

S O L O

S H O W

R O B B I E

W I L L I A M S

S A S O F M

- Achim Kayser/Alberto Storari/Alexander Niklasch/
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T HESE DAYS I AM CONSTANTLY IN THE MIDDLE OF A PROJECT

PRESS RELEASE:

I AM A PRESS RELEASE.

I've been ping-ponged between different people for days now. The artist hated me from the beginning. Then the gallerist wanted more background on the artist's achievements. Finally versions got crossed so the deadline was extended. Now there is no end in sight. I'm kind of tired.

I was in my final draft this morning when the artist suddenly suggested we use his fingerprint in place of a text describing the exhibition. This came after a gallery assistant compiled me, with endless enthusiasm and patience, out of multiple keywords and half-ideas spewing from the gallerist and the artist. Now she is starting to look frustrated, as it doesn't seem to be coming together. The gallerist reminds her in a hushed voice that the artist is in a difficult place in his career as well as in his private life.

The gallerist greets the artist on the display of her tablet. He is still in Berlin to sort out his relationship and looks a bit dazed, but that might be the video quality. She tells him this is really not a good time for him to be disappearing like this. He asks when a better time to schedule a nervous breakdown might be. "Just not now, dear." She turns to look blankly at the gallery assistant, trying to decide whether to be tough on him or make him feel understood. She sighs and assures him they will figure out a solution. "You can show your studio assistants how to finish the work. We'll work through this press text and send it out. Just tell us how you want the work photographed and then you can bail out after the opening and take a vacation and relax." "So you don't like the fingerprint idea?" "No, it's really lame."

The assistant uses the moment of confusion to google the effects of a Paleolithic diet. Her boyfriend started the diet some weeks ago and he became a lot more alert and focused. But he might have become less affectionate and almost cold. She wonders whether hunter-gatherers were less capable of sustaining relationships. She finds more stuff on idiosyncrasy and scavenging and looks up definitions of detritivores and decomposers such as fungi. She looks at the image of Mycena Interrupta and is stunned by its shiny cyan color. Incoming mail interrupts her browsing and she switches back to work mode.

What am I supposed to do? The gallerist turns to the assistant after the Skype call ends. We're already showing an older piece in the exhibition. It's a beautiful piece, vivid and bold, but he's too young to burn out and he's selling well. He needs to learn to delegate more of the actual production. The assistant bites her lip. I think he's having a crisis. He told me he's having serious doubts as to whether it even makes sense to go on.

People say Edward Bernays invented me but that's just because they've all been watching The Century of the Self. From what I know Ivy Lee used me before, when he invented crisis communication for his clients who were involved in all sorts of disasters and crimes. Remember the Ludlow Massacre? I've been involved in the battle around versions of a story from day one so just try to tell me something new. Speaking of crisis communication, why not openly announce that this artist is going through a phase of depression and insecurity and sell it as an expression of the

SOLO SHOW

collapse of a rotten system? I wouldn't mind. We could sell him as a decomposer, a fungus, or a piece of majestic mold waiting to be consumed. I think that would be very contemporary and I'd enjoy being part of it.

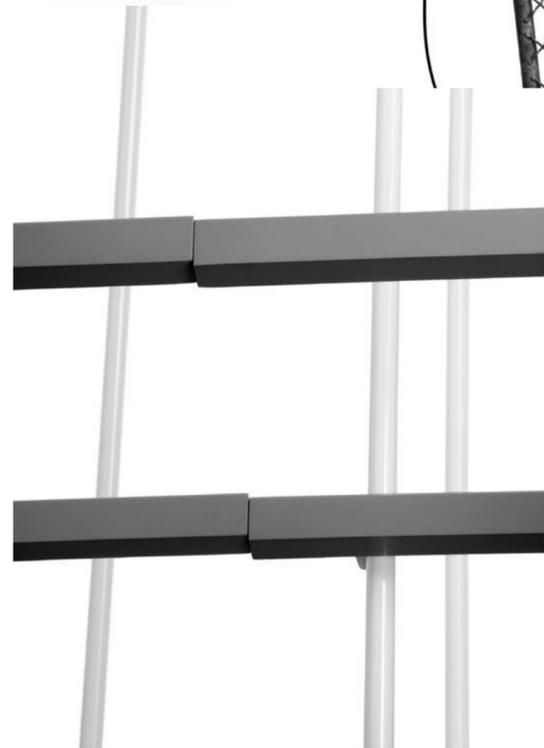
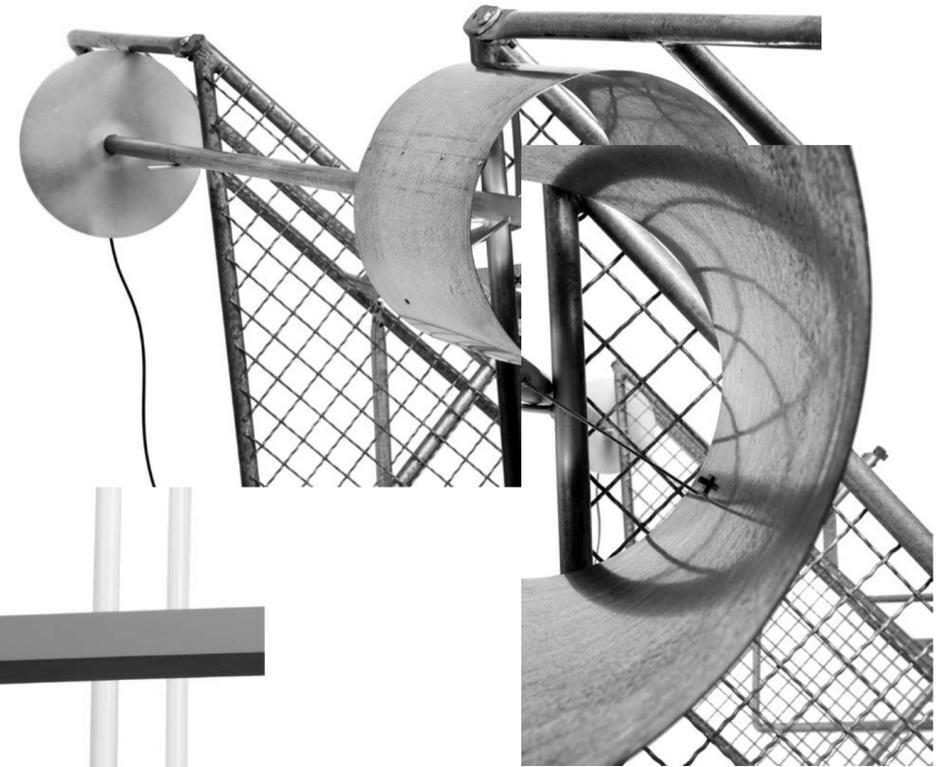
Dear Friends,

I'm sorry if I've been out of touch as of late. Things have been a little topsy-turvy.

I wanted to invite you to my SOLO SHOW opening on November 17 at e-flux in New York. I hope you can make it.

With warm regards,

Robbie Williams



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CONVERSATION: ROBBIE WILLIAMS

Robbie Williams and I are scheduled to meet in his gallery, which has recently moved into a larger space, and Robbie's not here yet, again. His dog, Bert, a young German Shepherd, is gnawing about on an invitation card, waiting. I seem to be doing the same.

Robbie and I have known each other since the time we spent together in the academy, but at the same time that I was sitting around in various assemblies and organizing events, he was working in his studio. He often came to our events and parties in the evening. We spoke about our different methods of working and seldom had the same opinion about anything. Even though he thought our events were good and enjoyed visiting them, he was very skeptical when it came to group projects. He accused us of being exclusive; I accused him of keeping all his eggs in one basket.

Not long ago he asked me if I would write something for his upcoming show. I agreed under one condition: namely, that we have a conversation.

Robbie: Sorry, I had to run somewhere again.

Natascha: You have a lot to do at the moment, don't you?

R: I do, but I can't work. Come, Bert! What are you gobbling up there? Give it here, precious! I'm somehow restless and lack concentration when I get back into the studio. I make myself one coffee after another, or I play with Bert. I like watching her. Look how her tongue hangs out, like a wet rag. It makes me happy to observe something living, something that grows every day—something that changes and develops.

N: Aren't you afraid she'll chew on your artworks or break something?

R: You mean because it looks so chaotic in the studio? Yes, ever since I moved into the new studio, I just yank things out of the boxes—I've been doing that for months now—and then I catapult myself somewhere else.

Actually I don't care if she breaks anything. I observe Bert for a long time and try to figure out what makes her tick. Then I watch how she reacts when I want her to do something, like sit still or lay down. I talk to her a lot. I talk to my sculptures too, by the way. Anyway this is why I added Bert to my life. At least with her there's some possibility for a development.

N: Don't you see any development in your work?

R: Yes, of course, but there are certain things that interest me that only living things do. They can't be represented in an artwork. One can actually only do work about the absence of living things: process, growth, movement, the unforesen. Actually, one can only construct a lack or a plea, a lack that calls for something absent. In the viewer, you can only bring about the same lack that you experience yourself when you try to portray something living.

N: When you say lack, do you mean something flawed?

I mean, as if the state produced by an exhibit were flawed because it can't portray the living.

R: No, not flawed. I like to sense a magnetism—an empty space which asks to be filled; which calls for movement, change, action.

N: You mean you would like to create a need.

R: Yes exactly, create a need – a longing, an energy that knows there is more than this. There is a space, a form, an object, and my body relates to them in a specific way.

Impulses come out from the object. In part, they—the impulses—are direct and concrete. Distance, confinement, stability, temporality—these can be learned impulses. With this particular object one would normally do this or that, meaning one would normally use it for a certain purpose, or the object comes from this or that context. Sometimes disorientation arises when you combine these impulses, because the body simultaneously produces several impulses that perhaps contradict one another. Then, depending on the situation, an abstract, wavering necessity emerges. This is actually what I find the most thrilling. Sometimes it only leads to one wanting to leave the room as quickly as possible. Sometimes airplanes create a similarly shaky state of being. There's something telling you that this place, the airplane, doesn't correspond to your body. The seat is too small; the air is thin; you're constantly worried about the changes in air pressure, gravity; maybe you're panicked. Pressing deadlines and emails go through your head, not to mention that you're really thrilled by the in-flight entertainment. Tons of impulses all at once, and there's still an emptiness. The place produces an emptiness.

N: You aim to confront exhibit-goers with this kind of experience?

R: Visitors to the exhibit are autonomous, and their behavior lies outside of my realm of influence. But I do want to make a certain, highly specific environment in the space that the viewer enters. And I guess I do rely on different values based on intersubjective experience to challenge exhibit-goers. If something makes me laugh, and makes two or three other people laugh, then I can be pretty sure that it will have the same effect on many others. I relinquish the production process in the last phase in order to get more distance from the works and to be able to judge and control their effects better.

N: You hand it over to your studio assistants?

R: Yes, that too, but I actually have the works made outside, by a professional fabricator

N: Now I'm a little bit confused. On the one hand you say that you are fascinated by living things,

that you enjoy watching things grow without any intervention on your part. I thought I heard you describe something like a longing for loss of control. I thought that the emptiness you spoke about does, indeed, stands for a longing for life, liveliness. But then it seems that throughout the development of your work it's only about absence of organic process and about control.

R: That's exactly what I've been trying to explain from the outset. You simply can't show the amazing beauty of something living. You shouldn't even try. You can, however, portray the conditions of for example a dog's training; the disciplining of strength and instinct, access to the living body, limitations, demands. A kind of negative print of the living comes out of this. The outline of the dog who is to be trained is drawn minutely within the methods and tools of the trainer, and within the emptiness of the negative exposure or print emerges an invisible energy—a movement which withdraws itself from absolute control.

N: That sounds mysterious. Does the dog turn into a ghost?

R: Yeah, maybe. Life somehow turns ghostly within the logic of technology and science.

N: So, training would be the methodization of processes, which stem from a certain knowledge of the living, a methodization that secures the function of the living, therefore a kind of executor of the sciences' grasp of the living and its functions. Here, the ghostliness would lie in the inner resistance or withdrawal enacted by the living, because it will never be completely intelligible or controllable through the methods of science. It's a critique of the tradition of the Enlightenment!

R: I wouldn't have really put it that way, but sure, why not.

N: I still need a minute to understand why you reproduce life-denying states of being with exactly the same means and methods that are usually adopted in order to ...

R: ... no, I wouldn't say life-denying, more "pressing" somehow, "conditioning" ...

N: ... fine, but what I'm getting at is that you yourself use methods of control and technical perfection, meaning you actually reproduce all of the things that you find reprehensible.

Is this something you do for the benefit of exhibit-goers? Why do you want to confront people with a lack of life instead of developing an alternative and more whole state of being?

R: All right, I get it. Just forget the exhibit-goer for a second. Why do you make work?

N: Because there's a thing that I don't understand, and I want to learn something about it.

N.S.H

R: OK, and why does it end up being an exhibit?

N: I want to share my questions with other people.

R: Exactly! Say no more. Why do you always get these idealistic whims? Here's your slogan: "Let's all join hands and build a better world." Sure, I think it's fabulous with all your project groups and collectives, et cetera. I do like coming to your events, but to me, there's something about it all that comes off as far too save-the-world and wishy-washy. You act like you're living in a parallel world that's way cooler, but you're just blocking out every other possible context or environment, as if it's possible to live outside society from inside society. And instead of getting your hands dirty with art market money, you live off the government. Super!

N: Why are you suddenly getting so aggressive?

R: I can't stand this naïveté, and sometimes it's really too imprecise for me.

N: Often, in group projects, the focus is not on perfecting the finished product. The things that happen in the working process and between the people involved are more interesting. To me, this model already represents a kind of a better world, and in the best-case scenario, the idea of the viewer would actually be disposed of. I always find it stupid to take part in something that I had nothing to do with making; that's why I find it silly to make such a hullabaloo concerning its effects on the exhibit-goer.

R: You're fooling yourself. The world will always be divided between doers and watchers.

What you all are doing is, at best, elitist. You just shut out the audience, or in any case you make it extremely hard for them to comprehend whatever it is that you're actually up to. I've often felt excluded during your events. Despite that, I found them interesting, but that was because of the atmosphere, the energy, and the people.

N: You could have participated.

R: No, I don't like subjecting myself to other people's decisions, and I don't believe in compromise.

(A gallery intern approaches us and asks if we would like some coffee.)

R: Oooh, yeah – coffee! Maybe we should go outside and have a smoke, too.

(We sit down on the steps in front of the gallery. Robbie's smoking. The intern brings us coffee.)

N: I'd like to get back to something that you said earlier. You mentioned that you have started giving your work to a company, which produces it. Why did you start doing this, and can you explain a little how something like this works? I have the feeling that this might give us a new

CONVERSATION: ROBBIE WILLIAMS

perspective on the question of the audience: me finding it odd to hire other people to produce something in my place, and you being suspicious of working in collectives.

R: What's your problem with hiring other people?

N: It's uncomfortable for me, and I don't understand the necessity. If there's something I'd like to do, I do it myself. If I can't do it, then I teach myself how.

R: How romantic. You're a real artist! I think it's fantastic, hiring people to do things. For one thing, why should I trouble myself with doing something that can be done much better by someone else? The other thing is that all the organizational work would just cost me time and nerves.

N: I don't mean that I have something against dividing up working tasks.

R: Yeah, but you guys always have to discuss everything and reach common agreements. I find this incredibly boring and time-consuming. Nothing good emerges when you have to come to an agreement with lots of other people. In terms of my own work, I'm not capable of entering into compromises. When I pay someone to carry out a work for me, then I can be sure that he'll do it exactly the way I say. If he doesn't, then he doesn't get paid. It's that simple. What's more, I don't have to express gratitude all the time or have a bad conscience.

What I often experienced in the past was, "No, sure it's fine if you need until next week to finish it. Just work on it as much as you can—whenever you feel like it." And it always gave me a bad feeling. If someone is getting paid fairly, then I have no problem saying, "No, I need it tomorrow, not next week."

N: Funny, but I believe that one of the main reasons I studied art was because I didn't want to have —or be— a boss. I thought that everyone is his or her own boss in art.

R: I have no problem with being the boss. It depends completely on how one treats one's employees, if the pay is okay and if I act fairly, or if I exploit them.

N: Does your assistant have a contract?

R: No, why should she? Our relationship is based on mutual trust.

N: Do you still pay her when she's sick?

R: Have you been sent as a union representative? I can't afford to pay someone when she's not working. After all, I'm not a company. I have to find substitutes when my assistant is unable to come in, and that costs money. No ... but she's aware of all this. She can also say, "I can't next week because I have my own exhibit." The flexibility comes from both sides.

Fairness means giving notice far enough in advance, and trust means not needing all the bureaucratic stuff.

N: Somehow we got off track. What I really wanted to know was how one of these production contracts works.

R: For a little while now I've been working with a company that was recommended to me by the gallery. Other artists from the gallery have already been producing there. The company is super! They're totally friendly and very professional. They understand immediately what I want, too. Let's say I go to a normal business and explain why I need a certain part: the guy looks at me like a brick wall and says, "We don't do that sort of thing here." Then I have to explain to him what sort of special thing he would have to do. He does it, and it ends up looking different anyway. This company works on artwork production only, all day long. They're also carrying around the entire history of art in their heads. They understand what I'm talking about and they will try things out until something works, and they make sure that it holds up, that it doesn't fall apart during the exhibit or later in some buyer's collection.

N: In my own practice I've often had the experience that a work can change significantly during the experimentation phase or the construction phase.
R: I know, but I don't have the time for long experimentation phases. Also I'm not sure whether I'm convinced by an experiential approach. I like creating facts.

N: But during the production, depending on the situation, one might end up having completely different ideas. How can you place so much trust in your first idea and give the production over to someone else, thereby relinquishing the possibility to continuously correct the work? Furthermore, failures can often lead to thrilling discoveries and learning experiences. After all, this is where much of the enjoyment in developing a work comes from. I would hate to have to abstain from engaging in this process and the search for solutions. It seems to me that questions of professionalism or professionalization are at stake here. As you say, we're almost always working under time pressure. And as a result we can't risk having these kinds of experimentation phases. They have to be carried out by skilled, experienced people who develop feasible solutions within the deadline. And they don't doubt the idea or waste time like we do ourselves.

R: It is true that the pressure is enormously high, but I can actually work extremely well under pressure. Sometimes it's quite good for the work. Decisions have to be made quickly, and they have to be final. But it's true that it doesn't allow one to ponder, or refuel, as I would say. It becomes more and more difficult to just disappear or to remain in my head, thinking without rhyme or reason, or to read books with no apparent goal, or construct things without knowing what for. I feel chased by the galleries. At the moment, I just have the feeling that I'm repeating myself, that I'm making

things out of a reservoir that's already pretty much empty. That's why I'm in a bad mood.

N: Whoa there, time pressure and a bad mood—that's a bad combination.

R: That's why I find it so nice and pleasant to give the production over to someone else. I have more distance to the work. The working process is less personal, and therefore I can better recognize what works and what doesn't.

N: Okay, but this also happens in collective projects. The ordering of things according to "mine," "yours," "me" and "you" gets dissolved, and it's ultimately the thing which receives the focus. It doesn't matter whose idea it was or whose work it is.

R: No, that's not at all what I mean. It's totally important that it's mine and that it stays mine.

N: But if someone else produces it, then it's not yours anymore.

R: That's not true. Of course it's still mine. It's my idea, and I tell them what to do.

N: But you just said that you allow them to experiment and to carry the idea out. This is when a lot of the things that contribute to the form of the work happen, depending on the situation. By and by, it somehow becomes their baby too, doesn't it?

R: No, it's my name that's on it afterwards. I take the responsibility, and in the end I'm the one who gives the green light for a project. They're paid to fulfill the contract. My assistant can't be said to share the authorship of my works just because he answers my emails.

N: I wouldn't be able to hold these things separate from each other, and if I could, I would feel the necessity to make the division of labor visible, like in film. Direction: Robbie Williams. Camera: Jane Doe. Sound: John Doe. Assistance: Miss X. ... Anyway I don't think that anyone does anything alone. You're always being influenced; you ask your friends for their opinion, or you get ideas when you listen to someone. That's why I think it's good to show it, either by working in a collective and thereby giving up authorship, or by naming those who were involved.

R: Have you ever heard of a collective that was successful in the art world?

N: Now you sound like my gallerist.

R: He's right. Nobody buys work from collectives. As I said, I find it interesting to relinquish certain steps of the working process, but at the end of the day, the public—and the buyer—wants to see one person's name. You can't change that. It also has something to do with the way art's value gets established. It's all quite abstract, and it has a lot to do with the name. As a buyer,

you're buying the name along with whatever the name stands for.

N: Let's talk about control again. You say you're the one who controls things in the end. So, the people working for you ask, "Is this how you want it, boss?" and you say, "It was to be taller" and that person says, "Alright boss!" ...

R: Exactly!

N: What if you're not so sure about its height, and he's scheduled to get off work in two hours and wants to finish it before then.

R: Then he gets off work later.

N: That would make me uncomfortable.

R: Well, I can't change the way things are!

N: I would end up forcing a decision that isn't yet well hashed out in order to be considerate to that person.

R: And why? This person works for you and is paid by you. You really don't need to be considerate.

N: I wouldn't be able to keep these things separated.

R: It's sweet of you to be considerate, but are you seriously saying that your assistant's schedule is more important to you than the outcome of the work? To my ears, this sounds like unprofessionalism. What is at stake is making the work right.

N: Sure, maybe for you, but not necessarily for the others. He's just doing his job. If it is indeed as you say, if it is only about the thing, then the other guy is actually in a pretty weird dilemma.

On the one hand, it's not his thing, meaning he can't arrive at any decisions himself; and on the other hand, he has to identify with the thing to the extent that he can be enthusiastic enough to want to work extra hours. Maybe I'm really not professional enough to understand that.

R: Anyone who's just doing their job is anyway in the wrong place if they're working in the art world. You have to bring a certain passion and curiosity with you in order to work in this field. There's no way I can work with someone who drops the screwdriver at five o'clock and yells, "Closing time!" Some museums work like this, and it's completely impossible to get things done there. People just have to understand how art works. Forget punching in and out of the time clock. That drives me crazy.

N: We've been getting further away from the main topic. We were talking about control and about having things made for you. Now we've ended up talking about these different models for alienated and non-alienated work, which is a topic I do find very interesting in itself. It is, indeed, interesting that art is one of the only fields that remain

GLIMMER OF THE MULTITUDE

By Brian Kuan Wood

SPECTACULAR SURVIVAL
 Today it seems almost impossible to reconcile two forms of exploitation: one that arrests working bodies in space and time over the long term—over days, weeks, years, lifetimes, and generations—and another that takes place in an instant, in the time it takes for a camera shutter to snap or for a commercial spot to be shot and broadcast in all directions to replicate a moment of work across the earth. On the one hand, we may perceive a growing class divide distinguished by overlapping spheres of hand work and eye work: of sweat and blood on the one hand and images on the other. But this taxonomic division itself falls apart quite quickly when we find that both spheres of work are constantly moving across old divisions, between capital, management, and value speculation, that do not mesh on two levels. It does not mesh to keep sweatshop workers and hopeful interns from finding the means to fair payment, but on the other hand we don't really know whether visual and so-called immaterial work are really doing anything special for anyone. And on top of that we are still trying to figure out exactly how capital pools around certain kinds of work output that can be copied and distributed at no cost. We do not know how to make money off music after file-sharing. But we do know that models only become more fleeting as audiences become more vast and unpredictable. And yet someone like Eric Glatt, a former AIG employee who turned into a labor activist after being fired from AIG and taking on an internship as an accountant, put it eloquently: "I can't tell my landlord to give me free rent so he can gain experience as a landlord."¹ Which is all to say that we may be fully inside of a new paradigm of art production defined by the market crash of 2007/2008, by an era defined by finance. By financialization and poverty, speculation and decay. Defined also by the public sector defunding at a time when the art market is hitting record highs. You might know it as the thing that made you poor

but sexy.² Or that suddenly made you relatively rich for the first time and painfully alone for whatever reason.³ Or some combination of the above. Really, some heavy things went down and we all feel the effects. You can try to keep it light, but it is also about darkness and weight and surfaces that do not refract light. It is about what is moving things around when everything is produced by vision. It is about accepting that property speculation was actually no small matter at all, but actually a profound antimatter made out of regimes of visibility and visibility that are so sophisticated that we need technologies developed in the contemporary arts to untangle them. And of course the contemporary arts are at the same time bound up in the same tangle.

But first we need to consider that light is not only about optics. Israeli physicist Mordechai Segev even thinks it can move objects. After all, light can already be used to make objects appear invisible by refracting on the same side of an object it lands on, thanks to the concept of negative radiation pressure introduced by Russian physicist Victor Veselago in 1967. Segev proposes that this can be taken a step further to produce the equivalent of a tractor beam, by moving light photons in one direction while the wave of energy they travel on moves in the opposite direction.⁴ It's a kind of applied paradox. Segev's proposal is still in an experimental phase, but in the meantime we might have already figured it out. Wasn't it also in 1967 that Debord wrote *The Society of the Spectacle*, his treatise on mass visibility as collective desire, on spectacle as a kind of negative commons that affirms surface and appearance at the expense of substance? For Debord, the abstraction machine of spectacle was the very site of alienation and the severing of labor from the source of that labor, the worker. And of course he was right—that's what spectacle is and that's what it does. But we have come a long way since then. And it hasn't gotten any better, just more interesting. And even Debord recognized that the forms of vision deployed by spectacle are not to be underestimated as belonging only to some dreamy imaginary. In fact they become concrete very quickly. As Debord puts it, "The spectacle

cannot be understood as an abuse of the world of vision, as a product of the techniques of mass dissemination of images. It is, rather, a *Weltanschauung* which has become actual, materially translated. It is a world vision which has become objectified."⁵

Spectacle produces its own autonomous commodities on the one hand, as Debord famously repeats, but if we also recognize that vision moves objects, we end up in another place altogether. And this is where spectacle turns into speculation. It is where light moves in one direction and matter moves in the other to work as a tractor beam across both time and space alike.

But what is speculation in the first place? The dictionary describes it as "the forming of a theory or conjecture without firm evidence."⁶ It is soft projection. A feeling. An emotion: unscientific and imprecise. It is a form of vision that produces a figure without a ground.⁷ But crucially, within the sphere of capital it is a form of vision produced by desire, and it is according to this vision that it sculpts goods and commodities in its own image—even as David Graeber says, "unmoored from any legal or community constraints, [financial speculation] was capable of producing results that seemed to verge on insanity."⁸ But to see only commodities as the concretization of this sphere of optics would be to underestimate the profound effects of financial speculation on the basic forces that moor our very sense of being in the world. Alberto Toscano for instance has considered landscapes as reflections of economic instability.⁹ Philip Mirowski in *More Heat Than Light* considered the perversity of economic ideology basing itself in physics and laws of thermodynamics.¹⁰ But we can look even closer.

BUBBLE RUBBLE

To give an example of how speculation assumes a material form, we can look at Rotterdam, where a massive volume of its office spaces are empty at the moment due to the slumping economy—around 600,000 meters squared, which is really a lot for a small city like Rotterdam.¹¹ It's a problem in general for the Netherlands, but while a city like Amsterdam stopped its municipal building projects, Rotterdam accelerated construction with the idea that

untouched by the pressure of union demands. The informality of relations of production in art is based, on many levels, on a system of identification. One is promised inclusion in the system when one identifies with it, when it becomes more than a job. A friend once said to me that he longs for alienated work, for a kind of work that draws the line between him and his work—a work from which he can extricate himself after the whistle blows. It indeed is the case that one feels lighter when working for someone else. When I help friends or am involved in other people's productions, I have another distance which, depending on the circumstances, can be very productive and much more fun, especially when under time pressure. Also, one doesn't hang on every question when it's someone else's project that's at stake. In this sense, it can be very attractive to work for other people.

R: Right! Everything doesn't always immediately have something to do with exploitation and repression. For example, this company gets an official contract from myself or from the gallery, and the work doesn't start until the conditions are clear.

N: Yes, and it's interesting how that's exactly where the line gets drawn. The companies that are hired by artists to produce are paid according to their own standards, and work according to their own regulations. There is a big difference between people from whom idealism and enthusiasm are expected in the workplace and professionals who set their conditions and time frames themselves.

R: You'd be surprised at the extent to which enthusiasm dominates in this company, and they're always working overtime. ... Hey, should we go get a beer?

N: When is your flight?

R: Um, not until seven.

N: Are you taking Bert with you?

R: No, I wouldn't subject her to that. Airplanes, quarantine, cages. Ugh! No way. She stays with Victor or with Mom.



increased building activity would provide an economic stimulant. The situation is clear: more buildings for fewer people.

The great example is Rem Koolhaas's *de Rotterdam* building, a completely Stalinist thing designed in 1997 that languished until construction began finally in 2009, actually at a moment when the market collapse lowered the cost of construction materials, making it possible for the developers to begin the 160,000 m² building (apparently the largest in Europe).¹² The municipality basically guaranteed the developers full occupancy for ten years, so the city uses its pull to get businesses and tenants into the building, effectively guaranteeing rent so that the developers can cover their costs. And the city gets its trophy for its skyline.

Land is converted into landscape. Commons are subjected to optics. Gentrification processes are accelerated by communication; this is not paving paradise to put up a parking lot, as Joni Mitchell sang, this is putting everything behind glass. It is not a flattening but subjecting of everything to vision. Glamor is distilled and distributed to become glimmer, spectacle turns into flash. Light becomes the primary actor in not only adding glow to a substance, but also deciding whether or not it exists in the first place.¹³ And this is the essence of speculation. You simply trade a fleeting material for a blueprint, a disappointment for a promise. You trade depression for a fantasy. Decay for a dream. What is happening in Rotterdam is actually something that is already well known in the free zone, in tax-free trade ports like Dubai or Hong Kong and of course Rotterdam. What they are actually building are buildings for no people. They are future ruins. They don't exist yet—they're still being built, but they've already come down. This is where we can begin to discern a very crucial characteristic of property speculation where two timescales of future vision and material reality merge in a peculiar way to mash desire with the laws of gravity to produce material anachronisms frozen in space. Even in Berlin, high-end boutiques appealing to a bourgeois relic of upwardly mobile urban gentry are left in the dust as they are themselves gentrified

by kebab stands appealing to a more heterogeneous multitude of EasyJet tourists looking for parties and jobs at the same time.¹⁴

When the difference between building and destroying disappears, we enter into a totally different sort of timescale in which you basically have to live through birth and death simultaneously, and over and over again, as the exact same thing. Or, consider Reza Negarestani's convincing description of decay as "positioning itself on the substratum of survival, in order to indefinitely postpone death and absolute disappearance. In decay, the being survives by blurring into other beings, without losing all its ontological registers. In no way does decay wipe out or terminate; on the contrary it keeps alive."¹⁵ Debord might say that "social absence of death is identical to the social absence of life," but this is a much more interesting *mise en abyme* than any straightforward melancholic terminal vitalism.¹⁶

But nevertheless this is where Debord's more poetic and even prophetic observations on spectacle can actually be read today as a quite concrete treatise on the physical laws of a kind of vision that takes on a life totally independent of any material support. It was actually in the autumn of 1968, when Debord was becoming a major figure in Paris demonstrations, that Robert Venturi and Denise Scott Brown began their research that led to *Learning from Las Vegas*, their infamous study of postwar American vernacular sprawl as a communication machine masking a sophisticated language honed for immediate impact behind postwar sprawl and vernacular kitsch. It is a moment in late modernism typically marked by ambivalence and the dissolution of heroic certainties in the face of slowly emerging distributed information systems. And Venturi and Scott Brown's provocative dip into kitsch Americana seems to follow the spirit of the time until you end up with the figure of the decorated shed—a simple architectural structure wearing a giant costume that might look like a building-sized duck. Faced with the sheer ridiculousness of this building-turned-sign, the search for a more pure structural origin only reveals the further horror of a straight genealogical line going back to

Chartres Cathedral serving precisely the same function of the roadside attraction or spectacular beacon announcing itself to pilgrims. Venturi and Scott Brown remind us that spectacle has been around for some time and is not in itself the problem. The unmooring of spectacle from support on this level is not a broken promise so much as the actual location where culture is produced from nothing—certainly without any need for grand justifications or allowances to make something like a gigantic duck.

On the other hand we can still rely on Debord's critique of spectacle's capacity to produce weightless machines for attention capture and energy extraction primarily at the nexus of finance and art. With the liquidation in public financing and heavy private investment and even fiscalization of artworks and the art field we encounter the same strange paradoxical movement of decay and glitz happening simultaneously. The art market has reached record highs following the financial crisis. Infrastructure crumbles on the one hand but another regime emerges under the rubble where we start to see strange parallels between finance and art as regimes mutually built on vision and optics. And yet in the meantime most discussions on art have shifted to the structural forces that determine production and the context of production for some time now—on work, labor, financing, economy, and institutional forces rather than individual works or movements or artists, the most interesting of whom are anyhow already turning the structural conditions that produce their works into the content of their works. As the story goes, art is made out of labor and an economy of forces that determine the circulation of the things we call artworks. Andy Warhol knew it and so did Marx.

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Footnotes on P. 30

MEMO:

I meet Uwe Schwarzer for the first time at the Sharjah Biennial in 2005. He is there to install an artist's work; I am installing my own work. We find ourselves surrounded by the putting up of an exhibit in an edifice built by the sheikh for the sole purpose of the Biennial, a museum, an architecture containing workers from Pakistan and India who paint walls, unpack and install artworks and polish the marble floors for the arrival of the sheikh, all under the exploitative conditions which characterize life as a migrant worker in the Emirates.

The workers are here on a subcontracting firm's charter. A job in the United Arab Emirates is a promise for a better future, better than any future in their home countries. Uwe is here to guarantee that his customer's work gets installed according to plan. I am here because I fancy the idea to make myself a picture of how—in which context—my work is shown, because I always like to install my own work. When I arrive in my space, there are two workers busy with the task of painting the walls, and two others are waiting for my instructions regarding where to run the cables. Not only do I witness the working conditions in Sharjah, I stand also as an inextricable part of them.

They resemble a bad dream that one can't wake up from. How did I get here, and what's different here than elsewhere? Or does something become visible here, something which remains otherwise cloaked because too far away, because it happens in blurry, fleeting form—because I fancied the idea to avoid exploiting anyone with my work? I feel deranged; I'm disoriented, and I feel very naïve.

The modes of work and production in the art field are manifold. The approaches range from solitary studio-sitters to jet-set networkers, from collaborative cutting-edge researchers to collectives and cooperatives, not to mention hyper-productive art companies and all of the variations in between.

When the production process leads to a large exhibit, money is relative. While one thing gets huge amounts of money, the other thing gets zero. Material, equipment, shipment and insurance are paid for at fixed rates.

Honoraries, salaries, accommodation and personal expenses are subject to negotiation. Specialized technicians are paid at their usual daily rate, workers are paid by the hour, and artists customarily get paid nothing, just like volunteers and interns—they are paid with an abstract prospect of self-upgrade, an appreciation in self-value, stimulated perhaps through participation.

My own practice is founded on collective, trans-disciplinary contexts. My main interest lies in collaborative, self-organized and horizontal working relations.

In my environment, decisions were discussed and pitched collectively. Sites and events were self-organized,

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themes and their representation were chosen and carried out using interdisciplinary methods, and nobody got paid. As these collective working contexts were more and more dispersed—replaced with temporary collaborations, more activity inside the institution—this practice became engulfed by institutional structures and logics and underwent a tough, complicated transmutation. I encountered the pressure to professionalize, to align oneself with the given order, with spite and astonishment.

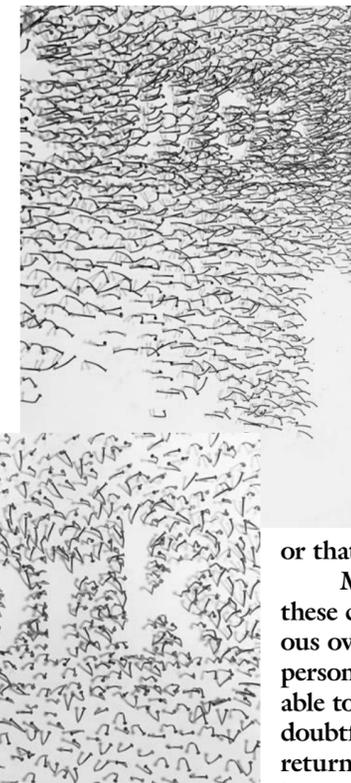
The standard responses from institutional personnel—"This is how we always do it," "That's out of the ordinary," "No one has ever asked for that before."—were the demarcations for vitally needed boundary crossings within the institution. Be that as it may, the actual structure of the institution hardly allowed itself to be destabilized or disoriented. At the end of the day, the opening has to offer something to see: an exhibit, anything. The promise of the institution must be upheld at all costs.

No consideration is given to whether the content of the exhibition is affirmative or critical, playful or aggressive. Most importantly, the production process cannot and should not be delayed. The show must go on. One can do a critical work which confronts the processes of the institution, but one cannot change the division of labor within the institution's functions. One cannot change the fact that a press representative writes a press release, that a technician installs a video projector, or that the employee lays a cable.

My understanding of production in these contexts almost became an over-zealous overidentification with each and every person involved; ultimately, it was, at best, able to spark disorientation. Anyway, it is doubtful that the museum employee, returning home at five o'clock to his family—or to his own work—wishes I would liberate him from his 'alienated' working relations. It isn't really his problem that I can't cope with relegating jobs or giving other people instructions.

Uwe comes from another world. He runs a company which is hired by artists to produce artworks. His identification with this work goes as far as making sure that his customer is satisfied, that his company has produced the best possible work, and that everything is delivered and installed according to schedule. He is paid fairly for his work, and when the project is completed, it is standard procedure that he has nothing more to do with the artwork.

On the one hand, I'm increasingly astounded at the way some artists work while I listen further to Uwe about his profession, and on the other hand, I'm astounded by my own astonishment. I had always asked myself how some artists manage to produce fifty exhibits in one year when





MEMO:

I'm already overwhelmed by four. I knew that other people have assistants who answer their emails and help them with research; all the same, I wasn't aware that specialized companies exist which can produce practically anything (almost anything) that an artist could come up with. I wasn't aware that many artists produce this way occasionally or even exclusively.

In inner circles, everyone knows these companies. They come highly recommended, because they are responsible and produce high quality work. But appearing in the public eye is something that neither Uwe's company nor other companies do, and this is good, says Uwe. He doesn't clamor about his work. Not even a company sign hangs in the courtyard entrance, and nobody seems to wish there did. To top it off, everything which has anything to do with the customers or with their respective productions remains strictly confidential. This is also a reason why many are enthusiastic about producing work with Uwe and his company. Discretion is important when dealing with artworks.

The more I hear about Uwe's work, the more curious I become. I make up my mind to ask him if we should do a project together. I would like to gain a better understanding of this sector of art production, a sector which remains invisible to the exhibit viewer; also, I would like to renew a questioning of my own practice in order, among other things, to analyze whether or not an insistence upon certain modes of production reproduces unwanted romanticisms which serve the myth of the self-made, the genuine, the authentic—qualities for which everyone loves 'the artist' so much—as though the wish for self-directed, unalienated, collaborative thinking and acting pronounces that no one is exploiting anybody, and no artists are setting themselves up for exploitation. On the one hand, I have the impression that Uwe's working conditions are less distorted than mine, and I almost envy him for this clarity. On the other hand, I sense the necessity to engage in a fresh questioning of existing relations and conditions—which Uwe's work is only one element of—to avoid accepting them as naturally given.

We meet regularly throughout a period of two years in order to think about a project we could do together. For reasons of discretion, Uwe is skeptical and careful.

We decide to invent a pretend artist for the purpose of revealing the different working processes in his company while opening them to discussion. We produce the work of Robbie Williams and document the production procedure.

Natascha Sadr Haghghian
Berlin, May 2008

N.S.H

CONVERSATION: UWE SCHWARZER

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Natascha SADR HAGHIGHIAN: What sort of education did you undergo, and how did your present activities get started?

Uwe SCHWARZER: In art school I studied free arts with John Armleder, and as part of our studies we did adjacent projects where we invited friends of John to describe, to draw or to give us schemas for their artworks. Then we carried out their plans and made an exhibit out of the end-products. That was the first moment when I made works happen for other artists, seventy artists in all, including works by Haim Steinbach or Olivier Mosset, pretty much all of John's friends—so very well-known artists were involved. I also made a large catalogue that went with it. That was quite an experience.

I also tried to stretch out my feelings during my studies, seeing as I was highly occupied with my relationship to other artists, so I did an internship with Rolf Ricke. I was part of an exhibition there with Fred Sandback, who I still get excited about. He traveled all over the world with a suitcase containing a little bit of wool thread and made room-size installations or sculptures out of it. The contact with Rolf Ricke was quite fruitful for me. Chatting with him was totally fantastic.

Do you know Rolf Ricke?

N: No, not personally.

U: When I first came to Ricke, there was a Donald Judd piece lying in the bathtub on blankets. Up to then, I had known art through the museum only, hung on the white wall with pretty lighting, and suddenly there was this Judd piece parked there wrapped in furniture blankets. That's one experience that actually never let go of me.

I love Judd, and for me his artworks are almost proverbial. In that moment I saw his artwork for the first time materially, meaning I saw it only as material, a form lying in the bathtub. It somehow brought it down to earth, but in the end, it also didn't. Seeing this was so much more than just a Judd on the wall; it was really important for me.

After that I worked in Massimo De Carlo's gallery in Milan. For the most part I did the organization and got to know a lot concerning art production and so on.

N: All of this was still during your studies?

U: No, De Carlo was afterwards. What I did while still studying was a job delivering vegetables. One of the customers was the art museum in Wolfsburg where at that time a giant sculpture by Mario Merz was standing, one that had fruit and vegetables on it. There was an order on my list to supply this sculpture: an apple, two pears, three heads of lettuce—something like that. These fruits and vegetables got replaced by fresh goods approximately every ten days, but they were ordered by the kitchen. In other words, there was the order placed by the kitchen—quite simply, three crates of salad, two crates of tomatoes, five bags of potatoes—and on top of that, two more apples, three bananas and two heads of lettuce that were needed for the installations, for example. That was quite odd for me, of course. I put

a sign reading "Art Transport" in my delivery vehicle window each time I drove there, chuckling to myself, knowing that I had the stuff for Merz' sculpture in the back of my van. I worked a while at Flash Art and wrote a short profile of the city of Milan. I got to know various collectors, artists and gallerists during the interviews. After my time in Italy and with Massimo de Carlo, I came to Berlin. I was excitedly wanting to work directly for an artist. Through the contacts I already had as well as through Massimo, after just two months I landed a contract to make a piece for Carsten Höller, a very complex piece that nobody could figure out how to make. I managed quite well, and everyone was enthusiastic. I was the one who would make Carsten's pieces from then on, in addition to all of the other artists in Carsten's gallery, and since then it grew bigger and bigger. Basically from the outset, I didn't consider it as a profession from my point of view. On the contrary, Carsten and other artists needed my help, and I helped them.

N: Back then, was that a source from which to finance your own work? You did, in fact, study art yourself, and you did have an artistic practice.

So the things you're describing probably happened on the side, didn't they?

U: Yes, in Italy I had quite a lot of exhibitions. I was then part of this momentum of up-and-coming, very young artists. It went very well, and I was totally connected in Italy, but not in Berlin. This contract work that I did existed primarily to earn money, and on the side I realized my own works. But as I said, it was fun for me to help. That's how it really was. Since I constantly had to write out invoices, I was at some point sent to a tax advisor who told me, "you've got a company here."

N: (laughs)

U: So, (laughs) on top of that, I had never wanted to be self-employed, because I had known this from my father and wasn't so keen on it. Suddenly, though, I was self-employed with my own company. That's just what happened.

N: The fact that you carried out works for other people according to their satisfaction, that you delivered something great—that definitely means that you accumulated certain abilities or that you already had certain abilities at your disposal. Can you specify your abilities and how you acquired them?

U: I'm absolutely certain that my strengths lie somewhere far from any ability to work with my hands. Sure, I did mount the works and make the installations, but it isn't the case that I can deal with wood particularly well or weld with great proficiency. I believe that my proficiency lies in understanding well what the artist would most like to have, and I know how to direct a project. I know how to explain to other people, my employees, for example, what they have to do in terms of crafting something, how the

piece should look in the end, how it is made and so on. I know that for an artist, only a certain material is worth considering, only a certain kind of surfacing, paint or treatment, because another kind of treatment would leave traces behind that don't comply with the artist's idea or sense.

This saves the artist from asking a lot of questions. Some artists don't know what the edge of a laser cut looks like in plexiglass or how this edge changes when it is sandblasted or filed by hand. They leave it to me to propose the right solutions, to filter through possible methods and materials—for them, in terms of their sense—meaning I can exclude the ones which couldn't possibly come into play.

N: You take over particular decisions for the artists, so to speak.

U: First, he or she would simply have to gain all of the production experience, spend time researching, considering and deciding, not to mention following the whole production; it's possible to skip over this whole procedure, because I understand what the artist wants, not only in terms of questions concerning material or treatment, but also in terms of all other possible aspects, other decisions which might be required later on.

When an artist comes in with an idea, and he or she made a sketch, then I understand how he/she imagines it—and I have at my disposal the practical knowledge needed to make continuing decisions for potential future questions. One must be able to fit a work through a door, transport it, pack it, leave it to others to install. It has to last, through many an installation and more. I always have these kinds of pragmatic, practical questions in the back of my mind.

Project management means briefing people, producing a plan, thinking about how to make something, and distributing tasks. I speak with those who are going to carry these tasks out. I also do the quality control. This means that I constantly attend to the production, making sure that it gets done the way it should.

N: Do you have the feeling that you learned these skills during your time in art school, during your studies with John Armleder?

Or do you think that you were anyway already carrying them with you, that you simply elaborated these skills out of an interest? To put the question another way, do you think that your art studies have helped you in this regard?

U: I came into contact with several artists and their production methods through John. He explained a lot, but I think that I was also influenced by working with other artists, including during my studies, through museum visits and catalogues.

I immersed myself deeply into artists' concepts and thereby acquired my abilities. By the way—and this is the best part—I already had an interest in many artists during my studies for whom I work today.

One of them was Liam Gillick, for example; and Mona Hatoum, whom I had already admired then, called quite recently and wants to have a work made. It's wonderful.

N: And was it just an effect of the process that your own artistic work moved increasingly into the background?

Did you simply have less and less time, therefore automatically producing less of your own work, or were there specific motivations? In short, did the one interest you more than the other?

U: My last works were actually intertwined with the works of other artists. I did a lot of works in which I once again invited other artists to do something, from my declaring a bicycle as an exhibition space and inviting other artists to do something on it to an airplane, which really did fly—art flight, loopings, and flying off your head—I too was always a passenger. I figured out that my own artwork had a strong involvement with other artists' works, and I tried to initiate this involvement by way of my own artistic work.

But it was a detour, as I preferred to engage directly with them. Suddenly there was my job, unmediated involvement with the artists, speaking about the artworks, and this was very constructive. I saw then that fulfillment for me lies more in direct involvement—rather than with making sculptures or executing happenings, even though happenings have always been fun for me.—I must say as well that I feel more at home producing work like this.

Now I work together with a great number of people and have a much more intense exchange than if I were to work alone. It is, indeed, difficult as an artist to work together with other artists so closely. At the end of the day, my job is much easier, and so much comes out of it.

N: And you always have the advantage—the pleasure—of seeing the artworks in the bathtub rather than seeing them later in the exhibition space.

U: Unfortunately, I see far too few of our works in exhibition spaces, because I often see them here in the workshop for the last time before they go somewhere else.

There is another aspect of my present work which I find better: you get a contract or a project, you work for it, and when it's over, you get paid for your work. Work and payment exist in direct relation to one another. The role of the artist within the art world somehow disturbs me; some artists almost do the job of a service industry worker, filling up the museums' spaces and maybe getting the production costs paid for, if they're lucky.

This means you don't build up expenses, and you somehow earn money later through the sale of the work. You earn it from an object instead of being paid for your work. I have to say that this didn't really float my boat.

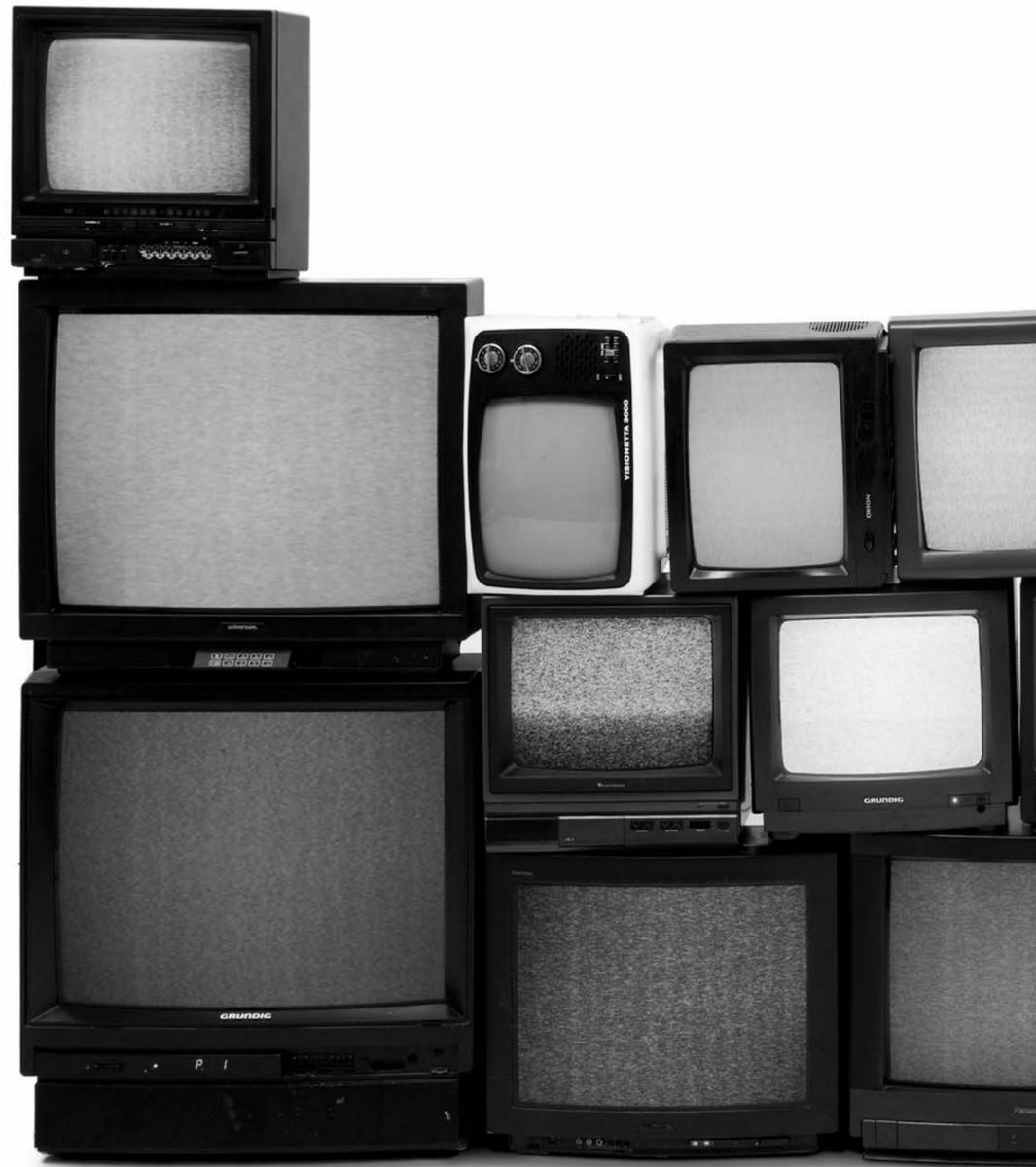
N: So that is what you didn't like while continuing your own art career?

U: I discovered that real production was more beautiful for me than anything else.

N: And now you can concentrate on really producing.

U: Exactly.





CONVERSATION: UWE SCHWARZER

N: ...and on that which is actual, so to speak.

U: I find it somehow more direct.

N: Can you describe in more detail how your work proceeds. You mentioned that you work together with a lot of people.

What happens when you get a contract, and how does it happen? What does the day-to-day look like during such a production?

U: I talk with an artist who has an idea or a project, or someone sends me sketches or other materials which describe the project. Then I sit down and ponder, either together with the artist, alone, or here with my colleagues: how could one realize it? Is it doable in the way it's described, or does something have to be changed to enable its realization?

Along with this comes the planning of the budget. Then I talk it through again with the artist. I present him or her with my best proposal for making it, along with whatever other thoughts I may have, and then I make an offer. This offer is forwarded to the museum or the gallery and is confirmed from there, or not. If yes, then it all starts, often under time pressure of course.

N: This means that the artists come to you with an already concrete idea?

U: Yes, actually, quite often, mostly... Sometimes there are also unknown aspects: Could we do this? How would this be? Have you already thought of this? I would say that ninety-eight percent of the time, it's clear what the artist wants, at least in his or her imagination. In some cases, there has already been research. However, sometimes the project is not quite so developed; then we talk and think of what to propose to the artist.

N: Who is we?

U: We are Thomas, Achim and myself. We run the business, more or less, and employ a group of several people. There's also Viola in the office who submits inquiries, does a lot of research and orders material, all in close cooperation with myself, of course. Viola is pretty much my right hand. She also draws many projects on the computer in 2D or 3D so that we can translate the sketches that we receive into their real measurements and be surprised that it looks totally different afterwards (laughs). Or she constructs data for laser cuts and similar things. Then there are several people who are good in working with wood, metal, plastics, painting—people who can form something with their hands.

N: —who have a specialized knowledge in a specific field.

U: Exactly. Well, I believe there is only one trained carpenter... no, our welder also learned the blacksmith trade. But all the others had no formal training. Except... wait, that's not true either. We also have an informatics and electronics engineer who builds all of our circuitry, switches, controllers and so on. He actually did study informatics and electrical engineering.

There are a few that began studying their craft at an early age. So then the work gets distributed and planned here. When the deliveries arrive, my colleagues and I have to check that the material is in order and that it has the right measurements. Throughout the production process I check up on the projects again and again. Sometimes I have to correct things because they haven't been done well enough. Or I notice something: hmm, that doesn't look very good, not at all like I or the artist probably imagined it. Then I take a quick photograph and send it to him or her or call him/her to come by. Then the project enters the next phase. The smaller parts are constructed, assembled, and the work is photographed and packed. If necessary, with the help of photos, an instruction manual is made. Most of the time, we organize the transport and sometimes, here and there, the installation.

N: So you have various workshops here: a wood shop, a metal shop and so on.

What happens when you are confronted with a task that you have never fulfilled before or that demands skills which none of you have? Do you manage anyway, or do you outsource it?

U: There are things where someone says, "I'd like to do that. I'd like to find out how." We got a contract, for example, for Tiffany glass. Achim was eager to try it out and ended up doing it himself. We also have a huge base of people whom we can ask. Over time, we've covered relatively many fields, but there are naturally always new things.

In this case we just ask around. There is the possibility to find people who can do this or that in our workshop. We hire them on a freelance basis. Or we outsource it and hire another company. For example, we don't have a laser machine. It's not worth it for us to add such a thing to our workshop. Every laser machine is different, and we know that it's better to do this cut with this company and another cut with the other company. This is a typical case when we say, "That has to be done with these or those guys." We finish the data here to the extent that it simply has to be fed into the machine, and then we have the cuts delivered back to us.

N: We spoke shortly about the theme, skills, but we only touched on your own skills. In your opinion, what skills do artists possess these days?

Or what do you expect from an artist? What should he or she contribute to the production of an artwork?

U: To start with, I don't expect anything from an artist—in a positive sense. I don't think he or she necessarily has to bring any handy skills with him/her. It's difficult to say anything general about this; one has to look at each individual artist. Many have visual ideas in their head and think about the external form of the work, leaving us to propose its realization. For example, some artists have aversions to certain materials, even if they aren't visible. One artist is against polyurethane foam, which

is sometimes very useful stuff, and the other has problems with certain numbers. We make three supports behind an object, and the artists doesn't like the number three. Then we have to build four supports, even if they aren't visible. But to return to skills—most of the artist we work for don't have any handy skills. They just plan their projects. Their skills consist in conceptualizing their artworks, and sometimes it borders on the doable or even surpasses the limits of the possible. Some are stimulated by testing these borders. Sometimes we get slight heart palpitations, because we have to do things that we actually don't want to do at all, not to mention aren't allowed to do. But some are interested in this aspect.

But here, the production process plays a little a role as does materiality. The visual is the thing. Meanwhile, some artists have started making computer drawings instead of hand-drawn sketches in order to represent the work more spatially or comprehend its proportions more precisely. Or there's Olafur Eliasson or Jorge Pardo, who even construct 3D models for us.

N: Why do you think that so many artists give the realization of their work over to people in your position? There are other companies in other countries that work like you. Do you think it's merely a question of time, since almost everyone has such an unbelievably large amount of things to do? Is this why they prefer to give production over to someone else? Or does it also have something to do with this question of skills?

U: Well, there are several reasons. In principle, no person exists who can simultaneously be a super welder and work with wood, glass, textiles, leather and whatever else, meaning, therefore, that the artist inevitably lacks the skills needed for a complex project—because no one can do everything. Hypothetically, he/she could go to a cabinet maker and a locksmith and have all of the smaller pieces made separately, but we've collected all of these skills under one roof. If artists were to have to organize all of this individually, they would have much higher quantities of things to do—really.

Added to that, there are the existing risk factors when the work is passed along from hand to hand. If someone messes up, doesn't think clearly or doesn't know what the other one is doing, then the whole process can break down—and finally, something doesn't fit together. Or the work requires that the locksmith does something first, then the cabinet maker, and then, once again, the locksmith. Here, everything is in one house, and measurements and other details get discussed by everyone. We take over all the planning work, plus the coordination of the different workshops, which saves not only time and money, but a lot of thought too.

N: So there has to be an understanding for the idea of the artist. You described this before as a skill. If the artist delegated the work to many different craftsmen, then it's quite possible that they have no idea of the

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big picture that he or she has in mind. Perhaps they also normally have nothing to do with art, meaning they would react to unusual contracts with indifference.

U: Yes, this can happen very easily.

N: Then you also do a kind of translation work, don't you?

U: Exactly. Say an artist wants to make a steel tub, but can't give a precise technical description of what he or she wants. The artist can only describe it visually. When I go to the bender, I explain to him exactly what needs to be done—so he knows exactly what to do. Artists are sometimes not in a position to do this. This is one part of our job. On top of that, I have a long relationship with the external companies that we commission. I know their language, and they know mine. This means that if the bending is supposed to look perfect, I have a vocabulary to help us achieve this. If it's supposed to look trashy, then I have an expression which I know they will understand. We understand how to communicate with each other about the work.

For this reason, things move quickly and less mistakes occur than when an artist does this him or herself, at least when an artist does this for the first time or has little experience going to a metal bender.

N: So it simply has a lot to do with experience, being a team that knows how to work together.

U: Yes. Of course in addition to that, there's the giving of advice, not necessarily as though it were an officially offered service, but because when I speak with the artists about the project, I end up giving them feedback.

N: Perhaps one could describe it like so: an idea comes in, and then there's feedback that comes from thinking about technical possibilities as well as about if and when the idea stands in conflict to that which is possible. And then this information feeds back into the idea.

U: Sometimes there's a clear statement from the artist. "I'd like to have it like this or like that," and then, according to the picture I have in my head, I notice, for example, that it's not right or that this material doesn't correspond with what the artist imagines.

Sometimes the final product wouldn't match what the artist usually does—it wouldn't be a real so and so. All this goes through my head, most of the time during my trip back home or to the workshop after the meeting. If it occurs to me that something there doesn't match up, then I can bring these thoughts to the table. I see it as my responsibility, also as my challenge, to propose the right thing to the artist, to assist her or him in the making of an exact piece. This is part of the job that I really have fun with, this challenge, this attempt to make every project the right way, to prevent mistakes. If the work is indecisive, imprecise, or if it doesn't really fit in to the grand scheme, then the artist will just be disappointed when he or she sees the work in its finished state. Or the gallerist will be disappointed, or whoever else. This squanders

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energy. I like it better when everyone is happy, happy for the piece.

N: This means that you, in a certain sense, do have influence on particular aspects of the content, insofar as they collide with what you are able to predict, how you think the product will look in the end, or what sort of technical problems you think could arise. In other words, the end-product happens within the communication.

U: I would agree with this in terms of aesthetics, not, however, in terms of content.

Some projects are simply harmonious; they achieve unity. But with some projects, I notice something that's off, and then I voice this. I think that the artists who come to us appreciate that I, that we think along with them, not only in relation to the production, but also in relation to the final form which the work takes and to the artist's body of work.

N: Earlier you mentioned Donald Judd, who engaged quite intensively with industrial production in his work. It hasn't really always been the case that artists have produced beyond their own technical abilities, or, let's say, beyond their own technical language. But precisely this is a clear characteristic of much art that is being produced today.

How does this relate to the work that Judd produced then? Or perhaps one would have to travel further back to the beginning of the industrial revolution and to the ready-made. One could also say that conceptual art paved the way for certain aspects regarding the division of labor, as it is practiced by artists today. Do you see a development here? How could one describe this?

U: Any answer would be a theory; in reality one should look at artists' production methods individually. Twentieth-century artists developed several new strategies for producing or realizing ideas. Donald Judd, Andy Warhol, Joseph Beuys, Marcel Duchamp, Rosemarie Trockel.

In the field of art, such a development cannot possibly be linear. I think it's more interesting to take it one artist at a time, look and see what they did individually, in whichever context. What I find particularly thrilling today is how there are so many methods for organizing the production of one's own artworks. One example is Olafur Eliasson, who has a huge studio full of hired people in which the works are planned, built and given test-runs. Quite simply, this is a big company, and Olafur is the boss. This is one economic model among others that artists can adopt.

Other artists give the development of their artworks over to other companies. Olaf Nicolai, for example, commissions an architecture firm to design his works, and then they turn around and hire us to build them. In this case, we just do what is required. We could just as well be cabinet makers. Olaf plays consciously with authorship and production methods. Or take other artists, like Rirkrit Tiravanija, who attempts to draw

creativity from his exhibit-goers. He also allows us a certain amount of creative freedom in that he gives us instructions in a particular way. An example for this would be a piece of wooden furniture by Enzo Mari that we reconstructed for Rirkrit. Rirkrit just gave us this instruction: please copy, but in polished stainless steel. Of course, you can't make a one-to-one copy of wood with stainless steel. The wood has a thickness of nineteen millimeters, but steel doesn't come in a thickness of nineteen millimeters. So you have to take the 20 millimeter steel. Then you have to see how it is possible to arrive at a copy that is 'correct.' I decide together with my people what is right, and in this case with Thomas, who carries out, supervises and organizes the metal work.

This is how we develop the stainless steel copy that is right for Rirkrit. Or take Sylvie Fleurie: she not only works with objects which come from a particular level of the world of shopping, but she also shops for ideas and possibilities for making something. Others use us chiefly as a trustworthy workshop. "I need a table. Here are the measurements." Or Michael Elmgreen and Ingar Dragset value surface finishes that are very clean and elegant.

Lacquers and metal surfaces should be treated in a very neat and clean way. I think the reason they come to us is that they simply trust it will be as super as they wanted.

N: One could say that the spectrum of people's motivations for coming to you ranges from the purely practical—"I relegate because someone else will do it better, because I don't have the time to think about it."—from conceptual contribution to the thought process involved in realizing a piece. For example, one may want to have a craftsman make an artwork for the very purpose of quoting a form of production or conceptually overstepping the idea of the artist's hand or the original.

U: No, I don't think that artists come to us for conceptual reasons. I don't think one would, because what we are isn't at all clear. A real cabinet maker would be more clearly defined. Tobias Rehberger, for example, has his Porsches produced in Thailand according to his own sketches, or Philippe Cazal asked a graphic design agency to elaborate his works. Instead, I believe we fill in this gap where the individual needs of the artist are met and completed by our possibilities. On the one hand, it's knowing and trusting that the whole thing will turn out the way the artist wants; on the other hand, it's the negotiations that we take responsibility for. We build boxes ourselves made out of the correct type of wood for transport overseas, assuming this is the sort of transport that comes into question, and then we worry about the transport ourselves. If you order a plexiglass object somewhere, you have to pick it up, pack it yourself, etc. You've got a lot of work on your hands.

We take care of all of this. I call the museum and say, "We've met the deadline with this project now, and the work can immediately be transported by this or that mover." Among other things, it's important that artists

can come to us with their idea, while all of the experiments necessary for the realization of the piece are on our side. They needn't have anything to do with this experimentation phase. There is an agreement: it's finished on this day, and it costs this much. The artist mustn't risk time or money, the gallery or museum either.

N: Those would be the practical considerations, it seems. It's easier logistically and technically for the artist to work like this. In an earlier conversation, you used the example of a door. I'd like to come back to that. An artist wants to have a door in an artwork. Now, he or she could attempt to make a door him/herself, and he/she would manage as good a door as he/she is capable of—even though he/she is no carpenter.

But it will be different from what a door normally looks. This is the service that you can provide: to make a door that looks like a door. If you can't manage it yourselves, then you hire someone else who can. With this, I'm coming back to the question of industrial production, or the question to what extent artists today relate easier to modes of production which are different from traditionally artistic modes, how this relation has changed over time.

U: When one looks at an industrially produced door from a distance of two meters, then it looks super. But if you look at it from ten centimeters away, it doesn't look so good anymore.

This is what you get from a specialized company that makes doors for apartments or for offices. But more than often, this doesn't satisfy the artist. It has to look even better than a real door, like an ideal door.

N: Hyperreal?

U: Exactly. When we look at a door from Elmgreen and Dragset, it isn't just the standard door that gets used everywhere. It's simply made better. We care for the very last detail. You can't go to just any door maker or carpenter to have this done; there's a bit more to it than that. We made a luggage conveyor belt for them, for example. When you look at a luggage conveyor belt in an airport, it looks great from ten meters away, shiny, glittery, fantastic full of little doo-dads. But when you get closer, you see that shocks don't fit, screw holes have been threaded—things have been adjusted and so on.

Even if the conveyor belt is brand new, it isn't perfect. That's why a conventionally prepared luggage conveyor belt isn't ideal for Elmgreen and Dragset. Sometimes this also depends on the expectations of the gallery or the collector. Sometimes everyone wants it to be perfect, sometimes only one out of three.

But this is another question.

N: (laughs)

U: We can fulfill these expectations. What I'm saying is that industrial production or an industrial aesthetic is often a theme for our artists, meaning they use objects that are actually

constructed in a regular company that specializes in this object or the other rather than in a mass-producing company, but the production in these companies is still often not good enough to fulfill the demands of the artist.

N: Basically, you have to produce a hyperreal object which in terms of this high quality doesn't exist in reality, which looks, however, as though it does correspond with 'reality.'

U: Exactly—like it comes from fantasy, from the imagination, an image of the actual object.

N: Yes.

U: ...because one doesn't see these minimal impurities until one gets really close, though they aren't part of the picture one constructs in one's imagination.

N: These imprecisions are part of the reality of a production which is as perfect as was necessary for the functioning of the object, as perfectly produced as was possible given the available amount of production time.

U: Yes. There are certain levels of tolerance there, and with us, they are pretty low. We like to keep things tight and precise.

N: It seems to me that the preparation of the objects do play a large role in the final result, at least on an aesthetic level. But it seems difficult to me to separate the aesthetic level from the level of content. What is your relationship with the finished product? How do you feel, for example, about questions of authorship? Does the final product belong completely to the artist, or is it also a little bit yours?—outside the fact that the whole thing is regulated by the contract.

My question is posed more in terms of your feelings.

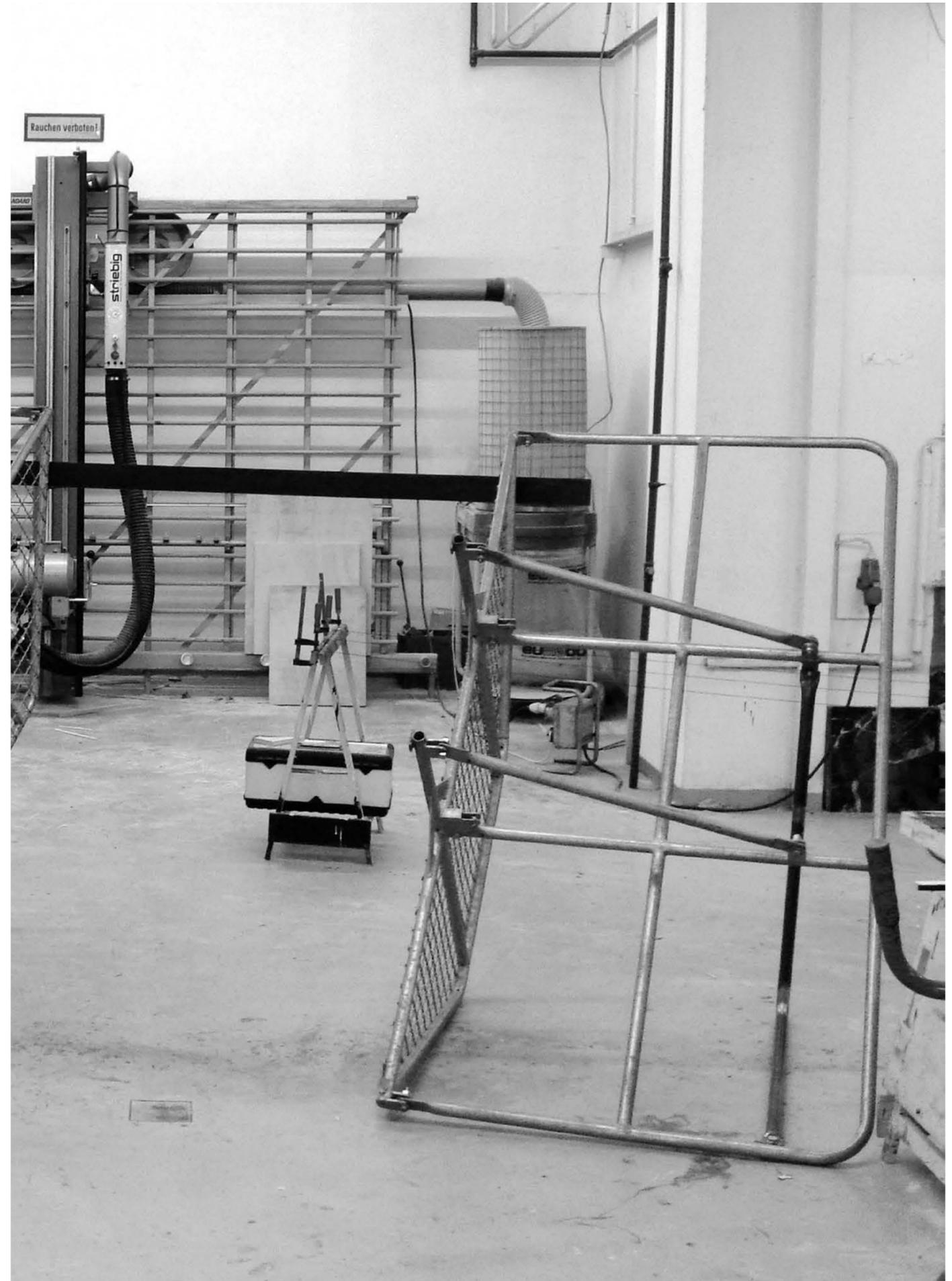
U: No, for me they are jobs I've been contracted to do, and I have no expectations in terms of authorship. It has never been important for me to stand in the foreground.

If I really love a work that we made, then I'm excited about the artist, that he or she could think up such a great work, and I am happy that I was allowed to realize it. The idea comes from the artist, and the carrying out of the idea happens through technical, craft-oriented or other differently oriented aspects which do not justify any sort of authorship regarding the artwork.

No, I simply have a lot of fun working together with the artists, and this is sufficient (laughs).

N: And it is possible to keep things separate in terms of your feelings?

U: Yes, absolutely. We work simultaneously on many different projects, and we've worked for quite a lot of artists. Each project is equally valuable and important. Sure, maybe I like the one artwork more than the other. But it doesn't come from me.



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N: I think that the question is maybe a bit more abstract, simply because I have the impression that there are two elements. There is the idea and there is the fabrication. How are they related to each other? In the end, doesn't the final object consist of both? Or am I making this too abstract? I think that the general public still has this image of the artist as someone who gets an idea in his/her studio and then sits down and realizes it.

Starting with the concept, he or she continues with the realization process, and it all culminates in the presentation—this all bears the handwriting of the artist; and everything is cast in the same mold. Of course there are people today who still work this way, and I don't want to say that one way is more contemporary than the other. It's not a certain loss of authenticity which concerns me either, but it does, indeed, seem to be the case that so many artists have given up on this sort of approach without somehow communicating the change in practice to the outside.

Meanwhile, a lot of artists have achieved this separation completely; they've completely removed themselves from production. Their work consists in the conceptualization of their pieces, maybe even along the lines of conceptual art; but their work doesn't enact the rejection of the object, the rejection that conceptual art was calling for in its time. Back then it was said that the object no longer plays a role, that it's really about the idea, and presently this object has returned in a very singular way, only now it is separated from the actual tasks of the artist. Despite all of this, the traditional image of the artist is still maintained for the outside viewer. For me, this is like a blind spot.

U: When we produce a work, we make sure that it shows the hand of the artist. This is very near and dear to our hearts. We make sure that everything is right, that the screws, the lacquer, the surface, or whatever—that it all represents the hand of the artist, that it's coherent.

N: Is it possible to describe this more closely? How would one explain what the hand of the artist is?

U: I think if one looks at the works that are standing in front of us now, one would quickly notice that they are works by Elmgreen and Dragset. If you've seen a few works by them, then I believe they can be recognized. The same with Carsten Höller or Terence Koh. If you're not careful, if you do something wrong, then the big picture of the artist's body of work gets destroyed; all it needs is the wrong screw. It follows that the main concern is the artist and not the fabrication; or in other words, the possibilities for the fabrication are basically limited to the handwriting of the artist. The question is quite metaphorical. If a piece by Dan Flavin were to suddenly have the wrong proportions between his fluorescent tubes—unfortunately, we've

never done a Flavin—then it would be noticed, and he would be the responsible one, not the person who made the lamps or arranged them. So in the end the responsibility for the whole thing lies with the artist, and he's the one who stands tall next to it. Or he doesn't stand tall, because he doesn't have to stand tall. He does, however, carry the responsibility.

N: ...because he is the surface which appears on the outside, or the one who represents it.

U: Exactly, yes.

N: In your opinion, why is it that art is always so different than film in this regard, that despite this relatively large team, some of the members of whom work on the artworks, there is always only one name standing there. Can you understand this?

U: The artist stands for his work with his vision, with his life, with his entire thinking and acting in relation to his work. Therefore, he stands with the help of, or together with the sculptures or works. It's the same with architects, the same in film. In film, it's the director who's standing there. In film, the whole list of credits is there only because of pressure from unions. Sometimes I think it's pretty absurd that even the interns are listed; sometimes I like it when even some uninteresting loner from the countryside who made something small gets his name in between all the other important names.

In the end, however, the decision to mention all the people is a legal decision and not a content-related decision made by the director. And I also don't really think it makes sense to show all of these names in the art field.

Ultimately, if these are people that are unknown to the general public, then they are only names. They would only be worth mentioning if one also told their stories. Of course, that would turn into something completely different. I don't really think that it's necessary.

N: You don't think it would change public perception and thereby change the way in which audiences perceive artwork?

U: I often have the experience that when I explain my profession to people, they are astounded. "But, I thought the artists..." I hadn't really thought about it." Here's the deal: if you simply were to put an artwork in a museum with only a note under the title that lists everyone who helped produce it, it would really confuse people. If this were described in texts about the work, as part of the work, it could make sense. But each artist has to decide this for her/himself.

N: It would play a role in the market. It is through this clear division of labor that it also becomes clear what is sold there. Admittedly, it is you who does the fabrication, but the authorship rests on the artist. In comparison, it is more difficult to sell a group work than it is to sell the work of a solo artist, even though it is made by a team. But obviously there is a different

perception regarding what it is.

U: It's becoming interesting with the two of us and with our exhibit. It's definitely a team project. The question is, how will your gallerist be able to sell the final product? The other question is how we deal with the authorship question in our project. You said that you wanted to include me as an author.

N: Yes, because when all is said and done, it would be true to the way the project emerged to name you as an author.

I didn't give you a contract to carry out, instead, the form of the project has arisen from our conversations. For this reason, there isn't this clear boundary in our project.

U: It's a situation which doesn't normally happen with me. Usually, I don't invent artworks or discuss them, at least not in this way. You and I are playing a game, and it is entertaining to be an artist for a limited time again (laughs), even getting paid for my creativity. I think what we're trying out is interesting.

N: (laughs) I think so too—but I'm still confused when you use terms like creativity, for example. What exactly does one need it for, and can you really separate it so clearly? Do you mean that creativity is what the artist brings with him/her and that what you do has nothing to do with creativity?

U: No, of course we're also very creative, but it's not the artistic, inventive creativity of conceptualizing an artwork, at the very least in thought; it's more the creativity of technicians, engineers and craftsmen. With craftsmen, the creativity is more related to the process than to the final result, because the final result is, indeed, the decision of the artist.

N: But this is a slight contradiction of what you described at the beginning, namely about which work it is that you do and where you see your own strengths.

U: That's right.

N: You're actually not the craftsman.

U: No, it's true that I bring myself into it, but I wouldn't now describe this as creativity.

N: Then how could one describe it?

U: I think that it has to do with my skill in comprehending and perceiving things thoroughly, with analysis on the one side and finding solutions on the other side. I search for solutions for the handwriting or within the handwriting of the artist. Actually, I just try to stay on the path that the artist is on, and if something occurs to me, an idea, then I'm happy to bring it to the table.

For example, I may think that the artwork would do better to adopt a different aesthetic proposal for a form, and it would thereby stay more successfully on the straight and

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narrow. Or it might be interesting to tread along the edge of the path with a different proposal. I have a certain understanding of an artist and her or his work, and I strive to keep her/him on the path, as long as she or he wants to stay, of course. But with the term, creativity, one immediately enters the sphere of artistic creation and invention, something which I would prefer not to claim credit for.

N: Do you mean that there exists a creative moment as a quality within art production?

Where can one find this moment today, in your opinion? Does it happen at a particular point in the development of the idea, or where and when does it exactly happen...?

U: With the artist?

N: Yes, or within art production as a whole. My question was if, according to your view, the creative moment is limited to a specific moment in the development of an idea.

U: Sometimes I come into one of our workshops and someone says, "This won't work. We have to do things another way." Then you have to get creative.

—
Berlin, May 2008

OPENING

I AM A PARTICLEBOARD SCREW.

I am a particleboard screw. My magnetic head dangles from the cross-slot bit of a rechargeable electric screwdriver. At this moment I am placed onto a particleboard, and turned until I go into it. The turning motion is accompanied by a reverberating noise composed of the electric screwdriver's howl, the rubbing between my thread and the particleboard into which I spiral, and the creak of the ladder upon which the exhibition assistant with the screwdriver stands. In the background, a small portable radio plays "*What Goes Around Comes Around*" by Justin Timberlake. I notice how the resistance is increasing, how the revolutions are getting slower, and how the screwdriver's cross-slot bit suddenly pops loose, spinning around on top of my head for a few seconds without result. Dirk, the exhibition assistant, attempts once again to get the lurching bit into the slot and sink me into the board. Obviously, this isn't the first time this has happened, since Dirk is cursing with pursed lips. Something like, "fucking screw, get in there, damn it ..."—the "damn" is in reference to the rechargeable battery, which runs out in this moment. The grating on my head stops. Dirk descends the ladder in order to change the battery. We find ourselves in the former work floor of a factory, which is now an art exhibition hall. Big, wooden shipping crates are all around, bearing names and branded signs indicating which side is up and which side down. A forklift emits a warning signal while backing up.

A woman in a white doctor's smock inspects a crate, which is being opened by two men in work overalls. She has a list in her hand and is holding a pair of glasses with an attached flip-down magnifying glass. A little group is approaching from the other end of the hall. There are three women; one of them is in her late forties and wears a boyish, tossy hairstyle and a pantsuit with low-cut neckline. The other two are in their mid-twenties—one with multicolored-asymmetrical hairstyle, telephoning, the other with a ponytail, taking notes, writing down what the older woman is saying. An unhurried man with a half-bald head

and quiet, soft-soled shoes, whose belt is adorned with various pockets, tools, and a walkie-talkie, also belongs to the group; as well as a young, Danish-looking man with a digital camera, and a dark-skinned woman in her mid-thirties with a rolling suitcase. "So ... this space. Isn't it fantastic? We're just opening your boxes. Your work will look gorgeous in here!" The dark-skinned woman nods and looks around. She looks tired. "Do you want to go to your hotel and rest a little?"

Dirk ascends the ladder again and starts to put a new screw into the particleboard next to me. Either he's forgotten that he wasn't yet finished with me, or he's saving me for later. I can feel how the particleboard is being pulled up against the base structure, and how the screwdriver is already commencing with the next screw. Now Dirk twists his arms upward, and a tattoo under his arm comes to light, warping slightly with the play of his muscles. A stick figure salutes next to some lettering. There, written in uppercase letters, is the word "EMPTY."

I'M DIRK.

I'm Dirk. I'm hightailing it outta here at four, latest. Then I'll zoom back home and finish the residency application. The next few days here are bound to be pretty much a slave ship.

That's why it's tonight or never! LOS ANGELES, awesome! Driving through Santa Monica with the top down, my arm around my sweetheart, shorty in the backseat. Are they allowed to come along? Did it say anything about families? Crap. I have to find out for sure if they're allowed to come, too. Otherwise I'm not going. Even though ... "Dirk!" Roger is standing on the bottom of the ladder with the curatorial throng in tow. "This is Dirk. He is building the wall for the Velecita piece." "Hi Dirk! Can we have this wall ready by tomorrow morning? The artist will arrive tonight, and ..." Her telephone rings. "Hello? Yes, Fabio! How are you? Excellent." She turns around and wanders toward the center of the space while she telephones. "Why tomorrow?!?! I thought he's not coming until the day after tomorrow." With raised eyebrows, Roger looks into my flabbergasted face and says dryly, with that you'll-manage-won't-you? expression in his voice,

"Well, so now he's coming tomorrow." "I don't have any time! Today I have to pick up shorty from kindergarten and I ..." Roger has already turned away toward the curatorial throng. "Roger, we need to make sure that the projectors are installed for the artists from Cuba. Can you ..." Then there is a humongous crash and a quake that makes my ladder wiggle.

I AM AN EMAIL

I am an email. I was created on Tuesday the 5th of May at 1:53 p.m. on a newly purchased MacBook, but I am still sitting, unspent, in the same computer's draft folder. It is Wednesday the 6th of May 2009, at 10:23 p.m. Nuria Gordon-Ray wrote me last night in a fit of enraged disappointment—tears were involved—but she was too clever to go right ahead and click the send button. She sat at her desk in the art exhibition hall office with a glass of Averna in her hand and kicked herself away from the desk with a snuffled sigh, so she could yell "fuck this stupid fuck!" out loud in the middle of the room, and while standing up, get a "besame en culo!" in for posterity. She came back to the desk, shut her laptop and packed her things. "Hello, can I have a taxi to the Kunsthalle. Yes. I don't care if your computer is down. Send the damn taxi now. I'm tired." Emails like me are, by the way, written by the thousands every day. The threshold you have to cross in order to stick a letter into an envelope to moisten the adhesive strip with your tongue, possibly cutting yourself on the sharp edge of the paper while you're at it, to close the envelope finally, buy a postage stamp, and to run perhaps in the pouring rain to the mailbox, is unthinkably higher than the mere click you have to make on the little grey send button on the upper right-hand edge of the email. Suppose the sender accidentally activates the button or afterwards regrets having done so: he will feel a flash go through his body like a phantom pain. How many flame wars have been started with emails like me? How many friendships terminated, working relationships finished off, projects failed? You could fill up a space in the bookshelf a meter wide. Experienced e-communicators therefore have a highly respectful relation to the send button.

This morning, Nuria couldn't be

bothered to deal with me any further. She didn't have the time. After doing a quick email check without sitting down, she ran off to inspect the space with the exhibition hall's house technician. Some artworks weren't delivered until today, after endless email ping-ponging and telephone calls with the shipping company, customs, and the insurance company. The office is almost empty. Nuria's assistant and the intern have joined the inspection. Esther, the public relations lady, is at a meeting in the art exhibition hall café. Only Mrs. Marquardt, who does the finances, is sitting at her desk, typing numbers into an electric calculator.

I AM NURIA

I am Nuria. I have been doing this job now for almost twenty years and—oh my god—I have fought so hard for this exhibition. It was so important for me to make this statement, and the place and the moment are perfect. How was I supposed to know that the Biennale would get in the way and who would let that just slip through their fingers? And now, on top of everything, there's this accident. Oh come on, don't go limp on me. "Can someone get me a coffee? Jennifer?" "Yeah, sure. Can do. Latté?" "Yes, and listen Jenny-honey, why don't you bring me an aspirin, too." I follow the seesawing ponytail. Staring at it, I fall suddenly into a kind of trance. It feels as if I cannot move my body any further, except in one direction. I hear my monotone voice saying: "I am going to have a smoke," and my legs begin walking toward the exit. First hesitantly, then more decisively, they carry me into a tunnel where the sounds of the Hall at first become muffled, then fall completely silent. The light starts to get dim and flickers like the sun breaking through the leaves in a forest. A twittering zing accompanies the sound of my movement. I can sense every detail of the friction between clothes and body, every eddying little wind that my arm produces as it swings back and forth. I breathe in and out, and I follow the stream of air that swishes past the inner wall of my nostril on its way outside. Then I am in a park. It is night, and the tepid air lies on the skin softly. I lie in the grass and look up into the sky, which appears in different cutout shapes between the treetops. It is like I am lying on a

dance floor and seeing the ones who are dancing around me from below. Pleasant. I stretch my arms toward the sky and dance too. "Brauchen Sie Hilfe?" A face suddenly appears in my field of vision. "Did you get mugged? Do you need help?" I sit up. "Oh no no, thank you, I'm OK. Thank you."

I AM THE OPENING

I am the opening. I will not explain at this point in time what an opening is. There's been quite a lot of brouhaha around here for my sake, which I couldn't really care less about but at the moment it's not so clear whether I am going to take place or not. There has been an accident. A sculpture fell over, actually down. Down all the way to the basement. In any event, there's a huge hole in the middle of the Hall now. The curator and the architect are both standing around the hole, making phone calls. The technical director scratches his head and corrects the safety barrier's position by a few centimeters. The Danish-looking young man is taking pictures of the hole. "What statics? I don't understand what you're saying. We need this problem solved. Now!" The curator is speaking louder now while she walks along the hole with one hand on the safety barrier.

I AM DIRK

I am Dirk. I'm sitting with Jennifer on the steps next to the loading ramp at the Art Exhibition Hall. Her arms are wrapped around her legs and she's teetering to and fro. "Why is she taking her bad mood out on me? I'm sick and tired of being treated this way! Jenny this, Jenny that ... I'm not just something to mop the floor with." She wipes away her tears and blows her nose with a tissue.

"Something to mop the floor with?" I take her ponytail and try to flutter it in her face, grinning. She looks quite sweet with her puffy eyes and tear-streaked face. But she won't be cheered up. She won't have it. "Excuse my saying so, but seriously, have you ever told her that she shouldn't take her bad moods out on you?"

She flicks her cigarette away and stares straight ahead. "What?"

She sighs and keeps staring. "I forgot to fax back the contract with the insurance company."

She looks at me with this half

spiteful, half crying-for-help face and then tells me with a niggling voice for what seems like an eternity the whole story about strict Nuria who is only concerned about herself and about the pressure she feels to do everything right and why now everything is her fault and how the Exhibition Hall is surely going to go broke because of the hole. I drift away in thought. I think about my application and where I'm supposed to get the letter of recommendation. It's going to be a pretty tight squeeze, once again. Will I make it out of here today? Either they will postpone everything anyway, which would on the one hand be good because I would definitely win a lot of time, on the other hand it would be bad because I've been counting on the money.

"Jenny, I have to go back inside. But that's total bullshit that you're responsible. You're an intern. Hello?! You don't get paid. Hello?! For real. No person here can make you responsible. If the insurance fax had been soooo important, then one of the employees should have done it. End of story. They can't do that to you. If it turns out that the Exhibition Hall in fact isn't insured now and that they have a problem because of a hole and a trashed work by Mr. Superimportant-artistguy, then it's nice of you to cry, too, but it's really not your problem. They should pay you first."

I stand up and go back into the Hall, which suddenly seems completely deserted. Apparently, everyone has left. I hear my footsteps on the floor pavement as I walk slowly to the middle of the space. The hole lies dark and silent, like a small lake. The sculpture protrudes out from the lake like a sunken ship. Actually, I'm extremely fond of the whole thing; I can't understand why they're all so upset. I sit down at the brink and look into the dark spot.

PREFACE:

I'M SEDA

Natascha Sadr Haghghian's make-believe assistant. She uses me to write awkward emails, and recently I've given lectures in her place. Actually, I exist solely because Natascha is always running behind schedule, because she has too much work to do—because other people in this situation usually have assistants onto whom they can dump all the stress. Hence, I am an unpaid joke of the art system, a joke which Natascha assumes makes fun equally of the system and of herself ... Ha ha haaa.

So I'm fictional—some people accuse Robbie Williams of this as well. But to be honest, I'm tired of this discussion. Everything in this system is so constructed through and through, from beginning to end, so staged to the extent that I have no idea where the actual reality is played out and who emerges within it. In any case, one cannot be sure of anything, above all whether one is getting abused or not, no matter if one is fictive or real. These days, almost nobody has contracts for anything. If one does, then the conditions are typically disgraceful, antique—relics from another dimension that somebody has neglected to get rid of. At any rate, in art, there are only spoken agreements and personal trust (which is supposed to suffice even for make-believe assistants).

I've been friends with Robbie for years, and we had our ups and downs. The insecurities he has been showing since his breakdown are quite new and surprising. He became more valid in a way. "Reality turns into fiction, and vice versa," he had said at one point.

It must have been five years ago when he explained to me that it was more interesting to construct hyperreal states of being—states that are too complex to be seamlessly built into the Known—than to engage in reality. In many instances, our conversations have revolved around these multi-layered states of being through which we move so often, so matter-of-factly. For me, it means constantly switching roles from good friend to invisible assistant and representative of myself or others, equipping myself with different features and new strengths every time. For Robbie, the hyperreal states of being he got so excited about concerned his work only.

Once, while we were slurping udon soup at our favorite Korean restaurant, I said, "Alone this daily sport, splitting my work between things I do to earn a living and things I 'really' do, borders on growing a new, super-speedy body part." He drew abstract figures in the air with his chopsticks and laughed at my patchwork reality. I explained that switching from work context to work context, from one corresponding identity to another, demands a high measure of discipline, timing, energy and capacity for abstraction. I grabbed his chopsticks and said, "You used to work for other people, from check to check, in order to finance your own projects. You were routinely angered by this condition and spoke about a future when you would only have to deal with your own shit." He flipped his credit card on the check and said, "When you do your own shit you have to deal with all sorts of shit."

My impression is that Robbie's work did, indeed, feed on these differing levels of reality and did border on

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growing a new body part, one he couldn't conceivably have envisioned without his own unique experience of fictional realities. Since his crisis, he seems to need some new parts for his very own life—not for the work—and for the first time ever, I feel ahead of him.

I never dug how any kind of homogenous artwork could possibly get produced amidst such complex living and working conditions. Homogeneity cannot be manufactured within a transient and inauthentic scheme that's been thrown together with leftover bits and pieces from different times and places. Admittedly, though, these predetermined breaking points—provisionally fixed with emergency tape—do grow together; the whole remains fragile and unstable.

For a while now, Robbie has had his own assistants so he could concentrate all his energy on his work. Now it's time for him to get his own shit together. Wish him all the best and much success with his SOLO SHOW.

Seda Naiumad
San Francisco, October 2013



SOLO SHOW*

November 17, 2013—January 18, 2014
Opening: Sunday, November 17, 4—8 pm
Exhibition hours: Tuesday—Saturday, 12—6 pm

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*SOLO SHOW
Robbie Williams

*SOLO SHOW

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SOLO SHOW is a research-based project on art production initiated by Natascha Sadr Haghighian together with Uwe Schwarzer.

OPENING: SUNDAY NOVEMBER 17, 4—8 pm
4—7 pm: Opening, unpacking, and installing of the work with registrar ZACH BRUDER

6 pm: CHUS MARTINEZ in conversation with Natascha Sadr Haghighian and Brian Kuan Wood

TUESDAY NOVEMBER 19, 7:30 pm
STEPHEN SQUIBB: Duchamp's Strategy of Refusal—On the Artistic Mode of Production

NORMAN CHERNICK-ZEITLIN: Lessons Learned at the Employee Art Show

LINDSAY CAPLAN: Status Update: Networking, Value, and Desire
A statement by Free Cooper Union

SUNDAY NOVEMBER 24, 6-8:30 pm
FREE COOPER UNION presents
The Politics of Destruction:
a performative reading of the 41-page transcript of a Cooper Union board of trustees meeting in September 2012, when the board discussed closing the school.

A two-part newspaper entitled INN PPEER- RPPEETTUUAALL PPRROODDUUCCTTIIIONN accompanies the exhibition SOLO SHOW, with part one distributed at the opening and part two available in the exhibition during December.

More details at www.e-flux.com/program

SOLO SHOW, 2013 Image Captions

P. 4—5
Details of SOLO SHOW, Robbie Williams
Mixed medium
Dimensions vary
Photography: by Rainer Jordan

P.8
Production shot of SOLO SHOW
Photography: Arash Mohtadi

P.11
I CAN'T WORK LIKE THIS, 2007
(Details), Natascha Sadr Haghighian
Wall installation, nails, hammer
170 x 240 x 90 cm

P.12—13
SOLO SHOW, Robbie Williams
395 pieces of clothing
60 x 230 x 80 cm
Photography: Rainer Jordan

Production shot of SOLO SHOW
Photocredit: mixedmedia Berlin

P.16—17
SOLO SHOW, Robbie Williams
Acrylic on wood and MDF, neons, cables, transformers
300 x 330 x 130 cm
Photography: Rainer Jordan

Production shot of SOLO SHOW
Photocredit: mixedmedia Berlin

P.18—19
SOLO SHOW, Robbie Williams
18 TVs, cables, DVD and DVD player, junction box
160 x 290 x 50 cm
Photography: Rainer Jordan

Production shot of SOLO SHOW
Photocredit: mixedmedia Berlin

P.22—23
SOLO SHOW, Robbie Williams
Zinked steel, lead, light bulbs, cables
155 x 360 x 170 cm
Photography: Rainer Jordan

Production shot of SOLO SHOW
Photocredit: mixedmedia Berlin

P. 25
OPENING ESSAY
By Natascha Sadr Haghighian

P. 28—29
SOLO SHOW, Robbie Williams
Wood, cable, wigs, zinked steel
170 x 240 x 90 cm
Photography: Rainer Jordan

Production shot of SOLO SHOW
Photocredit: mixedmedia Berlin

SOLO SHOW, 2013 PT.1

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Notes from GLIMMER OF THE MULTITUDE by BRIAN KUAN WOOD P.9—10

- 1 For the production of the film *The Black Swan*, directed by Darren Aronofsky, about a schizophrenic ballerina of all things.
- 2 As Klaus "Wowi" Wowereit, Berlin's Social Democratic mayor, sloganed his city.
- 3 Maybe some of your personal relationships crumbled.
- 4 See <http://www.wired.com/wiredscience/2012/06/light-tractor-beams/>.
- 5 Guy Debord, "Separation Perfected": no. 5 in *The Society of the Spectacle*, trans Fredy Perlman and Jon Supak (Detroit: Black & Red, 1977).
- 6 "Speculation." *New Oxford American Dictionary* on my laptop.
- 7 See Hito Steyerl's "In Free Fall: A Thought Experiment on Vertical Perspective," at <http://www.e-flux.com/journal/in-free-fall-a-thought-experiment-on-vertical-perspective/>.
- 8 David Graeber, *Debt: The First 5,000 Years* (Brooklyn: Melville House, 2011), 341.
- 9 Consider Toscano's forthcoming book *Cartographies of the Absolute* and his text "The Equator of Alienation" for the Taipei Biennial 2012 catalogue.
- 10 See Philip Mirowski, *More Heat Than Light: Economics as Social Physics, Physics as Nature's Economics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989).
- 11 See http://www.zus.cc/work/urban_politics/162_Schieblock.php.
- 12 See http://www.ovg.nl/en/blog/de_rotterdam_verticale_stad_van_rem_koolhaas_op_hoogste_punt.
- 13 See Tom Holert's excellent video work *Labours of Shine*, 2012.
- 14 Thanks to Leon Kahane for pointing out how this is happening in Berlin.
- 15 Reza Negarestani, *Cyclonopedia* (Victoria: re.press, 2008), 182.
- 16 Also see Debord, *SoS*, 160: "The spectator's consciousness, immobilized in the falsified center of the movement of its world, no longer experiences its life as a passage toward self-realization and toward death. One who has renounced using his life can no longer admit his death. Life insurance advertisements suggest merely that he is guilty of dying without ensuring the regularity of the system after this economic loss; and the advertisement of the American way of death insists on his capacity to maintain in this encounter the greatest possible number of appearances of life. On all other fronts of the advertising onslaught, it is strictly forbidden to grow old. Even a "youth-capital," contrived for each and all and put to the most mediocre uses, could never acquire the durable and cumulative reality of financial capital. This social absence of death is identical to the social absence of life."

Laura Barlow/ Liam Gillick/ Lumsday
S Magdalena Magiera/Mariana Silva/
Markus Schmacht/Michael Müller/
Mynou Dietrichmeier/Neville Reichman/
Natascha Sadr Haghighian/
Norman Chernick-Zeitlin/Otto/Pascale Willi/
Pierre Maite/Pollux/Rachel Ichniowski/
Rainer Jordan/Ray Anastas/Robert Schlicht/Roger/
Sandy Kaltenborn/Sebastian Summa/
Seda Naiumad/Stefan Kessels/Stefan Pente/
Steffen Puschke/Stephan Hempel/
Stephen Conover/Stephen Squibb/Tammy Lin/
Thomas Huesmann/ Thomas Laprade/
Thomas Wendler/Tirdad Zolghadr/
Uliana Zanetti/Ute Waldhausen/Uwe Schwarzer/
Viola Eickmeier/William Wheeler/ Zach Bruder

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Pt. 1