

KEEPING US ALL ALIVE

by Florian Schneider

Dear Phil,

Sorry about the delay in getting back to you but work has been intense the last few days. So, I'll get straight to the point.

Telephone conversations conducted by homeless people aware of the fact that they were being recorded; the anonymisation and transformation of the original recordings and the transcribed content into songs, composed by musicians with no concrete relation to the original context; the presentation of these compositions as vinyl records in an array of specially designed listening booths in a museum or a theatre. Maybe all this could be terribly misunderstood as charitable, nostalgic, or even exploitative. I don't think so. On the contrary, I understand it as a potentially infinite loop of abstractions, which appear as negations of the real abstractions of the world that surrounds us: the real abstractions of the commodity form, the real abstractions of charity, the real abstractions of homelessness, speechlessness, disconnect-edness, and of a systemic lack of imagination.

In return, we have to realise that the power of artistic abstraction is an abstraction which, rather than being subject to aesthetic consumption, is indeed productive; which, rather than escaping contradictions, characterises the specific quality of a work of art; and which, rather than being reduced to a matter of communication, creates an abstract sense of community in terms of realising how differently we live and how we can work differently. As Toni Negri wrote at the end of the 1980s, "The abstract is our nature, the abstract is the quality of our labour, the abstract is the only community in which we exist."

I would also assume that your piece marks another, important step towards the invention of a new kind of realism, a form of documentary which is non-representational and, to quote Negri again, "capable of rearticulating the present into something other than a system of global indifference."

(Remember Scritti Politti in "Skank Bloc Bologna" from 1978: "Keeping us all alive - something in Italy"?)

One can imagine perfectly what it would have been like to turn the content of these conversations into a Brechtian play. But rather than moralising, we enjoy their abstract materiality. Rather than raising awareness, we move in circles.

I saw your work last autumn, when it was installed at HAU Hebel am Ufer in Berlin. I was invited to give a talk as an introduction to a performance entitled *Orpheus in the Land of the Living: A Smuggler's*

Opera, a new piece by andcompany&Co. which takes on today's issue of illegalised border crossing and so-called human trafficking (or people smuggling). Together with a small audience I have been sitting in HAU2, in front of the installation of an artwork with the title *my heart's in my hand, and my hand is pierced, and my hand's in the bag, and the bag is shut, and my heart is caught*. Some of the people waiting for me to finally start my lecture, decided to listen to a record first; others listened to me only briefly, while they were changing the booths.

As I read from a text which I wrote fifteen years ago about the figure of the people smuggler, or "coyote" (as it is called at the US-Mexican border), I started to feel a strange mix of contingency and untimeliness. In a side remark I quoted from "The Tracking Shot in *Kapo*", the canonical text by Serge Daney who, in the second of its only three footnotes, introduces Jacques Lacan's notion of the *passieur*. "The *passieurs* are strange: they need borders but only to challenge them. They don't want to be alone with their treasures and, at the same time, they don't really care about those to whom they pass something. And since 'feelings are always reciprocal', we don't really care about them either, we don't pass anything to them, and we often empty their pockets."

On my way back to Norway I read Daney's entire text again, which I haven't done in quite a while although it certainly is one of the pieces of writing most dear to me. I decided to reread it with a group of art students within the improvised setting of an exhibition we put up spontaneously on the occasion of a local documentary festival.

During this reading, we encountered a strange paragraph towards the end in which Daney writes, "And every 'form' is a face looking at us. (...) The form is desire; the content is only the background when we are gone."

When Serge Daney wrote these lines, he knew that he would die soon. He tried to sum up his life as a cineaste and prolific writer on film by short-circuiting his impressions while recalling and revisiting Jacques Rivette's review, entitled "Of Abjection", of Gillo Pontecorvo's film *Kapo* in Cahiers du Cinéma. Rivette coined the dictum that a filmmaker who dares to make a forward tracking shot in order to reframe the dead body of a concentration camp inmate who threw herself into the electric barbed wire, is a man "worthy of the most profound contempt."

Thirty years later, Daney compared Rivette's rigorousness in terms of a dialectical relationship between form and content, when it comes to the moral impact of a tracking shot, to the ethical and aesthetic bankruptcy culminating in TV productions such as Band Aid

or USA for Africa, which were broadcast at around the same time and which feature a myriad of electronically generated dissolves blending the faces of starving children with those of famous musicians.

Meanwhile, another twenty years after Daney reflected on what he called a deportation "from my real situation as a spectator-witness forcing me to be part of the picture," immersion has become an almost unquestionable prerequisite of any kind of expression in the visual cultures that surround us - from the most banal form of data visualisation to the advanced technologies of 3D movies. At the same time, the terror of participatory practices can barely conceal its true face, functioning within an emerging totalitarian system of expropriation of relational value generated on the basis of imaginary property.

Form is a face, and a face is a signifying machine that does not only express what is behind it. Contrary to the common belief that a face exhibits the interior decoration of the mind to the public, revealing an individual and essential truth as a mirror of the self, form appears as desire exceeding the banalities of art as a "mirror of society." Form is an intensity, a block of experience, the building material of affects, an abstract intensification which suspends individuation.

Daney and Rivette are now gone. Against the background that remains, I understand your project as a work that opposes its artificiality to that of the art institution, its documentary character to that of documentary. Rather than rescuing the world, or making at least a small part of it a "better place", it questions our attitude towards it. Instead of trying to identify images of reality with their ancestors or reproductions, we have to understand art as the creation of new and abstract realities. This introduces vision as a social practice which takes place at a certain distance but in a line of sight: for example, that between Museum Ludwig, where the listening booths are set up, and GULLIVER survival station, where the homeless receive support and make free phone calls which are now abstracted and refrained into songs.

I am running out of time again, but I hope we can continue our conversation soon over another cup of coffee. I very much look forward to it.

Yours sincerely,
Florian

Florian Schneider is a filmmaker, writer and curator. He has exhibited and lectured worldwide, and initiated research projects such as *Imaginary Property* (2006) and *Dictionary of War* (2006-2010). Since 2014 he is Head of Trondheim Academy of Fine Art in the Faculty of Architecture and Fine Art at the Norwegian University of Science and Technology.