The Given (Interior) World

Stephen Loo: University of Tasmania, and Ross Gibson: Sydney College of the Arts, Australia

ABSTRACT

The following is an attempt to write, following Derrida, to illustrate (if at all possible) the parergon, a supplement, fragment, detached form and outside of the main exposition (that is framed, by and framed as, the interior of the project), the latter being an artwork called K2-02 that is nothing more than a voidal space. This writing, as parergonal, demonstrates that it is itself another territory with an interiority; but because it is in an ensemble which makes up the artwork, the writing is also a part of the innermost territory of the project. The interior territory of K2-02 can paradoxically be nothing other than an incessant parergonality.

PARERGONALITY, OR WRITING THE OUTSIDE

The possibility of interiority given by the existence and nature of the frame is a common refrain in the study of interiors. However, in her essay ‘Chaos, Territory, Art’ in the 2005 issue of this very journal – an essay that is always already a frame for this current issue on Interior Territories – Elizabeth Grosz notes that it is the frame’s capacity to partition, divide and demarcate the earth as chaotic substance that allows art to emerge. However, the frame does not define what art is, or define art as that something which can be found within its enclosed interior; because here, the demarcation by the frame to produce spaces that can be named inside and outside is deferred. The frame nevertheless demarcates, but in the process of doing so as it cuts into a milieu or space, enables particular intensifications in the flows of substance, so affect, sensation and thinking can come into being, producing what Grosz calls the ‘extractable qualities which become the material and formal structures of the art.’

In speaking about the frame in this way, the status of the interior as an identifiable territory cannot therefore be straightforwardly given, as it is not beholden to an inside-outside demarcation. And in the present case, wherein the interior in question is an artwork with a voided interior, the question of territory, and interior territory in particular, becomes positively aphoristic.

Writing (about) this interior territory is constantly deflected to the margins, whereupon we encounter the frame that is no less the inside (containing traces of the interior; in this case an artwork that has to do with interior space) or the outside (inscribed by supplemental, ornamental and/or unnecessary preoccupations of the work, in this case includes a public art work in China, other writing outside the work including the present essay, and another altogether different artwork in the artwork). The frame as the actual bounding mechanism is beginning to show that it itself possesses an interiority.

Note here that the frame defines territory as much as the frame is itself territorial (Territorialisation (which is a constant flirtation between territorialisation and reterritorialisation) is the process of provisional delimitation that depends on the modes of organisation undertaken by each form of life and each cultural form, unleashing qualities that make artistic (and design) endeavours possible. Territorialisation is not related to bounding, but more accurately to distancing, as it is a process of differentiation that gives an openness for new sensations and thinking to be abstracted from the located body or bodies.

PASSE-PARTOUT, OR WRITING (IN) THE FRAME

When territory frames it does not necessarily make something visible and extractable as its interior. Territorialisation explodes the frame as it inhabits it, so what constitutes the interior is constantly deferred. How do we write about this frame, this impossible interior territory? We cannot. Writing about interior territories is always already writing the frame, writing in the frame: all writing is marginalia.

In The Truth in Painting, Derrida writes on writing on the frame. His metaphorical plane of composition in the passe-partout, the mat, is usually cardboard, with a cut-out for the ‘work’, placed under the glass in a frame. The passe-partout serves two purposes: distancing the work from the glass (viewing plane), and to enhance (as an ornament) the visual appeal of the work. Derrida says:

I write right on the passe-partout well known to picture- framers. And in order to broach it, right on this supposedly virgin surface, generally cut out of a square of cardboard and open in its middle ‘to let the work appear. The latter can, moreover, be replaced by another which thus slides into the passe-partout as an “example.” To that extent, the passe-partout remains a structure with a movable base; but although it lets something appear; it does not form a frame in the strict sense, rather a frame within the frame. Without ceasing (that goes without saying) to space itself out, it plays its card or its cardboard traits and of colors. … What appears, then, and generally under glass, only appears as it is a process of differentiation that gives an openness for new sensations and thinking to be abstracted from the located body or bodies.

In speaking about this frame, this impossible interior territory we cannot. Writing about interior territories is always already writing the frame, writing in the frame: all writing is marginalia.

I write right on the passe-partout well known to picture- framers. And in order to broach it, right on this supposedly virgin surface, generally cut out of a square of cardboard and open in its middle ‘to let the work appear. The latter can, moreover, be replaced by another which thus slides into the passe-partout as an “example.” To that extent, the passe-partout remains a structure with a movable base; but although it lets something appear; it does not form a frame in the strict sense, rather a frame within the frame. Without ceasing (that goes without saying) to space itself out, it plays its card or its cardboard between the frame, in what is properly speaking its internal edge, and the external edge of what it gives us to see, lets or makes appear in its empty enclosure: the picture, the painting, the figure, the form, the system of strokes [traits] and of colors, … What appears, then, and generally under glass, only appears to do without the passe-partout on which it banks [fixe (fixed)]. This would be almost the place for a preface or a foreword [sic], between, on the one hand, the cover that bears the names (author and publisher) and the titles (work and series or field), the copyright, the fly leaf and, on the other hand, the first word of the book: … with which one ought to ‘begin.’

1. "I write right on the passe-partout..."
MARGINALIA / FORWARD

The written work within this paper which follows, the work framed by the writing of the frame in a practice of parergonality, stands as one element of a collaborative ensemble artwork by Stephen Loo and Michael Yuen for the University of South Australia’s SASA Gallery, 25 March – 24 April 2009, called K2-02.1

K2-02 is an investigation of the limits of gallery as a space of and for art, or more accurately the framing as the condition of possibility of what can be named art. The framing limit of the gallery is firstly geographical, and is located at the physical boundaries of its spatial containment that sanctions what is art by virtue of being in on the interior. This interior space is in counterpoint to that which is without conjunction, without project, the very ordinary, on the outside. It is literally the walls, floors and ceiling of the gallery, as already given, and the seemingly absent presence of its interior, that is the artwork.

The second limit is territorial, whereby the art practice, by virtue of negotiating the interiority of a space called a gallery, always already implicates a multiplicity of relations on the outside. More specifically, every object made, every movement enacted within the gallery is an inflexion point of territories that defy the bounding of space by the gallery walls. In fact, the actual performative public artwork (or that which counts as the art in artwork) of K2-02 lies outside the gallery. The public is invited to rent and wear simple black T-shirts with a single glowing blue LED light sewn with transducting thread on their backs, producing a poetic performance of nine small lights wandering the city. K2-02, the physical gallery space, is no more than a clearing house for the T-shirts, a banal shopfront for the artworks by Yuen.) In this way, objects and movement appear as what Bernard Cache would call ‘images’, light and sound that are polychromatic and polyphonic territories of relations already in play between the interior and exterior.

By investigating the relations between geography and territory, K2-02 is interested in the gallery as interiority outside of functionalisation in, by or as art; that is, in the internal mechanism of the gallery as a disused space, as leftover, as a ruin of the future, with its vicissitudes re-presented within its own space. This leftover space is a gift back to the university, a sudden opening of a space able to be time-tabled in an environment of space shortage. The work invites others to fill the space, unplanned and unsolicited, leading to the gallery being used for tutorials, a slide night event, a launch of something altogether unrelated to the work and to the gallery, and another artwork called The Poetics of Brine, a performance work by Stephen Loo, Emily Potter and Robyn Tucker as part of a project funded by University of South Australia’s Hawke Research Institute of Sustainable Societies.

So, even what is innermost to the territory does not belong to the work; it is an interiority displaced that becomes the productive territory. The gallery as the interior can only be seen as a presentation or demonstration of itself, and of its ‘communities’ and their empathic performances. This is Maurice Blanchot’s unacknowledged community of things, spaces and people that happen to arrive within the geographical frame of the gallery as territory, perhaps unannounced, and thus merely there ‘beyond any utilitarian gain’. The ordinary fact of such being together in their vitality is a democratic constellation that makes up a dense spatial body whose ethics and politics, of appearance challenges the practices of art that rely upon the spatial framing of the gallery.

THE INTERNAL EDGES OF A PASSE-PARTOUT ARE OFTEN BEVELED

This essay is written territory. The work in collaboration with sound, light and performance artist Michael Yuen, started as a gift ‘giving back’, of what was most interior to the possibility of an artwork, the space for the work itself. The space for the work in the SASA Gallery, Adelaide, South Australia, is the space of the work, namely the SASA Gallery.

Room name: K2-02.

I started following Michael Yuen’s art practice work, including a public work called Follow. The following is a quote from his artist’s essay:

In June 2008 Follow was created in downtown Shanghai. I hired fifty people to follow me for a day as I went about my usual activities. The crowd was under no special instructions other than to follow me. When we stopped the group swelled to a hundred at times, as bystanders joined in. The crowd temporarily blocked streets and sidewalks as we progressed through the city. It was a pilgrimage, a protest, bought stardom, a human roadblock, a labour strike, a fanatical pack, a mob and a march. Follow, for me, is foremost a public action resonating throughout a city. It is the hiring of a crowd’s services.9

The act of following is sustained by anticipation of the fulfillment of curiosity of a gift to come, the shape of which is unknown. The result of my curiosity is an essay in two voices called Follow Follow, which became Yuen’s and my artists’ essay for K2-02. Ross Gibson, who was the external scholar to the exhibition, wrote the catalogue essay that followed K2-02 as a work following Follow as its outside condition, to which it paradoxically owes its being and its innermost territory.

The following is yet another spacing of the work. The recombination of my half of ‘Follow Follow’ with Gibson’s catalogue essay is writing after, and therefore outside, K2-02, a re-territorialisation that is performative of its interiority; the return gift.

Above
Stephen Loo and Michael Yuen, K2-02, Installation View with Michael Yuen, SASA Gallery, University of South Australia, 2009. Image Josh Crossan
Under no special instruction other than to follow, the crowd came to be because of a social contract that binds without announcing what it bounds. The exchange is purely economic: the Chinese Yuan for the mere presence as human beings. Through word of mouth — small announcements, Chinese whispers — the social contract emerges seemingly without origin, as minute gestures unite in what Erin Manning calls pre-acceleration, or the a-perception of the potential of common movement, causing the social contract to be reinforced, unfolding between frustration and release, anticipation and working a new hustle in a system where usually you grab your body and your mind along to the other place. This is sometimes set up in a political contest, where a complete deal gets designed cunningly so that all options are already imperceptibly slanted well before negotiators arrive at the table. Set up like this — as some shenanigan that is both less inert, albeit attentive. Opting out of the talk-show system altogether, Alexander Kluge. Whenever a question touched on issues in such a way that Kluge fundamentally disagreed with the premise and intention of the question, he charmingly, politely, passively declined to answer. He just sat there, inert, albeit attentive. Opting out of the talk-show system that thrives on rhythm, noise and repletion of apparent teleology be construed as political? What is this space opened up by the event of the crowd, the absurd appearing together of human beings? Is this space already inscribed by politics, or can it be made political? We ask with Jean-Luc Nancy, ‘Is Everything Political?’

In the streets, the crowd suspends order at that instant purely because of its appearance; it is an event that evokes pure empathy of itself as an event. Michael Yuen’s experiment with a crowd that the artists have actively chosen to use. The crowd is frequently deemed political by the State by virtue of its form and not its intention, and this is certainly the case in China. But remember, the crowd in Follow was formed for the inane reason of the promise of a bit of money. Can this heterogeneity of the promise of a bit of money. Can this teleology be construed as political? Is this space already inscribed by politics, or can it be made political? We ask with Jean-Luc Nancy, ‘Is Everything Political?’

The crowd is frequently deemed political by the State by virtue of its form and not its intention, and this is certainly the case in China. But remember, the crowd in Follow was formed for the inane reason of the promise of a bit of money. Can this teleology be construed as political? Is this space already inscribed by politics, or can it be made political? We ask with Jean-Luc Nancy, ‘Is Everything Political?’

For there is some definite use envisaged in the artists’ decision to block, strike, and resonate, but also to disperse, diffuse and disappear. The public appears in space; a common appearance of human beings that de-functionalises designed space. The crowd is frequently deemed political by the State by virtue of its form and not its intention, and this is certainly the case in China. But remember, the crowd in Follow was formed for the inane reason of the promise of a bit of money. Can this teleology be construed as political? Is this space already inscribed by politics, or can it be made political? We ask with Jean-Luc Nancy, ‘Is Everything Political?’

Questions about inaction and vacancy occupy your mind when you ponder what Loo and Yuen have actively not done here. The nothingness of their gesture grows big in the mind and becomes something more hefty than just a gesture. The artists are making an almost-not-there show of abjuring the displayed privileges that usually go with winning the right to exhibit in a desirable and competitively esteemed venue. When you think about it, the vacuity of the idea is downright compelling. Seeing nothing in the idea at first, you might say it sucks. But on pondering the vacuum that Loo and Yuen make for you as you approach the show you might see. He made himself into a forceful negative space warping all expectation by making arhythmic time, and thus he explicated the premise and intention of the question, he charmingly, politely, passively declined to answer. He just sat there, inert, albeit attentive. Opting out of the talk-show system that thrives on rhythm, noise and repletion of apparent information, Kluge simply took the fuel out of the machine. He did this obviously. It was breath-taking and fascinating to see. He made himself into a forceful negative space warping all expectation by making arhythmic time, and thus he explicated and simultaneously obliterated the meanings that were set up and intended by the surreptitiously hostile interviewer.

The crowd is frequently deemed political by the State by virtue of its form and not its intention, and this is certainly the case in China. But remember, the crowd in Follow was formed for the inane reason of the promise of a bit of money. Can this teleology be construed as political? Is this space already inscribed by politics, or can it be made political? We ask with Jean-Luc Nancy, ‘Is Everything Political?’

So many acts in everyday life in China are small pieces of civil disobedience.
The peloton is the large main group of cyclists bunching in the centre of a road race using the slipstream to reduce drag. The form of the peloton emerges from slight adjustments by each rider responding to the complex behaviour of riders around him or her.

Conventional wisdom has it that there are about 450 million bicycles in China. The exhibition is a bit like that interview. Hiding obviously in plain sight, the unoccupied and wasted space made by the art show named *Ku-02* is an idea so not-there and so perverse that its negativity gets positively stamped on your thinking. The tricky gift offered by this nonspace — the idea of giving the room named *Ku-02* back to the forces from which it has been so hard won in the past — this paradoxical inaction-idea has a power out of all proportion to its immateriality and inanity. Not inept, not juvenile or naive, it’s actually an elegant and forceful idea. An idea of space made absent and time made wasted by its unscheduled laxity.

The peloton is a dynamic gathering of a crowd that continually self-adjusts by the enactment of intentions of its members. The value of the intentions (to give / way and drop back) however cannot be measured with reference to what is received (an opening to move back to the front) because of the emergent nature of the form of the crowd. The behaviour of members of the crowd, led by irreducibly complex interactions of exhaustion, curiosity, boredom, distraction, determination, failure, and mimicry, gives an openness of being by virtue of not having been inscribed by an overarching (political) teleology.

Here’s another story brought to mind by the *Ku-02* show. I recall the moment — the most potent instant in an entirely engrossing pageant — when Muhammad Ali held his hand back and clearly chose NOT to hit George Foreman as Foreman let go of consciousness and headed toward the canvas in Round 8 of their ‘Rumble in The Jungle’ in Zaire in 1974. Ali’s decision to do nothing in that decisive moment was a proclamation of his trickster supremacy. I remember watching it live in a university bar and hearing the entire beery hall gasp, laugh then applaud the way you would at a magic show.

The Rumble was also the occasion of a differently brilliant and vacuous scam, namely Ali’s drawn-out and bewildering choreography of inaction, which he dubbed the ‘rope-a-dope’ manoeuvre. Using the disengagement and intentional passivity that define the rope-a-dope, Ali spent several rounds just leaning limply backward and hauling all Foreman’s aggression out so that Foreman poured his destructive power exhausting into the ether rather than into Ali’s endangered person. It was ugly, clumsy and brilliant, because who could believe that Ali, the consummate showman and aesthetician, would choose to be so leaden. Only in the exhausted aftermath did Foreman understand what had been done to him — NOTHING! Ali did nothing. Ali became a vacuum and Foreman surged into it. Negative space.

This condition gives the capacity and desire for crowd members to fall back, or surge ahead or wander. Here the condition ‘gives’ as the event of being is given. Heidegger interprets *Eingriff*, the Event of Being, as es gibt, which in German means it is / is given. The gift given in this circumstance is not framed by an economy because it cannot be made present: once the gift is recognised as the gift, it is no longer a gift because its being made present becomes an obligation which demands reciprocity. The gift, like the friendship from which it derives, has the character of an excess (hyperebole) such that it cannot be measured by any calculation of its value. The gift is for …

Derrida works on the proposition (or, as the infinite speed of obligation … for life already the definition of life does not need to be defined, instead it is the for that organises, it has a might.)

Derrida never lost sight of Cixous’s speed in *H.C. for Life*, That is to Say … which begins with the letter ‘V’ which begins ‘vitesse’ (speed) and ‘ve’ (life) / life in a life which is no more death than the opposite of death, a life which does not know death. These two astonishing ruses of passivity — plainly poetic in their creativity and audacity — are why so many artists, from Norman Mailer through to The Fugees and the brilliant writers of the *Wire Wing* TV series, have been fascinated by the Rumble in the jungle.

Now, it’s a ridiculously long way from the bloodsport in the Kinshasa Stadium to a quiet little gallery in Adelaide, but both theatres of non-assertion operate with the same logic. And as we’ve seen, real smarts can lurk inside something ostensibly ridiculous.

Two words have chimed through my essay already: ‘trickster’ and ‘gift’. Attending to these special words, some readers might have discerned a theme: my text is written in dialogue with the writing of Lewis Hyde, whose two quite wondrous investigations of creativity — *Trickster Makes this World* and *The Gift* — help us see into the ruses and transformations that play in Loo and Yuen’s use of the SASA Gallery. Hyde’s writing is full of bracing moments of definition, where seemingly familiar notions get spun around so that you can see them from a fresh perspective. For example, Hyde reminds us that the word ‘art’ derives from linguistic roots concerned with connection, joints and border conditions. Hence we have terms like ‘articulate’, ‘artifice’ and even ‘arthritis’ (which is, of course, a condition in a joint). An artist can make a connection...
people to engage with the challenges, generating its true worth only so long as it continues to connect differently from commerce, Hyde observes, because an artwork gets locked away because of its monetary or commodity value, it tends to lose its social or gift value. In art to work. However the correspondence between material worth of the gift (after all it seems like free money as there is nothing asked to be done for it) and the counter gift (impossible to measure because there is no brief other than to follow; and there is really no obligation to follow) is ambivalent. The work maintains a misalignment of the economic worth of the material reality in the world, by making irrecirculable a finite monetary sum with the infinite possibilities for action, if not inaction. The affectual and cognitive dimension of misrecognition is to me the ethico-aesthetic work of Fallow. The exchange of money, in reciprocity, usually guards against the fear of loss of something already in possession. In Fallow, this condition is made ambiguous. In agreeing to give – the promise of money at the beginning of the work obligates the crowd to give – but what needs to be given in return, is unqualified. If the prerogative in Aristotle’s potence to not be lost (in) the crowd.

For Derrida, the gift can never be present, but is coextensive with a forgetting. The gift is nothing, organised by a perpetual deferral and define a distinctive frame, saying ‘this is inside my art while all that is outside’. The artist thereby establishes a contentious difference or line or demarcation between a given, natural phenomenon and a made, cultural artifact. Think of Marcel Duchamp. The cunning articulator: Think of his obsession with conjunctions, his fascination with what can happen when readymade normalcies meet in an uncustomed proposition. Think of that mysterious but compelling quality that Duchamp said he always sought: the ‘infra-mince’ (or ‘infra-thin’) epiphenomenon or non-event that lurks inside a Duchampian artwork. Think of the irony and befuddlement and exquisite sense of designed banality that Duchamp can assemble.

Every artist can be a trickster like this, presenting objects, intentions and circumstances in ways that overturn common sense. An artist can intervene in an ordinary frame to articulate some proposition around which your everyday understanding might turn until a revelation emerges on the other side of the frame that joins the habitual world to the artistically refreshed world. Along these thin lines of conjunction, an artist can help us see things anew. One of the most compelling and tricky turns an artist can perform is the act of gift-giving. Occurring as it always does along some connective nod, art is a transaction. But art is different from commerce, Hyde observes, because an artwork generates its true worth only so long as it continues to connect the larger world to the people who engage with the challenges, stimuli and surprises inherent to the artifact. Whenever an artwork gets locked away because of its monetary or commodity value, it tends to lose its social or gift value. In a move of trickery that can be wondrous when done well, the artist can generate a particular type of wealth (which Hyde deems ‘erotic’) by receiving the gift of tradition, then aligning it to individual talent and training to produce something new which is then paid forward to the world in the form of a fresh gift thrown into widespread circulation. In this act of giving, the trickster can stir a society’s defining energy, the politics is about wrong names – misnomers that articulate a gap and connect with a wrong. The crowd in Fallow, ironically the common presence of human beings as an appearance in a radical self-organising motility, is a gift of itself to itself that arises from the refusal to accept determination. The space of the crowd is the space of deferral, an opening up of time for delayed reciprocation that is no longer simply a return and therefore escapes the relations of a simple exchange. The gap which opens between intention and action is a return and therefore escapes the relations of a simple determination. The space of the crowd is the space of deferral, an opening up of time for delayed reciprocation that is no longer
anything, the money is recompense for the gift of the self, in its openness (as the ‘loss’ of self) owing to an absence of an imperative to function or ratio for action.

The return gift, or more accurately ‘work’ in exchange, is uncertain. The practice that emerges in such an asymmetrical relation of energy and capital that defy an exchange logic are, following Bourdieu, ‘acts of cognition’ (recognition and misrecognition, hesitation and conclusion, of worth), socially constituting a subjectivity that takes form to becomes the objective reality of the crowd as an unavowable community. 1 What emerges is a new public whose absolute presence in a work opens up a space – admittedly one predisposed to taking photographs and videos (of what exactly?) – as a concession to doing something for the money, or believing something worthwhile is happening.

Follow creates an economy – an oikos (home) – that is political, not in the common sense of a ‘political economy’, but politics where the self-sufficiency of human beings is shown for its incomensurability (of value, of ontology): an articulation of incommensurability (of value, of ontology): an articulation of incommensurability, of the non-unity, the non-figure, therefore a space-opening, of the trickster’s guise and carry a trickster’s intent, ready to redraw yet again the boundaries that distinguish ordinary existence from the creative performance of moment-by-moment ingenuity.

In other words, having negotiated the trickery of the negative space, having made it to the other side of the framing division between useless space and used space, you get an artful role. It’s like something you’ve earned. It’s like an infra-mince initiation.

Accepting this shirt, which is a ruse made material, you take it to the world, knowing by now that Loo and Yuen’s project has given you a sly and portable frame with which to examine and re-articulate the ordinary world, to make the world anew at every moment.

It’s a big idea – that art joins you to the everyday world of habit, power and compromise – and when you first find this idea refreshed for your delectation in the SASA Gallery, it’s almost nothing, but at the join between the K2-02 and all the institutions, rules, habits and permissions that bind the room in space and time every day, there’s a thin trick you can find that helps you reframe and refocus so that, moment by moment, you might re-make the given world.

NOTES
2. Grosz, Chaos, Territory Art, 14.
12. Jean-Luc Nancy, ‘Is Everything Political? (a brief remark)’ in Project Muse, Philip M. Adamek (trans.) (Michigan: Michigan University Press, 2002) at https://muse.jhu.edu/journals/new_centennial_review/v002/2.3nancy02.html To Nancy, everything may be political only if everything is not total or totalized but de-territorialized.
16. Derrida, H. C. for Life, That is to Say .. . 86.
19. Hyde, The Gift: Imagination and the Erotic Life of Property. 189. ‘The increase does not appear until the gift moves to the third party.’ NOTE: how the K2-02 situation is one of returning the gift – ‘kula ring style’ – keeping the energy in circulation rather than locked up – get the impulses moving.
22. This argument comes from Jean-Luc Nancy’s explanation of politics, and the necessity to move from an economical model of politics, which relies on commensurability and thus equivalence and exchange.
23. The concept of a ‘political economy’ comes from the notion that the ‘well being’ in the home (oikos), interpreted commonly as the self-sufficiency of the human being or the consistency of and confidence in the (a)evaluation of human life as a totalism (for example as part of nature, or an assured place in the world), is extended to the polls. Therefore ‘political economy’ in capitalism generally becomes enacted as the sustenance of wealth creation rather than of well being in the polls as it is in the oikos. See Jean-Luc Nancy, ‘Everything Political’.