

# Experimentalism

Experimentalism is a rather slippery object—certainly not a movement or an easily identifiable condition—and is a sufficiently unstable and general concept so as to generate a range of positions and debates about the contemporary relationship between art and politics. Why experiment? This is certainly not a new question—each generation of artists in the last century has asked some version of it, inheriting the critical impulse of the avant-garde to reinvent the role of art in society. But, today, with the global markets and fragmented politics, the question seems groundless. Is this because experimentalism is nomadic or is it quite at home in institutions? Is experimentalism merely a style or is it a practice? What does “experimental practice” mean today? How do artists and theorists from different generations and social positions think about experimentalism? What are the links between experimental practice and particular social and political projects, such as those related to identity politics, labour or censorship? These questions formed the basis of the Public Access conference “Blowing the Trumpet to the Tulips: An Exchange on Experimental Media,” and the proceedings of that conference form the basis of this issue of *Public*. While we would have wished for all the presentations and discussions that evolved from them to be reproduced here, the difficulties of rendering the dynamics of “live” presentations into a printed journal proved to be insurmountable in some cases. Equally inexpressible in print is the affective context.

The conference was held only six weeks after the attacks of September 11, to which many of the presentations, not surprisingly, made direct or indirect reference. The issue of historical relevance for experimentalism, at that time measured largely against the backdrop of globalization, has been given a more sustained and questioning point of focus in some of the articles printed here.

Yet that was not the only source of distress. Colin Campbell, a video artist from Toronto well known personally to many of the conference participants, was at the time gravely ill. He was to pass away on October 31. It is not enough to say of Colin’s work that it was ‘admired,’ although that is certainly true. Colin was one of those rare artists about whom it can be said that he made tangible contributions to artistic and social thought. While he always supported artists and worked tirelessly on their behalf, he also had strong and very informed opinions about which forms of experimentalism he felt he could support, and which he couldn’t. There were certainly many at the conference who felt his critical presence.

His thoughtful and discriminating character was as much in evidence in his dinner table settings as it was in his ideas about art and politics. This made his artistic contributions so compelling to a community that also cared about the social conditions of artmaking. As everyone who knew him would agree, he was, in addition to everything else, just a very lovely man. We would like to dedicate this issue to his memory.

For Colin Campbell 1942-2001.

—Gary Kibbins and Susan Lord