

## ***Show me, don't tell me***

“Make any text speed it up slow it down run it backwards inch it and you will hear words that were not in the original recording new words made by the machine different people will scan out different words of course but some of the words are quite clearly there and anyone can hear them words which were not in the original tape but which are in many cases relevant to the original text as if the words themselves had been interrogated and forced to reveal their hidden meanings” - William S. Burroughs, *The Invisible Generation* (1966)

**Annikka Haekkler-Olje Ekersson: With so many artists and art critics today exploring the virtues of fiction writing - a form of writing in parallel to the writing normally connected to their practice - I would like to start this interview by interrogating the seductive ambiguity that this position posits. Could you talk a little about how you see this position being adopted into curatorial practice?**

Niekolaas Johannes Lekkerkerk: Indeed, fiction writing is increasingly entering the loosely defined boundaries of art writing, although I am not sure whether we should consider this as ambiguous. It could be regarded as ambiguous in the sense that fiction writing is still fairly uncommon in the context of contemporary artistic practice, whereas it is more established in other fields. Rather, not so say that fiction writing is completely new to the visual arts, there currently is a tendency of artists, art critics, and curators as well, that employ fiction or fiction writing as an active part of their practice. In this, fiction writing could be a *modus operandi*, something central and key to their practice, not so much of a parallel. I guess it would be misleading to judge the fiction writing that does not feed into exhibitions as a side-activity of professionals variously involved in the field of the visual arts. Lets take for example Keren Cytter and Nathaniel Mellors, both featured in the exhibition *Hindsight Bias*. Cytter's novels and Mellor's scripts, which are being translated to video pieces and books, can rightfully be ascribed to, and more specifically, form the fundament of their artistic production. I think the parallel which you mentioned before is aimed at the fact that writers are increasingly being called upon to contribute pieces of fiction as supplements to the critical discourse on a specific work, artist, or exhibition. It has become very common to find short stories or chapters of novels in the pages of an art magazine, a biennial reader, or even as the main printed outlet of an exhibition project. What writers mostly adopt in such situations is the position of the invited guest, the indirect commentator.

If we look at curatorial practice it is true that a piece of fiction writing can become a framework for an actual exhibition project, as is central, for instance, in Raimundas Malasauskas's practice. We might also start to think of projects initiated by Tom Morton and Mathieu Copeland. In my opinion a certain ambiguity or tension is raised not so much with fiction writing as (part of a) curatorial practice, but with exhibition making as fiction writing.

**AHE: By what means do you, as a curator, consider fiction or fiction writing to be ambiguous or tensed in exhibition making or in the context of an art project?**

NJL: Of course, fiction can be an effective, thought-provoking, unsettling critical tool. Of course, we favor the oblique over the categorical, the summoning of ghosts over the analysis of bullet points. Although, this surge of interest in fiction writing can have an awkward dimension as well. I guess fiction (writing) deliberately avoids the point, or takes different pathways to reach a certain point. With writing you can take as simple - or difficult - a method as you wish to arrive at the desired result. What one would usually consider blatantly false, you can grant a plausibility and thereby show how easily everything can also be understood in a completely different way. This is a great thing.

Indirectness in exhibition making can stem from a desire to better understand shades and nuances, but it can also emerge from the refusal to take responsibility: whatever point might be hidden in a fictional text will be much more impenetrable than if it were articulated within, for example, traditional critical discourse or theory. Just as with any other format, writing should be employed consciously and deliberately for the right reasons in the right context. In the essay *Complexities of Complexity - Practicing Criticality and Narrative Through Curatorial Models, or Where is the Exit?*, I argued that narration in exhibitions - I did not mention fiction, but it would clearly apply - is less capable of addressing the complexities that manifest within our daily life's. It was written in the context of exhibition projects seeking to embody and actively engage with the complexities of daily life; proposing a number of alternatives that embrace undefined complexity and are more capable of moving in parallel to daily life. In this specific situation it is problematic when a curator underscores his or her version of a story, relying on the anecdotal and monolithic narratives that downgrade the ontologies of art. In other words, however strong the desire for the representational, the crux of the issue is that this cannot be done with everything. So rather than looking to represent something impossible to represent, why not attempt to embody something impossible to represent? In this sense I think fiction can be extremely important and has to do with the power of imagination and self-reflection. It could be employed to let the viewer or reader think about a given reality or temporality without having to mention these a single time; in doing so, *additional* meaning could be rendered.

**AHE: Could you perhaps exemplify with your most recent exhibition *Hindsight Bias*, which involves notions of fiction and storytelling?**

NJL: In *Thinking About Exhibitions* (1996), Bruce W. Ferguson argues that every exhibition tells a story, by directing the viewer through the exhibition in a particular order; the exhibition space is always a narrative space. This book is not necessarily up to date, although I have to agree that a

certain guidance in a spatial sense, and the selection and placing of artworks remain important and unavoidable to date. The question remains, who is telling the exhibition's story? The curator, the artist, or both? In most cases they are not mutually exclusive. I consider *Hindsight Bias* to be an artist-exhibition; the artist is put on the spot, so to speak. It is important that the curatorial thesis maintains certain parameters and intentions, but in this configuration it avoids to overdetermine the works. In this case that would mean that there is a clear absence of curatorial subject matter; the exhibition is not informed by a certain theory, a piece of writing, a dominant line of thought, and so forth. In doing so, the attention is shifted from the exhibition parameters to the artworks. It exemplifies a form of exhibition making that works between the autonomy of art as a principle (not as a goal) and the curatorial statement. When we talked about a certain ambiguity in curating it was perhaps this double affirmation of voices, of speaking subjects. Since *Hindsight Bias* is centered around notions of fiction, storytelling, and narrative modes, including artworks that quite actively and literally engage with these topics, it would be a misconception to have an equally "dominant" voice as curator; to pour the exhibition in a curatorial equating sauce consisting of one ingredient, a singular voice. It would work against the exhibition's intention to consider the works as a series of orientations that are employed to make us consider life's complexities as multilayered and more dimensional. By taking a step back as the curator you allow the viewer to approach the works more individually, less influenced by the "unidirectional" curatorial statement. It allows the viewer to experience the great adventure of the mind to try to catch the "I" experiencing itself. This is not a hollow mind game, but rather a childlike attempt to catch oneself thinking. It is precisely the failure of this that measures the vastness of the human imagination.

**AEH: What are your personal motivations for conceiving this exhibition?**

Increasingly, I have become interested in forms of fiction (film, literature, music, visual art) that position anti-suspense and polyphonic narrative structures as its primary creative arcs, and how this type of practice may be utilised to probe the receivers' attitude towards the "inconsistencies" of contemporary culture. Such anti-suspense may be described as a response to, or break from traditional narrative structures where the receiver experiences a beginning, middle and end - in that order. Because such stories are propagated around us on a daily basis, we have specific expectations and anticipations that are redolent of narrative form itself. We as spectators come prepared to make a narrative reading of any creative encounter, and I would suggest that this is as true of reading fiction as "reading" art, music, and films, in that we consistently attempt to make a whole out of sometimes dislocated or unhinged fragments. In my projects I am seeking to create a space for showing a wide range of attitudes that problematize a total conception of reality and daily life, focusing on the less tangible forces and attitudes that shape common thinking and behavior;

exploring the gray space that we inhabit between images and power. I think space and time are both to be made strange in order to come to terms with it...

**AHE: Deviating from the exhibition format, you mentioned that the artworks are the most important dimension of the exhibition. Simple as it sounds, do you think artworks curate too?**

NJL: While we as curators think that we give artworks a “voice”, but actually the artworks speak through our choices and scenarios. Perhaps artworks are the only full-time curators I know. The question here is, of course, whether we should see an artwork as machine, animal or alien. Common knowledge would suggest that animals tend to lean towards a more domesticated curatorial practice than aliens, but this should not be a reason for us to get into a discussion of what it means to be full-time versus free-lance. There are some interesting aspects in seeing artworks as curators: artworks are not committed to a specific meaning or agenda; they have no ego; they have more freedom than artists and curators; they do not get old; they have no intentions (only potentialities); they do not have to justify themselves, because someone else does that for them; they do not authorize their actions. Perhaps this is just a group of preconceptions about artworks? Nevertheless, the main issue at stake here is perhaps not definition, but the concept of responsibility. If artworks do curate without authorizing their actions, don't they discard the responsibility of the curatorial act entirely? Perhaps so - after all, the main problem of responsibility is its close ties with authorship. How, then, do we engage with author-less yet highly responsible structures of creativity?

**AHE: When Godard spoke of “the reality of art” he meant precisely this, that the artwork cannot propose solutions, or even conclusions, because its function remains in the space of the statement, of the stating of the problem. This stating of the problem is already an affirmation of the discourse within which the problem is conceived (cinema, art, exhibition making). I think we can agree that conceiving the problem remains in the space between the curatorial statement and the artist's intention with the artwork, but how do you approach an artwork if you want to remain close to or in the realm of reality and/or daily life?**

NJL: One way of looking at it would be as Nicolas Bourriaud formulates in his book *Postproduction* (2002): “... the artwork functions as the temporary terminal of a network of interconnected elements, like a narrative that extends and reinterprets preceding narratives. Each exhibition encloses within it the script of another; each work may be inserted into different programs and used for multiple scenarios. The artwork is no longer an end point but a simple moment in an infinite chain of contributions.” To some extent I agree with Bourriaud, although I do not find it

necessarily dignifying to approach an artwork as an infinite palimpsest. Of course this happens all the time, every exhibition ascribes a new meaning to a work; if you would look into the “pedigree” of an artwork, which generally does not happen a lot, you would see that the work serves a variety of topics. Perhaps it is somewhat idealistic and naive of me to think that staying as close as possible to the artist’s intention with the work, you avoid another layer of complexity, that you can stay in the proximity of daily life. I guess setting up an exhibition is, above all, an act of interpretation...

Instead, I would propose to see an artwork as a ghost. Lets think for example about the film *I’m Not There* (2007), a biographical film directed by Todd Haynes about the iconic American singer-songwriter Bob Dylan. Six actors depict different facets of Dylan’s life and his public persona, while Dylan himself is absent. At the beginning of the film, a caption reads: “Inspired by the music and the many lives of Bob Dylan”. Accompanied by a Dylan-like figure riding a motorcycle, the title of the film appears and a narrator says: “Even the ghost was more than one person...”. Personally, I consider this as the possibility of an artwork to transgress its formal boundaries, perhaps not literally, but as it is shaped, metaphorically speaking, by the viewer and the exhibition context. As Willem de Kooning once said: “I have to change to stay the same”. It is this kind of ghost that maintains the artwork’s possible potentiality and relevance.

In the context of *Hindsight Bias* I would suggest a different reading: in the film *In Praise of Love* (2001), Jean-Luc Godard states through his protagonist - another ghost: “I am thinking of something. In fact, I’m thinking of something else. You can only think about something if you think of something else.” By reorienting and twisting the desire for immediate access to meaning - which in the case of life’s complexities is always subjective - I would like to invite the viewer to think about issues related to the complexities of daily life by thinking about the artworks present in the exhibition, and I would thus like to challenge the privileging of presence over absence. It could also be regarded as an exit strategy: since it is highly arguable that daily life can be represented in an exhibition context, it is perhaps more adequate to render meaning through fictitious and staged accounts; via artworks. In other words, to think about the reality of daily life by thinking about a representation, an interpretation, a falsification, and so forth. It departs from a ghostly presence.

**AEH: Last question: What would then be the viewers’ position in this setting?**

NJL: In my opinion the viewer is the witness of history. By “witness of history” I mean the figure who authenticates the narrative by presenting him or herself as both narrator and eyewitness. That this witness of history has become a viewer does not solely concern the events he or she encounters; it also implies the consciousness of a very modern discourse on representation - that of *realism* - and of a series of mediations that lie between the subject and the world.

Annikka Haekkler-Olje Ekersson was born in Malmö in Sweden in 1956. She had several solo exhibitions, for example at the daadgalerie, Berlin, Göteborgs Konstmuseum, Konstmuseum Malmö and at the Cubitt Gallery, London; and group exhibitions at Temporary Kunsthalle, Berlin, Hayward Gallery, London. Annikka Ekersson realized numerous projects and commissions in public space, for example for the Arnolfini in Bristol (2009), for UP Projects in Regent's Park in London (2008), for the Tensta Konsthall in Stockholm (2008), for Platform Garanti in Istanbul (2007), for IASPIS at the Venice Biennial of 2005, and for the Dakar Biennial (2008). Among her recent project are 'Schazam' at GerhardsenGerner, Berlin (2010), 'Code Share' at CAC Vilnius (2009), 'The Greenroom' at Bard College, New York (2008) and in the Sheffield Biennale (2008).

Niekolaas Johannes Lekkerkerk (1988, The Netherlands) lives and works in London. He was a curator at the CODE Gallery in Amsterdam since its inception in 2008 until 2009. He worked at SMBA (Stedelijk Museum Bureau Amsterdam), where he was a curatorial assistant for the *Africa Reflected* project (2009), *Mathilde ter Heijne: Long Live Matriarchy!* (2009) and *Walker Evans and the Barn* (2009-2010). He has published a number of books and seminal texts including *Delusion of the Day - Temporary Structures in the Realms of Contemporary Art* (2010), *Indiependent Mag. - Case Study Magazine on the Contemporary Indie Scene* (2010), and *Untitled (Constants Are Changing) - On the Body Metaphor and the Painterly in the Works of Felix Gonzalez-Torres* (2010). He completed undergraduate studies in Art History and Visual Culture at the University of Utrecht and is currently enrolled in the MA course 'Curating the Contemporary' at the London Metropolitan University; run in conjunction with the Whitechapel Gallery.