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Inside-Outside: Practice Between the Private and the Social

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Inside-Outside: Practice Between the Private and the Social

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Report

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Dedication

To my parents who taught me the love for people and words.

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I would like to thanks my professors, for encouraging me to pursue my projects even when they were not easy to fit in the framework of a Studio Art practice. This freedom was very meaningful for me. I would especially like to thank Prof Megan Alrutz for being my home away from home, and Mike Smith who was always there for me. Most importantly I want to thank Eyal, the love of my life, who is always the smartest, and who has been teaching me everything I know about patience.

Abstract

Inside-Outside: Practice Between the Private and the Social

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The University of Texas at Austin, 2016

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In the course of the last few years, the work I have been making was very eclectic in terms of methodology and form. My practice ranged from studio practice pieces, to a socially engaged workshop based work. I tend to see the relationship between the different works as dialectical, at least to some degree, while each work is pushing forward a different parameter that was not fully realized in the prior work. These back and forth movements have left me with some questions regarding gallery aesthetics versus socially engaged projects, and my position on the scale between them.

The largest question I have, however, is whether I need to choose one practice or another, and if so to which degree the ethics and aesthetics of the different practices can or should be distinguished from one another. In this report I do not attempt to answer those vast questions, which will probably stay with me as part of my practice, but rather to raise four core issues that I find crucial to their exploration, and to which I dedicate four separate sections. Those issues are the gallery as a socially isolated site, questions about the relevancy of socially engaged art change to studio art practice, guilt as motivation for art making, and lastly, relationship between action and documentation in art.

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Chapter 1: Inside and outside; The gallery as a social non-site

I consider the binary oppositions of inside and outside central to the relationship of art making. I think about it in the context of the location of the art making process- inside the studio or out in the world, the location of showing the work- inside the gallery (referring to “inside” not as an architectural factor, but rather as a relationship to the art world institutions) and outside of the gallery. I also think about this binary as a method for examining sources of inspiration and content in the work; internal (to the artist) or external (driven from other social, aesthetic, political sources), and lastly, it is a way to think of the inspiration or actual materials, and whether they are showed inside or outside their original geographical area (and social reality).

During my first year at the Studio Art program (2012-2013), I was working with video materials I made in Palestine. Moving to the US from Israel only a year earlier, the reality back home still felt more relevant and vivid to me than my daily life and social reality in Austin, Texas. During this time, I have created *Handcuffs are Not a Metaphor*, a dance and video performance. This work integrated videotaped reenactment of violent and oppressive acts happened in the West Bank in Palestine in 2002, that was also the inspiration for a choreography for a dance performed next to it by four dancers from Austin TX.

Through this work, I was trying to deal with the possibility of ‘travelling’ with representations of oppression outside of its original geographic and social context, with all its ethical possible problems. The work was presented at the Blanton museum, Austin TX, so the video footage went through two stages of framings- from being shot in Palestine, to being presented on the other side of the ocean, where the people who are presented are most definitely seen as the ‘other’, and second, being exhibited in a museum, a space that is disconnected from their social and political reality, and where their experience becomes aestheticized and considered a piece of art.



Figure 1: *Handcuffs are Not a Metaphor*, 10 minutes three channel video and live performance, Blanton Museum, Austin TX, 2013



Figure 2: *Handcuffs are Not a Metaphor*, 10 minutes three channel video and live performance, Blanton Museum, Austin TX, 2013

Unexpectedly, I found Robert Smithson's theory of site and non-site as one of the most interesting and useful ideas in order to think of the relationship of my work to the gallery space. Unexpectedly, because whereas Smithson worked with objects and landscapes I am interested almost solely in people and direct communication and relationships, hence I hope adopting his ideas of non-site for a social context, would not distort them. In his interview with Paul Toner in 1970, Smithson says:

As far as you may go out to a periphery area, the art is always being transmitted back in some way or another, some information feedback.Basically my thing is based within the context of dialectic that goes from the indoors to the outdoors, and back from the outdoors to the indoors, etc. there are alternate ways of making the context known, either through maps, photographs, or in the case of the non-sites, with physical materials. (Flam 1996, 234)



Figure 3: *Handcuffs are not a metaphor*, still from video. shot in Tul Karem, Palestine, 2012

I would like to borrow the dialectical relationship between the landscape as the site and gallery as non-site to the social realm. While making *Handcuffs are Not a Metaphor*, I was struggling with the disconnection between the non-site, sterile gallery, where the performance was presented, and the site, which is the city of Tul-Karem in the West Bank, where the footage was made, with its violent and charged political situation. Looking back at this work, I believe that the missing link was putting the travel of the videotaped materials from Palestine, in the center, ‘making the context known’ as Smithson puts it. I think that the action of revealing the context from which the materials come from would have made it less problematic ethically.

An unresolved question I have following Smithson’s concept, is why, though, from the first place, the art is “being transmitted back (to the gallery) in some way or another”? In the social context, the main aspect of this question is not geographical, or spatial. Instead it is a question of audience, and who is the artwork made for. Whose eyes considered central and whose peripheral? This question was one of my main concerns while pursuing my next project, *Am I Invisible*, during 2013-2014.

Chapter 2: Aesthetic and ethic criteria in socially engaged art

Am I Invisible, is a performance and video project written and played by members of Austin's homeless community, and directed by me. One of the important parameters in the project was to hold the performance in a central and convenient location for the homeless community, so the participants, and other people from the homeless community would be hosts and not guests, in order to challenge the hierarchy of central and peripheral spaces and audiences. The performances took place in one of the central services centers for the homeless in downtown Austin, and in the Austin City Hall plaza. For the latter, designated shuttles were available for people from the homeless community to commute to and from the performance. The workshops and rehearsals, as well, took place in one of the homeless services centers in town: Am I Invisible has been created during the course of eight months' process made of workshops at the Austin Resources Center for the Homeless (ARCH) and was open to all ARCH clients. In these workshops, I facilitated different exercises inspired by *Theatre of the Oppressed*, a theory and practice of a politically engaged theatre, conceived by the Brazilian scholar and director Augusto Boal.

The participants poured their ideas and personal experiences into the form of the exercises and this content was the infrastructure to our final performances. The final public performances consisted of live theatrical monologues, video installation, and a participatory theatre scene that invited audience members' to act on stage solutions for the oppression experienced by the homeless protagonist.

The core of my project was to challenge my own and others perceptions about homelessness, and to use my practice to promote change in social hierarchies and power dynamics. One of the main questions I have been thinking about is whether using a work of art to promote ideas of social justice impairs the value of it as a work of art? Or "Does a work of art need to stay outside of the instrumentalist attempts of the social mission? And whether determining the structure of a work of art according to the content or the mission is problematic" (Jackson 2011, 47), as put by the performance studies scholar Shannon Jackson in her book *Social Works*. In her essay *The social turn: Collaboration and its*

discontent (The social turn), warns Claire Bishop of “instrumentalizing art in compensation for some perceived social lack”. (Bishop 2006, 178-183) For me, the main question to follow, is simply why not to instrumentalize art? In Social works, Jackson mentions criteria to measure a social art work’s success rather than its formal complexities and interrogative possibilities:

based on its degree of community and self-definition, its efficacy is measured in its outreach strategies, its means for providing access, the representational demographics of its participants, and its identifiable social outcomes. Such critical barometers also worry about the mediating role of the artist, about whether an artistic vision enables or neutralizes community voices. (Jackson 2011, 44)



Figure 4: *Am I Invisible*, Improvisation with masks. Workshop, ARCH Austin TX, 2013

These criteria were, indeed, in the center of my consideration while creating *Am I Invisible*, and working with people from the homeless community. Bishop argues, however, that one of the problems of the critical discourse around the field of socially engaged art is that “aesthetic judgments have been overtaken by ethical criteria”. she describes the strong believers in social practice as “activists who reject aesthetic questions

as synonymous with cultural hierarchy and the market” (Bishop 2006, 178-183). It seems like Bishop description means to problematize the idea of aesthetic questions being a synonymous with cultural hierarchy and. Indeed, this idea has the potential to dangerously flatten the idea of aesthetic investigation. However, I believe that it is extremely valid, even important, to demand art that challenges the cultural hierarchy.



Figure 5: *Am I Invisible*, audience member acting her solution out with the group’ actors (left) discussion with audience (right), Trinity Center Austin TX, April 2014. Photos by Lily Brooks



Figure 6: Am I Invisible, Video Installation, Trinity Church Austin TX, April 2014. Photo by Lily Brooks

Bishop suggests that due to the political urgency that brings some artists or critics to consider only the ethical aspects of the work, “There can be no failed, unsuccessful, unresolved, or boring works of collaborative art because all are equally essential to the task of strengthening the social bond.” But it is, of course, a question of who is the work of art designated for, and who gets to decide what is considered failed, unsuccessful or boring. Hence, I believe, the process of challenging the cultural hierarchies includes not only questions of representation and participation in the work, but also rethinking the aesthetic establishments from the first place. Once the work is targeted for different eyes than the art world establishment’s audience (or not exclusively to it), doesn’t the aesthetic evaluation change with it, following the beliefs, ideas and taste of its audience? My role, as a mediator in the process of making *Am I Invisible*, as I see it, was to encourage a shift in the existing

art producing-consuming equation. I believe that such a change inherently entails a different and more relative and inclusive criteria for aesthetics.

Chapter 3: Burning a gas station; guilt from a hindrance to a fuel

I was sitting in a car next to the driver. I think my husband drove the car, but this moment was only presented to me as a close-up on a hand touching the seat. We stopped in a gas station, and I threw a burning cigarette butt out the window. For some reason I was thinking I'm preventing damage and not creating some. A fraction of a second later, I realized how dangerous it was. The car reversed a little, I stepped on the butt trying to put it out and the car moved on. I looked back and saw how in slow motion, the butt gets lit again and put the whole gas station in fire, destroying everything around and killing a few people. This dream appeared to me last night.

Yesterday, while reading Bishop's *The social turn*, I found in her text another description to a type of socially engaged art she describes as "art that invest in Christian ideal of self sacrifice to renounce authorial presence". (Bishop 2006, 178-183) Usually, when I read such criticism on art that aims to create social change I get defensive, as I do believe, as I mentioned before, in its importance and impact. But for some reason, reading the words "renounce authorial presence" made me see more clearly that at least in part, the motivation to utilize art for social change, derives from guilt that rises when I want to express my personal conflicts and struggles, rather than larger social structural oppressions. I was thinking that it might be possible to transform the guilt I experience while "claiming authorial presence" from a hindrance and use it as a subject matter. Shifting between making art for "doing good", as Bishop puts it, and allowing myself the possibility of personal expression, is a main tension in my practice. To me, there is a thin line between enthusiasm to work socially and engage with other social groups, and feeling that I am not allowed to express anything else. Guilt, and its relationship to art making and self expression might be a great fuel for putting a few more gas stations on fire.

In this context, I would like to mention a work I have made during the year I spent in Brazil in 2014-2015. After moving to Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, with our few months old daughter, my partner and I have hired a nanny. Experiencing the role of an employer for the first time, and more than that, an employer of a domestic worker, was an unsettling

experience for me; I could not resolve the tension between my social beliefs with this new role I had. The huge socioeconomic class gaps between me and Fernanda, our nanny, made me feel very guilty and to almost obsessively think about her, my role in her life and the unjust privileged position I am at. I went back to one of the theatre plays that had been very influential in my life, *The Maids* by the French playwright and poet Jean Genet. This play depicts a very tensed and complex power dynamic between a ‘Madame’ and her two housemaids, who develop a sadomasochistic role-playing, alternately playing themselves and the mistress. In one of the scenes the mistress says to one of the maids:

I’m not tired. You treat me like an invalid. You’re always ready to cuddle me and pamper me as if I were dying. Thank god I got my wits about me. [she looks at the maid and feeling that she has hurt her, adds, with a smile] come come, don’t make such a face [with sudden violence] alright that is true! There are times when you are so sweet I simply can’t stand it. It crushes me, stifles me! (Genet 1962, 68)

Revisiting this play as an employer of a nanny who works at my home, it was shocking for me how much these feelings described by the French mistress from the beginning of the last century, resonated with me, and this was a moment of a realization: I *am* the Madame, no matter how kind and respectful or a “good employer” I am. This understanding of the inevitable power dynamic that is embedded in a relationship between people from different socioeconomic background, all the more so as an employee and employer, stimulated me to create the next work about Fernanda’s daily commute to our home, her job.

Traffic in Rio de Janeiro can be horrible, and Fernanda used to travel 2-3 hours in order to get to our house in the morning, and 2-3 hours back to her house. Fernanda agreed to videotape her way from her house to ours, walking and going up and down three different buses. I took thousand snapshots from the video, one every 9 seconds of the way, printed them, and posted them in a chronological order, covering our bedrooms’ walls in our rented apartment in Rio. While making this work, I experienced a shift of focus. At first, the final installation was my main objective, but while I was posting the photos for many hours (while Fernanda is watching my daughter) the performative aspect of the work became the

most important one. Although choosing the bedroom as the room to cover with photos was a default, during the process I have realized that the choice meant to fall asleep and open my eyes to Fernanda's long commute. If the initial intention was to make work about the problematic unjust social power relation, it turned to be about *my* need to "never forget" how unfair it is, and ultimately to perpetuate guilt.

Becoming aware of this difference, between trying to evoke awareness to lack of justice through the work, and expressing my own perspective playing a role in an unjust equation was important for me. This differentiation enabled me to continue with self exploration as a starting point for making work, as was in the last project I pursued during the the MFA program, and which I would like to discuss in the last section.



Figure 7: 9,000 on the way to work, installation. video still. Rio de Janeiro, 2015.



Figure 8: 9,000 on the way to work, installation. video still. Rio de Janeiro, 2015.



Figure 9: 9,000 on the way to work, installation. video still. Rio de Janeiro, 2015.

Chapter 4: Generating change or documenting a failure

The last work I have pursued during my studies, was maybe the only one that was created with a focus on self exploration as a content generator and with a gallery setup in mind. The initial motivation for this work, named *Peers* was a wish to interview my peers from the Studio Art program in order to get to know them better, feeling that I am not able to do it organically. The alienation implied by this wish turned, however, to be the subject matter of the work. The people with whom I communicate in this project are not strangers; some of them share a studio with me, others I see in the art building hallways on a daily basis. Still, I found myself holding back, stopping in the acquaintance mode. I utilize the camera as an aid to make the steps I would not do without it.

Under the camera's gaze I create encounters with peers in which our relationship is the focus. In these encounters I ask my partners to make reassuring statements or to schedule some future activities with me. These documented moments are real and in some there was a connection or even intimacy generated. At the same time, the artificial structure of the situation may suggest that the relationship lasts only until the camera stops recording.

The project deconstructs the manner in which people in my surroundings get closer to each other and create friendships. I believe that the experience of living in a foreign country almost inevitably brings one to use generalizations in order to categorize and describe the new complex experience: new place, new people, and new culture. This work has started as conversations with fellow grad students, all native to place and language, and my otherness, I believe, is evident in the documentation of our conversations. However, In the course of the project I was starting to question the weight of the cultural difference in creating the social barrier I experience.

The work *Let's have fun in the house*, that is presented next to *Peers*, addresses the inner psychic, alongside the institutional aspect of these social barriers. *Let's have fun in the house* is a single channel video, and is a portrait of a pathetic alter ego and presents an eccentric character who is only able to maintain a relationship with her teddy bear.

Both *Peers* and *Let's have fun in the house*, ultimately unveil a failure to communicate. Looking back at my initial purpose of the project, to get to know my peers better, makes me wonder about the role of documentation while intending to create intimacy: at some point, as I mentioned, the subject matter of the work became documenting the failure, exposing the alienation and the awkwardness. When this happens, there is not a lot of room left for genuine attempt for creating a relationship.

This tension between authenticity of the communication and the documentation is something I would like to continue to explore. I would like to push the attempt to communicate further, to the extent that the making process is a more serious attempt to create relationships, and not a one in which the failure is almost predetermined. In such work, similar to art for social change, the change generated by the making process is the core motivation for the work.

The Israeli documentary film maker, David Perlov, says in the voice over of the open scene of his film *Diary*: “The warm soup is tempting, but I know that from now on I will need to choose: to eat the soup or to film the soup.” (Perlov 1983) To conclude, I would like to further explore the tension and complexities between life and art once it involves documentation. If changing reality is the core, what is the essential reason to document it and ‘interrupt’ the process from the first place? If the process of documentation supporting the change, is it mainly instrumental? Why is it important to frame it as art? And in other words, why is it necessary to make art as a part of generating these changes?

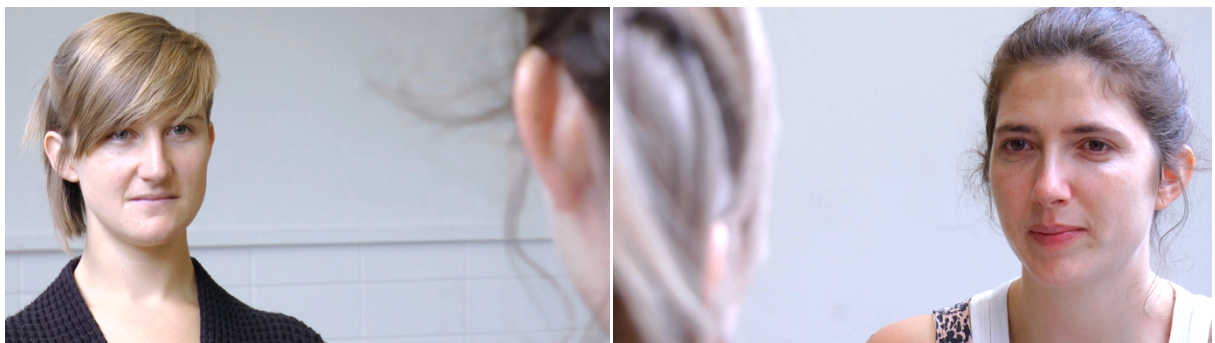


Figure 10: *Peers*, 12 min, 4 channel HD video



Figure 11: *Peers* and *Let's have fun in the house*, installation shot, VAC 2016. Photo by Sandy Carson



Figure 12: *Let's have fun in the house*, 5 min HD video

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