

CHAPTER TEN

NEITHER HERE NOR THERE: INVESTIGATING INSTANCES OF SHOWING

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I am a filmmaker, an artist filmmaker.

I am an artist. I make films.

Whichever way these statements are turned, neither version is without pretension.

Exhibit A: Repetitive use of the word ‘I’.

Categorization is limiting, but necessary to communicate succinctly, and necessary, not least of all, at the point of sale.

But what am I selling?

I was meant to have worked out this elementary question a long while ago.

Resistance to categorization could be ideologically driven – or the youthful feebleness of an outgrown teenager stuck in a perpetual crisis of identity. The latter cannot be ruled out conclusively.



P.O.A. © Minou Norouzi 2013

If I am a filmmaker I am likely to be 'selling' stories.

If I am an artist making films I am likely to be selling objects. I mean:
Film objects.

Exhibit B: Hesitant to commit to a single marketing strategy.

Whether operating in the field of art practice or in the film industry one thing is certain: Ideas need a product application.

Uncomfortable with the questionable economy that is the sale of artists' film – especially confusing to those who are film school trained - I recently considered placing on my home page the following statement:

Nothing here is for sale.

Collectors may acquire new works on a commission only basis.

I did not. In a bipolar turn as authentic as the teenage resistance mode I may instead put:

Everything here is for sale. P.O.A. ¹

One has got to eat.

To put in context these ranting deliberations I should start by saying that I have experimented with making and showing work in both an art context and – briefly – in the broadcast sector. Neither instance is an entirely comfortable habitation for me. In an art context, I have often found the instances of showing video work problematic. In the broadcast sector, I was troubled by the production methodologies.

I recall a particularly bad early experience when I showed *Imago*, a seven-minute single channel work, in a group show curated by one esteemed writer, critic and artist. As I often found to be the case with such group exhibitions, the show was hung without any interference from the artists themselves. Presumably I considered it a privilege to be included in the first place, so it did not occur to me to place any conditions on showing the work. Whilst some consideration went into the presentation of the paintings in a salon style, the entire catalogue of selected video works, with exception of one, were shown on a looped DVD show reel. The monitor was placed in a little annexe out of the main salon, and was accessed through a white linen cloth ‘door’. As if white linen could ever stand a chance in successfully preventing light or sound spillage. As well as the unfortunate spatial configuration, I learned then that the sequencing of short video works may require a curatorial skill set more akin to that of an editor - skills that sometimes still seem a little overlooked in a lot of instances in curating film and video.

In another show the same work was placed on a reel mixing both 16:9 and 4:3 aspect ratios. *Imago* is compositionally very considered. Stretching its 4:3 ratio to a 16:9 screening format means losing significant portions from the top and bottom of the frame. It is an oversight that would be inconceivable if we were talking about hanging photographic or painting works.

The attraction of showing video work in the gallery also often overshadows adequate consideration toward audience and viewing

experiences. And it is this type of discontent that motivated me to start investigating instances of showing that were well considered.

What follows is a discourse as much tied in with my practice as an artist, filmmaker - I may never decide - as it is tied in with curatorial deliberations that have surfaced in the process of being involved in putting together a project called Sheffield Fringe.

Sheffield Fringe is a curatorial platform specializing in showcasing works at the intersection of documentary and art practices. It is an annual, nano-sized, festival-like event staged in Sheffield. The project otherwise has no fixed abode and screenings have taken place in spaces ranging from a private flat, the Angus-Hughes Gallery, an artist-run space in London, to more formal spaces such as S1 Artspace in Sheffield and the Museum of Modern Art in Buenos Aires. Amongst these variations it has become noticeable that the space and atmosphere, the way a screening is staged, can produce a protocol of behaviour in the viewing public. And that it is possible to 'direct' this protocol of behaviour.

For instance at one such screening at the Angus-Hughes Gallery titled *Urban Observations: Los Angeles*, there seemed to be a consensus in the room. A consensus of paying attention, being present, engaging earnestly with the work. Adam Hyman, Executive Director of the Los Angeles Filmforum who selected the works in the programme referred to the different viewing modes in an earlier discussion as: 'entertainment as escape versus entertainment as engagement'. People turned up on time and stayed throughout the 90-minute screening programme. There was almost no coming and going as is customary during these free gallery screenings. It may be possible to speculate that this protocol of behaviour was supported – besides the expertly selected programme - by the spatial configuration, and maybe the tone of the curatorial text. Perhaps the volume of people present had an impact too. There were more than 100 bodies in the room standing or occupying the gallery floor - we had prepared for only 40 visitors with chairs –and the films had commanded a kind of 'serious' attention before they were actually encountered.

Sheffield Fringe as a project came into being because a collective of artists and filmmakers, including myself, felt that a regular platform dedicated purely to showing conceptual documentary works was missing in the UK. But for me the challenge was to create and experiment with instances of showing documentary art objects in a way that considers both the

intentions of the artists and that of the audience.

Two questions frequently arise in relation to the project: The first, *'Why Sheffield?'* is asked mostly by contemporary art professionals who are not overly familiar with the documentary market. The short, pragmatic answer here is: Sheffield Fringe coincides with Sheffield Doc/Fest, one of the highest-ranking documentary markets worldwide. It was instigated as a kind of antidote to the main event.

Then, divorced from its conceptual tie to the main event, staging Sheffield Fringe say in Buenos Aires or London admittedly brings about confusion. *Why "Sheffield Fringe"?*

This solicits a slightly longer answer, which describes Sheffield Fringe not as a festival but as an idea - a concept questioning the possibility of marginality as a cultural position, questioning also the efficacy of opposition, and the actual use value of an alternative. It may sound a little far fetched to suggest thinking of Sheffield Fringe as an action rather than an event, but I want to try.

If I were allowed to think of Sheffield Fringe as a concept, then I would say it is to experiment with a concentration, not on reach or impact, but on scale.

Like a Russian doll its form continues to repeat itself on a smaller and smaller scale until the smallest doll is carved out of one solid piece of wood.

Sheffield Fringe as a concept then exists to advocate scaling down from larger components and to perceive the whole landscape of activities as one body carved out of the same piece of wood.

To experiment with what Sheffield Fringe is, or what it is not, its identity, its non-belonging, also has purpose.

Firstly, disorientation can conjure navigational initiatives. Secondly, questions are an essential starting point to dialogue.

At the moment the egalitarian aspirations of Sheffield Fringe as a project are met by the fact that everyone involved is volunteering their time and expertise. All events are free to attend, so there is nothing bought or sold.

Collectively we just want to see the work, or get the work seen.

But in a less idealistic milieu, in the market place, where works are bought and sold, what are the varied positions taken by artists, and their choices of presentation? The popularity of video works in the gallery context has more than surpassed a popular peak. We oscillate between walk-in, walk-out set-ups and the black box within the white cube type of presentation. There is a proliferation of DIY cinema spaces, one-off screenings in galleries, as well regular long term screening series.

What can be said about the status of these works in the gallery, relating to audience reception?

What defines a cinematic experience? A blackout space, seating, communality.

What about the impact of space on audiences experiencing these works as a solitary engagement, versus a communal one?

The desire for a captive audience is still very much seen as belonging to the realm of commercial filmmaking, and perhaps assumed to be of slightly dubious intent.

Artists have traditionally distanced themselves from the notion of a captive audience, favouring more open choice and fluidity of movement.

I started off idealizing a sit-down movie theatre type of situation as a place of communality, one that has potential in co-presence.

What continues to interest me is to look at the psychological dynamics of intimacy affecting audience reception in the context of a collective viewing experience.

Three moving image works caught my attention, works that I could just as easily imagine in a sit-down cinema environment, but which I encountered in gallery settings. None the less I was captivated by them. Below are instances of showing that in my view work from an audience perspective:

- Saskia Olde Wolbers' film *Pareidolia*, a solo exhibition at Maureen Paley Gallery in January 2012;
- Richard Grayson's *Magpie Index*, presented as a solo show at Matt's Gallery also in January 2012;

- Renzo Martens' solo presentation of *Episode III: Enjoy Poverty* at Wilkinson Gallery in 2009.

All three artists make films and operate mostly in a gallery context. I found that they have, at least in the case of Olde Wolbers and Richard Grayson, an equal measure of discomfort with the sit-down time-specific screening scenario for their work that I have for the walk-in, sit on a hard bench and walk out whenever, scenario.

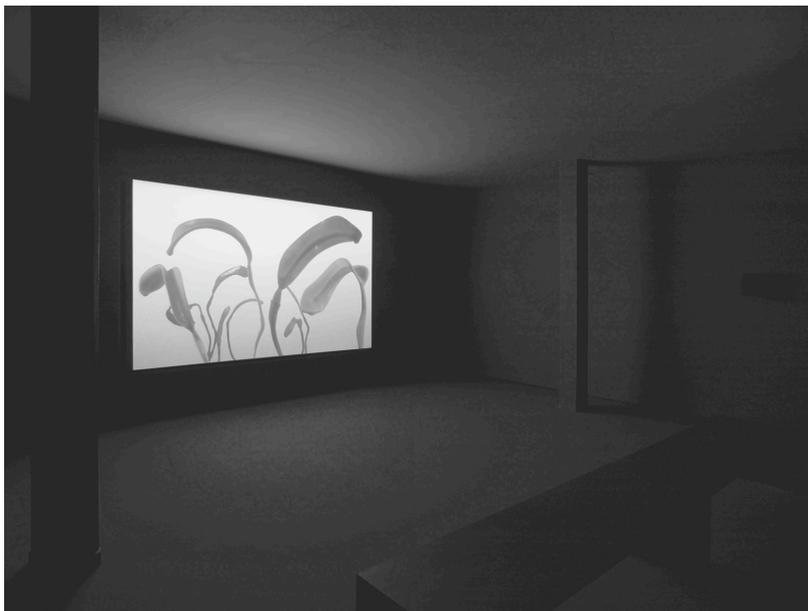
I entered an explorative conversation with the artists and in the case of Renzo Martens, with his gallerist Amanda Wilkinson. My main interest in this conversational exploration was on the subject of intimacy, the public sphere, collectivity, and audience reception. In a paper entitled 'Intimacy', Lauren Berlant says:

The development of critical publicness, depended on the expansion of class-mixed semiformal institutions like the salon and the café, circulating print media, and industrial capitalism; the notion of the democratic public sphere thus made collective intimacy a public and social ideal [...] While the fantasies associated with intimacy usually end up occupying the space of convention, in practice the drive toward it, is a kind of wild thing that is not necessarily organized [...] It can be portable, unattached to a concrete space.²

I started thinking about this idea of a portable intimacy, which is 'unattached to a concrete space' in relation to the increase in cinema style installations in a gallery context and questioning whether we aren't moving towards the same aspirations that have connected audiences to film objects and film culture since the beginning of cinema history - a presentation culture that is audience-centric, one that wants to engage an audience and keep them captive.

Saskia Olde Wolbers says that there are definite conventions of how to present work and within that she mentions there is: 'lots of room for error'.³ She likes to think of the encounter with installation work to be like reading a book, an intimate solitary happening. Olde Wolbers work is often seen in large thematic shows, for example, her film *Trailer* was shown at the 2008 exhibition 'The Cinema Effect: Illusion, Reality and the Moving Image; Part 1 *'Dreams'*' at the Hirshhorn Museum in Washington. The show was a comprehensive survey of video art, in three parts, which according to the rather transcendental sounding commentary

addressed ‘film’s ability to transport viewers out of their everyday lives and into states that lie between wakefulness and sleep, sending them on journeys into the darker recesses of the imagination.’⁴



Pareidolia, © Saskia Olde Wolbers, courtesy Maureen Paley, London 2012

Olde Wolbers describes the Hirschhorn show as a labyrinth with her film in a self-contained room. In her description of how she envisages the audience moving through the space, her interest in discovery becomes apparent: ‘With my work I imagine it’s a bit like eavesdropping, because there is this voice that is already talking before you got to the room.’

Two of Olde Wolbers’ films were shown at *Ambulante*, a documentary festival in Mexico known for its vigorous curatorial considerations. However, she says that she feels screening in an art context gives the work more of a presence.

Works of art are kind of elevated in a presentation in a museum ... for me screening in an art context makes it more precious. It’s a luxury really that somebody puts on a video in a museum...I feel you get a more immediate audience. Most of the reasons are quite unexplainable and maybe I ended

up in this sort of means of distribution because I was trained at an art school and that is my context.

When I started to make narrative (videos), people like Tacita Dean and Tracy Emin, were then making quite refreshing work, more personal (work)...That sort of work appealed to me. It made me want to put a narrative into my work but with the art world as a reference... more than film.

Besides a status elevation, the preciousness is perhaps to do with the production and controlling of space. In an absurdist associative leap I start imagining the artist or curator, the exhibition maker, as a high priest, holding a sermon.

His/her presence does not manifest through the projection, the beam of light in the case of film, or an invisible signal in the case of video, but the section of white wall, suspended rectangle, or cube construction that the projection hits. I imagine the screen itself as a body that speaks.

What hits that body is form, ambience, mood, pace, and in the case of Olde Wolbers painterly images, and a narrative.

Although affected by the spectacle that is described as an elevated presentation methodology I do still question if the strength or presence is not in the content first rather than the space or manner of the presentation. When visiting Olde Wolders' show at the Maureen Paley it is precisely in this presence that I forgot my discomfort with the space and the hostility in the behavioral modes of a gallery-going crowd: laughing or any type of audience reaction is not considered cool; clapping oh no; the hard bench; the inability to rest my back. My irritation with the protocol of behaviour did not matter here. I was just glad to see the film.

Richard Grayson too talks very poetically about how his installation *Magpie Index* was conceived and how he imagines it being received.

His solo exhibition at Matt's Gallery, also titled *Magpie Index*, lends itself to a curious deconstruction: at the opening event 30 headphones were made available to a 300 strong audience for an eighty minute documentary portrait focusing on legendary singer-songwriter Roy Harper.

One of the things informing *Magpie Index*, Grayson tells me, was *My Dinner With André*, a film where in fact there is very little moving image,

where the focus is on the conversation'⁵ or in the case of *Magpie Index*, on the monologue.

As he explains: 'It could not be an interview. It needed to be this head, this voice, addressing a specific but nameless and abstract audience.'

Before the presentation at Matt's Gallery, *Magpie Index* had previously been shown at The De La Warr Pavilion as a 'standard gallery video install...the dark cube and the bench', and it was also shown as a sit-down screening event at the Baltic Contemporary Centre.

These three being very different presentations for the same artifact, I wonder if, like me, Grayson might be agnostic?

'No I was finding my way with it... I wasn't quite sure what I had. ...What I really wanted was just the intensity...there are moments where he does look out of the screen and seems to make eye contact with you. I wanted that focus. So even the screening worked...'



Magpie Index ©Richard Grayson, courtesy Matt's Gallery, 2012

On the subject of the decision to use wireless headphones at the opening, he has enough charm to be able to refer to it as 'the error' and be instantly forgiven:

It's [...] possibly a failed analogy...but...I was hoping to perhaps suggest (something) about our relationships with these cultural productions i.e. that of music...designed for mass consumption. But we also have a very personal individual relationship and I wanted to indicate something about "the voice of", the voice of Bob Dylan, the voice of god. It is a social thing, but it's also intensely personal. So the sound becomes a soundstage inside your head...We consume music quite often in publicWe make our own commune with that voice...So (it's about) the tensions between the idea of a group and a bunch of individuals. That is why I wanted to do it and also it solved an acoustic problem...

Similarly Olde Wolbers sites acoustics as a driving motivation in her presentation decisions for the Maureen Paley show:

Everything is led by the audio, to make the audio resonate in the right way in a gallery space because it's a narrative you need to be able to hear what they are saying ... it needs a different type of attention, so I'm just trying to make that switch for the audience of sitting down and giving it [their full attention] or whichever attention.

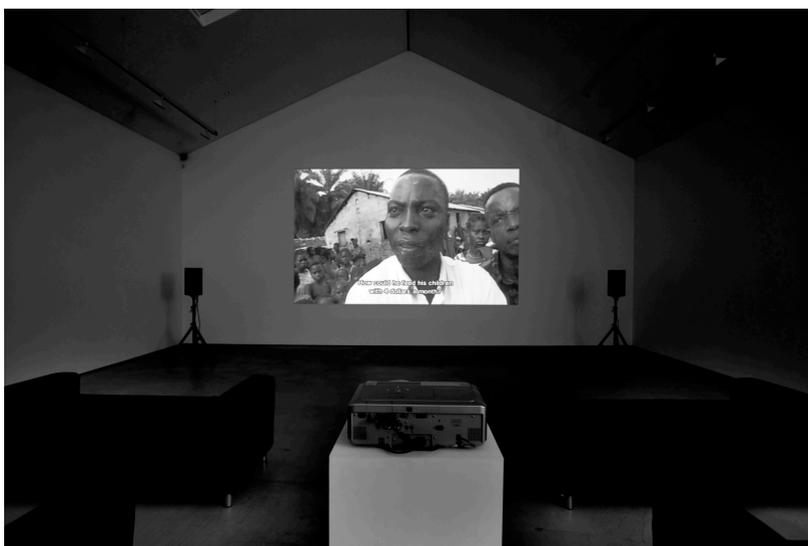
Olde Wolbers says this laughing with a shy ambiguity as if it were shameful to be so demanding as to want an audience's full attention.

Perhaps another way of approaching any discomfort with the push-pull relationship of an audience in captivity versus one that roams freely is to think of these installations as a kind of performance - a deferred performance, where the performer is in fact physically absent.

Renzo Martens' *Enjoy Poverty*, on the other hand, relies wholeheartedly on the artist's presence within the piece and is also a type of performance. Not just within the film but also during the screening event, and in the reaction the material demands of its audience. There is something sadistic in the work of Renzo Martens. It is a type of sadism that carries a Brechtian type of purpose, of intentional emotional rupture and dislocation, to the point of physical discomfort. When watching the film it seems difficult to agree or disagree with his position intellectually, or ideologically. Instead the experience of viewing the film is visceral. *Enjoy Poverty* was presented in the UK as a solo exhibition at Wilkinson Gallery, and is available for purchase as a certified limited edition. It also opened the International Documentary Festival Amsterdam, a leader in the documentary field. It was financially supported by Dutch, Belgian, Swiss, Finnish and Austrian television broadcasters.

In the UK gallery presentation, Martens' gallerist Amanda Wilkinson says that 'it was the most misread' piece they had ever done at Wilkinson but, to her, also 'one of the most important'.⁶

The film is referred to as a video work, and is being traded by Wilkinson as an artwork. Martens uses, if not all, most of the classic documentary modes to polemicise the desperately hopeless commodification of African poverty by the aid and media industries. The commodification of poverty by yet another industry, in this case the art market, through sale and distribution of the film as an art object is a valid but separate discussion.



Episode III: Enjoy Poverty, © Renzo Martens, courtesy Wilkinson Gallery, 2009

To Amanda Wilkinson, showing video in a gallery context is generally highly problematic. She says: 'People don't watch...anything over 5 minutes in a gallery...people simply do not watch films properly.'

She has 'been thinking a lot about how to overcome this', and whilst she does not ordinarily like being dictatorial towards the audience:

With Renzo's film being 90 minutes, it was more like watching a feature film than looking at video art. So we treated the space like a cinema. We put sofas so people could sit and be comfortable and we said the film

would play three times a day (at specific times). It's the first time we've ever done it but it did work. People enjoyed being given that information.

In terms of the practicalities of viewing, she says:

It's great to see things on a big screen but you know I'm not so romantic about it - the materiality of film and seeing it on a big screen, and the nature of how it's projected. Renzo for me is not that sort of filmmaker. For me it's the concept and the content and whether I see it there (she points at the computer) or on a big screen. Of course its more emotional when it's big (...) it's loaded, but still seeing it privately it's as effective for me. It's just important that you see it. It's just important that it's seen.

In his essay entitled 'The Construction of Spectators by Early Cinema', Alain J.J. Cohen writes:

During the first years of motion picture, there were no normative cinema spectators. Exhibition circumstances for early films varied enormously. They were shown in Vaudeville theatres, exhibition and church halls, opera houses, cafés, department stores, schools, fairgrounds and many more locations. [...]...and....essentially involved a mobilization of the viewer's attention through a discontinuous series of attractions, shocks and surprises.⁷

And so it is, that this perhaps is just a transitional adjustment period waiting for a time when a balance is struck between our now well-established solitary viewing habits and our re-emerging desire towards co-presence and communality. And a transitional time before a balance is struck in re-addressing the power relations between exhibition makers and the viewing public.

Case dismissed.

Notes

¹ Price on Application

² Lauren Berlant, *Intimacy: A Special Issue, Critical Inquiry*, Vol.24, No.2, *Intimacy* (Winter,) The University of Chicago Press, 1998, page 284.

³ Saskia Olde Wolber, 2012. Interviewed by Minou Norouzi. [wav audio file]. London 11.03.2013.

⁴ The Cinema Effect: Illusion, Reality and the Moving Image, January 7, 2008. Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden. [online] Available at: <http://www.hirshhorn.si.edu/collection/home> [Accessed 25.04.2013]

⁵ Richard Grayson. 2012. Interviewed by Minou Norouzi [wav audio file] Royal Festival Hall, London on 05.03.2012.

⁶ Amanda Wilkinson, 2012. Interviewed by Minou Norouzi [wav audio file] London on 21.03.2012.

⁷Alain J.J. Cohen, *The Construction of Spectators by Early Cinema*, in *Hollywood spectatorship: changing perceptions of cinema audiences*, ed. Melvyn Stokes, Richard Maltby, British Film Institute, 2001, page 155.