts, not only how this has impacted on the work you've produced, but also on how it's been received?

Andrew:

I see our work as inhabiting a pretty tightly defined area, which can then sit within and inform other contexts. We've worked in lots of areas and countries and one common denominator is definitely that we communicate and make tangible something that was previously intangible. Stylistically and contextually we've sometimes had to be malleable to keep being paid, but less so in recent years now that we run the studio better. But even that malleability has informed our practice. Sitting in meetings about branding a product for a client informs our practice.

So if a curator of anything is concerned with re-contextualising, then you're working with us to re-contextualise our work output. This Publishing Rooms show could have been a magazine, or a fashion brand without much adjustment at all.

Iain:

Totally agree that it's vital to show cross-context work. I guess it just becomes a question what's showing - but this is obviously up to the curator to keep the relevance and integrity of the work. I do have trouble with how brands (fashion brands in particular) sometimes work with artists - taking the aesthetic but maybe consciously hiding any of the other, more challenging meaning in the work to fit their need.

For us, we naturally work across disciplines and I can't imagine it any other way. I'm actually writing this from some sort of hack day we've organised for the publishing rooms project - around the table are:

Q3 (continued)

Andrew and I, our little brother (Ben Foxall) who works in web-browser technologies, Ben Barwise who runs Clacktronics <http://clacktronics.co.uk/>, and our web developer Seb.

All from different disciplines, it's exciting for me to be around these people who see different problems and have different ways to fix them, but all for a common output. Constraints - in terms of publishing tools - make you focus on what you're really trying to express.

And so in turn a lot of the actions in Publishing Rooms are about stripping back the possibilities. Yes, you will be able to take 'selfies' but the process and outcome should hopefully excite/question something else in the broadcasting of self.

Q4

Tom:

Yeah, this ability you have to define your own context, and therefore the terms of engagement for the viewer is very interesting. Something that is generally quite rare in galleries, from the perspective of the artists, or even the position adopted by the gallery. Passivity, and a reliance on the 'contemplative experience' seems to triumph, whereas you're making the gallery a non-passive and essential site. I like too the automatic irreverence you have towards the gallery because (as you mentioned) Publishing Rooms could easily have been manifested across a range of formats, so you are not bound to and by the exhibition space, it's simply another platform.

I read an interview recently with Åbäke, who along with maybe M/M Paris feel quite comparable to Foxall. The interviewer coined a nice analogy that they were like 'a jellyfish sitting uncomfortably across different disciplines - design, art, teaching and research', suggestive of some organic Venn diagram. Could you both individually (no conferring) give me a nature analogy/metaphor for your studio?

Andrew:

Definitely stray cats. That should be attributed to the editor of a magazine in Sao Paolo that we were working on who told us that we were stray cats, like him. Categorising what I and we do has always been difficult for other people to understand if we are asked to explain. The categorising has been an issue for us only because we had to make money. We've never belonged to an industry so we had to categorise it for people to grasp what we can do for them. Art direction means different things to magazines or a fashion brand. Designer means different things for websites and furniture.

Iain:

Hmmm, I'm not sure - I like the jellyfish analogy - hopefully one sitting in the same place, but getting increasingly comfortable.

Q5

Tom:

I was wondering whether you could talk a little about the use of the flat-bed scanner in this exhibition? For me, they have the feeling of an 'old-technology', but the way you are approaching them is to almost ignore any prejudice towards the 'obsolete', and return the attention to light & dark - photography in it's purest form. It also feels like you are slowing the image making process down. You can't just instantly photograph something with a scanner, they are time-based and require an element of patience from the subject. It's a clear example of you creating the terms of engagement for the viewer, it almost feels like a cinematic tactic...

Iain:

There was something interesting about using the old flatbed scanner, and writing a program that made it possible to speak to very new technology. Because it's not normally done, or not designed to be done anyway, it gave a potential to find out new things.

And also, as you mention, the pace - sitting for your portrait where you are at the mercy of the speed of the scanner, or scanners, and hopefully start to fall into their rhythm. And it naturally builds an anticipation, which will hopefully feel different from (eg.) waiting for your internet page to load on a slow connection. Or at least somewhere in between that and sitting for a painted portrait.

And the physicality is interesting - the scanners move and make noise; a noise that's still physical and necessary - unlike say, the shutter click photo noise on an iPhone. When we were testing it was interesting to see someone refreshing their screen (as a form of 'start' button) and a scanner at the other end of the room go off. In the same way I always liked wireless ink jet printers - a physical action somewhere else from submitting a button on my screen. I remember starting off a domino rally by ejecting a cassette from our VHS recorder to hit the first domino when it dropped, using a remote control - it was a long time ago, but it felt like the future.

Andrew:

We and a friend constituted the only three skateboarders in our small hometown in Fife while growing up. Skateboarding is a really tight set of parameters that promotes extreme resourcefulness. Four wheels and a wooden plank. The more

Q5 (continued)

resourceful you are the better skater you are, and the skate scene upholds that; Daewon Song is making very popular little videos (for his instagram) of things like him playing for a whole afternoon on one curb and coming up with new things to do on it. And the parallel is in our work with the idea of stripped back tools and the subsequent resourcefulness that forces our work forward. Scanners are ubiquitous; pretty much everyone or every office owns one and has a pretty fixed idea of how to use them. And we've been revisiting the merits of them to see what happens.

The unknown output is something that we play with. When we set up our Webcams#1 show we had no idea what it would feel like to be in the space with the ten live feeds. We get excited by that anticipation element of the process. A lot like the excitement of picking up the 35mm prints of holiday snaps in the 90's, or sending something to print across the room, like Iain mentions.

As you point out, the image making process goes full circle back to the first photographs ever taken. The scanner cameras especially since they are reading the image through a lens and so the scanner doesn't pick up any colour information. And the scanner wall output will depict a big strip of the scans stitched together, like a roll of film negative. But I'm not particularly interested in these connections since I don't see them influencing the output. We're definitely not asking people to slow down and remember how portraits used to be taken. Any familiarity shouldn't be that explicit or distracting.

Q6

Tom:

I'm always interested in the way we feel about an exhibition before and after it has opened, and what changes in the process of actually handling the materials & objects in the space, during the installation period, in particular the split second decisions that can completely alter an intended reading of an exhibition, that has perhaps been worked on for months...

Now that Publishing Rooms is open, and we're talking about it from the 'other side', how do you now feel about your original ideas, and what has changed?

Andrew:

Our aim was to set up a framework for creative publishing and we inevitably had no way to test the outcome fully. So now we are experiencing the outcome and I'm sure that I won't be able to process it properly before we disassemble the exhibition. I'm in a state of limbo because visitors to the show are still publishing. People are coming back to the gallery in order to publish images for a second or third time with new ideas that they've had since the first visit. I feel very attached to that process. Every time that the exhibition and scanners are switched off at night I feel a tingling of loss.

I remember that while planning and designing the set up we were either focussing on the scanners, plinths, walls, lights, etc. or how someone would interact with them. And since it's impossible to imagine more than 3 or 4 people at the same time in any great detail then it meant that we were usually imagining one person sitting on the scanner camera bench or pushing their face against with the scanner wall. But seeing Publishing Rooms up and running makes me think about more than the singular. We all have our own phone, our own time, our own agenda, and so we end up publishing more in the singular, I think. In Publishing Rooms a lot of the more interesting output is happening in collaboration. I'd like to explore that in a future set-up.

Iain:

The print-outs of the scanner cams are selected by our intern Marion each day remotely and printed at the university and clipped on the wall. It makes a link between the installation the production - like some sort of a manual or user guide on the wall, and has definitely become a more important part of the installation

Q6 (continued)

than I had imagined at the beginning. And also has a curatorial aspect to it, which is good because it just highlights that most other aspects in the installation hopefully don't - the user just gets on with it.

Q7

Tom:

I think collaboration is one of the only opportunities many of us have to start thinking subjectively and more openly about what we are doing. You have both mentioned the importance of handing responsibilities to somebody else, and this being a positive experience.

I wanted to ask you about how the exhibition explores the theme of archiving. I really like the way the archive for the exhibition is not detached from the exhibition itself, it is intrinsic to how the exhibition presents itself. Could you talk a little about this?

Iain:

Archiving is something I've always been interested in; I like what happens when I look through an archive - stories are formed around the data, whether or not they are accurate. We thought it was important to keep a completely open and current archive of the project, allowing people to search through it by people (scanner cams) or time (wall scans). And also using the archive during the exhibition as a source to curate a selection of images building during the show (as mentioned in previous question).

During the exhibition I've enjoyed looking at the archived Wall Scans as a record of activity in the gallery - the cloth being scanned as someone cleans the exhibit before it opens or just knowing someone had their face against a scanner at a certain time and date. There's something I like about the physicality of the location plus image snapshot.

I've always liked Goytaku, a Japanese method of printing, which started as a means of fisherman recording their catch - painting the fish with ink and taking an imprint on paper. Something like a brass rubbing I suppose, but taking the print of something that will only exist in that state momentarily, which adds another urgency to it. And as a studio we've been trying different ways to use the process - last time it was to take a print of a whole room at different times but we didn't quite get there.

Andrew:

To reiterate: the archives produced by the show are all different; the scanner wall is archived by timestamp, the scanner cameras are archived by name, and the body

Q7 (continued)

scan only allows you to see the latest scan. There's definitely a different attitude to each one. If you had to input your name in the scanner wall in order to set it off (like you have to do on the Scanner Cameras) then I'm sure that there would be a different output. Maybe more personal. You might not want to leave any scanners in the wall void of your 'imprint'. Whereas on a timestamp, where the scanners are activated periodically, then it's maybe less of a forceful invite to exhibit yourself. In the show I remember that woman from China stayed for about an hour at the scanner wall. She started to scan the contents of her bag, and then wallet, and ended up scanning her credit cards. When she remembered that these were all going online then she ran up to us and asked for them to be deleted on the server.

The archive is the Publishing Room's only tangible output. And when the exhibition is de-installed then we can tie off the archive and think about what we can do with it. In all of the graphic identity and website we were making a brand around the experience as a visitor, anticipating that it would be transferred to the archived output. Maybe the archiving element of the exhibition is what Iain and I are most intrigued by. Almost overnight I stopped painting and drawing in my mid-twenties because it didn't know why I was doing it. Around 8 years later I started drawing and painting again after I realised that I really valued the fact that it was archiving a moment in a way that photography or sound or film cannot. The more time you spend in the situation that you are trying to depict then the more you experience it. There's a Lucian Freud painting of the view through the back windows of his studio, depicting nothing but a mess of trees, brickwork and debris. I like to imagine that he started painting that on the days when a model didn't turn up, and that it provided him the same satisfaction since it was really all about the time spent in the process of archiving the immediate environment.

More details on publishingrooms.com