PRELOM: When we introduced you with a broad concept of Prelom, your pre-condition for giving us an interview was that it should be published as part of 'Ideology and Its Discontents', one of journal's two main sections, rather than 'Reading the Image', which for a person working in art would be a more logical and professionally 'correct' choice.

CHARLES ESCHE: I think it is natural to want to place what I do, as a curator and museum director, within a political field. 'Reading the Image' struck me as limiting that field to issues of aesthetic selection only and I am always interested in how such selection can indeed be 'read' in terms of its wider context or sphere of interest. Equally, the question of how ideology can be re-evaluated interests me a lot. I guess this relates to my personal journey into the art world as a disillusioned socialist looking for another field in which a new social-democratic/socialist imaginary could be constructed. Having felt the weight of defensive orthodoxy crushing new thinking on the left in the 1980s, I found a space for freer thinking in contemporary art galleries. Of course, freedom is always relative in real situations, but I found (and still find) the space of imaginative proposition, or modest proposals as I've called them elsewhere, to be greater in the field of contemporary art.

To get back to ideology, I think we have to see the ideological as an imaginative act. Classical Marxism would understand ideology as the imposition of a system of thought onto seemingly unconnected phenomena and I think that's close to Spinoza's idea of the imagination as knowing self-deception – acting on something that you know not to be real. So, ideology and the artistic impulse are maybe not so far apart in these terms, both making imaginative projections onto the world of hard facts. Maybe that difference is indeed part of the political or even religious divide, between those who only trust the tangible reality of demonstrable facts and those who prefer to speculate about what might be if things were different. I'm on the side of the speculators here.

Finally, with my friend Czech artist Pavel Büchler, I have recently been trying to get to grips with the origin of the term 'contemporary' and it seems that this term dates back to pre-revolutionary Russia when it was connected to an idea of socially or politically progressive art, rather than simply 'modern art' which is what people do at a particular moment in time. Restoring this link between 'contemporary' and progressive would require the intervention of ideology and it's something I would be very happy to encourage because it would also start to draw a line between different aspects of the modern art world of 2004.
PRELOM: You mentioned ‘speculations’, ‘modest proposals’, and also quite often you talk about ‘possibility’, in the sense that art can offer a certain ‘possibility’. By using this term, are you referring to the terrain of art as a speculative field in opposition to the commercialism and gallery structure, or do you charge it with political meaning as well?

CHARLES ESCHE: ‘Possibility’ is a key word for me. By ‘possibility’ I simply mean the space to think the world otherwise than it is. I think that today this lies within the terrain of art more than other fields that are hemmed by their own disciplinary procedures or their attachment to notions of realism or pragmatic politics (the ‘how-best-to-manage-the-unchallengeable-force-of-the-global-free-market’ school of thinking). However, I would not deny that given the totalizing structure of global capitalism, creating ‘possibility’ has to be done from within the existing structures, there being no outside from which to gain an overview anymore (at least for the time being; ideological thinking might create it again in the future).

In terms of the art world, ‘possibility’ also achieves an important distinction from the commercial strategies of the gallery system. If we value art in terms of the possibility that it creates in the free thought of the viewer, then what becomes vital is access to the work or to the mechanisms that might realize this possibility.

It’s also important to understand ‘possibility’ not as a fixed condition but a slippery and changeable state made of spatial, temporal and relational elements. In other words, for possibility to emerge there needs to be a site, a moment and a group of people (material that is obligingly in the hands of public art institutions), as well as a trigger – the artwork – that I suggest privileges the art space as a site for possibility to be realized. Even if this situation may be temporary and might simply be a way in which capitalism can fix its internal contradictions, there’s no reason to refuse to make use of it for investigative ends. How far can the field of visual culture or art be a test site for economic alternatives? How far can we press the protective shield that has accrued around art in free market capitalism? Can we sneak ‘possibility’ in through the back door when, like Ernst Bloch says, ‘there is a very clear interest that has prevented the world from being changed into the possible’?

PRELOM: How do you see a position of curator in relation to the ‘possible world’? What kind of possibilities can produce curatorial work within the so-called ‘grand shows’ (biennials, triennials, Manifesta, Documenta, etc.), apart from creating concepts, contexts and opportunities and observing certain limitations, frameworks and exclusions?

CHARLES ESCHE: Generally, I would say the curator (in the abstract sense of a role within the art system) is responsible for the attempt to realize possibility that has been created by the artwork. It is therefore, in some ways, a second order function but nonetheless necessary for the artwork to do what it can do to its full potential. So, curating is not really about collaborating with an artist but taking the artwork and adding a context and a set of conditions for it to be encountered. Personally, I find that reasonable and accurate, though sometimes working with artists whom I have commissioned to do new work I have become much more
intensely involved in the creation of possibility, but that is quite rare and requires a level of friendship that you can have with only a few individuals.

You allude in your question to the big shows and ask whether possibility can be created there. It’s an important question for me, and one that I’m struggling with now to try to answer positively. The biennale-type exhibition is compromised by the need to attract a mass audience or promote a particular city; it also lacks a certain possibility to be reflective of its own condition in the way a museum can be over a longer period. With Istanbul, I’m trying to rectify this by making a show that will look back at the 18-year history of the Istanbul Biennial in the Van Abbemuseum, Eindhoven.

At the same time, biennales can be very important as introductory mechanisms for artists outside old Europe and the USA to enter the art world, from which they can be taken up and shown in more generous surroundings (for instance, I was pleased to make solo exhibitions with Surasi Kusolwong and Nedko Solakov as my last shows in Rooseum, Malmö as a way of establishing the work of those important artists outside the biennial circuit). As long as this later move happens, then biennials have an art world purpose. In terms of the viewers, biennials also serve as introductory surveys – like greatest hits of the year CDs – and as opportunities to excite interest in art that can be pursued subsequently.

But the question of whether you can, through biennales, create the possibility I am talking about is still moot. I opted for Istanbul because I think there, in that particular place, we can say something about new ways of imagining relationships in the world that will have a resonance. The city of Istanbul, as the largest in Europe, makes for an amazing situation to produce a biennial. If I look at other grand shows of mine, I hope the 2002 Gwangju Biennial signaled an acceptance of collaborative and group practice into the art world through our invitation to many artist and curatorial groups and small scale spaces. My Tate Triennial of British Art in London in 2000 called Intelligence basically failed to shift anything in that country’s debate. In broader terms, I think Documenta X and XI both signaled a certain point in art where the field was open to political discourse and they have and will prove significant. I’m not clear what the last few Venice Biennials achieved beyond introducing some new names.

But I think in general, a ‘grand show’ has to be simple in terms of its address to the viewers and to try to capture a current debate and frame it in a certain way so that we can recognize its significance and make use of it as a recognized phenomenon rather than an individual assertion. That’s at least a criterion by which I would be happy to be judged. The year round institutional program can go much further in terms of realizing possibility but we do need ‘grand shows’ to help mark a certain development in the issues around art.

**PRELOM:** You are working on the project Cork Caucus as part of European Capital of Culture. As far as we understood, the idea is to remove the emphasis from the production of objects to the research, discussion and distribution of experience/information/knowledge. Many curators engaged in such big, official projects are emphasizing the urgency of mixing local and international experience. Is this really important?
CHARLES ESCHE: The opportunity for Cork Caucus came about after an invitation from Tara Byrne of the National Sculpture Factory in Cork to develop a project for the Capital of Culture. The problem with these ‘Capitals of Culture’ is that they are usually perceived to be about the culture of representation and spectacle. They often prioritize tourism and economic development rather than the speculative possibility of culture. They become representations of what the city is about to the outside world and its ability to be part of an international spectacular-event culture. While they are all very enjoyable and satisfying on many immediate levels, they are less effective in terms of contributing to the local critical cultural debate. So the opportunity of this invitation was to see whether or not an event such a Capital of Culture could incorporate an attempt to propose something that would contribute to a critical discourse in the city at the grassroots level and that would leave a legacy for the future.

Coming from the outside, there are a lot of assumptions you bring with you but one of the most important things to ensure is that you had an interest in the intelligence that exists in the city itself. Firstly, it was important to engage key collaborators both local and international. For that reason I was keen to involve a local art group (art/not art) and Annie Fletcher, who’s Irish but lives and works in the Netherlands. Further, in order for it to be really meaningful, it had to be collaboration with the creative people across the city. Of course, that’s an extremely ambitious plan but necessary to maintain an idea of openness and engagement right through, between now – or what we have called the ‘grassroots’ phase, the ‘nucleus’ of the event with many guests coming to Cork in June-July 2005 – and the period beyond. I hope the ‘grassroots’ project will begin to develop contacts across different groups there and that an intensity of engagement becomes possible through the work of NSF and art/not art in particular. Now, desiring engagement is all very well and noble but it’s nothing unless it has some objective or some sense of where it might want to go.

That brings me to the reason why we began to play around with the notion of a democratic structure itself. The idea of Cork Caucus was initially based on two other workshops that I organized, one in Seoul, Korea in early 2002 and one in Indonesia in late 2003, both called ‘Community and Art’. Those two workshops were about ten days long and the idea was that groups from Asia and Europe were to come together and present their activities. Their intention was to establish meeting points across a large geographic divide and to see if they might spark collaborations or bilateral initiatives between individual groups that we had brought together in these two places. We concentrated on artist and curatorial groups because they are critical to organizing activity in places that have little or no official institutional infrastructure.

I think those two workshops were quite successful, but along with achievements there was also a certain amount of frustration about two things. Firstly, they were too short; secondly, they didn’t allow a considered and longer-term response to the presentations that were made. These frustrations combined with a lack of clarity about the agenda. Simply bringing people together, creating the possibility of meeting, was extremely valuable, particularly in a situation where most information was gathered through the Internet, but it was not enough to get anywhere further – it only scratched at the surface. So the question was how can it be possible to make
something that remained discursive but was more able to determine its own agenda, or determine the questions that would form the agenda and then develop ideas within its own structure.

One motivation for Cork Caucus was that we wanted to discuss the relationship between art and democratic development. This was partly as a result of discussion in the two previous workshops and partly because the relationship between the issue of Europe and culture brings up the question of how art could contribute to the huge problems we now have with imagining new forms of collective decision-making and collective action. We seem to have in Western Europe a stable assumption that after 1945 we achieved ‘democracy’ and that it needs no serious critical examination. I think that is dangerous, not only because it has made us lazy and apathetic, but because it flies in the face of contemporary life. An important question for me is to question how far we have achieved a democracy in which we are satisfied and in which art and cultural expression has a clear and defined role? If not, then how can art help to open up this question, given that it has played such an important role in the past? For instance, we only have to go back to Joseph Beuys to find one crucial link between art and democratic thinking. Given that he wanted to start his Free International University in Ireland, his perhaps flawed notions of art, democracy and education became a wonderful starting point for us. Beuys wrote a proposal with Caroline Tisdall that was sent to the EEC (now the EU) as an application for funding for a new model of university to be situated in Dublin. Perhaps inevitably, given the imaginative chasm between bureaucracy and art, it was turned down. However, the project has been restored through a confluence of new interests.

The idea of calling the project ‘Cork Caucus’ was not only a nice wordplay but also a term that links directly to the process of making a decision. The origin is meant to come from the Native American tradition of taking decisions. In the US Democratic Party ‘caucus’ you literally stand in various corners of the room and the biggest group of people gets the decision. It’s very primitive but very beautiful form of visual democracy. A caucus is then a democratic means of taking a decision and I think it differs from a workshop in that a workshop is a coming together for production or exchange while a caucus is a coming together in order to make a decision. That’s a subtle difference, but an important one. The logical next question, of course, is ‘what is the nature of the decisions we want to make’? Again, I think we have imposed answers based on our experiences and hopes for Cork.

One issue is how can an event like this contribute to the reserves of cultural capital of the creative community in Cork. If we really get it right, this area might produce a series of decisions that can be continued and enacted after the Caucus happens. The second major issue is how can we decide the forms of the relationship between what we are engaged in – the territory of visual culture – and political or cultural change as a pre-existing objective. Indeed, we need to consider the development of the democratic model itself, given that we presume democracy to be underdeveloped. How could our kinds of discussions and material projects contribute to that development? This area might produce a statement or a series of proposals in a post-Caucus publication – or it might leave us still puzzling, we shall have to see. Personally, I am interested to see if
such an old fashioned notion as solidarity could be revived here. Do we have enough common interests to declare that we share aims for which we can work in solidarity with each other?

Those may be the main questions that Caucus can raise, but who takes that decision about what form the proposals might take, how they are weighted and what contributions to the debate might actually look like? I think this is where the Caucus model becomes very interesting because what you have in the Caucus model are ‘candidates’ who put ideas forward for approval or rejection, like in a classical US presidential election. The decision as to the value of the proposals is taken by the ‘constituents’ – the people who come to Caucus – and of course candidates for one proposal become constituents for others. So what I think is interesting for Cork in bringing international people like Surasi Kusolwong, Catherine David, Shep Steiner, Giorgio Agamben, Gayatri Spivak, Maria Eichhorn, and many others who will be presenting arguments and projects for each others consideration, is an engagement with a series of propositions, and indeed participation in these propositions, in order to consider what art has to offer a city community today.

Whether that participation is critical is one of the questions that could be determined by this model. The question then becomes ‘Can people in Cork take some of these proposals forward on their own account?’ If they do, I think Caucus can present a model of engagement with art and individual artists that becomes very exciting. What’s interesting is that at the end of Caucus a decision is taken in Cork, about Cork, for Cork, if this doesn’t sound like democratic hyperbole. What our job as organizers comes down to is, I think, to provide the proposals that the constituents feel able to choose or to reject, and, as a result, to shift the pattern of creative behavior in the city towards something they all feel happier with.

**PRELOM:** As a curator of Istanbul Biennial you also decided to work in/with the city. Working title of this year biennial is simply “Istanbul”...

**CHARLES ESCHE:** Istanbul as a city is really important right now. In all sorts of ways, both historically and of the moment, it reveals some of the basic contradictions and possible solutions to our current dilemmas. I’ve called Istanbul a predictive city to challenge the idea that is somehow following an already trod path towards US-style global modern capitalism. I would say, perhaps provocatively, that I believe (and hope) that Eindhoven (where I live) will look more like Istanbul in 25 years than Istanbul will look like Eindhoven. What you find in Istanbul is neither the fundamentalist conflict of Western fear nor the exhausted notion of European social democracy consensus (I’ve written a lot about Swedish social democracy recently so I won’t justify that statement; one of those essays is translated in Croatian in a recent Swedish show catalogue). Instead, you have a form of agonistic living together in which people survive, continue, prosper without a fundamental agreement on the pattern of society. It serves as a concrete form of what Chantal Mouffe has called an ‘agonistic public sphere’, though the publicness of that sphere is constantly under threat from rich families and from privatization. It’s a strange thing to say but I actually like the people that I’ve met in the governing party there – maybe I’m foolish but they do genuinely seem to be pursuing their
own sense of what Turkey could be in relation to Europe and Asia in a very thoughtful way. Working in the city is inspiring because of the possibility it creates, in the terms I've defined above. You are allowed to think things otherwise more than in any other place I've been.

In terms of the biennial, that puts on quite a lot of pressure and we've tried to respond to it in a number of ways. Structurally, we decided to avoid the pitfalls of Ottoman nostalgia-kitsch, or at best the notion of the historic city providing spurious legitimacy to contemporary work, the notion that has disfigured a number of previous biennials. So, we will use only relatively recent buildings and sites that are either domestic or associated with contemporary trade and production. These feel to be more appropriate spaces in which artists can show their explorations the city today. Secondly, we decided to reduce the overall number of artists to less than 50, to show more work by each individual and to ask around half of the selected artists to come for an extended residency in Istanbul (2-6 months) to produce new work or choose existing work with us that would address the sensibility of the city itself. As a countervailing force, and to avoid the dangers of a kind of Istanbul essentialism, the other half will be showing work that contrasts with the environment and condition of Istanbul and tells other stories or experiences from other parts of the international imagination. A second, separate project will be called Istanbul Positionings and will trace existing activities in the cultural field throughout the city of 15 million, marking them and providing opportunities for them to contact each other, as well as the Biennial viewers and artists. The Positionings project will also include independent initiatives organized to coincide with the Biennial itself. I hope this structure will provide a means through which the works can be seen to touch on the questions of the city and its significance today but of course we have to understand that art is always an intimate experience that talks to the individual and about individual experience. So, the question of Istanbul will always be dealt with tangentially, in passing or as a quixotic, personal account. I think that quality of intimacy, or at least its absolute desirability as a quality of good art, is an antidote to the danger of art as a kind of politics by other means. Democratic politics always have to be addressed to the group and the mass, which art doesn’t need to and probably can’t do effectively. So an art that is interested in politics has to realize those limitations very quickly, which is perhaps why some overt political artists often give up at some point. As I said before, I made the reverse journey because it seems to me this quality of intimacy is precisely what I want to find in the world as a way to start to re-imagine it.

**PRELOM:** We would like to contextualize a bit more two projects that we were talking about earlier. The previous Istanbul Biennial was presented under the slogan ‘Poetic Justice’, which, in a way, was a specific reaction to the last Documenta. Documenta XI became a referential point for criticizing or approving creation of political platform within an art show. The exhibition was strongly criticized for the lack of art expression and ‘surplus’ of political reportage. It seems that the art world is very much worried at the prospect of art becoming not much more than means for political messaging, which slowly but surely leads to moral and didactic
conception of art. How do you see the interstice between autonomy of art and art’s reflectivity and engagement? How do you see this constellation in case the third element is introduced, a historical (but still relevant) voice of political theory claiming that socially engaged art represents a side-effect of the society that mistook politics for culture, an idea that engaged art represents a more digestive form of search for social emancipation?

CHARLES ESCHE: One actually wonders about the danger of art as a harmless outlet for alternative voices that maintains the fiction of free speech without effecting ruling class efforts to impose their version of global capitalism. It is an element of the money and interest that foundations and nation states put into culture for sure, but my problem with the analysis is twofold. Firstly, I don’t believe in a coherent ruling class outside the ideological neo-cons in the Washington White House. Global capitalism itself has developed a terrifying kind of internal logic based on the mechanism of shareholder value and profit that excludes individual conspiracy in favor of a kind of blind pseudo-religious faith in the inevitability of the market to be the ‘best’ system of distribution. Most operatives of the market system, and even at a very high level individual capitalists are merely operatives, are neither stupid nor uncritical but simple pragmatists that have faith in their system as ‘better’ than any other in terms of economic growth, wealth creation and other targets that capitalism has made for itself and then successfully fulfilled. So, I don’t think about conspiracy but rather a melancholy failure of ambition and imagination in our current social model – and that is the reason of our current political neutralization. Secondly, any attempt to change that, or to start suggesting alternative ‘targets’ for social and individual fulfillment, needs to begin with the qualities of intimacy, desire, aesthetic satisfaction and quixotic personal contentment that art does speak to and about. So, I think we can think in terms of the relationship between art and political change provided we understand that it can never be causally linked, that those that are not affected at the intimate level will always deny it and that it has always happened throughout history. I would only add, at the risk of repeating myself, that this moment in our history presents a particularly grim outlook for thoughtful human development and that we need the force of the intimate imagination of possibility more than at many other times. So, we should feel enthused to keep working within the art field, even at the risk of partially satisfying the current system’s desire for harmless critique. Besides, we should not underestimate the possibility that harmless critique can become harmful over time.

Interview was conducted during November and December 2004.

Interview by: Jelena Vesić