

## Dada in the post-colonial field: Dave Hullfish Bailey's CityCat Project for Brisbane<sup>1</sup>

In recent years the English art critic Claire Bishop has repeatedly questioned the denigration of the aesthetic and renunciation of authorship in much relational, participatory and socially engaged art.<sup>2</sup> For Bishop, work of this nature, despite its evident good intentions, is not only bland, but misguided because its rejective impulse ignores the fact that art is essentially premised on a 'tension between faith in art's autonomy and belief in art as inextricably bound to a promise of a better world to come.' Which is to say, 'the aesthetic need not be sacrificed on the altar of social change, as it already inherently contains this ameliorative promise.' Mobilising a polemic developed by the French philosopher Jacques Rancière, that the aesthetic is the 'ability to think contradiction: the productive contradiction of art's relationship to social change', Bishop advocates 'highly authored

situations that fuse social reality with carefully calculated artifice', and which may be seen, crucially, as within a Dadaist tradition. More particularly, she argues for 'artistic gestures that shuttle between sense and nonsense, that recalibrate our perception, that allow multiple interpretations, that factor the problem of documentation/presentation into each project, and have a life beyond the immediate social goal'. And, further underlining links back to Dada, Bishop promotes 'the continued value of disruption, with all its philosophical antihumanism, as a form of resistance to instrumental rationality and as a source of transformation.' While her critique has been misrepresented as merely policing the boundaries between art and non-art, it in fact constitutes a positively constructive attempt to find some measure for discriminating among different socially collaborative practices.

It is within this art historical framework that Dave Hullfish Bailey's *CityCat Project* for Brisbane can be thought. In 2002 the Los Angeles artist said, 'if there's a one-liner about what my [site-based projects] attempt, it has to do with replacing an iconographic vision of place with an inhabited, on-the-ground geography.'<sup>3</sup> By the latter Bailey means an analytic system that attempts to account for and engage the day-to-day cacophony of lived places, with their competing layers of natural histories, social structures and political dynamics, let alone their deep interconnectedness with other places under globalisation. Bailey approaches places as relational ecologies – aggregates of complex structures and overlapping spaces, which affect each other through a variety of feedback loops. The structural diagnosis is not unique, but Bailey may be unusual in his willingness to think through the challenges it poses to the forms and functions of art. Rejecting both the 'purity' of aesthetic distance, and the 'goodness' of immersive action, his projects propose the space of art as one that is isomorphic but reflexive with the space of the real. That is, his projects come to form as parallel systems, which are separate from but exist alongside those they investigate, and which are capable of generating new circuits and procedures that traverse the spaces of 'art' and 'life'. To insist on art's autonomy is to declare – rightly or wrongly – that the space cannot be bridged; to lobby for art's immersion is to collapse it. But Bailey wants to retain difference *within*, not *from*, the real world, a distinction that is especially acute as it bears on post-colonial space and collaboration within it. To speak then in terms of the space of art and the

space of the world, for Bailey these are not spaces in which different things are, but spaces of *organising* things differently.

Bailey's *CityCat Project* was initiated in 2003 as a commission from The University of Queensland Art Museum to develop a new work for *TURRBAL-JAGERA*, a large Münster-style exhibition, its title conjoining the names of the Aboriginal tribes who occupied the Brisbane area prior to the establishment of the Morton Bay colony in the 19th century.<sup>4</sup> The exhibition was staged in late 2006 at the university's St Lucia campus, which is located a short ferry ride from the city on a picturesque 114 hectare site in a bend of the Brisbane River. Bailey began with extensive on-the-ground research at the university and in the city itself. The artist's gumshoe detective method – he walked around, obtained oral histories, and held meetings with experts in diverse fields – was pursued in tandem with wide-ranging secondary research. This included reading *Tom Petrie's Reminiscences of Early Queensland*, Rosamond Siemon's *The Mayne Inheritance* and David Nichols' biography of the Brisbane post-punk group The Go-Betweens, who along with the writer David Malouf and actor Geoffrey Rush, are amongst the most celebrated of the university's cultural alumni.

In the course of this process a number of pieces of information emerged, which – despite their often-isolated contexts – the artist related by means of a series of drawings that involve complex diagrammatic webs. The results mix bona fide scholarship and accepted lines of cause-and-effect with much flimsier, highly lateral connections derived through playful language games and other experimental kinds of logic. Unfolding

along lines that grant similar density to the facts of place and the terms used to represent those facts, they recall the Borgesian logic of Robert Smithson's early drawings. While non-standard, they still function as plausible informational indexes of geographic locations. Yet Bailey's drawings are better understood as complex discursive sites in their own right: as relational systems in which internal motors (semiotic imperatives as well as historical causalities and material processes), link things in ways which neither replicate nor are reduced to the instrumental rationality of familiar cartographic and representational methods. By finding (and sometimes forcing) 'cross-traffic' between elements within natural, human and linguistic systems, Bailey's drawings challenge our habitual ways of mapping, and accordingly present opportunities to 'recalibrate our perceptions' of place.<sup>5</sup>

This mix of deconstructive and synthetic impulses is important in Bailey's work: he is also interested in re-wiring places. Taking a highly heuristic approach, he often proposes events, encounters and tools based on the relations generated by his drawings. For example, through the kinds of logical circuits proposed by the working drawings for the university project, the artist arrived at the concept of a momentary delay to the normally swift passage of Brisbane's CityCat ferries. Since the late 1990s these highly visible and popular craft have played a key role in the redevelopment of the Brisbane River as a civic and touristic amenity. Indeed, today the CityCats are so much a part of the image Brisbane projects of itself that it is hard to imagine the place without them. Aware of earlier histories of the river now over-coded by the narrative in which the CityCats are

both subjects and agents, but also of his own 'outsider' status, Bailey approached the local Aboriginal leader, playwright and activist Sam Watson, to enquire whether the local Traditional Owners – the descendants of the Turrbal and Jagera people – would have any interest in effecting such a delay. Importantly, in the invitation Bailey left open all questions of the location or purpose of the delay, as well as details of its choreography and theatricalisation. Watson responded affirmatively and, in due course, identified a small park on the bank of the river diagonally opposite the university as an appropriate site. This location was chosen for two reasons. Firstly, it is the site of an ancient Dreaming story known as the Kurilpa Dreaming, and therefore has a particular significance within traditional Aboriginal culture. Secondly, the park is situated on a historic boundary that excluded Aboriginal people from the city after dark, a curfew line which was enforced until the early 20th century by police on horseback wielding bullwhips.<sup>6</sup> Here Watson determined that a small group of local Indigenous people would gather under the Aboriginal flag. He also arranged for another small group to travel on the CityCat ferries, with all participants being senior members of the local Aboriginal community. As the CityCats neared the chosen site Watson determined that they would diverge from their usual course, bring their bows to face the bank and then slow to a stop near the shore. While the CityCats drifted in the current, the Aboriginal people onboard moved to the front and silently acknowledged, usually with a wave of the hand, those on the riverbank who similarly gestured back. After several seconds the CityCats reversed their engines and abruptly returned to their

usual course. The event was unannounced to its audience, leaving the Aboriginal people onboard as the only source of information available to them. Several conversational exchanges ensued, often between individuals who would not otherwise have interacted.

This momentary event, which was experienced by hundreds of people, took place every 10 minutes as the CityCats travelled back and forth from the university between 10 am and 4 pm on Saturday, 2 December 2006. Watson's elaboration of Bailey's proposal not only served to translate passing 'scenery' into lived 'place', in line with the artist's intent, but constituted a silent yet powerful assertion of Aboriginal history and culture, self-determination and land-rights. So much so, that at a public forum the following day Watson spoke of how the event had served to empower local Aboriginal people in the face of a long history of white oppression.<sup>7</sup> He also declared on this occasion that the event would thereafter be a Dreaming story that would be told, re-told and, hopefully, re-staged into the future.<sup>8</sup> Watson's optimism was well-founded. On Saturday, 9 May 2009, the river performance was developed further by Watson, while he and Bailey, separately and together, elaborated a number of parallel manifestations of the work, including by exhibition, workshop and public discussion.<sup>9</sup> This evolution of the project, both as a discursive work of contemporary art and as a manifestation of the Dreaming, is perhaps its most significant outcome, and underscores the preparedness of Aboriginal elders to enliven and enrich traditional culture in dialogue with western aesthetic sensibilities.<sup>10</sup>

The extremely fractured character of the *CityCat Project* – its multiple forms and

parts, its multiple spaces, audiences, and functions – suspends its meaning not by withholding particular meanings, but by distributing these specificities over a wide range of geographic, cultural and discursive sites, each of which is understood as irreducible to the others, yet existing in relation to them. (Bailey's documentation included an audio recording of the CityCat during its 'deflection' maneuver, a large banner which combined several different views of the space in which the deflection occurred, a desk of public research information, several drawings presenting his idiosyncratic connections, and a highly stylised and distorted wall drawing of the routes). In how it problematises its own documentation, the project enacts the terms of Bailey's invitation, where the semantic gap between the artist's semiotic derivation of the idea of a deflection, and the political uses and historical meanings that might be evoked by such a deflection, was pointedly upheld. While Bailey was certainly interested in such meanings, his gesture was limited to framing a space in which they might emerge – not only to stand alongside his own contextualisations, but against dominant readings.

This understanding of artistic function – as generating disjunctive space (or recognising the disjunctions already lodged within and between existing spaces) – leads directly into an alternative model of collaboration. Here Bishop's notion of the 'highly authored' takes on an additional meaning, where 'highly' may be read quantitatively (as in many authors), as well as qualitatively (as in formally resolved). The two coexist in the project, where Bailey's 'informational sculpture' and Watson's direct political speech each answer quite specifically to their own contexts and

imperatives, yet remain irreducible to each other, or to any third position. Bailey's model rejects the tacit expectations of collaboration, especially as they apply in socially-oriented practices: namely, solidarity of intent and univocality of expression. His model is radically distended in a way that assumes its participants may not share common knowledges, aesthetic languages, nor political aims. For Bailey, the point of collaboration is not to overcome this condition, but, by embracing it, to formalise the distance which empathy must traverse.

Bailey's interest in the spaces between things points to an intriguing aspect of how the performance on the river was structured and how it produced its audience: the event substantially functioned outside the institutional frame or branded space of art, and was staged primarily for a captive 'non-art' audience essentially unaware of who or what was behind the ferry's unorthodox movements that day. This uncertainty was central to the work. Had the umbrella of art hovered too closely over what unfolded, had the imprimatur of an institution been clearly involved, it would have stabilised the piece, removing the questions it raises of political power, collusion and meaning. Such questions are largely blunted when the viewer knows they are within the space of art and that what is taking place is understood as 'an artwork'. The same applies when a performance is clearly grounded in a political institution, or even a social goal, however laudable. But between these poles of the current debate – where the viewer is rendered slightly off-balance and confused, unthreatened but unclear as to what or whose space they are in, and what it is precisely that is happening – perhaps a kind

of attention to detail and context emerges, and perhaps what begins in observation may end for some in appreciation. It is in these spaces of disruption and disorganisation, and in such moments of 'turbidity', that Bailey's Dadaistic authorial methods, as well as his work's 'socially ameliorative promise', both reside. And it is in the complex interaction of all these spaces that Bailey's *CityCat Project* is emblematic of advanced art today, an art that reorganises its own relationship to its audience, and to its authors.

#### NOTES

1. This text was developed in close consultation with the artist. An earlier form of the text was presented at the *Spaces of Art* conference on 17 April 2009. There it was accompanied by a looping display of 78 images, with each image projected for 10 seconds. The display was constructed by Bailey and included many images of his working drawings, as well as documentation of various other aspects of the project.

2. See, for example, Claire Bishop, 'The Social Turn: Collaboration and its Discontents', *Artforum*, February 2006, vol. 44, no. 6, p. 178. Unless otherwise indicated, all quotes below are from this text or Bishop's rejoinder to Grant Kester's response, which was published in the following May issue of *Artforum*.

3. Jan Tumlir, 'Dave Hullfish Bailey: visitation rites', *Artext*, Spring 2002, no. 76, p. 38.

4. The full title of the exhibition was *TURRBAL-JAGERA: The University of Queensland Art Projects 2006* (2 to 17 December, 2006). The show was curated by the writer and loosely modeled on the large art in public space exhibition staged every ten years since 1977 in the German university town of Münster.

5. For an insightful discussion of Bailey's working drawings for the *CityCat Project*, see Catherine Chevalier, 'Dave Hullfish Bailey, Queensland University, Brisbane, December 2006', *Frog*, Paris, 2007, pp. 96-9.

6. On the history of the Boundary Streets of inner Brisbane, see Michele Helmrich, 'Mianjin Ngatta Yarrana (Brisbane,

I'm going)', *One Square Mile: Brisbane Boundaries*, ex. cat., Museum of Brisbane, 2003, n.p.

7. The public forum was an event of the *TURRBAL-JAGERA* exhibition. In addition to a joint-presentation by Bailey and Watson, it included presentations by the Düsseldorf artist Leni Hoffmann and the Paris-based art critic Catherine Chevalier on the work of the Viennese artist Heimo Zobernig.

8. While there is a tendency to see the Dreaming as pertaining exclusively to events of the ancient past, it also explains contemporary events, thus confirming a continuity with the order of things stated there. To this extent, Watson's *CityCat Dreaming* is perhaps to be viewed as an extension of the Kurilpa Dreaming, re-establishing links between the present and the past when things were not fractured, and also asserting that dreaming has not been silenced by modernity and colonialism. In fact, as Aboriginal art is normally a part of a collaborative ritual that is an expression of the Dreaming, it and its manifestation in the river is, in a sense, the 'real author' here.

9. The further development of the river performance in 2009 included an additional deflection site, approximately 500 metres downstream from New Farm Park, where a didgeridoo player performed under an Aboriginal flag that Watson had strung from the branch of a nearby mangrove tree.

10. The embrace of Western art materials, forms of display and contexts, by successive generations of the Papunya desert painters since the early 1970s, is the most well known example of this phenomena. See Vivien Johnson, 'Seeing is believing: a brief history of *Papunya Tula Artists 1971-2000*', *Papunya Tula: Genesis and Genius*, ex. cat., Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney, 2000, p. 187. In a review of the *CityCat Project*, Rex Butler was also concerned to draw parallels with the Western Desert painting movement. See Rex Butler, 'Dave Hullfish Bailey', *Artforum*, September 2009, p. 314.