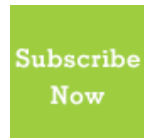


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## Art of Welfare

Goethe Institute, London, UK  
by Belinda Bowring

Enquiries into the relationship between art and politics are invariably mired in dissatisfying disputes on the purpose of art. An unabashed belief that art has a yet-to-be harnessed potential for social good, or at least an inherent pedagogical power, endures and a conference dedicated to the 'Art of Welfare' might be seen to promise the most woefully worthy end of these debates. Yet, despite the somewhat wrong-footed mixture of contemporary art and Norwegian politics, this day-long conference was not without interest for Scandinavian politicians and art thinkers alike. Taking Michael Elmgreen and Ingar Dragset's Serpentine gallery exhibition 'The Welfare Show' as a point of departure the speakers sought to address the artistic and political implications of socially motivated art practices.

Peter Osbourne commenced proceedings with the question: 'What is the space for political art in institutionally validated sites?' Looking back to the 'ghost of welfare past' he undertook a detailed study of politically motivated practices from the 1970s and early 1980s when welfare was a sign of social inclusion rather than the U.S. model of exclusion that has come to dominate. Gilbert and George's 'Dirty Words Pictures' (1977) depicting the 'depressed social vibrancy of dilapidated public space' were presented as precursors to Elmgreen and Dragset's highly formalised realisations of emptied social space. For Osbourne the crudeness of 'The Welfare Show's' allegorical address – described as 'art for adolescents' – was its palliative; this crudeness signified politics, demonstrating that just as welfare has been evacuated of the social the space for politics in art is empty.

Claire Bishop's contribution provided further thought on Osbourne's assertion that what was notable in 'The Welfare Show' was its status as spectacle, which would have previously been seen as an 'anathema to welfare as a subject.' Her paper on problems surrounding participation and inclusion cited Oscar Bony's version of social realism, The Worker's Family, as evidence of the South American precursors to contemporary collaborations with 'real' people. Bony's payment and exhibition of a worker's family in Argentina, complete with their own personal pedestal, was shown to pose similar ethical conundrums as works including Paola Pivi's 25 Cubans dancing in an oval shape (2000).

Jeremy Till's presentation on 'Architecture and the Welfare State' used a detailed examination of Sheffield's Grade II listed Park Hill housing estate to define the fate of public housing today, while Norwegian social anthropologist Thomas Hylland Eriksen sought to examine diversity by dissecting the normative values of social inclusion; questioning the difference between inclusion and similarity. However the most contentious speaker was saved for the end of the day: former Norwegian minister for labour, conservative Victor D. Norman. His hypothetical solution to unemployment, based on subsidising the unemployed to undertake socially meaningful tasks such as care for the elderly, was greeted with profoundly-voiced derision. Proof, if needed, that this art audience at least was anything but politically apathetic.

Belinda Bowring