

## ***Performance Space Residency – On Collaboration***

*Elizabeth Boyce & Simon Ellis, 30th May - 17th June 2005.*

### **Activity & reflection**

We began the residency with the desire to move on from a model of collaboration in which self-contained units of work are assembled within arbitrary and accustomed forms of exhibition and performance. We knew, in short, only what we didn't want to do. Early in the residency this anecdote crystallised our aversion: "There's a very funny expression, I think it was coined by Hal Foster, the 'used car syndrome' – it is about how people from different fields ... will always get attracted to the most conservative ideas from the other fields. This way you end up with the following equation: 'you buy my used car, I buy your used car, and then we end up with two really shitty cars.'"<sup>1</sup>

Our desire to develop another mode of working together came from dissatisfaction with the "used car" model and our individual interests in critically examining and disrupting our separate practices.

Having described this open field of enquiry, we then had to ask what it might mean to develop a shared practice and how we could start.

In the early part of the residency we commenced what was a 'methodological exchange'. Although we had worked together in the past, we were both interested in knowing or experiencing more of the other's individual practice. We discussed and notated the type of language we used to discuss our ideas, methodological conventions, and the common forms of our work. Initially, the idea was to use these sets of information as a means of developing a working process from the 'bottom up'; to identify and allow shared areas of interest and ideas to emerge from the exchange as a starting point (or series of starting points) for a future collaborative work. This proved difficult.

We found our initial sticking point to be embedded in language. In trying to exchange complex ideas we discovered that we couldn't assume a common professional terminology. We also encountered misunderstandings because, at times, our reading of each other's use of language gave rise to issues of power and respect.

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<sup>1</sup> Ekroth, Power and Wallenstein, Swen-Olov (2001) - *Interdisciplinary Laboratory-A Talk with Jens Hoffman*, Site Magazine 1. Retrieved 10 August 2005, from [www.sitemagazine.net](http://www.sitemagazine.net).

Increasingly, we felt as if we required form-content ideas to drive the questions of shared methodology. We thought of this as a type of cause-effect problem: is the idea caused by the methodology, or does the idea lead to an appropriate shared methodology? We were worried that we would spend three weeks swimming in methodology (all very nice) but not finding a means of understanding the ‘transition’ from method to form-content. This is not to suggest that such a transition exists, but perhaps there is a model whereby the various processes of collaborative methodology are seamlessly bound? Or better still, can the methodological processes be foregrounded and extended (consciously) throughout the development of a shared work (and not simply be something that resides in the early stages of a collaboration)?

Encountering these hurdles we sought to experimentally insert some “content” into our methodological enquiry. We thought that some material to provide a starting point might “rudder” our enquiry and create a diversion from problems that were seriously hampering our ability to proceed.

Still committed to our desire to disrupt our habitual practices, we decided to arbitrarily “lodge at the first hotel we passed”. We happened to have some material at hand that had emerged spontaneously outside our professional practices immediately prior to the residency: out of mutual curiosity we had made observations and video of a slug living in our shower recess.

We then devised two tasks that involved observing the other working with the ruddering ‘data’ forms. These data comprised: a) simple numerical information concerning the time and location of the slug in the shower recess (collected over about a 2 month period); b) time lapse and real time video footage of the slug (which inadvertently solved the mystery of how and where the slug entered the space). The numerical data were loosely scientific (if there can be such a thing), alluding to a more rigorous observation of an animal species in a laboratory situation. We were not so much concerned with a ‘true’ representation of the slug’s appearance and disappearance in the shower recess, but in gleaned a sense of its travels. What was important about these data sources was that they provided a means of exploring and considering our respective practices away from a “making work” mentality.

We constructed a “rule” whereby the other would not comment or talk during the observational process; just to sit and watch the other doing or going about dealing with the data forms: Elizabeth organising and considering the numerical forms, and Simon manipulating and trialing possibilities with the video material using Final Cut (activities which were representative or characteristic of aspects of our respective practices). It was rich terrain because of the allocation of time and space to watch in a respectful, attentive and constructive manner. The “pressure” to devise a shared working methodology was reduced as we learned (first hand) more about the kinds of process and ideas the other engaged in as they were “doing”. Paradoxically, this facilitated the emergence or clarification of an appropriate cooperative and functional working environment for constructing a shared methodology, and in many respects this was a turning point in the laboratory/residency. The process of quiet observation was also fertile in the development of other ideas relating to future (near and distant) artistic experiments, workshopping possibilities, and even outcomes.

Additionally, and perhaps ironically, this observational practice also gave rise to a mutual desire to begin discussing and assessing our ideas and material critically, reading the implications and potential meanings of our activities, separately and combined as potential artistic outcomes.

We experienced this as a spontaneous and surprising emergence and exchange of ideas. We revelled in the ease and excitement of discussing possibilities after our painstaking earlier work, yet at the same time we remained cautious that this fresh impetus would lead us away from our intentions for the residency.

In other words, given that our initial focus was collaborative methodologies, then would this “imposition” of “content” enforce a top-down type approach, and consequently (and adversely?) impact on the integrity of our endeavour? Given this uncertainty, and subtle breach of our objectives for the residency, we declared this first negotiation closed. Our idea was to return to a starting point that once again foregrounded collaborative methodology over and above the construction of objects or outcomes – in other words, a “bottom-up” approach. In this second negotiation we were looking to delay as long as possible the shift in our focus (conceptually) from “method” to “outcome”.

Returning to our ‘methodological exchange’ we applied the attentiveness and respect learned during our observational exercises and, having experienced the benefit of applying ‘good manners’, we self-consciously sought to work in a pattern of invitation and response. For example, one of us would ask the other to ‘direct’ an activity/exercise/scenario. Based on the experience of that task, we would then suggest another activity. Our suggestions were framed hypothetically - “How would you feel about doing this?”; “Do you think it might be interesting to do this?” – and often the polite response was, ‘Yes, let’s try that.’

Importantly, we approached these tasks with experimental and observational intent. Instead of seeking to promote or critically assess ideas or material for creative outcomes, our aim was to exchange ideas, language, methods, conventions and perceptual and aesthetic frameworks.

This made possible the development of small outcomes that, at the same time, documented the residency. In addition, this type of outcome (existing at a kind of nexus between product and documentation) more generally represents a way or method of developing and examining artistic ideas.

When publishing the public outcomes of our enquiry – web-based video documents – we discussed at length how we should describe those documents to make clear their relationship to the residency and to our shared and individual practices. Having toyed with words like, ‘document’ and ‘experiment’, we chose to describe them as ‘negotiations’.

The expression, ‘negotiation’ seemed particularly apt following a discussion about how collaboration was not necessarily an act of compromise. ‘Negotiation’ can denote either agreement or compromise. To compromise is to make mutual concessions to resolve a dispute or conflict, whereas an agreement can denote a resolution based on the harmonious sharing of opinions. ‘Negotiation’ allows for either approach and additionally refers to the process of finding a way through or over an obstacle, a maze or a problem.

## **Negotiations**

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negotiation: n 1: a discussion intended to produce an agreement; “the buyout negotiation lasted several days”; “they disagreed but kept an open dialogue”; “talks between Israelis and Palestinians” [syn: dialogue, talks] 2: the activity or business of negotiating an agreement; coming to terms.

## **Possibilities**

Our residency at Performance Space generated a large number of questions about our desire to work together, ways in which we could effectively (and creatively) work together, and the degree to which our practices overlapped – in form-content, language, conception and execution. In many respects we feel as if the residency created a strong basis on which we could now begin to develop a profoundly shared way of making. It is with considerable enthusiasm that we are now seeking other artistic explorations in which we continue to develop methods to perturb our practice-based ideas and idiosyncrasies, and to examine in further detail the processes of collaboration.