

9. Contention, complicity, failure: a complex alternative space

Introduction

There are, of course, many alternatives and also, it may be that 'the alternative' is a euphemism for "needs not otherwise met" as Julie Ault defines it. 'Alternative' is, in any case, a contentious term, implying a hierarchical position in relation to a dominant mainstream, and the undoing of such restrictive categories and hierarchies was one impetus for the initiatives that had become known as the 'alternative'. By 1995, the 'alternative space' had both a material history and an institutional one, the term had accrued meaning, I address this accrual in chapter 2, through a review of critical texts and in chapter 4, where I look at use of spaces and institutions in London. Alternative spaces had always been diverse and changing spaces. I accept that during the period 1995-2005, in London, the term 'alternative' as applied to art institutions became outmoded and decried by some. I believe that the concept remained operative, although problematic. It had become impossible to imagine making a material space where different conditions would apply, because of the erosion of boundaries between art and the rest of the world. Complicity with dominant conditions was more practicable than oppositionality. But it was still possible to self-organise or to use existing spaces differently.

A complex alternative is not ironic, it's complicit, it is not as contingent as often assumed, either in aims or in strategies employed, it re-uses old strategies again and again, it is opaque, subtle, complicated and mis-understandable. As for the discourses of the Left, so central to much criticism of the 'alternative'; of hegemony and solidarity, to counter hegemony requires turning on oneself, and there is no solidarity, there are

arguments and competition, solidarity remains theoretical. I have considered adaptations and liaisons of alternative strategies and tactics and mainstream activities, which support existing hierarchies and authorities. I have described kinds of use which are acknowledged to be no longer oppositional, to be using the idea without its radicality, failures. Yet, acceptance of complicity means that failure is not seen as drastic but as the failure to destroy the other, which may be a reflection on the continuation of something that is denied. so as specific positions are identified and held, or abandoned, the 'alternative' still has potential.

Discourses of the alternative

I discussed how the writing of a coherent history to the alternative and hence 'Alternative space' is hampered by contention around this term 'alternative', and framed by the associations that have accrued to it. In chapter 2, I looked at the critical literature that formed the discourse by which we recognise the 'alternative'. By looking at the relationship between the avant-garde and the alternative, in critical terms, during the later 1990s, I showed how strongly a narrative of inadequacy, compared to historical avant-gardes with their overt aims and historically contingent strategies, had been presented. There and in chapter 4, I reviewed some accounts that looked at how alternative organisations were organised and practised and in chapter 7, I presented collections of terms drawn from ephemera and from accounts of alternative organisations. These terms, 'mutual support', artists' 'agency', 'autonomous', 'collectives', 'temporary' 'contingent' relate to the institutional characteristics of alternative spaces, they were used far more often than terms that indicated political intentions, such as the intention to change social role of art, or to be radically political.

The contemporary surveys and guides I used as references (Moving targets 2, Art London, The Galleries Book) predominantly use 'independent' rather than 'alternative' to describe galleries which are not funded by a major public funding source, but the galleries described as independent tended to have some characteristics that I have aligned with being alternative, by matching the terms used to describe them with existing definitions and my own thesaurus, as described in chapter 8. Although the term 'alternative' was used in the title of the retrospective exhibition *There is always an alternative* (2005) the writings in the accompanying book do not adopt or use the term to describe a movement. I did not find argument, in the literature from the later part of the period of this research, about the term. It is seen as an outdated categorisation, a term from the past, or to be used of activities in the past, rather than objectionable or worth debating. The historic associations of the 'alternative' are valued and having been alternative in the past adds to the reputation of an artist/curator, as I explain in chapter 4, yet because 'alternative spaces' are recognised as feeding into the gallery system, this usage conflicts with the aim to counter hierarchical systems of the art world, which is still an impetus for making an alternative space.

As opposition to dominant conditions has been superseded by relative complicity, counter-cultural and anti-Establishment connotations have been distanced, and disputes about hierarchical distinctions between art forms forgotten, the politics of the 'alternative space' have changed. The term 'artist-run' is a more neutral term which upholds the authority of artists, without evoking the oppositionality implied by alternative (to what?). And yet, in my description of the knowledge economy as context and the items I show in

chapter 5, there are some reasons why opposition is still present. A central theme of the 'alternative' was an opposition to the necessity of showing art in galleries that presented it as a commodity, of "countering mercantile circuits" as Julie Ault puts it. If alternative spaces were about making spaces for art to be shown in which were not driven by commercial aims, then with greater public funding of art, particularly art which does not take place in galleries but in the social realm, which reaches new, diverse audiences and which provides continuing professional development for artists, for example (both current Arts Council England criteria) and in a blurring of the demarcation between public and private spaces, this aim might become redundant. I question the assumptions of the aim to counter commodification, by giving examples in chapter 5 of practices concerned with participation in 'mercantile circuits', but on alternative terms. The assumptions questioned are not only about whether countering mercantile circuits is possible, but of whether countering commodified space was really a need of artists. One of the projects was an artist-run art merchandising project, which began partly as a critique of supermarkets, two others were comments not on the art market, but on supermarkets, the imagery of commerce and the commercial environment of shopping centres. These projects do, however, assert the artist's authority about art, of who assigns value, of who controls distribution and are related to historically alternative aims in that way, but they are critical of the commercialisation of the environment, rather than critical of the status of art as a commodity.

Whilst the term "alternative space" has, in the ways described above become to some extent emptied out, there are several terms which were used frequently in the literature on the 'alternative' which are now used in mainstream discourses of art criticism, for

example “socially active art”, “site-specificity” and “agency.” I have traced the use of these terms in chapter 2 and reclaimed them when, in chapters 4 and 5, I have expanded the concept of the ‘alternative space’ to include institutional and site-specific practices which are not in separate, artist-run spaces.

In chapter 7, I consider language again, when I analyse how subjects are described in library catalogues, and how the changing meaning of existing words can cause problems when subject indexing. I endorse the continuing development of a thesaurus for contemporary art.

Aims and Strategies of alternative space

The continuing relevance of the idea of alternative space is problematised by the diffusion and diversity of mainstreams. Art which is primarily intended to be socially active, formerly alternative, is encompassed. Artists’ authority on art and its institutions is encouraged, if circumscribed. More abstractedly, the opposition of inside to outside has disappeared. The ‘alternative’ in retrospect was a state of dialogue with dominant conditions, rather than of opposition to them, as Raymond Williams defined it. The concept of ‘alternative space’ itself is problematised by complex understandings of time and space, an issue which I address in chapter 4, through the presentation of theories of radical temporality and critical space, first introduced in chapter 2. In Chapter 5, I look at ephemera from art events that were, in some sense counter to or alternative, under the themes of commodification and politics/protest, (major critical issues in post-1968 writing on avant-gardes and the alternative), these issues remain relevant, but compromised. There is no longer a centre/periphery either geographically or in roles - the

artist initiated project is just as much an institution as the gallery. In this context, exit as described at the end of chapter 5, is a strange strategy, a spatial metaphor for abandonment. The concept of a complex alternative space that I introduce is speculative: not necessarily a material space, it includes practices which use methods of site-specificity and institutional critique to temporarily alter assumptions about a space, or experience.

The relationship of the 'alternative' to the avant garde, in terms of aims and strategies is another problematic. I address proposals that concepts and attitudes developed in critiques of the avant-garde are unable to explain the 'alternative', suggested by Drucker (2005) and Graeber (2001). Graeber suggested that the organisational practices used in alternative organisations have more in common with anarchist principles than with traditional Marxist theories of the avant garde. With reference to the few accounts of why and how spaces were set up (Bank, City Racing¹ and Beaconsfield) it does seem that it is strategies for survival which were contingent, for example, rather than strategies for modes of address, or for organising events, still less artistic or critical strategies. I do not, however, think I am able to make a conclusion about this, as my main source is ephemera, which documents art events rather than the maintaining of institutions. My source material again inclines me to agree with his observation that avant-gardism has tended to be a theoretical discourse about strategy, whereas the alternative has tended to be defined (by practitioners) as an ethical discourse about practice. Alternative spaces have been simultaneously material and discursive spaces; although usually sited in

¹ I carried out a discourse analysis on 'City Racing', see chapter 4.

specific places and often formed, and eventually disbanded, in response to pragmatic problems. Buildings are adapted because that type of building is available and affordable, rather than because a particular space is required, as described in chapter 4.

Retrospective platforms such as those provided by Ault in the form of exhibitions and related publications, do not define the 'alternative'; they give room to many alternatives. I identified issues that continue to resurface: mutual support, autonomy/agency for artists, collective running, re-using sites and building are far more evident than political radicalism: and these are practical, organisational strategies, which are used complicitly in and amongst 'mainstream' structures. Whereas Martin Beck gave an account of "tight interrelations between the material and symbolic spaces produced as indicators of contingency" (Beck, 2002, 276-7) through post-minimalism, the 'white cube', feminism; the ephemera shown here record such tight interrelations only in projects which specifically offer an opportunity for site-specificity, for example projects in hospital buildings mentioned in chapter 4. In works which reflect on their own context, such as I describe in chapter 5, it is the symbolic space which is addressed, though the form of the work may relate to the material space, in citing formats used there.

As I showed in chapters 3, 4 and 5 where I use ephemera as my direct source, references to historical 'alternative' strategies such as institutional critique, site-specificity and the everyday, to the forms of conceptual art and to mail art and book art continue to be used, as shorthand for the 'alternative'. I introduce citation, as my method of interpretation, showing that art ephemera cite both from visual art and from traditional printed ephemera. I demonstrated how the visual and textual strategies used in contemporary art

ephemera relate to the event and to social and political intentions of the participants, by writing about mimicry as a form of citation, and showing examples of mockery, fakes and tailpieces, with illustrations in chapter 3. Style can demonstrate historical allegiances as well as act as pastiche. In contemporary art ephemera, aesthetics of other printed items and of traditional ephemera are re-used and adapted. The items I show in chapter 3, to show that it is significant that these are visual as well as textual entities and that although they are often brief and insubstantial textual documents, they have a very wide set of references made through appropriation, parody or pastiche, homage etc. that indicate artistic strategies. Contingency is often mentioned as intrinsic to critical, alternative practice, but the tactics shown in the ephemera cited in chapters 3, 4 and 5, show that strategies of mockery, détournement and mapping are used again and again.

Heterotopia: space for alternative voices

By recognising the building of an art library collection as a representation of spaces, I exploit the possibility that the library is a place that contains different and sometimes contradictory ideologies and symbolic-representational orders or systems: a heterotopia.

Materials are decontextualised by their move into the library, where they are recontextualised. The library catalogue is a constructed context for the art objects and art practices that it represents raising questions to do with visual representation and with objectification (assimilation of the object to the whole), as much as with archiving and documentation. Library collections render a form of power; are the means by which societies maintain, reproduce and (may) transform themselves. The objects housed in a library collection – books, film, journals, documentation etc... reflect and facilitate

cultural hegemony; the practices and discourses that are collected are the ones maintained as dominant, legitimate and disseminated. Foucault categorises libraries as heterotopic in terms of time, actually heterochronic, but I argue in chapter 7 that to exploit the possibility of making them heterotopic, in a contemporary timescale, requires deliberate critique of the existing rules of cataloguing and habits of managing ephemera and of the ideological assumptions underlying these procedures, for example, the impact of FRBR, the change in catalogue structure that makes it possible to represent relationships between entities is useful, and can be used to describe visual citations as well textual, but the proliferation of terms to describe subjects is more difficult to fit into existing procedures for using controlled subject headings. I advocate going beyond such adaptations of procedures, to consider how the creators of this material want to be represented in the library and how potential users might find their way into it.

I strongly advocate an inclusive stance towards the representation of artists and their work. Stressing ephemera – by-products of art events that have vanished, and the terms of art practice recognized in ephemera, particularly the operation of the idea of ‘alternative space’, I advocate engagement with the concerns of artists; my collection of ephemera is meant to sustain the presence of multiple voices and to make transient events (more) present. Ephemera embodies both a record of the art-practice and often of its failure, and has value as a source of potential and diverse histories. The collection and database which were made as the practice element of this research, document the large numbers and varieties of practices in London in this period and are intended to counter a limited, and reductive, historicisation of the period as it has been written. In the written thesis I

present a few accounts of particular works and projects, to indicate the complexity of practices, and understandings of what art was, at this time.

Throughout the thesis, but particularly in chapter 7 on libraries, I reflect upon art librarianship in terms of the values of subjectivity and authority, visibility (use of visual as well as textual forms), reflectivity, complexity, concern with context and the overall importance of the concept of representation, which are more strongly developed in visual art research, and in the domains of contemporary art curating and archiving than in librarianship. However, librarianship can be a practice-based research, concerned with representation (of artists) and context (of art practice and its representation) in the academic cultural repository. In this instance the resource created, whilst it included standard metadata, had a visual interface which added value to it. In the interface, the cards relating to specific sites were grouped together, and photographs of these sites were added. Geographical mapping of the sites was used as a way of organising the information, using sorting by postcode, but in future developments of the resource, linking to a GIS² would enhance the resource.

Complex alternative space

The strategies of representation that ephemera mobilize take place at an interface of art aims and social structures that is both practical, and ideological. These interfaces have been a vital part of contemporary practice. However, because some ‘alternative’ art practices may be concerned with specific ‘space’ that art exists in, the question of where art is operative; the ephemeral documentation that is produced occasionally contains

² Automated digital global information system.

comments on that space. I suggest that this happens when the space is in some way intended to be an 'alternative space', by which I mean a social space defined by artists for art to operate in. Art ephemera are used to announce the entry of art into a social space, or to document the space as a context or material of the work. The architectural space itself is not necessarily taken over, it may be just that conditions are described.

Throughout this thesis, I understand the possibility of making an 'alternative space' to be built upon the understanding that when you cross the threshold of an institutional space, you encounter conditions which are the result of how the space is set up and run, both administratively and theoretically. One contribution developed in this thesis is the understanding of a complex notion of 'alternative' related to the production of a 'critical space', extending the concept of 'alternative space' by including practices of institutional critique and site-specificity.

Starting from existing definitions of the 'alternative space' that were practical, organisational, or politically radical, my understanding of contemporary practices has been elaborated in accounts drawn from ephemera. The ephemera shown in chapter 4 map London, and some announce events inside existing institutions, which were intended to alter how the visitor would experience or understand the space (citing another kind of space). In chapter 5, I addressed the question of alternative space in terms of questioning the knowledge economy as context, of doubting contingency of strategies, of questioning opposition to commodification and political engagement. I showed in these chapters that in London the aim to create an 'alternative' art space has remained operative in the sense

of contesting, or changing the conditions encountered when entering the space. This has lead me to think that the idea of 'alternative space' can be used to describe both the politically radical absolute deliberate opposition to existing values and also various kinds of evasion of them, sometimes both simultaneously, rather than being based on a defining criteria such as being artist-run, or having stated political aims. The artistic strategies employed: mapping; a post-modern political form, *détournement*; originating with the Situationist Internationale, parody; a satirical form, used in England since the 16th century, individual voices; possibly from romanticism, collectivism; in a socialist or anarchist sense, are repeated, again and again. While there is an element of contingency in the particular situations, strategies used are less contingent than might be assumed.

The quality that I have called complex alternative space involves the use of available methods of critique, or the creation of new tactics to enable a restless movement or instability, to carry on argument, or to produce friction in circumstances that are not usually seen as changeable. Opportunistic rather than contingent, the aim is not to be a vanguard of opposition, not to change society, but to make space for individual voices, for contrary thoughts, sometimes called an "alternative consciousness"³. What I have found in the research is productive disagreement, is restlessness, an 'alternative' space for thought, of a rejection or questioning of assumptions. It is not oppositional in the sense that it can defeat what it opposes, it accepts failure, or complicity. The mass of diverse and contradictory ideas and actions are themselves the complex 'alternative', this alternative is contentious.

³ See Control magazine, summer 2007 issue.

Documentation of alternative space

The problem of how to document alternatives is another theme of the thesis, equally as problematic as defining the alternative space and its strategies. In the second chapter, this is evident through an absence of archives as source material, rather, writings by critics and practitioners in a reflective mode were used. In the third chapter, the possibility of an archive was put into doubt and the value of ephemera as documentation was established by my use of individual items, of fragmentary narratives drawn from my readings of visual and textual manifestations. Rather than truth and authenticity, I emphasised allusions, visual similarities, stylistic formats which are modes of citation, a method carried out through the 4th and 5th chapters. In the 6th chapter, I considered the question of archiving the alternative directly, describing how the qualities of the archival record would contradict the qualities of the alternative understood as an-archival, short-lived, informal and changing. There are no archives in the sense of consistent and structured collections of accounts and administrative documents of the wide variety of activities that take place, and if there were, they would not reveal what these individuals or groups were interested in, what their motivations were. In this chapter, collections of ephemera in libraries were proposed as an alternative, more fragmentary means of documenting potential diverse histories, and ways of developing ephemera collections as a resource were compared. In chapter 7, the urge to archive was argued in my own drive to use space differently, and hence my reflexive questioning of the rules and procedures of my profession. I considered here how cataloguing in the library shapes information. I looked at fixing in space and time, that happens as material is put into the repository, by the use of physical organisation, metadata and controlled language and I advocated the

exploitation of cataloguing processes as a way of facilitating access to contemporary art ephemera.

In chapter 8, I report on my collection and reflect on my interaction with it. My thesis is based on a close reading of a relatively small number of items, which come from people or institutions that are part of my own social network. This is a mimetic strategy. The structure of the written thesis is mimetic of my practice as a librarian; going from establishing background knowledge, close reading of the items, deciding authority and subject headings, collection development, cataloguing and review, in sequence. I reflect upon the problematic raised by my own proposal i.e. to make a collection of art ephemera in order to document 'alternative' contemporary art practices.

In the thesis, by excessive reliance on ephemera as a source, I have stressed its potential. Ephemera are a particularly valuable source for building up a survey of galleries over time, and showing where they are located. The collection of ephemera shows, for example, that many art spaces do not last more than a few years and that commercial galleries tend to last longer than 'alternative' spaces but that this movement then leaves room for other activities. It also shows that over the period of the research and collection, there has been an increase in the number of galleries, and a drift into spaces in East London. Compared to the main published sources (guidebooks and surveys in art periodicals) published sources describe a fairly small number of organisations as currently interesting alternative spaces. While these usually contain a description of the space itself, the aims of the gallerists and of the art shown, the ephemera collection is a more continuous, long-lasting resource which maps the field over time.

Ephemera may, occasionally, contain comments on why spaces are opened, although they do not usually explain the kind of lease acquired or how funding arrangements contributed to the end of the space. Their references to funders take the form of logos, sometimes many, another kind of citation. Ephemera, in a critical mass, are a good source for finding out the number of group shows and single artist shows, and the names of artists, and curators involved. By cross-referencing these, networks and connections on different levels are indicated. Ephemera are a restricted source of images of art-works, but the eclectic and citational visual strategies used in them add another layer to what it is possible to know about how art is shown and thought about. They hold references to themes and subjects to some extent, particularly in press releases, and describe the type of interaction hoped for.

An account written from ephemera is a reading, an interpretation of fragments, this is one of the values of ephemera as a source, they document many alternatives. Art ephemera show how art-work and art practices were contextualised by those who were involved, and because they are visual, as well as textual, they document visual practices, and attitudes and concerns expressed visually. A vast supplement to the documentation contained within art libraries, art ephemera are an evocative resource that can document innovative art and convey diverse histories.