
Not something immortal achieved by mortal hands

On Hannah Arendt: Eight Proposals for Exhibition

1 January 2021—26 March 2022

Richard Saltoun Gallery, 41 Dover Street, London W1S 4NS

Intimate, like the mist that summons rainbows but can fall, surround, and obscure, *Eight Proposals for Exhibition* showed 'Invisible processes' that, according to Hannah Arendt, swallow up 'every tangible thing.'¹ The exhibitions stretched across fifteen months, breathing in and out of London's pandemic restrictions and the political thought gathered in Arendt's, *The Gap Between Past and Future* (1954). Through the eight essays in this collection, Arendt argues for a pliant and responsive ecology to supersede modernity conceived as an adamant matrix of celebrity politicians, betrayals, and extinctions.

For eight visits, I walked London's eerie streets. Indoors and in shadow, people stitched and crocheted, making rainbows to display. My passing was reflected in their window-glazed spectrums. These were the threads of time on people's hands, their garrulous life-works. Arendt said art was 'to shine and to be seen, to sound and to be heard, to speak and to be read.'² Art was reciprocal. But it was the era of isolation, of rupture, one day of intermingling, another restricted. The first exhibition was open less than a week before a national edict shut everything down.

Living unrestrained is fraught. Freedom in capitalist society is unfair and unequal. The stable decorum of archaic civilisations locked individuals in their social roles, releasing them from the anxiety of goals and aspirations. By contrast, contemporary art champions unconditional freedom to respond. Arendt believed art should not seek affect but renewal. Art must repudiate its claim to immortality and purge its intrinsic values. What could this look like? In eight visits, eight spatiotemporal episodes, catharsis was a step-by-step process.

Arendt likens the chapters of *Past and Future* to music. At Richard Saltoun, the gallery's three spaces acted like the parts of a sonata with their expositions in a room facing the street. Outside, the frontage is guarded by iron railings, tightly grouped, spears upward pointing, facing London's wealthy Mayfair. Inside, going deeper, I saw development and recapitulation, each space incrementally adding complexity and withdrawing further from the neighbourhood's secure abundance.

Repetition became significant, re-entering, passing once more through the interlocking galleries. In the streets, a different register of time was trapped in the dust that gathered on un-swept thresholds. Beyond padlocked glass doors, dimly seen, chairs upturned and taped. Beside these doors, faded posters for events called off a year ago. Experiences that never happened, loss and depletion—people out of circulation and the world primed for renewal.

For Arendt, political thought originates in darkness, with words overlooked and utterances unheeded. And so it was that the first exhibition, 'The Modern Age,' opened with tableaux

of the dusky order of bygone commerce with its agricultural produce, preindustrial crafts, and barns. Conditions evoked by a series of Siah Armajani's *Houses* (1970-78). These were miniaturised wooden models of rustic store rooms cast in bronze. But nothing was circulating, and no one was going anywhere because there were no entrances or exits. Hypostasis was the melodic theme in a sonata that led in stages to *Fête du Rougevin à l'atelier* (1960), an ink drawing by Véronique Filozof. Filozof sets an awkward reverie in another timber barn interior, the bacchanal of a supposedly simple and unregulated past. The fun is ingenuous. It's a discordant party with opposing and unequal factions. Those oppressed show apprehension, suspicious that a future worth fighting for is untenable. Freedom is destined to be smothered by the spectacle of liberty. A fourth wall lets the audience look in, but there was no way off stage for the actors. Arriving at this scene involved passing through a room decorated with bespoke wallpaper by Thomas Bayrle. Bayrle's pattern, with a cow motif in baby blue with a faux Regency Stripe, resonated with Andy Warhol's *Cow Wallpaper* (1966). Bayrle's version forfeited any connection to physical cows, as Warhol might have once seen them grazing in fields around Pittsburgh. Retrogressive, it elicited limited and diminishing options. The cow emblem was shrunk down and reduced to a cartoon simulacrum. The Warhol ethos of hedonistic vanguardism was absorbed, sanitised, infantilised, and replaced with polite heritage.

After seven torturous months and five exhibitions based around constructing the past, autonomous learning, authority, and freedom, skewed quotation re-surfaced in a series of works on paper by Renate Bertlmann in the sixth exhibition, 'The Crisis in Culture'. The drawings were spiky riffs on the soft forms and oppressive voyeurism of Hans Bellmer's surrealist erotica. Bertlmann's graphics introduced possibilities of consent and mutual pleasure, atomising a patriarchal logic of erotic control and predatory masculinity. The works exposed the surrealist Freudian irrational pitched against bourgeois propriety. In this spurious dichotomy, psychic oppression hides in permissiveness.

Bertlmann's psychosexual declarations of emancipation were this exhibition's median works, adding biform nuance to a theme established by a minimal arrangement opposite the entrance. Pamela Rosenkranz's *Pour Yourself* (2016) is a row of five Evian bottles on elegant plinths. Conventionally, Evian's spring water is marketed with a limpid promise of refreshment to flush impurity from the body. However, these bottles contained suspensions, each a different taint, broadly corresponding to the skin colours of the earth's five ethnic groups. Floating scraps of membrane suggested the fluids may have derived from an aggressive process, like in a horror movie scenario where human flesh is liquidised as daylight fades. The initial impression of crisp modular Pop Art turned uneasy for the spectator made to dwell on the bottles' turbid fluids—Evian's free flow displaced by murky sediments that intimated division, pollution, xenophobia, and denial. However, between the pure and contaminated, there was disjuncture in the soupy content. The containing bottle is made from PET, a crystal-clear plastic. Transparency guarantees the refreshment experience is always as advertised, forever flowing, spring-fresh. Rosenkranz's iteration bottles up something else, perhaps culpability; perhaps it seals in potential. PET refuses death and decay. Indestructible, it pollutes everywhere, every corner of sea and land.

In the innermost room, Annette Messenger provided a coda, evoking further unsettling thoughts of everyday stuff. Her soft sculptures were made from sleeping bags, gloves and

puffer jackets, materials connecting with the paraphernalia of sleeping rough. Except, the items were all new, pinned on the wall in vulva-like folds promising a touch of pleasure and envelopment. The works chimed with Arendt's conception of culture as a force of care. However, care was not simply a response to past homelessnesses, the granular erosion of opportunity to the point where individuals are expendable. The simple arrangements set preservation against 'efforts to subject nature to the domination of man.'¹³ The items, padded and weather-proof, would be the necessities for survival in coming times on earth in extremis. In the future, when the victorious culture of phallic monumentality decays, what prevails will be the spectre of culture's capacity to sustain and cherish.

While a return to a culture of responsibility glimmered, it was not the end. The final exhibitions connected with two supplementary essays in the second edition of Arendt's book. Chapter eight, 'The Conquest of Space,' addressed the existent and the cosmic, indicating that radicalism has no place to go when the past preoccupies the present and the future. For example, Elaine Reichek disavowed the minimalist appearance of her three untitled paintings by agitating their surfaces with intricate activity in paint and needlework. Yet the minimalist associations remained, suggesting there was not much she could do to oust the intransigent occupation of her present with reductive former meanings.

Reichek's attention to surfaces contrasted with Carey Young's *Contracting Universe* (2010), a wall-sized print from a NASA rendering of Martian topography. It was sublime, despite being literal and untouched by imagination. Sylvia Plimack Mangold's illusionistic paintings sat between these poles of the mechanically reproduced and the caressed. Mangold treated the exact world of things as a wonder. In a typical example, *Thirty-six-and-three-quarter inch of Rule with Light* (1975), the titular representation is life-sized. The image is a fulcrum for verisimilitude and compositional rigour. The artist cares for the abstractions of math and geometry while seeking the audience's objectivity and judgement of truth.

In the same empirical spirit, inch after inch, through repeated gallery visits, past experiences became criteria for judging new evidence. Eight times over, and at last, the body's purposeful movement to the end wall, the back of the final show with its image of inhuman data. That movement was like the tenacious virus recognising its host, needing fusion with the human who is ultimately expendable.

The UK's pandemic hiatus enhanced awareness of both close and warm and far away and shut off, tangible and unknown, the bodily and otherworldly, those cherished and those fucked-over. *On Hannah Arendt's* message was consequential, eight times seeking to preserve. I stood with my back to the cold beauty of a lifeless planet. I looked back over fifteen months of this epic programme, foggy with themes turned on their head and played back as contradictions. It was an essential fog, a fog to shroud pathways, so mortals might lose their way on their destructive course.

Notes

1. Hannah Arendt, *Between Past and Future: Eight Exercises In Political Thought*, The Viking Press, New York, 1961, 63.
2. Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition, Second Edition*, University of Chicago Press, 1998, 166.
3. Arendt, 1961, 212.