

Collective beginnings in the Last Place On Earth

Laura Mansfield was invited to examine the work of the artists (Future 20 Collective & Studio Morison) and the wider support group, as a form of social art practice and to explore its distinct trajectory over the course of the year and through the pandemic.

We are submerged inside an unknown entity of rippling coloured stone. We are being taken on a journey, transported through the façade of HOME into a rolling desert landscape coloured by a darkened sky. We find ourselves in a bleak new world of burnt out structures, twisting bones and pulsating sky-bound forms. Guided by a repetitive soundtrack, spoken lyrics warn us not to be frightened.

For many viewers it will be impossible to experience Last Place On Earth without considering the specific context in which it developed. Rooted within a time of lockdown saturated with feelings of anxiety and uncertainty over daily news of ever-increasing national and international death tolls, the desolate landscape of this digital world resonates with the weight of a familiar everyday turned to ruin. Yet despite its dystopian vista, Last Place On Earth was forged in a collaborative environment broaching the utopian, breaching paths of collective creative experimentation able to liberate from the limitations of an individual 'practice' to embrace discussion, exchange, debate, risk, solidarity and support.

Future 20, the year-long artist residency and professional development training programme for emerging artists at HOME was scheduled to culminate in a large-scale public event and takeover of the building's main gallery space in August 2020 guided by the mentoring of Studio Morison. With the announcement of a UK wide lockdown on 23 March and the closure of public institutions, the prospect of a gallery show and its familiar processes of collective exhibition were lost immediately. Confined to bedrooms of shared houses or family homes, as well as deprived of the option of visiting a studio, the Future 20 collective were left without the familiar tools, materials and spaces previously integral to their practice. Thrown off course and interrupted in both the trajectory of the project and day to day life, an opening for experimentation and potential revealed itself, the constraints of lockdown calling for the generation of alternative approaches to creativity and production. Forced to look at what was around them, the time and space of lockdown fostered a reassessment of the participants skill set. A filmmaker whose previous work was focused on narrative constructs began filming small fragments of the world outside her window, recording the sounds of her mother cooking and becoming, through circumstance, more experimental in the editing of recorded material. A glass artist turned to writing and creating music. What is more, conditions of self-isolation brought forth a relative levelling of the playing field – diluting slightly the hierarchy of professional

artist, curator and gallery institution. Studio Morison and producer Debbie Chan were equally confined to their homes. The gallery was closed. What was possible for the project to become was now an open question for everyone to address.

With the everyday turned upside down by the pandemic, pervasive feelings of an uncomfortable uncertainty saturated a collectively shared mood. Conditions of uncertainty that became the fragile foundations for the construction of Last Place. In an effort to continue the project or simply following the need to reach out for much needed interaction, regular online meetings proliferated. Shepherded with the guidance of artist Ivan Morison, the group was encouraged to share their continuous processes of making, recording, marking, feeling and thinking under lock-down conditions. The request to share what was perhaps perceived as scraps, sketches, experiments and unformed ideas was a call for the artists to embrace and exhibit the faults and failures of the creative process, the uncertain and unrefined. Such a process of sharing triggered the group into responsive conversations and relational creative acts. Through a dialogue of response and exchange Studio Morison encouraged the Future 20 artists to start building a virtual exhibition out of those fragments of works, constructing a digital experience that radically moved away from traditional notions of a group show. The resulting process of collaboration began to subsume individual fragments of works and voices into a collective whole, refocusing individual energies onto a collective effort of constructing a shared work.

Studio Morison's practice is honed around creating distinct environments that hold, envelope and transport the audience, whether through the physical construction of architectural spaces or the communal experience of sitting around a carefully curated dinner table. Welcomed into the environment of these works, audiences are invited to play an active part in its evolving shape and duration, as well as its lasting effects. Rippling under the surface of pleasant engagement are feelings of slight discomfort, caused by an uncertainty over the boundaries of what one should or should not do. Jolted out of the comfort of a passive spectatorship, audiences are gently called on to take responsibility for their active participation in an evolving work. The artist Phil Collins, long term collaborator with HOME, has commented that within contemporary practice certain artists are no longer the provider of an experience, but concerned with 'setting a stage' that serves to facilitate an encounter (that is ultimately out of their control).¹ Resting upon such an encounter, the staged artwork or the artwork as stage presents a moment of disparity that shakes the viewer out of their habitual routine, questioning and disrupting expected and established rituals of behaviour and patterns of viewing, as well as providing possibilities for the uncomfortable to proliferate in turn. Turning the established model of a group exhibition into an immersive digital world, in which singular works become indistinguishable from the very fabric of the landscape the viewer is invited to explore, Last Place provides a

¹ Collins, presentation at *Imagining the Audience. Viewing positions in curatorial and artistic practice* 1–2 October 2012 **Bio Rio** Stockholm, Sweden

stage that facilitates an encounter disrupting the established relationship of artist, audience and work. Echoing Collins comments, such an encounter is founded on a disparity with the potential to ignite a questioning of the status quo reaching beyond the immediate experience of the work itself.

Supporting a diverse range of artists working in different disciplines, Last Place On Earth was built on the back of diverse skills, ideas and creative thought processes of each participating artist. Obfuscating the difference between foreground and background, architecture and exhibited works, objects created individually transformed into the very fabric of the digital landscape. Ceramic vessels became the craters in a desert, crocheted plastic bag figures took on the monolithic proportions of pulsating architectures, the sound of sausages sizzling became part of an ambient soundtrack - elements of the everyday morphed into new constellations informing an emerging world. Here, the construction of a world from found fragments resonates with the literary genre of fantasy. In her study *Fantasy: The Literature of Subversion*² Rosemary Jackson describes the literary genre to be concerned with inverting the everyday elements of a familiar world,

Recombining its constitutive features in new relations to produce something, strange, unfamiliar and apparently 'new', absolutely 'other' and different.³

Jackson draws our attention to a methodological feature of fantastical narratives that subvert elements of the everyday to produce worlds at odds with their immediate environment, displacing the viewer into a site of critical potential and extra-ordinary alternatives, disrupting and interrupting the security of the familiar with imaginary alternatives. Rooted from the outset to the building and forecourt of HOME familiar to its regular audiences, Last Place on Earth takes us on a journey on which familiarity is quickly disrupted, a fire starts to burn in the darkened light of a cityscape obscured by pulsating coloured masses. Guided around the square and into the building itself, the comfort of familiarity is radically challenged as we enter the ruins of the gallery structure emerging from a slowly heaving mass of thick black water. Last Place on Earth [Rolling Stones or The Rolling Stones? Somebody make up their mind!] transports us into a fantastical world that has emerged from the tumult of our times, resonating and reflecting our present anxieties and future uncertainties.

The unique conditions of living in lockdown prompted the Future 20 artists to reassess their skills – forced to take stock of limited resources they began to reassess their abilities to contribute to the project. Such reconsideration of one's practice prompted a wider disciplinary intermixing – filmmakers wrote poems, performers started to record sound and those focused on physical engagement were introduced to alternative routes for interaction more commonplace within gaming and the digital world. In describing the practice of curation, Ine Gever notes that curating is “about opening up ‘spaces’ within which different discourses can be brought into relationship

² Rosemary Jackson, *Fantasy: The Literature of Subversion*. (London and New York: Methuen 1981).

³ *Ibid.*,17.

with one another” calling such sites “spaces of transformation”.⁴ Through the careful fostering of a process of collective world building, Studio Morison perhaps opened up such a space. What is more, in making the individual contributions dissolve into the whole of the world, a certain levelling of hierarchies resulted in the egalitarian subsumption of individual practices, disciplines, physical abilities, professional reputations and ethnic and cultural backgrounds into a collective whole. A modality of collaborative practice that resonates with an art historical tradition perhaps more readily associated with the performing arts. Forged in the heydays of experimentation with collective forms of living and working, underpinned by philosophical and social critiques of ipseity, as well saturated with a radical pedagogy of collectivism, the utopian forces at work in of this fragile tradition are here more or less unwittingly picked up and carried, relaunched for the pressing needs of our times.

Although Last Place on Earth has grown out of a multiplicity of distinct voices coming together in a collective work, it is difficult not to subsume the egalitarian nature of collective ownership under the dominant signatures of the established artist and the institutional context of production. In light of this conundrum it seems at least necessary to note that although the project is facilitated with great skill and care by Studio Morrison and HOME, it is neither authoritatively lead nor owned by them. In asking Future 20 artists whether they felt represented in the world they collectively constructed, the answer was resoundingly affirmative, albeit not without an awareness and recognition of moments of difficulty, conflict and uncertainty along the way of a process that required all those involved to take numerous creative risks. Working collectively is not an easy task, as anyone who has done so can all too readily confirm. However, through the care taken over the process of dissolving an individual practice into a greater whole, the resulting work is a truly multi-authored endeavour and testament to the human ability to work collectively in times of pervasive difficulty.

Laura Mansfield
Independent curator and researcher
<http://lauramansfield.info>

⁴ Curating the Art of Contexts. Conversation pieces (Maastricht: Jan Van Eyck Academie 1995) p.41-2.