

A backroom conversation

Magali Arriola and Kate Fowle

January 2006

Published in Pacemaker 11 magazine, Paris. March 2006

Kate Fowle: So I went to the Backroom in San Francisco yesterday to take some photos of the installation and realized that it is a great time to have a conversation about it. Six months after its incarnation the project continues to expand in scope the more time you spend with the materials that the artists are offering for review. It's incredible how much is there. Each source expands as you look into it, so that it is actually impossible to get a sense of 'getting somewhere' with the materials in the traditional sense of research. This is in part because of the fact that (in a positive way) you are at the mercy of various tracks of discovery that are being conducted by others. You are, in effect, a witness to ideas as opposed to a participant in them. But at the same time the project opens up new avenues of thinking about (as well as problematizing) aspects of art/society/politics/culture that first attracted you to an artist's practice. In effect the materials extend as far as your own ideas and thoughts (opening up the proverbial can of worms).

This has got me to thinking about the temporary aspect of an archive. I am still pretty sure that it is not possible (apart from in the contemporary art world) to have a short-term version of the archive in the strict sense of the word. But at the same time, what makes this concept interesting is how it can start to question the impulse to archive or accumulate knowledge. By using this strategy in the context of an art project it can start to highlight the reality of the accumulation of information. For everyone (including archivists) there is a saturation point. The systems and structures that are necessarily put in place to account for information start to take over from the material itself. At the same time the motivation for archiving becomes stronger than the impulse to learn and/or question through information.

Magali Arriola: There is an interesting relation between what you're saying about the construction of an archive, and the way the whole Backroom project started and kept growing almost on its own which is the fact that, retrospectively, it actually doesn't seem to have a proper starting point -basically the three of us started inviting artists and other cultural practitioners that we thought would be interested in (and interesting for) this kind of exercise, having agreed on the fact that we wouldn't organize or curate its content. And when thinking about the accumulative process of an archive, the first thing that comes to mind is that there should be some sort of rational planning and understanding of this process in order to organize the information. Maybe one of the main features of The Backroom was the fact that it brought together all those contributions that, even if pointing to different directions would still overlap. And one could feel somehow caught in the middle of it all. That relates to what you mention about being a witness to ideas rather than a participant, which I think can happen in a "traditional" archive but, in this case, I am not totally sure if I agree. I guess that precisely the fact that The Backroom could at some point make you feel overwhelmed by the amount of information it displayed—rather than by its systems of organization— was more interesting than being a witness to the way that information could have been organized and structured. That is actually what allows for a more active approach to its content since you have to make sense of it in your own terms, maybe using a very few clues that were provided by the artists.

KF: What strikes me with the Backroom, and the way that we went about accumulating information and ideas, is that if we were to ask the same practitioners to contribute in five years time it would all look and feel very different. In this sense it is a census, or a snapshot, of where people are at now in terms of their relationship to social and political ideologies, and what they are finding most pressing or relevant in that context. In the case of the Backroom this is happening both in terms of artists processing historical events, as well as relating to recent cultural phenomena. In turn it is inevitable that this also relates to broader social or political art world tendencies. What would it mean to preserve this momentary gathering of material

thoughts? There are a number of instances whereby people would choose to do this as an organizing or documentary principal, but in terms of art practice it is very clear that it would be counterintuitive to do so. The fluidity of research within some of the most interesting practitioners today (and historically) is the ability to let go of data or facts having processed them, and question each step of a journey into 'nowhere' so to speak (in the sense that there is no ultimate end to research.) In this respect you could say that there is an immediacy to the project that comes from its temporary nature.

MA: Now that this first stage of the project is over and that we can view it as a dormant (and ongoing) entity, I think that one of the most interesting things about it is precisely the fact that with every potential restaging of the Backroom its content will probably never be the same. This is because new artists could be invited to participate with their contributions, or because some of current participants' interests would hopefully have shifted, bringing in some new materials that can, in turn, open different perspectives for the whole project. This has an impact, not only in terms of its content, but also of its structure and form. And I totally agree that in the overall it functioned as cultural, social and political radiography very much informed by its temporal coordinates. But that's the interesting part of working with information. There's so many ways to approach it and display it, and if it fades physically it will still have another kind of life of it's own. I am not sure either about preserving it as a momentary gathering of thoughts. I think its fading away actually allows us to think about the whole project in terms of triggering selective memories rather than constructing a selective history (or archive).

KF: I completely agree, and in a broad sense politically I think this is very important. But, I'm not sure what this immediacy, or as you suggest, 'a selective memory' means in terms of research or an archive? What do you call it?

MA: Insofar as calling it an archive? Again I'm not so sure... but, again, maybe the more seductive part of the project is the fact that, if it ever was one, it was a temporary archive. It was one that is inevitably very much dated and simultaneously therefore displays immediacy. The fact that the Backroom wasn't static but constantly changing, in the way that we added artists' contributions on a regular basis, together with the fact that it never pretended to be exhaustive, nor to enhance a rational or systemic organization of the information it contained, was also very important for the way that a variety of contributions were able to haphazardly complete a take or perspective on one particular issue. I guess this is one of the more enjoyable things about, let's say, artistic and curatorial work... It was not so much about having an insider perspective on somebody's practice, but more a way to see how one person finds a thread between ranges of different issues. If you think about Paul Ramirez Jonas, or Sam Green, who kept sending information over the months without us knowing what we were going to get, this becomes even more evident. And then of course there is also the fact of one's personal baggage that could add or complete an approach to certain matters.

KF It's evident that there are some recurring interests (both in terms of approach to the project and materials) which span across contributions. This is something that I was really interested in discovering over the time that the project (in this incarnation) took place. I also think that the scale of the project now is bigger than we thought it would go, in terms of the amount of material and the number of artists that are included, but also the potential for thinking around the different perspectives that are offered. I'm thinking in particular about how a conversation with Kota Ezawa – that started with wanting to dig deeper into his the films, videos and images that inspired him – over time turned into an incredible hour-long film screening of classic Hollywood films, esoteric documentaries, art videos, music videos and more – each extract lasting between 5 seconds to a few minutes – but together saying more than I could ever imagine about the impetus of his practice and his process of thinking. From another angle, the ongoing dialogue with Dennis Crompton from Archigram, whereby each document, film clip or reference that he sent through opened up another question about their practice and its impact on both exhibition-making and research today, has expanded both my understanding and points of reference for their work, to the

point that I now feel I can start to ask the 'right' questions about the group's practice in relation to what I want to understand and take with me into what is happening now in architecture and art now.

That takes me on to the research aspect of the project, which I think for me is the foundation of the concept. All the artists are present because one of us either had questions we wanted to ask them, or we wanted to know more about a particular project, or had a hunch that what the artist was thinking about was interesting to us in some way. In 'research' terms it's accumulating a strange hybrid of primary and secondary materials at once. As a result, in some cases I feel that there is more work to be done in terms of having a conversation with an artist - I haven't quite got to the bottom of 'it', whatever that might be (I'm thinking Stephen Kaltenbach). In other situations it feels that it has opened up dialogues that are developing into projects or potential ways to explore ideas in the future (as with Tom Lawson and his *Real Life* magazine). Other research conversations seem to have gone far enough as they are - perhaps because of the fact that they are almost a resolution in themselves of previous conversations with an artist.

On another level the project is not about our research, but that which the artists are conducting/have done and I wonder what the project means in those terms? What is it to present artist's research in this way?

And then of course there is the audience/public. I'm not sure what it is for them - my thinking is that for those who are really interested in the project, it becomes some sort of fantasy or desire - its about potential rather than any kind of concrete 'research.'

MA: It would be really interesting to open this conversation to the artists that were involved in the project to see what the whole process meant to them, even more so since they actually had very different approaches to it. It was really interesting to see how someone like Walead Beshty totally shifted his approach to it from its LA version to the one in SF and how his contribution went from something very general (texts, images of the Arcades, interview with George Romero and *Dawn of the Dead*, to very specific photographs of the abandoned and crumbling Iraqi Embassy in Berlin, something that, in my view, allowed him to negotiate the relationship between his artistic practice and his personal research interests. Hopefully a new project will come out from that negotiation. From that perspective, it's also interesting to think about the different ways to navigate the Backroom - or even more the lack of any filter that would establish priorities but, just one's own curiosity... I really enjoyed the fact that all this was presented in a raw state. There were no 'curatorial' priorities but merely an intuitive approach on our part. By this I don't only mean our approach through the 'selection' of the artists that we invited to participate, but also (and mostly) the artists' contributions; they were totally free to send whatever they considered was interesting to see, read or think about in relation to the conversations we had with them. This generated materials that sometimes don't make it to the final process or incarnation of a piece. Displaying whatever is just laying out there - historical facts, cultural constructions, artistic processes, everyday objects - pretty much at the 'margins' of what is usually considered artistic manifestations and cultural practices, was somehow a sort of a challenge... After all it was really difficult not to think about the artist's work when going through all of this material. We chose to present it without putting a name on it. Furthermore, in the presentation very few things were labeled apart from listing the contributions under the artist's names in a file... And of course I think that the audience/public experience of it might have been totally different to ours - but again I think that is the enjoyable part of it. This was particularly true in its original Culver City location and its context among the commercial galleries, where all those people (or arty passers-by...) who weren't familiar with the project and went into the Backroom thinking it was an *art gallery* and looking for the *art work* - some of them really had an hard time...

And I totally agree with what you say about the fantasy/desire. Maybe the most frustrating thing about the whole project was being confronted with that the amount of information, and the fact that it could endlessly expand and potentially become a very boring exercise to process. This is a

little bit tricky, but again the fact that the Backroom was accumulating information against the clock, and knowing that all that information was meant to 'disappear', made it somehow very seductive. But I guess that if we think about its LA – SF versions as a starting point, the project is flexible enough so that one can imagine different incarnations of it in the long term...