

Contemporary curatorial practice in two exhibitions: *The Nelson Touch* at the Royal Naval Museum in Portsmouth and *Cloud & Vision* at the Museum of Garden History in London.

What do we mean by curatorial practice? Does contemporary curatorial practice differ significantly from other forms of curatorial practice? How has the advent of curatorial programmes over the last decade influenced the perceptions and expectations of curators entering the field? Is contemporary curatorship a profession or a practice? Is today's curator a conceptor, a facilitator, an enabler, or a creative organiser? Curators have eclectic provenances. They may be educators, writers, collectors, artists, or from any other number of practices - Hans-Ulrich Obrist¹ initially studied economics and politics. They are required to have a wide-ranging skill set: writing, exhibition design, education, fund-raising, marketing and an independent curator may have to incorporate all of these roles simultaneously. With so much variation and diversification, the cultural field in which the contemporary art curator moves, is in constant flux. Each new exhibition brings its own unique challenges and every institution carries with it varying requirements. As curators move from exhibition to exhibition and institution to institution, the roles and skills they utilise create a continual variation of the points of exchange between the curator and the venue, the curator and the work, and the curator and the audience.² This would appear to be a different perspective on curating, compared with traditional forms of curatorial practice. In 1971, Edward Fry, in his article, "The Dilemmas of the Curator", defined his view of the curatorial position into three roles. The first role was "the caretaker of the secular relics of a nation's cultural heritage"; the second role was "the assembler" through collection acquisition "of an otherwise non-existent cultural heritage" and the third was as "ideologue." Since then, the role of the curator in the field has evolved beyond Fry's parameters. In an interview in 2000, curator Hans-Ulrich Obrist observed some of these changes:

I think Fry's definition is partially obsolete, partially valid. The museum has a storage function, for which the curator is caretaker. What is clear is that amidst all the changes within the museum, the collection of the museum remains its backbone ... but this is only one aspect of a greater complexity. I am a negotiator

of new forms of curating; a catalyst, someone who builds pedestrian bridges from the art to many different audiences.³

Within Fry's definition of ideologies, there is no reference to advocacy for the artist or responsibility to the audience, though in fairness, when Fry developed his definition of the curator's role, the majority of museums were not extremely vocal about artist advocacy or audience responsibility either. Today these issues are among the main concerns of the contemporary curator. Although a great many curatorial initiatives take place outside the museum (public art, socially-engaged art practice, land art etc), the museum is a particularly rich environment for contemporary curators. In the same way that artists have been fascinated by the museum, whether it has been to interpret the display or critique the institution, contemporary curators may take the museum as "a medium" or even "a muse" and use it as a source of inspiration for their work. In other words, the museum (and this could be either an art museum or some other kind of museum) is a rich contextual space within which a contemporary curator may choose to work. Today the most important determining factor for curatorial practice is the context within which a curator operates. A curator never works in a completely neutral space, therefore the activity of a curator is in part a response to particular determining conditions of the exhibition or project environment. The history, memory, and identity of places have a significant influence on how curators approach a project for a specific place. A curator may develop an exhibition that is in response to the history of a particular place or may adapt an exhibition to create juxtaposition between a place and the work that will be exhibited within that place⁴. Often the curator operates as a catalyst, she starts a process that becomes a dialogue with the artists. Through this collaborative process (which may involve institutions as well as artists), the final project becomes more than just the view of one individual; it evolves into a vehicle for many authors and allows more possibilities of exploration, understanding and interpretation.

Heinrich and Pollack take issue with the increasing professionalism and academicisation of curating and call for its de-professionalisation⁵. They argue that recent professionalism has brought about homogenisation and atrophy and posit a mode

for the “curator-as-auteur”, (in the cinematic sense) rather than curator-as-professional. The importance of “signature” and a redefinition of competence in terms of originality rather than following some professional code of conduct is required to keep curating creative, innovative and critical. Kate Fowle emphasises that curating is a process, rather than a job. “Practitioners are now as much mediators and producers of culture as they are keepers of institutional mandates or purveyors of taste.” She argues that curating has become a “field” rather than a job and so it makes it harder to rely on the traditional career strategy of apprenticeship (after completion of an art history degree) as a key to gaining the necessary skills and understanding of curatorial debates and issues. All a curating programme can do is to: “provide time for people to build on their knowledge, to experiment, and to challenge their assumptions of the field”⁶. Within this broad scope of the cultural field in which the contemporary curator operates, it is possible to identify a number of specialist fields. The areas of public art, gallery exhibitions, socially-engaged practice and land art have been referred to in the context of different modes of curatorial practice. Some of the specific skills referred to are applicable across all the curatorial sub-fields, but in each case, it is possible to identify some specific and determining characteristics that make curatorial practice different and project-specific. If the process of exhibition or project development is seen as a vertically integrated operation with the exhibition concept as the starting point and the realisation of the exhibition as the final end product, the degree of differentiation in the curatorial approach is much greater higher up the chain. In other words it is at the point of conception rather than realisation that the difference in the curatorial approach can be observed. Implicit in curatorial practice is a conceptual element that may involve theory, contextualisation, a critical approach or a combination of all three. At the centre of all curatorial practice stands the art work, the prospective art work, the art process and the art performance – singularly or in combination. There is no prescriptive starting point for an exhibition or curatorial project, it may be a place, a group of artworks, a curatorial idea, a public commission or competition.

The nature of curatorial practice I am exploring is a specialist one which takes site and the contextual elements within a site as the starting point for a curatorial project. **Claire**

Bishop raised the issue of the museum as a contextual space that led to a useful discussion on Kwon and shifts in specificity⁷. Kwon's investigation of site-specificity as an evolving definition that goes beyond an "inextricable, indivisible relationship between the work and the site"⁸ to a view of site as; "structured (inter)textually rather than spatially" and "as a fragmentary sequence of actions and events through spaces, that is, a nomadic narrative whose path is articulated by the passage of the artist"⁹. She characterises contemporary life as "a network of unanchored flows"¹⁰, in which the deterritorialised site is more relevant to today's migratory habits and dispositions. However, she acknowledges our attachment to place persists as this informs our sense of identity. Underlying her argument is a desire for authenticity: "How to sustain the cultural and historical specificity of a place that is neither simulacral pacifier nor a wilful invention?"¹¹ The relationship between the artwork and the site remains important, but there is more going on in the contextualisation of the work. The work may also reference another site, a series of historical events or a discursive space beyond the physical site. In the curatorial examples I have chosen, *The Nelson Touch* at the Royal Naval Museum in Portsmouth¹² and *Cloud & Vision* at the Museum of Garden History in London¹³ there are some important site specific elements which have to do with the geography, the architecture and historical function of the sites. But in addition interest and complexity are heightened by a series complementary contextualisations that have developed beyond the physical site: myth, narrative, memory, personal histories, literature and debate.

In comparing and, contrasting these two exhibitions, it is useful to consider the specialist museum as not only a physical site, but also a contextual space. This necessitates a detailed understanding of the sites' contextual specifics of which the following are brief summaries. In addition, knowledge of how the underlying institutions function, in terms of structure, politics and personalities, is essential for the contemporary curator to negotiate an appropriate working environment. The Museum of Garden History¹⁴ (fig. 46, figs. 49-53) is located in St. Mary's of Lambeth, a deconsecrated church adjacent to Lambeth Palace. It is a social history museum, providing an insight into the history and development of gardens, gardening and garden

design by displaying garden tools and garden-related artefacts, curiosities and ephemera donated by private individuals. The collection has particular focus on the role of 17th C “plant hunters” and in their introduction of new species to the UK, (ornamental gardening was on the rise and the possession of rare plants indicated wealth and status). A Museum of Garden History would not be complete without a garden of its own and a replica 17th century knot garden, decorated with flowers and shrubs of the period, has been created in the graveyard (fig. 76) around the tombs Tradescants (father and son, plant hunters) and Captain William Bligh of the “Bounty” (fig. 77). The museum was founded by John and Rosemary Nicholson, who traced the tomb of the Tradescant family and discovered the church was due for demolition, whereupon they initiated a project to save the building and created the museum in 1977. The elder John Tradecant was head gardener at Hatfield House and the link with Hatfield persists to day with its owner, Dowager Marchioness of Salisbury, being one of the museums trustees. The sacral architecture of the building delineates constraints for the contemporary curator and the building as a historical artefact in its own right sets the tone and influences the context of any exhibition housed within it. In 2000, the display of these objects was reinvigorated by curators, who placed the objects within the space, consigned small or “valuable” objects to vitrines (figs. 50-52) and authored explanatory wall charts, thus assisting the viewer in his interpretation of the exhibition. The existence of these artefacts creates a series of constraints for the contemporary curator and for the most part, objects or processes belonging to contemporary art exhibitions have to insert themselves (intervene) among the existing artefacts.

The Royal Naval Museum¹⁵ is located in the Georgian storehouses, built in 1763, in the “Heritage Area of Her Majesty’s Naval Base at Portsmouth” (figs. 1-4), and charts the history of the Royal Navy since its inception. Permanent exhibitions include the “History of the Sailing Navy” and “Nelson”, housed in the Nelson Galleries (figs. 5-17). The Victory Gallery (in an adjacent building) is the link with HMS Victory (fig. 4) that has its own curator, and comprises a narrative of the flagship and the “Trafalgar Experience”, which allows the visitor to “experience” battle on the gun-deck of a British sailing warship! The museum was founded as the Dockyard Museum in 1911

and the foundation collection consisted largely of ships relics, figureheads, models and other naval memorabilia. During the C 19th HMS Victory was moored in Portsmouth Harbour and operated a small public museum. Under the aegis of the Society of Nautical Research, the flagship was restored and reopened to the public 1928 with the collection being moved onshore and combined with the contents of the former Dockyard Museum. In 1972, Mrs. Lily Lambert McCarthy (fig. 13), donated her collection of Nelson artifacts and the Royal Naval Museum was founded as a Ministry of Defense funded museum. The museum was devolved in 1985 under the National Heritage Act and became a trustee-run museum, assisted by grant-in-aid from Ministry of Defense. The museum's mission is: "to preserve and present the history of 'The Fleet', the ships that have defended Britain's interests over five centuries and the men and women who manned them". The Historic Dockyard in Portsmouth is a high security heritage site, comprising three historic ships (Victory, Warrior and the Mary Rose), the Royal Naval Museum and Actions Stations, an interactive section about the modern Navy. Curating in the Historic Dockyard requires careful negotiation with a variety of institutions, notably the Royal Naval Museum, the Curator of Victory, and the Portsmouth Royal Naval Base Property Trust, which is responsible for activities taking place outside. The fact that the exhibition is taking place at the Trafalgar Weekend of the Bicentenary has necessitated the negotiation of special permissions. The artists have chosen to locate their work in that part of the Nelson Galleries that houses the Lily Lambert McCarthy Collection. The museum's curator has endeavored to display a large number of artifacts in a very confined space and consequently there has been little freedom of choice for the curator and the artists to determine the siting of the work.

The exhibitions *The Nelson Touch* and *Cloud & Vision* have been chosen owing to a high degree of personal involvement and the consequent relevance of the first hand experiences and impressions to the discourse on curatorial practice. For *The Nelson Touch*, I am the curator of the exhibition, collaborating with the Royal Naval Museum and Aspex Gallery (a public gallery focusing on contemporary art in the Portsmouth area). The exhibition title: *The Nelson Touch* derives its name from Nelson's

imaginative naval tactics and the “common touch” he had with his men, leading them bravely into battle and empathising with their predicament. With regard to *Cloud & Vision*, I am a member of the commissioning organisation, Parabola¹⁶ and was involved in discussions about the exhibition, which was curated by Danielle Arnaud, Jordan Kaplan and Philip Norman¹⁷. The exhibition title: *Cloud & Vision* takes its name from William Blake’s Poem, “The French Revolution”, 1791; “The dead brood over Europe: the cloud and vision descends over cheerful France.” Both protagonists, Nelson and Blake, lived at a time when Britain feared the French invasion. Admiral Nelson was not actually a figure of the establishment and often behaved unconventionally and William Blake, author and artisan, was a critiquer of the establishment. They never met, though they share a common critical attitude towards the establishment and were unafraid to challenge it. From a contemporary perspective, they are historical figures and they form part of our heritage. How do contemporary artists respond in their treatment of the historical subject? Why should they choose to engage with it? What role can contemporary artists play in our understanding of our heritage? Artists may respond in many different ways in their treatment of the historical subject. In *The Nelson Touch*, (evidenced in the work of Helen Maurer and Sarah Woodfine)¹⁸ it is Nelson’s actions, his legend, the naval environment, the battles, and the associations of place, notably, “Trafalgar” that trigger their interest. With regard to *Cloud & Vision*, artists are responding to Blake’s practice as a printer of seditious pamphlets (Polly Gould); his anti-dualist qualities (Manuela Ribadeneira) and his questioning of the order of things (Andy Harper), while others take more literal readings of Blake’s work as their starting points, such as his painting (Brian Catlin and Annie Whiles) and his poetry (Phil Coy and David Burrows).

In developing a curatorial concept for exhibitions of this nature, the contemporary curator needs to ask herself the following questions: Why are these concepts chosen and what is their relevance in the sphere of contemporary cultural production? It requires an awareness of debates about content, context, critical theory and cultural policy. These issues were discussed with **Barnaby Drabble**¹⁹ with reference to *The Nelson Touch*. He argued that my being interested in sailing was insufficient to justify curating this project,

and he was dubious about the value of bringing two communities together (naval and contemporary) - something I considered important. He contended that the artists I had chosen were in no way representative of contemporary art practice and that the resulting work would just be several subjective viewpoints. What has changed since speaking to Drabble is that I no longer talk about my interest in sailing, but focus on Nelson and the Trafalgar celebrations, questioning their contemporary relevance. I situate the project with reference to museum interventions in general, curatorial projects initiated by other naval museums and I am investigating the work of other curators and artists whose practice explores the interface between contemporary visual art practice and history²⁰. The contemporary curator needs to position herself in this field of battling standpoints, constraints and collisions of interests. Curating today means much more than just exhibiting artworks, it means taking a position²¹. In this context, why are the exhibitions to be sited in non-art, historical, specialist museums and heritage sites? What roles do site, place and context have in shaping the exhibition? To what extent can the museum be treated as a contextual space - space as context as opposed to viewing space? The role of the artist with regard to the space as well as his interaction with the historical subject comes under consideration. The curator needs to be aware of: How the artist will engage with the site? How the artworks are to be produced? How do the artworks engage with and respond to the site? Do they just occupy the space or do they occupy and use the space including its existing artefacts? What are the politics of display within the museum? To what extent does the museum have a strong curatorial line of its own? How do the artworks affect (enhance, or detract from) the permanent display of artefacts in the museums? Are the artworks performing the function of integrating into the permanent display or do they intervene in a manner that is critical of the display. The distinction, made by Deutsch and developed by Kwon, between assimilative and interruptive models of site specificity can be applied to a contextualised museum project. In the “assimilative” model, the artwork integrates itself into the existing environment, providing a “unified harmonious space of wholeness and cohesion”, whereas in an “interruptive” model, the artwork functions as a critical intervention into the existing order of the site²². Do the artworks confine themselves to a comment on the display or is their intervention more wide ranging pointing to a critique of the institution itself? The

core texts on artists' intervention strategies (McShine, 1999 and Putnam, 2001) cover similar ground, though with differing points of emphasis. For McShine, the museum is the "muse", the source of inspiration for the artist and the format of his presentation is an exhibition of the artists projects at MOMA. Putnam's approach is more interesting in this context as he works with the museum as a contextual space, treating the museum as a medium – that is a tool with which the artist works. He bases his insights on his own field work as Curator of the Contemporary Arts and Culture Programme at the British Museum, with a brief to examine and re-examine history, art and artefacts in the light of current cultural-related issue. He contends;

All the images and objects in this museum were once contemporary, they had an emotional immediacy and meaning. Why do we have to think of the British Museum as ancient and Tate Modern as new? I'm interested in subverting our expectations of time.²³

In *Give and Take* (2001), the Serpentine Gallery and the Victoria and Albert Museum, (V&A) collaborated on a two site exhibition creating a visual dialogue where contemporary objects and past artefacts were placed in proximity to disturb intentionally the taxonomic approach to display adopted by the museum. Lisa Currin exhibited fifteen contemporary artists in the V&A, challenging the definition of what constitutes fine and decorative art. She argued that a museum should be contemporaneous; "By continually rethinking the display of its collections, a museum demonstrates that is open to fresh investigations and insights shaped by ongoing cultural transitions."²⁴ For the exhibition in the V&A, three new works were commissioned²⁵, with the remainder being selected by an external curator in response to the museum's collections. Hans Haacke selected objects from the V & A's collection and exhibited them in *Mixed Messages* at the Serpentine Gallery, thus challenging assumptions that only contemporary art could be shown in a contemporary public gallery. The exhibition was not about the V&A as such, nor was it intended to be a critique of the institution, it was more closely related to exhibitions that integrate contemporary art with collections²⁶. By inserting divergent narratives into the V&A's collection, it included other voices (including those of the contemporary artist) into the meaning of cultural artefacts.

In exploring historical context, contemporary artists may also confront heritage issues which involves additional dilemmas as the “heritage industry” may trivialise the past²⁷. Museums and heritage, for example, may distance us from the past by promoting an uncritical patriotism. Walsh critiques the outdoor historical spectacle and it is possible to apply this critique to the Nelson phenomenon. The Trafalgar Re-enactment on the Solent in June 2005 was not “fought” between the British and the Combined French and Spanish fleets, but in order to convey semblance of “political correctness” and avoid “rubbing it in” that the British won a clear victory, the nationalities were replaced with two teams: red and blue! Similarly, the burgeoning indoor heritage attraction is criticised;

The heritage centre usually attempts to represent some part of a place’s past through more ‘post-modern’ media: sound, light, smell and even heat²⁸.

An example of this phenomenon is the multimedia “Trafalgar Experience!” in the Victory Gallery. The combination of replica sailing vessels, the reverberation of creaking timbers, cannon fire and human cries coupled with a didactic narrative over the PDA system creates a pseudo-history²⁹. How may contemporary artworks mitigate some of the more crass offerings of the heritage industry with regard to our appreciation and understanding of the past? How is the viewer likely to react? One problem is that some viewers appear to prefer consuming representations of the past rather than being involved in the production or co-production of those representations.³⁰ Could there conceivably be a role for the contemporary artwork in terms of engaging the viewer in a more active and performative role? Museums such as the Royal Naval Museum contribute to a form of “rationalised institutionalisation of the past”³¹. There is too much reliance on didactic interpretation, such as the wall texts on the entrance of the Nelson galleries: “Nelson the Man” and “Nelson the Hero”– each categorisation followed by five bullet points!

Heritage needs to forgo the meta-narrative to favour the idiosyncrasies of local histories.³² The nature of the Museum of Garden History (not directly connected with “historic” events, privately rather than publicly funded, with a more diffuse, less

proselytising mission) lends itself better to this role. In *Cloud & Vision* the physical site is also less important. More significant is the presence of “intellectual capital” and the links developed by the curators. The relationship between Blake and the physical site is indeed tenuous. Important is the fabric of circumstantial evidenced woven by the curators as they involved artists, writers and performers in a project which takes as its starting point the fact that Blake (artist, engraver, printmaker, philosopher and poet) lived in the vicinity (13, Hercules Buildings) for a decade (1790-1800) and produced some of his most interesting work during this period. Danielle Arnaud, co-curator states;

For Parabola the context of the art we commission, the place where it will be seen and the historical relevance of the work are all very important. In this case, William Blake lived 200 yards away from the church, and could see it from his window. Whilst he was certainly not a traditionally religious man in 18th century terms, he would likely have walked into the church at some point³³.

Andy Harper, one of the participating artists, contends;

Blake had a very personal relationship with this church, and it wasn't a positive one. He was a very spiritual man, but this church charged a fee to sit in a pew, which excluded a lot of people. Now that the church has been taken over by this museum, and the entry fee is entirely voluntary, it feels like the right time to bring Blake inside.³⁴

An understanding of curatorial practice, an exploration of the museum as a contextual space, and an appreciation of the site-specific elements that underpin an exhibition, as well as its locus within the sphere of cultural production, are issues at the forefront of this discourse. Also the role of contemporary art interventions in traditional museum display has been questioned and the problematics with regards to heritage issues have been raised. With this in mind, it is useful to look at why the artists were chosen, how the specific artworks perform and to question whether the intentions behind the curated exhibition are being fulfilled by the processes that follow. *Cloud & Vision* is small exhibition, sited in the garden, at and in the entrance and around the immersion font in the museum. The curators made a virtue out of a necessity: not wanting to interfere with an existing temporary exhibition on the restoration of the gardens at Hatfield

House³⁵, they decided to concentrate the exhibition in a limited number of specific places. The effect is to force the viewer to concentrate and immerse himself in the details, as if he has been taken back in time to a slower pace. He is forced to return many times to the works, moving in and out of the entrance passage into the garden and round the font, circumnavigating Harper's globe. The artists were chosen owing to their interest in working with historical context and in the public sphere and all have considered the specifics of the space in their work. Manuela Ribadneira has grown a giant ampersand out of the grass in the churchyard (fig. 44). This symbol was often used by Blake to unite opposite ideas – as in this exhibition's title, *Cloud & Vision* and here the typographical symbol seems to grow out of the graveyard, somehow laid to rest among the dead but still alive, embodying that idea of opposition. David Burrows' sculptural answer to Blake's poem 'Sick Rose' (figs. 67-68) seems to break through the very foundation of the church, with brightly coloured flowers growing from a mass of glittering black dirt, surrounding the immersion font, their sickness spewing violently from each flower and mingling with strangely placed, half-buried items – a vest, a child's shoe. Rotating slowly above the *Sick Rose* is Andy Harper's *An Orrery For Other Worlds*, a giant globe suspended above the site of the original font, reclaiming the now vacant circular space (figs. 53-58). The near black globe is covered with white painted foliage. Harper says;

When I was asked to take part in this exhibition I had just come back from South Africa, so I had just crossed the equator, and I was thinking about how random it is that we have these ideas of up and down, or north and south, with up always more important. I wanted to have the globe hanging, and turning, with an equator but with no obvious difference between the two halves. I wanted to question what we all think of as the natural order, in the same way that Blake did. A lot of my previous work has dealt with images of real vegetation, but this is new ground for me. There is a poem by Blake that is accompanied by a picture of a plant, and no one has ever been able to identify that plant, Blake just made it up. With that in mind I made every plant on my sphere imaginary, just built up from painted brush strokes. You could say that this encounter with Blake has changed the way I approach my work – I'm not scared of words like 'imaginary' or 'in the spirit

of anymore. It's made me feel free to bring more fantasy, or more of a sinister quality, to my work.³⁶

Brian Catling's *Flea Bowl*, 2005 (figs. 65-66), stands on a plinth beside and below Harper's globe. Brian Catling gives only a hint of its origins in "Lambeth Tenant: Extracted Reflections on Blake's Ghost of a Flea" and sketches an imaginary meeting with Jimmy Cricket (fig. 64),³⁷ Catling does not take his inspiration from the period Blake spent in Lambeth, rather he interprets the link with Blake in Lambeth more loosely as he references Blake's work on "Visionary Heads", started in 1819³⁸. *The Ghost Of A Flea* (fig. 63), (c.1819-1820), exhibited in Tate Britain (fig), is evil, gothic and grotesque. Its vast bestiality contrasts with the visible form of the spirit's physical embodiment - a scarcely visible little flea. The ghost is gorging on a bowl of blood and Catling re-represents this bowl, leaving the viewer to imagine the flea. In *Rain on the Parade* (fig 59-60, 62), Annie Whiles directly references *Glad Day*, 1794, the suspected portrait of Blake, in the reserve collection of the British Museum. He is depicted cavorting in the nude "embracing the day" (fig. 61). She contemporises it, appropriating images of characters from Coronation Street (fig. 62), and produces it in textile, framing in an ecclesiastical lectern as part of the contextualisation (fig. 59). What appealed to Whiles was Blake's unequivocal sense of joy; "I wonder about Blake as an artist and visionary now, in 2005, making so open, direct and earnest a gesture towards an audience. I wonder if in relation to this gesture, I as an artist could do "that", in an art world that checks itself against irony and pathos." Blake's time in Lambeth was a politically volatile one, with the French Revolution shaking the foundations of British institutions. He set up as an independent printmaker and purveyor of inflammatory texts, produced on his own press for the local community. The prints and publications were produced in very limited editions, partly as a response to the political sensitivity of the time, and he circulated them amongst fellow artists and patrons. Polly Gould works at a copperplate printing press, such as Blake would have used (figs. 70-72). This heavy immovable historical printing press is connected to a virtual press in the form of a 'blog' www.floatingpress.blogspot.com/. The web acts as a space of contemporary self-publication for personal diaries and electronic pamphleteering. In conversation with The Blake Society, a new 'floating press' society

has been generated, part parasite, part acolyte. It asks the question: can something seditious and literary really be freed from the mausoleum of history?

How do these contemporary works critiquing a C 19th artist and intellectual compare with works exploring one of Britain's national heroes during the Bicentenary celebrations? The artists work through their own subjectivities, using appropriated material and drawing their inspiration from idiosyncrasies in the site and its associated material. Helen Maurer is creating a mixed media installation, *Turn a Blind Eye* (figs. 32-35),³⁹ She is erecting flagpoles in the Historic Dockyard, from which she will hang a message in flags: "turn a blind eye"⁴⁰ and will set up a telescope in the Nelson Gallery, acting as a "camera obscura", projecting a small image of the scene outside on to a flat surface in the museum. Her hypothesis is that in using the camera obscura, the projected image is inverted, so the flags will appear upside down, - symbol of distress. She is collaborating with Matthew Sheldon (Royal Naval Museum) and Mark Meatcher, (Portsmouth Naval Base Property Trust), to work out the positioning of the flagpoles to give the correct height and focal length required for the camera obscura to function⁴¹. Maurer envisages the image being round, approximately 20 cms in diameter and having a "Super 8" quality. She is also acquiring archive footage of marches and demonstrations taken in Trafalgar Square⁴², being interested in Trafalgar Square as a focal point, used when people wish to draw attention to issues – so the work will compose three elements: the flagpoles, the telescope and some video footage of events in the square. Sarah Woodfine is working on *Battle* (fig. 23)⁴³, a three-dimensional drawing of the aftermath of Trafalgar. She is fascinated by models of 19th sailing ships and the physicality of shipbuilding as well as naval tactics and battle formations, and she has blown up photocopies of the ships and battle formations, revealing intricate details that are otherwise lost. She is interested in etchings and engravings of the period and describes her practice of drawing as being similar to these techniques. Her work has developed through various stages: she considered producing a two-tier model, but abandoned this as too literal an interpretation of the event. She also experimented with drawing an upturned boat with a view inside the hull, but gave up this approach on realising that 19th C sailing ships do not invert (unlike modern sailing yachts) as the hulls

are heavy and square-shaped. Her current drawing portrays three semi-submerged masts of indeterminate provenance, sinking and breaking up at different rates. The sea is full of flotsam and jetsam as the ships splinter with their cannon and shot exploding⁴⁴. Sarah creates a contemporary representation of the after battle situation by forgoing literal detail in favour of abstracted images. Her personal viewpoint and imagination take over with an uncanny doom-ridden result. In her black and white palette, the colours are reversed - the sky is black and the sea white. Black works as an isolated object and is contoured, the sea, on the other hand, is rendered in white, and appears infinite with the water acting as an invisible backdrop on which the details of the post-battle situation are crafted. The horizon line is drawn with a spirit level – it has to be completely straight! The drawing is encased in a perspex box, similar to *Blake's Garden* in *Cloud & Vision*, (fig. 27). This has to be a perfect structure with the base cut at a 1.5 cm angle, producing a subtle tilt that will have a subliminal effect, creating the impression in the mind of the viewer that he is “at sea”.

In curating exhibitions that take site specificity and historical context as their starting points, what special concerns need the contemporary curator address with regard to her audience? How does the viewer's experience differ between an intervention (juxtaposition of contemporary artworks and existing artefacts) versus seeing these objects in a white cube⁴⁵. Does the context add meaning and are the objects enhanced by their surroundings? To what extent do the contemporary works improve the viewer's understanding of the existing collection? Are the artefacts « background » or equal partners? *Cloud & Vision* is focussed and tightly integrated, bearing witness to the curatorial skills and experience that have been acquired over time. It is a multi-layered exhibition that builds its resonance on layers of memory: the church architecture, the formal vitrines of historical garden artefacts and the contemporary art works. *Cloud & Vision* makes considerable demands of the viewer: he needs to find the work as it is hidden among the church interior architecture and the museological display and it requires him to understand the contextual references, which may be site-specific, time-specific, literary, political or visual, contemporary or historical. *Cloud & Vision* and *The Nelson Touch*, experiment with commissioned site-specific works of art

that engage with history and intervene in the traditional museum display. As such these exhibitions are situated in a tradition of museum intervention projects and although the primary concern is not to critique the institution as such, the works may point to some issues in curatorial policy as practiced by the institutions. An earlier Parabola initiative at the Museum of Garden History, *A Month in the Garden*, 2001 experimented with integrating existing contemporary artworks into the museum's display in likeness to the approach adopted by Currin in *Give & Take*. *The Nelson Touch* goes further in the sense that the work is made specifically for the exhibition - which poses the curator with additional challenges including the need to develop a close and anticipatory working relationship with the institution. The relationship between the independent curator and the institution is a delicate one as conversations with **Felicity Lunn**⁴⁶ emphasised. Her advice has been particularly helpful as it is the first time the Royal Naval Museum has engaged with contemporary artists. An issue of concern for the independent curator is: Do the institutions appropriate this new cultural capital and use it to their own purposes? The Royal Naval Museum is concerned to raise the profile of Nelson and 19th C naval history, by modernising the display of its exhibits and introducing new elements into the engagement with the Nelson phenomenon. It is interested in emphasising the relevance of Nelson and in opening up the collection to new interpretations that appeal to the contemporary viewer. The museum is also focussed on reorienting interest in Portsmouth as the prime site for Nelson, perceiving that following completion of the Trafalgar Re-enactment and the Fleet Review in June, Portsmouth would be overshadowed by the celebrations in London. Aspex Gallery was interested in collaborating in *The Nelson Touch* as it will be moving to its new docklands site in Gunwharf Quays next year and is currently concerned to develop links with the naval community and naval institutions. *The Nelson Touch* forms part of the gallery's outreach programme and is perceived to be instrumental in fostering these relationships. The contemporary art interventions work on the level of engaging with history and in disturbing the traditional taxonomy of the display. They could have gone further in terms of their criticality, either by way of a critique of the spectacle (Trafalgar Celebrations) or of the heritage industry itself. Lack of apparent critique is a result of postponing David Cotterrell involvement in the project, as he was the artist

most likely to have taken a critical approach. For example, he was particularly interested in the irony of the celebrations, such as the Fleet Review, given the current downsizing of the Navy⁴⁷. Having said this, Woodfine's *Battle* reflects her personal horror of war and its implicit human tragedy, stating this in a quiet way, juxtaposed with artefacts that celebrate Nelson's naval battles. In *Turn a Blind Eye*, Maurer creates associations outside the physical space of the Royal Naval Museum. By transporting images from the Historic Dockyard (including the bow of HMS Victory) into the museum space, she makes the link between the museum display and its historical context. By showing film of some of the marches and demonstrations that have taken place in Trafalgar Square, she contemporises the work pointing to the current tendency to turn a blind eye to a range of political and social issues.

Contemporary curatorial practice has been defined as a practice that needs to be fluid and adaptive in order to respond to specific projects. A contemporary curator requires knowledge of the spheres of cultural production within which she operates, and an understanding of how a specific project may be contextualised within these spheres. She needs to scope out her own role in both developing the concept as well as executing the process and requires the ability to know when it is appropriate to involve collaborators. An independent curator⁴⁸ usually works outside the institution, but may choose to work with institutions and as such is bound by some of the constraints endemic in the institution. The decision to specialise in a particular area of curating is a result of a growing appreciation of the complexities inherent in the cultural field. Kwon states:

The (neo-avant-garde) aspiration to exceed the limitations of traditional media, like painting and sculpture, as well as their institutional setting; the epistemological challenge to relocate meaning from within the art object to the contingencies of its context; the radical restructuring of the subject from an old Cartesian model to a phenomenological one of lived bodily experience; and the self-conscious desire to resist the forces of the capitalist market economy, which circulates artworks as transportable and exchangeable commodity goods - all

these imperatives came together in art's new attachment to the actuality of the site⁴⁹.

The development of my curatorial practice will continue to focus on context-based art practice, focussing particularly on the museum or cultural institution as a contextual space. I intend to explore further the role of history as a catalyst for the commissioning and production of contemporary artworks. In this process I will continue to research the artist's relationship with the museum and work produced in this context that may involve referencing its history, reinterpreting the display or critiquing the institution. Specifically, I have negotiated a project with the Royal Academy of Arts, (RA) to invite artists to make new work in response to its history, architecture and role as a cultural institution.⁵⁰

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- ¹ Hans-Ulrich Obrist has curated exhibitions at Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris, Kunsthalle Vienna, Deichtor-Hallen, Hamburg and Serpentine Gallery in London. After an initial training in economics and politics, he switched to contemporary art and has organised a variety of exhibitions in venues such as his own house, a monastery library, an airplane and a hotel.
- ² Cartiere, 2004, p. 15.
- ³ Thea 2001, p. 89.
- ⁴ Cartiere, 2004, p.21.
- ⁵ Greenberg et al, 1996, p. 238.
- ⁶ *Manifesta Journal*, No.4, 2004, p. 92 and p. 96.
- ⁷ External tutorial, June 30, 2005.
- ⁸ Kocur and Leung, 2005, p. 33.
- ⁹ *ibid* p. 39.
- ¹⁰ *ibid* p.48. This is an unusual (and mixed) metaphor. It is likely that Kwon is uninformed about nautical matters, as it is impossible to anchor a flow. It follows from this that a network of unanchored flows is equally impossible.
- ¹¹ *ibid* p. 49.
- ¹² The suggestion to curate the Nelson project at the Royal Naval Museum in Portsmouth was made by tutors during a seminar at Goldsmiths, November 2004.
- ¹³ *Cloud & Vision* is the fifth in a series of summer exhibitions curated by Parabola at the Museum of Garden History.
- ¹⁴ www.cix.co.uk/~museumgh/
- ¹⁵ www.royalnavalmuseum.org/
- ¹⁶ www.parabolatrust.org.uk
- ¹⁷ Danielle Arnaud is the Chair of Parabola, Jordan Kaplan is a member and Philip Norman is Curator at The Museum of Garden History.
- ¹⁸ The original curatorial concept was for a project with three artists. At a meeting with Aspex Gallery and the Royal Naval Museum, 13.7.05, it was decided to postpone David Cotterrell's contribution until Spring 2006 to coincide with Aspex's move to Gunwharf Quay. The Royal Naval Museum is considering the possibility of a permanent installation to commemorate "The Year of the Sea".
- ¹⁹ External tutorial, April 27, 2005.
- ²⁰ *The Nelson Touch*: Contemporary interpretations and representations of the life and times of Admiral Horatio Nelson by artists David Cotterrell, Helen Maurer and Sarah Woodfine on the occasion of the Trafalgar Bicentenary Celebrations, September 9 - October 23, 2005. MACC, PP2, pp.11-12.
- ²¹ Tannert, 2003, p. 243.
- ²² Kocur and Leung, 2005, p. 32 & p. 50.
- ²³ www.jamesputnam.org.uk/press_06.html
- ²⁴ *Give and Take*, 2001, Exh. Cat., p.6.
- ²⁵ Ken Aptekar, *Q&A*, V&A, 2000, exh. cat. pp.14-17; Neil Cummings and Marysia Lewandowska, *Use Value*, 2000, *ibid* pp.20-21; J. Morgan Puett and Suzanne Bocanegra, *The Manhattan Tartan Project Phase I and Phase II*, 1999-2001, *ibid* pp. 30-31.
- ²⁶ *ibid* p. 8.
- ²⁷ Walsh, 1992, p. 2.
- ²⁸ Walsh, p. 105.
- ²⁹ Sarah Woodfine disagrees with my assessment of the Royal Naval Museum, describing it as "a good old-fashioned museum", comparing it favourably with the National Maritime Museum in Greenwich, where, admittedly, the interactive, public entertainment element is much more in evidence.
- ³⁰ Walsh, 1992, p.171.
- ³¹ *ibid*, p. 176.
- ³² *ibid*, p.183.
- ³³ "Exploring Blake's Work" in South London Press, July 11, 2005.
- ³⁴ *ibid*.

³⁵ Lady Salisbury's current exhibition, *A Company of Pleasures: Garden Renaissance at Hatfield House*, documents the recreation of the original Tudor and Stuart gardens. It occupies most of the nave and has necessitated moving some of the permanent exhibits!

³⁶ "Exploring Blake's Work" in South London Press, July 11, 2005.

³⁷ Exh. Cat. *Cloud & Vision*, pp. 26-27.

³⁸ In the company of his friend John Varley, a water colourist, Blake would undertake experimental séances during which he would sketch his visions of the long dead. Whilst engaged in such sessions Blake conceived of a malign presence, which he declared to be "The Ghost Of A Flea", having a human-like form flecked in green and gold, flicking its tongue towards a bowl of drained blood.

³⁹ *The Nelson Touch*, an Aspex Gallery Project at the Royal Naval Museum, Portsmouth, September 10 - October 23, 2005, Exh. Guide.

⁴⁰ Nelson is said to be the originator of the phrase, "to turn a blind eye", meaning to refuse to take notice of a situation. He is supposed to have said this on disobeying a signal to withdraw during the naval battle of Copenhagen in 1801. Nelson led the attack of the British fleet, commanded by Admiral Sir Hyde Parker, against a joint Danish / Norwegian enemy. The two men disagreed over tactics and at one point Hyde Parker sent a coded signal using flags for Nelson to disengage. Nelson was convinced he could win if he persisted and placed the telescope to his right eye, whose sight he had lost at the Battle of Calvi in 1794.

⁴¹ Sheldon has negotiated permission to erect the bases and flagpoles for Maurer's work from the Portsmouth Royal Naval Base Property Trust in the arena opposite the gallery window. Maurer has to verify the height at which she needs to fly the flags in order to acquire the correct focal distance. Currently this site is only offered for the 9th September - 20th October, and we are still in negotiation with the Royal Navy for access on the Trafalgar Weekend, October 21 -23.

⁴² Eg. Dockers' Strike 1949, Hands-off Cuba Demonstration 1962 and the Anti-Vietnam Demonstrations 1968, sourced from ITN, British Panthe.

⁴³ The sketch for the Exh. Guide (see fig. 23) is based on an engraving by Robert Dodd from the Lily Lambert McCarthy collection.

⁴⁴ For the construction of her work, she has referenced images in HMS Victory Curator, Peter Goodwin's *Men O'War: Illustrated Story of Life in Nelson's Navy* (2003, London: Carlton Books) and *Nelson's Fleet at Trafalgar* by Brian Lavery (2004, London: NMM, Greenwich).

⁴⁵ In *Manifesta Journal*, No.1, 2003, p. 21, Igor Zabel argues that the white cube is no longer a neutral space but is loaded with numerous references.

⁴⁶ External tutorial, March 15, 2005.

⁴⁷ The headline, "Trafalgar 2005: Nelson's New Day of Victory" (Daily Mail June 29) was superseded by "A Navy in Tatters" (Daily Express, July 6), Annex, MACC, PP2, 2005.

⁴⁸ Jens Hoffman, Director of Exhibitions, ICA, London claims to be an independent curator working *inside* the institution.

⁴⁹ Kocur and Leung, 2005, p. 33.

⁵⁰ *Proposal: Artists Residency Programme at the Royal Academy of Arts*, Parabola, 31.1.2005.

Accepted by the Exhibitions Committee, Chaired by Tom Phillips, 1.7.2005.