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and Workers' Clubs, but also the workplaces themselves, organised and invested much more into informational-educational activities for workers.

In this respect, we can see some historical alignment between the past socialist self-educational experiments and the recent practice of the WPU. However, the situation today is much more brutal than it ever was for working people under socialism. The progression of austerity, which first minimises social standards and applies budget cuts, and then suggests to us certain forms of 'do it yourself', crowd-funding, start-ups for young people, increased mobility, etc. – all this has much more to do with capitalist adaptation, necessary survival strategies, and a part of 'normalisation' that wants to cut away critical edges. If anything, the legacy of self-management and the current politics of the ILS involve a current that goes against capitalist normalisation, and towards thinking about long-term alternatives that would work for social needs. As we can see, the role for critical education is of the highest importance for theoretical and at times even political work; but on its own, it will not change material conditions.

FROM I TO WE

Melissa Gordon & Marina Vishmidt

SIDSEL MEINECHE HANSEN Let's start at the beginning, with your project 'A conversation to know if there's a conversation to be had'. What, for you, are the main stakes of the project? And how do you see its connection to the question of a feminist methodology of study?

MELISSA GORDON 'A conversation to know if there's a conversation to be had' started with the idea of creating a community of artists. When I was living in Berlin in 2007, I felt that I was living in an art world where I met a lot of people at openings and parties, but really wasn't having the kind of conversations that I wanted. So I guess it began with the sense of wanting to create an organisational structure that could provide me with what I wanted from the world around me.

Around that time, I did a show in London called *Exquisite Corpse*, which dealt with the monstrous figure of women in the history of punk and psychotherapy, and included a lot of research into feminist collectives and magazines. The show left me feeling a couple things: first that I didn't necessarily want a solely historical focus on feminism in my practice, and secondly, that I wanted to instigate social situations as much as I wanted to 'assemble' art objects.

I met the art historian Sue Tate, who was writing a piece on female artists in the Berlin Biennial, and we started talking about organising a symposium for women to meet and talk about the conditions of being female artists. We were concerned that feminism would seem like a dirty word to many people and actually felt shy about approaching female artists to talk about 'feminism' in relation to their practices. At the time, in 2007-8, it felt that calling yourself a feminist as a young artist had a slightly embarrassing twinge to it. I tried to raise funds in order to bring together about 30 or 40 female artists to a retreat, but we basically could not get it off the ground. Absolutely no one would touch the idea of paying for a female artist to go somewhere to talk about being a female artist. The project sat on the shelf throughout 2009, during which there started to be more of a 'historicisation' of feminist art practices in some large exhibitions (WACK!, a 2007 exhibition on 'art and the feminist revolution', for instance) and in discussions in the art press.

So in early 2010 I was on a residency in America and I thought to myself: 'Okay, it's time to do this: instead of an international gathering, I'm just going to do a one-day meeting in New York, where people can come if they want'. So I wrote up an invite to 'A conversation to know

if there's a conversation to be had' and I sent it to every practicing female artist living in New York that I could think of. I was afraid that people were going to react to the invite with responses like 'Why are you trying to turn me into a female artist rather than approaching me as an artist', but to my surprise every single person that got back to me, from Trisha Donnelly to Elizabeth Peyton, wrote really positive responses, saying that they thought it would be a useful experience for them, even if many of them couldn't attend. Almost everyone got back to me, and suddenly I felt that the response gave gravity to the fact that the meeting needed to happen.

We ended up organising the first meeting at Dexter Sinister in New York: we basically squatted their space for a day. Stuart and David, who run the space, bought us a big box of coffee and I think in the end about 15 artists came. It was awkward at first, but we ended up staying from 11 in the morning until about 7 at night. What ensued was a conversation between practising female artists that felt special: there was a rare level of candor, which led to in-depth discussion on a number of topics. A lot of women approached the meeting with the attitude: 'I'm not a feminist artist, but I identify as a feminist, and I don't know what the relationship of my work is to that term'.

One particular thing happened which was a very productive: people could talk about the problems of being a female artist without feeling that they were complaining, as they were all fairly successful artists. Becoming aware of this distinction between complaining and being able to speak about experiences was very important. The possibility of saying 'I notice this happens' - whether this was about gender dynamics in curatorial relationships or about being excluded from certain art circles, such as male gay art circles, or boy-based art circles - was a huge relief, as it brings the realisation that one is not just harbouring these suspicions on one's own. At this first meeting, there was also a very interesting discussion on value and the fact that women don't earn as much as men in the speculative (as well as waged) art world. As a result, the question came up as to why we would even want to participate in a hyper-capitalist model which inherently excludes us above a certain tier, and how it might be possible to establish a model outside of that. Afterwards in New York the group kept meeting for about 6 months or a year, with other women also coming to the meetings. Eventually it all ended, but what did come out of it was a really strong set of friendships amongst the women that were there that day, extending to the others who have encountered them afterwards.

I decided to do more meetings in cities where I knew a lot of people, so I organised one in Amsterdam at the Kunstverein, where about 35 women showed up – it was really busy! In Amsterdam we were talking a lot about how it is seemingly easy to start off as a woman artist, but how difficult it is to then maintain your career and move to a different level. A lot of women who were present felt supported early on in their career, but that this support thinned out over the years. Even though they were represented by galleries and part of discussions, they questioned why many did not manage to move on to internationally renowned careers in the way their male peers had been able to. The group which came together there still meets: they've all become quite close and they're doing things together such as studio visits, meeting at each other's exhibitions, etc. They've formed this pretty intense, super helpful structure of support that carries on to this day. I think this is fantastic – and it is completely down to their own volition.

Finally, I also organized a meeting in Berlin at Salon Populaire and a final meeting in London which was held at Raven Row. I think around 40 women came to Raven Row, and it was a really great, open, long-winded discussion about working conditions, self-presentation, support structures, the 'maintenance' of a career, and people's relationships to feminist art. I started to see recurrent themes, which is what motivated me to carry on with the project and to try and address the questions that kept on arising, by publishing magazines with the same DIY attitude that the meetings had started with.

So in terms of answering your question about a feminist methodology for studying: if I look back it think it was a sense of being excluded that made me decide to form my own conversation, but in the process of doing that I realised that the conversation I became part of is very different from the model that I felt excluded from. So I would locate a feminist methodology in creating a new type of conversation, and answering specific needs, and doing this outside of normative institutions. But, in my opinion, the set of friendships that developed across all the cities are the most important outcome from the meetings. This was a realisation that ensued from all the meetings: that the excitement of being together and around each others' practices formed the basis of what might be considered a 'feminist methodology'.

TOM VANDEPUTTE You have edited two magazines, titled *LABOUR* and *PERSONA*, which developed out of the 'A conversation...' project. Could

you speak about the importance of these publications in connection to the meetings?

MELISSA GORDON As with the meetings, my initial motivation for deciding to publish a series of magazines was to make something that filled gaps in relationships and conversations that I felt were lacking in the world. Historically, we know more about friendships between male artists than about relationships between female artist, or even the partner/marriage relationships between artists. I think this points to the fact that only certain relationships in art are positioned as 'historical'. So by creating situations in which women can be friends with each other, support each other, and then name that as being important is a historically significant act. In this regard I think of the magazines (in connection to the meetings) as very interesting documents of and historicisations of female relationships: women are grouped together in the magazines in order to uphold each other, make a rich dialogue, enact something together that's part of a dialogue which is important for all artists.

The first magazine, *LABOUR*, came out of much of the discussion around both the financial realities of the art world, as well as the role artists play in relation to this leisure/work divide. I originally recorded the first meeting in New York but I did not feel comfortable doing anything with it. Using it felt representative and archival. Instead I started thinking how I could expand the discussions around the main topics that came up rather than quantify them. So I asked Marina [Vishmidt] and Kaisa Lassinaro to make a magazine together. As editors it was about creating the right boundaries or frameworks for these more open conversations: through initial discussion between the three of us, setting up interviews, or making editorial choices throughout.¹ A similar motivation was played out in *PERSONA* – which is really is the document of two years of talking with people about their ideas and trying to piece together a clear picture of a contemporary female artist that is many and one at the same time. I'm very happy that both *LABOUR* and *PERSONA* feel like a world that you enter: the contributions are very cohesive and speak back and forth with each other. I should mention the magazines also pay homage to certain printed histories: the cover of *LABOUR* is the back cover of a Heresies

1. Melissa Gordon and Marina Vishmidt (eds.), *LABOUR*, 2011. With contributions by: Nina Power, W.A.G.E & Marina Vishmidt, Emma Hedditch, Claudia Sola, Meredyth Sparks & Lisette Smits, Jessica Wiesner, Avigail Moss, Kaisa Lassinaro & Lizzie Borden.

issue titled 'Women Working Together' which we were given permission to re-print, and is actually of an image I had in my studio for years. The same goes for the cover of *PERSONA*: it's from a postcard I had for ages, which came in a Rita McBride catalogue 'Naked Came The ****' by Gina Ashcraft. Also *PERSONA* pays homage to Eau De Cologne, a fantastic publication made by Monika Sprüth in the 1980s in Cologne, putting female artists' conversations together into a glamorous art magazine.⁽²⁾

SIDSEL MEINECHE HANSEN How do you and Marina understand your own roles as organisers and editors?

MELISSA GORDON The most important thing for me throughout the whole project, from the initial 'A conversation to know...' meetings, to the magazines, to the many performative and discursive launches of both the magazines, and to a current project entitled 'WE (Not I)' is that it's productive, *that it's not accumulative*. Every stage has to feel like it's useful for somebody. Otherwise, it risks becoming codified into some language that defines what a dialogue 'should' be about or what a project's 'theme' is, or it turns into advertising or self-promotion. As an editor I've been strict to keep the magazines from becoming vehicles for self-promotion, because I feel this is a normative and limiting position that contemporary artists are trapped in.

I've approached the entire endeavor as a way to figure out how being an editor is part of my art practice: although I still don't think of the magazines or other manifestations of the project as 'my' 'art' project. They are art projects, but include other peoples' voices, which I do not want to consolidate into my own voice. I find it more interesting that the publications and activities become platforms for a cacophony of voices, but I'm not at all interested in 'servicing' others or their practices, in the way art 'platforms' tend to do.

So even now I'm still negotiating the role of editing or aggregating in my practice insofar as it touches this project. I'm suspicious of the role of the aggregator, as it seems to invoke a mere assemblage of content. To me an editor instigates, shapes, organizes and creates frames for

2. Melissa Gordon and Marina Vishmidt (eds.), *PERSONA*, 2013. Designed by Kaisa Lassinaro. With contributions by: Gina Ashcraft, Isla Leaver-Yap, Lucy Skaer, Rita McBride, Celine Condorelli & Avery F. Gordon, Jen Liu, Eva Kenny, Chris Kraus (Interviewed by Allie J. Carr), Daria Martin, Audrey Reynolds, Josephine Pryde & Sabeth Buchmann, Nadia Hebson, Jo Freeman, Sue Tate, Marie Lund, Eau de Cologne, Karolin Meunier & Elisabeth Subrin.

content, and attempts a 'timely' position. In the objects and exhibitions that I make, it is very clear to me how I operate as an editor; in a similar way, I also think that my voice speaks from the overlaps, sequences, and relationships of what comes together in the magazines and throughout the entire 'A conversation...' project. But my practice is first and foremost located in my own work – I've mainly instigated this entire situation out of a desire to make a more interesting 'art world' in which to participate!

MARINA VISHMIDT The journal is implicated in my 'professional profile' in a way which is not exactly parallel to Melissa's, so perhaps my perspective is much less worked out than hers. I see it as one of the collective projects in which I am engaged – one of the more reflexive ones. Melissa is responsible for most of the content and editorial conceptualisation around each one, and I come in rather obliquely, on different vectors. Maybe I act more as an interlocutor and co-realiser than co-editor in some ways. I am always in the process of figuring out what the association is between the journal and the rest of my activity, but the one constant is the conversation that goes on between Melissa and me.

I suppose I would be interested in thinking of my role in the journal as somehow liminal to the different structures of authorship discussed so far – artist, author, editor, co-editor. Maybe the figures of the assistant or mediator could also be ways of considering this kind of participation. Like Melissa, I am strongly resistant to the accumulative and subsumptive dynamics she identifies in the modes of visibility as an individual or group formation in academic and art circuits – at this moment, but also in a more long-term, structural sense. When art loses its borders, the 'politics of publicity' (Alberro) becomes decisive, and the discussion about 'platforms' outlines that well. Authorship – even under the auspices of its evacuation – is indissociable from that, and of course editorship can partake in this logic, or even inflate it, like curation does through mimesis of the production of value in discourse, the clustering of thematics in architectures of value.

I am interested in the journal as a feminist project which is capable of staging different kinds of encounters between people practicing very differently and who have quite different relationship to their materials and conceptions of what their activity is. For it to be a feminist project, though, it also has to stage a certain amount of estrangement or friendly criticism towards the identity categories which at the same time enable it, that is, maybe most saliently, 'woman artist'. The idea of this

journal making for a more interesting art world, as Melissa said earlier, is something that I do and don't go along with – the art world as currently constituted (or in general) is maybe not something we want to invest our energies in improving, but from another angle, the fact that this is both where we are and have chosen to be situated means there is something at stake in trying to realise kinds of social relations in the relative latitude the 'art world' affords us that are more tolerable or more exciting than the ones in the academy, or in the corporation or the concept store or the job centre – however much these logics can be present, or rather, continuous, with the art world.

SIDSEL MEINECHE HANSEN The next step in your ongoing project is a series of work meetings titled 'WE (Not I)'. Could you speak about this project and its main organising principles?

MELISSA GORDON The idea behind 'WE (Not I)' is to address questions around concerns of authorship, both singular and collaborative, and to quantify the term 'author' in relationship to female practices. The project will address these questions through a series of week-long meetings of over 70 artists, writers etc. across two cities, New York and London, held in 2015. The meetings are a place for women to bring projects and practices which rub up against discourse around 'We': the non singular voice, problems and questions around collaborative practice, topics like the edge of the self, empathy, selfhood, creativity... The meetings will have public events separating 'work' from 'social' time. It will be fairly unruly – I don't intend to control people's attendance or their outcomes. I will edit a series of small publications from things that are raised, and will curate or orchestrate a show afterwards, working out my relationship to editorial decisions in artistic practice.⁽³⁾

So many female artists that I know now, especially in London, are working in the territory of expanded or non-singular authorship, and it's also something I'm engaged with in my own work. At the same time I think it's actually really dangerous to be supportive of 'collaboration' in a general sense, because that position does not allow artists the space to talk about the fact that there's rampant accumulation happening in contemporary art. This is particularly important for female artists because

3. WE (Not I) is hosted by South London Gallery, Flat Time House and Raven Row, London and Artists Space, New York. See: <http://aconversationtobehad.wordpress.com/>

they are the ones that are mostly being accumulated, have historically been accumulated, and who historically continue to be accumulated by contemporary curators. When 'expanded' art practices ignore the question of who made what, and become focused on who is presenting something best, I start to call the motivations behind this into question. I hope frank conversations about the problems of working together are raised and a language around non-accumulative support structures is quantified. I'm talking also, perhaps, from a place whereby I'm thinking about when it becomes hard to distinguish between whether something is 'my practice', or just something that I'm doing as a person. Does everything you do as an artist have to get stamped by your authorial voice? In my own art objects I can play freely with this, I'm interested in messing up authorship, and often I do this by pulling the rug out from under accepted modes of authorship. But I'm often coming from a sardonic position in my work. I'm not sure how much I want to put my voice at the forefront of what I do or if I'm happier for my artistic voice to be one step back from the front of the piece.

What I will be bringing to the 'WE (Not I)' week to discuss has to do with the value of trust, which I think is at the centre of the entire project. Trust is both inherent in the creation and continuation of speculative and waged capital, but it can also be an agent of effective change. If we can view the construction of art history through the lens not of gender or 'timelines', but rather as an accumulation of a series of consenting gestures of giving 'trust', we start to see that there is a direct link between speculative value (what gets bought, what becomes highly desirable) and the creation of history (what gets reproduced, shown, distributed most often and loudest, but continues on a speculative trajectory). This seems self-evident in terms of value creation, until you start to think about what it means to trust someone else: and how this has particularly problematic reverberations when considering how generally, legally, physically we deal with 'trusting' the voice of non-white, male, western voices, all throughout culture, even now. So 'trust', to me, poses this epicenter of value creation: if we can trust a practice, we give it value. If a body of practices trust each other, they grow value together. Both the organisation of the meetings and the format of the magazines are geared towards creating trust between people.

TOM VANDEPUTTE You have spoken about 'dropping out' as a strategy of addressing institutional power. Could you explain what you mean by this?

MELISSA GORDON The 'drop-out' is for me a character that moves value around by not participating frontally. Perhaps this is the aspect of the character of the drop-out that I find so fascinating in relation to my own work. To return to your earlier question: yes, I think the drop-out could be a feminist methodology, for sure. In our conversation titled 'Drop Outs: Slackers, Sociopaths and Social Workers' in *PERSONA*, Marina and I talk about the fact that dropping out creates a negative space around what is happening in art at a moment in time, it shows the edges of the 'playing field'. I'm also interested in Suhail Malik's lecture series 'On the necessity of art's exit from the contemporary', because I think the conundrum of the 'impossibility of exit' points to this problem of dropping out: how can one actually make an outline of an art field from within in any critical manner while participating in something that we can't escape from? Hopefully we can make a model with 'WE (Not I)' that performs the critical function of the dropout in some way – albeit in a productive sense. I think most acts of dropping out have been productive, even though they're seen through a lens of negativity.

MARINA VISHMIDT Yes, listening to those lectures by Suhail Malik, and finding a lot to consider in what was being developed there, in some ways the most immediately compelling moment – and this links, at least for us, to feminist methodology very saliently – was when he talked about the need for 'institutions of negation'. Rather than disavowing or rejecting institutions (political, artistic, whatever) and thus allowing them to go on dominating and exploiting, supported by a complicit withdrawal which in practical terms usually ends up looking like co-operation in a non-level playing field, he suggests we should be re-shaping or inventing institutions so that they do what we want them to do. This involves first of all not being reticent but confrontational on the question of power. The drop-out seems imbricated in this kind of question, a kind of incipient institution of negation.

BEYOND THE MOOC

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Universities and art schools alike have been subjected to the pressure of recent austerity politics and the ongoing attempt to transform higher education on the basis of neo-liberal principles. In this context, there is an urgent need to conceive of alternative frameworks and methodologies of study – whether this is within, outside or at the margins of academic institutions. This book examines what is currently at stake in education through a series of conversations with artists, theorists, activists and educators who are all actively involved in developing new models of study. Ranging from self-organised learning to critical teaching methodologies, the conversations gathered here offer a resource for those interested in the renewed politicisation of education and alternative modes of pedagogy and inquiry.

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