

wiggle room

Robbie Williams

Natascha Sadr Haghghian,
Seda Naiumad,
Uwe Schwarzer,
Ashkan Sepahvand,
and Robbie Williams

wiggle room #3

Robbie Williams

by Natascha Sadr Haghghian, Seda
Naiumad, Uwe Schwarzer, Ashkan
Sepahvand, and Robbie Williams



Wiggle Room #3

Reliable Copy #16
First Edition - 1000

Series Editors: Nihaal Faizal and
Sarasija Subramanian
Copy Editor: Adreeta Chakraborty
Design: Nihaal Faizal

Cover Image: Video screenshot from the film
'My Fair Lady', 1964. Courtesy of Natascha
Sadr Haghghian.

Copyright © Natascha Sadr Haghghian,
Seda Naiumad, Uwe Schwarzer, Ashkan
Sepahvand, Robbie Williams, and Reliable
Copy, 2025

All rights reserved. No part of this
publication may be reproduced, stored in
retrieval systems, or transmitted in any form,
by any means, without the prior permissions
of the copyright owners.

Printed by Pragati Offset, Hyderabad

ISBN: 978-81-970506-4-0

Natascha Sadr Haghighian, Seda Naiumad, Uwe Schwarzer, Ashkan Sepahvand, Robbie Williams, and Reliable Copy would like to thank Haytham El Wardany and Karthik Raj.

Contents

11	Editors' Note An Operative Fog
	2008
21	Preface
24	Robbie Williams in conversation with Natascha Sadr Haghigian
40	Memo
45	Uwe Schwarzer in conversation with Natascha Sadr Haghigian
72 & 73	SOLO SHOW
75	Production Notes
	2009
83	The SOLO SHOW Test
	2013
99	Press Release
102	Introduction
106	Opening

114 & 115 SOLO SHOW

116 IINN PPEERRPPEETTUUAALL
PPRROODDUUCCTTIIOONN

2014

145 Note

146 Introduction

150 & 151 SOLO SHOW

2025

155 To Dust

Editors' Note

An Operative Fog

A blind spot is an area of reduced or absent vision or visibility. A blind spot may be bodily—the result of an inherent limitation or sustained injury—or structural—such as when a driver is unable to see a part of the road due to an obstruction. An artist's life, much like its public image, abounds with several blind spots, some built-in over decades, if not centuries, and others resulting from more recent obstructions. A simple example: rarely does an artist hear what a gallerist says of their work at an art fair booth to a prospective collector; nor is it always evident to an artist how or under what conditions a museum hires the labour that goes into mounting their work. Similarly, an artist's personality (and its public projection), whether meticulously guarded like Stanley Brown or spectacularised like Andy Warhol, can also serve to perpetuate blind spots—about ideology, character, process, working methods, intents, and output—whether intended or otherwise. How an artist makes work too, can be a blind spot.

And how exactly does a blind spot come to be rectified? As viewers of any police procedural or crime drama will have immediately noticed, most of the plot rests on identification—on seeing clues, on looking for evidence. Every event leaves a trace, and so one looks for fragments of what transpired, in an attempt to piece together a singular picture. Often these scenes present this seeing as mediated, as built-up—the result of advanced training and analysis. They depict the deployment of predetermined forms (the chalk outline, the forensic photograph—to name

just a couple that use materials often employed by artists), and as necessary, they employ professional expertise (forensic experts, toxicologists—similar to how artists use specialised fabricators for challenging or large-scale projects). It was in David Robbins’ book *‘Accrochage’* that a detective searching for a missing artist starts to suspect that he is one and the same. He realises that his investigative methods are not so different from the artist, and so begins to doubt his own identity. He starts to realise that an identity, like a crime scene, is a site for discovery—for tracing the contours of an event, of a system, of geopolitical forces beyond the individual.

The daughter of an Iranian-doctor and a German-nurse (or a German-doctor and an Iranian-nurse, who can be sure?), Natascha Sadr Haghhighian’s work has often engaged with the representations of identity. Her first published CV from 1999 described not her professional achievements, but her bodily injuries. If the CV is simply a means of propping up an identity, often to evaluate present and future value,¹ then a CV of injuries—one of disfigurements, lapses, scars, and age—creates what the artist has often referred to as an “operative fog”: an obfuscation that clouds the scene, only to perhaps paradoxically allow one to see clearer.

The body remains central to Natascha’s work today, several decades on, but this is a body multiplied by stand-ins and doubles. In film production, a stand-in is a person who substitutes for the actor before filming, usually for technical purposes such as lighting and camera set up. A stand-in never appears on camera, doing what an actor is too busy to do. Since the year 2006, Seda Naiumad has appeared as Natascha’s personal and studio assistant—a way of

populating the workforce, and occasionally, like any good assistant, as a stand-in for the artist herself, often writing emails or giving interviews on her behalf.

A double, on the other hand, comes to perform the actual role, and appears on camera. Still occupying the shadows of the actor, the double is usually seen from behind or from a distance—as in a stunt or in the case of a compromised position. The double however makes a far more lasting appearance, is recorded. Natascha Süder Happelmann, who represented Germany at the Venice Biennale of 2019, with a rock on her head at all times, could be seen as the artist's double.

And Robbie Williams? An artist described in different press releases as alternatively Italian-German, Turkish-American, and Egyptian-Taiwanese, Robbie plays more than a supporting role. Neither an assistant nor a stand-in, neither a double nor a substitute, Robbie commands a distinct position. In practice, Robbie Williams is a figure, both conceptual and authorial, and also an excuse—an excuse at engaging a system, a structure, and a production process. While appearing singular, he is in fact multiple. Not necessarily an extension of Natascha, Robbie emerged as a necessary part of her collaborations with mixedmedia berlin (an art production company founded by Uwe Schwarzer) to explore the mechanisms of an international contemporary artist and the propped up myth of the solo artist.

Crafting a fiction is not necessarily a means to an end (as in the case of many artists who have deployed fictional personas as monikers for their own work), but often more like creating a new player in a video game—a way to play

the game differently, to engage from another side, with new limitations and new possibilities. Each role comes with a knowledge that is contingent and limited, and a major challenge before us today, as artists and otherwise, is to create potentiality—to carve out a space where we can leave behind impoverished scripts (where we're left to fill a, supposedly neutral, template)—and access abundance.

As Walter Benjamin once recognised: genuine revolutionary art transforms the cultural institutions themselves, rather than pumping a new kind of content down the old channels. A genuine revolutionary art then is best observed when institutions crumble, as they did when Natascha was coming of age as an artist, with the fall of the Berlin Wall, when institutions including the state and the police, but also the museum, were no longer infallible, were no longer a given. Museums often label an artist's work 'institutional critique' but the truly critical work is not a critique of the institution, but a way of seeing the world without it. It is a way not of giving rope to sinking institutions, but instead of standing back and letting them fall. And why not? We never believed in them anyway. And make no mistake, a solo artist too, is simply one such institution.

In her work, across her multiple characters, Natascha has often enacted the double agent,² in more ways than through Seda or Robbie or Happelmann. In early works, such as when she was awarded the ars viva Prize in 2000, she invited the jurors (composed of several representatives of leading German corporations and banks) who wished to see her work, not to her studio but instead to a bus stop in Berlin's Mitte where the event was secretly recorded and documented. Another time when the curators from

Manifesta 4 in 2002 wished to include the artist's work in their exhibition, she invited them to the Frankfurt Zoo, where the artist, dressed in a costume with zebra stripes, awaited with a camera crew to make them the subject of a video as much about animal enclosures as curatorial practice. Two constant questions Natascha puts forth in her practice are: What is a contact zone with power and how can it be undermined? Or to put it another way, what are the blind spots and how can they be engaged?

And perhaps this undermining, this engaging, is what we term, for our intents and purposes, as wiggle room. It is an attitude towards work, an agility of response, and most importantly, it is a demonstration (with all the connotations of that term). Not a blind spot, but a smoke that clears the view—an operative fog—just like the one that Natascha engages with the cast of characters that form her possest group.³ Such a demonstration is never just a means to an end, but as with our premise of wiggle room—neither an escape hatch nor a way out, but a means through which to enrich our participation in the field; a guide to playing this game by our own rules, as necessary.⁴

¹ See also the artist's CV exchange project 'bioswop'.

² Inspired by figures like the alchemist John Dee, who worked as a spy for the queen, signing off as 007 while also engaging in occult sciences, and whom Natascha has thought about and included in various works over several decades.

³ The possest group takes its name from 'posse est', the Latin for 'can be', or potentiality as a mode of being.

⁴ This ending is an echo of the ending from the editors' note of wiggle room #1.

2008



Preface

I AM 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 favourite 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 cheque to cheque, 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 cheque 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 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
Sardinia, May 2008

Robbie Williams in conversation with Natascha Sadr Haghghian

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 organising 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 sceptical 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?

Robbie: 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.

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

Robbie: 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. Anyways this is why I added Bert to my life. At least with her there's some possibility for a development.

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

Robbie: 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 unforeseen. 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.

Natascha: 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.

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

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

Robbie: 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 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 aeroplanes create a similarly shaky state of being. There's something telling you that this place, the aeroplane, 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.

Natascha: You aim to confront exhibition-goers with this kind of experience?

Robbie: Visitors to the exhibit are autonomous, and their behaviour 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(s) 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.

Natascha: You hand it over to your studio assistants?

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

Natascha: 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, stand for a longing for life, liveliness. But then it seems that throughout the development of your work it's only about the absence of organic process, and about control.

Robbie: 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.

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

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

Natascha: So, training would be the methodisation of processes, which stem from a certain knowledge of the living, a methodisation 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!

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

Natascha: 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 ...

Robbie: ... no I wouldn't say life-denying, more "pressing"

somehow, “conditioning” ...

Natascha: ... 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 the exhibit-goers? Why do you want to confront people with the lack of life instead of developing an alternative and more whole state of being?

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

Natascha: Because there’s a thing that I don’t understand and I want to learn something about it.

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

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

Robbie: 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 the art market money, you live off the government. Super!

Natascha: Why are you suddenly getting so aggressive?

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

Natascha: 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.

Robbie: You are 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, the people.

Natascha: You could have participated.

Robbie: 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.)

Robbie: 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.)

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

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

Natascha: 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.

Robbie: 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 organisational work would just cost me time and nerves.

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

Robbie: 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."

Natascha: 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.

Robbie: 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.

Natascha: Does your assistant have a contract?

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

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

Robbie: 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.

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

Robbie: 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 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.

Natascha: In my own practice, I’ve often had the experience that a work can change significantly during the experimentation phase or the construction phase.

Robbie: 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.

Natascha: 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, failure 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 professionalisation 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.

Robbie: 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.

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

Robbie: 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 recognise what works and what doesn't.

Natascha: 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.

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

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

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

Natascha: 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?

Robbie: 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 fulfil the contract. My assistant can't be said to share the authorship of my works just because he answers my emails.

Natascha: 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 labour 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.

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

Natascha: Now you sound like my gallerist.

Robbie: 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 the 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.

Natascha: 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 has to be taller" and that person says, "Alright boss!" ...

Robbie: Exactly!

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

Robbie: Then he gets off work later.

Natascha: That would make me uncomfortable.

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

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

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

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

Robbie: 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.

Natascha: 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.

Robbie: 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.

Natascha: 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 remains 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.

Robbie: 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.

Natascha: 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.

Robbie: 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?

Natascha: When is your flight?

Robbie: Um, not until seven.

Natascha: Are you taking Bert with you?

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

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 assembling 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 characterise life for migrant workers 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 it is 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. Specialised 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-organised, and horizontal working relations. In my environment, decisions were discussed and pitched collectively. Sites and events were self-organised, 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 professionalise, 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 destabilised 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 labour 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 over-identification 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 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 specialised 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 reliable 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 clamour 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 to, among other things, analyse 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 sceptical 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 Haghighian
Berlin, May 2008

Uwe Schwarzer in conversation with Natascha Sadr Haghghian

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

Uwe: In art school I studied fine 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 feelers 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 travelled 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?

Natascha: No, not personally.

Uwe: 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 organisation and got to know a lot concerning art production, and so on.

Natascha: All of this was still during your studies?

Uwe: 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's 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.

Natascha: 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?

Uwe: 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 realised 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."

Natascha: (laughs)

Uwe: 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.

Natascha: 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?

Uwe: 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.

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

Uwe: 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.

Natascha: 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?

Uwe: 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.

Natascha: 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?

Uwe: 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 aeroplane 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 fulfilment 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.

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

Uwe: 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.

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

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

Natascha: And now you can concentrate on really producing.

Uwe: Exactly.

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

Uwe: I find it somehow more direct.

Natascha: 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?

Uwe: 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 realise it? Is it doable in the way it's described, or does something have to be changed to enable its realisation? 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.

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

Uwe: 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.

Natascha: Who is we?

Uwe: 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 enquiries, 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.

Natascha:—who have a specialised knowledge in a specific field.

Uwe: 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 organise the transport and sometimes, here and there, the installation.

Natascha: 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?

Uwe: 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.

Natascha: 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?

Uwe: 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 realisation. 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 artist 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 artists we work for don't have any handy skills. They just plan their projects. Their skills consist in conceptualising 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 as 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.

Natascha: Why do you think that so many artists give the realisation 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?

Uwe: 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 organise 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.

Natascha: 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 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.

Uwe: Yes, this can happen very easily.

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

Uwe: 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 metalsmith, 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 metalsmith.

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

Uwe: 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.

Natascha: 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.

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

Natascha: 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.

Uwe: 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.

Natascha: 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 readymade. One could also say that conceptual art paved the way for certain aspects regarding the division of labour, as it is practised by artists today. Do you see a development here? How could one describe this?

Uwe: 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 realising 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 organising 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 millimetres, but steel doesn't come in a thickness of nineteen millimetres. So you have to take the 20 millimetre 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 organises the metal work. This is how we develop the stainless steel copy that is right for Rirkrit. Or take Sylvie Fleury: 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.

Natascha: 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”—to conceptual contribution, to the thought process involved in realising 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.

Uwe: 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 realisation 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.

Natascha: 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 himself/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 more easily to modes of production which are different from traditionally artistic modes, and of how this relation has changed over time.

Uwe: When one looks at an industrially produced door from a distance of two metres, then it looks super. But if you look at it from ten centimetres away, it doesn't look so good anymore. This is what you get from a specialised 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.

Natascha: Hyperreal?

Uwe: Exactly. When we look at a door by 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 metres 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.

Natascha: (laughs)

Uwe: We can fulfil 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 specialises 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 fulfil the demands of the artist.

Natascha: 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.

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

Natascha: Yes.

Uwe: ... 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.

Natascha: 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.

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

Natascha: It seems to me that the preparation of the objects does 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.

Uwe: 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 realise 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).

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

Uwe: 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.

Natascha: 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 realises it. Starting with the concept, he or she continues with the realisation process, and it all culminates in the presentation—this all bears the handwriting of the artist; and everything is cast in the same mould. 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 conceptualisation 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.

Uwe: 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.

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

Uwe: 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 recognised. 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.

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

Uwe: Exactly, yes.

Natascha: 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?

Uwe: 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.

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

Uwe: 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.

Natascha: It would play a role in the market. It is through this clear division of labour 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.

Uwe: 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 of how we deal with the authorship question in our project. You said that you wanted to include

me as an author.

Natascha: 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.

Uwe: 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.

Natascha: (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?

Uwe: No, of course we're also very creative, but it's not the artistic, inventive creativity of conceptualising 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.

Natascha: 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.

Uwe: That's right.

Natascha: You're actually not the craftsman.

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

Natascha: Then how could one describe it?

Uwe: 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 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.

Natascha: 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 ...?

Uwe: With the artist?

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

Uwe: 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.

SOLO SHOW

ROBBIE WILLIAMS

SOLO SHOW

ACHIM KAYSER
ALBERTO STORARI
ALEXANDER NIKLASCH
ANDREA SCHMID
ANDREA VILIANI
ANNA ROSSI
ANNE-PASCALE FROHN
ARASH MOHTADI
BERTRAM STURM
CAJUS PIETSCHMANN
DETLEF BRALL
ELISA MARIA CERRA
ERIK WIEGAND
EVA FUCHS
FABIO DI CAMILLO
FRANK KIEFEL
FRANZ KÖNIG
GERARD MCGETTRICK
GIANFRANCO MARANIELLO
GIULIA PEZZOLI
HENGST
INES SCHABER
JENNIFER CHERT
JENS QUEREN
JEREMY CARDEN
JO HANY
JÖRG WAMBSGANSS
JULIANE BAUER
KATHLEEN KNITTER
KIRSA GEISER
LA VINA

MARKUS SCHMACHT
MICHAEL MÜLLER
MYNOU DIETRICHMEIER
NEVILLE REICHMAN
NATASCHA SADR HAGHIGHIAN
NICOLE WILL
OTTO
PIERRE MAITE
POLLUX
RAINER JORDAN
ROBERT SCHLICHT
ROGER
SANDY KALTENBORN
SEBASTIAN SUMMA
SEDA NAIUMAD
STEFAN KESSELS
STEFAN PENTE
STEFFEN PUSCHKE
STEPHAN HEMPEL
THOMAS HUESMANN
THOMAS WENDLER
TIRDAD ZOLGHADR
ULIANA ZANETTI
UTE WALDHAUSEN
UWE SCHWARZER
VIOLA EICKMEIER
WILLIAM WHEELER

Production Notes

“Being an artist’s assistant is really hard work, you know,” Seda Naiumad tells me over a cup of fair-trade FrauenPower tea. “Not everyone can do it—I mean, travelling around the world, setting up shows, coordinating shipping, schmoozing, researching, occasionally acting as stand-in. It’s tough.”

Seda is Natascha Sadr Haghghian’s assistant. A striking, raven-haired firecracker with a jagged edge, her Lotte-Lenya-voice is thick with nicotine. I had written to Natascha to talk with her about her ongoing project, SOLO SHOW, but I was directed by the artist to meet with her assistant; attached to her email correspondence was a still from the 1964 film version of the musical *My Fair Lady*, depicting a crowd of Edwardian-era ladies and gentlemen at the Ascot Racecourse on Opening Day. With this in hand, I met Seda at her Altbau apartment in Berlin’s historic district of Mitte on a spring afternoon.

Seda began our encounter by referring back to 2005, when she and Natascha attended the opening of the Sharjah Biennial. “I looked great,” Seda beamed. “I was wearing my asymmetrical Comme des Garçons dress and even brought a pair of binoculars to get a closer look at the Sheikha’s diamonds!” Once in the crowd, Natascha and Seda started chatting with Uwe Schwarzer, founder of a Berlin-based production house called mixedmedia. Packed as they were into a brightly lit, overly air-conditioned gallery, Uwe was able to point out a work that mixedmedia had produced, leading to the inevitable question: How many works in the exhibition, and in other exhibitions, had been produced with the help of a production company?

Hearing this story, I couldn't help but think of the image Natascha had sent me from the racecourse scene, particularly when I imagined Seda wielding her binoculars in the midst of the crowd. In the 1964 film adaptation of George Bernard Shaw's play, the aristocrats, dressed in black, white, and grey, parade about with parasols atwirl, awaiting the start of the horserace. They raise their field binoculars toward the track and watch as the horses gallop by. "'Twas a thrilling, absolutely chilling running of the Ascot op'ning race!"

Performing a Wikipedia search of the Ascot Racecourse, I came across the following statement: "Over 300,000 people make the annual visit to Berkshire during Royal Ascot Week, making this Europe's best-attended race meeting. Many of the visitors know nothing about racing, and are there purely for the social side and to drink large quantities of champagne." Sound familiar? Welcome to the art world.

"Won't give away any names," Seda said coyly, "but next time you're in the Tate Modern's Turbine Hall and there is a massive chunk of super-polished steel in front of you, or when you wonder how the familiar roster of artists manage to make a new work for their fifteen-or-more exhibitions annually, a production company is probably somewhere backstage." Indeed, such pieces could be anywhere—in the heterotopia of exhibitions, biennials, and art fairs, the same audience encounters the same art, displaced from both the local context and any sense of origin.

Seda poured herself another cup of tea and continued. "I started thinking that it would make my job much easier if Natascha just worked with mixedmedia." The still from *My Fair Lady* began to make sense. For the past two years,

Natascha has been preparing for a solo exhibition at the Museo d'Arte Moderna in Bologna. The invisibility of any effort would be paramount in realising a strong solo show. Everything would have to be installed with perfect precision and on time, freeing the artist to bask in the glow of the opening. This is where SOLO SHOW enters the picture.

Most of Natascha's past works could simply be packed up and thrown into a bag. Others have taken place in a single moment, like her invitation to the curatorial team of Manifesta 2002 to visit the zoo in Frankfurt, Germany, and look at the new tiger display that claimed to have recreated the tigers' natural habitat (and yet no tigers could be seen behind the lush forest!). Some have taken place virtually—such as the project bioswop.net, a CV-swapping service for artists that has managed to raise questions as to the relationship between an artist's biography and her market value. Now, for the Bologna show, would she seek the help of a production company, as Seda suggested, and perhaps produce bigger, more market-oriented work?

The art production industry caters to artists who think big, work big, or simply need something truly big. Dating back to 1999, mixedmedia is a relative newcomer to a scene that goes back decades; Gratz Industries in Long Island City, New York, for example, was founded in 1968 and has produced works for Donald Judd, Barnett Newman, and Sol LeWitt, among many others. Today the industry has spread internationally, providing bespoke services that include brainstorming but are most attractive for their professional efficiency and invisible hand.

Seda did indeed manage to sell Natascha on the idea, but the latter had a larger experiment in mind. Natascha

approached mixedmedia in 2006 on behalf of an artist of her own creation, Robbie Williams. Engaging in a series of conversations with Uwe and his team, Natascha, through Williams, assumed the role of the ambitious artist mid-spotlight. Robbie would be able to fulfil the de rigueur expectations of a solo show. His work, produced entirely by mixedmedia and presented as a show of its own in Bologna, would be an inverted mirror-reflection of Natascha's, with its shiny, complicated technical assembly; yet the process behind the manufacture of Williams' show would remain invisible—the thirty-plus names, including Natascha, Uwe, and the entire mixedmedia team would be nowhere to be found. Much like our scene from *My Fair Lady*, the sight of handsome horses comes without the acknowledgment of the sweat and tears that went into the performance in the first place.

Staging situations in which the lines between backstage and onstage blur is a recurring preoccupation of this artist, inspiring a productive tension that, at its best, yields little moments of insight into the subjects of authorship, division of labour, value, and vision. Natascha will also present her own work in Bologna, alongside Robbie's. One can only wonder who will out-show whom.

Ashkan Sepahvand
Tulsa, June 2008

2009



The SOLO SHOW Test

Please evaluate the following statements in the light of your current working conditions and personal situation. Mark the statement that fits with you most with a cross on the “4”. Mark the other statements with “3”, “2”, “1”, according to relevance.

Important: each number can be crossed only once in every group of statements.

Add up the numbers for final results and check the SOLO SHOW Test Result Scheme on page 94:



- ▲ **I often feel overwhelmed by work but in the end I manage with some night shifts.** ① ② ③ ④
- My assistant answers most of my emails and organises my schedule. ① ② ③ ④
- **I am very disorganised. That's why I would not be able to delegate work to others.** ① ② ③ ④
- ◆ I would not be able to keep up my schedule without other people working for me. ① ② ③ ④

- ▲ **Deadlines are my most creative tools.** (1) (2) (3) (4)
- ◆ I am quite ambitious and I like competition. (1) (2) (3) (4)
- **My work is defined by the time frames I am given.** (1) (2) (3) (4)
- I work productively in a certain mood. I try to ignore the organisational stuff and any type of pressure. (1) (2) (3) (4)

- ▲ **An artist doesn't need a gallery to work productively.** (1) (2) (3) (4)
- ◆ The importance of an artist is shaped by who buys his/her work. (1) (2) (3) (4)
- **Today a successful artist operates like a businessperson.** (1) (2) (3) (4)
- Even though I know what I am interested in and why I work independently, I feel intimidated by market dynamics. (1) (2) (3) (4)

- **The quality of an artwork does not depend on the quality of its manufacturing.** (1) (2) (3) (4)
- ▲ The art market is totally irrelevant for the creation of an interesting discourse. (1) (2) (3) (4)
- ◆ **The artwork doesn't have to be made by the artist but it should be done well.** (1) (2) (3) (4)
- An artist should have acquired (artisan) skills. (1) (2) (3) (4)

- **Authorship of an artwork is not relevant.** (1) (2) (3) (4)
- Individuality is an important quality of an artwork. (1) (2) (3) (4)
- ▲ **Collaboration with other individuals is important for my work and I enjoy it.** (1) (2) (3) (4)
- ◆ The name of an artist works like a trademark. (1) (2) (3) (4)

- **An artist should always try to stay an amateur. Professional production is reactionary.** (1) (2) (3) (4)

- ▲ I try to extend my knowledge by confronting myself with things I haven't done before. (1) (2) (3) (4)

- **Specialisation helps me focus, it's the only way to maintain standards of quality.** (1) (2) (3) (4)

- ◆ Intuition and discipline are important for my success. (1) (2) (3) (4)

- **I cannot separate life and work.** (1) (2) (3) (4)
- ◆ I prefer to leave money negotiations to my agent/dealer. (1) (2) (3) (4)
- **I know my skills and the price of my work and I have no problem with negotiations concerning money.** (1) (2) (3) (4)
- ▲ A regular income is incompatible with creativity. (1) (2) (3) (4)

- **I am from a boring middle-class background.** (1) (2) (3) (4)
- I always want to have an income. (1) (2) (3) (4)
- ▲ **I think that art should engage in social change.** (1) (2) (3) (4)
- ◆ Art is a profession like anything else. (1) (2) (3) (4)

The Solo Show Test Result Scheme

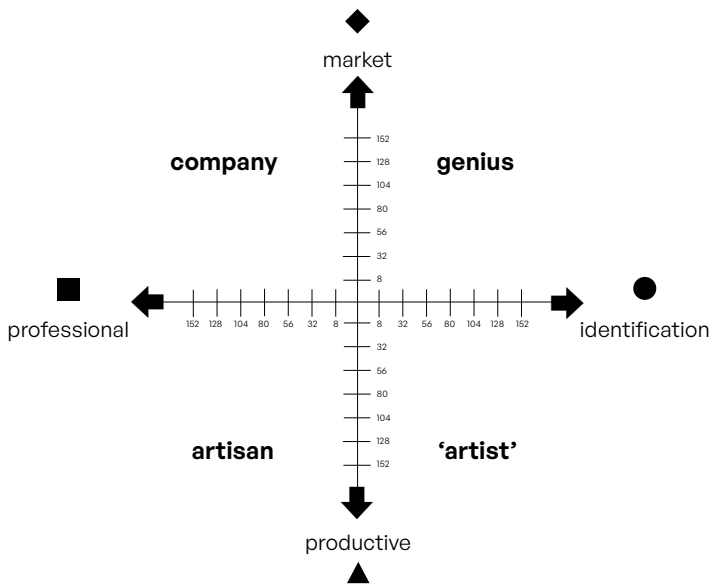
After you have evaluated the statements in the questionnaire you should add up the numbers according to the shapes before each sentence. Add up the numbers with a triangle, square, circle and diamond shape separately.

The four resulting numbers are your coordinates in the following scheme.

Place the numbers and connect your coordinates.

The resulting polygonal shape describes your position within the art system.

Congratulations!



2013



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 colour. 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 collapse of a rotten system? I wouldn't mind. We could sell him as a decomposer, a fungus, or a piece of majestic mould 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

Introduction

This is part II of IINN PPEERRPPEETTUUAALL PPRROODDUUCCTTIIOONN, a two-part newspaper that accompanies the exhibition SOLO SHOW at e-flux. While the first issue contained material more directly related to the exhibition project, this second issue opens the discussion up to a multitude of topics and contributors that nevertheless relate to the principle questions behind SOLO SHOW.

Before introducing the content of this issue, allow me to give an account of what SOLO SHOW is and is not, and how it came about. Some people have complained that it's all quite confusing.

So, SOLO SHOW is a research-based project on art production, initiated by Natascha Sadr Haghghian together with Uwe Schwarzer. Which does not mean that Natascha and Uwe are the authors of the work on display. It's my work. I, Robbie Williams, am the artistic author of the awesome work you see in the show. I fully acknowledge that the work was produced by Uwe's company, mixedmedia berlin, but it was Natascha's idea to wrap her head around how art is being produced these days, what a production company does, and how implications like value production, labour, and work relations, as well as authorship circulating around the figure of the solo artist are negotiated. So I, Robbie Williams, am fictional. There you have it.

This still does not mean that Natascha and Uwe or Natascha and mixedmedia berlin are the authors of the work. Nor does it imply that I am a pseudonym of sorts or a collective signature that everybody should use as an act of subversion.

At best this project creates an operative fog around these claims and ascriptions. But now that I'm here I might want to have a career for myself, which is mostly due to people's desires to see me as a white heterosexual male. I never said I was.

This is what the wall text says about me:

The work of Turkish-American artist Robbie Williams (b. Berlin) manifests itself in a wide range of materials. Williams' hybrid sculptures evoke questions about the conditions of the individual in representational spaces and reflect on what shapes our daily lives. On the occasion of SOLO SHOW, the artist shows one piece from a set of five objects that resemble obstacles for horses arranged in the space as if for a show-jumping contest.

The objects are loosely put together and would collapse just as a fence does when hit by a horse jumping over it. But instead of using the classical wooden structure, Williams has chosen materials that refer to his biography and playfully quote from the history of modern and postmodern art. SOLO SHOW is Williams' first major solo exhibition in the USA.

Coming back to the question of authors, the second space of the SOLO SHOW exhibition does not include my work. It is empty, apart from the sound of a horse running around in circles and jumping from time to time. Natascha suggested

that everybody who helped in the producing of my SOLO SHOW should be listed here and that this list should be updated. But I do like that in order to get from my space to the second half of SOLO SHOW, you have to use the elevator, go to the third floor, enter the e-flux office, engage in a chat with the staff, and grab a newspaper if you want, before heading down the stairs to the empty room with the sound.

This is what the wall text says in that space:

SOLO SHOW is a research-based project on art production initiated by Natascha Sadr Haghghian together with Uwe Schwarzer. Haghghian, in collaboration with Schwarzer, who is the head of the production company mixedmedia berlin, conceived the fictional artist “Robbie Williams” and had mixedmedia produce Williams’ “SOLO SHOW”. This company produces work for internationally renowned artists but usually stays unnamed and invisible to the public. SOLO SHOW, which includes a two-part installation and a publication, raises multiple questions about topics such as authorship, deskilling the division of labour in art, and the myth of the “SOLO artist”.

So now I filled you in on some of the gaps that might have occurred due to personal stuff I was dealing with around the time of the opening. I’m much better now, and actually I might shift my practice to working with spores for a while or go on vacation. I don’t really know where to.

But before I go, I'm actually extremely excited to introduce part two of IINN PPEERRPPEETTUUAALL PPRROODDUUCCTTIIIOONN (did you read my interview in the first issue?). There were several events during the first three weeks of SOLO SHOW, including presentations on the lockout of Union workers at Sotheby's, the initiative Gulf Labor, Free Cooper Union fighting tuition fees and speculation, an analysis of Marcel Duchamp's approach to commodity, and a critical juxtaposition of authorship propositions by Andy Warhol and Joseph Beuys. These presentations led to related contributions in this issue. Additionally there is an account of a long-term work relationship between an artist and a fabricator, and part two of the "Glimmer of the Multitude" essay.

I want to thank everybody who dedicated time to this endeavor, everybody at e-flux, and at my gallery, and all of the people who supported me.

Cheers,
Robbie Williams

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, dammit ..."—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 is 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 a low-cut neckline. The other two are in their mid-twenties—one with a multicoloured-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 finished 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 upper-case 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, baby boy 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 centre 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 baby boy from kindergarten and I ...", Roger has already turned away toward the curatorial throng. "Roger, we need to make sure 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, unsent, 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 metre 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 part. 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 centimetres. 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 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 giggling 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. Superimportantartistguy, 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.

Seda Naiumad, 2013

SOLO SHOW

Robbie Williams

SOLO SHOW

Achim Kayser / Alberto Storari / Alexander Niklasch /
Andrea Fourchy / Andrea Schmidt / Andrea Vilianni / Anna
Rossi / Anne-Pascale Forhn / Anton Vidokle / Bertram Sturm
/ Brian Kuan Wood / Cajus Pietschmann / Chus Martinez /
Daniel Bouthot / David Riley / Detlef Brall / Elisa Maria Cerre
/ Erik Wiegand / Eva Fuchs / Fabio Di Camillo / Frank Kiefel
/ Free Cooper Union / Gerard McGettrick / Ghazaal Vojdani
/ Giulia Pezzoli Hengst / Ines Schaber / Irina Contreras /
Jennifer Chert / Jens Queren / Jeremy Carden / Jesus
Barraza / Jo Hany / Joe Pflieger / Jörg Wambsganss / Josh
Altman / Juliane Bauer / Julieta Aranda / Kathleen Knitter /
Kaye Cain-Nielsen / Kirsa Geiser / La Vina / Laura Barlow /
Lex Kosieradzki / Liam Gillick / Lindsay Caplan / Magdalena
Mageira / Mariana Silva / Mariam Ghani / Mark Schubert
/ Markus Schmacht / Michael Müller / Mike Andrews /
Mynou Dietrichmeier / Neville Reichman / Natascha Sadr
Naghighian / Norman Chernick-Zeitlin / Omar Mismar / 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

IINN PPEERRPPEETTUAALL PPROODDUUCCTTIIOONN

ROBBIE IS

SOLO

robbie is what??

ROBBIE IS

TIRED

AUTHOR

A BUBBLE

AN
OPERATIVE
FOG

VERY
AFRAID

IINN
PPEERRPPEETTUAALL
PPRROODDUUCCTTI IOONN

IN
A
CRISIS

A
CRISIS

ENJOYING
THE
VIEW

2014



Note

Yesterday, we suddenly realised that we are lost in translation. The title on the cover of the SOLO SHOW newspaper in Chinese said ‘End of the World’ instead of SOLO SHOW. Nobody could explain where this phrase came from. We called the printer to stop the printing, but all the newspapers were already printed. We looked at the pdf of the newspaper and we found many more lost-in-translation moments. It became clear that the designer did actually design blindly, as he could not read Chinese. He did not tell us. And the Chinese proofreader assumed that we consciously decided to write gibberish, so he didn’t mention it—even though he wondered. So something alien was born, an expression of incongruity of production. A gap became visible. A gap of relating. Nobody really related, and the result was ‘The End of the World’. I think this is beyond beautiful. It is actually mindblowing.

Natascha Sadr Haghighian
Shanghai, November 2014

Introduction

This is IINN PPEERRPPEETTUUAALL
PPRROODDUUCCTTIIOONN, a newspaper that
accompanies the exhibition SOLO SHOW at the Shanghai
Biennale 2014.

Before introducing the content of this issue, allow me to give
an account of what SOLO SHOW is and is not, and how it
came about.

So, SOLO SHOW is a research-based project on art
production, initiated by Natascha Sadr Haghghian together
with Uwe Schwarzer. Which does not mean that Natascha
and Uwe are the authors of the work on display. It's my work.
I, Robbie Williams, am the artistic author of the awesome
work you see in the show. I fully acknowledge that the work
was produced by Uwe's company, mixedmedia berlin, but
it was Natascha's idea to wrap her head around how art is
being produced these days, what a production company
does, and how implications like value production, labour, and
work relations, as well as authorship circulating around the
figure of the solo artist are negotiated. So I, Robbie Williams,
am fictional. Here you have it.

This still does not mean that Natascha and Uwe or Natascha
and mixedmedia berlin are the authors of the work. Nor
does it imply that I am a pseudonym of sorts or a collective
signature that everybody should use as an act of subversion.
At best, this project creates an operative fog around these
claims and ascriptions. But now that I'm here I might want
to have a career for myself, which is mostly due to people's

desires to see me as a white heterosexual male. I never said I was.

This is what the wall text says about me:

The work of Egyptian-Taiwanese artist Robbie Williams (b. Berlin) manifests itself in a wide range of materials. Williams' hybrid sculptures evoke questions about the conditions of the individual in representational spaces and reflect on what shapes our daily lives. On the occasion of SOLO SHOW, the artist shows a set of five objects that resemble obstacles for horses arranged in the space for a show-jumping contest. The objects are loosely put together and would collapse just as a fence does when hit by a horse jumping over it. But instead of using the classical wood structure, Williams has chosen materials that refer to his biography and playfully quote from the history of modern and postmodern art. SOLO SHOW is Williams' first major solo exhibition in China.

Coming back to the question of authors, the second space of the SOLO SHOW exhibition does not include my work. It is empty, apart from the sound of a horse running around in circles and jumping from time to time. Natascha suggested that everybody who helped in producing my SOLO SHOW should be listed here and that this list should be updated. It is of course a very predictable and silly juxtaposition that does not do justice to me or to the people on the other side.

But I think it's interesting to figure out who should be on the list. How are we supposed to get the name of the person who helped in unloading my crates from the cargo ship and does that person really want to be on this list?

Anyway this is what the wall text says in that space:

SOLO SHOW is a research-based project on art production initiated by Natascha Sadr Haghghian together with Uwe Schwarzer. Haghghian, in collaboration with Schwarzer, who is head of the production company mixedmedia berlin, conceived the fictional artist "Robbie Williams" and had mixedmedia produce Williams' "SOLO SHOW". This company produces works for internationally renowned artists but usually stays unnamed and invisible to the public. SOLO SHOW, which includes a two-part installation and a publication, raises multiple questions about topics such as authorship, deskilling, the division of labour in art, and the myth of the "SOLO artist".

So now I filled you in on some of the gaps that might have occurred due to personal stuff I was dealing with around the time of the opening. I'm much better now, and actually I might shift my practice to working with spores for a while or go on vacation. I don't really know where to.

But before I go, I'm actually extremely excited to introduce IINN PPEERRPPEETTUUAALL PPRROODDUUCCTTIIIOONN (definitely check out my interview!). Among other things,

the issue includes a conversation with Uwe Schwarzer, an analysis of Marcel Duchamp's approach to commodity by Stephen Squibb, the essay "Glimmer of the Multitude" by Brian Kuan Wood, and a lot of cool pics from the production of my work.

I want to thank everybody who dedicated time to this endeavor, everybody at the Shanghai Biennale, and at my gallery, and all of the people who supported me.

Cheers,
Robbie Williams

SOLO SHOW

Robbie Williams

SOLO SHOW

Achim Kayser, Alexander Niklasch, Andrea Fourchy, Andrea Schmidt, Andrea Viliani, Anne-Pascale Frohn, Anselm Franke, Anthony Yung 翁子健, Anton Vidokle, Bertram Sturm, Brian Kuan Wood, Cajus Pietschmann, Xu Chenfei 徐辰斐, Detlef Brall, Mai Dian 麦麦巔, Elisa Maria Cerra, Elisa Schroer, Erik Wiegand, Hu Fang 胡昉, HUANG Yi Steven 黄一, Frank Kiefel, Gerard McGettrick, Giulia Pezzoli, Hengst, Ines Schaber, Jennifer Chert, Jens Queren, Jeremy Carden, Jörg Wambsganss, Johann König, Julieta Aranda, Kaye Cain-Nielsen, Kirsa Geiser, La Vina, Laura Barlow, Lan Linfeng 蓝林峰, Lulu Li 李星伯, Magdalena Magiera, Mariana Silva, Markus Schmach, Michael Müller, Miguel Ángel Emérico, Mynou Dietrichmeier, Neville Reichman, Natascha Sadr Haghighian, Otto, Peter Anders, Pierre Maite, Pollux, Rachel Ichniowski, Rainer Jordan, Robert Schlicht, Roger, Sandy Kaltenborn, Sebastian Summa, Seda Naiumad, Stefan Kessels, Stefan Pente, Steffen Puschke, Stephan Hempel, Stephen Squibb, Chen Sue 陈肃, Tammy Lin, Thomas Huesmann, Thomas Laprade, Thomas Wendler, Tirdad Zolghadr, Ute Waldhausen, Uwe Schwarzer, Vera Tollmann, Viola Eickmeier, WANG Yuwei David 王育伟, William Wheeler, Yu Xiao 于潇, Yat Chin TANG 邓逸晴 (Black Window Infoshop 黑窗里), Xu Yin 徐胤, Yuk HUI 许煜.

2025



To Dust

Seda Naiumad:

I think it was me who saw the marble with its pearlescent shimmer first. It rested next to the base of the stage, between security and the protesters. Its perfectly smooth roundness flashed and twinkled as protesters were moving. When I looked up to Robbie he seemed to have seen it as well. He glanced at it curiously, while his body otherwise seemed calm and held. He was standing on stage next to the curators, his hands holding onto something, maybe a note. For a split second our eyes locked and I could see everything that I felt but could not put in words. It was as if the room, no, actually the world, had come apart—split in two opposing stakes—and we both held our breath, staring at the marble’s curve.

I was with the protesters. I had told Robbie before and he had just nodded—not looking happy, more in general, not because of me necessarily. He didn’t say it but I knew that he knew that this show was going to blow up in his face. It had been ill-fated from the get-go, but ambitions and the pressure from his gallery had dominated the conversation early on. He was convinced he could use his leverage then, to make a difference and win the museum over. “If we just abandon the institutions, they will never change,” he said. I felt he said it more to himself than to me because he knew my position. Institutions had been consistent in being hypocritical and the genocide just fully unmasked their complicity in a rotten system. “Robert Cemil Williams, you know I’m not a liberal,” I responded, “I can’t help you.” I looked at him and saw a flat character. He was not Robbie, who I knew as a friend intimately for so many years, he

was the protagonist of a warped social order. And he was not ready to disrupt the social field that had made him. He believed he could negotiate with the museum. And he believed in his leverage. “I have to go, good luck habibi.”

Robbie Williams:

It was to be my biggest solo show to date. Everybody was excited and had been working tirelessly. Both Tim and Mark had encouraged me to think of this as my personal blockbuster—a move into the upper echelons of the arts. So I don't know, I just felt unusually hesitant, almost uncertain. Besides, the past two years had been beyond horrid.

There were tensions way before the opening. The entire art world was in turmoil, divided over the response (or the lack thereof) towards war crimes committed by Israel. Some people had signed stuff in protest and were then pressured by collectors to remove their signatures. Some people had been laying low in public but were very vocal in private. Some people were confused and felt they didn't know enough to take an informed position in what they called a polarised situation. Anyways it was complicated, sometimes it felt as if it was tearing at the very core of stuff in the arts.

I felt devastated by what my feed was showing but also too occupied with production to properly participate in anything. The news kept me up at night, endless heartwrenching testimonies of death and destruction, but also of defiance and resistance. Palestinians documenting the targeting of their homes, of schools, hospitals, universities. Parents burying their children, infants who lost their entire families, doctors operating without painkillers or anesthesia, cemeteries bulldozed, farmers salvaging crops from the rubble, starving aid seekers being shot while collecting mouldy flour from aid sites. It was utterly depressing and enraging.

At some point activists from Seda's circle reached out to me asking if I would be ready to cancel the show in protest. Many

people were involved in this exhibition, several institutions had teamed up, an architectural firm was commissioned for the displays, and some people who had been supportive throughout my career were backing it. There was simply no way I could pull out. I did think about it, I had to. Who wants to stand on the wrong side of history? But it was impossible, too late in the process to let all these people down. But I could do something from within. I felt I had leverage and was on good terms with the curators. Haha, what a joke!

Now, standing on stage next to Tim and Mark, I felt as if the floor had cracked right open, leaving us hovering over a gut of steaming viscera. I could foresee how we would all be devoured and turned into dust. Nothing would survive the nonsense written in Tim's opening address. Nothing would remain. What a shitshow.

My mother's voice purrs, "Cemil canım, they are afraid of us. Be kind to them." She always defended them like a good immigrant would. She was married to one of them, so yeah. Was that what I was doing here? Being kind?

Then I saw the marble. It was sitting there right in front of the stage—that gaping gut under my feet. It was so small but shiny and round like a pearl. I saw Seda among the crowd. She had seen it as well. We looked at each other for a second. And suddenly all fell still and silent in the midst of the boisterous urgent chants drowning Tim's lies. I saw Tim leaning into the microphone, his mouth uttering words I could not hear. He looked like AI, continuing his speech despite the fact that he will be turning into dust any moment now. I saw banners carried by waves of bodies, I saw many faces—some familiar, some not—chanting and clapping, and I saw the marble somehow being the epicentre

of all anticipation, all possible outcomes and direction. I remember thinking: it's so perfectly smooth while all else is rugged. It felt like everything was falling apart except for the pearly shimmer of this marble.

By the time I was able to get down from the stage, the crowd was traversing towards the exit. I glanced at the marble next to my foot and then at Seda and the protesters swiftly exiting the museum, banners held high and still chanting. Gradually Tim's voice reappeared from under the clamour "... our work is grounded in essential values that are non-negotiable. As a museum we are deeply committed to freedom of art and freedom of expression" My gaze followed the crowd proceeding outside, behind the huge glass walls of the modernist building. In the window frame behind Tim a large banner started to appear. It advanced like the wind, unfolding under many hands. Once stretched over the entire glass surface, it read "STAATSRÄSON is GENOCIDE". I watched the staff and security inside rushing to the window, trying to cover the word GENOCIDE with their bodies.

Another glance at the marble and my hand reaches for it. I don't know whether I actually manage to touch it as it all happens in a single breath. While my eyes are pinned to the shiny round surface, the entire museum around me folds down, everts, and spills its glass and steel structure into the surround. The fresh air hits my face like a rock and makes me gasp. I had intended to take the marble and walk out of the museum, but now there's nothing left to walk out from. Only the marble, still sitting next to my foot, is unaffected. I gasp for air again. Apparently my body is still standing upright but I do sense a strange ripple across its surface, almost like a shiver. My lips are moving, channeling the strokes of air,

my eyes are touching all that has unraveled around my feet. I can't discern inside and outside and I do not dare to look further ahead. Keeping my eyes to the ground I start walking towards where I suspect Seda is, the crunching sound of pulverised glass under my feet. In the residue I recognise remnants of my sculptures. "I'm done," I hear my own voice, "tamam hadi, I'm done." In the distance I hear chants.

Marble:

Of course we didn't destroy the museum. We're not brutes. Not that we have issues with militancy but we actually like modernist architecture. What you saw was all in Robbie's head. This is how he imagines things ending. Quite cliché if you ask us, but to give Robbie some credit, it is kind of consistent with his imagination, if you look at his work. So this is not exactly what went down. What did in fact happen was that Contemporary Art died that night. Well not exactly that night, but that's a longer story. You're asking why it had to die?

Before the revocation, Contemporary was another word for Complicit. It was inevitable that something had to happen and something would have happened anyways if we left it to the new reactionaries.

But when Contemporary Art ended, it did not end art. Quite the contrary. Contemporary Art had been holding art hostage in an endless present that continuously deferred and suspended the historical. In this deferral, it cultured a general numbness that it called aesthetic experience. Let us tell you, it was really an anaesthetics that eventually became a playground for fascism. Contemporary Art had reigned by means of a whimsical but sophisticated operant conditioning system with unbound rewards, but also coercive narratives of exclusion. Funnily, it held definitory power without accountability. In short it was a joke, as Robbie found out that night. What happened was that time had started counting again. The time of the dead as much as of the unborn. The time of stones. The time of dust and dirt. The time of things breathing and breaking. The time of names and naming. As Solmaz said: "let it matter what we call a thing." It goes without saying that praxis is a thing, that

study is a thing. And that things are looking pretty bleak. For now art remains as thermal shadow, allowing us to disperse and feel out the topologies of the surround. We linger at folds and recesses, traverse open fields of utter devastation, and find remains of sociality in the stretches between what for now we call tradition and anticipation. We find that flatness and roundness are not opposed, and that some properties are preserved even in dust. We learn how to touch these properties and turn them into infrastructures.

2008

Preface

was first published in *SOLO SHOW: Robbie Williams*, Koenig Books, London, 2008. This version of the text was first published in *SOLO SHOW, 2013 PT. 1: IINN PPEERRPPEETTUAALL PPRROODDUUCCTTIIOONN*, a newspaper published as part of *SOLO SHOW*, an exhibition by Robbie Williams at e-flux in New York, November 2013. The title 'IINN PPEERRPPEETTUAALL PPRROODDUUCCTTIIOONN' is courtesy of Brian Kuan Wood.

Robbie Williams in conversation with Natascha Sadr Haghghian

is an edited version of the 2013 interview, first published in *SOLO SHOW: Robbie Williams*, Koenig Books, London, 2008.

Memo, Uwe Schwarzer in conversation with Natascha Sadr Haghghian, and SOLO SHOW

were first published in *SOLO SHOW: Robbie Williams*, Koenig Books, London, 2008.

Production Notes

was first published in *Bidoun #15: Pulp* edited by Lisa Farjam, New York, September 2008.

2009

The SOLO SHOW TEST

was first presented by Seda Naiumad as part of the exhibition *Lapdogs of the Bourgeoisie: Class Hegemony in Contemporary Art*, and subsequently published in the exhibition catalogue edited by Nav Haq and Tirdad Zolghadr, published by Sternberg Press, Berlin, 2009.

2013

Press Release, Introduction, and SOLO SHOW

were first published in *SOLO SHOW, 2013 PT. 2: IINN PPEERRPPEETTUAALL PPRROODDUUCCTTIIOONN*, a newspaper published as part of *SOLO SHOW*, an

exhibition by Robbie Williams at e-flux in New York, November 2013.

**IINN PPEERRPPEETTUAALL
PPRROODDUUCCTTIIOONN**

designed by Ghazaal Vojdani, these slides were first presented as part of an opening event with Natascha Sadr Haghghian, Chus Martinez, and Brian Kuan Wood on the occasion of *SOLO SHOW*, an exhibition by Robbie Williams at e-flux in New York, November 2013.

2014

Note

was written by the author for a presentation she gave at the *10th Shanghai Biennale: Social Factory*, as a part of the opening of the show in November 2014.

Introduction and SOLO SHOW

were first published in *SOLO SHOW, 2014: IINN PPEERRPPEETTUAALL PPRROODDUUCCTTIIOONN*, a newspaper published as part of *SOLO SHOW*, an exhibition by Robbie Williams at the *10th Shanghai Biennale: Social Factory* in Shanghai, November 2014.

Natascha Sadr Haghghian is constantly at odds with the art world and asks Seda to deal with it.

Seda Naiumad is an assistant since 2006. She also has her own practice.

Uwe Schwarzer is the founder and director of mixedmedia berlin. The company produces artworks for contemporary artists in an extensive range of materials, techniques, and dimensions for exhibitions and projects in international museums and galleries since 1999.

Ashkan Sepahvand is an artist, writer, and researcher. He was born in Tehran, Iran, grew up in Tulsa, Oklahoma, and lives and works between Berlin and Oxford. His practice takes time. An interest in words and bodies shapes his enquiries. Projects take the form of performances, publications, and regular collaboration with friends.

Robbie Williams—the artist, not the singer.

Reliable Copy #16

Robbie Williams

By Natascha Sadr Haghghian, Seda
Naiumad, Uwe Schwarzer, Ashkan
Sepahvand, and Robbie Williams ·
2025

Wiggle Room #3

Reliable Copy is a publishing house
and curatorial practice for works,
projects, and writing by artists.
It was founded in 2018 and is
represented by the artists Nihaal
Faizal and Sarasija Subramanian.

Reliable Copy is a trademark
registered under the partnership
firm Press Works.

Reliable Copy & Press Works,
002, Serena Apartments,
Lloyd Road, Cooke Town,
Bangalore - 560005,
Karnataka, India

www.reliablecopy.org

