



Being-with: Access to Relation, Participation, and Togetherness in Contemporary Art

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Abstract: Being-with is an artistically based research project aimed at applying and studying participatory and relational practices within the arts as well as addressing the esthetical and ethical questions that such practices generate. The participants in Being-with – researchers and artists as well as children, parents, grandparents, siblings and other residents in the small town of Høvåg in Norway – gathered weekly for half a year to experience how aesthetic production may interact with social space and vice versa. The article reflects on what consequences such interaction may have for the conception of art, and its arenas and agendas ... when we consider art not only as a reflection of our lives, but also as an agent shaping our lives and changing the social surroundings we are part of. The article relates discourses of aesthetics penned by continental philosophers over the last 50 years to a specific setting in a Nordic contemporary art practice.

Keywords: Participatory art, relational aesthetics, outreach, “other-worlding”, prolepsis, aesthetics.

Introduction

Throughout the 20th century, the question of how art interacts with social space has been discussed. From 1990 onward, the intensity of the debate has heightened as a growing number of post-studio art projects embedded in the social field have emerged. These art projects involve amateur participation and stretching out over time, calling into question formal efficiency, artistic signature, the conception of authorship, and many other notions that used to be commonplace in the art world. One is reminded of how Adorno opened *Aesthetic Theory* by stating that when it comes to art, nothing is obvious anymore, not even its right to exist (Adorno, 1998, p. 11). The question that occupied Adorno was how art in its lust for life could seek “outside its own territory,” while at the same time preserving its historic identity. This concern was taken further when French philosophers, such as Michel Foucault and Jean-François Lyotard, as well as Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, published influential works in the 1960’s and 1970’s. Contemporary-oriented artists felt that this anti-authoritarian poststructuralism brought

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forward radical thinking that illuminated their own challenges. This article gives aesthetic issues penned by such pioneer philosophers and artists from Europe and the USA a specific foundation in a Nordic contemporary practice—an empirical response that brings up ethical and philosophical questions where art and activism, visions, and reality meet.

Basic intent

Over the last 20 years, there has been a wide range of publications describing projects embedded in relational aesthetics. The viewpoint has, from Nicolas Bourriaud's (1998) now classic *Esthétique relationnelle* and onward, been that of the observing outsider looking in – often, as was the case with Bourriaud, with the optic of the curator. In addition to Bourriaud's classic, contributions from Nato Thomson (2012), Claire Bishop (2004; 2012), and Grant Kester (2013) are good starting points, not only to understand the discourse framing relational aesthetics but also to recognize the diversity of practices within the field. In summarizing relational aesthetics, Anne Pasternak (2012, p. 7) describes the emergence of “a rapidly growing movement of artists choosing to engage with timely issues by expanding their practice beyond the safe confines of the studio and right into the complexity of the unpredictable public sphere.” Embedded in a shared basic intent, a diverse set of practices has unfolded under names such as “participatory art,” “community art,” “socially engaged art,” and “dialogic art.” These practices uphold the avant-garde movement's desire for performative, action-based projects known from Dadist movements, situationism, Artaud's Theater of Cruelty, art raw, happenings, and Fluxus.

Deliberately intertwined in social life outside art institutions, social phenomena—the civil rights movement, the Slow Food movement, the Zapatista movement, and the revolt in Tahrir Square in 2011—have also influenced relational aesthetics, bearing witness to a commitment to social change. Although some projects operate within a binary, macro-political discourse resembling the Paris 68-uprising, most are, in a more micro-political fashion, looking for ways to adopt policy without descending into politics. These projects go beyond concepts of right and wrong to seek the interesting and unexpected. Micro-politics works well when giving neighbors, local associations, and virtual or real societies opportunities to do and experience things together, create narratives and myths, and adopt other subject positions than those most commonly offered.

During the last 20 years, relational aesthetics' status and legitimacy within the art world has been strengthened; some might even consider its position today to be strong. It has created opportunities to redefine the relationship between artist and public, encouraging individuals embedded in communities and social networks to become co-creators of artworks completed only through their participation.

A commitment to change

Today, artists within and outside art institutions are modelling “possible universes” in the *interstices* established within the gaps of what seems like an unbreakable and continuous surface of offered human interactions. Donna Haraway (2008) suggests another term for this modelling of “possible universes;” “other-worlding.” Interstices have become a key concept in relational aesthetics largely due to Nicolas Bourriaud's (1998) re-reading of Marx “Forms which Precede Capitalist Production.” Marx used the term “interstices” to describe how individuals within networks on the fringes of aristocratic control developed economic and social models that facilitated the ways of thinking and being that came to characterize the upcoming modern society (Wood, 2008a). This calls to mind what seems to be Bourriaud's concern regarding how artists today can establish interstices within the framework of

modernity and prepare the ground for experiences of *becoming* (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987), experiences that break away from hegemonic configurations of what can be seen and said. In urban or rural communities, artists are initiating projects in which "possible universes" are modulated. Jeremy Deller summarizes the situation for many artists within the field: "I went from being an artist that makes things to being an artist that makes things happen" (Deller quoted in Thomson, 2012, p. 17). More than the familiar "What does this work of art mean?," a more burning question seems to be "What does this work of art do?" The focus shifts from what is reflected to what is produced.

Aesthetic placement

The American artist Dan Graham states: "All artists are alike. They dream of doing something that's more social, more collaborative, and more real than art" (Graham quoted in Bishop, 2012). The participatory art projects emerging in the 1990's were considered more socially oriented than what the museums, art education, concert halls, or the general artwork discourse could offer when asking how everyday basic relations—or more spectacular ones—could be used as artistic material. Such projects aim to create a social interstice, suggesting a different logic which represents resistance to, and differs from, those found elsewhere in society—a *dis-automation* of everyday life, what Helen Marriage likes to call "The power of Cultural Disruption." For shorter or longer periods of time, many of these projects are meant to modulate a temporary "world" and reflect on its symbolic value, or as Nicolas Bourriaud (1998) formulates it: "Each particular artwork is a proposal to live in a shared world" (p. 122). The work's ability to create new capabilities and social relationships that break away from established configurations of the sensible and possible plays a significant role in determining the quality of artworks in this field.

"Inventing and creating a world": *Being with* project characteristics

Contrary to the rich availability of outside perspectives describing projects embedded in relational aesthetics, this article attempts to provide an account from within. The project in question, *Being-with*, was an artistically-based research project with the goal of applying and studying participatory practices within the arts, as well as addressing some of the ethical questions such practices generate when they offer new approaches to arts methodology, arenas, and agendas. The *Being with* project will not be representing all the many and diverse practices associated with relational aesthetics; however, the lessons learned from this particular project shed light on some of the opportunities and pitfalls that characterize practices in which "participation" and "relations" are keywords. Within this framework, let me describe *Being-with* and some of the matters it brings to life.²

Who is part of *Being-with*, and what practices were exercised?

The most important participants in the project were the inhabitants of the village of Høvåg. The four-person group planning the project consisted of, besides myself, my colleague artist Agnete Erichsen, senior researcher professor Helene Illeris, and online blog editor and visual artist Marita Holte.

Every Wednesday, from January until July of 2014, we met in the local town hall. The building was a dignified wooden house from the first half of the 20th century with a rather large assembly room. We were around 40 members of all ages in the group. We started each session with a common meal of hot soup, bread with toppings, and fruit. The timing was carefully chosen; at 4:00 p.m., most people in

² For a more personal account of working with relations, participation, and community, see Valberg, 2017.

Høvåg have just finished school and work, and the families could meet for a meal and companionship until 6:00 p.m. The meal was prepared by Agnete and I (with friendly helpers) and made on site. It was served on a long table with benches. That togetherness is established when sharing a meal is an experience many share. But the meal also proved that the community launched here was more than anything physically and relationally docked. The meals brought forward not only easygoing conversations between neighbors—artists, plumbers, journalists, assistants, children, and adults—it also established a scenography and an aesthetic that made it possible for us to recognize how we were part of a project seeking both togetherness and otherness.



The meal. Photo: Marita Holte

We chose Høvåg because Agnete is a recognized and highly respected artist in the community, and her family has lived there for generations. As for me, children and adults in Høvåg kindergarten, which is located in the town hall, were familiar with my children's songs. Both Agnete's network in the village and the fact that we could establish a dialogue with the neighborhood through the kindergarten helped to establish contacts and invitations. We were terribly excited to see if anyone would come to our first gathering. The town hall was full!

The four prolepses

The notion of a *prolepsis* within relational aesthetics refers to the artist's sketch of an action plan. Like planting a seed to foster unforeseen relationships, the prolepsis invites participants to interact with gestures that are open and negotiable. The "here and now" interaction that unfolds as a reply to the prolepsis is regarded as the core of the work.

The prolepses were established by Agnete and I before we met the participants from Høvåg. We tried to develop prolepses that could promote "togetherness" and at the same time "otherness;" the search for unforeseen ways of being together. Agnete and I met weekly during the project to discuss experiences from the previous last week's gathering and try to figure out ways to let the artistic and relational flow unfold further on.

Prolepsis 1: The art of singing together

Both music and drawing represented strategies to examine together- and otherness. Many stories exist about the significance of singing together and our ability to identify with other people and establish

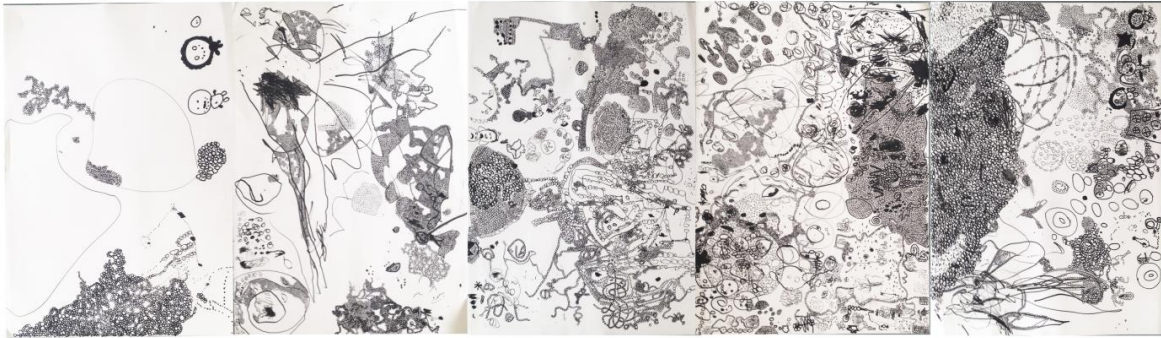
togetherness when singing (Yamamoto, 2004). Personally, I had a keen interest in so-called *Sacred harp* singing at the time. This is a tradition that goes back to the mid-18th century, a time in which singers met for special "singings," sitting in a hollow square facing each other. They could be smaller groups meeting in homes or huge singings for more than a thousand participants. The bigger singings included a potluck dinner in the middle of the day. Those who gathered sang for themselves and for each other, not for an audience. The whole gathering was meant to be participatory. We sang a lot throughout *Being with* as well! Like the meals, we highly treasured the sing-along for its ability to foster togetherness. Just as much, though, we treasured singing for its ability to facilitate the effects, affiliation, and playfulness that accommodate change and otherness.

A sing-along challenges the limits of what can be heard, seen, and said in the art world, in line with our most banal notions of the artist. "We typically view the artist as a heroic figure," Grant Kester (2013) writes. "A dialogical aesthetic suggests a very different picture of the artist, one defined in terms of openness to listening and of a willingness to accept a position of dependence and intersubjective vulnerability relative to [the listener], viewer and collaborator" (p.110). To bestow value on a sing-along would be just as devastating for the art field's access restrictions and current criteria for the cultural capital recognised as relevant in the art community, as it is vital for both the otherness and togetherness in a project like *Being with*. Already at the information meeting, we learned that participants sang well and willingly, also in harmony, and the rather big town main hall offered splendid conditions for singing.

Prolepsis 2: "A large, slow drawing"

A large, slow drawing was a kind of free, meditative drawing process without planning in advance about form, content, or direction, and it turned out to become one of the project's two most important experiences because it generated ways of being together that were not planned for, a gentle sense of the otherness we were seeking. The prolepsis was simple: Draw tiny circles with a pencil on a large sheet of paper. Add circles up against each other and let them unfold towards or away from the others. With this meditative drawing process, countless small circles very slowly were transformed to forms that were unforeseen by any of us, and more than what each circle testified to. Some sort of becoming took place, with skills participants felt able to exercise.

It was remarkable that these small circles emerged on paper and established form at the same time as the first gatherings proceeded quite loud and chaotic. The first four or five weeks, I felt the need to introduce "rules," but I was urged by my colleagues not to "take control." Then, for some reason, it calmed down. The reasons were probably many and complex, but at some point, I think that the slowly emerging form of circles in front of us must have begun to talk back: "Slow down!" In one of the interviews Helene did in the aftermath of the project, one of the participants told her, "It was strange doing something so close to nothing." This has since represented a key statement about producing "otherness" and other ways of being together in *Being with*—a modelling of a local community producing slow "close to nothingness" in an overwhelmingly busy everyday life.

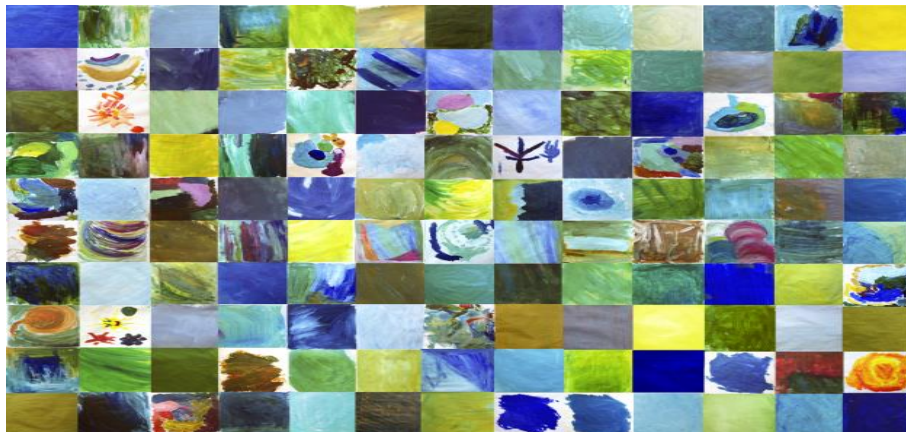


Excerpt from *A large, slow drawing*. Photo: Agnete Erichsen

A large, slow drawing—that became its name—unfolded as unpredictably, collectively, and slowly as our being together did: Circle on circle, weeks after weeks, months after months, until there were thousands of them covering large areas of paper like amoebas.

Prolepsis 3: “In the midst of—and in between—sound and color”

The basis of this prolepsis was an ambition to examine whether and how a musician and a visual artist could work inter- and trans-disciplinarily to gain access to new experiences of other- or togetherness. We produced a number of “color swatches” (acrylic on paper) to develop a sense of ownership over a visual world based on the three primary colours.



Color swatches (blue). Photo: Agnete Erichsen

Similarly, we developed a percussion instrument with three different categories of sounds (wood, metal, and glass), which 12 people could play simultaneously. In the tradition of John Cage (Göran, 2019), we wanted to develop scores that could project our color swatches onto musical scores (blue was the graphic score for those playing glass sounds, red was for metal sounds, and yellow was for wood sounds). This, however, unfolded in ways not planned for. The whole idea of playing from scores seemed to diminish the energy and take focus away from listening to the sounds we actually produced (Reminiscent of Bob Dylan’s “Ten thousand whispering, and nobody listening”). The concept of the score translating signs to sounds seemed to take the *presence* out of our shared awareness. Fortunately, the prolepsis was open and negotiable. Slowly, the musical flow moved towards a sound palette that resembled those produced by American musical minimalists, such as Terry Riley and Steve Reich in the 1960s.



Making our own instruments for groups to play together on the same instrument.
Photo: Tony Valberg and Marita Holte.³

Musically, a movement from the complex to the simple, from improvisation to repetition, from representation (color representing sounds) to receptive presence took place. These changes probably would not have happened if it was not for the discussions Agnete and I had in advance regarding empathetic and receptive listening. When we finally discovered this repetitive and slowly evolving sound palette, we continued to produce it every time we met, in the same repetitive way as with the circles. And the sound treated us the same way: Listening to ourselves playing with minimal change ("so close to nothing") paved the way for the appearance (Gumbrecht, 2004) of "togetherness" and a sense of "otherness" as well.

Prolepsis 4: A conversation without words, leaving its mark on music

Throughout *Being-with*, there was an on-going "conversation" without words: Pairs of families were connected and conversed through drawings. They shared a drawing book and took turns drawing in it every second week. A sender family handed over a drawing in the book that the recipient family took home, interpreted, and drew a response to on the next page. The books were exchanged at the gatherings and went back and forth between the two families. An interpretive and creative network of drawings crossed back and forth in the district between families that previously had not known each other very well.⁴

³ Video examples:

https://youtu.be/-jE_nyOw9cs

<https://videopress.com/v/ZJTApPcf>

⁴ The idea for the exchange of drawings without words came from a collaboration between Agnete and artist Gunnhild Bakke. They exchanged letters, replacing words with drawings. In the spring of 2011, they showed «Det vakke no´ Det vakje noke – en korrespondanse» in the gallery «Tegnerforbundet» i Oslo. Agnete had also exhibited the piece «Stemme og øye», putting together small circles on white surfaces.



"8 books, 16 families".
Photo: Agnete Erichsen



Transforming drawing books to songs.
Photo: Marita Holte

After this exchange had gone on for a few months, I talked with families who shared a drawing book. We talked about themes and moods in the drawings. Based on these dialogues, I made songs. For me, these drawings and dialogues offered access to stories and stylistic approaches that were outside my song writing "comfort zone." I had to get more involved in listening to others and could not just "do my thing," my most usual approach to craftsmanship. The fact is that I appreciated it, and probably made some of my best songs. It was also satisfying to be able to get an immediate response to the songs and hear them sung the same week they were made. We sang these new songs together at the gatherings through the last part of the project. *Tutti*, for the most part, with soloists from the families whose books had been the inspiration for the songs.

The 19th century notion of the composer-genius is weakened today, but the conception of authorship and artistic signature remains, ensuring a modernist conception of artistic autonomy. Economic structures are encouraging the notion of authorship as well, making *copyright* a stronghold for artists trying to make ends meet and hardship for the notion of art as co-creation in groups. A participatory project like *Being with* does, however, raise methodological questions regarding co-composing. The prolepsis *A conversation without words, leaving its mark on music* suggests one way to deal with co-composing in participatory art by taking steps to ensure that participation is situated within the artistic core of projects like ours, as a shifting in the conception of authorship is taking place in this field of art.

***Being with*: Ethics and dilemmas**

In seeing human relations as its primary material for artistic work, *Being with* offers a privileged starting point for aesthetic reflections on inter-human topics. In the aftermath of *Being with*, some key aesthetic issues have marked our reflections on the project. These issues are described below.

The discomfort associated with great narratives such as *Community* and *Togetherness*

There is no reason to glorify the notion of *community* or *togetherness*. Artists' and politicians' emancipatory longing for "community" has a disturbing history. The dream of a united people (*Das Volk*) and a community free from conflicts has produced momentous experiences of *A Larger We*, when thousands march united under flags and fanfares, but it has also produced nameless horrors. For good reason, Jean-Luc Nancy warns against the yearning that "fuses the *egos* into a higher *We*." The postmodern aim to deconstruct the Great Narratives, such as "community", gave the post-modern legitimacy in its time. When entering into a project like *Being with*, it is absolutely vital to take a critical look at core concepts ("community," "togetherness") of our artistic ambition, as well as our own emancipatory—and thus politically-charged—longings.

The American historian Martin Jay (1993) has suggested two main ways to illuminate aestheticized politics. The first has its origin in Walter Benjamin's renowned statement: "Art over life, says Fascism." Benjamin warned in pre-war Germany that his countrymen treated their own reality as if it was a work of art. This ominous anesthetization of politics does not solely resonate with Hitler's failed artistic ambition; Mussolini stated in 1932:

When the masses are like wax in my hands, or when I mingle with them and am almost crushed by them, I feel myself to be a part of them. All the same there persists in me a certain feeling of aversion, like that which the modeller feels for the clay he is moulding (Mussolini quoted in Jay, 1993, p. 74).

Some years earlier, Goebbels wrote that politics are the plastic art of the state. Such metaphors become even more disturbing when rooted in Kant's conception of the aesthetic experience as a disinterested interest. Kant's notion gave legitimacy to aesthetic judgments beyond morality and conventional sense.

At first glance, it may seem unfair to compare our project with authoritarian movements. It is disturbing, however, that our own ambition in *Being with* to blur the distinction between life and art, the mix of art and emancipatory aspirations, in fact resembles those social aspirations we least of all want to be associated with. It is in fact fair to ask the question: Is the community of *Being with* in Høvåg Agnete's and my lump of clay? This notion is particularly disturbing because *Being with* offered a seductive dimension of aesthetic enjoyment of music and visual art suited to strengthening an emotional connection to the project, an affiliation based on intuition and pleasure more than criticism and transparency. As Thomson (2012) puts it:

The concept of affect derives from the understanding that how things make one feel is substantively different than how things make one think. As cultural production is often geared towards emotive impact, understanding how cultural projects function politically and socially would benefit from an understanding of this poorly analysed concept (p. 32).

If our only defence is to state: "But we are different than them; we are not authoritarian, and our dreams are about a healthy and organic society; we have honest intentions," then there is reason for concern. We need to produce explicit strategies that allow us to experience how agency is exchanged between artists, participants, the artwork itself, and also perhaps the *zeitgeist* the project is embedded in. I will return to this later.

The second means of criticism concerning aestheticized politics might affect issues closer to our everyday concerns in schools and universities. I am thinking of Schiller's notion of an aesthetic education of the people: *Bildung*. His imperative to form the people through the arts has paradoxically proven problematic. Schiller was, as we remember, disappointed by the barbarism in the aftermath of

the long-awaited French Revolution, and he had to conclude that the people were not ready for real freedom. They had to, he argued, through aesthetic upbringing, be transformed into citizens who could handle freedom and not fall back to authoritarian structures.

Many have supported Schiller's suggestion of a strategy to reach a more ethical democracy through *Bildung*. However, 200 years later, Paul de Man (1996, p. 129–62) pose the question: Who are the tutors? Many have felt a calling to fulfil this role, and perhaps there is reason to approach anyone who conveys this ambition with suspicion. Suspicions have indeed been heard not only from de Man. Terry Eagleton (1990) has noted the authoritarian impulse in Schiller's aesthetic formation. He joins de Man's critique of Schiller's call for an "aesthetic modulation of the psyche" which, Eagleton argues, is a full-blooded project of fundamental ideological construction. Is *Being with* part of such an "aesthetic upbringing"?

It is remarkable that these warnings go hand in hand with emancipatory longing, not the least from Eagleton. That is the paradox that also applies to *Being with*: With disturbing historical experiences in mind, how can art help to create a sense of togetherness in contemporary society, a society marked by fragmentation and loneliness? How can we establish anti-authoritarian communities that also include the marginal, the unproductive, the childish, the absent, the non-functional, the lazy, the withdrawn, and the abandoned? Exactly what are we searching for in anti-authoritarian communities? How do we express ourselves when we are "modelling possible universes"? Is it in the footsteps of Habermas (the open public debate) and Chantal Mouffe ("relational antagonism in a community acknowledging disagreement") whose aim seems to be a tolerant society in which everyone is offered space—that is, anyone able to manifest themselves within a discourse in the public sphere? Or is it (like Kester, 2013, p. 115 suggests) perhaps in the footsteps of projects that have had a particular focus on the experience of marginality, with a particular care not to exclude those who are less confident in the use of language?



These pictures became important references when reflecting on *Being with*. The first, "The boy in the box," reminds us that not everybody took part in the official narrative of our shared community; some withdrew and established zones for otherness in the fringes of our togetherness. The second, "Boy with skirt on head," reminds us of our goal: to encourage ways of being that oppose the general rhythm and order of things, modulating possible universes.

Photos: Marita Holte.

Power and materialism in relational aesthetics

Being with leaves behind the idea of authorship and artistic signature, i.e., the "artist in control." We wanted to build a concept in which artists, participants from Høvåg, and the dynamics of the artwork itself influenced each other. However, when the question of power is addressed the artists good will and apparently antiauthoritarian leadership might be confusing and problematic to criticize. A number of factors give the artists a privileged position. The unequal positions will be exposed when confronted with the key question: In what way can artists and participants alter their roles, or indeed criticise,

subvert, or reject the structure of this invented world? I admit that Agnete and I never thought to trade places with anyone, referring to the relational work's character of laboratory and its interactive and open-ended nature.

Exercising power might be problematic when it prevents and restricts. However, it is productive when it enables and generates, and this aspect of power was essential in the conceptualising of *Being with*. We wanted to create a space that possessed a stake and a claim and transformed behaviour in unpredictable ways. That requires power. The constellation of singularities and traits that was brought into the project (such as personal identities, social practices, and ideological positions) represented a network reminiscent of what Deleuze and Guattari (1987) call *assemblages*: a collection of heterogeneous elements coming together and moving apart as an ever transforming but recognizable swarm. Such assemblages work through flows of agency rather than specific and goal-oriented practices of power, making the question of power in relational aesthetics both more promising and more opaque.

Duration as a constitutive phenomenon in the notion of the "work of art"

Duration has grown to be a core concept in our thinking about *Being with*, as it holds distinct consequences for the relationally-rooted artistic practices aiming to construct more diverse conceptions of the arts. As Grant Kester (2013) points out, the hegemonic notion of the "work of art" is intimately linked to Jean-Francois Lyotard's reading of Burke and Kant's notion of the *sublime*: the temporary shock (p.82). Adorno (1998) insisted that music's greatest moments consisted of such temporary shocks (p. 463). Its emotional power was supposed to transform the listener's consciousness as the shock was followed by an elevated capacity of awareness and understanding. The thought is that when you open yourself up to the shock, you might get a glimpse into the enigmatic work of art.

A work of art that is prolonged for a week, or two weeks, or half a year or more goes beyond the framework of temporary shock. However, our experience is that art projects revolving around the notion of togetherness require long-term relationships. A durational practice leaving the sublime (in the Lyotard meaning) expressionist art behind in favor of an art of *implementation* and long-time relationships will challenge hegemonic notions of art *proper*. The traditional interpretation of the art object as *mimesis*, a representation of a more "essential" world than what everyday life can testify to, will be challenged by an anti-Platonic wish to leave the "meaning" ("What does this work of art mean?") in a work of art behind and instead facilitate materials and processes that are tangible for the human hand, develop things heard, tasted, and seen in everyday life to examine the impact they have on concepts such as togetherness ("What does this work of art do?"). This anti-Platonism may be understood as an attempt to prevent art's declared humanitarian ideals from remaining separate from daily life, and thus keep art peripheral in terms of how we live and how we change the ways we live.

It is also worth mentioning that as relational aesthetics have gained rapid interest and legitimacy, a number of artists operating in the field of relational aesthetics have developed short-lived projects suitable for galleries, museums and the global biennial circuit with limited time and space for exhibitions. Concerns have been raised about whether these projects address a world outside the galleries at all and whether they promote the artists themselves more than social change. The dynamics of the established art-institutions may seem to be a barrier in the meeting with participatory art projects that maintains an intention to operate locally, in the long-term, and in community.

Documentation

Who is the owner of the voice that carries forward the narrative of what we have done and who we are on behalf of so many? How can one make sure that documentation promotes criticism and avoids associations with idealization of happy people in a happy community, or a resemblance of glossy magazines from an art-institution's marketing department seeking sponsors? During the project, we had dedicated discussions concerning some of the pictures posted on our blog, which were beautiful, but possibly bordered on idealizing.

New institutionalism and outreach vs. the critical neo-avant-garde

Today, art-institutions are encouraged to assume new roles that appeal to new and more demographically diverse audiences. Brandon Farnsworth (2016) refers to well-worn debates in the art institutions themselves about the crisis of audience and societal relevancy:

Approaches in contemporary music that, for instance, move towards greater social relevancy through smaller, more flexible groups of musicians working on site-specific pieces can create increased precarity for the performing musicians, while also engaging more successfully with a concert-going public that has felt increasingly alienated (p. 207).

In taking such measures, art institutions are adopting artistic methods from relational art practices. This leads to a steady stream of projects from the art institution's outreach-departments that are perceived as inclusive, experimental, and sympathetic. For example, orchestras across Europe over the past 20 years have developed and played concerts for children and young people characterized by interdisciplinary, dialogue and participation. It could be argued that without an inherent and ever-present critique in such productions, the tools developed by artists to question art institutions and work for change may be used by those same institutions to maintain *status quo*.

A vivid ambivalence towards art institutions has followed projects embedded in relational aesthetics. This applied to *Being with* as well, when we were invited to a well-established art institution to stage a two-day summary of the six-month project. Should we stay or should we go? We went, being received by a full house: the art institution's core audience, alongside new audiences who were there for the first time. Still, questions of motivation and effect remain when one draws a full house to an art institution after attempting to actually take art *out* of the state institution's instrumentalization and into everyday life.

The notion of "the other"

For a musician ready to play a concert, the waiting audience is "the other." Who is "the other" in togetherness? The fact that artists have trouble finding terms to describe participants better suited to capture their uniqueness and participation than vague terms such as "the group" or "the inhabitants" is a reminder that we have not yet brought a proper examination of "the other" to the table.

The literary critic Michael Warner (2002) observes that several senses of the noun "public" tend to be used interchangeably, but he distinguishes between three main categories: First, the broad *public*, who is a kind of social totality (too general to describe participation in the field of relational aesthetics). Then, *the public* as a narrow and concrete *audience* (too narrow to describe participants in relational embedded art projects). Placed between these is the third kind of public that comes into being only by *virtue of being addressed*. The "public" Warner has in mind is such that is established in the wake of a literary project like a book, but it might apply to other more improvised and temporary forms of public

as well. This kind of a public is recognized by a large degree of self-organizing; it represents relationships among strangers. It is both personal and impersonal, and it represents a social space created by a reflexive circulation of discourse. Warner describes such a public as part of "poetic world making." His reflections might be helpful when considering the question of "the other" in relational aesthetics. It is an open approach to participation (merely paying attention can be enough to make you a member) and recruiting ("Let it have this character, speak this way, see the world in this way. Run it up the flagpole and see who salutes"). The anti-hierarchical and mosaic organization of the term "a public" that Warner suggests resembles the notion of *assemblage* (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987). The assemblage exhibits a collection of objects as well as practices, feelings, meanings, affects, and effects that expose not only what this togetherness is but also what it does. What is affected, what is the effect, what are the energies, speeds, and flows? What are the boundaries of what can be done and thought in the territory constituting this assemblage? Assemblages are not regarded as processes of learning or imitating from a center, but of *becoming* alongside others in an actor-network (Callon, 1986, p. 19–34). In *Being with*, for example, objects, identities, social forces, and formations made and unmade each other as the project unfolded, creating territories and then unmaking them. What the notion of assemblage suggests regarding "the other" in participatory art is a more open, complex, and realistic relationship among those involved in an art project than what the modern dichotomy between the artist in control at the stage (*the same*) and the audience in the hall (*the other*) seems to offer.

Responsibility and methodology

Take a look at this picture:

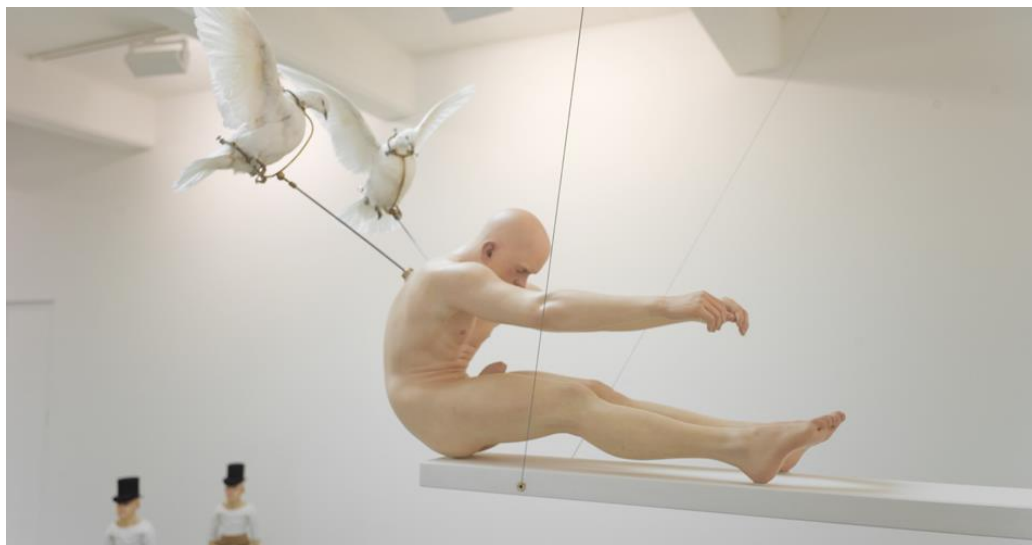


Photo: Christian Larsen

It shows a section of the Swedish artist Christian-Pontus Andersson's exhibition *Farewell Eden*. Andersson's desire for pure perfection is expressed through porcelain figures of himself, his friends, and his family. These porcelain figures are replicas of their originals down to the smallest detail, such as color shades in the surface of the skin or old and now hardly visible scars. In the many rooms of the exhibition halls, Andersson is "modelling a universe" (*Eden*) of himself and those close to him. He writes in the catalogue: "In Eden, we are as one. Together we are building and working hard to ensure our paradise is as beautiful, perfect and magnificent as possible. We build walls that block out the real." I saw the exhibition at the same time as I was planning *Being with*, and I recognized what seemed to be

a shared ambition in the two works: the desire to modulate an until now unknown world, also carrying a vague aspiration for the "magnificent." It reminded me of the schizophrenic nature of art, how it can be difficult to distinguish between what is real and what is imaginary, a state in which it can be intimidating and difficult to navigate. The difference between the two projects was obvious, though: Andersson's *Farewell Eden* took place in a gallery. Those paying to get in knew that what was in the building was "art;" the delivery and reception of a work of art was the tacit contract between artist and visitor. Andersson's *Eden* was different from everyday life. In *Being with*, the borders between art and life were deliberately blurred, making it less obvious that participating meant moving into a world manipulated to become a relational laboratory examining togetherness and perfection in all its wonderful and less wonderful lights and shadings. Nor can it be ignored that the participants' personal and trusting contribution to projects embedded in relational aesthetics—entailing glimpses into their lives that for them carry particular significance—can be used as a passageway for artists into the global gallery and biennial circuit. To quote Thomson: "In an era in which the production of culture is often used as an advertisement, the artist too can be guilty of projects wherein the production of art is simply advertising for the ultimate product: themselves" (Thomson 2012, p. 31). It seems obvious that relational aesthetics requires the ability and experience of empathic listening from the group of artists, and that this is an artistic practice which requires some form of articulated responsibility regarding those involved.

Art's emancipatory potential: Modelling possible universes—Reality or fiction?

Many, although not all, of the projects that are somehow embedded in relational aesthetics are committed to change and to examining art's emancipatory potential. The aim is to establish different settings and strategies—a dis-automation of everyday life—to gain experiences that the individual-oriented modern society has neglected. We ask whether *Being with* and similar projects represent an exercise in such activities that Jacques Rancière (2008) describes as producing "new identification regimes," nameless experiences of *the new*. Or maybe settings like *Being with* are already part of that new? Warner has shown how groups are constituted "by virtue of being addressed," and how they respond to the address and constitute "a world" that has previously only existed in the realm of fiction. In that sense, *Being with* represents a community evolving in between fiction and reality. It resembles Kant's introduction of the notion of contemplative art reception when it was an unknown practice to his fellow citizens. Encouraged by Kant, they started to gather such experiences and appreciate art reception through *disinterested interest*.

Derrida (1996) has pointed out how many of our notions of reality in their conception have a ghostly character; they are perceived as shadows, as both real and not real. He interprets Marx's choice of the ghost metaphor in the introduction to the Communist Manifesto in this light ("A spectre is haunting Europe—the spectre of communism"). For our part, we are interested in how the body's expressions and sensations in relational embedded art-projects give rise to new notions and ideas. We ask ourselves whether the role of art today may be to give participants reconstructed spaces where yet unnamed experiences manifest.

Lyotard (1985) and Jean Baudrillard (1994) describe a postmodern mood of melancholy and loss. Perhaps relational aesthetics' experimentation with temporary modelling of "possible universes" represents a more productive access to ways of living and learning together than what the melancholic, postmodern aesthetics ever managed to offer?

Forfatterpresentasjon

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