

## *Chris Evans: Socially Awkward*

### **Dan Kidner**

During a talk given at Tate Britain in March 2006 on the topic of collaboration, British artist Chris Evans made an admission about his working practice that may have surprised some in the audience. He announced, to the sound of muted laughter, that he was ‘rarely interested in mutual reward’ when engaged in collaborative work, and that, in fact, the ‘collaborative element’ of his work – in part, meeting and convincing people to take part in his projects – was not something that he relished. It might also be true to say that this is also how the artist feels about working with art institutions, commissioners and curators. As the politicization of culture – its utilitarian function as social ameliorative or harbinger of urban regeneration – intensifies, the relationships between institutions (and their sponsors), artists, curators and critical writers become ever more entwined and dependent. Evans’ projects increasingly operate along the fault lines of these relationships, by on the one hand evoking old systems of support and patronage, and on the other, by inserting, virally, new protocols or processes within existing systems. And, although ‘collaboration’ is something that the artist endures, reflecting upon the fact that he puts it at the centre of his practice whilst at the same time having an antipathetic relationship to it is the key to understanding his work, and also points to the delicate negotiation between the forces of an almost entirely instrumentalized culture and the desire for an autonomous art practice that all artists are now engaged with. Collaboration, consultation and negotiation are all skills in which today’s artist must be adept. Evans makes these processes the theme, and the site of his work.

In her essay, ‘The Social Turn: Collaboration and its Discontents’ (2006), critic and art historian Claire Bishop argues that what she terms the ‘social turn’ in art prompts a corresponding ‘ethical turn in art criticism’, causing critics to concentrate on the degree to which artists radically question their own ‘authorial’ position rather than making aesthetic, or any other kind of judgements. Although what she considers to constitute the ‘social’ turn is difficult to gauge, or whether there has been an attendant ontological shift that might be implied by such a phrase, the essay does chronicle a tendency in many contemporary practices to produce ‘projects’, the material forms of which are often determined as much by the artist as by his or her collaborators. The types of practices that come under the rubric of Bishop’s ‘socially collaborative’ art are many and varied, but her polemic advocates those practices that, ‘however uncomfortable, exploitative, or confusing’ invite its audience to, ‘confront darker, more painfully complicated considerations of our predicament’<sup>1</sup>. Evans’ work, although not cited by Bishop, would certainly seem to fit this characterisation of the ‘best collaborative practices’, even if it might not so readily offer up the required ‘aesthetic’ dimension that presumably makes the art critic’s job easier.

Maybe the best way to illustrate both Evans' ambivalent relationship to the process of collaboration and also his talent for confronting the dark and painful complications of the modern world is to look at the form the works usually take when they are exhibited, and also to consider what isn't disclosed or displayed. The artist's projects are more often than not represented by maquettes, screenprints or spray paintings that illustrate proposed sculpture. These designs result from a series of conversations between artist and specific collaborators. The artist acts as a kind of art consultant who chooses his own clients and the 'solutions' that are sought are often enigmatic or obscure. Just why would the managing director of a multi-national company choose to design a sculpture, in consultation with an artist, and agree to have it sited on a piece of scrubland in the middle of the industrial town of Järvakandi, Estonia?

The extent to which the consulted person is in control of his or her choices, or rather the amount of coercion that occurs during meetings, is unknown. Collaboration is a slippery notion in the context of art production, but one that when reflected upon opens up the possibility of understanding a great many contemporary practices that seek to conjoin social aims with aesthetic ones.

In 1999, under the auspices of All Horizons Club, Evans and Duncan Hamilton organised *Free Tutorials*. The project involved sending teams of artists, unannounced, into art schools around the UK to deliver impromptu 'free tutorials'. The content of these guerrilla crits, although anecdotally recounted by the contributing artists at two conferences organised to discuss the project and the state of art education more generally, was not recorded or documented. This 'missing' element is crucial, and it does more than simply pose the neo-conceptual conundrum: what is presented as the work? The ambiguous or unknown parts of the project become the content. The rumour, or the enunciation of the fact of the project, become the work.

In a later work, *Cop Talk*, art education is again the subject. In an ongoing series, which began at Amsterdam's Rietveld Art Academy in 2005, Evans arranges for an officer from the local police force to deliver a recruitment talk to students. Neither the content of the talk or the responses of the students is documented. The form of the work, when exhibited, is simply the spray painted poster that advertised the event. The site of the work could be said to be somewhere between the event itself and the presentation of the poster so that knowing about *Cop Talk* is, in some important way, to experience the work.

For a new project, *As Simple as your Life used to be*, commissioned by the British School in Rome, Evans interviewed four retired Italian politicians about the nature of sacrifice. In each case he asked them to come up with visual motifs, to be turned into sculptures. These sculptures, when fabricated, will be installed within the grounds of the Istituto Di Insegnamento Superiore Giovanni Falcone, a struggling school on the outskirts of Rome. The attempt to connect the high ideals and aspirations of Italy's recent political past with its future underclass is of course foolhardy. But what hope for any cultural initiative that attempts such a thing?

At this point in the describing of a project by Evans, uncertainty sets in. It will only get me so far to mention that the politicians are a mixture of fringe and leading figures in four of the dominant parties in Italy since the end of the second world war and that one is former Prime Minister, Giulio Andreotti. We could speculate upon the exact conversation that took place between the artist and the politician. We could even imagine that the meetings never took place, that this is just another story. We might

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<http://artandresearch.org.uk/v2n1/kidner.html>

even ask about the artist's political affiliation and wonder just what it was like to interview Giulio Caradonna, a member of the neo-Fascist Movimento Sociale Italiano-Destra Nazionale, who was once suspended from Parliament for shouting 'Viva il Fascismo!'. But the key to a project like this is the way in which power, social responsibility, art and aesthetics clash in an almost unbearably absurd way. Who is collaborating with whom, why and to what end?

Evans' projects function as working models of corporate, or public sector, consultancy in the way that some 'relational' works function as 'models of sociality'. In this sense the work could be posited as the flip side to Nicolas Bourriaud's much discussed 'micro-utopias'<sup>2</sup> the dark side of relational aesthetics, or micro-dystopias perhaps. He destabilizes the very idea of collaboration as something that offers real social utility in contradistinction to the autonomous art object. The artist thus delivers what could be described as a critique of collaborative, or what Grant H. Kester terms 'dialogic', practices, by simultaneously 'maximising the creative potential of a given constituency'<sup>3</sup> and subjecting that constituency to sustained critical scrutiny. This critical scrutiny doesn't simply undermine the authority of that constituency or parody its function, but rather defines the limits of or possibilities for meaningful collaboration per se. Deconstructing the very notion of collaborative activity can reveal as much about the limits of current art education in the UK as it can about the processes of co-optation of art and culture by state controlled public sector bodies and global corporations.

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<sup>1</sup> Claire Bishop, 'The Social Turn: Collaboration and its Discontents', *Artforum*, (February 2006).

<sup>2</sup> Nicolas Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics*, translated by Simon Pleasance and Fronza Woods with the participation of Mathieu Copeland (Les presses du réel, 2002), p. 31.

<sup>3</sup> See Grant H. Kester, *Conversation Pieces: Community and Communication in Modern Art* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004).