Ben Kinmont
Bookseller

PRACTICEABLE UTOPIAS

AESTHETIC-ETHICS & THE WORK OF BEN KINMONT

The last few years, if not the last decade, may well be remembered by art historians as the era of social practice. While social practice has a much longer history, one rooted in Situationist social theory, 60s and 70s live performance, Feminist, and Conceptual Art, the term has stuck in the art world only recently. While, I can't help seeing the renewed interest in Ben Kinmont's work in terms of this turn, I also want to be particular about what Kinmont's work is doing. There are noteworthy differences between his practice and the practices of other artists who locate themselves (and have perhaps more accurately been located by critics and historians) within the history of social practice. While Kinmont's principal questions are timely, they also partake of art historical trajectories that go deep to the core discourses of an international *avant-garde*. How is "art" defined in relation to "life"? How do art works confuse and complicate such categories? What are the limits of such an investigation with regards to politics, economics, and ethics? How can art works extend the worlds we would want to live in, and can they create practicable utopias? In his consistent addressing of these questions, Kinmont is the quintessential "artist's artist." Which is to say, he is an artist who speaks to other artist's concerns, taking up problems central to the definition of art itself. Throughout his works he may also be said to act as an ethnographer, theoretician, archivist, bibliographer, pedagogue, and ethicist. It is with this last category—*ethicist*—that I would like to dwell a bit in the following, brief essay.

Following Ludwig Wittgenstein, I maintain that the aesthetic and ethical are not separable categories. To make art and define what one makes as art, rather, always involves an ethical proposition. I believe that Kinmont's work acts in the spirit of Wittgenstein's ethical wager, while taking it beyond the realm of the linguistic where Wittgenstein largely dwelt. The artist Claire Pentecost suggested at the 2010 Creative Time Summit that the importance of calling anything art is inherently significant because the field of art is imbued with a heightened amount of value, both culturally and economically. By calling something art it enters a larger historical trajectory by which it may be judged, and by which it may assert the intentions of the artist. When people contest a work's credibility as an art work, what they are really doing is testing their own or their culture's definition of art. They are also implicitly testing what art can do, who it can serve, and who has the right to make and understand

The art world is not invited

Some artists bring new ideas, participants, and locations into the art discourse. These artists change the matter of the art world and in so doing satisfy the art world's appetite for the new. But there is no guarantee that the art world has understood or even savored what it has consumed. This phenomenon of absorption, not surprisingly, seems to be happening with increasing rapidity, even with confrontational practices such as institutional critique.

As new people, places, and ideas from outside of the art world are brought into the art discourse, ethics come into play due to the disjunction between value structures. Examples might include Christo's conflict with the California Coastal Commission during his *Running Fence* project (1972–76); Tim Rollins's work with KOS ('Kids of Survival') in the South Bronx (begun 1984); and more recently Rirkrit Tiravanija's work *Demonstration Drawings* (2007), a collection of drawings commissioned by Rirkrit and based upon pictures of political demonstrations found in the Herald Tribune. All of these projects reach out to new people, places, and ideas and yet raise concerns around authorship, objectification, and purpose.

Alternatively, one can try to understand that which is not included while simultaneously accepting that it will never be brought into the art discourse. This is to say that some art practices can lead an artist out of the art world and into an idea, group, or place where the value structure of the art discourse cannot follow and the art world is not invited.

For myself, this is an indication that a project has become something else. The acute difficulty is in trying to understand what it means and whether or not to communicate the content of that experience to others, and if so, to whom. From the viewpoint of the departing artist, when looking over one's shoulder back at the art world, there is a sensation of closing a door and accepting that departure. From the viewpoint of the person entering into something new, there is the question of how to sustain this practice and find value in one's work.

BK 2008

it. Of course, it goes without saying that the commodity value of art works is another realm of value that contemporary artists must negotiate, if only through their withdrawal or exclusion from a highly speculative marketplace.

The term *value* occurs regularly within Kinmont's writings about his work (See *Prospectus 1988-2010 Forty-two Works* and Antinomian Press' bibliography). As such, I think that it may provide a way to track the artist's aesthetic and ethics. In the artist's earliest works, we see him attempting to address the value of the art work as a form of labor and social service. This occurs principally through a series of works in which he offers the performance of household tasks, such as washing dishes or cooking breakfast as a service to specific people: *Kitchen table* (1989), *Waffles for an opening* (1990), *Ich werde Ihr schmutziges Geschirr waschen, I will wash your dirty dishes* (begun 1994), *Bed service* (1994), *Help* (1995), *"Forse, Perhaps"* (1995), *We both belong* (begun 1995), *Exchange* (1995), *It's easier to talk about art while washing dishes*, Sunderland (begun 1995), *It's easier to talk about art while washing dishes*, Wadsworth Atheneum (begun 1995). Washing the dishes is one of the most prominent of these services, and this most iconic (and mundane) domestic chore thus becomes a means of exchange where the private and public spheres are eroded, (albeit modestly). Dish-washing becomes a medium for care and service. It also creates a platform for dialogue and communication, where intersubjective exchanges can occur. Through dish-washing, Kinmont is able to initiate dialogue about labor, or how the private and public realms (fail to) interact, or simply foreground acts of mutual aid often excluded from a larger civil society. Dish-washing, in this sense, exemplifies what Kinmont calls "third sculpture," sculptures constituted through conversation, interaction, and relation. They are part of his ongoing investigation of how art can perform a mediating function within the social sphere.

While the dish-washing and related service works may seem exemplary of the third sculpture, they have also been held up as exemplars of "relational aesthetics," the art historical trend described by Nicolas Bourriaud. Borriaud curated Kinmont's work at the Joint Venture gallery in New York in 1996 and wrote about him in his landmark book Relational Aesthetics (Les Presse Du Reel, France; 1998). Despite this inclusion, Kinmont's works introduce certain economic dilemmas that are not typically the purview of the works described by Bourriaud. The fact that in a number of his early works the artist requests signatures from his collaborators/recipients of his work introduces problems akin to Yves Klein's signing of models, a work Kinmont makes

explicit reference to in his writings. What is the property of the artist? Where does her authority terminate and another's begin? What does her signature encompass? What does it mean to sign something in the current (art) economy? I believe it also asks us to think about how exchange becomes formalized, and how relationships can be observed and traced through contracts. However, in Kinmont's work, the signature moves in both directions, and as often as not from Kinmont to his participants/service recipients/witnesses/collectors (these categories are often combined). There is even a work where participants sign Kinmont's own body—his arms—as though inverting Klein's original gesture (*It's easier to talk about art while washing dishes*, Wadsworth Atheneum). In each of these instances, Kinmont is exploring the differences between the signing of certificates (wherein the document or work is signed by a single party) and the signing of contracts (wherein the doument or work is signed by two (or more) parties). In a very real way, Kinmont is proposing that we see the signing of a work as being the manifestation of cultural and legal relations with their own specific history, ethics and politics,

The aesthetic-ethical nature of the contract is extended by Kinmont in a work that appears most recently at the SFMOMA, as part of a mini-retrospective of the artist's work, *Promised relations; or thoughts on a few artist' contracts* (1996-97). Here he looks specifically at works by Marcel Broodthaers, Paula Hayes/Wild Friends, Ed Kienholz, Yves Klein, Komar & Melamid, Seth Siegelaub and Bob Projansky, and Various Times and People, all of which involved the drawing up, and sometimes the exhibition, of contracts. The contract is ubiquitous throughout Kinmont's oeuvre. We also find it in the catalogue entries of his book *Prospectus*, where the artist identifies which of his works can be reperformed through the phrases "project can be repeated" and "project cannot be repeated." The contract also appears in *Towards a Definition of Project Art* (2011), a broadside made in collaboration with students by which Kinmont and his class devised numerous criterion for the creation of community-based art projects. These criteria include "Projects should not harm participants physically or mentally"; "The artist's intent and actions in a project should not contradict the known will of the participants"; and "Be clear with participants what can and cannot be provided as part of a project."

In the text *Towards a Definition of Project Art* one can possibly locate where Kinmont's aesthetic-ethical concerns line-up specifically with contemporary critical discourse about the social practices of art,. Pablo Helguera proposes

A Declaration; or the future of art lies in that which is not art

When in the course of history, it becomes necessary for people to dissolve the art which has connected them to one another, and to assume the making powers of the earth, the separate and equal station to which they are entitled, a decent respect to the opinions of mankind requires that they should declare the causes which impel them to separate from art.

We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed with certain unalienable rights, that among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. That to secure these rights, artists are among us, deriving their powers from the consent of others. That whenever any form of art becomes destructive of these ends, it is the right of the people to alter or to abolish art, laying its foundation on such principles and organizing its powers in such form, as to them shall seem most likely to effect their safety and happiness. Prudence, indeed, will dictate that art long established should not be changed for light and transient causes; and accordingly all experience hath shown, that mankind is more disposed to suffer, while evils are sufferable, than to right themselves by abolishing the form of art to which they are accustomed. But when a long train of abuses and usurpations, pursuing invariably the same object evinces a design to reduce them under absolute despotism, it is their right, it is their duty, to throw off such art, and to provide new guards for their future security. BK 2011–12

in his lecture/book, *Education for Socially Engaged Art*, that one of the central questions for the socially engaged artist is whether (and why) they should venture into the complex disciplines of education, anthropology, and social service. In Kinmont's work , art can model the kinds of practices and behaviors that one would otherwise want from a larger sociopolitical and economic sphere. Art can also present a kind of micro-politics—a space where aesthetic decisions can undergird and affirm political or social ones.

Kinmont's work can also be seen as providing a counter-example to the two contemporary artists who the art historian Claire Bishop focuses on in her 2006 article, "The Social Turn: Collaboration and Its Discontents,." In this essay, Bishop explores projects by Thomas Hirschorn and Santiago Sierra, which foreground and dramatize sociopolitical antagonism. Compare Kinmont's project, *Moveable type no documenta* (begun 2002), where the artist interviews the citizens of Kassel, Germany (the town where Documenta takes place) about their definitions of art with Hirschorn's creation of his *Bataille Monument* (2002) in the same location. Consider also Sierra's use of the contract in many of his works, where he employs migrant workers and other displaced people to perform demeaning tasks—tasks, as many have pointed out, including the artist himself, that they are accustomed to performing. These ethical positions of these two artists are almost the reverse of Kinmont's, and perhaps could even be seen as antithetical. Where Kinmont explores on a small, personal scale a moral economy that he wishes could be so on a larger scale, the works by Sierra and Hirschorn dramatize the exploitative forces at work in contemporary life.

Kadist Art Foundation's mini-retrospective of Kinmont's works consists of two projects, both with complex ethical and aesthetic implications. The first being *Sometimes a nicer sculpture is to be able to provide a living for your family* (2002), a project of which the artist writes that "[t]he artwork is not the business itself, but the contribution to our cost of living." I am intrigued by Kinmont's clarification here, that the aesthetic product is the income earned for his family, since it locates the core of the work in a purely economic exchange rather than in directing attention to the artist moving outside of their discipline, thus towards a more expanded definition of the artist. This latter interest is investigated elsewhere by Kinmont (and most recently at his SFMOMA retrospective also this past fall), through a series called *On Becoming Something Else*, which is fascinating in its examination of artists who extended their initial work in other fields. For example, Lygia Clark's establishment of a professional psychoanalytic practice; or Guerrilla Art Action Group's (Jon Hedrick's and Jean Touche's) passionate activism on behalf of political prisoners.

Kinmont's economic concerns within these projects resonates with W.A.G.E. and other art groups (F.E.A.S.T., OWS Arts and Labor, eflux's Timebank, among many examples) who in the past few years have investigated fair labor practices within art economies and institutions. However Kinmont's emphasis on the domestic scene (contributing an income to one's family) separates him from the more public concerns of W.A.G.E. and others, or at least locates those concerns within a realm of private, domestic life. The content of his art project cum business—antiquarian books concerning food and wine before 1840 (the year, incidentally, that Napoleon's remains were interred) provide a virtual social history of pre-industrial, early Capitalist Europe. It also reflects a submerged utopia through which many fine gustatory pleasures may still be had, reanimated from the archives by chefs and gourmets.

The room-sized installation at Kadist reminds me that everything relates to everything else in Kinmont's *matryoshka*-doll-like practice. Here we see hung multiple broadsides, a form that Kinmont takes-up after the heretics for which his Antinomian Press is named. In one he has reappropriated the Declaration of Independence as an art statement, in another, "Gone," he muses about an exodus from institutional spaces towards spaces "in between" in which an ethics of project art may be considered analytically. To the back of the gallery space we see a transparent case with books from his dealership, maintained through a meticulous inventory. On another shelf we see the many catalogues Kinmont has produced himself, which historicize via bibliography the books in his collection/inventory.

The other project iterated by Kinmont during the retrospective at Kadist Art Foundation is "Exhibition in your mouth," a live sculptural work after the tradition of the *pièce montée*, whereof chefs would create dishes in homage to specific architectural phenomena. In conversations with Kinmont about an earlier iteration of "Exhibition in your mouth," created during the 2011 Performa biennial in New York City, what struck me was his concern for every detail of the meal/live performance/sculpture. Which chefs would be participating and how might he cultivate a productive working relationship with them? How, specifically, might the chef/restaurant be affected economically by the exchange? Who would have access to the work? These details were not peripheral, but central elements of the work underscored by the event's documentation. The Kadist

"exhibition" seemed to be of a more democratic (or economically accessible?) character, as passersby were able to attend, whereas during Performa a reservation was required.

On a personal note, as someone who works as a writer, editor, teacher, and curator, and has tried to maintain the inseparableness of these practices, I find in Kinmont a kindred spirit. Ethical conundrums and contradictions face us constantly—they are irresolvable, obviously, at a systemic level in our current world—and one thing that artists can do when faced with this challenge is to explore different ways of living, and of holding the problems of our sociopolitical and supposedly "private" selves in relation. If earlier in this essay I steered the conversation away from relational aesthetics with regards to Kinmont's work, I would nevertheless like to continue to stress that he maintains an ethics of relationality. However this relationality would be more akin to Marx than to Borriaud, specifically Marx's inisistence in his German Ideology that human potential must be fulfilled through multiple activities, multiple ways of being, and not merely in expertise. "In communist society, where nobody has one exclusive sphere of activity but each can become accomplished in any branch he wishes, society regulates the general production and thus makes it possible for me to do one thing today and another tomorrow, to hunt in the morning, fish in the afternoon, rear cattle in the evening, criticise after dinner, just as I have a mind, without ever becoming hunter, fisherman, herdsman or critic."

All of Kinmont's works attempt to dramatize the ethical character of everyday interactions, decisions, and behaviors in relation to previous art historical investigations of these difficulties; to elevate these actions and behaviors and make them transparent. The attempt at transparency—made possible through archival documentation and exhibition/presentational choices—is key to the reception of Kinmont's work, if not a desired effect it may have on audiences. "Ben Kinmont, Bookseller," gives us a closer look at one important part of the ongoing practice. How one "makes a living" as a part of one's *oeuvre*? How one also discovers through a particular content (books about food, wine, perfume) pleasures that make life livable? How the attention to a meal's preparation as well as to how and to whom it is served can model a world we would like to be? How not just to make participatory art, but to negotiate through aesthetic production the terms of our participation in a world of others?

– Thom Donovan, 2012

Gone

Leaving and left, we go outside to explore and find things anew. With institutional support and often without, we are there to open up possibilities and to relocate what is said and made.

Myself, I have been there often, in strangers' homes or out on the street as I chose to leave the institution to ask others for help with spaces in between. Often they don't care. But that's ok, for even when something is not, it indicates what is. And then there are those for whom a meaning happens, a something so fragile that it is best protected by a "shhh" or perhaps even forgetfulness. But in all cases, you are there for your own reasons and they are there for theirs. Sometimes these reasons overlap, but only sometimes.

One way in which to understand that overlap—or lack thereof—is through an analysis of the social dynamics of the project, one in which the ethics of the interaction are considered. It is towards that end that these considerations have been written. They are not a set of rules or guidelines, but rather a changing series of questions towards understanding what happens when, as artists, we leave the institution and enter the realms of public and domestic space.

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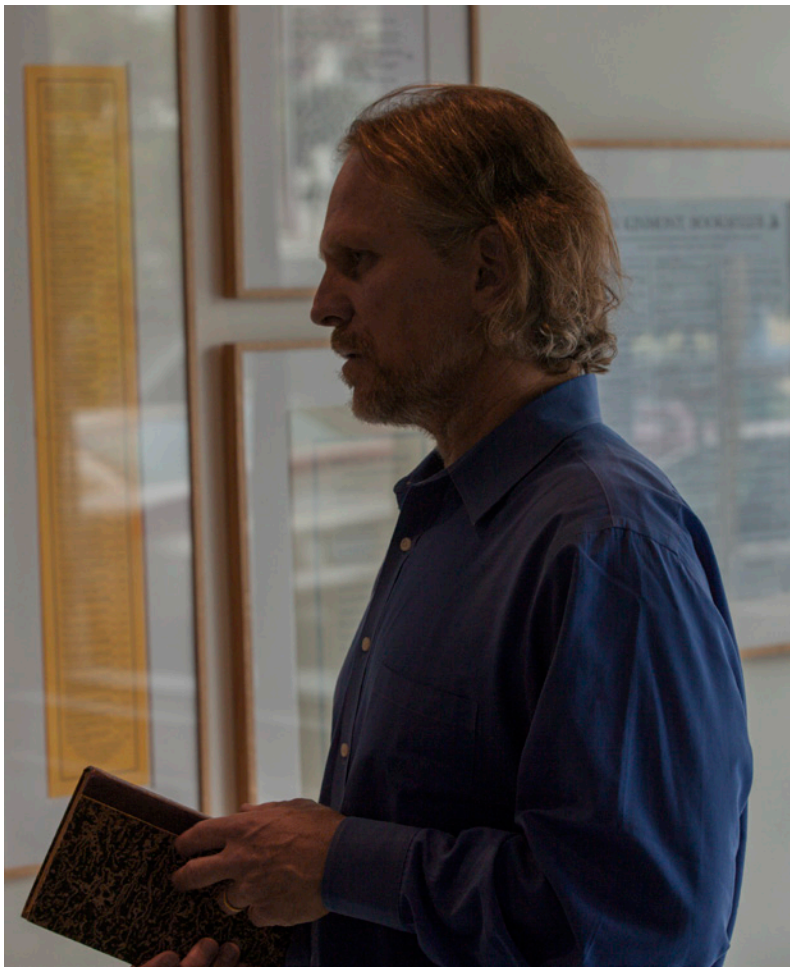

Again

When conducting a project, consider the contexts in which the project is occurring. Consider the natural and human-made environment. Consider the participants' interests and expectations, their well-being, and sense of privacy. How will their involvement be understood and represented? Do you need to obtain consent, either verbally or written, before involving them? Do they need a means to back out? Do you know how and when you will end the project? Have you been clear on what you can and cannot provide as part of the project? Is it important to discuss this ahead of time? As the initiator of the project, it might be interesting to consider where you are locating authorship. Is it with you or those involved? Is it shared? If something is sold, what happens to the money generated? Should your finances be transparent? And, finally, you may have a sense of responsibility to your idea but should your responsibility also extend to those involved in the project? If so, for how long? Are there boundaries to this accountability? Are there boundaries to the project itself?

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Kadist Art Foundation encourages the contribution of the arts to society, collecting and producing contemporary artworks and conducting programs to promote the artist's role as cultural agent. Kadist's collections reflect the global scope of contemporary art, and its programs develop collaborations between Kadist's local contexts (Paris, San Francisco) and artists, curators and art institutions worldwide.