

E. C. Feiss and Larne Abse Gogarty – an exchange on ‘best practice’ and refusal, with Franz Erhard Walther and Lee Lozano.

This exercise involved exchanging bits of writing and then writing in response, particularly to generate questions for each other. We then presented the text together at We Not I on April 29th, 2015 at Raven Row, London. For this transcript we have not indicated the speaker.

Wendy Brown has identified ‘best practice’ as a form of governance generated in the private sector that has come, through its implementation of particular standards, protocol, and horizons, to restructure the public sector (as an arena of social reproduction) within the rationality of private interest.

The crucial point about ‘best practices,’ is that they are a mechanism by which the entire orientation of a particular realm of population management is stripped of once ‘sector-specific’ values or goals – in housing this would mean that homelessness is diminished above all other considerations, in art this would mean that artists are supported in their practice without having to sell works – that there is some ‘public’ function or value to a society’s artists and cultural workers. And rather than these ‘sector-specific’ considerations, these areas of governance are installed with a set of ‘best practices’ as generated in multinational business. While we think of neo-liberalization as installing ‘outcome oriented’ good government, and while this is often one of its materializations, best practice offers a way of thinking about how the structure and facilitation of governance, prior to particular context or outcome, has been affected.

The effects of ‘best practice’ on the cultural sector have been well documented - the logic of multiple stakeholders, for example, has come to define educational, public, and offsite programming, both in terms of diversity quotas (stakeholders coming to mean community members or private interest or investment, a variety of constituencies which are undefined in relation to power) and funding (via public/private partnerships.) In this sense, ‘best practices’ become another linkage between the livelihood/viability of life for artists/cultural practitioners and all others who are affected by the impact of ‘best practice’ at the level of what was once state social care. The reformulation of, or the making of demands which target the use of ‘best practice’ as a means by which social reproduction is removed from state function, is a potential meeting point between artists and all others – who, after Michel Feher –might redefine what ‘best practice’ means and entails.

Towards this goal, what if we begin to think of the ‘practice’ in ‘best practice’ in relation to art practice? If ‘best practice’ in the public sector has eradicated its prior function – social reproduction – and applied a set of standards which reorganize social relations in direct (rather than buffered by a ‘private’ or reproductive sphere) service of capital (via debt for ex.) what does the meeting of best practice with art practice entail: to art as a formally contested public good? Rather than solely tracing the effects of this reorientation on the institution of art and its objects and practices, or further lamenting the shrinkage of the state cultural coffers, how might the re-articulation of art practice itself as a ‘best practice,’ lead to an analysis of the particular power of the contemporary cultural institution in naturalizing the trajectory of neoliberalism, as writing a short history of the present onto the bodies in the

museum, as a literal narrowing of participatory possibility. Concerning the historic function of the museum as a site of socialization (discipline), I think what this naturalization of current conditions entails is the introduction of *limited participatory expectation*. While the loss of art's formerly 'ontologically public' value is certainly the least of present problems, I'm interested in how this loss is materially operational. Furthermore, if the neoliberal shift entails that nothing has humanistic (as a democratic) value, again how can we not return to humanism but contest the value (financial) in which art is being inscribed. I.E., that all art must 'work' in some way (either directly via social practice or as leverage against institutional/sovereign debt.) that there cannot be value for it in and of itself anymore, which is not important re art but is an index of all kinds of formally public goods/structures/etc.

I came to this question – of the conflation of best practice with art practice - through research into the contemporary (post-2008) participatory displays of the work of Franz Erhard Walther. In this case, unlike social practice that is generated alongside 'best practice' in the first instance (social works which are funded/developed already within this logic – i.e., outcome-oriented social practice) Walther's works have been converted to a form of 'best practice' in recent retrospectives, exceeding the 'artistic practice' itself – I argue that the gap in the displays of his work, from the 1960/70s to now, shows how neoliberal rationality has permeated not only how art is shown, but the reconfiguration of its meaning, and the naturalization of this reconfigured meaning as it is applied to the bodies/arena of its participants. In terms of Walther's work being an abstraction of the relation of "art" to "the social" as a form of participatory sculpture that attempts to "generate the social," what does the replacement of his practice with 'best practice' – and the naturalization of this installation as representing a supposed democratization of his work – mean? In part, his work materializes 'best practice' – or showcases it as a form, as in this instance the literal form/display of his work is re-articulated. Where do you see the relation of best practice to artistic practice, via form rather than field of possibility (funding) in your research? I think this is different than solely being an account of cultural hegemony because cultural hegemony doesn't differentiate or take into account the specificity of the cultural object/practice at stake – how do art/artists feed into or provide for the state and capital, beyond an argument of their single direction "instrumentalization." What do you think the implications of this are?

I think the idea of a naturalisation of earlier works that involved participation and collaboration into a canon of 'democratic' models of 'best practice' offers us a really interesting way of re-approaching what might on first glance be a familiar gesture of recuperation/commodification. I would see this as a historical relation, and also an aesthetic, or formal question.

We are familiar with ideas about the recuperation of radical, marginal, or militant cultural forms into a homogenising culture industry. We generally understand this process as involving a dilution or erasure of historical meaning in order for such forms to become absorbed alongside a panoply of identities, goods, or social signifiers which the consumer 'chooses' to affiliate themselves with – the key here is a bourgeois notion of freedom and choice, that underpins a 'blind' marketplace wherein exchange via commodities supposedly abolishes the gap between desire and its realization.

In comparison, the process you describe the Walther works making from their initial moment of production to their display in the contemporary art museum as exemplars of participation and ‘best practice’ in this realm involves a different kind of absorption that as you describe, is also primarily formal. They are chosen for their ability to manifest a visual representation of art that attempts to “generate the social”. For this capacity, they are viewed as ‘best practice’ and their naturalisation into a canon of ‘democratic participation’ within the art institution imputes them with a meaning that is usually absent from the typical way we understand cultural ‘recuperation’. To take an example directly tied to the question of social reproduction and the public sector – the current rehabilitation/fetishisation of post-war brutalist social housing – involve an effacement of meaning, without a transformation or new invocation of social significance beyond reproducing normative bourgeois desires for homeownership, with a fashionable and edgy twist. In contrast, Walther’s work is claimed for the canon of participatory art in a way that can be taken to typify the abstract, depoliticised notion of ‘the social’ that underpins ‘best practice’ as part of the formalisation and professionalisation of this field.

In my own work, I have previously described this dynamic as the current ‘aesthetic dilemma’ of social practice. To view this through the lens of ‘best practice’ is to understand this move as underpinning a valorisation of works and projects that can be serially and uniformly ‘applied’ in response to austerity and the crisis.

Moreover, I view this idea of ‘best practice’ as emerging from a renewed pressure on the particular meaning of affirming or negating social practice *as art*, with this underpinning the particular relationship of social practice artworks to social reproduction. In that light – what you say about the concept and enforcement of ‘best practice’ as producing a link between the livelihood/viability of life for artists/cultural practitioners and all others who are affected by the impact of ‘best practice’ at the level of state social care – I think is true. One hopes that we can understand this as producing a potential point of solidarity. However, in attempting to retain a view of how ‘best practice’ contributes to the diminishing of aesthetic considerations (i.e. works that have no particular notion of a politicised social, but are viewed – formally and abstractly – as capable of functionally invoking better social relations rather than involving an aesthetic experience are best) I also wonder how a refusal of the terms of best practice might assist in a renewal of serious thinking about aesthetics, and the meaning of art beyond a kind of social rationality. I am interested in what this might mean as a point of refusal for a feminist art practice. Aesthetic thinking becomes an important way of thinking that does not ossify, a way of arguing against formalisation and the setting of limits in what can be affirmed or contained.

How can artists dodge the imposition of ‘best practice’ and thus the limits as to how a particular work can be understood as political? This is the aesthetic question for me. At the moment, I am interested in Lee Lozano’s *General Strike Piece* (1969) which involved cutting all ties to the art world, a process she explained by documenting exhibitions that she did not show in and the parties where she did not schmooze. Lozano’s removal of herself from the art world was an active commitment rather than a failure to ‘succeed’ and is interesting because of its refusal of standards and access, in contrast with the abstract notion of democratic participation. Embedded within the politics of this gesture is also something that links with the idea of consumption as ‘abolishing the imagination’ that I have already mentioned. It refused consumption,

and therefore I like the way this work forces us to imagine how it worked – what she might have made – where her career might have gone – and to re-think other aspects of her practice. It has a kind of sticking power that remains generative and problematic, not least in a feminist viewpoint because of Lozano's *Boycott Women* piece from a few short years later in 1971 which involved severing all relationships with women. Yet, even this seems a weirdly radical gesture as we witness the ongoing institutionalisation/commodification of 'feminist art' as genre, particularly in the revivification of formerly semi-obscure artists who deliberately sought to avoid the market (the representation of Jo Spence, Gina Pane, Helen Chadwick, Valie Export by Richard Saltoun gallery.)

Can we connect what I am affirming in Lozano with Fred Moten and Stefano Harney's 'Undercommons,' and their idea of fugitive speech? Moten and Harney invoke a refusal of recognition and seek to destroy the way notions of 'justice' cloud our ability to imagine beyond a kind of epistemological limit point. I am also curious about how such ideas could be connected with a strategy I observe as emerging through current 'twitter feminism' that involves a process of 'claiming' rather than recuperation, as well as a refusal of a dominant narrative. Picking and choosing how to read and affirm different aspects of popular culture as a kind of fiction that can be playful/humorous is appealing – but I don't know – it's also very close to post-net art 'lightness' which I find off-putting.

Still – I suppose my question is: could a mode of 'refusal' that involves denying access using language be done in a way that doesn't consistently reproduce mechanisms and tools of group splitting and/or power-wielding? As in, the inevitability of *Boycott Women*. In contrast, I am interested in the production of new imaginaries/forms of language that take up space through *myth* rather than policing. I am attached to the idea of secret languages, and fictions that are more about fantasy, new languages we make together, and projection, as a path out of this 'best practice' paradigm, as well as a means to bypass the proliferation of new terms of law. I feel this then becomes a more generative, declarative politics that has an aesthetic content which links to historical experience through reclaiming/imagining militant ways of knowing or being – a far more exciting prospect than nostalgia because it has a kind of absurdity that is wild.

I find it really interesting and necessary – particularly concerning a possible feminist politics – to unpick the relations between myth, regulatory norms, and laws – as entities that construct subjects and social spaces. Perhaps something to do together later. Law and best practice, are a relation of hard to "soft" power, crucially for us with a difference in intimacies – the difference in the way these two forms act on bodies. Both physically, but perhaps – in terms of your question about language as law in feminist space – law is that which generates a threshold or more 'total' possibility (no cis men) and best practice has a more ongoing 'conditioning.' (this space must be "safe"), a conditioning which must be maintained. Of course, the law is also maintained but via the maintenance of a canon/set of precedents. Best practice is rather the imposition of a set of social norms, protocol, and a particular horizon, imposed through regulation and practice rather than law. To turn to myth: one read of Lozano's *General Strike* is as a critique of the law. *General Strike* works because of the myth it generated about its implementation and perhaps points to how the law itself creates 'myth' – like the right to bear arms in the US for example, is arguably

maintained (apart obviously from the gun lobby) through myth, fable and saga. *General Strike* is a white paper, it is a contract with herself, it exploits the relation of legal threshold to the 'document,' and like your "wild absurdity," it is an official contract announcing "nothingness" or disappearance. It is not law that constructs but law that disappears – a critique of how the law 'let's die' or can function to disappear people completely, legally, and materially. What maintains Lozano's dropout? I have addressed this recently in my own work. I think based on the fact that her legacy returned after her death, means that her dropout was laboriously maintained – an ongoing maintenance of negating the self. Lozano could not only withdraw and be done with it-there was maintenance involved. This labor of self-negation, surely related to producing a "mode of refusal" – not designating laws, but ongoing conditioning work or the continuing enactment of paradoxically removing the self. But here we return to this idea of contesting the rationality and refusing the conditions of dominant 'best practice' and rather inhabiting its mode.

I'm interested too in how you've phrased the question: a mode of refusal to be built up *around* language. So to look at Lozano's document as not just language or the statement of precedent but a precedent (a withdrawal) that cannot come into being without this form. Crucially, this critique, of law via the document, is then carried within the refusal – so it is never a drop out which only occurs via language, but through a vehicle that also carries a critique or a political meaning itself. Lozano drops out of 'personhood:' in relation to her boycott of women, it is a dropout from non-personhood (in terms of women's historical non-place in law) and dropping out of an impossibility (if we think about the dilemma of writing women's history, and women's art history) of existing in history. So refusing that partial place in history. This is not all done only through language. The 'unproductive' aspects of this current feminist proliferation of language I think are to do with these terms not being engaged in a relation to their political root, in the sense of how they function materially, and how they might instead indict power relations in the very form/context in which they appear. A mode of refusal has to be exclusionary and this can be and traditionally has been (if we think about consciousness-raising) powerful – but I think only if carried out in relation – in *formal* relation - to the political reasoning for that exclusion. Rather than just the reiteration of a certain set of feminist-related 'laws' to signify political space. Lozano's "general" in *General Strike* is interesting here – as so much of the proliferation of this feminist language is 'specific' or invested in specificity and yet via form, Lozano is able to construct a much more viable mode of withdrawal/refusal. So rather than freaking out or obsessing over the terms of this withdrawal, they are 'general' but instigated through certain formal means (the document.)

Finally, to return to this idea of an ongoing negation of self – rather than the production of self that is so endemic today – here is another critique of the 'affirmational' or productive politics of feminist nostalgia or longing. If we think of Lozano's dual withdrawal from her profession (artist) from the scene of wealth (NYC art system) and from women, is this not an indication that dropping out or rejecting the subject 'woman' – as this subject is not determined by 'us' – is like or comparable – in parallel to dropping away from professionalization? This perhaps cannot be a direct comparison, but interesting to think about in terms of an abolition of gender – as in Marina Vishmidt's recent writing – and that Lozano clearly connects 'woman' as a partial subject of history (to reject this partiality) with a rejection of

professionalization. Monique Wittig's text 'Lesbians are Not Women' is relevant here. My question: should we reject the subject 'feminist' – considering the ways in which it is determined far outside of radical means and past – Hillary Clinton for ex. Lozano's "wild absurdity" is to reject women while remaining female herself - this gap maintaining the critique. Lozano's maintenance of her gender is yet another maintenance of this withdrawal – she could have transitioned. So, this isn't gender as experience or as body, but the category of woman as a partial subject in history and as operational in capitalism (dropping away from professionalization) and today, 'feminist' perhaps being integral to the operation of neoliberalism-as many have identified (for ex Nancy Fraser) as feminism has come to stand for freedom and equality within capital rather than its rejection. The Walther exhibition, for example, shows us that engagement in a representation of social production in fact guarantees or is part of its demise in the present. Similarly with feminism – where we also cannot access prior conditions of militancy – should we withdraw?