

## Is the *new* really *contemporary*?

Wiebke Gronemeyer on Nought to Sixty at the ICA

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Jeffrey Charles Henry Peacock, *Exhibition proposal delivered by hand to ICA, 19 February 2008*  
Photo: Steve White

No issue seems to be so untimely at our present times like the 'new'. Most often it becomes associated with utopia, the hope for a new beginning that leaves behind history in favour of a more radical future - the 'dictate of the new' might then become as restrictive as it aims to leave behind all restraints. At the same time, an engagement with the contemporaneity of our times is often pronounced as one of the greatest challenge for cultural production in general and specifically for institutional practise - both generative and responsive - around art.

Over the past five months the Institute of Contemporary Arts in London delivered a program that had at stake its own foundation: the definition of what is contemporary, what lies at the heart of the Institute of Contemporary Arts. 60 years ago, in 1947 it was established by a collective of artists, poets and writers to champion contemporary culture, showing experimental work across all media and engendering debates on a range of - in retrospect - contemporary topics. According to the ICA's director Ekow Eshun this tradition still defines the institutional principles at present: "The ICA is not so much a place as a principle. A belief in the new. An enduring faith in the creativity of tomorrow."<sup>1</sup> Avoiding the term contemporary Eshun here sketched what might be the institutions definition of this idea: the new and the belief in the new, providing for a future fuelled with creativity and originality.

The ongoing program of exhibitions, performances, screenings, and discussions entitled *Nought to Sixty* aims to embrace this belief. When it started in May it was announced as a platform for contemporary art, generating its production and portraying its emergence. Sixty projects by young artists from Britain and Ireland are being presented over six months with scheduled regular exhibition openings and events on each Monday night. The main question that seems to surround the institution's effort is *how* to represent emerging art practice at its best. An answer to this question is by no means easy, and specifically not if the question

is already misconceived: the question might not be how to represent, but to present artists practice. If the projects brief is to re-initiate the ICA as a "club for artists and a laboratory for experimentation", then the first attempt might be to change the institutional attitude and embrace the idea of a platform that presents and thus generates, and not only represents and responds. But the question that perhaps is even more prevalent is *what* will be shown and why that is contemporary.

As part of the overwhelmingly large series of projects one particular artistic intervention interrupts the comfort zone of the institution and simultaneously uses the institutions' aim to facilitate new ways to discuss art and its forms of existence within the contemporary world. During July and August the *Jeffrey Charles Henry Peacock Gallery* was invited to develop a project. The JCHP Gallery is a joint venture of artists Kev Rice, Dave Smith and artist and gallerist Thom Winterburn: the gallery has no physical manifestation, it exists without a space and uses the denial of the need for physical space as a means of presenting art. The gallery's response to the ICA's invitation has been to complete a JCHP exhibition entitled "Pecuniary Proposal" and thus re-gifts the invitation now inviting the ICA to fulfil a brief. This project entails the payment of 250 pounds to the ICA in order to facilitate an un-prescribed activity. The ICA used the fund to reproduce the original invitation card for "Pecuniary Proposal" and to distribute this copy within the *Nought to Sixty* mail out for July. What sounds like a collaboration between institutions is in itself embedded within the hierarchy of one institution inviting the other, which returns the invitation to execute a project, for which the invitation card is the only physical manifestation. This project accentuates the complex relationship between manifestations and their withdrawal, which here becomes formulated as a constant process of re-assignment. As only one example out of many, this project might have been wished to exemplify a character of the 'new' for the institutional practice. But despite judging if this really posed the question "of how such processes of reassignment

can exist within a larger system", the mechanics of this communication and negotiation could be in other words described as contemporary because they expose what are the essential and conditional circumstances for cultural production: contemporaneity as in a constant negotiation of manifestations and their withdrawal, past practice and its translation into the present.

First of all, the rhythm of manifestations and their withdrawal derives from the difficulty of determining contemporaneity other than being understood as describing a quality of being current or of the present. The German philosopher Karl Jaspers indicates the problem of indeterminacy within the contemporary moment: "The topic, however, is not merely inexhaustible, but insusceptible of fixed definition, inasmuch as it undergoes modification even while our attention is being concentrated on it. Past situations can be regarded as finished, as having had their curtain rung down on them, as having had their day and ceased to be; whereas the stimulating characteristic of a present situation is that thinking about it helps to determine its upshot<sup>2</sup>". The problematic endeavour becomes clear: the challenge is to balance determination while at the same time aiming to open up for alternatives. The processual character for the formation of what could be understood as 'contemporary' and 'new' tries to grasp the complexity of art and culture not only within the category of the contemporary, but taking the today as its departure point.

When looking at *Nought to Sixty* one might question if 'nought' really is the departure point of this project, as it is only perceivable embedded in the institutional history of 60 years. Shouldn't it be the *to*, as in *Nought to Sixty*? Would this not indicate a revisionist stance at a mid-point in the institutions history? While shaping this platform of art in the present, the ICA has to engage with the problem that every definition limits the openness towards interpretations and attributions that make these notions so ambiguous and thus interesting to deal with from the perspective of a curator, artist, theorist, or any other role

operating in the field of cultural production. Then, the so often formulated 'belief in the new' embedded in the wish to 'building up a multi-faceted portrait of contemporary art' could be described as an exceptional circumstance, where the presence of the now queries both institutional and historical determinations. Walter Benjamin once said: "thinking in the present time involves not only the movement of thoughts, but their arrest as well"<sup>3</sup>. This emphasizes on the problem of the impossibility of a fixed definition of the contemporary as it undergoes modification while it is being thought about. Thus, the ICA's program - a presentation of contemporary practice within the institutional frame - has to deal with the problem that any manifestation of the contemporary always faces the dual challenge to abstain from a conceptual designation while at the same time having to use and present defining terms and concepts in order to consider the implications of what is called contemporary within the institutional frame. That is to say, it is very much wished that the program both will respond to the current dimensions of visual art and culture in general, but will also generate criticality and call its judgement into question in order to negate a historical but reinforce a critical perspective on the contemporary. Within this understanding, the multi-faced project offers a way of engaging with what could mean contemporaneity by presenting a 'belief in the new', rather than a 'dictate of the new', by assembling exhibitions, performances, screenings and talks that embrace both the movement of thoughts and their arrest as well, as this is what then just starts to enable *Nought to Sixty*.

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<sup>1</sup> Benjamin, Walter, "Theses on the Philosophy of History," in *Illumination* (London: Pimlico, 1999), p. 249 ff.

<sup>2</sup>Jaspers, Karl, *Man in the Modern Age*, (London: Routledge, 1933), p. 1

<sup>3</sup>ICA Brochure, May 2008, p. 4