

## Introduction

# Tracking the Art of the Project:

*History, Theory, Practice*

---

*Johnnie Gratton and Michael Sheringham*

### Towards an Art of the Project

Rather than responding to the stirrings of inspiration, or meeting the demands of a finished product, contemporary cultural practices often involve setting up experiments, taking soundings, carrying out sets of instructions or sticking to carefully elaborated programmes. The ‘work’ made available to the reader/viewer is then very often an account of the conduct of the project or experiment, the record or trace of its success or failure, its consistency with or deviation from its initial premises. As often as not, such projects and experiments involve ‘self-implication’, putting oneself in the frame or on the line: the writer/artist is physically, intellectually, existentially implicated in the execution and dissemination of the work. The outcome of the project, its final product (if any) may be less important than the procedures that enable it to get underway. The project is frequently a lure, a device designed not to achieve a particular end, but to allow something unforeseen to happen.

The idea of the ‘project’ crosses generic, disciplinary and cultural frontiers. Yet, surprisingly, at a time when writers and artists have never been more inclined to describe their work as constituting or arising from ‘projects’, remarkably little critical attention has been paid to the idea of the ‘project’ as such, despite its many implications for the reception and analysis of practices so described. This book aims to correct this by suggesting a framework for evaluating the notion of the project in the light of various modernist and postmodernist cultural practices that raise its status to that of an ‘art’ in its own right.

Most of the projects discussed here can be characterised as literary or artistic insofar as they are motivated by an ongoing will-to-form that places

the energies of performance and process on at least an equal footing with whatever is destined to emerge as the end-product. Indeed the 'end-product' may so strongly condone the energies of process that it figures itself as one more stage in the process. In many projects, the element of process is supplied by a strong investigative impulse reflecting concerns of a sociological or anthropological nature. In line with the 'ethnographic turn' described by Hal Foster (Foster 1996: 182), such projects offer instances of site-specific, or more broadly site-sensitive, cultural research that regularly shift our attention from art to life, from the aesthetic to the extra-aesthetic, and from the personal to the collective (in short, from the *grand récit* [grand narrative] constituted by the modernist project of art to a more localised and more provocative art of the project). At the same time, in line with the figure of the 'participant-observer' propounded by contemporary ethnography, the writer or artist engaged in a project tends not simply to abandon the register of the personal, but rather to envisage the very practice of the project as blurring any neat distinction between subjectivity and objectivity, experience and experiment.

A regular feature of projects, as represented in this volume, is *re-siting*, which can be taken to refer not only to significant shifts of thematic focus (as just outlined) but also to physical shifts that resituate the writer or artist outside the study/studio and re-site art and writing as forms of experimental fieldwork – 'work in the world', as the American artist Susan Hiller puts it (Hiller 1995: unpaginated). Whereas modernist art endeavoured to create its own place(s), art in the postmodern era has shown a strong tendency to reinvest real space, outside the studio/museum, accepting and indeed asserting that art no longer has a 'proper' place. Across a context far broader than that identified in the 'ethnographic turn', project work as re-siting stems directly from this acceptance of the deterritorialisation of art. Hence the association of projects with the practice of adopting/adapting various professional roles and their attendant sets of working techniques (the artist as scientist, journalist, archivist, archaeologist, private detective, etc.), as well as with less formal but still coded – and therefore refunctionable – roles (such as the traveller, the gleaner, or even the chess player, to mention just some of the examples discussed in this volume).

## A Brief History of the Project

Historically, the art of the project emerges simultaneously in the fields of literature and the visual arts, often in the contexts of movements that bring them together. In the context of literature, we can locate the sources

of an art of the project in ventures where the cult of the author, the preoccupation with form, genre or psychology, and the expression of the inner life are subverted by factors that contest the border between art and the real. Romanticism's break with classical order involved a cult of the individual and of nature that took literature into new fields of autobiographical and perceptual experience. Rousseau's 'solitary walker' is the prototype of a pedestrian army including the Baudelairean *flâneur* and the surrealist explorer of the *merveilleux quotidien* [everyday marvellous]. Hybrid genres such as the essay act as vehicles for the recording of a huge variety of mental and physical adventures. In its often grandiose ambitions, the realist novel from Balzac to Zola betrays a 'scientific' bent that belies the reliance on conventions of plot, character and setting, and the provision of reading matter for the middle classes. Seeking to rival the botanist and the philologist, the novelist accumulates data, invents analytical schemes and devises experiments. Zola's huge dossiers, his manifesto 'Le Roman expérimental' [The Experimental Novel], and his involvement in public affairs, are all highly symptomatic in this regard. In combating realism, modernist writers like Gide and Proust, and late modernist writers such as the *nouveaux romanciers* [new novelists] often make fiction an arm of open-ended investigation, even if this frequently leads to abstraction.

From Baudelaire to the surrealists, who were the first French intellectuals to recognise the importance of Freud, poetry radicalises the Romantic concern with extremes of experience and unfamiliar states of mind: a fusion of psychological and linguistic experimentation becomes a hallmark of avant-garde writing, embracing such figures as Rimbaud and Apollinaire, who opened poetic space to a multiplicity of channels, and Henri Michaux, who wrote about his experiences of taking mescaline. Antonin Artaud's vision of theatrical performance, stressing event rather than representation, helped to give postwar absurdist theatre a strongly project-oriented dimension, in its emphasis on ritual and performance. Along with the visual artists with whom they worked collectively, Apollinaire and the surrealists recognised the power of non-Western traditions where the artwork has a variety of religious and social functions. Anticipating the rise of French ethnography, Victor Segalen's meditations on exoticism are echoed in the journal *Documents* and the work of its founders Georges Bataille and Michel Leiris, whose life-long autobiographical work draws out the 'project' strand in the post-Rousseau tradition of life-writing.

French existentialism has its origins in the same period (the early 1930s) when economic and political malaise encouraged a radical questioning of the individual's position in the world. In fact, Sartre's 1943

treatise *L'Être et le néant* (Sartre 1943) comprises a theory of the 'projet originel' [original project] that aims to replace conventional psychology with a more dynamic and open conception of individual self-fashioning through relation to others and to the world of experience. There are thus many premonitions, in the postrevolutionary literary tradition, of the kind of project on which this book focuses, even if, as we shall see, the art of the project is often strongly opposed to literary institutions and conventions.

Anne F. Garréta's *Pas un jour* (2002) [Not a Single Day] is a recent literary text that clearly reflects the contemporary spirit of the project. Garréta's work also confirms that it is the autobiographical current in modern literature, increasingly innovative in formal and existential terms since the 1970s, that has encouraged projects. Ironically, however, one of Garréta's aims is to combat a recent trend in autobiographical writing that is itself project-driven, namely *autofiction*. In the work of Serge Doubrovsky, who coined the term, and writers such as Alain Robbe-Grillet, Patrick Modiano or Christine Angot who have written in this mode, autofiction involves using the author's real name (as in autobiography), whilst at the same time including patently fictional elements. The effect is to set up a game where the author plays hide and seek with the reader, drawing attention to the processes through which identities are generated in postmodernity. Hostile to what she sees as a narcissistic promotion of the author's image, and a complicity with contemporary obsessions with celebrity, Garréta decided to construct an autobiographical text that adheres to strict ground rules. In an 'Ante-scriptum' she outlines the project. Every day for a month, she will set aside a period of five hours during which she will recount, directly onto her computer, the remembered details of one specific amorous encounter or relationship. At the end of the stint she will stop, whether or not her narrative has fully recalled the episode, or indeed arrived at its climax. No corrections or additions are then allowed. The point is to be faithful to the interaction of memory and desire: to retrace the pathways of desire, while at the same time allowing desiring fantasy to resurface in the act of memory. Each chapter will revive the mixture of control and submission, assertion and deferral, involved in responding to the desire provoked by, or kindled in, another woman (Garréta is a lesbian). Since real people were involved, a pseudonym is given to each partner and the chapters are then presented in alphabetical order, according to these fictitious names.

The bulk of *Pas un jour* then consists in twelve encounters (not the promised thirty) that vary enormously, from crushes and one-night stands to experiences that would result in protracted relationships. At the end, a 'Post scriptum' explains and dissects various ways in which the project

diverged from its guidelines. For a start, Garréta gave up after a few days, and then abandoned writing for several months, feeling that her programme had become a deadly routine, but also aware that she had become hyper-conscious of the anonymous reader to whom, in the terms of the project, she had made so many contractual commitments. This in fact led her, once she had resumed the project, to insert one encounter that was purely fictional. But as this meant the reader would not be able to recognise which chapter it was (barring tell-tale signs), the whole basis of the project was subverted, and control, at least at a fantasy level, was restored to the author. Having decided to stop at twelve encounters, Garréta then agonised at length over the question of publication. Both the women who recognised themselves in the book, and those who found they had been left out, could take offence. She was also concerned that her aim of combating prevailing images and discourses, where subjects are enjoined to parade and pursue the satisfaction of multiple desires, in a climate where the satisfaction of desire is associated with self-image and competitiveness, might in fact have misfired. Perhaps, she wonders, she has merely contributed to the cult and image of desire that she wanted to denounce, promoting herself rather than foregrounding the more gentle and often unresolved meandering of desiring fantasy. Yet this last chapter, which dismantles the project that had been initially assembled, is written in accordance with one principle Garréta claims she never cheated on: that of stopping at the end of a five-hour session. The book therefore ends in suspension and stands as the record of an experiment that changed the author's relationship to herself while challenging the reader to embark on a similar exercise. *Pas un jour* is an excellent example of the way works derived from or consisting in an experimental project can illuminate central issues of contemporary culture.

In the field of the visual arts, the increasing tendency of project work to be driven by documentary or quasi-documentary motives has inevitably led to photography, film and video being considered more project-friendly, or even inherently more 'projectual', than a medium such as painting. It would be wrong to conclude, however, that painting has not played a role in the emergence and practice of projects, or project-like undertakings, within the visual arts. If one of the defining features of the project is 'a direct engagement with the real' (see above), how can we fail to take into account the importance of impressionism as a global attempt to cut through the tradition of landscape painting towards a more direct *perceptual* engagement with the real? With late nineteenth-century impressionism, partly because of industrial developments that made paint available in tubes, the practice of open-air painting came into its own, allowing artists to make 'oil sketches', and not just preliminary drawings,

in direct view of their chosen outdoor motifs. Thus, while an artist like Monet usually completed his works in the studio, the practice of the oil sketch made the impressionist an artist 'for whom the act of representation was theoretically linked to the direct experience of the motif by the painting throughout the act of representation' (Brettell 1999: 95). In line with the aesthetics of the project, the dimension of process has now become visible in and through the finality of the product. That the principal locus of the act of representation has shifted outside the studio is a point that further chimes with the idea of the project, where the practitioner's research regularly takes the form of fieldwork, as opposed to more mediated modes of creativity that invoke the resources of memory and imagination. Furthermore, the immersion of the artist in the environment providing his/her motif links directly with another prominent feature of project work, namely repetition, for the artist's close engagement with the real tends to involve 'a process of sustained direct contact with the chosen site' (Andrews 1999: 192) that in turn yields a *series* of paintings of the same motif, as most strikingly illustrated by Monet's various series (in particular his many *Haystack* paintings of 1890–1) and by Cézanne's ten canvases of the Mont Sainte-Victoire (1902–6).

Just as nineteenth-century painting strongly influenced early photographic pictorialism, so the diversification of serial modes of practice and presentation that accompanied the rapid growth of nineteenth-century photography probably influenced impressionist painters. The paradigm of the photographic series as trace or outcome of a project was already being suggested in the 1850s by the emergence of travel photography. During that decade, photographers were recruited in increasing numbers to help document the findings of archaeological expeditions, most notably in Egypt. In 1851, five major exponents of this new technology were brought together under the aegis of the 'Heliographic Mission' to produce on behalf of the French Administration for Fine Arts a specifically photographic record of the state of important architectural sites throughout France. By the end of the nineteenth century, numerous photographic documentations of the urban construction of modern Paris had already been carried out. To this day, the most famous and prolific among photographers of Paris remains Eugène Atget (1857–1927), who, over some twenty-five years, dedicated his life's work to recording the remaining vestiges of old Paris and its environs. Over this period Atget built up an archive of 7,000 photographs (some say up to 10,000), which he took, and then catalogued, in series, constantly revising his filing system as he added to it. On the door of Atget's premises, a sign read 'Documents pour artistes' [Documents for

artists]—and this at a time when the term ‘document’ carried none of the aesthetic or intellectual value that accrued to it over the course of the twentieth century. His job, he felt, was to offer a service to illustrators, artists and museum curators who need such modest ‘documents’. Only after the discovery of his work by Berenice Abbot and Man Ray in the mid-1920s did it become valued retrospectively as an artistic project of unprecedented import. Man Ray passed the word on to the surrealists (and, through them, to Walter Benjamin), while Abbot took the good news back to the United States, where Atget’s achievement quickly came to be viewed by the likes of Walker Evans as a model of the photo-documentary art that he himself would do so much to foster. Unlike the later ‘humanist’ urban photography of Edouard Boubat, Pierre Doisneau and Willy Ronis, Atget’s photos of Paris, usually taken early in the morning, record an essentially deserted, often ghostly city. Devoid of sentimentalism, they at times display the kind of odd juxtapositions, latent narrative potential, and sense of the *merveilleux quotidien* that were to attract the attention of the surrealists. But overall, Atget’s photographic gaze remained dispassionate, distant, neutral (Buisine 1994: 146). And it is this quality, reinforced by the systematic nature of Atget’s serial and archival practice, that had the greatest impact on subsequent photo-documentary experimentation, from August Sander in the 1930s to Walker Evans in the 1930s and 1940s and Bernd and Hilla Becher in the postwar period.

Although Atget never regarded his enterprise as being in any way artistic, his obsession with his task, his ambition to produce an exhaustive visual record of his chosen field, set an example for generations to come. In this respect, strong echoes of his approach to the art of the project can even be found in the conceptual art of the 1960s and 1970s, sometimes directly, sometimes with an ironic twist, and often with an unsettling mixture of seriousness and irony. A telling example here is Douglas Huebler’s impossibly ambitious and inevitably unfinished archival project, *Variable Piece #70* (1971), in which the artist set out to document the entire population of the world by handing people one of eighty randomly selected signs bearing a cliché (e.g. ‘One person who is as pretty as a picture’) and then photographing them holding the sign. To quote Huebler’s own disarmingly deadpan gloss on his project: ‘Throughout the remainder of the artist’s lifetime he will photographically document, to the extent of his capacity, the existence of everyone alive in order to produce the most authentic and inclusive representation of the human species that may be assembled in this manner’ (quoted in Lippard 1997: 261). More generally, irony creeps into numerous conceptualist projects due to the fact that, in a manner

opposed to projects undertaken in the ‘straight’ documentary and photo-documentary traditions, they often leave the reader/viewer unsure as to what principles or values might have motivated them, apart from a desire to parody the scientific leanings of sociological research. Contemporary project work in the field of the visual arts, and in the interzone between the textual and the visual, is strongly indebted to conceptualism in the way it frequently undercuts the sense of its own point, even while displaying in its results the time, energy and commitment that has gone into the project. In the postconceptualist period, this loss of point often takes the form of a concern for objectivity ensured by what the project artists collectively known as the Boyle Family call ‘motiveless appraisal’ (Boyle Family: unpaginated). As will be shown later in this introduction, the elaboration of ground rules for a project often involves arbitrary decisions and random choices that imply an essentially ludic approach to what in other respects is undertaken as a serious enterprise with scientific or social-scientific ambitions. One of the many questions left for the reader/viewer to address will be that of the extent to which such injections of playfulness, along with hints of irony and fictionality, offer probing commentaries on the documentary norms embedded in contemporary photography, television and filmmaking.

No brief history of the project as a paradigm for the visual arts since the emergence of modernism can underestimate the influence of Marcel Duchamp as it impacted most notably on Dada, prewar surrealism and postwar conceptualism. From his challenging invention of the ‘readymade’ in 1913 to his work on his famous *The Bride Stripped Bare by her Bachelors, Even* (1915–23), Duchamp elaborated a procedural as opposed to substantial approach to art. Having photographed and published a set of his handwritten notes on the latter project in 1914, he waited until 1934 before publishing a further set of notes, drawings and photographs in 1934. Gradually, then, the preparatory work came to assume a status equal to that of the final object, for, as Tony Godfrey contends, ‘words are being published here as visual art’ (Godfrey 1998: 52). As with the sketch or oil sketch in impressionist painting, as with the *avant-texte* in more recent literary ‘genetic criticism’, the artist’s searchings take on an autonomous value alongside his/her findings, and our vision of the end-product becomes transformed and re-enlivened by our understanding of it as the last – or latest – stage of a project.

Finally, the displacement of product in favour of process confirms the existence of strong overlaps between project art and performance art. From this angle, the impressionist ‘oil sketch’ can be seen to anticipate twentieth-century action painting, it being no accident that various photos of Jackson Pollock at work on his canvases have attained an iconic value



equal to that of his completed works. Although performance art has a stronger theatrical dimension than project art, both frequently espouse intermedia and collaborative methods of creation that, as Henry M. Sayre remarks, can be traced back to ‘futurist and dada performance ... and to the entire surrealist enterprise’ (Sayre 1989: 9).

## The Project as an Art of Inter-in-Disciplinarity

Effecting a fusion of the aesthetic and the documentary, the project often has the role of providing an alternative to strictly scientific or abstract modes of understanding. Although he or she often adopts procedures derived from the experimental and investigative sciences, the project artist remains an amateur – indeed amateurism is seen as one of the hidden strengths of the project, underlying its capacity to offer alternative, indirect ways of knowing. In the literary field the emergence of the ‘amateur’ investigator is linked to developments in French thought. The theoretical revolution brought about by the convergence of psychoanalysis, linguistics and ethnography involved the development of new paradigms for the understanding of human reality that contested the approaches and findings of both traditional humanism and supposedly objective disciplines. Drawing on literature, history and the other humanities, the spirit of the ‘human’ sciences countered the pretensions of hard science whilst at the same time promoting radical and unsettling perceptions. Literary movements from surrealism to existentialism played an active part in this endeavour, up to and including the point in the 1950s and 1960s when it was subsumed under the banner of structuralism. But, as is well known, structuralism hardened into an anti-humanist orthodoxy of its own. In this situation writers either adjusted to these new orthodoxies, as the *nouveaux romanciers* and the Tel Quel group did, or found themselves cast as reactionaries.

In the hands of Roland Barthes, structuralist semiology gave a new orientation to social analysis by focusing on the status of representation. The armchair semiologist could study any phenomenon in terms of processes of signification. If in its more austere formulations semiology effectively bracketed out the human subject as social agent in favour of the play of codes, Barthes’s manifest fascination with the minutiae of everyday life led him to take his distance from ‘scientificity’ and to develop styles of analysis where the amateur status of the investigation is underlined – as in his books on Japan, photography, and the discourse of the lover. Barthes figures in the evolution of an art of the project because his work is imbued with a spirit of open-ended enquiry articulated in formal and existential experimentalism.

In the 1960s Georges Perec, a key figure in the contemporary art of the project, attended Barthes's seminar while he was working at the CNRS (Centre national de la recherche scientifique) doing background archival research for scientists. But if semiology as the expression of a fascination with the quotidian was one of the currents that fed into Perec's work, it combined, as he himself noted, with others: autobiography (the impulse to piece together one's life history); a love of wordplay and language games, and their application, as pioneered by the Oulipo group,<sup>1</sup> to the production of texts; and finally a boundless enthusiasm for stories. This constellation of interests – autobiography, the everyday, formal constraints and narrative play – will be ubiquitous in the project work discussed in this book. From the late 1960s Perec conceived his work in terms of a series of often interlocking short- and long-term projects, and he rapidly developed both the persona and the *modus operandi* of the postmodern exponent of the art of the project. He or she is someone who collects, observes, classifies, enumerates, compares, who is rigorous and disciplined while at the same time humorous and irreverent, the practitioner of what we could call inter-*in*-disciplinarity. Although the project is devised and carried out with an exactitude that can border on the manic, the investigator remains unofficial, amateur, a nonspecialist who mixes subjectivity and objectivity, high-minded speculation and parodic subversion.

The 'ethnographic turn' (see above) taken by the visual arts in the final decades of the twentieth century can be evaluated in terms of a number of strategies stemming from the notion of amateurism as just outlined. These will all be seen to share the same basic agenda whereby a documentary urge that originates outside the aesthetic concerns conventionally ascribed to the domain of the arts is at once appropriated and critiqued in the name of art (albeit in a context where, increasingly, the term 'art' is invoked reluctantly, as if for want of a better word).

The notion of amateurism arises specifically as a key aspect of the contemporary practice and use of photography. Much conceptualist work combines text and photographic image, in the latter case not necessarily photos taken by the artist herself. Conceptualists frequently sought to downgrade the domain of the visual, either by placing text within the frame usually filled by a pictorial representation, or else by resorting to pictorial representations that were poor in quality: indexically authentic as documents, yet iconically and aesthetically banal – 'un-arty', 'self-consciously flat' (Godfrey 1998: 178). These are qualities famously illustrated in conceptualist projects such as Dan Graham's *Homes for America* (1966–7: the artist originally wanted to publish this work in a magazine) and Ed Ruscha's *Twenty-Six Gasoline Stations* (1963). But

they are also to be found in the work of numerous later artists, often dubbed ‘postconceptualist’, such as Christian Boltanski, Annette Messager and Sophie Calle. As a prime example of conceptualist ‘reductivism’, the artist and critic Jeff Wall cites the strategy of the ‘amateurisation’ of photography, entailing the elimination of ‘all the pictorial suavity and technical sophistication [photography] had accumulated in the process of its own imitation of the Great Picture’ (Wall 1998: 84). Thus, under the sway of conceptualism, just as the paradigm of the ‘masterpiece’ was regularly subverted by resort to serialism, so the template of the ‘Great Picture’ came to be replaced by that of the humble amateur snapshot. In the case of project work, this strategy not only underlines the amateur status of the agent, but also offers material confirmation of the project as an ongoing process in which the agent is working on the hoof, rather like a photojournalist, with little time to compose his or her shots. The snapshot thus falls into line with the textual practice of note-taking in the course of a project (one thinks of Georges Perec, Sophie Calle, François Bon, Cortázar and Dunlop), a practice almost inevitably undertaken hastily and – prior to the stage of ‘writing up’ – with little concern for ‘literary’ style.

The photoconceptualist ‘amateurisation’ of photography, then, has had a huge impact on post-1970s project art, especially on projects taking the form of expeditions, surveys or investigations. To take but one contemporary example, between 1997 and 2000 the Korean-American artist Nikki S. Lee engaged in a number of projects whereby, having painstakingly altered her clothes, hairstyle, make-up and weight in order to assume the requisite social and physical identity, she proceeded to immerse herself in a variety of subcultures, from punks to yuppies, from Asian schoolgirls to American seniors, from lesbians to exotic dancers, always taking care to explain to the people concerned that she was an artist carrying out a project. The outcome of each project, as realised in a book simply entitled *Projects* (Lee 2001) is a series of colour photos, most of which show Lee herself posing for the camera with the various friends she made over her period of association with each community. In other words, the photos themselves are not even her own, but have been taken either by a close friend or a passing stranger. Indeed, the photos are snapshots taken with a cheap point-and-shoot camera, as evidenced in the regular presence of cases of ‘red eye’ caused by the camera’s in-built flash, and in the date stamp automatically recorded on each print. As Russell Ferguson argues in his preface to the book: ‘the stamp emphasises the amateur quality of the photographs, their lack of conventional composition. It is the mark of the real, of the specificity of a time and place, the evidence of a precise moment when a group of

people were together' (Ferguson 2001: 11). Amateurism produces strong evidential force, but can it produce anything more than that? Each photo is embedded in a series forming the record of a particular project, and, in the book in question, each project is embedded in a series of projects, twelve in all. And it is this serial structure, perhaps, that lends credence to Maurice Berger's contention that closer scrutiny of these photos reveals 'their visual and intellectual sophistication, their raw, uncanny ability to represent the complexity and fluidity of human identity' (Berger 2001: 55).

The cosy connotations of the term 'amateurism' can be set aside if we think rather of contemporary project artists as deploying a critical strategy of 'deprofessionalisation'. Such a strategy might take the form of emulating or infiltrating a particular discipline with a view to laying bare its ideological premises and unsettling its operational conventions – all this in such a way, perhaps, as to open up new possibilities of experience, understanding and evaluation. What James Clifford has called 'self-reflexive ethnography', as exemplified in the 'ethnographic surrealism' practised by André Breton and Georges Bataille, proposes just such a critique of the anthropological tradition, one of its aims being to reopen ethnographic enquiry to subjectivity and invention – or to the 'art' and not just the 'science' of the project. Over the last decades of the twentieth century, one of the main developments within the visual arts has been what the French art theorist Paul Ardenne terms a *redistribution esthétique* [aesthetic redistribution], meaning a voluntary diversion of creative energy into forms of cultural expression situated outside the artistic context. Whether the artist's domain of predilection is ethnographic, journalistic, or more broadly scientific, his/her adoption of it tends rarely to be uncritical. Rather, the shift to that domain takes the form of a *détournement* (originally a situationist term meaning that the domain in question is hijacked, put to a different use, 'refunctioned'), glossed by Ardenne as a complex process of appropriation, displacement and reconfiguration. Thus *détournement* understood as a mode of deprofessionalisation is always already preparing the way for a return to art, understood as constituting not so much an institution, or even a 'home', as, more heuristically, that which is 'entre les diverses productions de la culture, la plus ouverte et la plus disponible' [among all the various productions of culture, the most open-ended and open-minded] (Ardenne 1997: 288, 297, 298).

Among the host of instances offered of such *détournement* in contemporary art, two exemplary cases will be briefly discussed here. Mark Dion is a well-known American project artist who has engaged in work requiring him to adopt and adapt a number of roles, including those

of the biochemist, the ornithologist and the ethnographer. In his *Tate Thames Dig* project (1999), he turns his hand, not for the first time, to archaeology. With the help of a team of collaborators, Dion supervised an excavation of a delimited stretch of the Thames foreshore at Millbank and Bankside. The process of collecting, cleaning, identifying and classifying all the objects unearthed was not only documented textually and visually, but was also kept open to public view, as though to stress the dimension of performance. In directing the project, Dion instructed his team to adopt a ‘scatter-gun’ approach, collecting whatever caught their attention. In line with this conflation of beachcombing and archaeology, the resulting finds were later put on display in the form of a *Wunderkammer*-like installation, in which the gathered material was not necessarily stratified according to historical period: another departure from the norms of archaeological fieldwork practice. In this and other ways, Dion’s project comes to reframe the discipline of archaeology by questioning its aims, pointing in particular to the acquisitive impulse that underlies the history of archaeological endeavour. Thus the project is ultimately neither amateur nor professional, but rather an exploration of the potential opened up by a practice strategically located at the interface between art and archaeology, amateurism and professionalism.<sup>2</sup>

Bruno Serralongue is a French photographer who, believing that the idea of commissioning is historically central to the history of photography, and that, consequently ‘ce n’est pas forcément l’opérateur qui est le plus important dans la pratique photographique’ [the operator is not necessarily the most important person in photographic practice] (Beausse 2002: 10/15),<sup>3</sup> has specialised in taking on photojournalistic assignments. In *Corse-Matin* (1997), Serralongue gained employment as an anonymous reporter with the newspaper whose name yields the title of his project. In so doing, he placed himself under severe constraints, having to allow his work to be determined by both the assignments he was given and the editorial control through which it was subsequently filtered. One mode of exhibition of this project has consisted of the actual double-page spreads of the newspapers in which Serralongue’s reports figure (Beausse et al. 2002:172–81). Another was a series of twenty framed photographs, dominated by portraits. If the determining force of profession on art is graphically evidenced in the first mode, it is far from absent in the second. For, as Serralongue himself insists, the dominance here of the portrait format has less to do with his own power to choose than with the commissioning and editorial protocols that he agreed to accept. This is not, however, to say that Serralongue merely records his knuckling under to the profession that coopted him. After all, the outcomes of his project end up being displayed in galleries and art-books,

in an institutional context that continues to harbour the most ‘open-ended and open-minded’ of our modes of cultural production (see Ardenne, above). The resulting displacement indeed opens up these outcomes to critical as well as aesthetic interrogation, offering both artist and viewer the opportunity, as Serralongue himself puts it, to carry out ‘une sorte de réappropriation de l’information, parce qu’il n’y a aucune raison pour qu’elle soit aux mains des professionnels’ [a kind of reappropriation of information, because there’s no reason why it should be left to the professionals] (Beausse 2002: 14/19).

## The Time and Space of the Project

In most projects the specifications (often made up of self-imposed ordinances) bear on both space (location, itinerary) and time (duration, frequency), as well as on mental and physical ‘acts’ to be performed. Codified as a set of instructions, such specifications are often ironic because their precision accompanies a strong sense of the gratuitous. In projects where space is predominant, we can link this to the impulse to document real topographical sites, urban and natural, a key strand in recent art and writing. Georges Perec’s *Tentative d’épuisement d’un lieu parisien* [Attempt to Exhaust a Parisian Space] (Perec 1982, originally published in 1975) is a classic example of a project involving the exhaustive inventory of a real place, and since 1976 there have been innumerable projects of a similar kind. Another favoured spatial tactic is, as already noted, the itinerary, which we may now look at in some detail via a striking example.

Jacques Réda’s *Le Méridien de Paris* [The Paris Meridian] (1997) logs the author’s attempt to follow the line of the Paris meridian, established by the famous scientist Arago (1786–1853) when he was director of the French Bureau des Longitudes, but superseded when Greenwich was adopted. More precisely, Réda strives to locate the 121 brass plaques with which the Dutch artist Jan Dibbets, with the permission of the municipal authorities, had traced out Arago’s line on the Parisian asphalt between the Porte de Montmartre and the Cité Universitaire near the Périphérique in the south.

This proves to be no easy task, and Réda’s first bulletin, dated 16 December 1996 (the project will involve ten excursions spread over two months), is a characteristically mock-heroic account of his attempt to find the first commemorative ‘pastille’ in the environs of a municipal library, having made it more difficult for himself by embarking on his project shortly before nightfall. Yet this difficulty befits a key aspect of

the enterprise: the meridian is inherently an abstraction, and its materialisation is therefore already paradoxical since it makes physical something that is fundamentally intangible. Not to be able to find the plaques is entirely consistent with the fictitious and abstract notion they seek to make apparent. Dibbets was able to place his small brass plaques bearing Arago's name anywhere he thought fit along the line he must have traced on a map of Paris. Réda sets himself the formidable task, armed with a brochure giving approximate locations, of trying to 'walk' the line, even though it 'traverses' buildings of all kinds, boulevards and parks, and of course 'crosses' the Seine at one point (Réda wonders if he should swim across!).

At one level the project – walking the straight line – is as straightforward as the meridian, yet at another level – that of its execution – the project becomes a place of interaction, an interface between the abstract and the concrete, art and science, the material and the intangible, the mental and the physical, and ultimately the human and the inhuman. As an experiment that remains virtual, the simulation of a 'real' experiment, the project tests the parameters of different kinds of understanding or participation. The space of a project is always poised between the physical and the mental.

Réda's account of his forced deviations makes his narrative comically digressive as he contends with all sorts of impediment, including closed courtyards, plaques obscured by parked vehicles or dirt, and also the fact that, since they are not numbered, he is often not sure if the plaques are in correct order or if he has inadvertently 'jumped ahead'. He is also delayed by encounters with people whose help he enlists, sometimes disastrously (one man becomes so enthusiastic he is hard to shake off), and in one case with a literary acquaintance. This underlines the strangely floating nature of subjectivity in the project (discussed below by Johnnie Gratton), where the protagonist ceases to be his normal self but rather becomes an emanation of the project. Fundamentally, of course, there is little to report given the modest aim of simply finding each plaque and then going on to the next. But if this means that the project is not so much the realisation of a definite aim as the account of its execution, it also means that the digressions and deviations are its very essence. In a key passage Réda notes: 'En tant que tel, au fond, je ne suis pas fou de ce méridien. Je voulais voir ce qui peut se passer d'autre quand on se donne une règle de ce genre, et qu'on s'impose de l'observer; quel imprévu vivant peut surgir au contact d'un strict prévu mathématique. Bien peu de chose a surgi' (32–3) [In the end, I'm not crazy about the meridian itself. I wanted to see what else can happen when you make this kind of rule and force yourself to observe it; whether anything live and unpredictable can

arise from contact with strict mathematical predictability. Not much came up.] If, in his characteristically downbeat style, Réda shifts the focus of the project from a definite goal (identified as an abstraction) to what happens along the way, only to acknowledge that not much turned up (apart from seeing various monuments from unfamiliar angles), his verdict here is disingenuous. In fact the textual record of the project is alive with speculation, nuance, variation, thereby communicating the experience of Paris in rich and unfamiliar ways. Via the project, however footling, the whims and mood swings of the protagonist are seemingly generated by physical propinquity with the city streets in which he circulates, so that they become expressions of that experience. The project makes accessible a level of participation between subject and environment, a fusion or interaction that is usually impossible to detect yet central to the experience of space. Inherently performative, the project has little content but consists essentially in the activities that implement it and that therefore progressively change their character as they take on the contours and colours of the surroundings. As he fantasises about how at any point the meridian could intersect with, run parallel to, or coincide exactly with an outstretched arm, a baguette, a child's toy, or wonders if the postal officers are aware of it as it bisects their working space, or if the meridian is tempted to twang some strings in a music shop it passes through, Réda engages in the kind of counterfactual speculation also favoured by Perec, an activity that aligns the art of the project with utopian imaginings. And, as if to underline the project's performativity, he decides to mark the end of the project with a private ritual by giving one of the last plaques, in the Parc Montsouris, a good polish with the aid of cleaning materials brought along specially for this purpose. Disappointingly, the plaque refuses to shine.

As just seen, the space of the project is increasingly located 'outside' the confines of the writer's study or the artist's studio, in city streets, among local communities, in the thick of the everyday. This re-siting of creative activities takes the form of a *pro-jection* of both the agent and his or her place of work, an outward movement symbolically commensurate with a transgression of institutional confines and the methods deployed within them, and, at a more psychoanalytically pitched level, with a breaking-out from a home or womb. However, just as the impressionist painter eventually returns to the studio to complete his or her project, so the contemporary writer or artist usually comes back 'inside', returning to the fold of 'literature' or 'art' in order to engage in an act or gesture of completion. The relationship between inside and outside is ultimately dialectical, often marked by the figure of an 'airlock', such as François Bon's train compartment in *Paysage fer* [Iron Land] (Bon 2000), or



Cortázar and Dunlop's camper-van in *Les Autonautes de la cosmoroute* [The Autonauts of the Cosmoroute] (Cortázar and Dunlop 1983), fondly described as a 'capsule'. What, then, of the time of the project?

The dialectical complexities of the time of the project are announced in the very semantics of the term 'project'. As an object of linguistic use, the word 'project' may designate something envisaged, something ongoing, or something completed. These dimensions may in turn be taken to represent the main stages of project work. The project begins as an idea that then requires to be developed into a planned undertaking. Thus the stage of envisaging involves what Cortázar and Dunlop, at the beginning of the record of their motorway journey, call the 'preliminaries', covering the period from the initial idea to the formulation of a programme or blueprint. The programme will aim among other things to determine the spatial and temporal parameters of the envisaged course of action, the first in the form of an itinerary or location, the second in the form of a timetable. Rooted in the etymologically indelible make-up of the term 'project', this stage of envisaging, or temporal *pro-jection* into an as yet unrealised and open future, marks an indispensable characteristic of anything regarded or designated as a 'project'.

Seen from the viewpoint of the present, the project is a course of action that is underway, ongoing, in process, usually as a period of accumulation of data, and very often as a period of repeated actions that are likely, in terms of eventual documentation, to yield either a sequential (chronologically determined) format or a serial (thematically determined) format. The former tends to dominate in projects undertaken as journeys or expeditions, the latter in projects undertaken as archival research or surveys. Serial formatting remains the more prevalent feature insofar as it often continues to inform projects presented sequentially. The potential effects of serialism as exploited by different project exponents can range from flattening uniformity (the tendency of repeated actions to become disappointingly routine) to hypnotic absorption, in which case the project may take on the characteristics of a ritual. The French artist Sophie Calle, for instance, regularly refers to her projects as 'rituals'. Indeed, one of her earliest projects, *Les Dormeurs* [The Sleepers] (Calle 2000), carried out in 1979, bears the gorgeously postmodern subtitle 'Provocation de situations arbitraires qui prennent la forme d'un rituel' [Provocation of Arbitrary Situations Taking the Form of a Ritual].

This present dimension is where the time-span of the project comes into play, for the term 'project' strongly suggests a sequence of actions that is relatively long-term, drawn out over time. Correspondingly, an 'art' of the project might suggest engagement in a process that not only

takes time but offers creative ways of using, experiencing, structuring and reappropriating time, and of exploring the effects of time as change and *durée* [duration]. Hence the often unduly ambitious character of many projects, for, while some projects are set within predefined limits of duration, others are temporally open-ended, as in the case of Tom Phillips's *20 Sites n Years*, a photographic 'chronicle of change in the look of things'. The twenty sites in question are located along a half-mile radius around the place in London where the project was originally devised. The contract that Phillips made with himself has required him, ever since 1973, to take a photo at each of his twenty locations once every year on or around the same day, at the same time of day and from exactly the same position. On his website he expresses the hope that 'this process will be carried on into the future and beyond the deviser's death', and, indeed, he reports that his own son has already begun to stand in for him in recent years (Phillips 1992). Few records of urban change have taken on such a wittily epic and modestly committed quality as that devised by Tom Phillips.

Finally, the term 'project' may be used to describe a completed undertaking. But to apply the term in this retrospective way, whether to a book, a film, an installation, or an otherwise exhibited set of textual and/or photographic documents, is necessarily to recognise the trace within the final product of the now past future and past present dimensions of the project. That many such products are in fact not yet final as such, but rather examples of work in progress or of aborted projects, further underscores this sense of the un superseded impact on the 'result' of the project's envisagement and execution. A 'result' is above all a project when the process of accumulation can be seen constantly to jeopardise, even as it calls for, the moment of culmination.

## The Ground Rules of the Project

Ground rules, *contraintes* in French, serve a key role in project work. Perec's genius lay in transposing the spirit of Oulipo from text to life, often programming his existence in the way Dominique Rabaté describes in this book. The constraint can be fairly simple – spending three days noting down everything going on in a Paris square, or making a list of all the food consumed in a year or all the bedrooms one has ever slept in. But one of its functions is to focus attention on what is generally overlooked, on what Perec called the 'endotic' by contrast with the 'exotic'. As Charles Forsdick shows in his chapter below, many projects involve journeys, and what makes the journey conform to the art of the project

are the ground rules that determine its spirit. Thus the writer and journalist Jean Rolin reports in *Zones* (1995) on his decision to circumnavigate Paris by travelling round the Périphérique, the nondescript fringes of the city that used to be known as the 'zone'. Rolin's *contraintes* included an embargo on human exchange – so as to maintain the 'experimental' character of the situation – and a stipulation that he use mediocre hotels and avoid adopting the blinkered perspectives of the sociologist or the journalist. The point – the project – is to observe and to note without prejudging and also to reflect on the paradoxical difficulty of the enterprise. A similar attitude is present in Annie Ernaux's *Journal du dehors* (1993), a logbook of things sighted on journeys on the Métro and RER, and in the *Ville Nouvelle* where the author lives.

In its 'lighter' forms, *contrainte* consists essentially in committing oneself to a certain line of action or behaviour in a specific context, and very often its (negative) function is to help the 'enquirer' avoid the pitfalls of more narrowly based discourses and methodologies. An important influence here is the rise from the early 1980s of new kinds of ethnographic enquiry where anthropological aims and methods developed in the study of exotic peoples are applied to the proximate and home-grown. The aim is not to record strange folklore but to consider everyday behaviour, often in urban contexts, as an object of interest that risks losing its salience if approached through the professional grids of the academic sociologist. In his seminal *Un Ethnologue dans le métro* (Augé 1986), Marc Augé, a distinguished ethnographer of tribal Africa, discusses how one might practise an 'anthropology of the near' by taking the Paris métro as his focus and exploring the kinds of investigation and the types of approach one could bring to this everyday utility. As a subsequent book, *Non-lieux* (Augé 1992) – concerned with the postmodern landscapes of the motorway, the airport, and the shopping-mall – shows, the ethnographer, whilst maintaining his ways of looking, casts off his professional mantle, mixing the objective and the subjective, the descriptive and the analytical. Another kind of project, involving a fairly straightforward constraint, is exemplified by Emmanuel Carrère's *L'Adversaire* (2001), which records the author's obsessive relation with the Romand murder case, where it emerged that Romand had maintained a double life for over twenty years, so that even his own parents, wife and children – ultimately his victims – believed that he was really, as he claimed, a distinguished doctor with a top post in Geneva, when in fact he spent the working day driving around empty Alpine landscapes, and resting in anonymous lay-bys and car parks. Here Carrère's project as a writer involves exploring the implications of his amateur status – he is not a policeman, lawyer, journalist or psychologist – and what it means as a writer to become implicated in the life of his subject.

Numerous projects explore the example set by Perec and other members of the Oulipo group by committing the writer or artist to far more binding forms of *contrainte*. Strict rules are often set to delimit the time, space or itinerary of the project, such that a kind of life-world, or chronotope, is created. Strict rules can also be set for the modalities of the course of action and documentation to be followed over the duration of the project. These stronger ground rules may be conceived by the originator of the project, but may also be left to the decision of others. The work of the French phototextual artist Sophie Calle illustrates both possibilities. In preparing her major exhibition *Doubles jeux* [Double Game] (1998/1999), Calle turned her preparatory work into a project in its own right by deciding that the only retrospective elements to be put on display would be those attributed by the American novelist Paul Auster, in his novel *Leviathan* (1992), to a certain Maria Turner, one of the novel's characters. Since some of the projects ascribed to her fictional counterpart did not follow her own example, she further decided to close this gap by using Auster's novel to generate some new exhibits. Finally, in order to further enhance the 'double' element of 'play', Calle invited Auster to set her a demanding agenda for another new project whereby, this time around, she herself would in effect become one of his fictional characters – hence the exhibit entitled *Gotham Handbook: New York, mode d'emploi* [*Gotham Handbook*] (Calle 1998b/Calle 1999: 234–95), a phototextual log-book of the seven days Calle spent in New York in September 1994 carrying out the novelist's instructions by appropriating a public phone-booth and becoming its uncomfortably diligent caretaker. Needless to say, her account of the project records both her obedience and her disobedience in respect of the rules set by Auster, thereby underscoring that, the more severe the predefined parameters, the more likely it is that the transgressions will occur.

One of the projects realised by Calle in order to bring her closer to her fictional counterpart involved spending and documenting *Des Journées entières sous le signe du B, du C, du W* [Days under the Sign of B, C, & W] (Calle 1998a: 38–61/Calle 1999: 22–31). Calle's recourse to the power of a single signifier to generate both a course of action and its corresponding documentation clearly harks back to the work of the Oulipo group. Indeed, she makes a distinct reference to the most famous member of that group, Georges Perec, in the single text-photo diptych recording her day spent under the sign of the letter W. On this particular day (she chose a weekend) Calle journeyed by train, in a *wagon-lit*, to the Walloon region of Belgium. The items she brought with her, photographed in the train compartment (figure 0.1) and inventoried in the adjacent text, include a Walkman, a laptop allowing her to access the World Wide Web,

the writings of Walt Whitman, and a copy of Perec's part-fictional, part-autobiographical work, *W ou le souvenir d'enfance* (1975) [W or The Memory of Childhood]. Yet this very specific type of generative device also proves to be very much of its own time, for it connects to a pervasive use in contemporary art of what might be called the 'singular determinant' – this in a broadly experimental sense (depending on the nature of the project, the key ground rule may appear to be randomly



**Figure 0.1** Sophie Calle, *A Day Spent under the Sign of W*. © Sophie Calle. Reproduced with the photographer's permission.

chosen, ludic, eccentric or downright inappropriate), if not in the strictly numerical sense (since the key ground rule does not necessarily preclude the enlistment of further rules). Thus, in 1996, the artist Joël Hubaut invited the population of Deauville to turn up at the town square wearing red, or carrying red flags, or in their red vehicles. He produced a photographic record of what his call-to-arms described as this ‘installation éphémère’ [fleeting installation] (Ardenne 1997: 414) and went on later to repeat the same operation elsewhere, this time with the colour green. The ‘singular determinant’ invoked by the French photographer Luc Choquer for one of his ongoing projects is, rather differently, the axis of the ‘green meridian’ crossing France from North to South. Here, unlike Jacques Réda (see above), the project deviser is not *directly* concerned with the meridian, but uses it rather to delimit a thin geographical cross-section of France, a line on a map along which to conduct a survey designed to yield a portrait of contemporary French society. As is frequently the case, this singular determinant governs the selection of a target area and a target group. The actual conduct of the project is based on a further set of methodological ground rules. Thus Choquer proceeds by making the acquaintance of people living along the meridian, asking all of them the same set of questions, photographing them, and video-recording each interview. The results of this labour of love, begun in 1995, are documented on DVD disk under the title *Fragments du futur* (Choquet 2001). Although random sampling of the kind delimited by Choquer’s ‘singular determinant’ overlaps with an established mode of sociological enquiry, his *choice* of determinant would strike most sociologists as very odd, to say the least. Indeed, his manner of ‘sampling’ appears rather to be an attempt to merge sociological or ethnographic ‘sampling’ with ‘sampling’ as understood in the field of contemporary music, in other words with a compositional process that involves lifting, quoting or appropriating ready-made material that is not of one’s own making. Allusions might be detected in this procedure, moreover, to cubist collage and more recent ‘appropriation art’ in general. Thus, mechanically as much as creatively, a photograph ‘lifts’ an image from the visible world; a video interview ‘lifts’ the words and gestures of other people; and a survey conducted along an imaginary line ‘lifts’ a portrait of an entire society from a thin geographical sliver of France. Choquer’s example shows how the process of ‘lifting’ has shifted by the end of the twentieth century from an explicit to a less strident mode of political commentary. To invoke the note struck by Agnès Varda in her film *Les Glaneurs et la glaneuse* (examined in this volume by Emma Wilson), ‘lifting’ has taken on a more modest sense of ‘gleaning’.

One of the most noteworthy types of ‘singular determinant’ enlisted by contemporary project artists is the linguistic signifier (and one should note here that Hubaut’s ‘red’ understood as a label and Choquer’s meridian understood as a map-line, an ‘abstraction’, might also be construed as signifiers). Where Calle, following Auster, invokes letters of the alphabet, others invoke *names*. For the exhibition ‘Voilà: Le Monde dans la tête’, held in Paris from June to October 2000, the French artist Bertrand Lavier turned curator, compiling an embedded exhibition entitled ‘La Peinture des Martin 1900–2000’ that consisted entirely of sixty-five different works produced by the same number of artists, all with the surname Martin (the commonest surname in France). Here, the generating signifier is used, according to Lavier’s own blurb for the exhibition, ‘pour constituer une mémoire non sélective de l’art du XX<sup>e</sup> siècle’ [to constitute a non-selective memory of the twentieth century]. Thus the name as singular determinant brings about an instant democratisation of the normally elitist space of the art museum by ensuring that the often technically poor work of amateurs will stand alongside works of often much greater artistic merit. Indeed, the deployment of ‘singular determinants’ often has egalitarian implications in project art. The British artist Stephanie Bolt has been involved for some time in an ongoing project called ‘The Browns’. Her brief is to contact every ‘A. Brown’ in the British telephone directories and to ask them to send her a photo of themselves, with a view to forming a ‘living archive’ of contemporary life (Yorath 2000: 131). A similar goal, and one in which we again find strong echoes of Choquer’s methods and ambitions, lies behind a book by a young Frenchwoman, Sabine Euverte, entitled *Soixante-treize histoires de Nathalie* [*Seventy-Three Stories of Nathalie*] (Euverte 1999). Taking the popular first name Nathalie as the generator of her delimited yet nonselective target group, Euverte used the French ‘minitel’ network and advertisements in a national newspaper (much as Choquer uses the map of France) to undertake a systematic trawl of all the Nathalies in France. In her book, she introduces us to some 200 Nathalies with whom she made contact over a six-month period, recounting their stories as elicited from interviews, and including a photo of each interviewee, taken by a photographer who accompanied her. Finally, working in the same vein, but this time using his own full name, the photographer Keith Morris has undertaken, with the help of Welsh telephone directories, to contact all the Keith Morrisises in Wales, not just in order to photograph them, but also, by delimiting ‘a manageable slice of modern Wales’, to interview them. His ultimate goal is to explore issues of personal and national identity through a ‘comprehensive’ project whose results will be interesting enough

eventually to be lodged in the National Library of Wales (Morris: unpaginated). Thus, in the various quasi-ethnographic projects just discussed, the enlistment of a singular determinant delimits a nonselective, or arbitrarily selective, target group in order to accommodate an exhaustive ambition requiring considerable time, effort and perseverance on the part of the project's designer.

Each of the above projects sets up a systematic sampling or sounding process that, from the perspective of the professional surveyor, would nevertheless be considered to be far too experimental and arbitrarily selective for methodological comfort. Indeed, each project deviser is clearly unapologetic about having a strong subjective investment in his/her work. More broadly, each uses a single generative signifier in order to mobilise a project accommodating an impulse that is both 'amateur' and 'professional', subjective and objective: 'inter-*in*-disciplinary'. Each, in other words, invokes a consciously unconventional and highly restrictive rule of selection in the service of a heuristic undertaking, an *art* of the project.

## Exploring the Art of the Project

The types of project with which this book is concerned tend to explore the border areas between art, life, and various forms of order and knowledge, playing with rules and constraints, invoking systems or methods of understanding, but in an amateur spirit, producing 'works' yet drawing the audience's attention more to the (often mental) process than to the finished product.

Wendy Grossman's contribution looks at Man Ray, whose central place in the history of twentieth-century avant-garde movements (Dada and surrealism, and then modernism more generally) derives in large part from his pioneering use of photography as a conceptual medium, a tool with which to question the boundary between the document and the artwork. Tracing in detail the motif of chess, an obsession Man Ray shared with his friend Marcel Duchamp, Grossman shows how the grid of the chessboard and the rule-bound arena it circumscribes become the talisman of the artist's highly personal project, one that both contributes to and subverts the wider, teleological project of modernism. Playing his own game and foregrounding his persona as a player enables Man Ray, in his famous Black and White series notably, to plot complex issues of gender and culture.

Game is also central to Charles Forsdick's discussion of some recent examples of travel writing, a genre whose potential is often said to have



been exhausted by the demise of modernity's drive to conquer and codify, but which, when reconceived as project rather than achievement, can tell us a great deal about the contemporary world. Forsdick focuses on two journeys where the whole panoply of the epic voyage is playfully applied to the near at hand rather than the distant. Julio Cortázar and Carol Dunlop spend a month on the Paris-Marseilles Motorway, committing themselves to stay within the confines of the various rest-stops on the way; François Maspero and Anaïk Frantz spend a similar period exploring the B-line of the Parisian suburban RER rail network, staying at a different hotel each night and interviewing the local inhabitants. 'Travel as project', where the constraints adopted force the participants constantly to rethink what they are doing, turns out to be surprisingly fertile and revealing.

The reality TV show is another forum where life is played out in the experimental conditions of a game with strict ground rules. Focusing on *Loft Story*, Ingrid Wassenaar identifies the principal mechanisms at work in this French version of *Big Brother* as the desire for (but also the fear of) self-exposure, and the fear of (but also the desire for) elimination. Highly questionable in its financial motivation and in the way it 'projects' the intimacy of strangers into our living rooms, reality TV, through the creation of controlled situations that are also open-ended ('who will survive?') places the construction of social identities under intense scrutiny. Through analysis of a key sequence involving the expulsion of one of the 'housemates', Wassenaar argues that the ludic project of reality TV explores fundamental questions concerning attachment and indifference between individuals in modern society.

Like other contributors, Dominique Rabaté is concerned with the existential implications of project work. He parallels Georges Perec's abandoned project, *Lieux*, which in theory committed the writer to visiting twelve locations in Paris in a different order each year for twelve years; Roman Opalka's decision in 1965 to spend the rest of his life painting an uninterrupted sequence of numbers in white on a steadily lightening background, accompanied by recordings of his voice and photographs of himself; and Jean-Benoît Puech's transmutation of his private diary into the 'fictional' works of an imaginary writer. In each case the decision to embark on a project involves a compulsive long-term pre-programming of one's existence, and the risk of reducing oneself to a purely instrumental operator. Rabaté considers how these ventures reflect fundamental concerns such as the modern obsession not to waste one's time, and the tension between life and death drives: the desire for freedom or open-endedness, and the (deathly) desire for repetition and closure.

In her account of Agnès Varda's *Les Glaneuses et la glaneuse*, Emma Wilson shows how new technologies – digital video and DVD – enable

documentary film, rooted in encounters with the real, to be an ideal vehicle for the art of the project. Varda uses gleaning, itself an activity based on chance and recycling, as a way of exploring public themes – poverty, waste and individual survival, embedded in the lives of her interviewees – and private themes, notably her own mortality and the relation between her art and the encroaching shadows of bereavement and loss. Wilson argues that it is this willingness to place her own vulnerability at the centre of the film that makes Varda's enterprise, whose open-endedness is enacted in the sequel *Deux ans après*, with its updates, and additional material on the DVD, an authentic instance of a quasi-ethnographic project where the artwork brings about a genuine interaction of self and other.

A number of contributors to this volume set their analyses within the broad cultural and historical context of the shift from modernism to postmodernism. Kate Ince, for example, situates the project work of the French artist Sophie Calle in the space of two overlapping intersections, one between the artist's life and art, the other between postmodernism and feminism. She reads Calle as embodying a postmodern aesthetic that matches certain principles enunciated by Jean-François Lyotard and Jean Baudrillard. With regard to feminism, she characterises Calle's video and phototextual projects as 'games with the gaze' that audaciously extend the range of possibilities of visual and spectatorial agency available to women. Finally, the conjunction of postmodernism and feminism in Calle's work is argued to constitute a nexus favouring the emergence of an experimental subjectivity that is ongoing and self-displacing, never fixed.

Pursuing the question of experiments with subjectivity, Johnnie Gratton examines how the subject is affected by his/her involvement in the project. In an overview of recent phototextual experiments, he argues that project work produces an 'attenuation' of the powers of agency and initiative normally ascribed to the subject as author/artist, singling out four factors in particular that tend to bring about this partial disempowerment: collaboration and delegation; the characteristic open-endedness of projects; the appeal to documentary models; and the use of ground rules. While insisting that attenuation does not amount to an outright elimination of the subject (of the kind advocated by structuralism), Gratton moves on to a more detailed reading of work by Raymond Depardon and François Bon in order to suggest that the 'pull' of the project, once enforced by a set of ground rules and mediated by the use of the camera, can nevertheless be such as to bring the subject close to experiencing a sort of 'transpersonalisation' *into* the project.

Douglas Smith examines how André Malraux's seminal work *Le Musée imaginaire* (1947) formed part of a broader personal project that

came over time to resemble a *grand projet* – an expression designating the grandiose building projects commissioned by various French presidents since the Second World War. Smith traces the different meanings that the project took on as its context changed. Initially admired as a reaffirmation of humanism, and more broadly of the modernist project of emancipation, Malraux's project went on to be reviled as an elitist programme advocating an unassailable canon and, later still, as an ethnocentric programme subordinating the art of very diverse cultures to a heavily Western bias. Only with the advent of a more postmodernist aesthetic, one attuned to the techniques of phototextual montage deployed by Malraux, did certain personal projects such as those of Jean-Luc Godard and Chris Marker once more begin to explore the idiosyncratic elements of Malraux's work in a more positive light.

Edward Welch's chapter equates the modern era with the era of the project as grand plan, as evidenced most notably in projects of urban renewal. Focusing on the example of the Pompidou Centre in Paris, Welch examines how Marc Petitjean, a French photographer living in an apartment overlooking the construction site, undertook a personal, comparatively small-scale project that involved him in documenting the physical and social changes wrought by this *grand projet*. Like other examples Welch discusses of writers and photographers engaged in 'small' projects about 'big' projects, Petitjean is shown to work from the ground up, thereby offering a critique of the abstract, rationalist vision of modernity by foregrounding its top-down effects at the level of concrete experience. Thus, by working empirically, the exponent of the 'small' project emerges as an amateur in the *dissident* sense of that term so strongly highlighted throughout the writings of Roland Barthes.

Dominique Viart's wide-ranging review of trends within contemporary French writing sets out from the premise that, contrary to the opinion that this body of writing appears to have lost its way, it is not truly 'without a project' but has rather changed the way it discovers and elaborates its sense of project. Disenchantment with modernist avant-gardism is shown to be rife, with the onset of a postmodern sensibility undercutting any sense of strong commitment to a utopian future or to theoretical discourses that would set out world-changing agendas. The writer's projects can no longer be confidently teleological along the lines of the *grands récits* [grand narratives] identified by Jean-François Lyotard as the intellectual models espoused by modernism. Instead, according to Viart, contemporary writers such as Pierre Michon and François Bon compose a *trajet* [trajectory] along which a 'progressive consciousness' of being involved in a project emerges in the course of writing.

Michael Sheringham's chapter studies how the art of the project has served as the medium for recent investigations of the theory and practice of everyday life (Lefebvre, Blanchot, Barthes, Perec, et al.). He argues that the affinities between the project and the everyday may be found in a common resistance to the dead hand of abstract systems of knowledge and classification, and in a common tactic of obliquity. Stressing that projects avoid prejudging their outcome or product by creating a gap between action and goal, setting up procedures based on a protocol that fosters open-endedness, he shows how this chimes with the elusive nature of the everyday. Sheringham then focuses at length on François Bon's *Paysage fer* (2000), analysing the ways in which Bon's project, involving the attempt to note and classify things seen from a train window, in the course of a regular weekly journey, provides oblique and fleeting insights into the imperilled everyday of rural France.

Finally, although it carefully avoids any reference to the debate over the relationship between modernism and postmodernism, Patrick French's analysis of the 'aesthetics of existence' as outlined in the later work of Michel Foucault echoes the advocacy of experimental (as opposed to self-ratifying) subjectivity found in numerous projects characterised by other contributors to this volume as 'postmodern'. Developed out of his studies of various Greek and Roman philosophers, Foucault's notion of 'life as a work of art' is not to be understood in terms of a wilful activity carried out by a given self upon itself. Consistent with Foucault's long-standing interest in 'limit-experiences', the project of living one's life as a work of art is shown rather to take place 'at the limits of ourselves', where it propels the subject along a path towards madness, death or suicide. Uniquely perilous among the lines of self-fashioning drawn by the various experimental projects – and corresponding experimental subjectivities – tracked in the course of this book, Foucault's project nevertheless echoes the departure of these other projects from the modernist line taken by Jürgen Habermas in his famous and much debated essay 'Modernity: An Incomplete Project' (1983), where the German philosopher called for a return to the Enlightenment vision of a society progressing towards social emancipation through adherence to the principles of reason and rationalisation. To this end, Habermas favoured the instrument of 'communicative reason', the aim of which was to achieve consensus. Countering this 'grand narrative' with a postmodern vision of proliferating 'small narratives', Lyotard considered emancipation to be possible only through persistent 'dissensus'. At this general level, Lyotard and Foucault are very much on the same side. Indeed, it is arguably this persistence of dissent from the overarching projects of social and cultural engineering (whether of our environment

or of our selves), a dissensus often channelled through the figure of the writer/artist as amateur, that gives many of the ‘small’ or personal projects investigated in these pages their experimental impetus.

## Notes

1. Oulipo, a group founded in 1962 by Raymond Queneau and others, stands for ‘Ouvroir de littérature potentielle’ [workshop for potential literature]. Its members have included Perec, Italo Calvino and Anne F. Garréta (discussed above) and its aims were to experiment with ways of producing literary texts through the use of formal patterns and rules.
2. In this paragraph, we are indebted to the essays and illustrations collected in *Mark Dion: Archaeology* (Renfrew et al. 1999).
3. The essays in this book are offered both in French and in English translation.

## References

- Andrews, Malcolm. 1999. *Landscape and Western Art*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Ardenne, Paul. 1997. *Art: L'Age contemporain: Une Histoire des arts plastiques à la fin du XXe siècle*. Paris: Editions du Regard.
- Augé, Marc. 1986. *Un Ethnologue dans le métro*. Paris: Hachette.
- . 1992. *Non-lieux*. Paris: Seuil.
- Beausse, Pascal. 2002. ‘Entretien avec Bruno Serralongue’/‘Interview with Bruno Serralongue’, in *Bruno Serralongue*, 10–14/15–19.
- Beausse, Pascal, Eric Troncy and Alexis Vaillant. 2002. *Bruno Serralongue*. Dijon: Les Presses du Réel.
- Berger, Maurice. 2001. ‘Picturing Whiteness: Nikki S. Lee’s *Yuppie Project*’, *Art Journal*, vol. 60, no. 4: 55–57.
- Bon, François. 2000. *Paysage fer*. Lagrasse: Editions Verdier.
- Boyle Family. ‘Introduction’. <http://www.boylefamily.co.uk/boyle/about/index.html>.
- Brettell, Richard. R. 1999. *Modern Art 1851–1929: Capitalism and Representation*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Buisine, Alain. 1994. *Eugène Atget ou la mélancolie en photographie*. Paris: Editions Jacqueline Chambon.
- Calle, Sophie. 1998a. *De l’obéissance*, vol. 1 of *Doubles-Jeux* (7 vols). Arles: Actes-Sud.
- . 1998b. *Gotham Handbook*, vol. 7 of *Doubles-Jeux*. Arles: Actes-Sud.
- . 1999. *Double Game*. London: Editions Violette.
- . 2000. *Les Dormeurs*. Arles: Actes-Sud.
- Carrère, Emmanuel. 2001. *L’Adversaire*. Paris: POL.
- Choquer, Luc. 2001. *Fragments du futur* (DVD-ROM). Paris: Trans Photographie Press.
- Cortázar, Julio and Carol Dunlop. 1983. *Les Autonautes de la cosmoroute: Ou un voyage intemporel Paris-Marseille*. Paris: Gallimard.

- Ernaux, Annie. 1993. *Journal du dehors*. Paris: Gallimard.
- Euverte, Sabine. 1999. *Soixante-treize histoires de Nathalie*. Rodez: Editions Subervie.
- Ferguson, Russel. 2001. 'Let's Be Nikki', in Lee 2001, 7–19.
- Foster, Hal. 1996. *The Return of the Real*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Garréta, Anne F. 2002. *Pas un Jour*. Paris: Grasset.
- Godfrey, Tony. 1998. *Conceptual Art*. London: Phaidon.
- Hiller, Susan. 1995. 'Interview with Susan Hiller'. <http://www.diacenter.org/hiller/interview>, first printed in *Frieze* 23, 1995.
- Lee, Nikki S. 2001. *Projects*. Ostfildern-Ruit, Germany: Hatje Cantz Publishers.
- Lippard, Lucy. 1997. *Six Years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Morris, Keith, 'Keith Morris by Keith Morris X 71'. <http://www.cambria.demon.uk/snapper/keith/keith.htm>.
- Perec, Georges. 1975. *W ou le souvenir d'enfance*. Paris: Editions Denoël.
- . 1982. *Tentative d'épuisement d'un lieu parisien*. Paris: Christian Bourgois.
- Phillips, Tom. 1992. '20 Sites n Years: A Remembrance at 20 Years (1992)', <http://www.tomphillips.co.uk/sculptur/20sites/20rem.html>.
- Réda, Jacques. 1997. *Le Méridien de Paris*. Paris: Fata Morgana.
- Renfrew, Colin, Alex Coles, Emi Fontana and Robert Williams. 1999. *Mark Dion: Archaeology*. London: Black Dog Publishing.
- Rolin, Jean. 1995. *Zones*. Paris: Gallimard.
- Sartre, Jean-Paul. 1943. *L'Être et le néant*. Paris: Gallimard.
- Sayre, Henry M. 1989. *The Object of Performance: The American Avant-Garde since 1970*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Wall, Jeff. 1998. 'Marks of Indifference: Aspects of Photography in, or as, Conceptual Art', in Elizabeth Janus (ed.), *Veronica's Revenge: Contemporary Perspectives on Photography*, 73–90. Zurich: Scalo.
- Yorath, Dave. 2000. *Photography: A Crash Course*. New York: Watson-Guption Publications.