

Letting Go

Park Products is located within the Serpentine Gallery's Education and Public Programmes. In the period of their residency, artist Kathrin Böhm and architecture Andreas Lang have engaged closely with a number of different individuals who use the space of Kensington Gardens, the Royal Park in which the Gallery is located. Such engagements have developed understandings of the Park that go beyond its physical characteristics to consider the cultural activities and social occupations that define it as a place.

Cultural geographers have argued that the relationship between space and social relations is two-way: people make spaces and spaces make people. *Park Products* takes the activities already operating in the park, such as grass planting, compost making, dog walking and litter collecting, as the starting point for initiating and inventing new relationships between the different park users. Through sustained conversations and collaborative design processes amongst each group, the expressions of need or desire that operate through these existing practices are transformed into the functions of a new collection of products. In turn, these products act as prompts for new forms of exchange creating an alternative economy of places and encounters.

In commissioning artworks outside the gallery, much contemporary curating is engaged with debates around site specificity. These discussions tend to focus more on the particular qualities of one site and less on the relationships between sites, particularly those located *inside* and *outside* of the gallery. In exploring the boredom of the invigilators in the Gallery as well as the gardeners who also collect litter in the park, *Park Products* engages both inside and outside at once, demonstrating how

physically separated sites are still connected within larger networks, systems and processes.

The discovery of sculpture as 'place' articulated by a number of prominent artists in the 1960s has become a condition of contemporary art. Yet the interest in place that today underscores the work of many contemporary artists is distinguished by a shared concern in spatial production. By engaging with spatial processes the field of art practice expands towards design and architecture, into complex territories of interdisciplinary working, where artists, designers and architects can draw on one another's practices in order to call into question disciplinary procedures. Böhm and Lang are one such pair whose collaboration has continually engaged the intersection between art as a critical venture, design as a problem solving exercise, and architecture as a social process involving the demands of end users and clients.

Do we think of an object differently if we know it has been produced by an artist, a designer or an architect? On what terms do we designate one thing art, another design, a third architecture? Is there something intrinsic to a particular way of working that defines it as a discipline or practice? As a growing number of artists, designers and architects work together these kinds of questions start to emerge. As well as producing objects that 'look-like' design, a number of artists have adopted design-like working methods.

Although Böhm and Lang appear to be 'designing' objects, they do not do this quite in the way a 'designer' might. Central to the *Park Products* is an over-extending and, in some cases over-turning, of the responsibility to satisfy users' needs and functional requirements that designers take very seriously. Many of the products invent actions and even when they do respond to an existing need it is often in ways

that parody the need itself. *Hang-Bag*, a plastic bag with an in-built glove to allow the user to gather litter hygienically, responds to a perceived need but, by exaggerating the purpose of the product, the relationship between form and function is pushed to an extreme. Perhaps the architects' term 'programme' is more appropriate here than function, for it suggests a less deterministic view of use, one where imaginative narratives and differing experiences allow for a more diverse and contested understanding of what an object or space can allow a user 'to do'.

The fascination that art and architecture hold for one another appear to connect around function or programme. Architects are seduced by art's apparent lack of purpose, its freedom from function, while artists are compelled by the purpose and use of architecture and the power implicit in such a role. But although art may not be literally functional, it provides a place for critical reflection and for allowing new kinds of relationships 'to function' between people. Architecture is seldom given this opportunity, to have no function or to consider criticality as its sole purpose. It is this kind of exchange that is at the heart of Böhm and Lang's collaboration.

In the final stage of the project, on display for exchange in the roving 'stall', the products play a more pro-active role in encouraging people to engage with one another by negotiating specific forms of object exchange. Although Böhm and Lang made certain decisions governing the exchange, such as the prohibition of the use of money and the design of the stall, the exact terms of engagement were left up to the designers and users of the products. *Wild Grass Seed from Kensington Gardens*, for example, can be obtained for assisting with the maintenance of young trees, and helping a gardener will get you a *Chompost Bar*.

The products suggest new economies, ones whose exchange rates do not rely on the common currency of money. The value of one product can only be decided in specific relation to another. Although barter might not quite hold the utopian appeal of the gift economy as a critique of commodity capitalism – the promise of giving something for nothing – the potential of gift-giving can be held back by the expectation of return, something that is often not fully acknowledged. In *Park Products*, the proposition of mutual consent as the principle governing the exchange of objects is a refreshingly radical one, especially given contemporary deceptions around consumer choice.

If the raw materials of the park are transformed into products through new kinds of interaction between the artist, the architect and other park users where is the aesthetic value of the work to be located? In the products themselves or in the emotional, intellectual and social relations established by those people involved? If we were not involved directly either in the making or in the exchanging of the products, how are we to make a connection to these relationships? The products are both residues of the processes that produced them, but they also 'trigger' the final form of the work. Yet the final manifestation of *Park Products* is not predictable in advance and depends entirely on the actions of the users of the Park. And if we consider the aesthetic qualities of the work through the practices of production and consumption initiated by the various users, as makers and exchangers, how important then are the artist and architect's conceptualisations of these relationships?

I asked Böhm and Lang if they had choreographed *Park Products*, pre-selected the user groups and instigated certain rules of conduct, or had they let things emerge more organically? Böhm and Lang were emphatic – it was the latter. This made me

reconsider my own position. Rather than press forward to try to uncover the processes that I felt sure had been used conceptually to structure the project, I realised the situation asked for a different approach. To choose to relinquish control over the final work, and hand the decision-making process over to others, marks the surfacing of different creative consciousness, which in turn asks for a new form of critical engagement, not a holding down, but a letting go.

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'Letting Go' is a catalogue essay for 'Park Products', (2004), a work by Kathrin Bohm and Andres Lang, public works, commissioned by The Serpentine Gallery, London, and published in a catalogue accompanying the work.