

Hospitality: Of Art and Almshouses

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Almshouses

In little use before the Fourteenth Century, the term ‘almshouse’ is relatively recent in the history of providing charitable lodgings for the needy, and many almshouses today still carry in their names traces of former appellation and purpose. Those known as Colleges, Asylums and Hospitals point to a history of communal living, the provision of refuge and to the function of hospitality as central to the history of almshouses, while terms such as Bede House, *Maison Dieu*, and *Domus Dei* all point to the ways in which religion has long shaped our understanding of what it is to provide shelter and hospitality to those in need: those moral or ethical codes which govern our response to and our responsibility for the poor, the mad, the sick, and the lame; orphans, widows, pregnant women, travellers and pilgrims (Hallet, 2004; Howson, 2008).

Over time the function of the almshouse has narrowed to the provision of shelter to elderly people, and more recent almshouse buildings have often been named as Homes. Almshouses provide accommodation and refuge to a group that society struggles to accommodate; and in their more modern incarnation they offer hospitality, not just temporary shelter from the elements but the gift of a home, to those who no longer find themselves with or at home in the world in which they have grown old.

Hospitality

The Latin noun *Hospes* means both guest and host, it means visitor and it means stranger; it is the root of the word hospitality yet also of the word hostility. It is not surprising then, that there is something inherently precarious about the relations involved in hospitality. Hospitality can be understood as necessarily based in an unbalanced power relation where the host has the power to grant but also to revoke or deny refuge to a guest, a visitor, a stranger in need; but it can also be understood as the paradigmatic ethical relation between self and other, for hospitality speaks of an encounter which demands an openness on our part and a willingness to respond to the needs of the other (Kearney and Semonovitch, 2011; Still, 2010).

For Levinas (1994; 1998) it is the face-to-face encounter which calls us into an ethical relation with the other, and hospitality is the structure of this ethical relation. Yet it remains precarious, and as Derrida’s (1999; 2000) deconstructive analysis shows, hospitality hovers between possibility and impossibility. Impossible in so far as an absolute hospitality – boundless generosity, a gift that exists beyond an economy of reciprocity, debt or exchange – towards an absolute other – the wholly unreachable and unfathomable, the alien or radically other, the unknown and unknowable – is always in excess of what is possible; yet possible in so far as it operates within a bounded system of exchange where the reality or potentiality of reciprocity enables and engenders everyday experiences of hospitality (Still, 2010).

Accommodation

Hospitality entails that we do not simply respond to the other in so far as their needs and desires are identical to our own, rather we must be open to, accommodate, the other as other. In seeking to understand this sense of mutual approach, of the forging of connection between self and other across the gulf of difference, I turn to the work of Merleau-Ponty (1969), who offers us a conceptualisation of self and other as always already intertwined.

The poles of dualist opposition – self and other; body and mind; subject and object; immanence and transcendence – do not entirely merge for Merleau-Ponty, yet neither are they completely incommensurable. The other is not reduced to our consciousness of them, but neither do they entirely escape or transcend us. Rather, there is encroachment, there is potential for overlap, for ambiguity, for what Merleau-Ponty refers to as a reversibility where two non-identical aspects of being come into contact at a crossover, hinge or pivot point. It is this structure of reversibility that makes meaningful connection possible and positions the self-other relation within a framework that allows openness and responsiveness.

Art

This openness and responsiveness is also central to artistic practice for Merleau-Ponty (1964) as he considers the role of the artist, much like the role of the phenomenological philosopher, as one of letting oneself be moved by that which

exists beyond the limits of our own being yet to which we have an intimate connection – a hinged reversibility - through our embodiment in a shared world. The artistic impulse is thus one of hospitality, a willingness to accommodate or to be altered by alterity. Embedded and embodied in the world, the artist feels themselves called to respond to something that exists beyond the self, called into a hospitable relation with otherness which is then expressed in the embodied production of a work of art.

Thus in The Almshouse Tempera Project we see a mirroring between the hospitable function of the almshouses and the ways in which the project artists have responded to and allowed themselves to be moved by these dwellings in the production of their work. A commitment to otherness has doubtless animated this project in its engagement with the hidden or sequestered spaces and experiences of almshouses, and in its engagement with the now little-known, demanding and unruly medium of egg tempera. Yet the art that has been borne of this project is perhaps more significant for what it can tell us about the possibility for a connectedness with the strange, the foreign, the alien. For just as the foreignness of the medium returns us to a fuller appreciation of the materiality of artistic production and the artist's embodiment and situatedness in the world, the peculiarity or strangeness of the almshouse in modern society demands a particular kind of artistic response that explores its own ability to bridge the gap between self and otherness.

And in encountering these finished artworks we are confronted with an alterity that begins the cycle anew, once again calling us into hospitable response as we seek to open ourselves to that which exists in art which takes us beyond ourselves.

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