

Book review

Sammen om det? (Together in this?) Forskere og kunstnere undersøger intimitet.

Christel Sverre & Wenche Mühleisen (red.) 2012

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The publication *Sammen om det? Together in this?* has emerged from the collaborative project *Intimacy: Meetings between Art and Research*, a project which itself formed part of the research project *Being Together: Remaking Public Intimacies*, funded by the Norwegian Research Council. The book presents the results of collaborations between researchers from the Universities of Oslo and Stavanger and artists from the Academy of Fine Art, Trondheim (NTNU).

A first impression when holding the book by its somewhat slippery cover is one of *softness*. The contents represent in many senses a play on doubles. Written in two languages, Norwegian and English, the book, which also relates to an exhibition of the same name, is about art and research in private and public spaces, with artists and researchers working in pairs to investigate intimacy together (“*sammen*”). Since visual communication is my specialty, after reading the introduction I glanced through the pages for headings and images that might catch my eye. One thing that struck me is that hardly anyone (to be precise, just one person) in the pictures looks happy, when and if the participating people can be seen clearly at all. This signals serious art – and serious work. Photos from exhibitions, sketches, close-ups and diagrams provide visual variety. The headings are more eye-catching. They include, e.g., Staying with the trouble, An introduction to the project; Intimacy: Meetings between Art and Research; The creation of affective atmospheres. Intimacy in Public; Feel tank (instead of the usual “Think tank”); *Kreativitetens fysiologi* (about creativity, ingenuity and genitals); Shame on the ashamed (about reality and morality in Sophie Calle’s work); *Spor etter orgasmen*/Coming together (signifying an orgasm by drawing a “spastic” line); *Søndagsmiddag* (depicting family intimacy through “familyscripts”); *Uten grenser* (about internet intimacy);

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Elsewhere /*Et annet sted* (about private/public positions and relations within and between garden rooms); One-night stand – a single performance in a particular place; and “Intimasick” (about the need for new concepts).

The project leaders, Jørgen Lorentzen and Wencke Mühleisen, describe the project as “risky” and underpinned by theories about risk, as argued, e.g., in *Risk Society* (Beck, 1992; Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 1995, 2002) and *Reflexive Modernization* (Beck, Giddens & Lash, 1995). But in what way is the project risky? According to the authors, it is neither interdisciplinary, intradisciplinary nor transdisciplinary. Instead, it is *postdisciplinary*, as it explores the space between art and research and “encourages knowledge production grounded in hybridity, reflexivity and the non-linear” (p.15). They maintain that the project is neither about “knowledge exchange” or “illustration” (p. 15), nor the presentation of cases to give examples of a new methodology, but rather that it aspires to stay – in an explorative process – “in the trouble”. To some extent the different projects succeed in bridging the gap between art and research. Some even try to activate the in-between space that opens up during the intense process of art and research “making out”. The project is also risky because it deals with issues of gender and sexuality, as well as multi-modal communication in order to formulate, materialize and visualize social and cultural boundaries in private and public spaces.

The project aims to focus on changes in how intimate relations are lived, shaped and organized, thereby revealing their continuous shift between the public and private spheres. These changes are intertwined with the influence of market forces and new technology into performative and representational transformations of the intimate and the sexual, conceptualized as “intimization” and “sexualization”.

Together in this? is an important publication whose wide range of differing approaches deserves to attract a wider readership than academics and artists. One matter, however, to which I have given a lot of thought concerns the question mark in the title. Is it necessary? Somehow the question mark seemed disturbing and I was intrigued by its presence. After all, the participants obviously started out together, worked together and, in most cases, ended up together. But after reading and re-reading all the contributions, I started to appreciate a certain ambiguity and ambivalence that is represented by twisting the title into a question. The articles and project documentation can be understood as reflecting the multiple *ways* in which art and research can work together. Whether we are *together in this* is thus the key question that pervades the practices and theories presented in the book. It is a question that allows for no quick and final answer, as events have to unfold and will unfold differently each time. In some of the book’s examples, the projects seem to be a case of the blind leading the blind, as the project participants – artists and researchers alike – have no idea whether they can perform as they are used – and normally expected – to. In some cases the participants emerge in new relationships and new constellations, with opportunities to grasp ideas, concepts and processes that would never have materialized without their encounters with competences outside their own fields.

Those who think that current socio-cultural research is purely about applying methodologies that aim to *secure* and establish knowledge should read this book. As should those who believe that contemporary art is just about methodologies that aim to *un-secure* gender, social and cultural positions and identities. Ideally when doing so they should flick back a few pages, then jump ahead – and perhaps even start reading from the end. All this will give them a picture of the functioning of intimate hybridity.

The question remains whether the project participants and contributors really put themselves at any risk. And if they did, why didn’t this strike me as a reader? I found myself longing for the exhibition

space, longing to confront the real-life project as intimately and desirously as possible. I longed for fleshly and carnal aesthetics, the leakage that can rapture the available discourses and reveal the power of language, concepts and habits that still seem to be “on top”, and therefore are in need of re-negotiation and diffraction. This is how I experience being confronted with the book’s texts and visual communications. This is what the publication demands.

References

- Beck, U. (1992). *Risk society: towards a new modernity*. London: Sage.
- Beck, U., Lash, S. & Giddens, A. (1994). *Reflexive modernization: politics, tradition and aesthetics in the modern social order*. Oxford: Polity.
- Beck, U. & Beck-Gernsheim, E. (2002). *Individualization: institutionalized individualism and its social and political consequences*. London: SAGE.