

**Coming To
Have
A Public
Life,**

**Is It Worth
It?**

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Foreword

This publication was produced following an invitation to make a new project for *Art Now Live* at Tate Britain, September 2007. The event as a whole focuses on performance, and ideas of participation and storytelling.

I decided to produce and publish four different texts, made with Lizzie Carey-Thomas, Katharine Stout and Lina Dzuverovic who are the curators of the project, Marina Vishmidt a writer and curator based in Maastricht, Angelika Bartl a writer based in Berlin, and Karolin Meunier an artist and writer based in Berlin. I wanted to extend the invitation, involve more participants and try to represent more accurately the way in which I am working and producing thoughts. For me the production of thoughts and projects is very social, and dependent on my relation to others.

I chose the publication form as a challenge to an image of participation as visualised through the live appearance of bodies in space. I wanted to ask: why should we participate? whilst still acknowledging that thinking, writing and reading are also types of participation.

The texts do not fit easily into an existing form, they are not a catalogue essay, poetic, review or theoretical text. They are produced through an exchange, in which each person is listening and responding to both the content and how we are addressing one another. I tried to avoid posing a list of set questions and inviting persons into an existing structure defined by me. Rather, I let the discussions and text be defined by an attempt to produce something together. The exchanges took place over email, and were edited over a period of time, together.

We have taken the concept of participation in quite basic terms, participation as representation and enactment, almost like a threshold, which we are negotiating when we decide to participate, and in some instances we are discussing what this negotiation implies or makes us feel. We are talking quite specifically about participation in an art museum context, and trying to articulate our positions as viewers, artists and curators. The discussions are non-conclusive, since it is hoped that they will continue and remain open for comment and participation from the reader.

The publication will be given away during *Art Now Live* on September 8th 2007. I would like to extend an invitation to the reader to discuss and record their comments with me, on the day.

Emma Hedditch

Appearing, Becoming Visible, Having A Public Life.

I met Karolin Meunier in Maastricht at the Jan van Eyck Academie in March 2007. Karolin is a researcher at the Academie in the Fine Art Department, but lives in Berlin most of the time where she is both an artist and writer.

EH: In September I am invited to participate in a project for *Art Now Live* at Tate Britain. The project is announced as a performance event in which artists are exploring ideas of participation and storytelling. I have proposed to make a publication which will be available for people to read at the performance event, a performed reading in attendance.

The content will be a reflection on both the act and representation of participating in the production of exhibitions and meeting a public, and reflections on the act, and representation of participating in the production of a representative political society. We will not necessarily be producing the effect of participation, but we can discuss what we feel is happening when we enter these relations.

I would like to talk to you about your work, which I understand deals with a question of appearing for a public. I am interested in how you address this decision to appear and in some of the methods you explore in your texts and video work.

KM: I would like to take your invitation to work on this conversation as a possibility to appear in a previously unexperienced text format. The challenge of a public talk is always to refer to the combination of two different addressees, the concrete person one speaks or writes to (in this case it's you), and the intangible audience of visitors and readers. The invitation itself as a request to participate, be present, to take part in something is connected to the idea of having a public life. One can see in it an act of exclusiveness as well as an act of hospitality. I often try to take invitations as a more or less specified platform that forces me to react on the request, and at the same time prompts me to make a proposal.

In some of my videos I work with this situation, the performative setting of being confronted with the demands of a future audience. In a video called *Letter1* I am writing a text, and the text doesn't exist until I enter the frame of the camera, the mere possibility of being read is the only reason for writing it. The experiment is not about automatic writing, but a way of concentrating on this very moment, of creating a readable and meaningful text. In another video, *Model of the Figure2*, I am explaining a kind of self-made theory while drawing a diagram. The performance is scripted, yet staging the text in front of the camera causes me to speak in a different manner. If becoming public is linked to the idea of visibility, it could be understood literally as being inside the frame, which becomes evident when I sometimes leave the frame and therefore interrupt the lecture, leaving the

viewer alone. Working with the camera and not performing live, promises metaphorically to recapture power, which could get lost in a public situation, when one is committed to the passive presence of the audience.

Following the traces of some of your past texts was productive for me. Even though your manner of writing is different from mine, we sometimes deal with similar questions. When you circle around the task of writing the essay about Adrian Piper (<http://www.infopool.org.uk/emma.htm>) for instance, you are describing the whole process of gathering material, the difficulties of meeting Piper, and reflecting on the conditions of working. You've decided to say things which I've decided not to say. For me writing reviews is more an experiment in avoiding any personalised statement; sometimes a good description of another artist's work is already challenging. I am mentioning this in relation to your question on what it takes to be represented in a museum or a publication. I understand the job of being an author or an artist as a role that can be analysed and played in different ways. There is nothing new about this idea, but maybe it shows that working with institutions is not always a fight between a genuine self and an alienating system. I understand it as a provided form, available to be used or appropriated. Nevertheless, the need to define one's own appearance and attitude always remains. That is why I am interested in the way people use the pronoun 'I' in texts or speeches, and how this question of positioning yourself is linked to the situation of addressing. To speak from a subjective point of view, to refer to an important experience or a personal involvement often goes back to the decision to avoid a structure of objectiveness, that disguises opinions as knowledge. On the other hand, the personal experience, labelled as such, is not necessarily of interest to others in general. Or, to argue from another perspective, a statement is never pure and unmediated. One could say writing is always already contaminated by the fact that one is talking to an uncontrollable addressee.

EH: What I experience from your texts and whilst working on this one, is that writing is an action one has to perform. That is, enter into a thought and perform something back to you or with you, and with the intangible audience. These 'experiential ideas' or moments of movement are not something that we are reproducing or simply describing, they are something that we are writing and thinking, rewriting and editing. I also recognise it as a very discreet practice, until the publication or exhibition of it sets it in motion, when you are invited to appear, or your video work, where the text appears because of the camera being switched on.

I think this is significant when thinking about who comes to be a representative or how persons decide that they can represent something. It is interesting to examine how texts are modelled on our knowledge of an existing way of producing, or the capacity to imagine an alteration to this existing model, not only that we are able to produce, but that we are able to imagine changing.

You seem to have found something in your *Open Letters* which combine some

decisions about how to write, and what to write of. In the catalogue *Page One*, a number of pieces of your work have been reproduced. There is one reproduction of the *Open Letter #02*, which you distributed as a flyer to the visitors of a show. I am struck in particular by this part of the text:

“Because what does it mean to be present at as many places as possible, just to meet the requirement of public appearance? Visibility, surely, is the necessary condition for any discursive relevance, for identification by this public. However, it is provided that a ‘being involved’ interlinks with the ‘becoming visible’ within the structures of mutual availability. And this is a matter of property distribution: Anyone who wants to be seen must be available to the community. The produced images shall circulate. Invisibility, on the other hand, remains menacing. Having to stay outside economic logic implies not possessing anything that could be shared. Thus, this matrix with its character of exclusion demands to generate an area of abject beings, which are not yet visible, but rather embody a constitutive outside. The society assumes the right to decide by whom it is represented, because what is visible, constitutes the basis of any future tradition.”³

The text is producing a reading of movement of positions and perspectives. I am interested in the form of address, and what kind of positioning, writing to an unspecified audience from an unspecified position produces. Where does it leave us? Is it something we are involved in, belonging too? In this text you talk of the ‘community’, ‘public’ and ‘society’. Does each have a different political implication?

KM: It would be strange to talk about the text fragment, as if it were a statement, that one should take just literally. I assume it becomes obvious, everything sounds a bit too serious, as these generalising notions do, ‘community, society, public’, that I am mixing up. Still, the text describes the need to be recognized to achieve one’s own projects and concerns, and the fact, that this need can establish a situation of dependency, stress, strategic acting, competition etc. The notion of participation has a positive connotation. It refers to the promise of being visible by taking part. But what are the special conditions of each particular participation? I think the feeling of being forced to be present at as many places as possible, even though it might create an uneasy situation, is related to this ‘unspecified audience’. The gap one experiences between the process of production, which often implies invisibility, and the process of exhibiting, which belongs to the realm of ‘becoming visible’, is not always clear, of course. As I said before I experience the audience as present in its potentiality and as responsive to the working process. This might be the reason, why I am interested in using the grammatical structure of manifestos, rules and letters. The format itself suggests a strong connection to the reader. By calling him/her directly I am able to react to his/her intangibility.

The letter in general suggests that the absence of the addressee can be handled using an active approach, instead of perceiving this situation as a deficiency.

The open letter generates a special constellation in public communication. It is often published in newspapers or on websites by one or more undersigning persons to accuse representatives or institutions, to whom one is not able to talk personally. In addition the letter informs any reader about a certain case. When I write texts as open letters, these implications occur, but they are not activated in their concrete political function. I wouldn't call it an act of positioning myself. With using quotes and an ambiguous tone, I try to point to the quality of language as a material, that follows its own rules. It is always difficult to figure out who is speaking. My question is further, whether the act of 'borrowing' experiences from others could be understood as a performative act and thus as an experience itself. By appropriating these given structures, both the writing process and the recipient's situation get entangled with fictitious elements.

The 'I' is not such an easy signifier as it at first appears to be. Writing from a subjective perspective sometimes feels like walking on dangerous grounds, because the reader might identify the 'I' in the text directly with your person forgetting that the process of writing is always a process of abstraction. In your practice of writing and describing projects and talking with people about their work, you often show the means of production – not in a technical sense but the personal effects of different working conditions. You try to reflect your methods, your strategies of communicating and you take care of your body and relationships. This attitude is not always self-evident and it becomes even more relevant, if one considers it as a method itself. That is to say, the personal constitution could function as a tool, comparable to a camera for instance, which has its own capabilities and limits and thus influences the art work.

EH: Yes, I agree that the 'I' is not an easy signifier. I try to combine writing from this subjective position, with a descriptive text about the conditions under which I am experiencing something. I am also trying to include the text of other persons with whom I am sharing in a discourse with, over time, or something I am reading and seeing.

When writing, feminist and queer politics resonate in my thinking, and something that I experience through this thinking is the question of self-representation, which is often connected to the concept of self-realisation and multiple subjectivities, which I think is connected to your concept of the 'Working Group'. That is, one should feel able to express and learn to articulate one's position. Through these declarations a transformation of the self and the way in which knowledge is produced and circulated could occur, in very simple terms, more people produce more versions of knowledge and viewpoints. This is a rather narcissistic practice, in which one talks from one's own experiences, as a way of asserting one's right to tell about something you have experienced, are experienced in, or are experiencing. When I write reviews of exhibitions I try to use a method of inserting some 'experiential' components and making contact with the artist or curator in order to know some of the intentions of the work, process and method used to produce it. The intention is not to define their position

as the only possible place to view from, but to establish a discourse, using the text as a site of potential exchange. I try to write these details in the text. As a result the reviews are not easily accepted into publications which often aim for a more objective and critical approach to experiencing art exhibitions. I am not interested in reproducing what I feel are rather alienating social relations in terms of art production and a discourse around that production. Coming back to your question about using the 'I', I imagine it more as an understanding, that our bodies and lives are presented as our 'I' and that the functions of the body and behaviour, psyche, can, could and should interrupt all the time. I do not want to pretend I could ignore what I am capable or not capable of. The process of using the 'I' helped to transgress some of my experiences of myself.

This might be a point at which to refer to the idea of the 'Working Group' which you speak of in your video *Model of the Figure*. You say:

"When demonstrating the model of the figure, I assume that the self is a divided one. In fact, the self is divided into the person that one actually is and into the figure that one invents. Of course, you can make up several figures, but that will still be accompanied by certain problems: It might result in despair, because you are not able to decide. You no longer know who you are. Also, it might drive you into despair because you prefer being the figure to being the person. That is resulting from realizing that the figure's experiences are not your own.

*Of course, it is quite naive to believe that one has to undergo these fictional experiences in reality. But it implies the issue of defining the term experience. And this is exactly where a way out of the dilemma is presented, namely when the person and the figure join into a working group and influence one another. The working group questions, so to speak, the term experience which is based on a form of live-attitude. [...]"*⁴

¹ Letter, Video, 2002-05, 7 hours

² *Model of the Figure*, Video, 2005, 8 Min.

³ *Open Letter #02*, Flyer, 500 copies, in: *Hands-On History*, JET, Berlin, 2006

⁴ *Model of the Figure*, Video, 2005, 8 Min.

Participation Isn't Improvised, It's Planned!

I have known Marina Vishmidt for many years and we have produced several discussions and texts together. We have often discussed the question of participating in projects, asked advice from each other and tried to support each other. Through this process Marina and I have developed our thinking on many of the areas discussed in this publication. The following text formalises some of these discussions, but is still not completely formalised.

EH: I wanted to talk to you about the project and proposal to make a publication for the *Art Now Live* weekend at Tate Britain in September. I am interested in discussing the project/event with you. The project is described as a day of live works exploring ideas of participation and storytelling. I am wondering how we, that is you and I, might approach the production of an exchange, predetermined by our acceptance of the invitation to do so, but simultaneously generating a textual response to the terms on which we are appearing.

In my early talks with the curators Katharine Stout and Lizzie Carey-Thomas who work for the Tate and with Lina Dzuverovic, the Director of Electra, who is curating the project with Tate, I described that I would like to work with them on a series of texts and combine these with some texts produced with others in a publication for the project. Initially there was some reluctance to pursue this idea amongst the curators. There were concerns that this discussion would be very enclosed, exclusive and inward looking. This response made me think about what the expectations of the work they do and its representation to a public. It made me ask myself what the expectation of a public is, what my contribution to the project could be and the expectations the curators had.

MV: What is clear for me about a construct like 'participation' is its implication of applying legitimacy to processes, which are frequently nothing to do with self-activity or organising in common [on and across singularities.]

I would say that the semantic, and often actual difference between participation and collective action is that participatory situations are organised, engineered in a particular way and designed-to-be-completed by others. Rather than collective creation, it is participation that affirms what already exists – you participate in what is.

Participation, if approached as ideology, signals the attempt to erase conflict or structural antagonism, where power relations are masked more effectively by the assumption that everyone has the same interests – I am thinking here primarily of 'participation' as managerial ideology par excellence in the post-unionised workplace, of 'quality control' teams and efficiency drives, the doctrine of everyone having an equal stake in a system engineered to produce inequality – 'participation' as spectacle. This takes on a particular meaning in an art context,

where participation is currently enjoying something of the status of dogma, for all sorts of reasons.

However, it is in the context of art institutions that this actually gets interesting, beyond the obvious critique. Who authorises participation and in what – how something can be pushed beyond its instrumentalities by over-identification with an ostensibly emancipatory principle, taking it at face value and thus excavating it, rather than trying to work within the very circumscribed arenas that it usually puts into play.

Here ‘over-identification’ would mean taking certain democratic or egalitarian premises seriously in situations where they are employed, wittingly or not, to maintain the status quo.

EH: Taking an invitation to participate, is to present one’s position and the invitation signifies some sort of acceptance and interest in that position from the person inviting you. An interest in taking the invitation might sometimes only be due to the terms on which you are invited or a curiosity about where the invitation might lead. The terms can predetermine your actual participation, or you could try to redefine them yourself. Entering into this exchange could still result in alienation however. When we talk about maintaining the status quo, it indicates that we can reinforce the power structures that already exist, both by and by not participating, ‘status quo’ is a term that refuses disruption. But what happens when we learn the language of participation and feel confident about our ability to participate, and end up participating really well?

MV: This is a good point, and one where I think we can reflect on the tensions, between ‘participation’ and ‘collaboration’. It’s good to preserve an agnostic attitude, which remains attentive to the specificities of situations in order not to fetishise the oppositionality or the embeddedness as an attribute of any particular way of working or whom you work with, which doesn’t mean bracketing the structural efficacy of certain manifestations of ‘openness’ within certain kinds of enclosures.

In reference to the distinction between ‘participation’ and ‘collaboration’ we were thinking about earlier ‘collaborating’ as in ‘collaborating with the status quo’ and ‘collaborating’ as type of practice of working with, each implying a kind of ethics at best, a moralism at worst? It might also be good here to draw out the terms by which ‘disrupting’ the status quo is already a kind of collaboration with it in the scenario of ‘participatory art projects’ – disrupting the status quo of an institution when authorized to do so by/in that institution – so here I guess we would have to specify what we mean by ‘status quo’, whose status quo, on what level of generality?

It’s also important to draw a distinction, or explore a dialectical tension, between participation and collaboration as models of understanding, mediating or

practicing. Is it a continuum or does each model actually imply a different politics? One doesn't exclude the other, it can be moments of the other. To begin the discussion on even a very rudimentary level, questions of authority, agency, the operative and emotional lines between self and other, the negotiation of power, social and economic differentials, policy objectives, financial pressures are already in the picture.

The assumption is that 'participation' carries a pre-constituted or hierarchical element, let's say, and 'collaboration' is more ethical and voluntary, but it's a weak one. As always, it depends on the nature of the concept subsumed by these general terms, how the resources are distributed, and who walks away with the capital.

These are symptomatic questions in relation to e.g. art practices that unfold in a social 'site' or community-specific milieu. What is it about the art discourse/system/sphere that nowadays converges with what used to be the 'public sphere' of political action or social networks, or even, how did the art context become situated/disseminated as the last best semblance of a public sphere we have?

EH: I am working on a text with Karolin Meunier, in which we are talking in part about the way artists are using 'I' in their work and constructing the idea of an experience of one's self, in relation to a projected institution. I imagine us trying to short circuit the relations of our subjectivity, between you, Lizzie, Katharine, Lina, Angelika and Karolin which might produce an interesting effect, feedback, and could produce the block we are interested in.

MV: Yes, I am also interested of course in how this construction of an artistic subject in a discursive situation is marked by the project's 'storytelling' framework. I am wondering though about a) how to produce subjectivity instead of passivity b) how to dissolve as a privileged or authorising subject within the project without simply ceding more subjectivity to the curators/institution itself. After all, 'participation' may go as far as dissolving the unique artist-subject but institutional subjectivity always remains intact. Nonetheless, this remains about potentialities and powers and balances of force rather than the institution as a bad thing per se. We are talking about certain concentrations and blockages, certain accumulations and [inclusive] exclusions (with 'participation' being analogous to good old 'inclusive exclusion' and 'exclusive inclusion') rather than bad institutions and good autonomous subcultures. By paying attention to these mechanisms of power, legitimation, time and labour, I think we can also exceed the critique/complicity bind, which abides by the moralism and gratifying symmetry of an inside/outside.

I guess the main challenge for me here would be to figure out how to 'represent' or enact these kinds of practices, the discussions, the ambivalence in a way that relates completely immanently, very concretely, to the stakes of a context like Tate, without being limited by those stakes, and for me that would have to propose some

kind of productive antagonism. Something that is only possible to do at the Tate, but something that is not 'for' the Tate.

How can these considerations, these nuances, be enacted? How does a collaboration become possible when it is not so much a question of an activity but a thought process, an exchange. How can that be represented or continued or transformed in a space like Tate?

EH: I think this is what we are trying to think through. How could a text be produced from thought, made visible and read in this context? It is a text that is not only produced for this project, it is a text produced over time, and through the years of conversations we have known each other. But also that the project is this experience of thinking through these ideas with you in this specific context, noticing how that changes our ability to produce thoughts and trying to make that readable to each other, and a public.

When representing one's position there is a strong sense that it should be represented appropriately, and with a consciousness towards each other's questions. Returning to some of the early fears of Lizzie, Katharine and Lina had about the possible insularity of the project, I think these are important ideas to problematise, with each other, and with a reader, but who are we to decide what is un-representable and should remain invisible?

MV: It seems like the only place a politics can begin is the unthought of a situation. A reflexive scepticism about working with an institution like the Tate almost seems so fetishistic as a response, to come into a situation with, that it almost seems like, precisely, anti-politics in a way, a kind of self-indulgence that has long ago become normative, the grease of criticality. Do you think we can end up practicing an art of disappearing in the reluctance to give too much? Is it worth appearing at all in such circumstances?

Have We Come To Represent Ourselves?

Following the invitation to make a new project for the *Art Now Live* event at Tate Britain, I invited Lina Dzuverovic, the Director of Electra, Katharine Stout and Lizzie Carey-Thomas, Curators of *Art Now* at Tate Britain to work on an email discussion which we would then edit and publish for this publication. I wanted to discuss the positions we take in relation to working on a public project at Tate Britain, how we produce these positions and how they function. By positions I mean our approach to the situation, our expectations and projections. I am curious about the relations between artists and curators and interested in questions of representation. I don't mean being represented in the commercial art gallery sense, but something more directly political, that is: who and what is made visible, by whom and for who? The *Art Now Live* project attempts

to present works by artists who work with ideas of participation and storytelling. Participation raises questions about authorship, and who is invited, able, wanting to associate, give time to, or appear in the proposed project, wittingly or unwittingly contributing to its production.

EH: What is your approach to representing an artist and their work, and do you think the structures and methods you work with represent artists appropriately? Not only formally, but in ways that are exploring the representation of culture and the role of artists in society?

LCT: The starting point for me is always the intention of an artist and the sovereignty of the work itself. Essentially, my approach is to facilitate an artist, both intellectually and logistically, in the production and realisation of their work. So the process ideally unfolds through dialogue and discussion. It's difficult to generalise about methods as they obviously vary according to the nature of each project and the personalities involved. And hopefully an organisation like Tate, while always to some extent placing a certain frame around work, is adaptable enough to accommodate these different approaches. Working in an environment that puts work on public display and actively promotes it to cultural commentators and a broad audience, I think you're naturally feeding in to a wider discussion about the role of the artist and their relationship to the cultural field.

KS: Of course this depends on the nature of the work, but in principle my approach is to provide support both intellectually and practically for the presentation of an artist's idea and/or object i.e. a supportive role rather than foregrounding my own position or thesis (which is itself a deliberate stance). Of course I'm not neutral and any input I have into how the art is selected, developed and presented has a direct impact on how it is understood. I am interested in a serious and hopefully long term engagement with the art and finding ways of strengthening what the artist is trying to do rather than asserting my own ideas of what this might or should be. I think that the various activities that Tate undertakes contributes to an ongoing and ever-shifting discussion about the role of culture and artists in society – above all by making this visible. But like anything that enters the public domain, it is then exposed to many different interpretations – some of which are enlightening, some of which are misleading, if not damaging. Many people have preconceptions about what art and artists should be or do, and for me the whole point about art is that there are no set rules, and no obligations beyond those imposed by the individual practitioner.

LD: I think that any activity that is performed in the cultural realm, however small or marginal it may be, feeds into a wider discussion about the role of artists in society just by its very existence. Through the process of commissioning, producing, enabling, exhibiting or touring a work of art one is automatically rethinking roles of not just artists, but other figures in the cultural field.

In terms of my approach to the work I do and the work of Electra, the emphasis is on professionalism, putting the artist at the centre and creating an environment in which work can be produced professionally and given the time/resources it deserves. By professionalism I mean ensuring that we try to support the artist at every level of the process, try to carve out the time to develop the project conceptually as well as practically, that the economy of the project is realistic, that nobody is feeling exploited and that everyone is credited correctly for their work.

I don't believe in the false economy of art being produced and distributed without paying or supporting artists properly in the process, so determining the parameters of any project, being realistic and as transparent as possible, is what I strive for. This is, of course, not always easy to achieve, but I think there is a tendency (especially in well established organisations) to not pay artists because of the assumption that it is 'good for them to have a high profile institution on their CV'. I have seen this happen across the board and it is true that some artists will work for nothing because they'd rather see the projects happen than not. This is something I find very problematic and because of this attitude I have in the past felt my work as a curator in larger institutions has at times been compromised.

EH: I am interested to hear your thoughts, from a critical perspective, about small changes that could be made in the way that you work.

LD: Change can be imagined on so many levels, and I find this question a bit too broad to answer. I would like to see a more 'regulated' field in which we work – at least when it comes to those of us working outside major museums and art centres. I find it hard to dream up utopian scenarios when in reality I spend my time dealing with the bare bones of making projects happen. At Electra each project is created from scratch: there is no project funding, venue, partner or context to begin with, so each time we have to create a completely new world which didn't exist before. In a way realising each of our projects is my way of making those 'dream scenarios' come to life.

I also think that there isn't enough discussion about infrastructures, class, the invisible mechanisms behind artistic production and what forces enable projects to happen (or what stops them from happening), especially in relationship to the market (but maybe this is a comment about the status quo in Britain more than elsewhere). I would like to see more projects like the recent touring show and research project *Lapdogs of the Bourgeoisie* (curated by Nav Haq and Tirdad Zolghadr) for instance. That project really meant something to me as it openly discussed class – in relation to contemporary art normally a taboo, at least in Britain. I am not saying all art has to engage with its means of production, but so much is brushed under the carpet as a matter of course, that I find it reassuring and refreshing to occasionally look at the nuts and bolts of art making.

LCT: I find this question a bit too abstract to tackle. What interests me is the importance of being aware of the context in which you're operating, whether as an artist or as a curator, and figuring out what is possible within that territory. Tate's profile obviously engenders a certain level of expectation – in terms of its position, history, visibility and audience. It's about exploiting these things, and the resources it has to offer, while making incremental changes to the way the institution operates through the art and artists you promote..., and a new multi-sheet hole-punch would help me get on top of the filing.

KS: In my experience it is new developments in art that cause disruption to the institution and can facilitate change, so by introducing different types of practice to this context we are in some way a catalyst for that change. My main focus is always the 'quality' of the work and how this contributes to contemporary practice and discourse. I am aware, and can appreciate, that a non-specialist audience can find some contemporary art quite difficult to understand and identify with. I don't think this means we have to change the art we select or ask artists to work in a different way, but we (the institution) does have a role to play as the interface between the artist, their art, and a museum public. I think that it is in fact good that some art is difficult and challenging – I wouldn't find it of interest otherwise, but I don't necessarily find this means it should be obscure and impenetrable to a new audience – most art can be distilled to simple questions – how does this art make me think and feel differently about myself and the world, how do we respond physically, emotionally and intellectually to objects and ideas, how do these artworks relate to other people and 'things' in the world, how does this all fit within its social and political context – etc.

EH: I am interested in what you mean by using the term 'quality'. It's quite a difficult word I think, since there is an implication that you are able to make a judgement about something, when there are so many contributing factors to a work. It's a socially and contextually determined representation. The idea of selection, and competition, is based on value judgements that I find problematic. I am also struggling with the terms 'regulated' and 'professionalism', they are both terms that seem to imply the idea of a standard by which things are measured. I am concerned that in the more 'regulated' process you describe, we become more 'efficient' but less interested in social relations, in this case between ourselves, and persons coming to view the work. I agree that everyone should be paid fairly and, but I think this is something quite easy to establish.

KS: Yes, I use it as a deliberately contentious term but one that should be discussed and explained. It is not so many years ago that there was an idea that only a 'connoisseur' was qualified to judge what was good art. I'm keen to break away from this notion of art only being accessible to an elitist group of individuals, which I think can still seem to be the case when specialist language and terms are used. At the same time some kind of selection process is inevitable since on a basic level there are too many artists and too much art being made for it all to be shown equally! As you say Emma, there are many factors for these value judgements.

What a museum curator is looking for might be different to that of a private collector for example.

There is a responsibility for museum curators to continually question what criteria they are using, and indeed to question the choices of their predecessors.

LD: For me quality is more about the microcosm that is each individual work of art than about that work in relation to other works. The judgement occurs in relation to the parameters of that particular work, not in relation to other works out there. Having said that, of course, it is important that a work of art displays some awareness of its own place in society and within history and that it is 'in conversation' with the world at large. The questions I usually ask are to do with how successful the work is in achieving what the artist set out to do, how I feel about its own agenda or *raison d'être*, and how it develops within itself. Also, quality for me has to do with seeing that a particular work of art is doing something to the artist – I look for some sort of progress or change within the process. As a curator, I like to be quite 'hands on' with the process, and through that process I like to see how a work changes the artist. But also, how it changes my own thinking as well.

To answer your concerns about the terms 'regulated' and 'professionalism' – to me, these terms are precisely there as a way of exposing or foregrounding social relations. I am not talking about 'efficiency' as such (although I like that word too!) but about transparency, creating working conditions in which everyone is treated well, and in which social relations are at the centre. Maybe this seems obvious from an institutional point of view, where systems have been in place for decades but in a small new entity like Electra absolutely all the rules have had to be set from scratch. We invented everything, and to me it feels like the healthiest place I've ever worked and I'm just trying to talk about that process.

EH: Why did you choose to work with or in this institution, do you believe there is a place outside from the Tate in which you could do something like this project for example? I am conscious that this question of inside/outside may be a perceptual or linguistic question that I have constructed, but I think it is worth pursuing since my perception has affected the way I am approaching this project.

LCT: I don't find the inside/outside definition particularly helpful. What does it mean exactly? Commercial galleries increasingly function in a similar vein to institutions – employing curators, running project spaces and promoting supporting shows with a catalogue and programme of talks – while public institutions are increasingly required to seek funding from private sources. Every organisation could be described as an institution to some extent, with prescribed modes of functioning. One obvious difference to working within an organisation like Tate rather than in an independent capacity are all the associations the name brings with it. It's a known 'brand' with high visibility which has both its benefits and restrictions. There's an obligation to provide a degree of interpretation and

all activities attract a certain amount of scrutiny, sometimes suspicion, it has to be accountable and it's harder to be spontaneous. But it also guarantees an instant level of visibility to a vast range of people and access to a brilliant network of resources, all of which are there to enable work to get made and seen.

KS: I'm fascinated by your sense of a clear distinction between 'inside' the institution and what happens 'outside'. What do you mean by this? Often the art has been seen elsewhere – it is just the location/context that changes. i.e. when we show existing work. Do you think the work appears so differently when shown at Tate. What effect do you think that has on the way work is perceived? I can understand that people think Tate is a very 'solid' thing, since it projects a corporate and controlled brand image as a way of being visible within the heavily consumer led world that it is competing in, in terms of the pressures financially and politically to reach large numbers of visitors. But in actuality it is made up of and carried forward by the strengths and passions of individuals delivering their particular area of responsibility. Of course there are systems and checks in place so that no-one operates in isolation just like any large organisation, which can seem very bureaucratic at times.

LD: I don't see it as 'inside' and 'outside' but more of a complex field in which there are a range of ways of working and partnerships to be formed. Perhaps this is about defining what 'institution' means to you. For me it's a much looser term than the traditional institutions like Tate, Universities etc. I think of Electra as an institution and in terms of your question, I would like to think of it as being on the 'inside' – a part of something bigger and something that is connected to other similar bodies. For me what is interesting about my day to day work are the infinite possibilities to reinvent existing relationships and create new ones through each project, to create new situations across contexts and to open up new possibilities for artists we work with.

EH: Yes I am fascinated by this sense of inside and outside. I know it's not actually so defined/clear, as I think I alluded to in my question or if this is a perceptual/linguistic question. I can see that on a practical level it is not simply linguistic, since resources are scarce for funding art projects, but the fact that there are resources at Tate is an assumption that we tend to make. I think it became harder in the last Ten years to imagine that there is anything outside of these larger institutional frameworks, and that is why we accept the invitation to make projects initiated by the invitation to participate, and thus contributing to the production of this illusion.

I do have a sense of there being something inside the inside, or a sense that I am not inside this institutional frame as you are. I have no 'authorised' power there. But of course I am inside the frame of the frame, as it were, I understand many of the rituals and rules and have adapted my person accordingly, so that I can pass. I am curious about the antagonism that this position creates, what it creates in myself is a feeling of authority, and that I must behave in a certain way towards that authority, rather than it being a place in which I assert my subjectivity.

In terms of the works that appear in the Tate and if they are changed by the context, I think they are, and I think as a viewer I want to articulate that. Of course works are not changed essentially but our experience of viewing is different. I think the decision to position a work at Tate is particular, political and vital. I also think that since as Lizzie mentions there is this possibility for a large audience, one negotiates this space in a very particular way. I am interested in the possibility to maintain an intimate and intense relation within this more public place, that does not mean becoming private, it means to produce an exchange with others, despite the rather dominant ideology of the institution.

In our discussions we have talked a lot about how 'the viewer' will experience this project, you alluded to the idea that it might be problematic since it is so text heavy, and rather exclusive sounding and that a viewer might not spend the time reading the publication in the space. We discussed how to communicate the work to the viewer. I think these are all really fascinating questions, since they imply a certain understanding that we have, that we need to communicate. I think this connects to a question of outside and inside. My feeling is that we are all already implicated, and so is a reader/viewer, since that is who we are addressing ultimately, it is a project made for a viewer/reader, and because there will be a viewer. We are also to a certain extent becoming quite alienated from the project, as it goes on, through the many representations, surfaces on which it is reproduced, and the many people involved in its production, making the authorial position more plural.

LCT: I think this is one of the key dilemmas. How to make discussions more open, wide-reaching, inclusive and essential without adopting a mass approach that simply reflects every activity. There has to be some form of editing, selection and distillation of information. For example, I'm finding it difficult to understand how this discussion will translate for a viewer and how they will feel compelled to contribute to it. There has to be a balance between respecting the autonomy of an idea without compromise and being aware of your audience.

KS: It seems to me this discussion is very much between ourselves and I am curious to know how other people will be able to find a route into it. I'm also curious about your sense of being oppressed by the institution – you talk about its 'dominant ideology' and how you've had to change the way you behave/operate. This is harder for me to see since as you point out I am 'inside' the frame. I do know from having worked freelance and in smaller places that there is a higher level of scrutiny and exposure here due to audience numbers, press interest as well as the supposed 'gravity' of showing at a national museum, which some artists find gives unwelcome pressure and others actively relish! But this is more to do with personality I think. This is most clearly the case with the Turner Prize when there is an unprecedented level of attention placed on the four artists nominated and in particular the eventual winner.

EH: I think there is a lot of power held in a few places, and these places are powerful because they have the resources and willingness to make big gestures

which are highly visible. I do not want to believe that power comes with money and resources. I do also think of a different kind of power, one that is multiple and dispersed, unknown and full of potential. I think Tate has an enormous power to tell what it thinks is important, and to not tell what it doesn't think is important and that information is transmitted to a lot of people. So I think there is a responsibility to know what it is that is being perpetuated by this visibility, not just with the Tate, but every person that participates in the production of its image, the artists and the viewers included.

All Is Touching, Re-absorption

I met Angelika Bartl in September 2006. Angelika is writing a PhD on feminism and postcolonialism in documentary video art. We began talking about the interest we share in the production of sites for viewing art works, exhibitions, videos, films and screenings and how we are open to exploring the viewing process as a productive process.

We began this discussion in relation to the project *The Migrating Museum*, which was presented at the Jan Van Eyck Academie in Maastricht, (March 2007) by a group of theorists called FO/GO Lab, of which Angelika is a member. We have extended the initial discussion through email, over time.

EH: I want to discuss and act upon an idea I have called Re-absorption. Re-absorption could be a mechanism and an insistence that comes from the desire to retain an intimacy and solidarity of relations to people, thoughts, projects or things/objects, despite their being in the public realm and being in a process of absorption and interpretation by many other people, systems and structures. The word absorption implies a psychological state rather than incorporation, which would imply something more physical. Re-absorption is different to a sense of ownership, because it accepts and allows all other relationships and interpretations to take place, but asserts or reminds a person, in a positive way, about the particular relationship that they have to the person, idea or object. This is related to the questions, and a critique one might have about one's own institutional relations with an art museum for example and ways of escaping some of their commercial interests.

Re-absorption acknowledges and foregrounds interpersonal relations and desires. Through re-absorption I might be able to counter commercial/corporate absorption of persons, ideas and objects (whether actual or projected, because I am willing to concede that it might be projected, but still very real) by insisting on my relation to particular persons, thoughts, projects or things/objects and articulate my desire to express those relations not only in private, but through a very public declaration/demonstration i.e. by writing and publishing a text.

AB: What do you suggest, how can we work on these relations/desires?

EH: Re-absorption is situated primarily with the viewer placing as much of the responsibility for how a work is interpreted, into the viewers' hands, as with the artist or institution. There is a shared responsibility, to engage, read the work and represent a position. It has become clear that there is an imbalance of power, the power to represent or have your representation received by a public. With regards to the institution of the art museum, I want to insist that instead of leaving or exiting this relation, we continue to reinsert ourselves into it by asserting our position.

AB: Could you see how migration plays a role in this concept?

EH: Migration refers to the movement from place to place; the effects of which are always occurring on the psyche and body, and inciting transformations of one's subjectivity. The art museum being just one place among many others in which these effects occur, but in which there is often an isolated place constructed, disconnected from an idea of an outside world, without a sense of the present. Increasingly these spaces are privatised or emptied out through an adoption of corporate funding/sensibilities or a more regulated, approach/attitude from curators. If one were to choose to leave these spaces because of these new situations, the emptiness, what or who would one also be leaving? Migration is not simply leaving one place for another; it is also leaving persons and interpersonal relations in that place. I am interested in examining the way we assert our sense of belonging or not belonging to a place, by the way in which we identify or not with the people that are there, and what they and we have come to represent? Also I am interested in looking more specifically at how the art museum interprets our presence/attendance. Do we come to represent ourselves, representing ourselves?

AB: For me it is very interesting to see how you (as an artist) insist so much on the viewing position. I think that very often the viewer is related too linearly with the artist whose intentions he/she might interpret correctly or not. This concept seems very dangerous to me not only because it assumes a completely conscious and self-transparent subject but also because it differentiates between the "art-connoisseur" and those who do not belong to the art world. So, I think the first step of changing (or migrating) the borders of the art institution is to emancipate from the idea of a correct and conscious way of reading (and in this sense mastering) art. We can never own or fix a certain meaning. Rather, we have to conceive institutions, representations and all kinds/modes of activities as a question of community or collectivity without neglecting that power is always pre-figuring the spaces we might occupy within these communities.

EH: How do you work with these ideas?

AB: I try to develop a concept for watching documentaries about subaltern groups in the art context, which does not romanticise the idea of a political community of

the viewers and the people represented. It is about the (unconscious) collective aspect of representation despite different economies, desires and political interests of the positions involved, i.e. filmmakers, viewers and represented people. This could result in a different mode of subjectivity, which takes responsibility for its articulations knowing that there is no transcendental or right way of articulating due to the multifarious and ambivalent institutional and personal inscriptions, which are articulating ourselves. I think that this permits some kind of migration between different media-levels as well as between institutional borders like you suggested.

EH: Could you explain what you mean by media-levels? Does this connect to a concept of property? A radical property, where for example an artist presents a political work in the context of an institution, the constitution of which seems contradictory to the works and politics they are presenting? Does this constitute an infringement or transgression, let's say in the use of certain political ideas? I am very uncomfortable with assertions based on property a radical property, where the use or interpretation of ideas and ideologies is policed or controlled because of an attachment we have formed to those ideas, rather than allowing them to move, through different hands and heads.

AB: When I talk about media-levels I mean the spaces in which representations occur and become operate. Documentary videos, for example, include the spaces of their shooting, of artistic production but also the space where they are perceived, by a specific public. Of course, these spaces are always interwoven, but mostly the movement from one space into another is invisible or unconscious (This is the case, for example, when we only want to talk about the initial context of a work, its social background, without questioning how our actual gazes and interests indispensably change its meaning.) What interests me are ways of working on these movements back and forth through these spaces in a political way. One example is the video *Hot Water* by Alejandra Riera (2001). It shows women protesting for better housing conditions in Northern France using a direct camera style. Yet, the emphatic camera not only connects us emotionally with the fight, but the women get so close that they even repulse us onto our distant viewing activity in the art sphere (where the video is shown). Neither can we hang on to the illusion to participate in the fight, nor can we enjoy it as a distant aesthetic spectacle. The feminist struggle cannot be obtained or possessed as an aesthetic property, but we have to work on it – on its aesthetic meaning – as a radical problem of our specific, historical position in society, in front of the screen, within the art institution. In this sense watching documentaries can be seen as, what I would like to call, a 'problematic opportunity' (Could this be another expression for re-absorption?)

Pause

Angelika and I re-meet in July 2007 at Documenta 12 in Kassel. Angelika is one of the official guides for the exhibition and spends many hours a day communicating works to visitors. We resumed our discussion following my visit to the exhibition with students from Det Fynske KunstAkademi in Denmark. I asked Angelika

if we could discuss with some of the students the act of communicating a work, specifically in relation to Alejandra Riera's work *INQUIRY INTO THE/OUR OUTSIDE IN 2003* (2004-2007). The work is made from many components, eight video pieces made in collaboration with the Brazilian theatre group UEINZZ, in which they are making interviews with people on the streets of São Paulo, on themes that include modernism, cliché, reconstruction and disappointment. There is an arrangement

of photographs displayed taken by Alejandra in Paris, on the left are images of rather improvised buildings, objects, and other products around the city and on the right the photos are of the same objects but close up. A larger photo of a window of a bank is framed with a black rubbish bag, this material is used in other parts of the installation. I think this work is interesting to talk about in this context, because it is exploring the limits of representation, and trying to present that difficulty in the way the work is presented to us as a viewer.

EH: At Documenta I really wanted to experience viewing Alejandra's work with you and some of the students and have a discussion in order to understand the work or our reading of it. I was hoping to overcome some of the problems the students were having with viewing the exhibition in general, and how they thought they 'should' be experiencing it. In the context of the exhibition, which is curated with a particular intention, could you describe, why you thought it was interesting to look at Riera's work?

AB: I think that the research, which Alejandra Riera realised together with the Brazilian theatre group UEINZZ relates to our previous discussion. It interests me because it is explicit in the way it deals with the problem of definition of space and 'the public' but also as a work it structurally includes and poses questions about community. The curators of Documenta 12 also negotiate these topics, through the way the different museum spaces are organised. The references on the history and tradition of the museum confront the visitors with the absurdity of their art-viewing activity while at the same time the combination of decontextualised works insists on their mental movements. We become responsible for our own problematic and political gaze. Nevertheless I think that the exhibition underestimates its own size, its reputation as a 'world exhibition'. Most people – especially those who have a professional interest in a quick overview of contemporary art – just don't have the time and the ease to enter into the logic of this concept. They keep attached to the objects in the exhibition which – seen as such – allow the kind of viewing-consumerism which we are used to. (From this perspective the accumulation of beautiful single-art-work-entities dissatisfies those who look for more radical avant-garde positions.)

The 'Inquiry' by UEINZZ and Riera refuses not only this kind of 'radical property' but also refuses easy assignments of authorship and clear definitions of the work's extension. Because of its many parts and aspects nobody can see everything – neither those who look for the political meaning nor those who seek pleasure in the beauty of form. The idea of correct knowledge becomes problematic. We are dependent on communication and discussions, on the views and positions

of others in the exhibition and also within the work. Perhaps, in a way, we can understand this as the 'our' in the title of the work.

EH: There are some quite specific measures that Alejandra takes, in order to emphasise this problem. The inclusion of the reproduced Graciela Carnevale image *Documentation of an art action at the Ciclo de Arte Experimental in the Argentine city Rosario on 7 October 1968* showing a female artist leaving the gallery through a broken window. The curtains in Riera's installation are twisted and held back rather than left to drape heavily as in the other spaces of the exhibition. The mass of video documentation of interviews made with the UEINZZ theatre group, and the large volume of English translations, make this space into a site for thinking and working. Without going too much further into the specifics of the work, for the purpose of this discussion, could we talk about how this work operates in the institutional structure of Documenta 12. What is this situation attempting? Conflict? I am interested in this question of conflict, or contention, and how that can happen within this setting, without it being thrown out, or being complicit.

AB: It is very difficult to answer the question of institutional operations of critical art works, as art cannot produce conflict itself. It is more like a tool for thinking and discussing. The 'critical outcome' depends as much on the consistency of the tool, as on the context in which it is used and the history and context of the users. Concerning the specific project of Alejandra and UEINZZ, I appreciate that it is very much counteracting the speed of Documenta visits as well as the desire for condensed political images. As you said, different representations are demanding our time, energy and engagement. In this way, I think, we are taken seriously as political persons, in our activity as visitors to an art museum. Looking at art or even being in the museum isn't a critical activity per se, but a political one, in the whole range of the problematic, responsible meaning of the word. I think that this project opens up a space where we may ask: Who is able to be inside Documenta and who is not? What are the possibilities and where are the limits of the space? It is contesting the invisibility of the institutional borders as well as the illusion of a clearly defined inside and outside. In a way the challenging of the space itself becomes contested, without giving up that concept at all.

Thanks

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The logo for Electra, featuring the word "Electra" in a stylized, cursive, italicized font.

