An Art Without Qualities: Raivo Puusemp's "Beyond Art -- Dissolution of Rosendale, N.Y.”

Submitted by Stephen Wright on Wed, 2013-09-11 18:20

Indisputably one of the most exceptional documents in the history of concept art -- made up of archival material from one of the most thought-inspiring operations in the history of art on the 1:1 scale -- has recently been republished by Dublin's Project Arts Centre. Entitled Beyond Art - Dissolution of Rosendale, N.Y., it traces New-York conceptualist Raivo Puusemp's two-year tenure as mayor of the chronically conflicted and debt-beleaguered village of Rosendale, N.Y. between 1975 and 1977, from his election campaign to his resignation after successfully redrawing the political boundary lines, dissolving the bankrupt village and incorporating it into the neighbouring township of the same name. Puusemp's intervention, if we can call it that since he carefully avoided such artworldly jargon and at no time boasted that what he was doing was "art," has virtual urban-legend status in concept-art circles, after having been famously championed by Allan Kaprow in The Blurring of Art and Life. In fact, it seems that Puusemp's self-understanding as to the status of his political involvement and its outcome -- was it an artwork? an art-informed process? -- evolved over the course of his term as mayor. Yet, as he makes clear in his pithy introduction, Rosendale, A public work stemmed directly from his conceptual practice. It would be Puusemp's last acknowledged artistic project. And indeed, given its radically low coefficient of specific visibility, it is only thanks to Puusemp's friend Paul McCarthy that these documents were assembled and published at all -- in 1980, by the now defunct collective, Highland Art Agents. Upon resigning as mayor, Puusemp left Rosendale forever, moving to somewhere in Utah, and thereby joining the nebula of "offroad conceptualists" who have withdrawn from the artworld attention economy into the shadows, never performing what they do as art.

Of course plenty of things are not performed as art (in many cases because they just aren't) although their coefficient of art -- in terms of their form, contextual engagement and the competence they epitomize -- would be largely adequate for them to successfully lay claim to artistic status. And it is precisely this issue which makes Raivo Puusemp's short preface to Beyond Art so compelling. From it can be deduced an entirely original and under-theorized line of institutional critique as the backdrop to his project to instantiate a plausible new artworld in Rosendale, A public work.

But before considering the underpinnings of the project laid out in the document's preface, let's pause for a moment to consider just exactly what "not performing art" means in the case of Raivo Puusemp. Since his stint as mayor of Rosendale, Puusemp has ceased making art; he hasn't even done art. But he's thought it. Meaning that he's not so much a former concept artist, as that he remains an artiste sans oeuvre. Not in the affected sense of a dandy, but with the infectious humility of concept art. As he put it in a recent public conversation with curator Krist Gruijthuijsen at the Utah Museum of Contemporary Art (one of the venues to recently host a retrospective of the artist's work, up to and including his stint as mayor) Puusemp acknowledged as much, at least implicitly, describing how his relationship to art had itself become conceptual. “I've always thought about art, I just haven't done it. I would see something, and think someone should do that. But I would never do it myself.”

It's like concept art gone fallow, and then perhaps to seed -- which is actually very consistent with Puusemp's work prior to withdrawal. There is something Spinozian in that statement of art going conceptual: for Spinoza, after all, self-contentment (acquiescentia in se ipso) arises from contemplating one's agency or power of activity. But without, of course, actually acting. While there is legitimate -- though somewhat pointless -- we are supported by the enthusiasm and generosity of invisible people worldwide. are you invisible?
concern about how concept art has been reified or selectively recuperated, it is hard to imagine how an attitude as *imperformative* as Puusemp's could possibly be "recuperated" in any way, shape or form. He merely sees conceptual-artistic potential in any number of situations, relations and things, contemplates making it art, but leaves the doing, the making, the "performing" (or not) to others.

Of course, this principled imperformativity only makes sense against Puusemp's background as an active artist in the 1970s. This is the paradox of the imperformative: not-doing only has traction against a horizon of reasonable expectation of an ability-to-do and the deed itself. Countless things don't get done, but the imperformativeness implies that something actually eludes performative capture -- that it is done quietly, and not necessarily materially (who knows?) in the shadows. And the shadow of the deed is the idea. But the very fact that Puusemp would be inclined to contemplate people performing (or not) ideas he had thought of, also stems directly from his previous artistic practice.

Here's how Allan Kaprow describes Puusemp's "real experiment": "He would apply to Rosendale what he had been doing as an artist in group dynamics and predictive behaviour. He would consider the project an artwork in the form of a political problem. So he ran, successfully, for the office of mayor. His campaign didn't mention art. Nor did it mention disincorporation. Instead, it proposed an upbeat community involvement in the political process 'that accentuated the positive' (as local newspapers described it)."

Beyond Art: Dissolution of Rosendale, N.Y. documents that process through a selection of official records, legal letters, public notices, minutes of village meetings, and clippings from the local newspapers. Through them it becomes clear that though more conservative townspeople showed, at least initially, active hostility toward their new mayor, Puusemp actually encouraged their often vociferous (and no doubt sometimes calumnious) interventions in the townhall meetings he organized. Kaprow sums it up this way:

"He came to Rosendale, detached from its history and personalities, and made it possible for everyone to see what had to be done. The vote to dissolve was theirs, not his. But it must be added that besides helping the village to put its practical affairs in order, Puusemp was able to reduce long-standing factionalism and to reassure townspeople that dissolution did not have to mean the loss of neighborhood and community (as some had feared). Through the process of coming to grips with the village's troubles and deciding to dissolve, they spent more time together and assumed more conscious responsibility for their community than they had for a long time. In this small saga it was crucial that although Puusemp had approached the survival problem of Rosendale with a Conceptual artist's theory of social behavior in mind, he applied that theory in day-by-day human terms."

The exemplarity of what Puusemp did stems neither from the scope nor the impact of the action but rather from the inseparability of the artistic gesture from the everyday act in terms of scale. He was operating on the 1:1 scale. Puusemp approached politics as a social medium. One which has to be worked with and learned. "Deliberate changes in political structure don't just happen," he argued, "they are planned and occur because they seem inevitable. To make changes seem inevitable requires a clear structure and a systematic process." His tenure as mayor of Rosendale was part of a broader political shift in his conceptual practice: he went from observing physical relationships to observing and becoming engaged in social relationships, the function of the artist in both cases being, as he put it at the time, to define "structure where one was not evident before."

Of course, once structure can be made consistently evident, outcomes become predictable. This is something the mainstream artworld consistently brushes under the carpet, priding itself as it does on its audacity and unpredictability, all the while being engulfed in foreseeable moves. For a structural observer like Puusemp, art making started to feel like a game he no longer wanted to play -- at least not at the assigned level. By the time he got to Rosendale in the mid 1970s, he was a successful artist, making "physical and perceptual discoveries" which, as he put it, he would then...
"package attractively, compatible with existent art forms," thereby virtually ensuring they were "well received." Success in the artworld attention economy must have felt ludicrously easy.

Several things happened that would lead Puusemp to choose to move into the shadows. For one thing, he became involved with an underground group in New York City called "Museum" which allowed him to understand art as an essentially collective endeavor and to gain insight into group dynamics and process. But above all, he writes, "it became apparent that art was a continuum of predictable steps each built upon the last. It seemed that by being familiar with the then accepted formal parameters of art, and by doing work within those parameters, there was a great likelihood of art community acceptance of that work. Creative leaps were reduced to inevitable innovations and predictable steps. I became fascinated with the process of conception to completion rather than the product. From that point, I found it difficult to continue making art within the standard context."

His discovery of this "predictable innovation principle" clearly tempered Puusemp's enthusiasm for art-as-usual. Though it is pure inference to say so (since almost nothing written by this fascinating artist has been published -- hence the importance of this republication), for Puusemp knowledge seems inseparably bound up with disenchantment -- the disenchantment brought on by predictability, itself a consequence of some kind of strategic capture of energy. At any event, in 1970, on the basis of this disenchantment and as an utterly original form of what today could be called "institutional critique," Puusemp began his "idea plants," planting ideas for art works in unsuspecting would-be artists' minds, then waiting for the artworld to reap what he had clandestinely sown. The principle for these "influence pieces" was this:

"If it was correct that the next step in art was predictable, then it didn't matter who took it. Anyone actualizing that step would enjoy some degree of acceptance based on the accuracy of apparent inevitability of that step. The steps might be suggested to someone else and they might produce the work, unaware of my influence. When their piece was accepted by either being published or shown, my piece would be completed. The principal worked, the process was predictable. I became somewhat apprehensive of the manipulative aspects of this direction and discontinued any further pursuit."

Rosendale, A Public Work -- involving some 1500 townspeople in a process of political will formation -- emerged directly from this research and these misgivings, because the political, Puusemp reckoned, was the one sphere where influence and concept, contingency and structure, come together compatibly. The "predictable innovation principle" which led to it, however, relying as it does on an intimate familiarity with the "accepted formal parameters" such that "art community acceptance" was predictably likely to be achieved (kind of like trolling with a fish finder), bears a certain resemblance to Pierre Bourdieu's thought which was emerging at the same time -- unbeknownst to Puusemp, presumably, though it would be interesting to verify that. Bourdieu argued that actors in a given "field" (such as the art field) possess a kind of pre-reflexive knowledge he referred to as "habitus" as to what was expected of them in order to succeed, and what degree of dissidence or non conformity would be tolerated or found praiseworthy. A high-level athlete, for instance, would "know" what to do, and where to be, in any given configuration on the field; Bourdieu set out to debunk this supposedly "uncanny" premonition of players by objectifying its structure using a new set of conceptual tools and vocabulary. Specifically, habitus names those dispositions through which we perceive, judge and act in the world -- what Puusemp more simply called "familiarity." These subconscious shemata are acquired through lasting exposure to social conditioning and the internalization of constraints and possibilities. As such, they are shared -- and can ultimately be formalized -- by people with similar experiences, however different each individual may be. Habitus implies that these systems of dispositions are malleable, since they inscribe into the body the constantly shifting influence of the field. It sounds more mechanical than it really is, and in rough-and-ready practice is obviously quite messy (which is why artists, for instance, typically display disjointed habitus, mirroring their irregular conditions of living and may show signs of segmented or conflicted dispositional sets). But still, integrated field theory does provide heuristic insight into actors motives and choices. And this is because habitus plays itself out in a field -- that is, a structured
space of positions, or force field -- that imposes specific determinations on all who enter. Fields are both arenas of struggle (for acceptance, recognition and hierarchy) and autonomous spaces, jealously preserving their internal criteria of judgment against axiological incursion from other fields.

Of course, once a field's immanent logic has been decoded -- as Puusemp felt he had done when he began his idea plants, then again when he undertook to redraw the boundaries of Rosendale by getting himself elected as mayor, and perhaps subsequently when he took concept art the whole nine yards to simply seeing the coefficient of art in any number of situations and relations -- it's time to change fields.

The interesting thing is that fundamental shifts in the way art is done -- in its mode of being, or ontology -- are not predictable. They are not even visible or understandable to themselves. Today, a project like Rosendale, A Public Work seems exemplary and exciting because it offers art a new lease on public life; but it is easy to grasp such a project as art -- however molecular or marginal -- in an era that has begun to accustom us to the possibility of 1:1 scale practices with deliberately impaired coefficients of visibility, however under-theorized they still remain. At the time, though, it must have felt like a shot in the dark, essayistic, unsure of itself and gaining self-understanding along the way. That's how Puusemp has described it in conversation with Gruijthuijsen:

--Did you still think of yourself as an artist?
--It's hard to say. I just kind of walked away from it, or from the object stuff anyway. I was thinking about things a lot. I mean, the other thing is, I started looking at this Rosendale thing more and more as a piece of art. It was a strange thing to do, like living a dual life. On the one hand, I was doing this thing, but I couldn't tell people I was doing it because they would think I was using them or kind of manipulating the whole thing.
--But was it always intentional for you that running for mayor would be an artwork?
--I think it evolved. I was intrigued by the possibility...

Raivo Puusemp, a possibilitarian? That was the term (Möglichkeitsmensch) that Robert Musil coined to describe Ulrich, his Man Without Qualities. Not because his protagonist was without quality -- his insights were of exceeding quality -- but because he possessed none that determined the others and locked him down into a particular ontology. We tend to think of artworks as characterized by a deep singularity -- and as the documents on Rosendale's dissolution show, it was a project so steeped in nitty-gritty singularity as to conceal its self-understanding as art. But as a morphing pursuit of intriguing possibilities, and in light of Puusemp's decision to further withdraw from exercising artistic agency, Rosendale, A Public Work may be seen as paving the way toward an art without qualities.

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