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# The Politics of Small Gestures

Chances and Challenges  
for Contemporary Art

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## PREFACE

This is an argumentative book. It is openly opposed to quite a lot of different attitudes, trends and tendencies that are popular and widespread in contemporary art. It certainly has a good look at its enemies and a good go at them, but at the same time it tries to make a very precise point of also being for something else. In one simple sense, the whole book is about what that 'something else' can be. A 'something else' that comes in the guises and acts of small political gestures. A 'something else' that allows us to find and generate tools and the courage to find alternatives beside and beyond the instrumentalization of our life worlds, the society of the spectacle, the full blown commodification and mystification of artistic practice.

As an argument, it does not come out of nowhere. It has a distinguished background, a certain acutely present 'thisness', and hopefully also a future of a productive and challenging kind. The background that it emerges from is my personal experiences in contemporary art over the last couple of years. You will find numerous reflections on these confrontations with individual works of art in the main argument. What needs to be addressed, already at this point, is the intellectual debt this book as an argument owes to the realization of the 9th International Istanbul Biennial, curated by Charles Esche and Vasif Kortun, and held in September 2005. This book is an extended and developed version of an argument first put forward in an essay published in the Istanbul Biennial reader.

I would like to thank the following people for their invaluable comments and support: Schirin Amir-Moazami, Tere Vadén, Minna L. Henriksson, Michael Garner, Vasif Kortun, Branislav Dimitrijevic and Marianne Möller.

This book is dedicated to our kosmonaut Yuri Juhani Amir-Moazami

Chapter 1.  
**Introduction**

It's kind of a funny thing. We increasingly find ourselves in a peculiar, weird situation in which contemporary art seems to attract attention and interest for almost everything but its content. There is more and more talk, more and more buzz and hype about its market value, social hipness and entrepreneurial cleverness, not to forget the image it offers of flexible and oh-so-nomadic individual identity. What so very often goes missing are the content and the issues that contemporary art deals with and confronts. You know, themes like identity, sexuality, love, death, and, not to forget, gardening.

This book is an attempt to close the gap between the hype and the substance, between superficial interests and "goods internal to a practice". (MacIntyre 1985, 219)

It is an effort to see and articulate certain works and actions of contemporary art as vehicles for thought. Not as products, not as spectacles, and not as authentic expressions of something called reality, but as, well, something different, something else. And yes, that something else is the politics of the small gesture.

I will argue for a version of contemporary art that is a part of our everyday experience. I want to see art as a partner in crime. A crime of passion, that is: participating in the processes of shaping and making the content of concepts and symbols. A web of processes that aims at generating sustainable conditions for knowledge production. It is a version of involvement in contemporary art that focuses on what it has to say to us about our lives. It is not high up there somewhere, and neither is it down there anywhere. It is near, within sight, so close it tickles our imaginations.

It is about meetings. Clashes and collisions. Careful caressings and wildly swaying wunderbaums.

The starting point for our journey is the necessity of positioning ourselves within the broader framework of contemporary art. My value-laden proposition is to see contemporary art as a field within contemporary society that wants to be and is part of the whole fabric of which a given context is made. It is not in the vanguard, it is not conservative, and it is not nostalgic. It is active, right here, right now. It consists of acts and gestures that are available, accessible, self-reflective and self-critical. They are also, not to forget, highly enjoyable as challenges to our ways of understanding who we are and where we are the way we are. When some of these notions, or more precisely, when enough of them are

combined, they provide a way of stealing back the momentum for content-driven choices and acts within this field.

What I am talking about is the politics of small gestures. A small gesture is a political act that is either visible or embedded in works of art. It is these significant, distinct acts that I will be walking with and talking with throughout this book. They are gestures that are not the work of art in itself and are not the issue or theme of the work in question. What I am fascinated by are these embedded, significant gestures and choices that make the given work what it is; i.e. what makes it tick, and what turns it into something special. They are gestures that make the work become possible. Gestures as goods that are internal to a practice and which are found embedded in the work, in how it was made, communicated or, for example, mounted in an exhibition. They are acts through which these works become specific singularities in the process of being experienced by someone in a particular site and situation.

Small gestures are by no means happening solely in contemporary art and visual culture. They obviously have anecdotal cousins outside the sphere of contemporary art. Acts such as we all remember, or acts that are more marginal in their overall significance. Acts such as the German Chancellor Brandt kneeling at the Warsaw War Memorial in 1971, in the depths of the Cold War. An act like the speech made by the Israeli conductor Daniel Barenboim in 2004, when receiving the prestigious Wolf Award in the Israel parliament, the Knesset, by simply reading out the Declaration of Independence of the State of Israel, which guarantees all its citizens the same social and political rights, regardless of differences of race, religion and gender. Or the very specific, but not so well-known or appreciated act by the Finnish ice hockey player Esa Tikkanen, who used to drive the players on the opposing NHL team crazy by talking non-stop in a strange and unintelligible mix of Finnish, Swedish, English and made-up words. They even found a name for it: Tiki-talk. Or the act, and now we slip back into the domain of contemporary art, of the Norwegian painter A.K. Dolven in noticing that a great many of the people who bought her paintings - extremely subtle, delicate works painted with overlapping layers of grey that you only can sense and perceive in direct contact, not via photographs - tend to place them in their bedrooms.

In a word, they are acts that make a difference. An act as a small gesture that generates enough room of its own for it to survive and to avoid falling into the safe havens provided by dichotomous juxtapositions of us and them, and inside

and outside. It is not just a matter of numbers, and it is not just a matter of deciding a priori what is allowed and what is not - referring here to the current trend for returning to simple, minimal modes of expressions, often combined with a desire to stem the flood of annoying cross-medium experiments.

It is, thus, a small gesture that becomes something of its own - challenging, cherishable and enjoyable - in the constant tension between contemporary art as a fully commodified product and contemporary art as a conservative tool for high-brow cultural politics that seeks to juxtapose and separate good and bad, us and them. (For a recent example, see the Danish Cultural Canon project at [www.kum.dk](http://www.kum.dk).) Instead of pre-set hierarchies, a small gesture stands for a plurality of means of expression, a plurality of competing life worlds, but at the same time it emphasizes that both of these are only possible if there is enough room for something called reasonable disagreement and loving conflict. In one significant way, I want to deny the often-used excuse that claims there are no alternatives. Instead, it is and it always will be about how we can both articulate and push those alternatives forwards - and back again.

How this is potentially possible within contemporary art and visual culture is something that causes a couple of nervous laughs, and even more cynical sneers. It is a task that purposely goes against the mainstream, and yet at the same a time a task that believes it can find enough elements in the practices of contemporary art and visual culture that might actually pull it all together. The four core elements are availability, accessibility, self-reflection and self-criticism.

With availability I want to address the notion that contemporary art is not taking place behind closed doors. It is brought into the public sphere, in fact, with a dedication to co-constructing those open spaces. Availability also indicates that it is a means of expression that quite strikingly emphasizes content over medium specificity, even if in each case the tools of the trade have to be mastered and known. Thus, contemporary art can - as we have all witnessed so many times - take almost any form, from things on a wall to walks in a park, and back to serving tea to the unemployed. It seems that ultimately contemporary art can be anything it wants to be or can imagine itself becoming. The point to remember is: Everything that is possible is not necessary meaningful in itself.

The kind of contemporary art that I am after and referring to is accessible because it does not predominantly refer to itself, to art history or art theory, but

to our everyday experiences. It is everyday experiences, not as some glorified magical excursion into the depth of our souls, but as wary, tacky instances of how we perceive and comprehend who we are, where we are, who we are with, and how we relate to ourselves and our surroundings. But accessibility also has a demanding side. For anything to be meaningful and comprehensible, accessibility requires a site and a context. They have a history, a present tense and a future horizon that should be kept as open and flexible as possible. This is a process of shaping and making a context that happens simultaneously on the level of physical activity and discursive action.

Contemporary art is self-reflective because it certainly does not claim to be innocent. It is perfectly aware that every act is a part of a continuous series of acts. Acts that do not happen in a vacuum or a neutral zone. They are acts that claim something, deny something else, and stand still, leaving room for something worthwhile to emerge. Self-reflection is about the awareness of being part of the game, part of the problem. Through self-reflective acts we recognize both how we constantly have an effect on the outside world and how that outside world has an effect on us.

Finally, the self-critical attitude spells out the necessity of understanding that whatever it is that we claim is meaningful and important today will not necessarily be so tomorrow. This also means that our claims are versions from within multiple seas and deserts of versions - often competing and conflicting with one another. Self-criticality underscores the necessity of being open to criticism from both inside and outside, and also the responsibility to participate in critical discourses.

With availability, accessibility, self-reflection and self-criticality we have a broad background for the main chances and challenges that contemporary art provides. What follow in the individual chapters here - with the helping hand of numerous examples of artistic practice - are reflections on the following themes: What is a small gesture?; How are context and locality to be defined?; What is required by committed participation?; and Why can the MORE LOGO idea be seen as an alternative way of shaping a critical position?

However, before getting into the main chapters, let me sketch an outline of the changes that have made the immediate presence of contemporary art possible. There is a certain 'thisness' characterized by its vulnerability that allows it to be perplexed and questioned, but not to give itself over to passive surrender and

docility. This is a presence characterized by its ability to be open to challenges that question its own ways of being and perceiving. A certain particular kind of presence, a kind that creates the chances for a specific singularity, chances that rely on being exposed to influences and challenges, but facing them constructively and head on, not passively with ultimate resignation, or merely waiting and whining about them.

We are talking about a phenomenon that touches every part of our lives. Changes that are bound to have serious effects on almost every human activity, contemporary art included. In short, what is different today from, say, the mid-1980's is a set of alterations that come together in one word: communication. The world we live in is a different, not necessarily at all a better, place, because across the broad spectrum of possibilities the quantity of communication has both increased and become dramatically cheaper. By communication I am not only referring to sending oh-so-smart SMS's around and around the globe, explaining in immaculate detail to people who don't want to know it what you had to drink in the bar next door.

An increased volume of communication spells significantly cheaper travel, faster and more accessible internet infrastructure and networks, and a growth in international collaborations. Communication is the reality of fewer hurdles before and rules against the movement of ideas, capital, materials and people across the borders of nation states. We all know this, but precisely because it is so mundane a fact it has to be stressed. Things move and go around faster and cheaper. As ever, information is about power and power structures - and about how to use and abuse them. But information is not solely a captive of certain visible or invisible power players. It is as an opportunity, a raw material that is available around you much more than before. If you want or desire examples, please click yourself into the Wikipedia's websites, or simply enjoy the sound bite from the head of what is perhaps the most successful recent reorganizer of people's ways of travelling by plane: "Ryanair's chief executive, Michael O'Leary, said he hoped to introduce gambling facilities on flights by 2007. The European low-cost airline thinks the move might generate so much revenue that it wouldn't have to charge passengers for airfares." (The Economist 5.11.2005)

The crucial point now is how to connect quantity with the question of quality. And here we get closer to the idea of politics as politicization, not as party politics or as politicking, but as something that questions and throws off balance the habits of our hearts and that makes us create and imagine alternatives. In

the words of Michel Foucault, what we are talking about is the means available for eventualization. (2002, 200) We will return to the idea of eventualization in detail later on, in Chapter 5. It is about shaping the agenda instead of just standing to one side and watching it being shaped. And yes, it is asking, again and again, before you start running and acting, why do you do what you do? In other words: What is it that you want and desire to do?

It is very evident to most of us that there is obviously enough quantity, but not enough quality in all kinds of cultural production and intervention. The dilemma of quality is, of course, a truly honest dilemma without any clear-cut solutions. It is a process towards which one has to strive. A complex, demanding process that is guided by certain ideas and attitudes. The most important, and simultaneously the most difficult, is the problem of time. In other words, when striving for quality of participation within the public sphere, speed kills. And it really kills amazingly effectively. Speed kills in terms of not enough attention to detail, not enough time reserved for the activity itself, and not enough scrutiny of how it is to be presented and communicated further.

The fact that speed kills might be the first and most dangerous obstacle. And it has a couple of close cousins that must be acknowledged. Available, accessible, self-reflective and self-critical contemporary art opposes conservative tendencies, full blown commodification, excessive focusing on the financial aspects, the society of the spectacle, and instrumentalization of our life worlds. It is suspicious of nostalgia, mysticism, appropriation and pastiche. It strongly opposes nationalism, chauvinism, essentialism and racism.

Thus, it is rather clear what the version of contemporary art that we are pushing to the fore here is against. It is equally crystal clear that being against this or that, no matter how despised these thises and thats are, is not enough. It is not enough as a credible intellectual effort and it is not enough as an act of trying to make and maintain a chance for critical positioning and participation. What is required is a vision that guides these activities. A vision that is passionate, playful, but very serious. It is grounded and committed, situated and self-mocking. It is a means of being able to laugh at ourselves and with ourselves.

An act that has a certain impossibility inscribed into it, a certain productive failure. A certain specific and singular presence that does not strive for a predetermined goal. An act such as the following: an act as an act within the contemporary field of art, but not an act as a work of art. An act that was carried out a cou-

ple of years ago by a very young artist, and an act directed, with compliments, at a couple of internationally prominent curators. An act that is very strongly linked with its context and location as a relative periphery.

An act that consists of presenting valuable gifts to the visiting curators. Gifts that, on this occasion, came in the form of the artificial stones commonly used in window decorations. A gift the size of a remarkable chunk of stone, but as light as a handkerchief. A gift given to professional people making lots of professional visits on that same day. A gift that you could not put into a bag, and a gift that you could not just throw away unintentionally, because you could not hide it or push it into a trash can. A gift given with a warm-hearted wish and with a nasty twist. A gift from a north-country boy from a north-country land that is so proud of its pure, authentic nature. A gift that spelled out with such sarcastic accuracy the whole potential minefield of confusion between where we come from and how we are represented, by whom, for what - and why.

Chapter 2.

## What's So Funny About a Small Gesture

Size matters, right. The bigger the better, or is it the other way around? Is less really more? Or is less just a bore? How do we navigate between belief in expansion and the deep-seated desire for minimalism? What kind of a gesture is a small gesture? And why would that be such an important, significant notion in acts of contemporary art and visual culture?

Our task here starts with big versus small. The definition of a small gesture is not comprehensible without its counterpart, which is obviously that of a big gesture. However, the content of a small gesture cannot only be articulated vis-à-vis something else. It needs a substance of its own that goes beyond where it starts from. We will soon be returning to this task of going beyond.

But for now, pressing hard, with the pressure rising, big versus small. Here the comparison is not so much about the quantity, but about the quality of the gestures. That said, there can also be a distinction between the quantities, but that in itself does not help us get much further. The vital difference is about what these acts are aimed at, whether they appear to be big or small in size. The difference here depends on what kind of effect is wished for.

Therefore, the basic structural difference is that characteristically a big gesture wants to have a superb, everlasting, universal effect. It strives to make a difference on a fundamental scale. At the point of comparison, this is exactly what a small gesture does not seek to do. Instead, a small gesture comes out of a worldview according to which there are no meaningful, clear-cut answers or fundamental decisions. It is all about the process of striving towards a certain goal. A goal that we will never fully achieve, but a goal that we want to move towards in small, significant steps. Not only does a small gesture doubt the chances of these great acts made by the big gesture, it argues that they are aggressive, dangerous and often highly counter-productive.

A big gesture wants to make sure that everyone sees it, feels it, and hears it. It goes for the absolute maximum effect with a concentrated, orchestrated act. It wants to settle a score, make an essential change, in which the small gesture is very happy if and when it is sometimes able to make a smallish dent in our ways of comprehending and perceiving ourselves in our surroundings; who we are, where we are, with whom we are and what kind of relationships we have with our surroundings and also with ourselves. A big gesture does not tolerate other big gestures that well. It tends to be very jealous about the territory that it has or is trying to achieve for itself and its vision. The small gesture, on the other hand,

survives only along with the series of other small gestures that precede it, happen at the same time, and will materialize in the future. While a big gesture is a single act, a small gesture is characteristically a process that gains its momentum through the specific development of that particular case - and a development and an effect that continues to make waves after the initial act has taken place. A meaningful small gesture presupposes a network of small gestures. It is a network, but of a kind in which the connections are not constantly active, but nevertheless available and accessible within a common, shared horizon.

Development, yes, a word that also allows us to pinpoint the differences. For a big gesture, the act is an end in itself. It is the final stage of a long, committed development that is now completed.

For a small gesture, development is never about closure. Development is a description of a current situation that is nothing more and nothing less than that: a glimpse into an ongoing effort that recognizes both the need to be aware of one's achievements and aims, but also to be aware of the never-ending character of the search and research.

It is obvious that a small gesture is partly parasitic on a big gesture. We can find other labels for a gesture here. A big gesture in macro terms is the current name of the game. It is the parameters that have been forced on everyone in the game. A big gesture, for example, is the current market-force-driven belief that financial concerns are the only relevant ideology that makes sense. And that this neo-liberal doctrine makes sense not only in the realm of financial transactions and the production of goods, but also in every other field that exists in any given society, ranging from children's education to health care for the elderly. A typical big gesture is the trendy belief that something that might work in the private sector is bound to be the one and only answer in other areas of society. Thus, it is the big gesture that is characteristically guided in fundamentalist fashion by hard-core, one-sided logic. It allows no other views or options.

And here we see the main David & Goliath opposition between the big and the small gesture. The small gesture confronts the big gesture. The small gesture is in the margins, and the big gesture rules the centre, and the centres. The small gesture is there to follow its own particular logic. A logic that goes against the tendencies and rationales for the instrumentalization of our life-worlds, against the objectification of human experience, and against vulgar scientific dogmatism. It often enough willingly borrows ways and means from the big gesture,

but it uses them for a completely different purpose. A small gesture lives for the chance to be able to create alternative ways of being - whether that is being alone, together, in a creepy and persistent conflict or in a janitor's waiting room. These are alternative ways of figuring out who we are, how we are to act in a supermarket supersale, and why we say yes when we know we should have the courage to say no to things that go against our intuitions as human beings.

A small gesture is political in its potential. But in itself, like no other thing in itself, it is not political. It can become political. In fact, the question is how in each of several given singular, but mutually connected specific situations a small gesture becomes possible.

A small gesture generates opportunities to think, feel and hear alternatives - and then to learn how to implement and to maintain them. Not in a full-scale solution for the big gesture, but in a mundane, day-to-day act of trying to make everyday life a little more worthwhile. It is about the beauty of ordinary acts. A process that is filled with trials and errors, and with amazingly few successes. But a practice that is what it is all about: trusting an experience that is happening near enough to you (referring especially to emotional nearness, but not excluding physical nearness), in your situatedness, the feeling of being thrown into the flames of conflict. It also means that we have to trust, to learn to trust, the opportunities for sharing these experiences with others.

A small gesture is being political when it makes something politicized, questioned and no longer taken for granted. It is a process that we recognize from both micro and macro-level phenomena. A micro-level activity, for example, of a kind that breaks our hearts in its simplicity and naiveté. It is about actually taking the time to surprise your wife with an unexpected hug, to open the door for that man in your local library who never bothers to acknowledge your hollow hellos, and to leave that toilet in that semi-dirty train at least as usable as it was before you went in.

On the macro level of politicization we can focus on two examples. One refers to the structures of almost any so-called democratic government. This is a phenomenon that did not exist before the end of the 1960's, but which nowadays seems to be a part of our normality that we cannot imagine living without. Less than four decades ago there was no institution called the ministry of the environment or its administrative functions. Now there is, and this is now also showing its limitations. The fact that we have an awareness of environmental

issues is not in itself a successful big gesture that will save the planet from freak weather and pollution. It is about how that awareness negotiates with other aims and values within a given society and its chosen ways of dealing with issues that are common to all of us.

The other macro-level example also takes us to the tumults of the 1960's. It is often served up in slogan form as 'the personal is political'. A slogan that is so terribly misused and misunderstood that it definitely begs to be taken seriously. The small gesture is about personal matters being important. And it is about the personal being potentially political, with the crucial difference being that this potentiality has to be argued for, and not just believed in.

## 2.1. How Do We Define a Meaningful Small Gesture?

Now that we have somehow managed, even if only tentatively, to describe what a small gesture can be, it is time to turn to the why part of the issue. Thus, this chapter focuses on the main motivation behind the need and desire to achieve a small gesture. The question why is closely connected to the requirement that an act be meaningful. The imperative and motivation for taking action and for why something is meaningful are obviously part of the same dilemma. The cool, cruel question why also demands its counterpart. An attitude that with tongue in cheek, but still very seriously, retorts with the message: Why not? The question Why? is to be comprehended as a wish and a need to make a difference. Something is bothering the agent, something is not quite what it could be, or should be. There is room and motivation to do something else.

That something else can be anything from writing on a wall to blowing kisses from a motorway bridge - or throwing frozen snowballs at men in ice-fishing competitions, patiently sitting on portable stools while disappearing into their warm overalls. But what differentiates a meaningful something else from a not so meaningful something else? Is it at all possible to make this distinction?

The argument here is based on the conviction that not only is it possible, but that it is very much necessary to be able to make these distinctions. These are, however, never transcendental truths, but always value-laden contextual interpretations. Meaningfulness cannot be defined from outside the activity. In fact, it must be defined through the process of the act - and that is acts in the plural that are maintained and repeated.

Thus, a meaningful act is generated and made credible only through the act

itself. There is no way we can distance the act from the meaningfulness of the act. This, again, does not mean that there is no connection between various acts or between their meanings. There is a so-called 'weak incommensurability' that allows enough contact, but at the same time forces us to recognize the ultimate specificity of an act in itself as a process.

I believe it is of the highest importance that the abstract definition of a meaningful act is allowed to stay abstract. This is not a glorification of inarticulacy, but a safeguard for the centrality of the experience in a given time and space that cannot be fully repeated. Again, even if it is not repeatable and not fully translatable, it is still very much recognizable as a meaningful act among other meaningful acts.

A meaningful small gesture is only meaningful if it allows itself to be seen as a self-critical, self-reflective process. The moment it starts to take its aims, acts and habits for granted, it incredibly slips quickly further away from being a meaningful act. Thus, we have another main ingredient for our definition. It is an act that must be self-critical and self-reflective, otherwise it ends up simply producing what it can and becomes used to repeating what it knows, and simply producing more, much more of the same. In other words, it needs to try to go beyond, to cross imagined borders and to build or burn new bridges. It must, borrowing from an old pop song, try to push the elephant up the stairs, bend spoons and look for a proper place to land on the moon.

This attitude of questioning one's own presuppositions and starting points is a mental act that, especially with a small gesture, constantly has to be on full-alert activation. Otherwise there is a real danger of justifying a small act simply because it looks and sounds so sympathetic in comparison with a big, loud, ugly act. Smallness, however, is not in itself a virtue or a value. Neither is it a virtue or a value that a small act does not attract millions of viewers or readers, but only a handful.

The other way to address this danger is to put it as bluntly as it gets: small is not necessarily beautiful, and less is not always more. Small can sometimes be meaningful, and even beautiful, but it always has to acquire its substance and its weight again and again in each individual site and situation. A small act can be annoyingly cute, extraordinarily stupid and provincial, and it can be just plain non-sense. A small act constantly has a burning need to prove itself to itself and to others. And yes, that is its main chance of having the potential to

make, shape and maintain a difference.

The definition of a meaningful small gesture ultimately forces us to get back to the basics of any kind of relationship in which are active. It is a relationship involving multiple challenges and conflicts. It is about being-with, situating oneself in a context that is never there as a fact or a solid base, but that is in a constant process of remaking and reshaping. It is about being in a relationship. This sentence in itself might sound rather strange in this connection, but - no surprise here - I claim that it is not. The strategy that I follow is the act of twisting the notion of meaningfulness back down to the very core of everything we do. Things that are often done alone, but that do not happen alone, but in a continuum and in a context, with other agents and their acts.

In these never-ending games and positionings of relationships, we constantly find ourselves in a give-and-take struggle between two opposite poles that vigorously pull each other into a clash and a crash. It is about being in the middle of both mental and physical dilemma, between an individual's insular 'autism', the inability to converse with the outside world and the general and overall universal comprehension and translatability of communication. Using other terms, it is about complete individualization versus universal translatability. Whatever the chosen terms, the dilemma and the challenge do not in themselves disappear. They stay put, haunting or hunting us with their legitimate question:

How do you as an individual who is always a part of various contexts negotiate this battlefield between the one and the many, between the particular and the common, and between the subjective and the objective? This is one of the main questions that any meaningful act has to have a good enough answer for, for itself.

## 2.2. What Does the Small Gesture Stand For?

A small gesture is an act that is fully aware of its procedural character and equally fully aware of its situatedness within the context in which it takes place. An act that from the very first plans knows that it is not enough to be against something. What we need is a constructive, critical version of what a particular, specific, singular version of a small act stands for.

That said, as ever, within the process of trying to figure out who you are, what you want and who your friends are, it somehow seems compulsory to begin by

proclaiming what one at least is not for. Thus, this is an exercise that draws the lines between us and them. An exercise that turns ugly if these borders between us and them are seen as fundamental and solid. An act that must be seen as a tool for getting somewhere else - that somewhere else being the rocky road out of the unhelpful cul-de-sac of barking at a straw man of an enemy, helping us dig deeper into our own prejudices and stereotypes.

But it is important to acknowledge the effect of this tool that allows us - for the sake of the argument - to distinguish between what we can see as worth striving for and something that is point blank something that we feel we are against. This list, or to put it in more honest terms, this litany of miseries that the small gesture opposes is a very familiar one. It is a dangerous list because it easily tends to become a bit predictable and self-referential. It can turn into a list that is like a wishing well, no longer connected to daily realities. Thus, it can serve as a moralistic vehicle, which is not so very pretty.

All that said, it is time to bring in the bad influences, the bad things that we want to oppose. It is not just that we see the small gesture as outlined at the beginning of this chapter as being against these bad influences, but we have to recognize that most of the time the best thing we can achieve is systematically and vehemently trying to avoid them. The list: nationalism, nostalgia, mysticism, essentialism, chauvinism, conservatism, instrumentalization of our life worlds, and extreme, excessive commercialization and commodification. Attitudes and value-laden viewpoints that are not the same, but similar enough to be grouped together - and attitudes and values that are not necessarily always present in every case, but which vary from one to another.

I believe one significant test for the basic credibility of a small gesture is how it can deal with the temptation of being populist, and yet at the same time reach out beyond its core public. Or to put it another way: the credibility of a small gesture lies in its ability to criticize the items on our list in a way that is not lame, superficial or self-centred. A small gesture fails terribly if it becomes a site for reflections of a wish to be a good person without the necessary commitment that tears us apart, the necessary sacrifices that hurt, and the decisions that cannot please everyone. Just to make sure there is no misunderstanding about this central point: We are not advertising the setting up of a consensual choir to sing "We are the world, we are the children ..." day in day out.

The way to do this is rather obvious. We need to articulate what we mean, for example, by nationalism or chauvinism. In the discourse of a small gesture

nationalism and chauvinism very often go hand in hand. They are not the same thing, but have enough points of similarity. What motivates both of them is a view of a reality that is shaped by a belief in the superiority of one's nation-state. This view is given structure and kept up by the aspects that a given nation state wants to narrate about itself. It is very important to realize that neither nationalism nor chauvinism are facts, nor any kinds of truths.

They are stories told as narratives of both individual and collective self-understanding. They serve a purpose, and that purpose is to draw a solid, unbreachable and unquestionable line between us and them. A line that is defined with the help of what that particular nation state provides. (See Hobsbawm & Ranger 1983) Chauvinism simply adds another dimension to this illusion of ready-made integrity and superiority. This is a dimension that underlines the wished-for and always narrated virtues of manhood, paternalistic values and attitudes. Chauvinism stands for a view of a reality in which what are seen as typical male virtues are believed to be the only ones that can solve our problems and that are worthwhile supporting or pursuing. Characteristic of both nationalism and chauvinism is the implicit lack of perspective and comparison. They are not willing to risk self-criticism or willing to allow criticism of themselves by others.

Moving on through the list, another marriage made in hell that we successfully connect together is that of essentialism and mysticism. Essentialism is a claim, again a version of a reality that stands for an essence. An essence that is something deeper, something unchangeable, something transcendental and universal. Something that continues when most other things alter or disappear. Essentialism is a belief in the existence of a solid-gold truth. It exists somewhere there, most frequently inside us, inside a myth or a narrative. Where that essence-something is to be found or discovered varies from one version of essentialism to another.

Mysticism is one of the versions in which the essence is not found, as it is in scientific rationalism, via the ways and means of modern logical thinking and the development of technology, but through the opposite route to rationalism. Mysticism believes that there is an essence, but it is an essence that we can never discover. It is an essence that always escapes us, but that is precisely why it is an essence. The mystical cannot be seen or heard, only felt. It believes in an essence that cannot be articulated, but only believed. It is stronger than us, mightier than us. It is the pure.

From a more ethical perspective, the list allows us to combine instrumentalization with both extreme commercialization and excessive commodification. It is important to oppose these, because these three 'izations' manage very dominantly in such different ways to diminish the quality of the life that we live in contemporary societies. Not only do they tend to minimize our life worlds to a consumer existence, they also brutally simplify our ways of being. Through instrumentalization, we are not an end in ourselves and in our own right, we are a means to and for something. Our worth is calculated in terms of our worth as a means to some end. Most frequently that something is described and defined as the overall, aggregate common happiness or welfare. And just to indicate the extent of its utilitarian flexibility, it can be even be envisaged as a means of achieving world peace.

The real cruelty of commercialization and commodification is that they are ends for which we are used as instruments. The core problem in the current hegemony of the instrumentalization and commodification of our life worlds is that, not only are we used so as to get something done, but also that we are used in order to multiply the number of forms of commercial success and the ways of turning all the realms of our existence into products that can be bought and traded, and thrown away if we are no longer satisfied. But this is not, let me emphasize extra carefully, an anti-capitalist argument or position. Instead, it is an argument that openly sees itself as being part of the overall structure and overall problem of contemporary market-driven societies, within which its task is to find enough time and energy to cherish and respect pluralities of experience and expectations that should not always be reduced to countable figures and manufactured goods. In other words, it is not a matter of denial, but of shaping and generating alternatives.

Taken altogether, the list of things that a small gesture is against might remind us of a conservative position. But no, a small gesture is not a conservative claim. However, we need to be careful here not to define conservatism too naively. I am not referring to conservatism in the sense of a wish to conserve a certain situation or to return to one or other past that is way more meaningful than the current reality.

Conservatism is seen here as a continuous process of maintaining the status quo. (See Honderich 2005) It is a process, because without active maintenance a specific status quo of thinking and acting is bound to be altered and to disappear very soon. Conservatism is the ideology that claims to be no ideology at

all. It relies on what is, yet not as it is, but as a set of circumstances that allow participants in it to get the maximum benefit out of the situation. Conservatism is not a small gesture. Conservatism is an anti-gesture. It does not want to make a difference. It wants to hold on to a difference without presenting the reasons for that difference, beyond pointing out how things just are like that and should remain like that.

Thus, we have a litany of what to be against. Now, finally, what is a small gesture for ideologically? What is it that has shaped its vision and its turbulent, everyday decisions and indecisions? As is our custom, this is a list. A list of successive aims and attitudes: tolerance; self-reflection; self-criticality; enough self-esteem to be able to laugh at itself and with itself; an ability to enjoy the futility of a small gesture; and an ability to keep on keeping on. In other words, a small gesture is based on hope. A hope of being able to live with oneself and one's surroundings in a slightly more meaningful way. But how, how on earth can we do that? How can we not be populist, not nationalist or intolerant, and still be able to steal back the momentum for a vision of hope that includes and does not exclude, and that can be sustained and does not fall into horrifying acts of inconsistency. This how is the topic of the next sub-chapter.

### 2.3 The Politics of the Small Gesture

And yes, this how is framed and defined by the very context that it addresses and seeks to shape and revitalize. The context is the public sphere, the realm of give and take, push and pull, lies that fly and truths that get torpedoed by the complexities of something called an open public space. This how is characterized as in the potential for becoming a place, the possibility of seeing and acting differently, and it is the feeble promise to be able to make a difference.

The first rule here is to take a way out of the safeguarded insularity that acts of contemporary art so very often suffer from. A small gesture does not necessarily take place on a busy street corner, in the fresh-flower market or in a shopping mall occupied by teenage mall rats, but it does invite interaction and exchange. It is motivated by the need to get out of the ivory tower of art for art's sake. It knows that its only real chance is to get deep down and connected with the everyday life that we all live, suffer and survive in. A small gesture smells. It is sweaty, and it is uncomfortably loud - not to mention that it does not fit into illusions of perfect harmony.

Thus, the politics of the small gesture starts with the awareness that whatever it does, it must be seen, considered and also criticized in terms of the triangle of how the act relates to its discursive past, the public sphere, and the politics of the given site and situation. A set-up that certainly begs us to begin with a question. What is the role of contemporary art on a site awakened by a new curiosity and awareness of the relationships between these three protagonists? Of course, its role can be anything from street activism to painting itself into a corner with art-for-art's-sake arguments. However, the point is to argue that participating in the different contexts of contemporary art is worthwhile and necessary. What is required in these cases is then to argue why participation is worthwhile precisely there and then.

Here we have contemporary artistic action as a kind of diplomatic passport. An activity that is somewhat marginalised in contemporary societies at large, but which at the same time still enjoys some form of higher status. It is a password that opens doors that so often remain closed to other professions. This weird and ambiguous 'good will' that contemporary art still finds partly attached to itself allows participants to take on the role of the initiator and activist. It gives us the motivated moment, that small window of opportunity for using our own means and questions to address what we find important.

In the context of the public sphere and politics this opportunity takes an interesting turn. We get in with the help of our diplomatic status, and at first we can count on the fact that we are NOT taken that seriously. And yes, this lowered expectation confers huge rewards. It provides us with the shield of naiveté with which we can take up questions that have been hidden and neglected. We can start to ask the difficult 'stupid' questions that the 'real' players already know not to touch on.

However, due to the potential of contemporary art, I believe it has another role to play, instead of just shaping and setting the agenda for what is talked and argued about in the politicised aspects of the public sphere. Here we come closer to the idea of MORE, and also of FOR. What we can do is to lure into the discourse and discussion those institutions and participants that we do not agree with, and who do not agree with each other. Our unique opportunity is that we hardly constitute a visible threat to anyone's interests. Thus, while we still have the bonus value of 'being different' and somewhat 'sexy', we are able to bring together forces and views that would not normally agree to gather around the same table.

This is also when the going gets exceptionally tough and interesting. First, it is about the selection of with whom we want to try to talk, and then, of course, how we do so. If and when contemporary art, as activism within the public sphere, is meaningful, it has to have the courage to get closer to institutions with which it does not share the same aims and values. It has to be able to talk to its opponents and even its enemies. And this, in fact, is one of contemporary art's greatest opportunities: to make the Other present and visible, and thus to deny the mechanisms for making the Other an instrumental object. This is an answer to both 'What more do we want?' and 'What are we doing this for?' How this is done, is the next step in this catalogue of horrors.

The question 'How?' allows us to address three main characteristics of a certain version of contemporary art that can make a difference. These characteristics are vividly evident when we address them through the desired and already existing end results of the activities undertaken within this type of contemporary art. These are activities that are not in themselves against products or commercialization, but which definitely do not see themselves primarily as a product. They do not want to deny being part of the mechanism of exchange that we call advanced market capitalism, but want to be a part of it by actively trying to formulate their own criteria for it, not passively taking everything at face value and following because you are supposed to do so.

The main question is obviously: Can you be part of the game, but nevertheless productively pursue your own visions and rules, shaped and maintained by yourself in a critical and open interaction with other versions? This is a real dilemma that can never be fully answered. Sleeping with the enemy is always both complicated and necessary. On an abstract level, the difference can be highlighted by the aims of the activity. First of all, let us recall what the basic elements of any product, for example, toothpaste, are. As an end result, toothpaste is and always wants to be the same. There is no doubt about whether a toothpaste is a proper one, what it does, why and how. You buy it because it contains the ingredients and packaging that deliver what it promises. There are no surprises, there is no need for interpretation, even if there is always a place for it; for example, of the different tastes and colours of toothpaste and the lifestyle it promotes.

On the other hand, we have the end result of an act within contemporary art. It is also a product, but one of a different kind. It can be, and often wants to be, wrapped up, bought and sold, but its inner logic is very different from that of

toothpaste. While toothpaste only does exactly what it promises, a work of art, let's say a painting, also has to be able to do something else. It looks enough like a painting for the viewer to get the context and the setting. There is something in it that motivates us to look, and then to look again. There is some kind of visual candy in it. But if there is only candy, and if it is only visual fireworks, we would have no need to see it again and again. Remember: a one-trick pony never learns new tricks. The main difference is that a work of art also delivers something else. And that something else is the element of surprise and suspense. There is no way to solve a meaningful work of art. It requires a contextual interpretation, not once, but each and every time you confront it. You know where it is leading, but there is a surprise waiting for you when you turn the next corner.

Thus, considered in terms of its core aim, contemporary art is not a product. Its aim is to be a work of art. When this takes place in the public sphere, it is very often also motivated by other aims rather than by those of a commercial nature. Again, this act of taking part in the process of producing meaning within the field of contemporary art does not want to deny the possibility and meaningfulness of making money, but it points out that, if making money is the primary aim, then perhaps you ought to choose another approach that is more accessible and adequate than the self-reflective, critical practice of art. Contemporary art in the public arena participates in that public sphere with a different primary motive than generating financial profit. Advertising, as we all recognize day in and day out, is much better equipped for that.

What then is the aim of contemporary art in the public sphere? Here we get to the second main characteristic. The aim is to create meaningful, fruitful and interesting debates about important issues and themes in a discursive context. This context is always both a physical and a discursive site. It is an activation of a localness that contemporary art tries to achieve and which it yearns for. It participates in the production of content within the public sphere.

The unique element for contemporary art in this case is that it does not need to, and it does not want to strive towards consensus as an end-result of these debates. A government needs to achieve consensus in order to move forward and to make decisions. But contemporary art does not. As it does not need to deliver a pre-determined, totally conditional product, it does not have to aim for an ideal of consensus. Instead, it can and, in fact, needs to allow for distractions, differences of opinion, and a great deal of misunderstanding. It relies on

the principles of loving conflict and on the idea of reasonable disagreement.

The third characteristic of contemporary art is a direct result of creating and allowing the co-existence of a dissonance of voices, rhythms and values. This is once again the MORE and also the FOR that contemporary art, at its best, can achieve, and which it should constantly proudly stand for. Therefore, instead of consensus, the aim is a growing acceptance, cherishing and awareness of the day-to-day plurality of views and versions of reality that are always present in any context or site. It relies firstly on the acceptance of this pluralistic condition that predicts uncertainty, but it also needs to develop in another direction. That direction is the comprehension of pluralism and tolerance as something that, with the help of all the participants who share these demanding presuppositions, creates what we should be able to describe as enjoyment and joy, and also as convalescence. It bounces straight back to the questions posed at the end of the last section of this text. Who do you want to work with, and how do you survive with your loneliness?

And here, finally, we get to the politics of the small gesture. Before that, I insist on a short pedagogical summary. Contemporary art, in its interaction with the public sphere on political and politicised themes, is characterised by: 1) not being primarily a product and not striving primarily for profit; 2) not yearning for consensus, but for pluralism and tolerance; and 3) bringing together opposing views and values, and creating both intellectual and emotional joy.

But then again, how? If and when both the public sphere and politics are definitely filled with all kinds of communication and material, from sounds and slogans to moving images, the question is: What is the added value, the difference, that contemporary art can create and contribute?

As already hinted in the previous section, it seems very clear that the option of following the rules and means of advertising or of taking part in discourses in newspapers and television is not realistic or even meaningful. First of all, they are very effectively formatted, and they are saturated with the communication produced by specialist professionals in each field, not to forget the range of financial options, for example, in advertising and television production. If we want to compete on their terms and according to the rules they have established, we might as well stay in bed. We have absolutely no chance.

Thus, we have to figure out something else. That is the politics of the small ges-

ture. It is not about hiding behind the big players and the ugly noise. It is about taking part in the production of meanings within the politicised public sphere in the way that is closest to us. We don't have to take part in the shouting match. The alternative is not always the opposite, but the alternative does materialize in opposition to the hegemony. Thus, instead of a spectacle, we need a small gesture, a series of them, side by side, moving closer together. A small gesture is both the MORE and the FOR. It does not have to be small in scale, but it does need to rely on the characteristics outlined above.

## 2.4 A Political Gesture

### Phil Collins' *The World Won't Listen*

Phil Collins' video installation *The World Won't Listen* is arguably one of the most fascinating works of contemporary art since the fall of the Soviet bloc. And believe me or not, this is not an outrageous overstatement. The scale of the comparison is purposely as huge as it gets. This is a comparison that is simultaneously serious and ironic. The point being that Collins' piece is not just in itself a magnificent example of good, meaningful contemporary art. It is also possible to see it as a symbol of the contemporary art of our times.

Let us begin with the broader framework in which Collins' work might turn out to be a significant symbol for our times. But before that we have to recall what the work revolves around, what goes on inside it. The background is a 'best of' album by a British pop group from the 1980's called The Smiths. A group that since its break-up almost 20 years ago has lost very little of its impact and ingeniousness. The second main step towards the video installation seen in the Deniz Palas location at the Istanbul Biennial was a three-day Smiths karaoke event that Collins arranged in an Istanbul club. He had previously put on similar events in other cities, for example, in Cork, Ireland, Vilnius, Lithuania, and Bogotá, Colombia, where he also re-recorded all the backing tracks for the karaoke DVD.

The result is something that can be labelled 'the Bermudas triangle of experiencing art'. And yes, that is exactly why it is almost inevitable that we see it both as a symptom and a symbol of the contemporary. Art that it is accessible, enjoyable and challenging - and all of these in a heartbreakingly generous way. Art that does not refer to art history, is not based on narcissistic self-references to contemporary art, but which takes and shapes its contexts and contents from the everyday realities in which we struggle and survive. It is reflective and it re-

activates our ways of seeing with and thinking with - not to forget feeling with and experiencing with.

It is accessible to all viewers because what we confront and what we see in the karaoke songs and presentations is something that we can very quickly and easily relate to. If you are familiar with the original songs, it is obviously a much smoother road to follow, but nonetheless, even without any knowledge of The Smiths phenomenon, *The World Won't Listen* is there, inviting you into its domain with arms wide open. In other words, it is almost impossible to find a person who has no connection to at least one of these areas of contemporary life: pop music; karaoke; drinking alcohol; or melancholy.

It is enjoyable because it makes you laugh. And it really does this with a finesse that comes along so rarely. It is a very very funny work. Not funny as in a hahaha reaction in which you look down at someone, but funny as in a reaction that you feel about something. Something you can see on the screen and something you feel within yourself. It is also enjoyable because you do not need to know anything about any art theories whatsoever. The work is there. For you to be part of. Engaging with it, engaging in it.

Last but not least, the work is challenging because it manages to do everything it sets out to do so seemingly effortlessly. It seems almost too perfect to be true. The challenge connects us with another part of the idea of the work being a telling sign of the times. The challenge is to wonder whether Collins is taking a slightly too easy route? I mean, come on, isn't it all so shallow? The combination of a failure-proof remake of a pop-classic, a bunch of teenager losers that are all too ready to taste at least a little bit of simulated stardom, and a work that nobody can have anything against?

There are two ways to answer these questions. One is take a look at the process of making the work, and the other is to focus on the inherent quality of the feelings raised to the surface in the work. Elements that together say why Collins' work is not an affirmative act that plays by the rules of the music industry, but, in fact, is political in a very meaningful way. It is political as in making things possible.

When looking at the history of the project, the presumed 'easiness' and 'effortlessness' of Collins' work gets a new and realistic dimension. There is a certain important shadow in his smile. A smile made and shaped by deep-seated personal needs and desires, obsessions and embedded situatedness. In simple

terms, he is doing things that he himself would really like to do and to enjoy. Things that say something about our lives right now, and right here. Not by pointing a finger, not by rocking on your heels, but by opening a door through which we have the chance and challenge to see something else.

Considering the pure technicalities of the project, the workload is incredible, even for the critic equipped with the most insistent protestant work ethic. It took them three months to record the backing tracks. You can imagine the emotional investment Collins himself made in order to meet the performers and make them feel that they are being respected and valued. And then, in the end, there is the time spent editing the final version so that it looks as if it had been done in an afternoon, whereas it took weeks to accomplish.

The workload invested in the video installation is closely connected with the sentiment inherent in the work. Again, the funniness is just one layer. It would be a rather uninteresting work if it only consisted of making cheap fun of Smiths fans for the audience's voyeuristic pleasure. What I am after is something that slowly, but surely comes across while watching the work. Song by song, and performance by performance, the 'fun' part of it slips more and more to the sidelines. What takes its place is the motivation for both Collins and the performers. We smell a certain desperation. A certain unbelievably strong longing to be someone - somewhere somehow. We feel their need to be accepted, to be part of something. We feel the sadness of being alone, with nobody to talk to.

In other words, Collins' work contains an element without which his actions would indeed be shallow and lame. It contains the element of cruelty. And that cruelty is shown to have at least three significant sides. The first is the one you feel while watching the work. With every laugh you sense the pain. With every joyous gesture you immediately recognize how it is based on being hurt. And with every song the whole range of emotions adds up to and accumulates into a groove that is so sad, but so very true.

Besides the cruelty of the notion that what you are seeing and sensing is not out there somewhere, but definitely lurking inside yourself, there is another aspect of cruelty at stake here. And that is the cruel stroke in-built into any act of generosity. There is no way out of the dilemma. I might invite you for tea, but there is always something I want back from you. It might not be anything sinister or any more demanding than just a pleasant chat, but nevertheless, the person who gives wants something back. The third type of cruelty present here is the

motion that takes place when Collin's teases out the discrepancies between the ideal world and the not-so-ideal reality. There is bound to be a cruel kind of upset when a bedroom fantasy gets a chance to be lived for real. It is a revelation, and a disillusionment. A kind of a wake-up call that is not necessarily all that kind.

But how is Phil Collins' work political? This brings us back to how the work has been made, and especially to how the karaoke sessions were arranged. I do not claim that the work in itself is political, or that re-visiting the political legacy of The Smiths' lyrics makes Collins' work political. What I am confident about is that something else in the work is political. And that is the act by which he made it possible for the shy, unsure and not always so practiced performers to give all that they can give. An act and a political gesture that comes in the form of a rule.

While doing the karaoke evenings, every performer had 30 minutes to do whatever they wanted. The main house rule, which was non-negotiable, was: nobody laughs. A couple of times Collins had to stop the music and throw out people who were laughing. "Nobody laughs" became a political act. It is a political gesture because it made something that was not there before not only possible, but also attainable. It is political because it produced an alternative way of 'being with' - with oneself and with one's surroundings.

Through this act, a collective act, that is, something very specific and singular is created and generated. We can smell the dangers of singing "We are the world, we are the children", but we still ought to have the courage to recognize what is being made and taking shape - becoming a place. What is becoming is a version of social hope. Not as a solution, but as a kind of imaginary lighthouse guiding our activities. A lighthouse that has the tendency to alter its coordinates all the time, but a lighthouse that is always there - somewhere. A social hope that we need to find, and that is what I find in the work of Phil Collins, but a type of social hope that we most vehemently need to unleash. We have to lose sight of it, to lose it, but simply in order to be able to find it again and again.

## 2.5 It's a Cathedral - Hans Hemmert

Let us focus on another example, an example that takes us to a cathedral: a work of art that deals with a functional entity that we all know and recognize, but it deals with it in a way that is very different from what we are accustomed to. It does what it is supposed to: it gives us something that we can relate to, but

makes us aware of how we relate to it. This is called self-reflection with a joyous vengeance.

Hans Hemmert has built a cathedral out of balloons. These balloons are all the same size, but they come in all the fine colours from red to green and back to yellow again. The colour structure is achieved randomly using the circa 3000 balloons needed for this work titled Kapelle. It is a structure (600 x 380 x 400) that we are asked to go into. The idea is to experience it from the inside. To feel what it might mean if all the world's cathedrals were made of air and rubber.

If this level of appearances was all there was to Hemmert's work, it would serve as a perfect example of one of the main dangers of the enterprise with which we are working. In American slang, it would then really deserve to be called 'a one-trick pony'. It would be just a funny, but short-lived curiosity: a cathedral made of balloons. But there is something else, something more that gives a lot of substance to the vital question 'So what?'.

The materiality of the work has an ambitious and ambiguous character. You cannot simply solve it and set it aside at one glimpse and one experiential glance. We are, all of a sudden, back to the basics of any sculptural activity. This is air inside a rubber material. Or to put it into a time perspective: What happens to the air and the rubber structure of a balloon once it is inflated and the time, oh yes, goes by by by.

This has the distinct quality of 'that sinking feeling'. A troubled notion that something that you see there and then will not be there in the near, but still so distant future. Hemmert has made us aware of the transient nature of our existence in an entertaining and speeded-up way. We are not silly enough to claim that, through Hemmert's work, we are able to confront our existential angst about losing time or about never having enough of it, but what we do claim is that, with his work, we are able to laugh at ourselves and with ourselves. We can almost hear the sound of the air slowly, but surely seeping out of the balloons. There is no recognizable hiss but something is going on. A cathedral is shrinking as we watch it. And yes, this is again about how we watch. We are watching, but not seeing. The idea is something else. To conceptualize it, and to sense what is going on. To make it your own. There and then.

## Interview with Hans Hemmert, September 2005

“The politics of the small gesture? Yes, I do find that a very sympathetic expression. I like the play of opposites within it, you know, combining the concept of politics that is something of a large-scale entity with a small gesture that is something domestic, something about our daily realities. It is also clear that in direct comparison with big, spectacular gestures and actions, a small event or gesture is intuitively much more interesting. For me, a big gesture has something inherently unpleasant about it, something of an emptiness that is close to a lie.

“The pleasure in a small gesture is how something that is in itself so little and so meaningless can turn out to be or can become so interesting and intelligent. For me it is all about our perception, about how we perceive things. And a small gesture, for example, is a way to change and alter the existing reality slightly. It means visually changing the taken-for-granted parameters of a site just a little bit.

“The strategy can be to make or present something big as something very small, to turn opposites inside out, or to duplicate everything as we did in a proposal for Potsdamer Strasse with the group Inges Idee, duplicating a lamp, a bus stop etc. on one part of the street. Another example is the series of air-balloon works I did at the end of 1990’s in which I covered everyday, domestic situations with yellow latex rubber from the inside, for example, my living room and my studio. In these photographs, what you saw was me in my typical everyday setting. Everything was like before, only slightly different. The difference was the latex, an extremely thin (approx. 0.02 mm) layer of it that covered all the surfaces.

“Then again, the strategy can be about hiding or covering something. A process in which you partly guess what the object or activity might be, but you are not completely sure. The point is that you can never be quite sure, there is always that moment of hesitation lurking. It is what the Germans call an Ahnung, or put in another manner, it is when something is almost there, but not quite - knapp vorbei, knapp daneben. Something that looks functional, but which on closer inspection is not functional at all. Or the strategy is to combine things that do not normally belong together, creating a new kind of object in which there are details that we can recognize from other objects or settings. In all of these, as a sculptor, I tend to trust the minimal effect, or the minimal gesture that crystallizes and pulls together the various elements into into a single, unified entity -

as in a work of art.

“In one sense, the question of perception is for me a political question. This is in line with the thought that the personal is political, something that too often gets forgotten or is not taken seriously, and that is a pity. The process by which we perceive is both very fascinating and important. Let’s take a chair, a simple chair. A chair on which you can sit, but what else can you do with it? This is a play with connotations, a play with expectations. A play in which you have to rely on and trust the visual possibilities.

“Is a small gesture enough? Well, that depends on what you want, and, of course, on the level we are talking about. In terms of success, and discursiveness about it, this can be problematic. Anyhow, being successful and getting attention is always cyclical, trends come and go, and during an artist’s career there are some busier and some more silent periods, and that is just normal.

“But if we talk about a small gesture on the level of a work of art, or what, for example, motivates me as an artist, then the question is easier for me to frame and to answer. If and when I come up with an idea that enables me to test the borders and habits of our expected perception, then I am satisfied. That does make me happy. Whether this then turns into a meaningful work of art, that is another matter. Tickling our visual senses is one thing, but it is obviously not enough. There has to be something more, and that something more only comes through via time. It is via the passing of time that I can see if an idea is worth it or not.

“Another very important aspect of the process of avoiding the work becoming just another funny gimmick and a gag is its technical implementation. This can be done in a smallish model, a sketch or a trial production, but it is very important to try things out. It is only then - via the necessary commitment of time and energy - that you can realize what it is happening and what is going wrong, and what is going right.

“The beauty of the procedural quality and character of a work of art is that very often you set out to do something like X, but during the course of the action something else happens and takes the idea in a previously unheard of or surprising direction. It is not only a matter of ideas bouncing off and against one another, it is also about the material realities, about how the chosen material guides and directs the process. Sometimes the end result is in fact much more

than even you yourself thought at the beginning, and you recognize some of its main connotations only afterwards. And this, of course, is the hardest part of the process, how to keep it open and alive - and to let those surprises really lead and guide you.

"I am constantly struggling with the task of keeping the mental processes open-ended, and not producing simply for the sake of production, and not keeping on repeating the same patterns of thought. This is extremely difficult, because we are so strongly embedded in our daily lives, in our expectations, prejudices and habits. It is difficult to break them, and it is even more difficult to get a fresh, alternative view of them. This kind of openness, an openness that you cannot directly strive for, but which has to be left to happen, is also amazingly valuable and desirable. It is so rarely that I get that different glimpse into my own reality, that something which used to be called inspiration.

"These possible alterations of mundane reality are something that I am constantly occupied with. It is like the project of mine in which I began to build a smallish paper model of a church. What was peculiar about this church was how it was put together solely out of paper collected from fashion magazines. I got the idea when I saw the façade of a famous, massive church under renovation, and a huge commercial that was put up in the front of it during the restoration period. Again, this is about putting together ideas and materials that do not seem to belong together, like fashion and a church, and so on. Or to give another example, which is rather banal: The other evening I was staring at a simple light bulb in our living room. There was only the bare bulb, no lampshade or cover or anything. And I started thinking: What if I make the lamp cover out of paper in the shape of a military tank, would it not be great to have a tiny paper tank sculpture glowing high up on your living room ceiling? Think about the baaad shadows and all the misplaced and playful connotations it would produce, just think about it.

"But to answer the question about whether a small gesture is enough: Yes, it is, absolutely. If and when I manage to create and think through a new, altered version of my reality, then that is enough. It serves a purpose for me as a sculptor. Even if the scale is small and only, in the first instance, affects me, I become a kind of master of my own reality. I can make the decision myself, I can shape my surroundings, in a way, constructing, and very consciously, the way I am where I now happen to be.

“It is impossible to overstress the importance of the openness of one’s thoughts and also one’s perception. The task is to keep that openness alive, and also to open up and challenge the ways we perceive our realities.

“The danger for us all is that we can so easily keep producing over and over again things we already know how to do, and which are already gaining recognition. This can lead to megalomania, a slippery zone in which the scale of production grows larger and larger, while the content of the works seem to get tinier and tinier. I can’t do that, because I simply find it boring. I can’t repeat a formula over and over again. I need that openness; an openness that is not only pleasant, but which is also horrifyingly demanding. It very often leaves you very unsure about your work and its value and meaningfulness. A feeling of uncertainty that you nevertheless have to learn to accept.

“But, that again, is often hard enough. It is a kind of a balancing act between allowing the uncertainty and, at the same time, having solid enough self-esteem and belief in what you do - all in order that you can actually start something, try things out, and not just think about them. There is obviously no straightforward answer to this dilemma, it is characteristically something that is there to stay. For me personally, what helps is to rely on this type of self-reflective and conscious naivety. A very simple model or strategy - einfache denkstrukturen in German - that allows you to activate yourself and not be afraid of mistakes or misunderstandings

Chapter 3.  
**Question of Context and Locality**

“The enigmas of the ancient Egyptians were also enigmas for the Egyptians themselves.”  
Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, quoted in Zizek, 50, 1997

It has been stressed all along in this experiment in the book as argument that, for it to be meaningful, a small gesture cannot happen in a vacuum, outside of anything and everything. It happens, it becomes something that is always an integral, important part of a particular context. A context that has to be re-told and re-written in each case and on each site. This is a productive requirement that keeps us on our guard and on our toes, aware of nuances and of the necessity to provide localized arguments and reasons.

In this particular case the discursive context is shaped as follows. We start with the idea of a small gesture that would allow us to shape a certain version of time and space that can co-exist beside and beyond the society of the spectacle, the full-blown commodification and commercialization of our life worlds, and the longing for essentialistic and nostalgic, all-encompassing answers. This then will generate that ‘something else’ that I am trying to fight and argue for. A ‘something else’ that is characterized by the very ‘thisness’ of its being-in-the-world. A ‘thisness’ of being that we can recognize as exactly this and not that, but which we cannot define through compartmentalization and forced categorization.

It is a version of being, as in a process that shies away from fixed name tags and relies on its experiences being partially non-communicable - something that can be articulated, to borrow from the writer Andre Brink (2003), as what lies and is activated on the other side of silence. Finally, to follow the train of thought to its end, a small gesture that makes us aware of, to notice and, at the same time, to generate that particular ‘thisness’ becomes a place within which we recognize an entity that we can label a specific singularity. A version of one’s being-in-the-world that is simultaneously, and in a constant tug-of-war with itself, based on the singularity of its own logic and the specificity of the logic of the localities in which it is situated.

That then, in short, is the big picture. Let us now get back to its individual elements. A small gesture is about how to manage to make a meaningful difference in our daily realities. A small gesture is nothing if it is not anchored in and committed to the continuation of a context in which it tries to become what it wants to be - and to be very good at it.

It involves a complex quest to comprehend what you really want, with whom, for

what price, how and why.

But what is it that we want to understand by a context? And what is the relationship between a context and a locality? In simple, but effective terms, a context is the conditions for understanding and interpreting what is being said and done within it. However, it is extremely important to recognize that while a context does certainly always exist and has certain effects, it is always in the process of being re-interpreted and reconstructed. It is something that is constantly about to become and to happen. But again, it does not happen by itself, or neutrally, but is achieved or imposed via certain actions, visions and symbolic acts.

A context needs to be defined again and again in each new set of circumstances of awoken awareness. A specifically defined context for that particular time and space is the one and only tool that we have for resisting relativism and cynicism. If and when a small gesture starts from a point of view that cherishes and supports a plurality of approaches and versions of the world, the way these different, conflicting modes of being are comprehensible to each other is through the particular, in-depth, detailed descriptions of their contexts. Without these descriptions that are revisable and can be held accountable there is nothing but a destructive battle between the various positions.

Thus, a context involves a constructive, self-critical positioning of oneself in terms of one's own wants and wishes, but at the same time this is done in comparison with other versions of the same reality that we happen to shape and share. A context is what we always return to. It is the backbone of any meaningful participation in the production of knowledge within contemporary art and visual culture.

What about the relationship between context and locality? Here it is vital to recognize that both are concepts that are simultaneously active in the spheres of physical entities and discursive entities. Neither set of entities is, as the nasty old 80's dance-floor killer suggested, solid as a rock, rather they are contested, conflictual and compassionate. Both physical and discursive entities are constantly itching to be re-evaluated and re-visited. However, within each of their particular domains there is also a tendency to maintain the achieved status quo. This is a back-and-forth movement of balancing and bouncing, in which getting away in order to return to the scene of the crime of passion is both possible and preferable in terms of physical reality (moving away, looking in another way) and discursive reality (interpretation and re-reading).

It is also evident that a straight line drawn between a context and a locality is nothing but counterproductive and disruptive - be it in physical or discursive terms. These two entities, context and locality, overlap, but they are not the same. The main significant difference is in their range of activity. A context is a part of a field deliberately brought into focus, whereas a locality is the larger framework within which a number of contexts exist and bounce off each other. A locality is the overall political, social, historical, economic and psychological setting of a context in which some kind of activity or other takes place. But what kind of a locality do we have in mind? This is a version of locality that we have labelled non-naïve (See Vadén & Hannula 2003) and to which we will now turn our attention.

A non-naïve locality is a setting that allows the interaction between the wide variety of participants and forces within it that might otherwise be stopped or limited. A non-naïve locality emphasizes a conflictual comprehension of 'being with', instead of a search for a common consensus. Here it is necessary to underscore the main difference between the assumptions about communication and negotiation that are made within the ramifications of a conflictual site and a consensual site. The latter emphasizes that communication begins when the participants seek to move towards a recognition and realization of the ideal (and idealized) situation of force-free interaction. The most famous protagonist of this view is, as we know, Jürgen Habermas (See Habermas 1981).

The former, on the other hand, starts from almost the opposite direction, from acknowledging that there is no harmony or equality between the participants who are trying to communicate and negotiate with one another. Instead, in this version, communication is based on our ability to recognize and respect these differences and dissonances. What is more, the aim is to learn to live with them in a loving conflict, at the best of times, generating something that is called reasonable disagreement. This is a version of a strategy that is strongly promoted in this book. It is an argument that goes back to Hegel, and which finds its perhaps best-known counterpart today in the writing of Slavoj Žižek. (See Žižek 1997)

A conflictual site makes the seemingly paradoxical claim that it is only when we recognise the hindrances to and impossibilities of communication that we can achieve proper, credible communication between any two participants. It is important to note here how Žižek has developed his analysis of the fruitful dilemma caused by misunderstandings and gaps in communication. To quote:

“...what makes ‘communication’ between different cultures possible is the fact that the limit that prevents our full access to the Other is ontological, not merely epistemological.” (1997, 49) Thus, by recognizing this difference we accept that it is not about knowing (or knowing more or knowing it all), but about accepting the ontological differences between people and also between versions of reality.

A non-naïve locality takes this ontological lead and starts a mean, lean dance with it. A non-naïve locality focuses on the wounds, scratches and dilemmas of the very locality where so many competing wants and wishes cannot but fight and collide. A non-naïve locality involves bruises that are productive. These are bruises caused - descriptively speaking - by the demands to negotiate your ways of being in the world. A process of learning how to lose and to let go in order to be able to gain something else.

Thus, a non-naïve locality starts off from the notion of conflictual needs in any given site and situation. Here, the site and situation are framed from the perspective of the politics of the small gesture. Therefore, as argued in the previous chapter, the focus here is predominantly placed on the relationships between contemporary art, the public sphere, and the open field of politics as politicization. Let me now repeat it: this is about the relationships and about what happens in-between contemporary art, the public sphere and politics. My conviction is that, if they have anything meaningful to do with one another, this is when the parties and protagonists from all sides interact with each other. This is a participation that has no pre-written, clear rules or regulations. A kind of collective leap into an unknown setting in which we all feel as if the blind are leading the naked. A sight that feels slightly uncomfortable, but also necessary and inviting.

This sight is about the triangular drama in which each side tests the other, while defining themselves vis-à-vis the other. The important point is that each side in this triangular drama has the courage to step outside of its usual, safe domain. This implies that all the parties recognize the need to enter the grey, semi-unknown area and to experience what happens in that particular interaction - an activity that is shaped as the process itself is shaped.

Thus, each side has to have the capacity to question its own agenda, its means and aims. This capacity is never symmetrical for those involved. Differences in the ability to question one’s views and opinions are, in fact, inherent in the

process. However, at the same time, we do know from practice that it is often the artist (as an underdog compared to representatives of institutions or companies, for example) who takes the initiative and who has both the need and the desire to negotiate and compromise.

I have labelled this activity non-naive localism. This is a terrible name, and it is certainly one that needs a great deal of explanation. Non-naive localism is the attitude of a situated self in a context in which he/she has decided to focus as much as possible of his/her energy on participating in the production of meanings within a given site. For now, the site for non-naive localism is the city space, the urban environment where you wake up, go to sleep, quarrel with the neighbour's dog and wonder where your dear friends are after waiting over three hours for them in a cafe near the main railway station. It is within this site that you ask some mightily demanding questions. To whom does the city space as an open public sphere belong? What is permitted? What is not permitted? What is encouraged and what is discouraged? What can you do to create alternative sites and sub-sites within an increasingly totalitarian, privatised and commercialised public sphere, where only paid-for information, in the form of commercials, seems to be accepted? What is the responsibility of activists in the public domain, regardless of whether they want to call themselves artists or not? How can we learn to get closer to people who do not agree with us, and how can we fruitfully practice the process of compromise and negotiation with them?

Non-naive localism is an attitude that cherishes all the potentialities, often incredibly under-used, of a specific site in a city space. The 'non' prefixed to 'naïve' means that it does not call on the city to be its studio, that it is not dreaming of a white Christmas in the middle of the December rainy season, and that it is not taking itself too seriously. It is about a vivid awareness of the distinct past tense of a context, both discursively and physically.

The 'non' prefix also suggests that we acknowledge the basic tenets of any kind of meaningful activity within the public sphere, which can be exemplified - just so we do not forget this option for our route - in a museum or a gallery space. It is, in fact, the A and B of the ABC elements that define the public sphere: a) the quantity of participation; and b) the quality of participation. Thus, we can all admit that in each field of contemporary society there are definitely enough things going on, everywhere. What we do not need is more of the same. We need quality, and what we mostly need is to find ways to make different acts and discourses, and to lure them into the same site in the space of the city, to collide

with, confuse and see each other. Face to face, Lego to Lego.

The difficulty with this task is the obvious erosion of the common public sphere. This is a trend that has been around for some time, but which has certainly accelerated in recent years due to both the increased privatization of formerly publicly-owned property and amazing technological developments. The dream and illusion of a common, general public sphere on any site has received a decisive blow from the structural changes that the Internet has made possible and visible. There is no need to overstress this development, but the fact is that the Internet allows a de-centralised, semi-uncontrolled means of sharing information and performing acts of communication, rendering the idea of a single centre ridiculous. It does not demolish centres of power, in terms of money, culture or politics, but it does compel them to exist, not as single entities, but as plural ones that cannot sustain overall control and hegemony. There is always the grey area that exists both within and beside those power centres, always the zone that spells room for alternatives - but a zone that must constantly be re-made and re-shaped.

The disintegration of the common public sphere into thousands of tiny segments has increased concern about the possibility of there being any form of criticality within contemporary society. And yes, all of a sudden, with the concept of criticality, we have an exceptionally good theme, an intersection at which contemporary art, the public sphere and politics necessarily rub shoulders.

Anxiety about the existence of a meaningful critical attitude and response to the affairs of the world is based on two concerns. First of all, many people stress the blatantly powerful framework of capitalism that undermines the possibility for critical reflection. When everything has become a product, it seems difficult to claim that criticism itself can avoid turning into one, too. The other problem relates to the other end of the social scale. Commentators see the current fashion in the Academy as a way of undermining the potential of criticality. If and when critical theory becomes the norm and turns into a doxa of its own, who is there to criticize the critics? (See Butt 2005)

I believe that, even if each of these concerns contains some substance, the problems of this diminishing room for criticality are inadequately articulated and misleading. Due to the fact that there is no common public sphere, we have to remember the basic characteristics of any site that is a public sphere. As Habermas (1962) argued long ago, the public sphere in itself does not exist, it

is always becoming. It has to be always, again and again, created, maintained, supported, criticised, and renewed.

Therefore, the intellectually honest reaction to the changing character of the public sphere is to act upon it right here, right now, instead of nostalgically looking backwards. In other words, under changed circumstances, we need to define and redefine the notion of the public sphere in a new manner. If we have the ability to face this task, we very soon realise that, due to the explosion of thousands of small or medium-sized discussions, logically speaking, there has to be much more room and much more of the public sphere available.

True, the public sphere is not united, but rather it is plural and at least partly uncontrollable. Whereas the barriers to entering the classical public sphere have often been rather high, participation in a wide variety of smaller public-sphere discussions is now open in terms of accessibility and cost. Once again, what we lack is not the possibility, but rather the quality of participation. This is not a participation that produces more and more talk, while smoothly bypassing other people's arguments, without touching them. It is a participation that listens and watches carefully. Expressed from another angle: we do not need to know more, what we absolutely need is to manage to accept our knowledge, to take it ethically seriously and, finally, to try to act upon it.

### 3.1 Productive Questions About Misunderstandings

If and when the situation is a conflictual meeting of a variety of different localities that exist in the same or a similar enough time-and-space-bound context and locality, how do we get along in such circumstances? How can we avoid these clashes and collisions developing into violence? How can we - against all the odds - turn them into something productive? And how can we do this without invoking the ideal of the common good of a consensus in a restrictive sense?

The proposition here will take advantage of the existing conflicts of interpretation and views of reality. It does not try to hide the inherent, important controversies, but faces them as both a chance and a challenge. It does not end up in a whirlpool of misunderstandings, but begins the whole journey from the positionings provided by mutual misunderstanding between all the participants. Misunderstanding here refers to the impossibility of person A fully comprehending the way person B defines the central concepts integral to his/her self-

understanding. It is evident that A and B will use the same concepts when discussing the same theme, but the content of these concepts is not the same. The question is, obviously: How much do they differ and why do they differ? Furthermore, the ethics of misunderstanding claim that person A can never fully understand the motivations, wishes, values, fears and needs of person B - and vice versa. Even with these persons expressing the best of wishes and having the best qualifications and the necessary time, there is always something left in-between that cannot be transferred, translated or made transparent from one specific and singular experience to another.

However, this certain degree of inability and inaccessibility is not a problem, but a recognition of a really important characteristic of human relationships. This is the recognition that any entity is a unique and specific singularity of its own. Every person, every act, and every utterance needs to be treated individually. Not as an autonomous component, but as an individual belonging to and gaining its meaningfulness from the context that it takes place and is shaped in.

This singularity of a being gains its singularity only in a relationship with other singularities. Thus, it is not a singularity in itself, but a specific type of singularity, a part of a whole - a whole that is not a ready-made, solid setting, but an ongoing process. The idea of a specific singularity implies a certain degree of weak incommensurability. In other words, there is always something in the experience or act of person A that cannot be separated from the actual experience. It is therefore to a certain extent not translatable. Something cannot be communicated.

Here, obviously, one of the main concerns is how to define that obnoxious term 'to a certain extent' and that annoying reference to 'something' or 'something else.' These all are and will remain abstract notions without reference to a specific, particular case. A case that stays in balance, not through some ultimatum or strict rule. Instead, it is a kind of rule of thumb, nothing more, and nothing less. A kind of intuition that supports something that is good enough. Something that makes the ends meet, not perfectly and not always even so elegantly, but it does the job. It keeps things going. The idea of 'to a certain extent' is synonymous with 'good enough'. That 'something' is what makes the act or event worthwhile, it is the core content of the activity. It does not exist in an abstraction of the situation in which it becomes that very 'something'. That 'something' exists only for the duration of the rhizomic practice, in its action. It is not a reducible component of some of the structurally identifiable compo-

nents of the context or situation. That 'something' is not defined from the outside, and cannot be comprehended without the goods internal to that particular practice. We will soon return to the idea of goods internal to a practice.

However, what can be said here is that the idea is to put the focus on individual experience. An experience that takes place right here, right now. It creates a uniqueness in its own domain. It is present in an extremely demanding way. This is a mode of being that is at the same time looking for trouble and conflict, but also seeking the comfort of agreement - again referred to as 'to a certain extent.' This is a mode of being that we cannot walk by, that we cannot pass on. It is both a physical and a discursive event. We must stay with it, confront it, talk and walk with it. It relies on a respect for the uniqueness of that particular experience. A respect that requires enough time and resources to be credible and possible. A respect for the inherent difficulty of any kind of meeting that searches for a reciprocal recognition.

But why don't we respect that unique experience? One reason is that we don't seem to trust it. And why should we trust something that relies on uncertainty and on its own progress, on something that is constantly taking shape and being shaped? Well, why wouldn't we? This lack of trust is the flipside of the same reason that, from the other side, reads as a fear of risks and uncertainties. An individual experience taken, cherished and respected as a specific, unique thing takes courage. It stands alone, and must be left standing on its own, not as something that is lonely, but as something that is part of a tradition, part of a context, part of a continuity within a locality.

For many reasons, we tend to sense that this is not enough, that it is too random and too subjective. These are all fears that are based on the knowledge of what the wrong kind of subjectivity and narcissistic action can create. Again, fears that must be acknowledged and dealt with, but fears that cannot be the operative reasons for doing something or not doing something. A small gesture, in consequence, is something that allows coordinated, semi-controlled risks to arise. They are risks that you as a participant define and decide upon, not risks that you are required to tackle via someone else's initiative and interests. This time it is not your boss or anyone else who articulates it, but it is you as a person embedded in your own experience. This is a type of risk taking that is located very far from speculative self-help manuals or manipulative consultant-speak. It is a risk that belongs to you, and it is inherent in the practice that you are trying to sustain and to develop. In the plural, they are risks that serve to

question and to guide us in our self-reflection, but risks that do not, descriptively speaking, force us to fall down or hurt ourselves so that we have to abandon the ongoing journey.

It is evident that a unique, specific experience is partly non-translatable. And that is also how it should remain. The task is not to come up with boxes for categorizing things that brutally make different views and opinions comfortably comparable. Needless to say, that comfortable stance is a sad, dangerous illusion that does not respect the uniqueness of an individual experience. But it must be stressed that an individual experience and an utterance based on it are partly translatable and partly non-translatable. We must maintain a working balance between these two poles. This functioning is based on the multiple characteristics of an experience. Some things can be shared, and some others cannot.

The point of a balance that is constantly seeking equilibrium is that it allows the unique, individual experience to be and to remain partly non-communicative, but, at the same time, it is still available to those who pay enough attention to it. It is something we can relate to. It is not an incomprehensible language or act, but an act that is always simultaneously the same and different.

The sameness in question is shaped by steps taken to form a shifting, but functioning common ground. It is a framework that holds the activities loosely together, generating a presence that slowly but surely increases the recognition by each of the parties that there are plural ways of comprehending realities within the same context. Without force, this presence communicates the existence of beings. But this presence is also a potentiality for something else. And that something else is a result of a development within the site at which recognitions are accepted and respected. It is a promise of a missing link in the processes of 'being with' and communicating without force. The element that is needed is silence. A silent site and situation created in order that others can also speak. Communication as an act that does not rely on force, but instead builds on the speech act that, while it is being spoken, prepares to stop so that others can begin - and these stops occur in succession, one after another, forming a circular activity in which one thing truly leads to another. This is an invitation to participate, to leave and to return while listening and while speaking. (See Agnus 2000, 19)

We have to move very carefully here, because we definitely do not want to end

up in the ditch that we started off avoiding. One of the obvious things that sets the alarms off is the smell of the natural-born mysticism of a specific act. Something that is dressed up in the idea that all important and specific things speak for themselves. In other words, all efforts to bridge the gaps between one uniqueness and another are just window dressing. This is something that people who do not have a direct link to the unique experiences can only talk about.

How can we avoid sliding into the inherently closed universe of things speaking for themselves? The main argument is that for these 'things' to be and remain interesting, worthwhile and meaningful - both to themselves and to their immediate surroundings - they must be in demanding and challenging interaction with other unique experiences and utterances. They must be in interaction with the world at large, and with the microcosm of their own field. This is an interaction that goes back and forth, reminding us of the basic, well-proven principle of democratic governance. A principle that stands for the constant checks and balances between each act and actor. Checks and balances that underline the connection between each specific experience and also the necessity of these parallel actions for one's own development.

But what is the difference between something being 'singular' and something being a 'specific singularity'? This intellectual adventure might seem like a typically annoying form of arm-wrestling that never goes anywhere, except towards more and more empty explanations. There is, however, a very significant difference to be stated. A difference that allows the latter version, the 'specific singularity' to survive with the aim of situated commitment and still not to fall into essentialism, while the other version, 'pure singularity', remains hopelessly uncommitted, universalist, and vaguely essentialistic.

For this difference, we need to recall the source of the definition of singularity. For Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari (1988), singularity defines the mode of being of an entity as singular to its own logic of appearance and existence. The singularity of an identity detaches itself from the specificity of an identity that is claimed to be specific to its own place. Here the attraction to singularity and away from specific identity for Deleuze & Guattari, and for all those who have followed them with such sweet and sour dedication, is the idea that, while specific identity is always bound to a physical location in a space, singular identity escapes these hindrances and is therefore allowed to develop into something else. Here that something is the idea of an identity that is beyond the bipolar either-or constellations so familiar from Cartesian dichotomies. What's more, a

singularity allows us, so the claim goes, to take an innovative and even emancipatory distance from such ugly entities as the nation state, location, gender and so on.

Our main claim for specific singularity is based on its situatedness, which constantly has to be defined and checked up on. This involves an embeddedness that does not shut itself off, but willingly opens up to critique and comparison. The complaint against a pure singularity is that it seems to be so detached from daily experiences that it is no longer credible. It seems to be detached from the tacky details of our everyday quarrels with our closest friends, with the embarrassing, tiny issues that we fight for and against in trying to survive and maintain some sense of self-respect, and also detached from our fears of being forced to be alone, as in lonely. In a word, singularity promises too much - and at the same time not enough. It seems to trust in a big effect, while the specific singularity still trusts in the power and the politics of the small gesture.

A specific singularity allows both parts of the process to co-exist continuously. There will be no endless litanies of harmonious situations and objects, but a constant struggle in which we stumble on step by step - always falling a few half-steps back. In one significant sense, it is all about enjoying the way these differences between a physical site and a discursive site bounce off one another. A specific singularity is based on the recognition that we must bear both aspects in mind. We must have the notion of the hunger and helplessness, but we insist that we be able to imagine how these circumstances can be altered. Not with one big stroke of fortune or a great leap forward, but with small gestures, small acts that are inherent in our daily contexts and locations.

These are acts that recognize their locality and their background, but do not become captivated by them. Instead, they are sufficiently aware of where they come from, but at the same time very anxiously address the idea that, even if we all come from somewhere, both physically and ideologically, we do not need to stay there. What is required is the ability and willingness to participate in the shaping and making of that particular context in which you want to be an active part. This is a recognition of your own limits as a participant, but also a recognition of our responsibility, regardless, to keep on trying to make a difference. Not through large-scale alterations, but through small gestures that activate both the sunny and shadowy sides of our daily environments.

What is also required is a far-reaching acceptance that through this combination

of the specific locality of an identity with the singularity of an identity we can never ever achieve the best of both worlds. The whole journey is based on seriously false premises if we believe we can bring together only the parts that both make sense and are pleasant. Instead, a specific singularity is grounded on and ground through the impossibility of combining them both. This is not necessarily a conflict, but a situation of hostility and also of incomprehension. We should even have the courage to go the distance, and to admit that considerations of being with do not arise in situations of harmony.

These situations that question our ways of being with, that challenge all the participants, while leaving them no choice but to stay with the dilemma, are achieved only when we realize that they begin with the notions and aspects that the people in that same context do not share. Ethical questions are about these conflicts, and the chances of living with them. To quote Ian Agnus: "It is precisely what is not shared that is now the central theme of ethics. Only from this starting-point can possibilities of belonging be instituted which recognize difference, separation from origin, and yet sustain possibilities of identity." (2000, 181)

Therefore, as in any proper and credible meeting, these difficulties are not a problem, they are a necessity. A specific singularity is based on the attitude that there is no credible way of picking the cherries off the cake. There is no solution as in a harmony, but there is the ongoing effort of trying to negotiate and fix the situation in accordance with the motto 'good enough', trying to fit these complex parts and wishes into a compromise that all the participants can live with. And, yes, here we have the main aim: how to live with this. How to live with a complicated reality that helps and hurts, honestly cares for your well-being, but kicks you in the head. The point is that you have really no choice. Or the choice is between the soap-opera reality presented and promoted by the best-of-all-possible-worlds version as against the reality of the tacky, sweaty ordinary acts that sometimes amount to a drama, sometimes a comedy, sometime a tragedy. What is clear is that it will never be a toothless commodity that can be replaced by another product. It will be a version of reality that forces you to be creative and innovative in terms of where to find the individual, collective sense of hope and sensitivity to hope. And yes, a version that also forces you to cope - not only with hope and freedom - but with fear, anxiety and just the common daily, weary, vexing boredom.

But what can a specific singularity be? How can we articulate it, how can we

share it and communicate it with others? Here the emphasis has to be on how to define this particular type of process of communication. At the very start, it is vital to stretch the common boundaries of what communication is and can be. Here the importance is to see it not as passing on a precise set of information from person A to person B. Instead, communication at the cross-roads and meeting point of a specific singularity is about the awareness of being with in the negotiated place and site that is always changing and open-ended. It is about recognizing the other in his/her otherness, and accepting the limitations on getting closer to the other. It is also about seeing communication as a way of sharing this being with. Thus, communication as an unforced way of being there, A being present in one's very 'thisness' that does not just allow, but cherishes the co-existence of other versions of 'thisness' next to itself.

A certain kind of being present in one's 'thisness' as in an immediate presence that very powerfully exists, but which does so in a way that relies on the uncertainty of being and on the wish not to strive with a mode of being for something a priori decided and demanded. This "mode of being" trusts its ability to avoid becoming an object of instrumentalization or commodification. Instead, it leaves enough room for the actuality of a presence to develop and to evolve in accordance with its own specific singularity; a mode of being connected with other beings, and a mode of being that comes from somewhere, but which is on its way to somewhere else. A mode of being that is a specific singularity. It is not a closed entity, but a mode of being that wants interaction with, criticism from and the reflection of other participants in this particular context.

A mode of being that is becoming, but it is becoming in a very peculiar and always particular way. An emergence of something that causes both joy and fear, both positive expectations and howling anxiety. A mode of being that you are allowed to confront while standing aside, or kind of wasting time while wandering about. An act of tarrying in front of an image, as Hans-Georg Gadamer (1994) has put it. Or an act of trembling, in the words of Jacques Derrida, an act that is always partly conscious and partly not controllable, but an act that has achieved what it is after: a re-activation of difference. (see Wood 1999, 115) This is a difference that requires that crucial element of openness. An openness to the fact that things can and often do change and become something else. A minimal requirement of an openness that is both an obligation to yourself and also to others. This is not an invitation to try the impossible task of always being a good, if not a perfect person. It is about us as fallible persons with enough flaws to make jokes about. It is again about something being 'good enough' for us to

have the ability to consider it, to keep it in mind. In the words of David Wood, we have to remember that "openness does not require that one leaves the door open, but that one is always willing to open the door." Therefore, "responsibility then is the experience of that openness." (1999, 117)

But hold on, please, wait a second. How can something be powerfully and meaningfully there and then, but not have an aim of its own? Answering this by saying that this kind of being with is not based on the idea of objectifying oneself and others is perfectly plausible, but it is not enough. We need to dig deeper. And that deeper in this case refers to the necessity to allow that mode of being to happen without overly influencing its framework and its direction beforehand. Obviously, it would be silly to claim that there is no framework, and no direction - that would make the whole activity meaningless. It is a question of scales, dimensions and details, begging us to return to the idea of 'to a certain extent' and to 'good enough'.

But then again, how can we keep the process open? First of all, it seems a bit too self-evident to say, but nevertheless it is important to acknowledge that we have to comprehend the logic of the process - and learn to enjoy it and respect it. This is a process as in becoming a place. Something changes, something disappears in order that something else will take its place. But what is disappearing? And what is taking its place?

Tere Vadén (2006) has reflected on this ongoing, back-and-forth process of changes of perception and of structural constellation via the phenomena of nature and, in fact, especially via the way a very specific species of bear is referred to in the Finnish language. Vadén describes the constant movement of something, in this case a bear, withdrawing, reappearing and returning - so as simply to withdraw again. This is a process during which the protagonists are the same, but they also change. The bear that disappeared from most of the Finnish countryside as a result of agricultural practices and housing developments is now returning as a species that has learned to cope with the new situation. What returns is the bear as a species, but this is not the same bear that went away. Nor is it the same place to which it returns.

What is remarkable in this process of disappearing and returning is the possibility it offers for us to think along with and through it about what is both disappearing and returning. If it is never the same, if the home town that you left 22 years ago is no longer the same, what has become of it? Who decides this,

who has the access to take part in the production of knowledge about it?

We are talking about things taking place one after another, afflicting and affecting each other. This is a combination of sameness and difference. A process that can be analysed so fruitfully using the example of a bear because it is the other - and it is the other that a certain type of civilization has tried to demolish, but it seems to have found ways of surviving and returning again. Vadén asks: What does the return of the bear mean? Something got lost, but something is coming back, and it is coming back both as a new version of itself and as a memory of what it was. It is clear that what we are dealing with is the relationships between the participants within a context shaped simultaneously by all the time phases of past, present and future. But what is becoming, what is happening in these interactions?

Vadén sets the tone by stressing the following question, on purpose first stated here in Finnish: *Mikä on ajatellen tulossa?* (2006, 14) In an attempt at a translation, this complex sentence asks: What is becoming (through) thinking?

It also asks: What is the role of imagination in the thinking processes of letting something become by generating a “return”.

Becoming something is closely connected with the way ‘things’ are referred to. Here we come closer to another important dimension of communication without a teleological aim. This is a usage of articulation that applies to all the potentialities of a coherent, evolving language game. Calling a ‘thing’ X can, as Vadén points out, function, for example, as a description, a clarification, a categorization, as control and as power. It can also be used as a means of betraying expectations, of playing with them or of clearly lying about them. An utterance X can serve and be motivated by a need to be misled, or to wander off, or to be tricked into the opposite corner. It is an act that covers up and deceives in order to generate a conflict that both exists, but at the same time recedes - slowly towards the exit door, camouflaging its moves along the way. And not only that, as in the case of the bear, new ways of articulation also cover up and camouflage what X is and can be. These are all examples that demonstrate the inherent controversies in any language system and language game, and also the constant shifts of power within it.

Thus, a specific singularity relies on and evolves within the open, yet sufficiently protected wound. A wound that helps and hurts, shouts and contemplates a

pleasant silence. It is shaped and made and constantly remade in the opening up of an interpretation. An opening up as in the benefit of a doubt, a being thrown off balance. A specific singularity is an impure and unclean presence. A presence as a fracture. A specific singularity is the recognition of a plurality of versions of a reality and of a plurality of realities within any site and situation. 'Things' do not only get articulated in different ways based on different needs, wishes, aims, interests and fears, they also exist in a different manner from one another.

But how to deal with this confrontation within the meeting point of a specific singularity? Vadén asks for an attitude of persistence. "A view that is defended with persistence is open if it is based on misunderstanding: based on the vulnerability of ones own word and the word that you are confronted with" It is a question of the vulnerability of a being and its mode of being that is ready and open for challenges and new input. This mode of being is not submissive. It is able to breath in and breath out effects, both able to give and to take.

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What does this mean in terms, for example, of the bear that Vadén has written about? "To state the birth of a bear is to situate the place of the bear in us and also to situate our place in the bear. These places are not complete, uniformly fixed. They are filled with tensions and lively contradictions. The question of the birth of the bear is therefore a question about which contradictions take place in the name of the bear." (2006, 65)

In other words, it lures us back to the idea of being with in a relationship. A relationship within which we all simultaneously have an effect and are affected. The question is, of course: What kind of relationships are we after? How can we manage to alter them if we feel like it? And yes, how do we define both the role and the content of a meaningful effect in the procedural existence of a specific singularity?

### 3.2 The Politics of Identity Within a Locality

The theme of relationships within a contextualized site raises the question of the identity of the particular persons taking part in forming and shaking up these contexts. What are we talking about when we talk about identity in a sense that is not metaphysical, not essentialistic, not striving for some long-lost authenticity, but an identity that is based on a procedural 'something else'?

It should not come as a huge surprise that the version of identity that I want to present and work with (and also work for) here is quite far from the idea of a solid entity that, once found, does not change significantly. Instead of this typical good old enemy image of an identity hammered into the unflinching juxtapositioning of us vs. them, I will articulate identity as an ongoing narrative process in which one's identity in connection with the other stories being told is shaped, made and sustained. As a process identity is contested, constructed and conflictual. It is also temporary in character. But, in order to be a serious, credible process, it also has to be a committed, situated and coherently continual endeavour.

The key words here are situated and committed. An identity as a process must always be located somewhere. As a process, it comes from somewhere, it is currently at a certain stage and has a particular vision of where it wants to move towards. This location, as has been argued elsewhere in this book, is defined by characteristically being always both/and. It is simultaneously taking shape and place in a physical and a discursive context. That said, the version of identity that is argued for here is a combination of the specificity of this location (both physical and discursive) and the singularity of this act and event of being someone in the location (again both physical and discursive).

The combination of specificity and singularity can be described using the terms sameness and diversity. Following the lead provided by Paul Ricoeur, expressed in Latin, we have a combination of identity as *idem* and *ipse*. *Idem* stands for sameness, as a hierarchy of significations that support the unchanging core of the self. *Ipse*, on the other hand, stands for what differs for and in a person or a site from one temporariness to the next. *Ipse* is about changes and variations. It is about a dialectic version of the self, a selfhood that can only be created and generated in interactions with other persons. (1992, 2-3)

The question of identity as a diversity and as a selfhood is well articulated and promoted within the contemporary discussion of identity. What we lack is the construct of a combination of the two positions, of either seeing identity as something that is constantly made and re-made or as something that stays the same. Whereas viewing identity as a process quite automatically emphasizes the fluidity and the changing character of an identity, what needs to be filled in are the elements that say how an identity can remain specific to a location without turning into some sort of solid block of this or that type of unwanted and unnecessary essentialism.

First of all, we have to be aware of the core demands for a meaningful sense of identity. These demands go beyond the possibility of change and the celebration of difference. There is a need for belonging, and, again, belonging understood as part of a plurality of existences. As Tariq Modood has argued from a perspective of post-colonial criticism, “an unemotional, cool membership” of this or that community is not enough. We as individuals long for a framework that unites, and brings together actions in such a way that they make sense to us and to others who do and share them. (2005, 207). What we need is a quest to rethink the self in a fashion that allows it to continue on two paths and two ways of shaping itself. These two intertwined partners in that passionate tango are sameness as in your own roots (how you relate to your own background), and diversity as in the routes that you take when constructing your identity. (See Gilroy 2000)

What we need is an understanding of this both/and site and situation in which both sides are necessary - and in which both sides must confront criticism of their ways of shaping an identity. In the words of Maeve Cooke, this kind of criticism (which goes both ways) “reminds us that the self develops its identity as a being located in a plurality of (frequently shifting and conflicting) systems of meaning. We are also reminded that the self is an embodied being, with bodily needs, desires and an affective-emotional constitution that is intimately bound up with its capacities for rational reflection and action.” (1999, 264)

What this criticism amounts to is the task of envisioning an alternative to both essentialism and a free-floating version of the non-situated self, for example, as has been argued for by Agamben (1996). In fact, the idea of specific singularity promoted here goes strongly against Agamben’s idea of ‘whatever’, a version of a community without specific identifications and borders. Agamben’s use of singularity emphasizes how it is achieved and how it exists without an identity. Agamben is trying to articulate a version of a future community, a community that is becoming and a community that does not rely on a separated identity defined vis-avis or in opposition to other communities, races, nations etc. (Ibid. 8, 28) What holds this community together as an idea and as an identity is the feeling of connection and solidarity within oneself. This is a singularity without a specific presence or mode of being, but a singularity that is ‘whatever’. This ‘whatever’ is not indifferent to being. On the contrary, it very much cherishes its openness and its procedural character.

Agamben argues that there is a danger in definitions of identity that are based

on shaping and maintaining a difference. Thus, his alternative is to argue for a community and its identity that are not based on difference and do not produce a difference. Instead, it is again 'whatever' that holds a certain community together. 'Whatever' is indifferent to elements and aspects that form and formulate these differences. It goes beyond a locality, and beyond an identity depending on differences. The point is how 'whatever' emerges in its singularity and how it shapes the flow of its singularity. (Ibid. 30, 36)

The problem with Agamben's vision of singularity as 'whatever' is precisely what Agamben and others following him see as its main benefit and accomplishment. The idea behind 'whatever' is to get away from the current barriers within a locality and away from its brutal histories, both of which dominate one's mode of being. However, even if it is understandable that there is a need to get a distance from and new perspectives on our locality and context-bound mode of being, it is not that evident that denying the importance of a location-bound mode of being is the answer. Nor, to put it bluntly, is it a credible way of carrying out a successful re-evaluation and re-interpretation of our being-in-the-world.

The core argument of this book is, in fact, very much contrary to Agamben's. Instead of denying this location-bound identity any role, a version of an identity as specific singularity grounds its journey and the guidelines for that journey specifically in the complications and confusion caused by our relationship with a location-bound mode of being. A mode of being that is incapable of a meaningful re-articulation of its background and its presuppositions, without the necessary knowledge of that particular background and its presuppositions. The idea of 'whatever' is a beautiful construct for a community.

The idea has potentialities, but those potentialities are without credibility if they lack the tackiness of the daily experience of dealing with difference and with one's mode of being in the world.

This criticism of 'whatever' does not mean that there is an inherent hierarchy that applies to various versions of reality or that a more problematic and unpleasant comprehension of our mode of being is hierarchically preferable to a less committed and attached version. The argument for the embeddedness of our being in the world (as it is experienced individually) is not based on moralistic views of whose suffering or whose pleasure is more plausible or preferable. The argument urges the necessity of facing and confronting these pluralities of

the experience of embeddedness. An experience that is always partly non-translatable and non-communicative, but an experience that always co-exists and co-emerges within the same location with other experiences. Next to one another, bouncing off one another.

The argument against 'whatever' states that, precisely because the process of making and shaping differences is so problematic and so dangerous, it is necessary to pay a great deal of attention to 'thisness'.

The point that so easily goes missing is that, while we can analyze and articulate a difference, this in itself does not imply that this difference is solid, that it is blindly supported and justified, and that it cannot be altered. On the contrary, the procedural identity of a specific singularity survives only on the premise that the differences that it deals with are constructed and contested, manipulated and flexible. In other words, they are differences that are by nature productive. Not neutral and not innocent, but productive. The question is, thus, what do the differences that our experience of being in the world creates and generates produce? Or to pose the question from another angle: How can we make a meaningful difference within that sphere of production?

Funnily enough, the question of how to make a difference leads us back to the notion of 'to a certain extent' dealt with briefly in the previous pages. The ever-recurring classic How to implies a pointing out of where it is supposed to happen, which in itself frames the contexts for the activity. In other words, How to requires and presupposes a comprehension of the past-present-future horizons of that particular site. This is not a full comprehension, but is based on the idea of 'good enough', so that it allows us to participate and to make sense of the context and its inner structures and potential developments. What I am talking about is something that often gets labelled "goods internal to a practice". This is an Aristotelian concept, which provides us with a constructive view of understanding what "to a certain extent" can mean contextually. A concept that is not necessarily any more complicated than saying that good practice comes from good practice.

But let us not take that easy way out. Instead, let us see how Alasdair MacIntyre, one of the most prominent contemporary Aristotelian philosophers, defines a practice. "By a 'practice' I am going to mean any coherent and complex form of socially established cooperative human activity through which goods internal to that form of activity are realized in the course of trying to achieve those stan-

dards of excellence which are appropriate to, and partially definitive of, that form of activity, with the result that human powers to achieve excellence, and human conceptions of the ends and goods involved, are systematically extended.” (1985, 187) It is helpful to emphasise that for MacIntyre kicking a ball is not a practice, but playing football is, as is playing chess. Along the same lines, planting carrots is not a practice, but farming certainly is.

But what does this mean for our purposes? The answer is fairly obvious. It means that we have to respect the experiences of a given practice and to try to comprehend the processes by which goods internal to that practice have come about, how they are currently seen and interpreted, and especially what differences of interpretation there are within that practice about how to achieve the best possible, most meaningful results. In other words, we have to take, borrow and steal the energy and time needed to participate in the discourses within which the goods internal to that particular practice are debated, quarrelled about and even dismissed. The task is to try to do this coherently and consistently - always respecting the fact that each side of the argument needs the others in order to develop and survive.

The never-ending, constantly demanding discourses on the particular goods internal to a particular practice are one of the main ways we are able to articulate what a specific singularity can be as an identity in process, but an identity that will not and cannot escape into any kind of ‘whatever’ in order to be credible and meaningful. This means that we have to stay with the experience, and to pay attention to all its details, and to see it as a continuity of experiences that are in themselves singular, but specific to that continuity.

### 3.3 The Horseman's Story

#### The Everyday Politics of Fanni Niemi-Junkola

The picture comes into focus and the camera moves around, shooting the trotting horse. It is a horse race in winter: the sheer speed, the cruel breeze and the horse's hoofs working up a smooth, strong, continuous movement. An impressive, even dangerous continuum, inevitably drawing us in. Our sight adapts, focuses, and finally gets a grip of the action, giving us a chance to participate. This particular race is part of a larger work by the Finnish artist Fanni Niemi-Junkola, as well as being an independent piece. The larger whole is a portrait of Jalmari Svart, a professional horseman with a Roma background. Time, place and profession turned to lifestyle come together in Svart - A Horseman's Story:

three generations, whose lives are built on and bound up with horses and horse racing. Grandfather, son and daughter; stables, horseman's skills, races and preparations for them.

The leading role has been given to the Svarts' everyday life, its inner rhythms delicately captured by the camera. Still, the life has not simply been filmed: Niemi-Junkola has come face to face with the strange, unfamiliar lifestyle and portrayed it not by force or by twisting the facts, but by building up the story one step at a time, participating in the family' on its own terms.

The result is a beautiful description of a family working with horses. The film maintains a spirit of calmness and good will. It calls out to the viewer, making a gentle demand that we take a seat, wait, and then share in the carefully considered and staged rhythm, which is both intense and touching.

Yet the portrayed peacefulness and closeness are only one layer of the story. The harmony of this short film seems very simple, but it manages to conceal the many negotiations and compromises required to reach it. We can sense a diverse field of possible conflicts lurking in the background, avoided only by very gentle, time-consuming manoeuvres: meeting, getting closer, checking or even changing the viewpoint.

It is obvious that the strength of the film comes from these meetings between people, and the way they are reciprocally handled. This work has been developed through a process and is controlled by its content, by Niemi-Junkola's ability to focus on the essentials and to let the everyday life of the Svart family take the lead. It is the horses that are at the centre of this particular everyday life: they are the common subject matter, the open door for both the artist and the subject to go through. This door provides a chance for establishing and deepening an interaction between the two. Niemi-Junkola has put her trust in the strength of this horse-centred everyday life and chosen a slower pace of storytelling, which is somewhat unusual for her, but at the same time provides a firm foundation for the film.

There is good reason to emphasize that in her works she does not render everyday life as being more than it is. The everyday, compassionate and demanding encounters are not presented as or transformed into some overwhelming glory. The hard-won attitude of trusting in these moments of resistance and anxiety stays where it must stay: we feel the weight of our freedom and our responsibil-

ity. This sensitivity comes across as something we could relate to like a stranger, something that is familiar and unfamiliar at the same time. It is an attitude that has a name. A name called respect, yet not just any kind of respect, but a compassionate version of respect that grows out of the astonishment that something special and unique has become possible. And yes, with this compassionate respect, there might be a chance that we will dare to look for a feeling and for an opportunity that is raised by this embeddedness in daily struggles and conflicts, not capturing or chasing them, but tolerating and learning to live with them - making and maintaining an involved commitment.

What about the politics? The political dimension is a substantial part of the film. But, as with meetings on a personal level, the political dimension of the film is only crystallised through background knowledge. Niemi-Junkola's choice is full of respect for individual experience. She portrays otherness and being different in Finnish society, but does not make this obvious or easy to see. Instead of simplifying things, she offers a story with multiple levels, a story whose spontaneous calmness removes all stereotypes and simple assumptions. This is not a work of politics, but of questioning and of making the themes vulnerable and subject to change; and thus political.

Fanni Niemi-Junkola neither tries to be different, nor does she shy away from it. She is very curious and eager to get closer to the otherness that we know exists and is a part of Finnish society, but which rarely surfaces or becomes clear. In this case, it is Roma culture, so near and yet so far for many of us - like a group of hazy pictures without clear content.

Niemi-Junkola approaches this otherness with a double gesture. She stretches her arms out across the river of bruises and prejudices that colour and mould the togetherness that we are thrown into. She reaches out a hand to the Roma family, as well as to the viewer. This is not an offer of some nice, romanticised otherness, but of the everyday normalities, which are sufficient in themselves. This is a powerful and necessary gesture. It is reality that demands that we stop and spend time thinking about the comparative and interactive questions about who we are, where we come from, and how we face the challenges and possibilities of our everyday lives.

### 3.4 Sentimental Season - Johanna Billing's Magical World

In the far left-hand corner of the ground floor of the old tobacco factory site at

the 2005 Istanbul Biennial we found something strange. Something that somehow did not fit in. We were confronted with a beautiful, solemn video loop focusing on a group of children practising and playing a very particular song. What we saw was something that most of us deliberately want to avoid and not pay attention to. This was a sentimental season, during which basically everyone was suddenly fumbling for a handkerchief. We were a surprised audience with slightly wet eyes and certainly a warm heart.

But hold on? What is going on? Did I say a children's music group? Some oh-so-lovely kids rehearsing an uplifting song in a cultural centre that could be located anywhere and everywhere. We see their puzzled, but incredibly serious faces, we sense their excitement, the awkwardness of trying to perform in a language that is not theirs. We follow the movements of the camera, we adjust to the style of editing that borrows so very nonchalantly from classical pop/rock videos. The linear narrative is broken, but the coherence of the event is framed and secured by the factual duration of the song. There is a beginning and an end - and the never-ending repetition of the loop. And yes, in between, you notice the process slowly building up, being brought together with almost caressing editing that flows smoothly from one face to another, from one significant detail to the next.

Is this not a little too much? Too close to something that for good reason is labelled social pornography? Too much like a product made for all the granddads and grandmas in the imaginary public sphere?

With her film *Magical World* Johanna Billing has managed to create something of a failure-proof heartbreaker, a real-deal tearjerker. But, contrary to our deep-seated cynical inclinations, there is absolutely nothing wrong with her style, her attitude, or the resultant film. On the contrary, it gives us a wonderful example of how contemporary art can steal back themes and moments that we thought were lost forever.

The crucial difference between Billing's work and the flood of sentimental images of children that we have no choice but to witness day in day out is as follows: whereas the mainstream images of children are mostly instrumentalized for commercial use, Billing's piece is not a product. She is not desperately trying to sell us anything. She is not promoting anything. She is not articulating a social issue or a political agenda. Her film is a work of art.

As an artwork, *Magical World* is not holy, it is not above us. It is not detached

from our daily realities. It is here and now. It is here and now in a way that is simply amazing. It does not shout, it does not beg. It is a film that achieves a rare atmosphere of its own. It is unique in the way it has the courage to get closer and closer to the sentimental season that it wants to address and cherish.

I believe *Magical World* is a very brave work. It is an example of civil courage that goes against the tide of our times. It does not oppose the commercialization of our life-worlds. However, neither does it just passively stand by waiting to be bought, sold and recycled. Instead, Billing offers us an alternative. She shows us how it is indeed not only possible, but even preferable to deal actively with these major concepts and feelings that seem so cute and phoney, but nevertheless important. We need them back. We need these sensations and words for our own use right here, right now. We need to have alternative ways of defining what is hope, seen both individually and collectively. We have to be able to provide alternative versions of love and hate, misery and pleasure. Versions that are not flat, one-sided slogans, but entities characterized by inner tensions and loving conflicts. Versions that feel the heat.

The extra special special effect in Billing's film is obviously the song she has chosen to cover. With this choice, Billing is, funnily enough, following in the footsteps of that rather famous director called Tarantino. Both of them re-activate songs from the past that deserve to be heard and recognized again. With Billing's work, the original song was written by the black American singer Sidney Barnes in 1968. A song that definitely deserves to be born again. A song because of which I cannot but ask for help. It is a wish. Someone, somewhere out there. Please please mister or misses postman. Does anyone have a copy to spare or lend of the original version of *Magical World*?

Afterword. Later on, I did manage to track this recording down. I found a CD version of it in a record shop called Black&White in Sörnäinen, Helsinki. A specialist shop dealing in vintage vinyls and reissued CD's. When I asked about this particular song, the shop owner, a fair-haired man in his mid 40's, all of a sudden paid very careful attention. He looked up with a mile-wide smile caressing his face. He knew the song, and he knew where it came from. *Magical World* was indeed written by Sidney Barnes, but it is performed and recorded by a band called Rotary Connection in which Barnes was one of the three singers. The sleeve notes on the CD reissue describe the music of Rotary Connection as psychedelic soul. *Magical World* appears on the *Aladdin* album, released by the band in 1968. It is truly a mind-blowingly beautiful song - in the original record-

ing, too, in which the central role is played by the brilliant voice of singer Minnie Riperton. But what about the rest of the album? Well, let's just say that it can easily be reserved for the most courageous souls among us searching for that, errr, psychedelic soul.

### 3.5 The First Birmingham Complaint Choir Tellervo Kalleinen & Oliver Kochta-Kalleinen

The ARS exhibition series is an institution in its own right in the truest sense of the phrase. It has taken place every five or six years since 1960. An event that began as an attempt to introduce contemporary art practice and discourse to a post-WWII Finnish audience, it has developed into a significant exhibition that always sparks great expectations and sometimes even great experiences.

This year's exhibition focuses on the potential for art to play a significant role in our daily lives. It addresses the ongoing process by which artists increasingly deal with issues that are not just about art for art's sake, but about something else. At ARS 2006 that 'something else' is dubbed the "Sense of the Real", which serves as the show's title. This is a show with 40 artists or artist groups that covers all the potential mediums and occupies the entire Kiasma Contemporary Art Museum in Helsinki from January to August of 2006.

"Sense of the Real" confronts us with a genuine dilemma. Its aim of getting closer to the everyday issues and challenges that we are stuck with is both sympathetic and important. At the same time, this approach causes confusion, as the exhibition fails to situate the personal version of the real that the curators are after. In other words, whose 'real' are we talking about? The problem is highlighted when it dawns on us that not many of the works manage to move or touch us. This is a value-laden interpretation, which nevertheless points the finger where it hurts: How much do we need to know and be aware of someone's 'real' in order to be able to relate to it?

To counter this feeling, I have decided to focus on a single work, which avoided the aforementioned difficulties and disasters by generating something that we do not come across all that often: it is the only work in the exhibition that gets the audience to respond by laughing - out loud.

The work is The 1st Complaints Choir of Birmingham by the Finnish-German duo, Tellervo Kalleinen & Oliver Kochta-Kalleinen who manage to do something highly enviable in an eight-minute video. They manage to invite us to laugh with their work and at the same time to laugh at ourselves. Indeed, they manage to

massage our cortexes, creating something that can be called intellectual entertainment.

The work in itself has the following ingredients. It was made during Tellervo and Oliver's short, but solid fortnight's residency in Birmingham. They conducted a two-week-long workshop with the aim of founding a unique choir. The project focussed on compiling and setting the choir members' complaints to music, to be sung, performed - and enjoyed - by the choir members themselves.

Before interviewing the artists, I will try to argue why this particular work is not only interesting, but something that gives us poor lost souls a kind of hope - a hope that reminds me of a song from over 20 years ago about The Milkman of Human Kindness.

Accessibility: This work deals with issues and patterns in daily life that we all share and that we all reproduce ad nauseam. What we see is what the title of the work promises. We see a performance by a choir that complains, a choir made up of about 15 fairly young people who all share the same motivation: complaining and having fun at the same time.

Thus, the work is about how people in Birmingham complain about their surroundings, their lives, their work, the price of beer, the unfriendliness of other people, and how the bus is always late. To give you a taster, this is how the song starts:

Birmingham has changed so much, I don't like it anymore/Birmingham has changed so much, I liked it more before/Recycling is a token here, they do the very least/And if I keep on cycling here, I'm gonna be deceased

With the glorification of complaining - the most common thing on earth - the artists create a platform to which we all have access, a work that achieves the impossible: turning something nasty and negative into something productive and positive. Indeed, they shape and achieve a connection with the theme on such a vast scale and with such power it reminds me of another work done in an absolutely different style and on a different scale, but one that enjoys the same broad potential audience. The work I have in mind is Olafur Eliasson's Weather Project, which was in the Tate Modern Turbine Hall in 2004. These gestures are as far apart as they can be in terms of scale and focus, but as with complaints, we all talk about the weather non-stop, but we do it in slightly different ways.

We all, if we want to, have access to it - to talk and walk and argue with it.

Becoming aware of what you do when you do what you do: The background to the work is that Kalleinen and Kochta-Kalleinen were invited to Birmingham for a fairly short residency. On the site, they faced the common dilemma about what to do in a space that you don't know and have little time to get to know better. So they decided to deal with something they realized people in Birmingham often do - something that is common to everyone.

Kalleinen and Kochta-Kalleinen started collecting different versions of people complaining. They advertised the project, distributed flyers. Along with the material and the people interested in forming a choir, they found a composer to write the music. The whole thing was completed during a two-week workshop, and in itself represents a constantly evolving process and a collaborative achievement.

This is a magnificent song that, for example, highlights the following deep-seated opinions: My minidisk player is broken/sex pressure is too low/I don't like bad hair days, and my beard won't grow. It describes the ways we live life as it is: People eat my biscuits when we have a pot of tea/They never share their biscuits/no one appreciates me. It's a song that tricks us in a cruel way; it lures us into laughing at our own petty, recurring follies.

Rethinking the role of the artist: My claim is that in this work the necessary self-critical and self-reflective process focuses on more than issues of ego and collaboration. Here we have the artist as someone who takes part in the production of knowledge within contemporary visual culture in a way that turns something totally ordinary into something unique. A process of transformation that we cannot take for granted, and a result that cannot be forced. A process not driven by the need to make an object, but one that is happily dependent on the motions and emotions of a socially engaged practice, in which the outcome can never be fully predicted. It can be envisioned, but not fully planned. What we have is an art that structures a process to enable elements of surprise to live and breathe - and to kick.

The Pleasure Principle: Kalleinen and Kochta-Kalleinen's work was certainly easy to locate within the numerous white-and-black boxes built into the exhibition space. Theirs was the only box inside which people were laughing. This was a very distinctive laughter of a collective kind, a kind of shy laugh that tries to

conceal itself, but when the dam breaks, it all comes out without any hesitation or sophistication.

Why did we all laugh? What's so funny about people in Birmingham complaining in a choir? Nowadays we are even used to a choir of ugly men screaming; do we really need a choir that complains? The beauty of this work ultimately lies in a balancing act. As a concept I would never buy it. But as a work shown and seen at ARS 2006 it had me defenceless. I had to laugh. Not at, but with - with them and with myself. Kalleinen and Kochta-Kalleinen did something rather silly, something rather unnecessary and childish. They did something that spread joy and pleasure, joy and pleasure were very much present in the actions and faces of the people in the choir. 'God-damn-kilo-gram,' they were having fun at the rehearsals, on street corners and in pubs singing the chorus:

Why does my computer take so very long?  
Why can't the bus driver talk to anyone?  
And why is the beer so expensive in town?

I want my money back  
My job is like a cul-de-sac  
And the bus is too infrequent at 6.30

Why don't they pay me more?  
Life was good before  
And I am thirsty

Interview April 2006

Mika Hannula: How did you manage to get the participants involved in such a magnificent way, which is very apparent in the work? In other words, what did you do in order for the workshop and the work itself to function so beautifully?

Tellervo Kalleinen & Oliver Kochta-Kalleinen: Projects based on volunteers are markedly difficult. They often portray the enthusiastic participants in a semi-pitiful light. We believe this occurs only if the artists put themselves above the participants in one way or another. Our theme was complaining, and we knew very well that we do this as often as the others - there was no danger of feeling superior here!

Here is a short list of conscious choices that we made:

- 1) By taking part in the choir we joyfully shared in the particular sense of embarrassment that arises from being an amateur.
- 2) We cooked a dinner for them during each rehearsal. This gesture expressed our respect. Eating together allowed people to get to know each other and it also generated common ground for the group.
- 3) We made it very clear that this was not a joke. We wanted the end result to be the best possible, and we took the time and energy needed to rehearse the song. This was a clear message: we took them and their complaint choir seriously. As such, they also took the project seriously. There were a lot of participants who had never sung before (Oliver, for example). For them, and for others, it was pleasant to experience how the song slowly, but surely started to sound like music. This generated a collective sense of pride, which we can see in the resulting video.

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MH: What kind of conflicts took place during the workshop and how did you deal with them?

TK & OKK: At the very first rehearsal there was this scary, huge, red-faced fellow who kept giggling to himself. Everybody looked worriedly at him. We began the workshop with everyone writing a poem about themselves in five minutes. This opening functioned well. The poems were absurd and funny, and they made people laugh. The atmosphere started to be cosy, but it immediately got tense again when the red-faced man read his poem, in which he complained about how hard it is to fuck a chicken.

At a certain point in the evening this same man said out loud: "I am bored stiff, fuck off". Then he walked away. We never heard from him afterwards. A couple of others also failed to show up to the next rehearsal. We suspect that this might have been due to the behaviour of this man and the vibes that he spread.

Thus, there was no actual conflict, but via this event we became aware of the fact that we were not at all ready - and had no qualifications - for dealing with potentially disturbed people in the project. We have no idea how the project would have developed or turned out if this man had stayed to the end.

MH: Characteristically, this type of process cannot be fully controlled. At the same time you want to and need to produce a result. Can you say something about this balancing act?

TK & OKK: There were great many aspects that we could not control. These were, for example:

1) We made the most inviting and informative advertisements we could about the project. There was, nevertheless, a huge risk that nobody would participate. And we had no control over the number of participants, nor did we have control over their singing abilities. The project was open to whoever wanted to attend.

2) The lyrics of the song were entirely in the hands of the participants from Birmingham. We collected their complaints when they signed on for the workshop. For the first practice we divided them into thematic groups: complaints about Birmingham, complaints about other people, complaints about world affairs, and complaints about themselves. At the first practice we asked them to choose the group for the theme that they complained about most enthusiastically. In these smaller groups they chose the complaints that they wanted to focus on, and put them into the structure of a song. Later on the musician responsible for the song did some fine-tuning of the lyrics.

3) At the choir rehearsals we were just another part of the group. Mike Hurley - a musician that our residency hosts introduced us to - conducted the rehearsals.

Knowledge of the upcoming public performance energized the practising of the song from the outset. The participants knew that we were making a song out of their complaints - and everyone realized how big a challenge this is. A lot of them took part because they were interested in this challenge. The strict goal-orientated character of the process did not constrain it. Instead, it gave it a very clear framework and direction.

We made sure that there was room and time at the practices for things outside the plans. We ate together after each session, and people could hang around as long as they wanted. For example, the rap section of the choir song came about spontaneously during an improvisatory rap session after one dinner.

MH: You will be doing the workshop again during the ARS 2006 exhibition in Helsinki. How will it be different from the one in Birmingham?

TK & OKK: We think the Birmingham project was a success, but we still want to alter some details in the next step. They are:

1) In Birmingham all the participants were of a similar age with an interest in culture. In Helsinki we will pay extra attention to having the advertisement for the workshop distributed through lots of different channels, so that people from different parts of society will have heard about the possibility of participating.

2) In Birmingham we did not put enough effort into making the project known outside of art circles. Advertisements for the choir performance were predominantly directed at the network of the art organization that had invited us there. We will also fix this in Helsinki.

3) It is evident that the Helsinki Complaint Choir will be different. About 90 people have signed up for it. In Birmingham we had about 15 participants, and with a group of that size we were able to generate a friendly, intimate feeling, while having a chance to get to know each choir member well. With the Helsinki project this will be a much greater a challenge.

MH: You seem to place a lot of stress on the process of invitation?

TK & OKK: It's no trivial matter figuring out how to send out the invitation for people to take part in the complaints choir and how to reach a diverse range of citizens of the particular city. Even with the idealistic assumption that you could invite everybody, it is difficult to create an open space, or a neutral ground on which encounters between a wide range of people can really take place.

The artist Willie Doherty, also taking part in ARS 2006, asked us an interesting question. How would we do a complaints choir in Northern Ireland, in a town where the East bank is Catholic, the West bank is Protestant, with the river as a demarcation line between segregated territories? It would be very challenging to organize a choir that bridges the gap between the East and West bank, and a lot of thought would have to go into the setting up of the project, issuing the invitations and finding a space that is not coded in favour of anyone. Still, because the work combines two very basic forms of human expression - complaining and singing - (and surely both Catholics and Protestants are equally good at both) the complaints choir could create encounters that are not imaginable otherwise.

MH: So will there be more complaint choirs starting up after Helsinki? Have you already considered making a patent application for this model of complaint choir?

TK & OKK: We are eager to try out the concept in different cultures where people's problems seem different, at least to outsiders - and where the culture of complaining may differ too. We also have to admit that Willie Doherty got us very interested in Northern Ireland... But thinking about the question of a patent, there is a story linked to this, too. An artist group from Belgrade has asked if they could do the project in Belgrade. Their attitude of "sharing concepts" was very refreshing! We nevertheless had to write back that, actually, Belgrade is one of the places we are dreaming of doing the project. Because the project is a great opportunity for us to learn about people in different places, we would like to create the complaints choir of Belgrade ourselves. Perhaps we should have just said, sure, go for it, and watched how the Complaints Choir started to live totally its own life, independent of us.

Chapter 4.  
The Demands and Challenges of  
Committed Participation

For the sake of clarity let me emphasize that this chapter will focus on the complex bundle of questions about how and why we as individuals can participate in making and shaping our daily contexts and the habits of our hearts. This chapter, as the title says, is about the demands and challenges of committed and situated participation. It is about you and me. It is about us - about any of us who feel the need and necessity to try to actively take part in the production of meanings within various field of knowledge production.

Thus, the key words here are you and me as embedded individuals, not as narcissistic sleepwalkers, but as confused yet compassionate collaborators. Even if the focus in the latter part of the chapter shifts from individual acts towards the organizations and institutions, we must not forget the level of the individual actor and agent. If and when analyses on the structural level make any sense, it is only if they manage to keep their eye on the ball: the task of creating chances for different acts and interests to become what they want to become.

Acts done by individuals, again, not as free-floaters, but as mutually involved actors in supportive, but challenging networks.

This chapter is also about the necessity of always creating and re-generating the content of the public domain and its discourse. The public sphere is an abstract notion that always demands spatial and temporal descriptions and actions. This is not the same as saying it is an ahistorical concept or idea. What a comprehension of the making of a space in a state of becoming underscores is the constant, never-ending need to return to this task of articulating that public sphere; the fact that we cannot take the existence of an open-ended public domain for granted. Neither can we rely solely on the core functioning of a public sphere on its own. The claim that no public sphere exists independently is a call for the reshaping and remaking of that given site in line with its actual circumstances.

That said, I am fully aware of the shortcomings of the liberal idea of an open public sphere, where, so the story goes, all interested parties can collaborate and exchange ideas equally. This ideal situation is a beautiful dream, but not much more than that. Public space is a tool for control, and a tool for achieving certain ends. But it is not one single unity or entity. What the last 20 years of globalized economics and politics have shown us is how the dream or illusion of a single public sphere has been reconstructed and refurbished into thousands of sub-plots and new genres that none of the participants or those in charge can have a complete completely control of. What we are talking about is

the discourse known as a network society.

This is a constellation of human affairs in which the main unit is not an individual, and not a collective, but a network. According to one of the main advocates of network society, Manuel Castells (2000, 510), a network “is a set of interconnected nodes. A node is a point at which a curve intersects itself.” As example nodes we can take the stock markets, or a drug trafficking collective with clandestine laboratories, or Wikipedia. A network is based on connectedness and consistency. Or to put it in other terms, it is based on interaction and exchange; in short: on flows of this and that, and a little bit of something else, too. These are flows that are “purposeful, repetitive, programmable sequences of exchange and interaction between physically disjointed positions held by social actors in the economic, political, and symbolic structures of society.” This refers to flows of capital, information, images, sounds, technology - and the rest. One of Castells’ main claims is that the spaces that these flows create and generate are the new dominant forces. “The space of flows is the material organization of time-sharing social practices that work through flows.” (Ibid. 442)

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This is, no doubt about it, a discourse that is not without its own kind of hype, but which has effects that cannot be denied. There is no unity, but unimaginable numbers of segments that are not hierarchically constructed, but which co-exists in a network constellation. An absence of transparent hierarchy does not mean that there are no power games going on. What it means is that there are enough opportunities beyond the control of wealth concentration and political manipulation. There are, in other words, still enough grey areas for participating in shaping and making a public sphere. Not something that might speak to the masses, but which has the pulling power to attract enthusiasts about this or that subject.

But what is it that we are talking about? We are talking about the presuppositions and requirements for what it takes to shape a context to which it is meaningful and fruitful for you to commit yourself. We are talking about the basic core issues that are common to any kind of situated participation. We are, and will do so in a more detailed way a little later on, talking about reciprocity in our being in the world, and we are touching on how we can generate networks that are successful and sustainable. But we are also talking about why we do what we do.

Here it is helpful to look back to the core idea about what a critical theory stands

for. Once again, we have to leave behind the pretension of being self-impressed, proud protagonists of the avant-garde or self-appointed cool, weird outsiders. No matter what kind or type of self-delusions we cherish, we are part of the game, part of the mess. What we ought to strive for is the perspective of a critical, reflective participant. Following this line of thinking, we can have a workable definition of critical processes and participation. "The goal of critical inquiry is then not to control social processes or even to influence the sorts of decisions that agents might make in any determinate sort of way. Instead, the goal is to initiate public processes of self-reflection." (Bohman 2001, 100-101). Or to quote Michel Foucault, the same thing can be articulated as: "that critique is the movement by which the subject gives himself the right to question truth on its effects of power and question power on its discourses of truth." (In Butler 2002, 220)

The process of critical and reflective thinking relies on our ability to keep on keeping on. We must constantly follow our shadow and chase our imaginary tail, not be sorry about it or worried about it, but aware of it.

The key is situating one's self and how it has been constructed, and how that might, in fact, be altered, or even must be altered in the course of the inquiries. It is a process in which the aim of conceiving of and owning a truth leads to nothing but misery. What we need to focus on is the moments of not sharing, the moments of cautious conflict.

The moments that, following John Rawls (1993), we should call reasonable disagreements. These are compromises that can only be achieved if and when they do not aim at harmonized consensual agreement. Instead, a reasonable disagreement is based on both respect and cherishing of pluralistic views and takes on reality - views and takes that need to find ways to co-exist, but should not be watered down or forced into the unity of a single view. This is a coexistence built upon reasoning and situated commitment, not on nihilistic relativism. This aim places a heavy trust in the idea of always striving for an open exchange of opinions, while respecting the commonly shared value of nonviolence. It is about striving for something, although it (discursive equality, freedom and fair play) can never be fully achieved, but the incompleteness of these aims makes pursuing them even more important and a more pressingly acute issue. The aim is not a harmonic unity, but partial, contextual ways of dealing and coping with differences that should not be diluted and levelled out.

This is based on the selfish and self-defensive fact that only through comparison and conflictual argument does our reasoning have any chance of developing, and, oh yes, of becoming more accurate and meaningful. Any view, even the majority view, must be open to criticism, evaluation and opposition. It is through these processes, in the words of Georgia Warnke, that we find the courage to take ethical issues as seriously as they need to be taken so as to be confronted and addressed. What this means is that we trick ourselves into a process in which there is very little chance of going backwards. We commit ourselves to a mutual process in which we cannot but learn, slowly oh so very slowly, how to learn from each other. (See Warnke 2001, 301, 310)

#### 4.1 On Reciprocity and Being in the World

What does reciprocity between two or more parties or participants mean? What happens when two or more persons or groups have or want to be for a certain time in a certain place, where they have - in one way or another - to encounter one another? What are the ethical preconditions for this encounter - in which both are taking part voluntarily, but in which neither is necessarily really able to imagine what the point and pleasure of this is that the encounter will develop into the process that is called the third space? That is, the third space that is the result of negotiations about being together; a space that the parties involved create in mutual reciprocity, and which belongs to both of them only for that fleeting moment. (See Hannula 2001)

I will be concentrating on two basic themes: experientiality and the encounter. The aim is to unpack the assumptions involved in any mutual dealings on an ethical level. In other words, I will try to articulate the challenges and opportunities that are perpetually present in the game - whatever the collaborative project - but which are rarely dealt with sufficiently openly and explicitly. Unpacking these assumptions is not an end in itself, although it may occasionally appear that way. Its purpose is to create a framework for any actions taken within this reciprocity to be based on self-reflection by each party, on mutual, fruitful comparison, and through that ultimately to increase the meaningfulness - the precision, acuteness, enjoyableness - of what each of us is doing.

From an ethical viewpoint no encounter is ever complete. It is not actualised as something perfect, but always incompletely. This, however, is not a problem. It is an opportunity to create and to zigzag, to be in the world, to be together. In a situation in which all we can ever do is move towards something step by step.

And what we move towards is an extremely demanding goal: mutual respect and reciprocal acceptance.

But about that experientiality. When and if the goal is the mantra so emphatically set out above (mutual respect and reciprocal acceptance), this gives rise to quite substantial difficulties as regards the way experientiality is envisioned. The starting point is any meeting whatsoever, which can indeed develop into an encounter - which is something more intense and more demanding. A meeting that, for reasons of economy, I will present as being between two parties. We have A and we have B. Whether or not they know each other in advance ultimately makes no difference. The basic set-up is there and remains there - it is a matter of degree, of varying levels of anecdotes. More crucial is whether A and B share a certain range of experiences and focuses of interest - say, for example, a professional, religious or even a sexual one.

Whatever, A and B meet. Two individual experiences of the same thing are present in this meeting. That same thing is, on the one hand, the encounter in question. And, on the other hand, it is that same thing of which there now exist two different versions. There are, for example: What A and B think about contemporary art; What they themselves do within it; What they themselves like: and the part of contemporary-art discourse to which they see themselves belonging. To avoid any confusion, this is a contemporary art that is by nature plural, polygenetic and polyrhythmic. It is not one, but many, and that is why it is disputed and squabbled about in each of the contexts, and also between them.

It is, nevertheless, a unifying frame, one that offers fixed points and points of departure for the turn-taking game of difference and sameness.

What is at issue here is experientiality and respect for its uniqueness. Seen in ethical terms a meeting leads to an encounter only if both parties accept that both their experiences of the same thing are equal in their starting points and that they have to be treated in a corresponding way: as being on equal terms.

An ethical approach to experientiality thus assumes equality of experiences. This does not have the same fine-tuning as their being of equal value, since being on equal terms refers to an attempt being made to give both the same possibilities for being present and to have room for their presence. Being of equal value, in turn, assumes that experiences are totally equal in value, and ultimately even commensurable. Meanwhile, equality, in the sense of being on

equal terms, seeks to deny this resemblance, which tends towards convergence.

But once again, why equality, and not equal value? Firstly, in an encounter the inherent value of the experiences is secondary. An experience is simply an experience and is a value in itself. It has to be taken seriously in itself. Secondly, experiential critical democracy (which is self-critical, ready to encounter conflicts, doubts consensuses, and emphasises diversity and permissiveness) assumes that, in the end, A's and B's experiences are not translatable, rather they are incommensurable, but not radically incommensurable. (On experiential democracy, see Vadén 2003) On the other hand, this does not mean that communication and reciprocity between A and B are totally tangled up and fatally impossible. It is always hard to convey messages and to interpret them, but that does not mean that the messages are incomprehensible or impenetrable. We will come back to incommensurability, to experiential, critical democracy and untranslatability a little later on.

But before that, what are the consequences of a one-off, unique instance of experientiality? A and B have experienced the same thing, but their experiences differ. This difference is rooted in the divergence between their backgrounds, values and worldviews - and also in random factors such as momentary interest or lack of it, degree of fatigue and ambient humidity. They are interested in and work in the same field (contemporary art), but their background connections and current perceptions of it are inevitably different. And yet they are by no means opposites. This is a question of those crucial nuances that take each party back to their own individual experiences.

Experiences that can and will be compared with other experiences, but which cannot be positioned or translated in their entirety to make them the same as some other experiences.

I claim that ethical collaboration between two parties emphatically starts off, if it starts off at all, from this not-so-solid, yet inevitable foundation. Both say that their own experiences are different, yet meaningful and worthy of consideration. What follows from this is a highly significant diagonal step. A and B can set off in a common direction, in which they seek issues and opinions that unite them and about which they have opinions that are similar enough to generate a shared ground for starting a discussion. Or they can move in a specific direction, in which case they allow each other the necessary time to relate their own experience, its significance and content.

As we might suppose, moving about in an encounter involves a continual departure from and return to these two apparent opposites. In any case, simultaneous listening to and absorbing of impressions is essential. This involves a presence that opens up rather than shuts down. I.e. the seeking of a contact that always exists on both the depth and breadth axes, with our focus shifting from the general to the individual, and vice versa.

This is a question of situating each instance of experientiality, which takes place both in relation to your own background and history, and in relation to events and discussions in contemporary art. This goal is epitomised by the dual principle in hermeneutics. We first have to give the other a chance to tell their own story on their own terms and in a subjective manner. We first have to listen, and after that we have to relate what we have heard to our own experientiality, background and viewpoints.

But what role is played in this continuous moulding of the encounter by that certain degree of irreversibility in the individuals' experiences, the perpetual difficulty of translation and the term we have already mentioned: 'incommensurability'? The fact that there is always a linguistic barrier between communicating experiences and experiences actually being comprehended - the simple fact that there are different languages and the ways languages are used - does not by itself imply complete incommensurability. (See Spinoza & Dreyfus 1996) Practical, but by no means radical, incommensurability means that any experience is individual and has to be treated as individual. Going round the other way, this should prevent experiences being ranked in order of precedence and being made commonplace, and, at the same time, it also both demonstrates and reminds us of the mutual interrelatedness of experiences.

The question of translation is ultimately a 'pseudo-problem'. All of us who have even semi-carelessly learned to spell out any foreign word know that translation is not repetition, it is interpretation. An interpretation that has to be situated and justified. Experience never translates completely, but it is crucial that: a) We find someone to listen to the experience; and b) Try to articulate the experience so that it might be understandable and approachable. Thus, it does not turn inwards, but seeks to envision ways of being in the world, of being in reciprocity. In a communication relation.

In the end, experientiality is specifically a matter of what happens when difference speaks to difference, which in turn then communicates with difference.

Following Irit Rogoff (2000), the issue here cannot be allowed to be one of narcissistic complaint or some point-by-point litany of the problems of each particular localness, but of something else. Of something that I would want to call an encounter. This involves a reciprocity in which the differences discuss with and push up against each other, and clap each other on the shoulder, whispering and teasing, yet in a way that by no means seeks to achieve synergy or complete mutual understanding, but in which the goal, in the words of John Rawls as mentioned before (1993) is - reasonable disagreements.

#### The Encounter

The encounter. This is a road that leads somewhere. And it leads further and deeper into reciprocity, if both parties are capable of taking up the challenges of the encounter. These challenges begin from the sense of the uniqueness of the experientiality described above, but it is futile to think that the challenges end there - or that they will get any easier.

Additional difficulties already spring from the way that an encounter is like an instance of experientiality in the sense that it is not repeatable. An encounter and an experience are both unique events. Added to that, the progress of the encounter presumes that both parties are ready and able to enter into a self-critical and self-reflective relationship with situating themselves and then reflecting on things in relation to one another.

This means that, before anything happens between A and B, there, nevertheless, prevails between them an unspoken mutual understanding that both want to take a risk. They want to move towards an encounter, which requires that both stop to question and doubt their own starting points and beliefs. This is not a matter of denying one's own background, but of shaping a constructively critical relationship with it.

A and B are ready. They are ready to discuss, to compare their experiences and to give shape to them only through that encounter and through the shared space that arises during it; what I call the third space. This does not belong to either, but for that moment solely and specifically to both parties simultaneously. They perceive that they are able to work out - in small, tentative steps - modes of and preconditions for being together. They have the opportunity and the power to shape reality. The reality that is happening specifically there and then between them.

But what demands and challenges do we encounter on the journey to the third space? The issue here is one of difference and otherness. Of a pushing and pulling that is surrounded by particularly dangerous attitudinal landmines. Perhaps the most pivotal problem of all is the apparent ease of the encounter and of that pushing and pulling, an ease that can be called the Benetton syndrome, or the dilemma of productization and instrumentalization. The problem culminates in the way that, for one reason or another, there is no desire or ability to take the demands and consequences of the encounter seriously. To quote that exponent of post-colonialist critical theory Paul Gilroy (2000): "Difference is not constituted or situated in reality in a political enough way. This simply means that difference and otherness can, if we want, be set aside. They are not onerously present. They are countable, manageable and removable. They can be bought, sold and exchanged, i.e. all acts that radically deny the uniqueness of critical democracy and the ethicality of the encounter."

An encounter thus requires tonnes of joy and sorrow, mud and rubber dinghies. An encounter in a real everyday space is an always-difficult, menacing situation. It is an event in which we have to be capable of giving up something, if we want to attain and achieve something. It is getting and giving, pushing away and inviting in. It is a back-and-forth, building and fading motion, in which the meanings and statuses of differences are called into question. It is not politicking, but paying enough attention to difference does mean politicization of differences. The differences are brought out, and examined - in a constructively critical way. This is an encounter that is devoid of hurry, but which gets you nowhere. You are stuck. In the middle of a most assuredly entangled and sticky everyday life, which strips away preconceptions and gives cause to believe that perhaps an encounter with the other and with otherness is actually a little more difficult than listening to an exotic music performance and then hanging out in a cool bar.

I repeat the question: What happens in an encounter? I claim that an encounter is always primarily an encounter inside each person. It is a negotiation between those contradictory needs and desires from amid which we constantly shape who we are, where we come from, and towards what we might possibly like to be moving. Only after that comes the immediate environment, and after that in turn the other, the different and the alien - that is, if the previous level has been encountered consistently, honestly and meaningfully. The levels of encounter can be presented in the following way:

- 1) self - self
- 2) self - immediate environment
- 3) self - difference, otherness

A consequence of the quite radically step-by-step nature of an encounter is that there is no short-cut to an 'encounter with' or enough politicization of otherness. This is a highly prolonged process, which begins closer than home. It begins with an internal dialogue and struggle within the individual. It begins with my - each of us personally - learning to accept our internal contradictoriness and at the same time learning to envisage it in a meaningful way. This is a matter of life politics. Of a process that remains a fragile, but always slowly developing narrative - a narrative about the relationship between the self with itself and its surroundings.

Now we can ask with a happy heart: what on earth does all this high-flown abstract debating and translating have to do with participating in processes in contemporary art and the formation of meanings?

We need a simple way of saying this, and there is one. Experientiality focuses on the making of, the experiencing of contemporary art and its communication. The encounter takes place in this communication. In between, in motion and in being moved. Exposed, not submissive. The common denominator, that so very vague area that encloses us within it in a cheerily sweet manner, is called contemporary art and visual culture. It is a question of how each of us does in this four-level task, which is never resolved.

- 1) How do you situate yourself as part of contemporary-art discussions
- 2) How do you situate yourself as part of your personal background and values
- 3) How can you simultaneously articulate and communicate points 1 and 2 for those who are prepared to listen
- 4) How can you yourself listen, stop and give the other a chance.

This is a four-level intersection, whose degree of difficulty is dizzying. It is like a ten-metre diving board shyly inviting us. Already at first glance, we notice that the journey from the edge of the springboard down into the waiting water is not necessarily a straight one. We cannot even be sure there is water in the pool. We have no guarantees, no certainty. Waiting for us below could be a hellishly hungry family of sharks, a cheetah club in session, or a Moominpappa who breaks our fall with his outspread arms.

But we know and are aware that what we want to do - take part in the processes of the formation of meanings in contemporary art - will in no way advance or develop if we do not dare to move towards the edge, and if we do not dare to take that decisive step and jump, fall or stumble. Forward or to one side - actively and aptly. To simplify: what is demanded is both the ability to take risks and the courage to fail. And, above all, that we are capable of taking the risks one step at a time, slowly advancing and starting first from the springboard, whose height is in the region of ten centimetres, not ten metres.

## 4.2 Networks and Collaborations

“Don’t ask what your institution can do for you, ask what you can do for your institution.”  
Unknown artist

I believe the central issue with any kind of a community - whether it exists or is about to become one - is how it can manage to be both constructive as a means of producing the desired outcomes, and at the same time open to criticisms from within its sphere and from outside. On the other hand, besides this structural aspect, there is the second main question parked on the individual level at which each of us ponders how to achieve for ourselves a functioning and pleasurable context for critical encounters and interaction. In other words, it is about generating sustainable conditions for knowledge production.

In one sense, that is all there is to say about this issue. And what is said is simple, effective and accurate. However, the point is obviously the age-old question: How can you achieve these sustainable conditions for knowledge production. Once again facing that blank wall, and trying to answer this question, has a distinct pre-history of its own. The idea presupposes that for us to act meaningfully and credibly we can never do so alone. We need a context, and we need critical reflection. We need a social interaction that keeps up the momentum, that provides us with enough mental and physical walls to keep us on track and trusting our inquiries. A group situation as in a cohabitation that turns into a trampoline for pleasurable experiments and risk-taking with enough self-esteem to know how to fail in a productive and constructive way.

Thus, the bundle of questions that we face starts with: What does it mean and what does it require to do this? In the previous section, we thought through the basic characteristics of an ethical collaboration. In this section, the aim is to analyze, with examples, the characteristics of networks. We will start with a look

into the institutions, and by trying to see how to use an institution as a tool. Later on we will take up a case study of the experiences of a very special international collaborative network called Speak Up.

## The Institution as a Tool

Let us see if we are able to imagine it. You know, the institution as a tool. Like a hammer, or a toothbrush or a telephone - a manual or mobile. It does sound good, doesn't it? Having an institution as both a platform and a trampoline, to push forward the issues and actions that the people participating in it have selected as important and worthwhile. An institution that would only serve and only satisfy content-driven aims, without attending to its own inherent aspirations and administrative goals. An institution as a vehicle for thoughts and actions, an institution as a tool, which would have no meaning or substance as such.

But why is it that this important idea seems more like a super-naive dream than reality? Why do we feel that 'organization man' runs roughshod over the individual? And why does it seem that an institution primarily has a life and agenda of its own insular making? I really don't know, and I have difficulties even choosing which direction to evaluate and to break down the current structure. All I know is that I would really like to give the guy who invented the machinery of institutionalism a kick in the groin. You can be certain that I am on the look out for this character, and I will keep on looking.

Meanwhile let me try to articulate some basic assumptions about what is needed for an institution to function as an open-ended tool. These remarks are preliminary in character, they definitely do not contain the full or final 'truth', but they do try to establish certain central aspects of a road map for a journey that will never be completed, or an aim that will never be fully attained. This is a road map that helps us move towards something. These notions are not taken from any scientific literature or copied from TV shopping programmes, they are truly lived through, based on experience, due to the fact that - confession time - I became what I hated and despised. I was, forgive me, the head of an institution for five long years (2000-2005), working as the Director of The Academy of Fine Arts Helsinki. But as the numbers imply, that is no longer the case. I am free. I served my sentence.

## 1. Methodological Anarchism

For an institution to function as a tool, the first and foremost vital necessity is that it does not deliberately box itself in. In other words, an institution has to keep its future prospects and possibilities open. It has to have the ability, not only to allow, but also to cherish and sustain a plurality of means of articulation and communication within its framework. An institution cuts down its potential hugely if it is not able to leave its means of expression as open as possible. The ways things are done within an institution must be defined and debated in each individual case - and those ways must not be decided beforehand, but have to be based on the demands and merits of each case.

One way to describe this need is to label it methodological anarchism. What this means is as follows: a priori any method can be usable and practical. A method is understood here as nothing more complex than the strategy that an individual or institution has chosen so as to move forward and act upon a need or idea. A method is a way of doing things and implementing ideas. The point of methodological anarchism is to leave the field open for true competition, for a wide variety of ways of, for example, organizing and mounting an exhibition of contemporary figurative paintings.

Methodological anarchism's mantra is 'anything goes'. It cherishes the plurality of life-worlds, life-styles and worldviews. This ability to allow plurality to exist in possible means and methods does not mean that every method and argument is as meaningful as any other. Methodological anarchism does not fall down the stairs of relativism. On the contrary, it demands the concrete and accurate localization and legitimation of the methods used in each case. Instead of relying on history, politics or habits of the heart, it opens up the competition between methods.

What methodological anarchism is grounded upon is the idea of experiential democracy, which means that any kind of experience is a priori as worthwhile as any other. What's more, it implies that every kind of experience can be criticised and scrutinised as thoroughly as any other. There is no hierarchy of experiences, but a constant need to situate the interpretation of a unique experience - and to compare it with other versions of experience. Methodological anarchism denies the legitimacy of the common claim that we have to do things this way because that's how they have been done for years. This, however, does not translate into a situation in which we have to reinvent the wheel in every case.

What it does mean is that each given case must be awarded enough time and energy to go through its details and specificities. And that, of course, is a twenty-four/seven job.

## 2. A Feeling for Failure

An institution is an organization - a cliché that demands precision. What kind of organization are we talking about? In the simplest of terms, there are two alternatives. We have an organization as a solid structure, which fulfils its duties and churns out results that are defined by its agenda at the start of the journey. It is run by a manager, it functions through highly specified divisions of labour and allows very little room for uncertainty. On the other hand, there is a model of an organization as a constant, ongoing process. Instead of unity and clarity, this focuses on making sure that the organization keeps to the framework, allowing for change and making space for ideas to emerge and evolve. This latter type of organization is never finished, but always second guessing and criticizing itself. This higher level of self-awareness is not an aim in itself, but again a means for critically and constructively thinking through what to do, how and why.

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An organization as a process without the clear-cut necessity to produce result A or B or C is the second assumption about the institution as 'tool'. What this implies is not only a certain degree of lack of concern about the outcome. An outcome that, due to its procedural character, can be envisioned, but not determined from the beginning. Thus, the major necessity is to not to worry too much about what will come out of it. This, as a logical consequence, implies that an institution as a tool must be able to tolerate mistakes. But even more than that, it has to be able to leave the process so open, so unsafe, that it also able to fail. An institution has to be able to develop its own notion of failure based on its given context, aims and tolerances.

When experimenting and attempting to combine knowledge from different fields it has to be accepted that failure is a possibility. Currently, the best example of this is the ongoing processes involved in organising doctoral studies in artistic research - research that is linked to social and humanist knowledge, but which builds up its own criteria and aims. An institution has to have the nerve to allow its projects to fail. But to make that failure a meaningful and productive failure, there has to be a defined and defended strategy for learning from those mistakes. This first of all requires stamina. This is an old and often-used metaphor, but it still highlights the main element of any open-ended process. You try, and

you fail, but you have to try again. You stumble forwards, fall down, only to get up again, and again. This is a practice in which the inherent joy is embedded in this productive failure.

### 3. A Framework for Critical and Constructive Dialogue

This assumption takes us from abstract levels a little closer to the everyday cruelty and tackiness of life in institutions and organizations. The notion that every organization should adopt a workable way to arrange credible meetings for critical, reciprocal and constructive dialogue is hardly news. This is heard from every corner of management consultancies, who laugh about it all the way to the bank. It even seems that the more there is talk of a need for people in any organization to analyse each other and themselves, the less incentive there is or the courage to do so. The deep-seated reason for the failure of these attempts to increase intra-organizational dialogue, critique and analysis is based on a very simple, but brutal fact: honest, substantial and meaningful communication does not flow from the top-down model of asking or demanding. It is only possible to achieve a good flow of communication when that communication is given the proper motivational framework, which includes the way that it is allowed to happen, and that it again has consequences which do not work against those who have been criticizing the way the organization is run.

In other words, reality bites, it shines and gives off sparks so often, as with our image of Dr Livingstone in the jungle. He learned how to talk to the indigenous people, and, in the end, he thought he understood them. However, they outnumbered the Doctor by 55 to 1. They were bored with or scared of him, and in order to get rid of him in a civilised manner, they gave him the answers they thought he wanted to hear. The answers really had extremely little to do with what the people thought about the matters in question. They just gave the Doctor what he wanted. And yes, the information produced in institutions most often resembles the anthropologist's problem. It has no realistic value, but carries the stigma of pseudo-knowledge, which, due to the cruelty of the decision-making processes, means that it is not used as a backbone for management-level manoeuvres.

So how can we set up a situation that allows people to interact and practice an activity in civil society; a participation that, in the classical manner, is made up of two interlinked aspects: firstly, the quality of participation, and secondly, the quantity of participation. That is an enormous question, and there are no fast

tracks to take, or corners to cut. In the end, it is really simple. It is a practical matter of how to organise meetings with the people in the institutions and to start talking with them - slowly and straightforwardly - telling them what we are doing, how are we doing it, what could be made more meaningful and how we could enjoy this a little more. This, of course, is possible only if the institution is not facing serious problems with financial constraints and staff cuts. However, in all cases, the most important thing is to take these discussions directly to the level of substance. To stop beating around the bush, and get down to the what, how, where, why and why nots of the institution's practice, its agenda and its legacy. Points that link its everyday running to the values and ideas driving it.

#### 4. Learning by Doing

Every time you hear someone claim that something is a learning process, you should be very cautious and suspicious. Too often the idea of learning by doing is steeped in a paternalistic attitude that cherishes the top-down model of rigid hierarchies. However, learning by doing can be stolen back from the colourfully dressed consultants, and implemented again on the everyday level of an institution. What this then means is that, in order for the process to evolve, and for the activities in the institution to build on and support each other, the process must be understood as a long one. It requires a clear, openly stated institutional commitment, enough time and energy to change, try things out, fail and then try again.

And here is a nasty little secret. This learning process, the very act of making and shaping an institution as a tool cannot be completed in 12 months - in my experience a process like this needs four to five years to begin to take effect. And yes, however hard it is to convince those sitting on the cash coffers, securing that period of protected time is one of the most essential jobs of the institution. What is most important is that while the nuances of the process must be left open, and must be constantly thought through, the direction of the movement has to be trusted during this four-to-five-year period. Self-reflexivity is impossible if it is constantly questioning its own reflection and direction.

#### 5. The Ability to Laugh at Oneself

What this all comes down to are two attitudes that serve as a guiding force and a kind of symbolic glue for the idea of seeing and implementing the institution as a tool. This requires high self-esteem and courage to follow the chosen path

and to make such experiments, to learn by doing and really making the best out of the constant stumbling and day-to-day failures.

At the same time, what is needed is the ability to stand back from one's views and activities. This is the ability to relate to your surroundings in the world at large. It is the process of 'being with', and the task of searching for ways of situating oneself within the chosen context and the whole Wirkungsgeschichte. No tiny task, but in the best of atmospheres, a brilliantly fruitful way of organising ourselves, and the ideas and themes that we are interested in and fascinated by.

During these processes, it is more often than not inevitable that you are running on thin air, doing too much in too short a time and too small a space, in the end, simply taking yourself too seriously. In order for your process to evolve and emerge, to have that openness to shifting the balance and thinking differently, what you need is the ability to enjoy the micro-political endorsement of laughter. This is not a matter of laughing at something, but of laughing with the situation, and at times, with yourself. That is, the attitude that shapes the institution as a tool. This is a never-ending process of relationships, as in a relational ethics that knows, through failures, white lies and semi-successes, how to enjoy the guaranteed rollercoaster ride that is always ahead of us.

## **SPEAK UP**

Speak Up was a 21/2 year cultural-collaboration project in contemporary art involving the KUNO - network (Kunstakademierna i Norden - 11 Art Academies altogether) and Art Academies in Belgrade, Zagreb, Sarajevo, Skopje, Tirana, Pristina, and some institutions and galleries, such as Rooseum in Malmö, WHW in Zagreb and the NIFCA residency Programme. The project aimed at building networks connecting the Art Academies, professors, teachers, students and young professionals in the Nordic countries and the Balkan region. The writer of this book was deeply involved in the whole process. A process that was initiated, supervised and organized in a collaboration between Marianne Möller from the Nordic Council of Ministers, Branislav Dimitrijevic, art historian and curator working in Belgrade, and myself.

The project was one major part of a larger framework under the label "Norden Balkan Culture Switch", which brought together all sorts of cultural expressions and media from dance to literature, and from design to theatre. Speak Up! was the main project in contemporary art. Altogether it consisted of four workshops, two of them held in the Nordic Countries and two in the Balkans. In the last two

workshops (Zagreb and Helsinki) there was also, at the end of the process, an exhibition on the site. These process-based, short-duration shows were seen at WHW gallery in Zagreb in October 2004, and at the Myymälä2 gallery in Helsinki in May 2005. The participants were professors and students from the academies. In each workshop there were participants from three academies from each region - one professor and five students from each academy. Each workshop had approx. 40 participants.

A common method was developed for all the workshops. The content of the workshop focused on the theoretical tools for presenting work and for participating in contemporary art discourse. The working title was *Speak Up!*, which was used to encourage each participant to trust their own experiences, needs, wishes and fears: to speak up and share their thoughts based on their own point of view, and with words and vocabularies close and familiar to them. The workshop consisted of a common reading list, lectures by professors, and presentations by each student/young professional of their works or ongoing projects.

The task was to analyse, compare and discuss the means for producing art, and the ways of taking part in the production of meaning. The idea was to learn how to use theoretical tools and possibilities. All participants were asked to make a maximum one-hour presentation of their work. This was not just a presentation of what they do or have done, but the idea was to link the works to the particular discourse of contemporary art that they find interesting, and in which they want to participate. It involved taking part in a discourse, which requires much more than just talking - you also need to know how to listen in order to create a dialogue. The aim was to raise the level of self-knowledge (what you do and why) and self-reflexivity, and also to create a critical, but constructive platform for issues in contemporary art.

In many ways, I am not at all afraid to say that *Speak Up!* was a success. That is what the students thought and said so out loud, that is what the professors claimed when we parted in various airports or hotel lobbies, and that is what the official evaluation of the project said (For the evaluation, see Norden Balkan Culture Switch 2003-2005 at [www.norden.org](http://www.norden.org).) When wondering why it went so well, I believe the essential difference that, in comparison with so many similar events, means that the *Speak Up!* project has proven so successful is in fact a very simple matter. Unlike a great many international collaborations and interactions, we were given the benefit of the doubt. We did not need to run first, and think afterwards. We had the luxury of starting, in a group of people represent-

ing both sides, by thinking through what we wanted to do, how and why. This generated enough shared common ground for the participating professors, and it articulated a shared vision for the project, without setting up overly strict regulations and hindrances for its development to be based on practical experience and needs.

The result of the initial meeting leading up to the four workshops under the title *Speak Up!* was an answer to two questions: What do we need, and what is potentially sufficiently common to everyone? Professionals representing both the Nordic and Balkan sides agreed that all students and young professionals have a substantial need to learn how to articulate what they are doing in a more meaningful way - and meaningful in a sense that enables them to do what they want to do more precisely, more adequately, and better. And the common denominator was the fact that we knew we were able to rely on the deep-seated interest in participating in the processes of production of meaning within contemporary art and visual culture.

The workshops started in Belgrade, with ten days at the end of October 2003 (the participating institutions coming from Helsinki, Århus, Gothenburg, Split, Skopje and two from Belgrade), Then the days were scaled down to seven in Malmö in May 2004 (with Malmö, Helsinki, Copenhagen, Sarajevo, Zagreb and Tirana), continued with a week's workshop in Zagreb in October 2004 (with Malmö, Stockholm, Reykjavik, Bergen, Zagreb, Sarajevo and Pristina), where we also finished the workshop with a joint exhibition. The last workshop in the series was held in Helsinki in May 2005 (with Helsinki, Trondheim, Copenhagen, Belgrade, Split and Tirana).

But, once again, begging the question: In what ways has it been a success? On the structural level one of the benefits of collaboration between Nordic and West Balkan countries is the similarities in their size and geographical importance. What we are talking about is the reality of relative peripheries, which have woken up with a desire to activate and to deepen connections with sites and situations that are not in the very centre of international power games and positions. Granted, these relative peripheries are centres in their own right in their own location, but they are in great need of finding collaborative partners, since they simply cannot survive and compete in cultural terms solely by doing it alone. The other positive point of being from a similar enough background, even if there is a major difference in terms of the funding for culture in these regions, is the lack of paternalism and arrogance from both sides. A starting position

that allowed each participant actually to go into the process without too much weight of locked-in prejudices.

Another sign of success is the project's afterlife. Already, we have seen collaborations evolving a life of their own. Students from the first workshop have begun a series of exhibitions (in Helsinki, Århus and Belgrade under the titles Border Disorder I, II and III), and there are similar plans for shows or seminars from the other workshops, too. And even more importantly, in every workshop, it has been impossible not to sense the commitment to taking part in conversations about and comparisons of what people do and how. Without any unnecessary hype about it, we have witnessed how each participant has gone through the door that spells contemporary art, and has learned how to speak up for him/herself, and then also learned how to let the other speak up, too.

We all witnessed a slowly emerging recognition of the need to compare and to share thoughts in order for them to develop and to become more focused. All the participants spent long days sitting and listening to presentations and joining in a common dinner in the evening. The participants realized what were the similarities and what were the differences in each of their individual approaches and presentations. They were drawn, very rapidly indeed, into the process of re-thinking what it is that they want, why, how and what for. An act of productive self-reflection. And that, if anything, is an achievement you cannot be too happy about.

### 4.3 Dreaming of a White Christmas Peter McCaughey and a Bag Full of Snow

Peter McCaughey is a man who has made a career out of socially engaged art in a way that steers happily past market niches and creates its own fruitful platform and framework, especially through the practice of teaching. This is a practice and a career that have been running for the last 15 years - and still keeps going. In one important sense, McCaughey, who comes from Northern Ireland, is a storyteller - a narrator who knows for sure that, if the story requires it, what the hell, facts are made to be twisted and turned around, so that they serve the building up of the plot. However, before going into the exact details of his action with a bag full of snow, let me give you an idea of that storytelling in practice.

McCaughey makes a strong point of his own roots in rural Northern Ireland, being strikingly aware of the necessity to propose alternatives that help us avoid

the terrible juxtapositions of categories, manifested in violence, between different sets of identities and religions. His aim is to achieve ways of exploring approaches that manipulate and alter constructed and perverted perceptions and imaginations, so as to allow us to do two things: to avoid slipping into the negative spiral of essentialistic oppositions; and instead to be able to choose the accents and nuances that we want to support when talking about who we are and where we come from.

In his own words: "I am trying to create a space in the head where by habit, difference is met with curiosity rather than fear, where we learn to enjoy oscillation of meaning rather than need to demarcate and collapse permutations."

In the way that the ironies of everyday life tend to go, as an artist he has mainly worked in an urban environment, learning how to see the city, not only as a place for showing work, but as a source for actions and inspirations. He is especially fascinated by the city as an ever-changing site where his interest and focus is often on the dysfunctional or completely redundant framework that gets left behind when things change. In line with this he particularly notices places in the process of dramatic change and the potential they yield for cultural hijacking during this time of being 'unsettled'.

But back to that hint of a story. It is a practice that McCaughey invented and which he refers to as Ha'fing. When telling the story, he talks about Ha'fing as a very old, well-kept Irish folk tradition, which apparently it is not. But this is a little white lie that makes the story more compelling. He doesn't want us to think of it as art, because he wants the ritual to be adopted - to function as a point for reflection, fuelled by the romantic attraction of ancient traditions. It is a story about a game of numbers that you play with your own father and your own kids, a game of calculating when you will be exactly half your father's age, in other words, when you will be the age your father was when you were born. It is about the age difference between the two of you - and what it in fact means to you both.

To demonstrate: our son was born in 2003 and I was born in 1967. According to the rules of Ha'fing, our common number is 36. Thus, the task is to imagine that future situation in which my son will be 36 and I will be 72 - a scary, but illuminating thought, right? A thought that might cause anxiety and laughter. Whatever it causes, it is clear that it produces something, something that gives you a playful way of dealing with age, the question of generations, and how to

relate to your parents and to your children.

(An optional detail is the idea of Ha'fing as marking a mathematical rite of passage, as if we could prescribe the moment in life when we begin looking backwards more than forwards, or when the mantle of responsibility shifts from being looked after to looking after. This is a ritual event that the child plans for and pays for organizing - a way of spending a day together, in which there is the space, the focus and even the expectation that something will be handed over.)

But yes, sorry for the distraction, to get back on track to the Bag Filled with Snow. This is an action that McCaughey has not so far presented as a work of art, but it came out of an experience during a two-week workshop on site-specific art as a collaboration between the art academies in Glasgow (where Peter works), Valand in Gothenburg, and Helsinki. Peter desperately wanted to do something during the workshop, but he was only staying for five days of the fortnight. He was also fascinated by the masses of snow (you know, huge pyramid-sized piles of snow carried to the corners of streets so that the traffic can run its course) that filled the streets of Helsinki in that early February of 2003.

As expected, McCaughey came up with a sort of a solution to his dilemma. He invented yet another game. This time it was about him giving away all the belongings that he had brought with him to Helsinki, and then taking back something completely different. The background to this action is the nuisance that, when flying in to Helsinki, the airline lost his luggage for three days. He managed to survive without any of his stuff for three days, and thought, What the hell, I might as well rid myself of it all completely. What he did was to make a meticulous, exact list of all the items he had with him, a list consisting of an odd number of black socks, a particularly fine pair of shoes, a pocket knife, books, etc. All stuff that he then donated to the people participating in the workshop and others he met during his time in the town.

So far, so good. But what about that Bag Filled with Snow? Well, here comes the good part. The part in which Peter McCaughey returns home. He flies back to Glasgow via Heathrow (crazy, but true anecdote: the day after he arrived, Tony Blair sent the tanks into Heathrow because a woman was found to have a suspicious white substance in a hold-all) with his old duffel bag, but with none of the stuff that he left home with. Instead, he has something else in the bag. And yes, the bag is again completely full. He has brought back a rather large bag filled with snow - authentic, original snow, which has been extremely tightly

packed into the bag outside Helsinki airport.

You can call this idea nonsense or ridiculous, but wait until you hear what he did with the snow. Landing at Glasgow, he was semi-worried about the contents of the bag. In fact, whilst flying, he even got to thinking: “What if the snow melts and the water causes some technical problems for the plane? What if it crashes due to an act of contemporary art?”

But no, with luck and good fortune, our hero arrived home safely. Once home, the revelation of what to do with the snow came to him. He decided not to hold on to the snow for himself alone, but to share it with his friends. So what he did was to put the bag with the still-surviving solid snow (most of the snow was still happily waiting there) into his car and started going around the houses of his dearest friends. He stops at a friend’s house, knocks on the door, and offers them the chance to stand on an authentic piece of Helsinki.

As you can imagine, they all happily went along with this act, standing with bare feet on snow placed by their front doors, smiling like there is no tomorrow at the experience of having something quite exotic and weird under their feet. This was about the sensation of confronting a difference through an individual experience of it. And yes, it was definitely about doing something rather silly, but something that generated a logic of its own, and a sensation that you cannot repeat, and an experience that belongs there and then to these friends of his. A small, but effective gesture, indeed. A unique gesture saved for the history books by a series of photos taken by Peter McCaughey. Photos given to each of his friends, and photos waiting to be shown in a public gallery near you.

#### 4.4 Participation in Praxis Mobilitätshelfer (P M)

What do participation, politics and contemporary art have to do with each other? Well, in fact, much more than meets the eye. And yes, what we see when we concentrate on possibilities and pay a little more attention to the details of this multiple relationship, is, for example, the duo behind the project called Praxis Mobilitätshelfer, Caroline Lund and Thorbjörn Reuter Christiansen. How they are able to link these different spheres together in a meaningful and fascinating way will be discussed in a while, but before that, it is both helpful and necessary to contextualize their activity.

The philosophical background to the making and shaping of any activity that

deals with these questions (such as not only how to activate yourself, but also why to do so, how to increase your self-determination and how to be able to offer alternatives to the current, often hegemonic habits of our hearts and normative practices) will be drawn up with the assistance of three distinct trains of thoughts. These three will link us into the basic attitudes behind liberal political philosophy, continental consensus-driven thought, and the core ideas of structural power expressed in the thoughts of Karl Marx. The idea of this terrain-mapping exercise is not to come up with an all-encompassing picture, but to frame the main elements within the always shifting and contested boundaries of this topic.

Let us start with the liberal version of how, in the end, the relationship between an individual and a society is characterized. Perhaps the most influential liberal political philosopher of our times was an American named John Rawls. A person who on his recent death was known way beyond the specialist circles of his particular field. It was, in fact, already in 1971, in a book that became a contemporary classic, *A Theory of Justice*, that Rawls articulated his position on the intrinsic value of political participation.

For Rawls, participation in the common arena of the public sphere was a good thing on its own, due to two notions. Political participation (that is, for example, actively taking part in the discourse about what a public sphere or a civil society is) 1) leads to a broader conception of society, and to the development of citizens' intellectual and moral faculties. Besides this, it 2) lays the foundations for the sense of duty and obligation upon which the stability of just institutions depends. Thus, political participation is simultaneously important for both the individual and the collective as a society.

The second philosophical building block for the questions embedded in the idea of political participation is found in the early writings of the German philosopher Jürgen Habermas. While Habermas might have no difficulties in following the abstract tenets of what Rawls set down, he was willing to point out the demands and constraints of political participation.

Writing in 1962, Habermas claimed that the idea of a public sphere in which political participation takes place is not a given, natural or stable entity. Instead of being fixed, all these concepts require re-telling, re-visiting and re-defining. In other words, a public sphere does not exist autonomously. It is always constructed, debated and disseminated. It is always about to be in a state of becoming.

ing. And yes, there is no guarantees of what it might turn out to be, or not to be.

What's more, Habermas reminds us of the two main criteria for any political participation within civil society. A participation that will respect the initial idea that all arguments will be settled and fought out only by discursive means. These criteria, which at the same time define the public sphere, are: 1) the quantity of participation within a site; and 2) the quality of the participation within that site. Therefore, for Habermas political participation is always about the balance and interaction between the number of participants and the numbers of their actions versus the quality of these acts. The million-dollar-man question is, of course: Who defines quality? Or to state it from another angle: How can we participate in the processes in which quality is discussed and defined?

Continuing directly to the thoughts of Karl Marx, it is best to quote him at length, from a text that was originally published in 1859 as a preface to his *Contributions to the Critique of Political Economy*.

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"In the social production of their life, men enter into definite relations that are indispensable and independent of their will, relations of production which correspond to a definite stage of development of their material productive forces. The sum total of these relations of production constitutes the economic structure of society, the real foundation, on which rises a legal and political superstructure and to which correspond definite forms of social consciousness. The mode of production of material life conditions the social, political and intellectual life process in general. It is not the consciousness of men that determines their being, but, on the contrary, their social being that determines their consciousness."

Here, just for a measure of dramatic effect, it is also pleasant to fill in with a reminder about a truly classical saga that goes under the name of Pandora's Box. A story that, in combination with Karl Marx's very bleak view of the possibilities for us to affect our daily lives, puts another disquieting spell on the question of self-determination. As we remember, Pandora's Box was an item that was best kept unopened. What it contained varied from one version of the story to the next, and in the end, that is beside the point. It was simply too dangerous to flirt with the possibility of opening it.

What this implies is that, for example, self-determination is perhaps a typical case of a Pandora's Box dilemma. A case in which an increased level of self-

determination by people within public spheres does not necessarily mean something positive or constructive, but might end up in open clashes and violent conflicts. In philosophy this is referred to as the “war of all against all”, a nightmare scenario of too much freedom and no security. An argument through which the limitations of an individual’s power as described by Marx are indeed seen as beneficial and even absolutely necessary.

Thus, we have Rawls, Habermas and Marx, spiced with the ancient legend, all giving immensely different versions of the potentiality for, challenges to and suitability of an individual in a society trying to be politically active. Instead of trying to say which one of these three make most sense, let us focus, instead, on the opening offered in the P M project by Lund and Christiansen. A project that in itself is a kind of a result of all their case studies so far, namely acts and events such as Motivation, Skåne Social Art Forum, Blackboard and Sprechblasen.

Let us briefly recall some of their central ideas. “P M reshapes unused potential”, “P M helps recreate lost motivation”, and it also functions as a “platform for changes.” It is formed by two artists, whose practice is a hybrid criss-crossing of knowledge production and actionism that combines, at least, the field of art, design, politics, sociology, psychology and economics, to name just a few of the main stepping stones. Their aim is to create a situation and a site out of themselves and those taking part in the processes that allows them a heightened sense of self-determination. What is perhaps most interesting for us in this particular discourse, in terms of the above-described philosophers’ positions, is the way their project is not only content-driven, instead of being medium-based, but also the way it brings into the core of their activity something that is inherent in any meaningful process. And yes, that is the notion of research.

I would claim that research is more deeply seated in the P M project than just being part of the evolution, evaluation and continuation of a series of processes that has been going on for a number of years now. The two distinguishing features of P M’s activities, and the features that make them meaningful and proper research conducted with the means and materials available to artists, are: 1) coherence and continuity; and 2) ongoing self-reflection. Both simple enough claims and notions that, nevertheless, beg for a comprehensive argument.

The question of coherence and continuity, which is central both to any comprehensible and credible political participation and research activity, is manifested

in the truly procedural character of P M. Theirs is not a project without a view, but with a personal stance and personal commitment that stands for something. This is not another fake company, this is not about the imitation of life. This is something else, something much more rough and edgy than any fashionable and disposable product.

Theirs is neither a project that serves for the very limited scope of an art event. It is not there today, but gone tomorrow. Instead, it is painstakingly aware that, where it is today, is just a promise of the potentiality of what it might move towards - not exactly tomorrow, but more like the day after tomorrow. The evident stress here ought to be placed, amidst the pressure of doing something and learning by that very doing, on the moving towards something that happens in a way that takes seriously the attitude of giving the benefit of the doubt. An object X that Lund and Christiansen do not have that clear an idea of yet, but they do have a direction to go in. They also know that, in order to keep the process self-reflective and open, the aim in itself has to be allowed to be defined, not before the journey, but in all the various zigzagging steps of that never-ending process.

Finally, what is so promising about P M is that it does not mix ideas of enlightenment or of autonomy with the aim of a practice based, localized and contextualized with increasing self-determination. P M is clearly situated at the stormy cross-roads defined by our three major thinkers. In one way, Lund and Christiansen are much too naive to survive in these incredibly demanding circumstances, but, on the other hand, this naiveté is their strongest asset. They are also such seasoned activists of procedural art that they know how to avoid the black-and-white scenarios, answers or solutions, no matter whether they are argued in positive or negative colours.

P M does what any kind of a political participation is always in great need of. It 'eventualizes', to use the concept coined by Michel Foucault, something in our immediate circumstances and realities that we tend to take for granted, that we tend not to pay attention to, and in which we normally do not recognize the powers at play, while they are shaping the way things are and how we relate to them. They act as mental dentists, waking up that 'sleeper' in all of us.

P M have the courage, and they definitely possess the passion. All I can hope for is that I can witness their processes turning from fruitful potentialities to blood, sweat and tear-filled praxis, not only during next autumn, but also for several

years to come, for example, during the long hot summer of 2015.

#### 4.5 Slap-Stick Comedy with a Cause Ahmet Ögüt's Somebody Else's Car

At first sight, there is hardly anything remarkable about Ahmet Ögüt's work at the old tobacco factory site during the 2005 Istanbul Biennial. What we saw was two different series of slides projected onto the wall. The slides bear witness to actions taken by Ögüt. Actions during which he remodels a randomly chosen car to make it a new type and version. Ögüt takes a plain, ordinary car and decorates it with ready-made paper cut-outs to make a brand new taxi - or police vehicle. And yes, that's about it. Almost.

But before analysing what more is there in this act of semi-vandalism, let us be as cruel as Ögüt is to these poor, innocent cars. Is his action a work of art? Does it make any sense? Why would a childish game like this be in any sense meaningful?

I think the answer is a loud yes yes yes. The same answer on all counts, but for slightly different reasons. Basically, Ögüt's action is such a fantastic piece of contemporary art because it specifically comes from somewhere, has an impact in the present, and leans out of the window and reaches towards what might happen next. Thus, it combines the three time zones of past, present and future.

Where does Ögüt's work come from? The relationship might not be direct, but it is definitely recognizable. The background is comedy. Not just any kind of ha ha, ho ho ho comedy, but a very special type. A type that nowadays seems too often to be sidelined and not recognized. We are talking about comedy that is not loud, not a spectacle, and not based on nationalistic, racist or chauvinist prejudices. Ögüt's comedy is the comedy of the classics. We are talking about Buster Keaton, we are referring to Charlie Chaplin. All acts and interventions that are built on the explicit strength of a capacity for highlighting minute details of our everyday, mundane lives. Acts that trust in a particular insight, not the general noise. Acts that are simple and effective, not laborious and in vain.

I believe we need to make a crucial distinction here. Ögüt is not making fun of anything. What he does is to invite all of us who have managed to pay enough attention to his works to simultaneously laugh at and with ourselves and our surroundings. For this, for the precious moment, he hijacks a car and turns it

into another kind of car. He forces us to be aware of cars, girls and gasoline stations. Or traffic jams, crazy taxi drivers with attention spans shorter than a three year old's. He dupes us into thinking about cars in a slightly unusual way. And this, indeed, is how he links his act to what is happening to us in the present tense.

We are cheated into a game of laughing at and with the way an act of making a symbol of the state monopoly on force is made to seem rather ridiculous. We see a normal, typically uninteresting white car camouflaged as a police vehicle. An act that is carried out with such humorous precision, constructing the storyboard with such great attention to nuances that it in itself becomes something more than just the activity taking place.

This becoming something else is underscored by Ögüt's fine eye for the means of representation. I am sure that if these acts had been shown as video projections, they would have lost a lot of their power and pleasure. With the ancient, click-clacking sound of the slide projector, Ögüt tells us a story in a way that leaves plenty of room for imagination. He is perfectly aware that he does not need to show it all. This is not about authenticity. It is about what, for example, a police car connotes to us. A game that, all of a sudden, is no longer just ha ha and ho ho ho funny, but which takes on sinister shades and colours.

But what about the future? How are Ögüt's acts opening the doors of the future and tickling the cortex of our expectations? I don't know about you, but I certainly see a possibility here. I sense an opportunity. I feel for it, and I am sure that this 'it' feels for me, too. At least I have to believe that this is so. But what am I talking about? I am, again and again, talking about hope. Not the Pope, not the dope, but hope. A magnificently demanding four letter word that I can read so clearly between each of Ögüt slides. Can you see it too? And can you read it out loud?

Chapter 5.

## MORE LOGO as an Alternative Strategy

“Man fliegt immer nur so weit, wie man im Kopf schon ist.”

Four time Vierschanzentournee (Four Hills Tournament) winner, ski jumper Jens Weissflog 28.12.2005

Looking for an alternative? Not happy with the current situation? Want to change the world, starting with yourself? Use your imagination, it will take you to places previously unknown. Go on. Be a Tiger. This is your chance of a lifetime - act on it. It is all about connecting people.

Sentences like dead fish left to rot in a hot, humid afternoon sun. Burning and loathing. Slogans like annoying stings from bees that will not leave you alone. Words and concepts so familiar from the commercials all around us. Junk-mail adverts and the rest of the usual suspects of symbolic insult. But then again, we do want to make a difference, don't we? We do want to see substantial change, don't we? We do want to enhance the lives and possibilities of ourselves as individuals - or do we? What is the difference between a lame commercial slogan and the attitude that we really can change things with self-determination and self-fashioning in networks based on sharing and solidarity?

This chapter will focus on ways of taking part in the production of knowledge within contemporary art and visual culture - and on doing so in a situation in which and with the understanding that we cannot shut ourselves out of the current market-driven public discourses and mass media. We are part of them, and we are part of the problem, too. The point is: How do we act within these difficult frameworks? Or to put it another way: What can we learn from the creative commercial use of both symbolic and conceptual language games?

Thus, I will argue for the benefits of using the MORE LOGO strategy as an alternative. What this means and what its challenges and implications are will be discussed in detail shortly. But, before that, let us concentrate first on the idea of who precisely it is who is acting as a critical force. What version of the concept of an individual are we talking about? And what is the enemy that we are fighting against, and which we are using as a helpful wall on and against which we can define ourselves.

Let us first talk about the enemy. This is a familiar litany already articulated often enough in this book. We are against the instrumentalization of our life-worlds, which aims through rationalization and market-driven blindness to reduce anything and everything to objects that we can buy, count, trade and throw away. This is a threat that comes in many guises, but criticising it does

not necessarily mean that we are against the construction of a society based on market forces and liberalism. And please pay attention: This is not an anti-capitalist argument. What it does mean is that there are many fields in our societies that should not be judged or run according to the one-size-fits-all principle of producing a short-term profit. Fields such as contemporary art, religion, and, for instance, elementary schools.

To quote at length the artist Andrea Frazer, who has very effectively and economically put the finger right where it hurts: "We are in the midst of the total corporatization and marketization of the artistic field and the historic loss of autonomy won through more than a century of struggle. The field of art and now only nominally public and non-profit institutions has been transformed into a highly competitive global market. The specifically artistic values and criteria that marked the relative autonomy for the artistic field have been overtaken by quantitative criteria in museums, galleries and art discourse, where programmes are increasingly determined by sales - of art, at the box office and of advertising - and where a popular and rich artist is almost invariably considered a good artist, and vice versa. Art works are increasingly reduced to pure instruments of financial investment, as art-focused hedge funds sell shares of single paintings. The threat of instrumentalization by corporate interests has been met in the art world by a whole sale internalization of corporate values, methods and models, which can be seen everywhere from art schools to museums and galleries to studios of artists who rely on big-money backers for large-scale - and often outsourced - production. We are living through a historical tragedy: the extinguishing of the field of art as a site of resistance to the logic, values and power of the market." (2005, 162)

The idea of MORE LOGO is to argue for the combination of an awareness of the presence and role of the media, and a comprehension of its techniques, but, this time round, used for the alternative modes of expressions and alternative values that it supports and generates. This is a reminder of the classical dilemma of sleeping with the enemy, and flirting with corruption and being corrupted. There is a thin line between self-criticality and self-righteousness - not to forget about love and hate, dreams and disasters. A balancing act that will take seriously the challenge of participating in the processes of defining concepts through the production of knowledge.

It is also imbued with the aim of winning back the momentum for critical and dissenting acts and views. A task that goes again the widespread contemporary

tendencies towards full-blown affirmation. A dangerous and ultimately self-defeating tendency rigorously described by Paul Gilroy as “the fundamental point is that today, cosmopolitan estrangement and democracy-enriching dissent are not prized as civic assets. They are just routine signs of subversion and degeneration.” (2004, 27) A tendency against which this book seeks to find ways to fight.

Once again, however, on this journey, we must go back to the question of identity. Who is this agent that can be both self-critical and reflective, and also critical of the instrumentalization of our life-worlds? It is again beneficial to get closer to what we are addressing via a couple of negative examples. The identity in question is not a superhuman genius, whatever guises it comes in, it is not a romantic “self-creation”, and it is definitely not a consumer as a creative force or actor, nor is it an affirmative voyeur or free-floating flâneur. Instead, in a word, what we are after is an identity that is situated, self-formed, and maintained by an understanding of the context in which it is localized, but with a perspective on the temporariness of that context. What it also means is that both identity and context are required to constantly re-articulate and update themselves.

Following David Couzens Hoy, what we are dealing with is not the task of finding the truth or the final interpretation, but how to keep that interpretation alive and developing. A task in which we have to locate our interpretation in a certain context and its history with an open view to its future possibilities. Therefore, the value and the credibility of an interpretation depends on its plasticity. What is most important is understanding that the organic character of any credible interpretation involves both transposability and innovation. “Transposability is the capacity of the interpretation to survive when transposed to new and unforeseen contexts. This is the conservative dimension of interpretation insofar as interpretation resists change and seeks to maintain its epistemic and normative assumptions. However, survival also depends on being innovative and being able to open up new possibilities.” (Hoy 2004, 56)

The point of both transposability and openness is that they are not fixed elements, but always relative to the given issue and its framework - including its opportunities and limitations. They do not emerge and exist in a vacuum, but in a historical setting that points the activity in both possible directions, towards either closing in or opening up. This is a very important lesson when we are in the process of situating ourselves. A lecture that you cannot simply put on like

a costume and pretend to be acting a certain critical role. Instead of artificially dressing up, it reminds us of the necessity of emotions of what it means to play the part of the situated self seriously. To quote Hoy again: "Openness to possibilities is not the same as saying 'anything goes' because possibilities are always limited and situated. Furthermore, openness is the opposite of saying 'nothing matters' because possibilities are considered open only insofar as they are found to be worth pursuing." (2004, 232)

To argue for the same attitude in order to open up the moments of resistance from another angle we can turn to Merleau-Ponty, who reminds us of the process of situating ourselves, which is never finalized and never stable, but constantly in the making. Having a perspective from which one sees, speaks and acts is not punitive or a life sentence. It is about having a way, reminding us of that fantastic line in a classic blues, to deal with the fact that "if you don't stand for something, you will fall for anything". In other words, we can, and often have to, change or alter our perspectives and views on things, but none of this is possible if we do not have a situated point of view to begin with. Our experience is only meaningful from one perspective, not from plural ones, even if these alternative perspectives do exist alongside it. In Merleau-Ponty's words "the world is already constituted, but also never completely constituted." (Quoted in Hoy 2004, 104)

But for crying out loud, how? How can we make a difference, how can we manage to constitute ourselves and our surroundings in accordance with our values, wants, wishes and fears? What follows is not an answer, but a tentative speculation about one specific means that might lead to a meaningful way of dealing with the wish to do something and to achieve alternative ways of being. It is a means as a process of questioning. Or, as Michel Foucault put it, it is the process of eventualization.

What is this eventualization? It is now necessary to quote Foucault at length on this issue: It is a procedure in which "first, one takes groups of elements where, in a totally empirical and temporary way, connections between mechanisms of coercion and contents of knowledge can be identified. Mechanisms of different types of coercion, maybe also legislative elements, rules, material set-ups, authoritative phenomena etc. One would also consider the contents of knowledge in terms of their diversity and heterogeneity, view them in the context of the effects of power they generate in as much as they are validated by their belonging to a system of knowledge. We are therefore not attempting to find out

what is true or false, founded or unfounded, real or illusory, scientific or ideological, legitimate or abusive. What we are trying to find out is what are the links, what are the connections that can be identified between mechanisms of coercion and elements of knowledge, what is the interplay of relay and support between them, such that a given element of knowledge takes on the effects of power in a given system where it is allocated to be a true, probable, uncertain or false element, such that a procedure of coercion acquires the very form and justifications of a rational, calculated, technically efficient element, etc.” (2000, 200)

Eventualization as an act that questions, lures or forces out alternative modes of perception and conceptualization, and that throws an illuminating spotlight on the matters, issues and activities to which we too often pay little attention, and which we too often take for granted. An act that we will pursue in the next chapter, finally coming back to the idea of MORE LOGO.

## 5.1 Quality of Participation - The Strategies of MORE LOGO

This is it, this is the time to get down and get dirty, because you got to get down to get up - as the song happily reminds us. This is the time to show your colours. This is the razor's edge, on which, if we are not careful, we will start rocking on our heels, waving our finger and pointing at the wrongs and the wretched of the world, while denying any responsibility at all for these problems.

But, if participation makes any sense, it implies that we are not so worried about it actually taking place, but about the access to it and the availability of it. In fact, we need to be very worried about the potentiality for and the necessity of constantly re-generating it. The point is that not everyone has to participate in every possible theme and in every imaginable discussion, but that the door to that possibility has to be kept open, and invitingly open, to as many people as possible. We have to see the sea in order to realize that we know how to swim (a metaphor I promise to return to in a while).

Another thing we need to focus on is the quality of participation. Quality does not refer to some previously-stated, monument-like criterion that remains unchanged. Quality refers to the meaningfulness of the participation that is related to and defined through the wishes, desires, fears and interests of those who are about to participate. What it also means is that quality of participation relegates the importance of certain strategies to being unhelpful or even dan-

gerous. There is no neutral outsider's point of view; there is no neutral value statement. We are part of the game, part of the deal.

Therefore, strategically speaking, it is necessary to start thinking about what it means that we want to set aside the slogan NO LOGO and instead take seriously the challenge of the follow-up slogan MORE LOGO. The difference between these attitudes ought to be quite clear from the outset. There are, however, quite a lot of significant details to be addressed through them. It has to be noted that, in the following argument, I purposely distance myself from the actual content of what NO LOGO can mean within the discourse of the critics of globalization, such as Naomi Klein. Instead, I use it as a counterpoint to MORE LOGO.

The main difference is a question of direction. NO LOGO opts for denial; it turns against something, and shuts itself into a structure and position of opposition. Here the NO does mean NO, in the sense that, in the worst case scenario, it turns its back on its adversary; a strategy that is not very helpful, and which, ultimately, only makes the negative spell that keeps them as adversaries even stronger.

MORE LOGO, on the other hand, takes the opposite route. It is important to point out that this step is only possible after NO LOGO's criticism. It is like an act of turning back. An act with an attitude that is no longer satisfied with being in the inner sanctuary of having turned against something, and through that move having created a kind of safe haven for the participants who already share the same thoughts and visions. Instead, it comes out of a fixed position and wants to openly and actively play the game of participation.

If NO means protest, MORE means that just being against something is not enough. It is the first tentative step towards articulating what you are FOR and why. You have to draw another clarifying line here between the attitude of MORE and the logic of endless expansion, as understood in the model of capitalist market forces. I would argue that MORE stands for the quality of participation, not the quantity. Another comparative angle is to see MORE as juxtaposed to the strategies of the spectacle. For me, MORE is closely tied in with the idea of the politics of the small gesture, which was dealt with at length at the beginning of this book.

But yes, the basic idea behind the move to MORE LOGO is not too complicat-

ed. The idea is as simple as it gets: since we are overloaded 24/7 with messages, images and symbols on a huge scale, it makes very little sense to fight against them using their own means and material resources. This implies the necessity of thinking differently and of employing an alternative means of communication. Another significant matter inherent in the ideology of MORE is the attempt to offer an alternative to the existing hegemonic ways and means of discussing participation and presence in the city space as a site of production.

The idea of MORE LOGO can also be addressed by focusing on specific methods of branding. A process that for a few valid reasons does not necessarily have that good a reputation, but which according to Simon Anholt (2003) is a means that any agent can activate and use for their own ends. What Anholt is aiming at is shifting the focus of branding from multinationals to the currently weaker communities or governments. He is talking about the mechanisms of branding that, when used properly, would allow poor states to lift themselves up from the status of raw-material providers to being higher up the chain as producers of brands. His aim is to help the poorer emerging nations to use branding as a means for achieving sustainable growth and wealth.

Anholt takes up many examples of how, for example, Brazil is not yet taking advantage of its own resources and its own culture for its own ends. It is a puzzle for Anholt (2003, 32) how it is possible that a nation such as Brazil has not managed to lift itself up to the level of producing cool, sexy brands, rather than just consuming brands created elsewhere. The opportunity and home market are obviously there.

At the same time as being aware of the opportunity, we have to remember how the brutal realities of international trade and the lop-sided trade barriers cause a huge problem. According to comparative data for 15 products from 1999, the average tariff applied by Brazil to products from the US was 14.3%, whereas the US conversely charged an average tariff on Brazilian products of 45.6%. (Ibid. 102) Anholt's idea of using branding for the empowerment of a nation is obviously a provocative and challenging one, with lots of hurdles and practical problems, but as an idea that is definitely worth pursuing because of the characteristics of a brand ideology. The real potential benefit of a brand arises in a longer time perspective. It is a vehicle for sustainable growth. And it is very helpful for us to try to define what MORE LOGO stands for.

Let us get to the core of the issue. When Anholt is talking about the possibili-

ties of branding, he makes a clear distinction between branding and advertising, between design and public-relations exercise. Certainly they are techniques that are used in individual aspects of creating and sustaining a brand, but the quality of branding comes from somewhere else. "The motto of nation branding should be actions speak louder than words: proving things about the place can only be achieved through consistent policy, carefully planned investments, superbly executed innovation, and organized behaviour." (2006, 6)

Funnily enough, Anholt brings into the scheme the idea of civil society and the power of self-organization without which brands cannot be credible or functioning. "The kind of shared vision and common purpose which is a precondition of successful branding can only be achieved through 'soft power', and by a critical mass of stakeholders voluntarily endorsing and agreeing to support the national or regional brand strategy." (Ibid. 7) Anholt flirts with the idea of contrasting soft and hard versions of power, in which the latter is often enough based on coercion or the threat of it, whereas the former is based on the idea of persuading people to do what you, in fact, want them to do. A kind of soft power that nevertheless is a very effective type of power, and something that in power studies is labelled the third face of power. (See Lukes 2005)

But what if we change the title of a nation or a region and replace it with the idea of a single agent or a small group of agents pursuing the idea of making and achieving a small gesture via the strategy of MORE LOGO? What can we learn from the mighty mechanisms of branding, what should we avoid, and what should we head towards? And perhaps most urgently, how do we manage to connect it with the necessity of avoiding the dominance of corporate logic and the instrumentalization of our life-worlds? Just as a teaser, let's recall Anholt's up-beat and perhaps overly enthusiastic summary of what a brand can really do: "National brand is national identity made tangible, robust, communicable and useful. A good brand represents a real competitive edge, and is without doubt the single most valuable asset which any nation possesses; and knowing how to protect, develop and exploit it is the key for translating the intangible wealth of developing countries into economic growth." (2006, 5)

Perhaps the most important notion and consequence of the strategy of MORE is how it directly affects those (that is, in fact, most of us) who are not happy or satisfied with the current state of affairs. In other words, the strategy of MORE works as a boomerang: it forces all of us to be self-critical and to really focus on the articulation of a comprehensible and credible alternative. MORE here is syn-

onymous with the attitude behind what it is that you are FOR?

Thus, the move beyond NO means that we are faced with the task of self-reflexive and self-critical articulation of what we want and why. And this, of course, as we all remember from our own shy, sharp or shallow experiences, is when it starts to get real and when it starts to hurt. We lose the benefit of the perfect enemy if and whenever we are able to step out of fixed models of prejudices and oppositions, if and when we actually try to reach out and touch. There is no longer a fixed 'böse onkel' who so magnificently serves to define what we are against. At the same time, as the enemy's scarecrow function fades we enter into a process of acknowledging that the other is not a solid, clear-cut entity, but a mixture of conflicting needs and fears like ourselves.

We are, then, on the verge of becoming something new, rather than endlessly reproducing what already exists. What's the difference, what MORE can we say? The thing we are FOR, that we want to represent, is a very long, demanding process that starts, like any reflective activity, with a catalogue of provocative questions. Again, they are not literally provocative, but they do throw those doing the thinking off balance. Or put in another way: if the questions are not disturbing and difficult, then they are simply not valid questions.

The wonderful catalogue of correct, valid questions starts off at an abstract level with the cruellest of the cruel: What is that you want? In order to maintain a purpose adequate to our aims, this question has to be framed and focused on our activities in the triangular drama in which contemporary art meets the public sphere and politics. It is within this strangely comforting, yet at the same time strangely annoying, dilemma that things finally get serious. It is like trying to stand on a chair with three legs, or like trying to swim with only one leg or one arm. You are still sitting on a chair, and you are still swimming, but you can no longer compare the activity with the normal practices of sitting or swimming. It is something different. The parameters for the activity have been altered. There is a burning, immediate need to figure out a new relationship with the three participating forces.

This slightly silly metaphor may serve us better than it initially suggests. Let's stay with the swimmer who swims with one arm and two legs. What if we imagine that this one arm is activism in contemporary art? To continue: What if the left leg represents the public sphere and the right leg, politics. There has always been a connection between these parts, but the connection has never really

been problematised or politicised. It has been taken for granted that it exists as it does. It is only through the momentary loss of the second arm that we begin to notice what is going on and why. Where did we lose the fourth member? Well, we did not actually lose it, but what was active there before is no longer there due to the act of questioning the fundamental way that a person swims. It was lost (hanging loosely and passively by the person's side) when we started asking what is MORE, and what is it that we are FOR. A hand that serves as a symbol for the belief in failure-proof strategies.

But perhaps it is high time to climb down off the abstract ladder and to situate ourselves in two specific cases. Cases that come in the guises of Indymedia and Superflex. Indymedia is an example of self-organization and networking that has certainly generated an alternative way of both producing and consuming news and information. It has very much used the potentialities of the MORE LOGO strategy to get where it is at. It is an example of cooperation on the level of a wide variety of localities and a functioning and credible communications network connecting these localities. A system that Hardt & Negri (2004, 349) label a 'multitude'. This is an organization that is based on the long tradition of free radio stations and experimental TV production that has tried to break the monopoly of the major media companies. The birth of Indymedia dates back to the large-scale protests that evolved in Seattle during the 1999 WTO summit. The idea is to generate and distribute, mainly through the Internet, information about events such as these demonstrations that do not get the coverage they deserve.

I believe the most interesting aspect of the Indymedia example is how they have taken action and done something. Instead of complaining about and criticizing the existing media coverage and the existing media bias, they have created a medium of their own. On the same note, Indymedia do not serve as a means for reforming the ways corporations handle their information work. They act alongside them, still within sight, but achieving an alternative that co-exists with other sources of information. Quite a lot of their strategy is, in fact, condensed into the slogan that they use: "Don't hate the media, become the media." (Quoted in Hardt & Negri 2004, 305)

Currently Indymedia cover over a hundred cities, on six continents. It is a well-developed and amazingly high-coverage distribution network. However, it also highlights the ultimate shortcomings of a network on this scale. There is no doubt about the importance of each individual organization in this large net-

work. Local Indymedia communities from Chicago to Chachachaa provide and promote views that need to be heard - and shared. But how far does that go? How big a multitude of global democracies has been or can be achieved in such a network?

Tickling our brains, and promoting alternative versions of the news are always beneficial and important issue and act on their own. But that in itself does not lead to something else, and especially not if that something else is the desire for global democracy as argued for by Hardt & Negri. Clicking into the Indymedia homepage is a revealing experience. You immediately have access to a fantastic amount of information from all over the world. You can read about the problems of this and that site and community. Very well, but what is that you do and could do with that information? This is not a conservative worry, and it is not a dilemma that has no clear-cut solution - although the argument set out here starts with the wish for Indymedia to be and to remain where it is, and appreciates its existence to a very great degree. That said, we can focus on the core dilemma of a network like Indymedia. We have lots of information, but what does it say to us, how can we comprehend it and act upon it?

Reading about the problems of housing estates in a suburb of Chicago is interesting. It becomes even more interesting if you know someone who lives near there, not to mention having a connection with someone directly affected by this particular problem. And yes, in our contemporary times, these connections and networks are there to remind us that we are not alone, which we need from time to time so as not to lose the glimmer of hope that we have managed to detect. But at the same time we have to be aware of the shortcomings and limits of this kind of interaction.

These inherent limitations bring us back to the question of locality and physical experience. There is no way we can get over the fact that there is a major difference between being part of the actual problem in Chicago and reading about it with great sympathy somewhere else. In the worst case, what Indymedia creates is a chain of problems that are set alongside other problems. It adds up to a meaningful, but in itself suffocating litany of difficulties around the globe. Problems being next to each other, and these problems having a lot of similarities does not yet mean that they interact or speak to each other. But how can that be achieved? How can we learn from the examples of others?

The argument here does not mean that sharing experiences is not meaningful,

since it very definitely is. Nor does it imply that, no matter what, we are always alone with our dilemmas, because that is not correct, either. What I am trying to argue is that the process of even comprehending the details of any site and situation takes much more time than reading the content of the given internet address through and through. Achieving a deep-seated, conflict-aware connection between one difference and another difference is the hardest part, and that is exactly why it is also a very important part. It is the part in which we try to connect the specificity of a locality to the singularity of its identity. A process that does not dream of a global multitude, but is much more interested in generating a loose community based on the experience of reciprocal recognition of a difference talking to another difference, and then again another one and another one. A fugitive and fleeting, but nevertheless powerful community in its specific singularity.

Let us move on to the second example. This is the Danish artist trio Superflex (see [www.superflex.net](http://www.superflex.net)), who have been working together since the early 1990's. Their activities span such a wild range that I need to focus here on just one of their recent interests, and on two related projects. And yes, that interest is the process of making a copy. Or put in other words, this is about flirting with the strategies of branding and also pirating different kinds of products. And then again, their interest is crystallized in the concepts of self-organization and self-empowerment.

Lately, their activities have focused a great deal on producing drinks. With the help of farmers from north of the Amazon, in the Maues region of Brazil, they have tried to generate a market for a new brand of soft drink that uses a substance called guarana. This is a caffeine-packed soft-drink ingredient that is especially popular in South America, but it is also used in drinks sold everywhere. This different venture into making alternative drinks is a work that they made specially for a show called Shiftscale in Tallinn, Estonia. It was the opening exhibition at the new Kumu Art Museum, and for this special occasion, Superflex also produced something extra special. They introduced the world's first non-alcoholic vodka called, yes yes yes, Non-Alcoholic Vodka.

But first to the guarana power drink. The background here is the dramatically worsened situation of local farmers in the Amazon during the last couple of years. Due to mergers between breweries and soft drink producers, the big international companies who buy the guarana were able to capitalize on their near-monopoly status and radically push down the prices for the raw material. The

price dropped from 25 dollars to 4 dollars. (See Bradley 2006)

The farmers' co-operative, a self-organized group of Amazonian farmers called COAIMA had to do something, and one of the things they did was to contact Superflex. What they were after was to get closer to the know-how needed to raise them from the position of mere raw-material producers to the level of producing products containing guarana. What Superflex were after was to link themselves into this very particular and difficult, but interesting situation, and to try to help these farmers find meaningful ways of re-organizing themselves. They wanted to help these farmers to make a change, and while doing so to learn more about how to produce added value when trespassing against the common, classical rules of the market.

After many visits, a couple of workshops, plenty of brainstorming, a lot of planning, and a great deal of more-detailed talk, and some inevitable false starts, a soft drink labelled GuaranaPower has been in production at a micro-brewery in Denmark. It started right after their extended research trip to Amazonia in 2003. The process was jointly initiated by Superflex and a group of guarana farmers in the region. Together they came up with the idea of producing a soft drink that would be in direct competition with the main guarana soft drinks currently produced by companies owned by multi-national enterprises.

The plan flirted with the design of already-existing brands. Their new logo purposely uses the same colour scheme, red, green and black, on the label. The label, however, also states that it is "real Maues guarana for energy and empowerment" and the back label on the bottle has a photograph of the COIAMA co-operative on it. The short text on the back label reads:

"GUARANÁ POWER is an energy soft drink produced by a guaraná farmer's cooperative from Maués in the Brazilian Amazon, in collaboration with The Power Foundation. The farmers have organized themselves in response to the activities of the multinational corporations xxxx and xxxx, a cartel whose monopoly like position on the purchase of the raw material has driven the price of guaraná berries down 80%, while the costs of their products to the consumer has arisen.

"GUARANÁ POWER employs global brands and their strategies as raw material for a counter-economic position while reclaiming the original use of the Maués guaraná plant as a powerful natural tonic, not just a symbol."

Soon after production started, the rights to the logo and the recipe were handed over to an organization called The Power Foundation. Superflex gets no economic benefit from selling the drink. For each bottle sold the surplus goes into The Power Foundation. This means that, after paying for the guaraná raw material from the farmers, paying the flavour master, bottling and distribution, there is about 20% left, which goes into The Power Foundation. The Power Foundation then supports the farmers. They recently decided to buy a fax machine with some of the money.

The Power Foundation works with a local distributor (søbogaard) in Denmark, a bottling company and a flavour master. Up to the Spring of 2006, the foundation has been able to sell about 100,000 bottles. So far, its main business is in Copenhagen. The drink is being sold in a lot of cafes, and in 7-Eleven stores and other convenience stores in Denmark. They are now moving into Italy, and have received requests from Norway and Finland, too. They are currently focusing on how to increase distribution, and also facing potential legal disputes with Guaraná Antartica, the main producer of guarana drinks in Brazil. Guaraná Antartica is currently owned by a multi-national company called Inbev. In fact, The Power Foundation has already exercised a bit of self-censorship, when it altered the first version of the logo so that it is more easily distinguished from that of its competitor. Just to put things into perspective, so far, the new drink that gained cult status very fast has sold over 100,000 bottles, while the multi-nationals' annual sales are around 15,000 more. It is also good to realize that fair trade is still very marginal to mainstream markets. Fair-trade goods account for only around 0.01% of world trade. (See Bradley 2006)

Superflex's aim is to launch the drink in Brazil later on this year. The biggest difficulty has been the logistics, especially in Brazil with the transfer of money and so on. The other problem is the common nuisance for any start-up: fragile cash flow and no effective cash buffer to rely on.

But has it been a success? Jacob Fenger, one third of Superflex, explains that it is a mixture of things. "The Guaraná Power is a counter product that deals with a very specific political problem that appeals to a large group of people. It deals with a real problem in the markets of soft drink instead of just being critical about fair and free trade. If you buy the product you become active and that is a very easy way of being revolutionary - understood with an ironic smile. The media in Denmark has been very keen on telling this story (the David-Goliath effect). There has been a lot of support from people that use the soda for events,

buying t-shirts and so on.” (e-mail conversation 28.2.2006)

The other Superflex project that I want to focus on is also a drink. This time a drink with a universal following, but certainly with a local twist to it. This is the Non-Alcoholic Vodka project, which was presented at the Shiftscale group exhibition in Tallinn, Estonia, during the spring of 2006. This is an example that, unlike the Guarana project, might sound like a one-off joke, but definitely has a much darker side with shades attached to it through its location.

In one sense, Superflex's action in Tallinn was as straightforward as it gets. For the exhibition, they produced over 1000 half-litre bottles of Vodka with no alcohol in it. And no, it was not just plain water. It was distilled with a distinctive flavour close to that of cayenne pepper. A proper Vodka drink, so to speak, with a smooth first taste and a strong kick, with the necessary characteristic burning sensation in your throat afterwards. A drink that was introduced at the opening at a Non-Alcoholic Vodka bar open free to all visitors. It was served, by beautiful people wearing fresh white T-shirts sporting the logo “Non-Alcoholic Vodka”, in small schnapps glasses with the requisite logo on them. After the opening, what was on display was a set-up styled in the fashion of a product presentation. What we saw was a carefully constructed pyramid of bottles next to and on top of one another with a shiny mirror separating the three levels of the pyramid.

What made this action much more than a gimmick and a funny, parasitic take on the reality of product presentations is the site for which it was planned and where it was executed. This site in Tallinn is something that takes a bit of explaining. From the historical perspective, we have to consider the fate of the independent Republic of Estonia. A country that became independent for a short period in the 1920's, but which then, on the verge of World War II, was occupied, first by German troops and then by the forces of the Soviet Union - forces that stayed until the early 1990's, when this little state regained its sovereignty. During the Cold War, Estonia was part of the Soviet Union, and was so most unwillingly.

After its newly won independence, Estonia started to develop into a market-run liberal democracy at great speed and with the change producing amazing effects. It capitalized on its relatively highly educated workforce and very low labour costs by attracting manufacturers, especially from the nearby Nordic countries. At the same time, Tallinn became a very popular resort for tourists

from the Nordic countries. These were not just any kind of tourist, but were very special: they had a mission. They were people that acquired, with reason, the label 'vodka tourists'. Thus, Tallinn served ever thirsty Nordic visitor, especially Finnish tourists, cheap vodka - and then more cheap vodka.

The effect on the urban development of the cityscape was that a central area of the old town in Tallinn looks like one huge alcohol shop - if we allow some exaggeration here. The traffic in drink increased to all time highs after Estonia entered the European Union in 2004 and almost all the restrictions on bringing vodka from Tallinn into Finland were removed. Currently, about 6 million people travel from Helsinki to Tallinn and back (or the other way around) each year. The figure for the route between Stockholm and Tallinn is about 700,000. (Suomen Kuvalehti, 29, 5/2006)

And yes, it is specifically here that the Danish group introduces its premier product, Non-Alcoholic Vodka. Or to put it more precisely, they launch it as an idea and a potential. There are no plans, or at least not yet, to produce this drink for the market, but, of course, if the demand is there, things might change. Thus, the point of what they did was something different. And that something different was highlighted by this small, significant gesture, doing what the city does so well, but with a distinct difference. They served vodka, but even if it might have had a certain similarity to the taste of the vodka that we are used to, its effects were very different. The funny thing being, I suppose, that if you ended up drinking too much of it, you would, in fact, feel sick, but you would not have got the high in between.

But, back to the anecdote with the legs. In the taken-for-granted collaboration, the legs did what they were supposed to do. When functioning properly, they created and maintained a plausible rhythm and coordination. They did not kick at the same time, but one after another. They functioned together in a sequence, but not simultaneously. Now, when the other arm is momentarily numb and out of action, and if we do not want to drown, still holding true to the scope that the metaphor seems to allow us, the swimmer has to come up with a new solution as to how to combine these three remaining body parts. It is not only that each part has to take on more responsibility, and to act differently than with the previous rules of the game, but that the changes in the ways they act also affect each other strongly. Thus, what contemporary art can do in this newly politicised, opened-up site that is more alive and asks more questions of the public sphere, depends not only on what it itself wants, but also on how the other parts

react and make decisions.

Therefore, what follows after the question: “What do you want (not to drown and to stay active as a swimmer, enjoying the process of questioning, not destroying or only deconstructing)?” is the legacy of a much more detailed set of questions. One of them is: ‘Whom do you want to work with?’ In our case, it is obvious that we want to be present and part of the public sphere and of political discussion, but we have to be much more precise about which part, remembering that no all-encompassing unified public sphere exists. The questions continue: “What do you want to say? Who do you want to be your listener? Whom are you willing and able to listen to? How can you participate in the context that you want to be a part of?” And yes, the final decisive moment, the common denominator for all these: “Why? Why do you do what you do?”

All of these mental toothaches are presented here on an abstract level that cries out for a practical context: The practical needs and necessities of making decisions, taking turns and making choices that exclude some paths while including others. Even on an abstract level, however, there is still something else to add. This is the core ethics of any kind of participation, and again it manifests itself in two inter-linked questions.

1) What are the contexts, discourses, scenes or communities that you want to be an active part of? Here the locations of the activities are of necessity plural and changing, not solid, fixed identities, even if the need to focus on a couple of contexts, and not to extend to hundreds, has to be comprehended, as is the need for a tolerable and reasonable fluidity of identity mixed with the continued security of a certain kind of sameness (See Ricouer 1992.)

2) How do you cope with your loneliness?

## 5.2. Speed kills // What are we FOR?

I am pretty sure, not to say very confident, that most of us share the notion of doing something for a change. Call it what you will, call it freedom of choice, call it the fire that burns inside you, call it the ego that tortures you, or call it the passion for pleasure. We want to be able to do what we want to do, and to do it in circumstances that permit us and push us into fruitful interaction and argument with other views and positions. We need the critical context of a certain kind of community, and we need to generate sustainable conditions for knowl-

edge production. Conditions that allow and help us to do what we want to do with a little bit more focus and in a way that is a little bit better. In other words, to do a little less, but much better. That can't be too much to ask for, right?

Why then is it so difficult? And why do we so easily choose the most convenient excuse and start moaning about lack of this or that resource - whether it be time, money, patience or just a good old pair of running shoes? Why do we fail to resist the temptations and immediate satisfaction of quantity instead of trusting in the possibility of quality?

I think we can also agree with the claim that SPEED KILLS. SPEED KILLS as in the reality that bites when you do too much too fast, and do not care to stop and think about the quality, but are simply happy at the quantity. But, what concerns us here is how we can combine both SPEED KILLS and MORE LOGO? Is there not some deep, unsolvable contradiction here? I am sure there is, yet not necessarily as an obstacle, but as a reminder of how anything taking place within the system of capitalist market-force logic is prone to being turned into an instrumentalized product with a near sell-by date stuck on its bottom. Thus, MORE LOGO is an alternative only if and when it uses its chances to create modes of exchange and interaction that are based on something other than consumer satisfaction and the logic of more of the same.

But let us focus on the idea that SPEED KILLS. A notion that all of us have to have the heart and the courage to admit that we can fall for it. We all do too much and too fast. Cutting corners, pasting together things that do not really fit - and then we run run run away, and bury our heads in the sand like an ostrich. What I wonder is where do we run to? And how can we say that SPEED KILLS without being taken hostage by nostalgic conservatism or fundamentalist, less-is-more fanaticism?

Difficult, so very difficult, said a man who tried to make a perfectly round, tight snowball that could break any window it wanted, but a man who tried to achieve his goal with no snow. He just wanted to use imaginary snow as his material. What this failure at the start of the story wants to point out is simply that, if there is an answer to the dilemma argued for above, it is found precisely when we manage to find a workable balancing act in between nihilism and apathy, in between commodity logic and denial of the pleasures of shopping around for the latest fashion item or techno gadget.

Thus, what we are looking for is ways of avoiding both extremes, and of finding enough room for alternative ways of dealing with each other, alternative ways of, yes, being together. And this alternative 'something else' has to be much more, it must offer much more, even if does depend on this litany of complaints, than just another angry set of criticisms of consumer culture, criticisms of the collapse or disappearance of the public sphere, or the emergence of the hedonistic me me me society. We need a vision of an organic, constantly self-reflective, tolerant and open-ended society based on specific singularities.

But then again, this balance might not be enough when we recognize how easily all (or at least most) of us seem to be diluted into processes in which we are turned into objects of desire or objects of waste management. We have learned through Foucault that power in itself is nothing if not productive. What it produces is a completely different matter, and based on the acts that take place in the context of that power, and the historical background of the particular site. We have also learned through Manuel Castells that information is power, and the type of power of the network that flows without a centre or clear-cut hierarchy. What this all means is that, even in the hyper-effective illusion of capitalist societies, where most of us are thoroughly conditioned to behave in pre-ordered, carefully monitored and supervised patterns, there are always chances to act differently - always ways of providing alternative ways of talking, walking and, well, for example, bowling - or even shopping. But not alone, mind you. Not alone.

However, this room to manoeuvre and to produce something else is cut down by the logic of who can and who will say no, and who will simply follow. In the words of Zygmunt Bauman, pointing out the dilemma of SPEED KILLS, within which the question of agency and its ability to act is directly bound up with particular sites and particular times: "Power tends to be measured by the ability to avoid engagement or to disengage and escape at short notice or without notice, while the symptom of powerlessness is the inability to arrest or even to slow down the moves. Keeping the option of the 'vanishing act' open is fast becoming the global powers' principal strategy, while 'hit and run' becomes its most favoured tactic." (2001, 203)

What Bauman is referring to is the development of macro-economic practices, with more and more of those practices being beyond the control of sovereign nation states, and the limits they set, or try to set. What is left for individual, democratic governments, in this worst case scenario, is dealing with the current

race to the bottom - and that bottom is where the idea of a common good and the vision of a good society disappear so very effectively, and dangerously.

But what can we do? First of all, we must at all costs try to avoid falling into the sweet and sour trap of blaming others while enjoying the latest version of a conspiracy theory. Instead, we have to push the alternatives to the fore. Indeed, this particular what is the range of opportunities for the politics of the small gesture. I guess there is not much to shout about, but to point to the hopelessness of that mission. A certain hopelessness of the grand theory or the big gesture that is, in fact, based on, and only possible and plausible when it is grounded on, a long-term, coherent, consistently developing trust and hope that what we do (politics of small gestures) makes sense and make a difference.

A carousel that can turn into a vicious circle, but then again can create and generate something of an opening to act and think differently, to imagine beyond commodities, to feel beyond clear-cut aims, and to see beyond one-size-fits-all habits of the heart and part-time solutions. It is an aim and an attitude that come very close to the contextualized experience described by Gadamer as tarrying in front of an image. An experience that is always located at some particular site - a site in which we need to stay put and stay present in the constant back-and-forth, pushing-and-pulling. In his words, and in my reflection on the dangers of speed kills can be overcome in our relationship with contemporary art: "This is truly free seeing, where art shows itself to us, compelling us to tarry and offering an opportunity for participation. The work of art comes forth - for a moment. Thus alternate distancing and coming forth, tarrying and moving on, but also moving along." (1994, 54)

Thus, it is about staying close to the context, shaping and making it, relying on means and materials that are in sight and in your interests. Instead of trying to catch and cover all the possibilities, it is about how to grasp that one thing that makes sense there and then - and yes, to follow it up and down, up and down.

### 5.3 Birgir Snaebjörn Birgisson There Is Nothing Wrong With Being Nice

There is nothing wrong with being nice.  
The new gentleness.

A workshop course given by the Icelandic, Reykjavik-based painter Birgir Snaebjörn Birgisson at the Academy of Fine Arts, Helsinki, 14.3 - 18.3.2005. A

description of the course given to students, and a basis for the discussions in the group meetings.

The power of being gentle and yet serious.

Possible advantages of the silence and stillness of the image within the painting.

Narration: values, categories.

Painting as an intellectual object.

Opinion-making and possible demands on painting.

A few thoughts and questions concerning the content of the course.

What are our normal expectations from paintings?

Which paintings have the students seen lately?

What is a good painting?

How do they differentiate between painting and other mediums?

How do they categorize paintings?

What is there to be looked at?

What is an intellectual painting?

Does a painting have to be an intellectual object?

What is a non-intellectual painting?

Can the source or the idea for a painting come from wherever?

Does everything count?

Are some ideas better than others?

Are social references necessary?

Is it necessary to have a stand, or something to say?

Where does one seek ideas?

Does one need ideas?

What needs to be done to get attention?

Where is the power to be found?

Does one need power?

Are silence and stillness acceptable?

Does a painting have to be any of the following: narrative, provocative, ironic, politically correct, poetic, informative, mystic, shocking, beautiful, silent, still?

## 5.4 Olafur Eliasson and the Question of Situating a Utopia

There is a work called Utopia, at the Venice Biennale, 2003. You look into a white square, edge circa 60 cm, and the moment you look into the white space, it violently flashes. The mechanical surprise, with blinding force, shoots the word

UTOPIA straight into your retina. The word is powerfully burned into your vision. The flash is gone, but the word stays. No matter what you look at, you see that word in black again and again. You unwillingly project it onto everything you want to see. This is a reversal of the subject-object construction of the viewer and the viewed. The subject becomes the object that unintentionally projects words from the object, which is therefore turned into a subject.

For Eliasson, UTOPIA is not the end station, it is not the vanishing point. UTOPIA is not outside you, it is inside you. It starts with you, in this precise moment. Potentially.

### Interview March 2006

“In my work I don’t focus primarily on the end result. For me, it is more about taking part in a dialogue, providing tools for negotiating that relationship, and evaluating the structures within which the dialogue happens. The benefit, as I see it, of the quality of an artist’s participation is that it combines content and form. It uses an introspective language that is self-reflective. I don’t agree that this notion of the possibility of creating and constructing one’s own reality is in itself hopelessly romantic. It can be also a critical attitude.

“Let’s take the concept of time. A work of art can very well show how time is both relative and negotiable. It is not as if art could make a different version of time, or that it could replace current time with something else. Instead, a work of art can articulate other dimensions that have been neglected, it can open up alternatives.

“It is a question of cultural codes, habits and norms, which all have a connection to the sphere of economics. For example, one basic feature, such as our vision, is already strongly commodified. It is written into the act of seeing what we hold to be attractive and what not. When I talk about the possibility of constructing one’s world, I do not mean it dogmatically. What I refer to is the potentiality of an act, a potentiality for success in shaping one’s reality. It is, in itself, a self-reflective process. Contrary to modernistic claims and aims, it does not strive for an increased level of self-understanding, or a purification of one’s views and wants. Instead of a highpoint, it strives to keep on going on, to be able to keep the process itself in motion. It is a critical, embedded vision of a trajectory of life. It combines with it the forces of resistance and the ability to see potentiality all around us. What it produces is not a statement, but a suggestion.

“What this all comes down to is the idea of singularity. I think singularity is about how we emotionally engage ourselves in a space. It is understanding that space is inherently connected with the aspect of duration. It is not a solitary or autonomous notion, but something that needs the perspective of time. Without the aspect of time a space does not make sense. What this means is that the difference between two singularities is also connected to time, and how we see the difference only in time. I believe that there is no trajectory in a singularity. The trajectory has no perceptible quality. There is no picture, but there is the time-line. A time-line, for example, of the tree in the garden. There is the aspect of it growing, and there is the time of the different seasons that the tree lives through, or successive erosion that affects it. The point about singularity, and this is where it is strongly linked to my idea of utopia, is that if and when we allow the idea that an object is not the same in any circumstances, then we allow it to be a process. A process that is again affected and that at the same time affects. If we manage this, then it is more and more difficult for us to patronize and to colonize these objects or things turned into one-dimensional objects.

“A singularity is a meaningful way of distinguishing between two versions of subjectivity. On the one hand, we have subjectivity as a process, and on the other hand, we get subjectivity as a solid entity. In terms of the events and acts that I am interested in, the main distinction is that singularity does not take the idea of an object (that we watch and relate to) for granted, but allows it to be (and to be shaped) in the interaction between the subject and the object.

“An idea or a version of a singularity is what I see in the simultaneous processes in the interplay between something as a consequence and something as being in a con-sequence. When consequence stands for the moments or acts that happen one after the other, for me the concept of con-sequence points to the situations or sites that are there between the consequentially proceeding moments or acts. In the latter, it is important to see how the sites located between moments affect the moments before and after them, and how they also, of course, shape that site and situation of in-betweenness. So this is about paying attention, not only to the sequences that happen after one another, but to the points and sites between each pair of sequences.”

Why is this innovative use of a definition so important to you? What is it you want to say or point out with this distinction?

“For me, it is a tool for demonstrating that art is not an autonomous activity. Or, in fact, that hardly anything we do can be totally separated from its setting and the sequence of acts that both affect and are affected. The problem is that too often events and acts are seen as independent capsules, instead of recognizing and being aware of the causality of things around us.

“For me it actually opens up through the very basic notion of when we consider what it means to do something. First of all, any action has consequences. It has implications. We can crudely divide doing something into critical and non-critical variants. The distinction is not evident, and we need to be very careful here. What I mean by critically doing something is characterized by its potentiality. The most important part is the self-reflective aspect, that we are aware of where we are and how we are. This is, for example, about the awareness of how we perceive what we look at, and how this act of seeing is not neutral or given, but always constructed.

“The potentiality of a critical attitude helps us to shape alternatives to the tendency that I have called model mania. It is this very influential habit of trying to categorize and to box things in. The contrast with the critical attitude is questioning the ways this model mania tries to make things be seen as natural and non-negotiable. The task, obviously, is therefore to provide opportunities and also means of re-evaluating these claims.”

“The notion of responsibility is inherent in the act of doing something, an act that has consequences. And this implies any kind of an act. Even just walking down the street has consequences, by brushing air aside, and you moving towards something. These consequences are not necessarily interesting or meaningful, but they are there. And yes, one main question is therefore what consequences are seen as important and worthwhile dealing with.”

You have talked about the necessity of evaluating spatial claims. Can you try to describe this critical moment?

“There is an abstract and slightly less abstract answer to this. On the most abstract level, the critical moment is preceded by the following set-up. In a very simplified form, it is about how I participate in the world that I exist in. While minding about the world around me, I gather knowledge about it. Knowledge and impressions that I then digest in a situation that I would call a laboratory. A place where experiments are done. After digestion, I often put something out into the world. It is highly important to recognize that the process of digestion

is not about stepping out of the world where I live and exist. Digestion takes place as a part of that world, and this digestion is again both affected, and also has an impact on a lot of different things. It is this constant back-and-forth, two-way street where the input and the output affect each other.”

“The practical version of the answer is to focus on a person who happens to see a work of mine, and who hopefully then also engages in the process of digesting what he/she has seen and experienced. This is a micro-laboratory of a sort, an experiential situation in which during the process of input and output something might have changed. And yes, this sounds naive, but I really do believe in it. I am not at all sure of the success of these experiments, but I am really sure about their potentiality. I am very sure that art has consequences. It has the ability to re-negotiate the languages of the way we conduct ourselves in our realities.”

“Let me re-trace my steps a bit here. I BELIEVE is the title of a work I did in Denmark in 1992. It was a work staged straight onto a billboard. It was a direct act against the apocalyptic tendencies of that particular time. It has to be stressed that I do not want to impose my beliefs on anyone else, but I do believe in the fact that through my work I can orientate myself in the world. I am never certain that what I do is a success, but I am extremely convinced that what I do is worthwhile, that it is meaningful. How do I keep this belief up? Well, to be honest, it is very simple. I like what I do. It is fun. And when doing something, one thing leads to another and this process also sustains and supports the belief in the meaningfulness of my actions. I have a feeling every day that things can change and turn out better.”

So there is never the moment of horror, the doubt that paralyses you?

“No, not in that sense. However, there are certain fears that I feel and that I see, but they are not personal, but about certain aspects of the art world at large. My horror is when I witness the procedures of the art world that make and force things and works of art to be static. The danger is the way museological ideology determines a work of art as a solitary autonomous object. It is terrifying to see how so many of those with power within the discussions of the art world still want to force a work of art or an artist to be autonomous. The trouble is that I do not want to end up in a box like that. I am connected, inter-connected, and it is these complex negotiations of relationships that I am interested in, not ready-made set-ups. There is, though, a personal difficulty here and that is the

danger of producing the same thing all over again. In one word, the danger of becoming a formalist.

“I think this problematic static tendency is strongest in huge group shows that have an extremely strong need to stabilize the content of and the conduct in the exhibition space. It is understandable that these shows want to control the clearly drawn lines between what is a subject and what is an object, because their content is totally dependent on this division. The cultivation of a behaviour in which this line is strongly separated creates the definition of the works in themselves. It creates a gridlock between the subject and the object and I think this in itself is a highly counter-productive setting.

“The downside of this achieved clarity and security is that it does not allow us to negotiate the matter in an open and content-driven manner. And yes, the point here is the relationships between how we are and where we are in our worlds. The problem with the ideology of the museums is the way that through the dichotomy of subject-object it becomes very patronizing towards us as viewers. It puts us in a place that I do not feel comfortable in. It hands information down to us from a legitimized position to which it in itself has become almost oblivious. It is not self-critical or self-reflective. Museums tends to show us how things are, instead of doing what they could do - and that is to give us ways and suggestions for how to be more generous with each other.

“My mission is to de-stabilize this gridlock. I want to play with it, and to turn it upside down. What I am interested in is how the work of art looks back at you. It is that special moment, the collaborative exercise in which a certain kind of reversal of the subject-object constellation happens. For me this process does not materialize only conceptually or only visually. There is the aspect of physicality embodied in it. This is a question of the quality of looking, and the differences in degrees of deconstruction of the previously dichotomous construction of the relationship between a subject and an object. And yes, I think this precise moment is a very very healthy one.”

Can you say something about how this moment occurs for you? It sounds like a perfect example of a small, but significant gesture that just slightly, but effectively changes the parameters for how we comprehend where we are and how we relate to ourselves and our surroundings.

“I am not that interested in its actual happening, but in its potentiality. This

involves a need to shape a site and situation where one can have an increased sensitivity towards the site. In the most basic sense it is about the process of thinking about this potentiality. It is about the heightened awareness of your place (and the way you are in it) in a certain micro-environment, be it driving in your car or sitting in your office. It is also about how to avoid the self-seductive mechanism that are inbuilt into us in the capitalistic system that we live in.

“It is of the utmost importance to differentiate this potential criticality from the classical notion of enlightenment. What I am after is not a new, heightened level of understanding, but something else. And that something else is connected to the notion that the potentiality of a critical attitude is also in itself a construction. It is not necessarily better, but has the ability to reflect its situatedness. What this means is that anything and everything we do always goes both ways. Doing something affects something outside, but it also always affects the process by which you do what you do. Thus, it is not only about going inside or outside, but the simultaneous process of both/and.

“In our field, I see it as the dilemma between two options that are no longer either workable or interesting. On the one hand, we have the exhibition as a spectacle. You know, the trend towards a Disneyfication of art practices, which like any spectacle operates on the level of representation, but claims to have a connection to the level of experience, which it, of course, completely lacks. Then, on the other hand, we get the classical version of the museum, of a sacred place that repeats the claims to a purifying universalism. The question and the challenge is not to choose between these two bad variants, but to create a new alternative. And yes, of course, I have no answer to this at all. All I know is that this is a very important and burning dilemma that concerns most of us. And yes, ultimately, it is about communication, about how we communicate what we do to ourselves and to others.”

This is a book as an argument. It has tried to argue for that ‘something else’ within the processes of shaping the conditions for and the making of the content of concepts and symbols within the field of contemporary art and visual culture. It has argued that this ‘something else’ could be found within the framework of the politics of the small gesture. A gesture that can find enough space and energy to exist and survive in the midst of the pressures placed, on the one side, on the virtually full-blown commercialization of our life-worlds, and, on the other side, on the mystification of artistic creativity and activity that produces insular art for art’s sake only.

Chapter 6.  
**Conclusion**

It is clear to me that this book as an argument is partly a failure. It really has tried in so many ways to get closer to the core of the issues at hand, and to say something significant about that something else. But it has surely failed. Often enough, I have managed to describe meaningful and moving examples of artistic practice that rely on that certain decisive moment, that decisive gesture that makes those acts and works precisely what they are. However, I clearly have not succeeded in bringing these different actions together into a nicely formatted concept. True, and purposely, I wanted to avoid all-encompassing views or definitions in order to let these different examples go where they want and need to go, but the idea of letting it all go wild and loose is not a very good excuse for imprecise thinking.

But there is a certain saving grace in this particular kind of a failure. This inaccuracy is part of the problem, and part of the game. These politicized small gestures are not easy to articulate without boxing them in, and therefore not paying enough attention to their specific singularities. As has been argued numerous times before in this book, a certain aspect of any specific singularity is not translatable or able to be communicated. Some parts always escape - and they are meant to do so.

There is also another dilemma that is active and present here. The fact that what you are aiming at constantly changes its shape, position and colour is not always all that funny. It is damned frustrating. You get prodded and pushed around, and you start a wild intellectual chase and end up with emotional bruises all round. You get a massive itch, but not such a clear idea of where to scratch. In other words, you are left hanging on without a proper safety net. You accept that something disappears, but it is difficult to figure out whether the part that you could not articulate was specifically that element that you were supposed to leave alone anyhow, or was it precisely that element that you were supposed to confront and face with rigour and endurance?

The only remedy for this cruel uncertainty is to keep your eye on the ball. And this time, the 'ball' is artistic activities and those small gestures that take place within it that make these activities interesting and worthwhile. Activities that might take the shape of a large-scale action or a minute effect, but activities that are all based on that significant, small gesture that allows us to pay attention to where we are, how we are, and to what we might move towards in a slightly different and perhaps even more productive way. Thus, we need to get going, back to the basics, and yes, we must be aware of the fact that we are deal-

ing with individual cases, which have to be respected in accordance with their specific singularities.

This respect, however, also requires that it be a two-way deal and delivery. In other words, it is necessary that a specific singularity is compared and set next to other specific singularities, and that these entities interact and have an effect on each other, but that they remain different and are not made just to be part of the tendency to manufacture more and more of the same.

This book as an argument for our increased ability to pay attention to these small gestures has re-instated my belief and my trust in the necessity of acting in a long-term, committed, coherent and situated way. We just have to find enough hope and trust to keep on keeping on. There is no security, no guarantee, but there is a hunch - based on intuition, vision, values and experience. We need to move towards something that constantly disappears and changes its shape. Something we cannot pin down without destroying it.

We can call this endeavour or journey by many names. We can call it following a trick of the light, we can call it the dialectics of the unattainable, we can label it fishing for compliments, we can even call it a waste of time chasing wild roses. It does not really matter what we call it, the point is to recognize that the focus has to be on the chase, on the journey, not on landing up somewhere or finishing up with something rock solid and super-sellable. It is a task, any task, that you, or I, that you there in the corner counting the number of red cars passing by at that very particular intersection on that very special Tuesday afternoon, find important and worthwhile enough to pay all our potential attention to. It is, in short, a task worth pursuing, even if you never ever achieve it fully.

In this book, that 'something else' that is generated through a small gesture is what I have called a specific singularity. It is a particular something else that is born out of and through the political small gesture that makes and moulds that specific singularity. What makes it specifically political is that this act makes something possible, it changes things. It makes something become something else.

As a concept, a certain, specific singularity is not a winner. It is very hard to see how someone could sell thousands of crazy, sexy & cool T-shirts with it. But let's face it, this type of shortcoming in itself is not necessarily all that horrible. Perhaps we can even find enough courage to call it a virtue to respect complex

issues and to leave complicated things to evolve and emerge as complicated things. It is, if anything, a potential act that requires and deserves all the strength and stamina embedded in loving and caring conflicts.

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