

**Other Plans:
Bookworks by Juan Cruz
and Michael Dean**

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Other Plans. To have them at all means that there must have been an original idea. The phrase is predicated on the very idea of deviation. We must have been deviating from something, so what was it?

(what now seems like) A long time ago. The North East of England. Within a cultural climate that seemed very pressing, David Metcalfe of Forma, the Newcastle-based commissioning agency, had an idea for a project. The landscape of his home city and that of Gateshead, its sister city across the Tyne, was changing. Regeneration was reshaping the architectural landscape at a rapid rate. It was the visible face of powerful changes being implemented to rebuild the prosperity of the cities after their fall from industrial glory. The flagship architecture of new art galleries and music centres now flanked the river where before there had been only dereliction.

Yet these emblems of progress existed within a broader reality in which the evidence of poverty and social deprivation lingered just out of view. To Metcalfe, the sister cities' joint bid to be crowned European City of Culture in 2008 exemplified the relationship between their need to broadcast a positive image to encourage the snowballing of investment, and the complex social and cultural situation that was being created by new prosperity existing side-by-side with continuing deprivation.

Metcalfe thought about how, in the cities' rush to project this favourable image nationally and internationally, those manufacturing that image must avoid compounding inequity or division locally. He thought about the complicated socio-economic situation that so often results from the scramble by metropolitan authorities for the very real prizes that are dangled before them in such high-stake beauty contests. He thought about independent voices bringing some of these issues into relief.

So he decided to commission a project to do just that. Come and curate it with me he said, so I did. We did some research, contacted some interesting artists, drove them round brutalised council estates on a mini-bus whilst nice people from the Council filled their hands with polished marketing brochures. We thought about the issues involved in regeneration and about the relationships between individuals and the structures that author their social and physical environment. We thought about use, ownership, change and belonging, and about reflecting self-determination in the personal, idiosyncratic and tangential. We decided to locate the project in the same public structures and spaces that the City of Culture bid occupied: publicity material, public spaces, documentaries, consultative processes. The artists came up with good ideas and things got quite ambitious. But on the road to actually getting the money and the permissions together to make the project happen, we stumbled and fell over numerous obstacles, numerous times. And the more we stumbled, the longer the road seemed to get and the bigger the ditches along its sides seemed to be. After a while, it felt like our normal state was more like face down in the ditch than striding confidently towards realisation.

And then everything changed. NewcastleGateshead failed to win its bid to be City of Culture and fell in the ditch with us. And so the context for the project dissolved. My discussions with the artists Juan Cruz and Michael Dean about how to continue were quickly overtaken by the question ‘Why continue?’ — the critique of what was now failed ambition seeming essentially pointless.

To suggest that we found a solution to this problem immediately would be to make this into a fairytale of critical clarity. Time passed. We wandered about in the ditch, caught between the desire to forget the whole thing had ever happened and the desire to have not wasted all our time. As Cruz and Dean both worked with text in distributable forms, they had originally been asked to create a work that would take the form of a newspaper-style publication to be distributed direct to people’s homes, work and meeting places. This pre-determined form now became an artificial structure limiting the artists’ work. Without the context, what was the point of asking the artists to consider doing anything other than what they might chose to do themselves? Both artists wanted to make new works that took the form of a book, a form that was as flexible and autonomous as they chose to make it. At first the idea of making books with both artists was a pragmatic way of neutralising the feeling of wasted investment, but the convoluted relationship between the apparently conflicting ideas of context and autonomy slowly grew to provide the critical foundation for Other Plans.

With the removal of the immediate context of the City of Culture bid, a harsh light was thrown onto the inherent structure of contextual projects. The creation of artworks in response to particular contexts — be that in dialogue with the physical structures, history or politics of a specific place or group of people — is no longer a new tendency. Through its assimilation into the structures of public institutions for commissioning artists, contextual projects have become not only commonplace, but so permeable that they are now simply another option through which artists can create work without any obligation to endorse the political aspirations originally attached to the tendency in its infancy in the 1970’s.

But the conflating of a contextual framework for the production of art with the idea of commissioning work from artists throws certain problems into stark relief. The commissioning of new art works has become one of the main currencies through which curators and institutions define their standing, accompanied by an entrenched assumption that newly commissioned art has some inherent value simply by being new. But commissioning can become a type of flawed conspiracy. There are problems for both artist and curator — for the artist, the pressure to create and then to present publicly within a fixed time-frame; for the curator, the inverse pressure to accept and present what the artist has made. The expectation, if not obligation, to present the work publicly removes the open timescale of the studio, a timescale that allows for critical appraisal to come before the work becomes public. Contextual commissioning is particularly vulnerable to such problems as it conflates these pressures with the pressures of an external cultural framework, potentially creating a double bind.

Our discussions began to focus upon a specific knot of problems: the frustration that in such situations the art work is largely dependent on its context for its meaning and its creation; the fact that inevitably this removes some degree of autonomy from the artistic process and threatens to make the artist’s work illustrative of, or subservient to, external cultural agendas; the conflicting observation that if the relationship between the artist’s preoccupations and the context for the project is not reflected in the work in a meaningful way, it is likely to seem opportunistic at best and, at worst, pointless. The idea emerged that rather than responding to the context of a particular place, what was now at stake was making work that somehow

reflected on the inherent problems of this type of commissioning, whilst maintaining the works' own inherent value outside of this particularly critical discourse.

The reasons why artists are selected for such commissions are as varied as the curators that organize them. But selections, whether rigorous or lazy, insightful or uninspired, often conform to a number of obvious logics. The selection of Cruz and Dean for the original project in Newcastle and Gateshead could illustrate two of the most obvious.

Born in Spain, but raised in Wales, Cruz explores the mechanisms of displacement and the construction of identity through an interrogation of the creative process. These themes are common currency within contextual commissioning projects, given their inherent dialogue with the social, political and historical fabric of the places in which they are sited, making artists who share Cruz's concerns mainstays of such projects. These artists can occupy the role of interested outsiders — they have a critical investment in the place in which they work as a framework or subject for their practice, but simultaneously their practice can be resistant to the expected politics and narratives of that place.

Whereas the selection of artists such as Cruz can thus be predicated on some sort of pseudo-anthropological idea of distanced observation, Michael Dean's selection could illustrate the completely opposite, but equally obvious logic. Raised in Newcastle upon Tyne, Dean performs the role of (normally token) local boy, with all the investment and intimacy that is supposed to imply. Dean's practice only reinforces his suitability for this role. Rooted in the apparently mundane minutiae of everyday life, his texts evoke the intimate fabric of personal experience, drawing on the autobiographical, including his youth in the North East. Economically rendered in the typeface Liquid Crystal, the font works to slow the reader's digestion of the words. The placement and scansion of Dean's texts create — from barest descriptions of people and objects — an almost physical linguistic space that becomes charged with an unexpected emotional impact.

Artists' different structural relationships to the contextual commissioning process obviously need have no bearing on whether the work they make in such projects is any good, but for Cruz and Dean these relationships created explicit pressures and thus played a fundamental role in driving the direction and shape of the bookworks they created for Other Plans.

Finding himself invited increasingly to participate in contextual projects, Cruz was motivated by a strong desire to avoid becoming overly identified with this particular way of making work. Thus he made the decision that the work he would make could have no reference to the original context for the project. Simultaneously, however, he was drawn to finding a way to reflect critically on this mode of production through a work.

Cruz's work is an English translation of *Niebla*, a novel written in 1914 by the Spanish philosopher Miguel de Unamuno. The novel recounts the story of Augusto, a man of some substance but, in the words of another of the book's characters, simply a 'poor chump' who spends his life in a fog of philosophical confusion. The novel is composed of a series of tricks and deceptions played on Augusto by the other characters, on the characters by the author, and by the author on his reader. Augusto falls in love with Eugenia, a stranger he encounters by chance on the street. At first rejecting him, she eventually agrees to marry him, but then elopes with her lover, thus breaking Augusto's will to live. Before killing himself however, Augusto decides to seek the advice of the book's author, Miguel de Unamuno, unaware that Miguel de Unamuno is his creator. Unamuno reveals to Augusto that he is a fictional entity who is unable to control his own destiny and who will die when the author decides — as he then does.

The seemingly economical, conceptual gesture of nominating the text of another writer to act as his work is contradicted by the intense labour Cruz foisted upon himself by translating the novel from Spanish to English personally. Increasingly, Cruz had come to consider translation as a form of labour that could inhabit the space or act of making art. This assertion has particular pertinence in terms of contextual commissioning. Cruz observed that in this situation the artist is persuaded to gear their subjectivity towards a context created or chosen by someone else, and in so doing performs the labour that is required to fulfil someone else's idea. Thus Cruz's translation of Niebla functions as a two-part metaphor for artists' relationships to contextual commissioning: both the novel's narrative and the act of translating it being meditations on the muddy relationship between autonomy and dependence.

For Dean, the pressure to gear his subjectivity towards the original project's context arose from the confluence of references that had occurred naturally in his work with those in the project. Despite the fact that his texts were evolving away from any suggestion of a geographical or cultural context, the expectation to act as the local boy created the danger of his work being compromised through becoming illustrative of the project's agenda rather than a genuine representation of his practice at that point.

Time is perhaps more of a real agent of change than any artistic or curatorial decision. The collapse of the original project not only neutralised any expectation for Dean to enact the local role but also allowed him time to consolidate his conceptual position. In mountains and triangles, Dean's contribution to *Other Plans*, all explicit signifiers of geographical or communal cultural or social context have indeed been excised from the texts, fueled by a conviction that such references, in fact, limit the meaning the texts might hold for their audience. Instead, the reader is presented with a sequence of linguistic images of people and objects, fragments of landscapes and interiors, that are rendered in the barest of detail, yet seduce the reader with their distinct cadence and hypnotic rhythm. Dean has described the texts as 'a facility', a middle point with which both artist and audience engage whilst remaining mutually exclusive from each other. Any meaning readers derive from the sequence of texts is associative, created by the passage through its facility, not inherent within it.

Although the staccato simplicity of the texts ensures the work floats free of readings that might engrain any communal context within its texture, Dean's texts are not neutral. Rather, the residual idea of the autobiographical is buried somewhere deep beneath their austere construction. Content and form combine to create the impression of an intensely personal, sensory engagement with the world. In foregrounding such a direct relationship between person and situation, the work re-imagines the idea of context as the super-micro — a continually developing fabric spun intimately around the individual that is carried through changing places, times and social positions, influenced by them but remaining ultimately continuous and distinct from them.

There is a harsh but liberating perversity in the fact that without this essay being inserted within the books, there would be no readily identifiable trace of the critical dialogues around context and autonomy that informed their production. Placed back within this critical discourse, the works Cruz and Dean have made are perceptive observations on both the nature of the artist's engagement with context and what the very nature of context might be. Yet, in essence, they remain stages on which this discourse can be rehearsed, rather than the discourse itself. It is therefore only fitting that this essay is printed as an insert that is not attached to the books in any way. One day soon it will probably fall out.