

TERCERUNQUINTO, I AM WHAT I AM

IKON EASTSIDE

10 JULY – 24 AUGUST 2008

Tercerunquinto, translated into English as 'a third of a fifth', is a collaboration between three artists working out of Mexico City. Formed in 1996, the collective has since created numerous interventions in public and institutional space that, in their words, 'question the boundaries between private and public space, examining the organised frontiers around the constitution of such definitions'.

Indicative of their approach is *Iluminacion Pública* 2006 (Public Illumination 2006) made for the 9th Havana Biennial. Consisting of two 1000 watt spotlights flooding the area outside the main biennial venue with light, the work made economical use of the resources offered to artists participating in such an event; namely the limited amount of space and electricity available for the installation of an exhibition. By creating this work on the street, Tercerunquinto points to the privileged institutional access to resources, usually in limited supply for the rest of the Cuban population. At the same time the strength of the beams, which were much more powerful than standard street lamps to the extent that they had an aggressive presence, made a subtle allusion to surveillance and more generally to the potential of public services to evolve into something more controlling.

In 2007, the group presented *New Langton Arts' Archive for Sale: A Sacrificial Act* at the San Francisco gallery of the same name. Having spent time at the venue, observing and analysing its practice, structure and operational systems, and acknowledging the difficulty of its economic situation, Tercerunquinto concluded that as a not-for-profit arts organisation, Langton's biggest asset was its memory – its archive. The group therefore proposed to put the gallery's entire collection of documentary material relating to thirty years of exhibitions, performances and events up for sale. The project was controversial and attracted much attention; New Langton Arts is San Francisco's longest running non-commercial artists' space and has a rich history bound up with the emergence of new art forms including performance, time-based art, video, installation, electronic music and concrete poetry by artists now considered to be seminal.

Besides the economic value that the archive might reach on the open market, Tercerunquinto was interested in the 'sacrificial act' implied in the gesture of relinquishing one of the most valuable resources

that an institution possesses – an accumulation of artifacts that embodies its essential ethos. In the end, New Langton Arts didn't follow through on this promised 'sacrifice' and instead held a series of public conversations around the notion of archive: if it were sold, and New Langton Arts was thereby freed from the burden of its institutional past, would the organisation lose its identity or simply redefine itself?

Tercerunquinto's institutional analysis explores what organisations like the Havana Biennial, New Langton Arts or indeed Ikon represent and signify. Recent projects have focused upon external manifestations of institutional identity, taking as their material the architecture and logos of cultural organisations. A project for the Sines Biblioteca Centro de Artes, Portugal, focused on the distinctive graphic logo of the institution, which adopted the silhouette of the building itself. Removing material from the walls of the galleries they used this to create a monument in the form of the logo, a play on the institution's assertion that 'cultural centres are the new monuments of cities'. This examination of the relationship between architecture, the identity of an institution and the cultural project extends to their work for Ikon.

Their proposal for Ikon grew out of a two-week residency in Birmingham in 2007, based at the gallery's former Eastside building on Heath Mill Lane. Exploring the district they became interested in the 'scars' left on buildings by the signage of prior occupants and how this corresponded with their established interest in institutional self-definition through architectonic modes. At the same time they were made aware of the changing focus of the area. Once farmland, Eastside was until very recently a centre of light industry, full of small businesses processing metal or producing small parts for the car trade. Eastside's reinvention thus reflects economic history, which moved from an agrarian economy through the industrial revolution to the current dominance of the cultural industries. Many new arts organisations have emerged in post-industrial parts of the UK and Europe over the last decade, often accompanied by landmark buildings and powerful branding. Their high profile has increasingly led to the promotion of culture for its perceived regenerative effects. Ikon's new gallery space in Eastside might be considered in the light of these changing attitudes towards culture.

Tercerunquinto's response to the situation they encountered in 2007 is a transgressive gesture, a phrase punched through the back wall of Ikon's new building: I AM WHAT I AM. The act of breaking through the walls of the white cube is a strong one that functions at once as a response to the immediate situation and the more general dominance of galleries as institutional homes for the production and presentation of art, a practice that is, in its essence, free. Cuts into the walls reveal the basic material substance of the seemingly tough, impermeable building, suggesting that it – and what it symbolises – could be fleeting.

By opening a perspective onto the building work taking place beyond the gallery, the piece seeks to underline Ikon's identity in a district undergoing regeneration. The work functions as a proposition; by transgressing the physical boundaries of the institution, shifting our attention from what is contained by the gallery to what lies beyond, it proposes that Ikon define itself in terms of its surroundings as much as those surroundings are redefined by the organisation's presence. To this end, the inscribed phrase – which emerged in conversations about Ikon Eastside between the artists and Ikon staff – is an ambiguous one. On the one hand a humble and honest assertion of identity, it might also signify pride or an unwillingness to change. Hovering between two possible interpretations, it encourages the institution to ask itself which one it will choose.

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Open Thursday – Sunday, 1–5pm, Admission free
www.ikon-gallery.co.uk