

Listening to People's Stories Often Takes the Form of a Diagonal

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In the 1980s and early 1990s, we were not political enough for activists. Too much art. And for the art institutions we were often too political and not enough form. Since then, ways of looking at the canon and the political have changed. Confrontational distancing criticism became less, the common became more. With works such as **WEALTH COMPLEX** (2010-2017) and **HEALTH COMPLEX** (since 2017) or even **A WORD A DAY TO BE WIPED AWAY** (since 2014), we aim to address **practice** related issues.

Thus, during our preoccupation with the economies of health - usually referred to as the CARE economy - we have begun in 2017 a series of works entitled *HEALTH COMPLEX* in which pressures of profitability, blackmailability, vulnerability, and exhaustion come up. At the same time, in these works we present views of hands, bodies, textile fabrics, and tools.

How do we make art?

Since the beginning of our cooperation, the spaces of social diversity and power, as well as their overlaps and intersections, have been at the center of our attention. But how do we cultivate this engagement beyond art?

Conversations and the rereading of texts on the art we are currently engaged with are certainly part of it. But also the preoccupation with problematic cultural patterns, some of which we do critically question, but which we nevertheless tend to reproduce. And finally, out of the joy of developing images and spaces for what affects us directly and what can be shared and also verified with the people around us or with a public we don't always know.

Topics and concerns, without method, & co

We have concerns, we have topics and we have questions. On the canon, which also controls gaze and visibility, on the value of work, on WEALTH - richness or prosperity as partial understandings of it in German - and on CARE, where Pro Choice, f. e., is part of it. The contexts in which these are addressed are constantly changing and shifting. We neither have a concrete intention to shape things from the beginning, nor do we simply want to

visualize. It is above all the presence of people with whom we meet, the stories they are sharing with us and the experiences they are bringing together that enable us to access the context and to address the issues and concerns in a concrete way. How they can be addressed and find form in a space is something that has to be figured out each time anew. How can the path from the development of a concept to the realized work be described? We cannot really answer this question, because we don't have any automatisms as far as the use of a method is concerned. The collective, visible with the **& co** in our name as a sign of cooperation with others, has made us smarter. It gives us self-confidence. It has also shown us how important the political is in art. And as Suzanne Lacy said so well, it's constantly about renegotiating authorship: "I think that newer social practices, including those in my own public works, generally reveal not an abdication of the individual artist's production, but a negotiation of authorship that is handled differently by different artists."¹

The diagonal in space

How can we give voice to that which concerns us directly? How do we address an audience? With our works we want to give space to stories about/from/of people. We often set these up as divided spaces and / or as diagonals. The installations we develop for this purpose divide up spaces, but these are at the same time transparent and permeable, for example by using grids. And they can be bypassed according to a diagonal. The use of the diagonal - defined as a line connecting two non-consecutive points (or corners) - offers its own unique advantages. The resulting spaces help us to find out where exchange and discourse begin and lead to emotions and to change, and thus can become political.

archastik is a video installation on the train station square of the city of Biel-Bienne. Produced in 1985, the installation is an early attempt we made to develop a work for the public space. It consists of a corridor made of reinforcing mesh, arranged chairs, a microphone, loudspeakers and a video monitor on a tin barrel. The corridor runs diagonally across the square. This diagonal slows down the movement, causes detours and loss of time. With the title we thereby aimed at the intermediate area between architecture and sculpture from an understanding of self-organization.

The poetic space as a composition of stories

We are never about efficiency, despite professionalism in art. We are about losing time together with people. This usually happens in a roundabout way. The diagonal is an

¹ Suzanne Lacy: Gender Agendas, S. 22.

abstraction of these movements. The diagonal also represents a part of our preferred way of working as a collective. We understand losing time as: sharing concerns, research and experiences with many different people, without already being able to know how content and contexts come to a form. The **constant** and the **variable** are always the pivotal points of the diagonal. The constant through its proximity to the concept that we develop for a project in conversation and over time. The variable through its proximity to the context, which is decisive for what we want to compile and negotiate in terms of content.

Art history exists only since 1971. We make this assertion out of our work. It is not our intention to rewrite art history or to spark polemics. We use it when we are invited to deal with a collection. What we were able to do, for example, with the installation **WHAT DO WE WANT TO KEEP?** (2018) in the Graphische Sammlung of the ETH Zurich on invitation of the director Linda Schädler. How can we today estimate works in a collection, classify and categorize them? We used Linda Nochlin's text "Why have there been no great women artists?"² to filter the collection first. In other words, to repeatedly address the questions about the art canon and the gaps it contains. The main filter is: what images represent women's work and what kinds of women's work are represented in art? An additional filter is that of gender and that of signature: who signs? To what gender? Are there collectives among them? In doing so, we have no intention of retroactively revising the canon or denying the collection. We show what we find.³ If we don't find anything, we also give space to what we haven't found. Together with the curatorial team, the exhibition space thus becomes a place of collective research and production.⁴

A WORD A DAY TO BE WIPED AWAY (AWADTBWA) is an installation of words that has been produced in four versions so far, starting in 2012. First, it is a collection of words. We ask people we contact to give us words that should disappear from their vocabulary. In other words, words that they don't like. We transfer the words we receive with chalk onto a wall surface, so far mainly in exhibition rooms. In the exhibition, the words can be gradually erased by the visitors. One word per person per day. For the Sinop Biennial (Turkey, 2014) and for the solo exhibition at CCA Tbilisi (Georgia, 2015), we have received, in dialogue with people, words for places that are committed to experimental projects and social diversity and permeability. For both of our projects, we were intensively supported by a team during the conversations with the audience. How can such a concept be translated into an

² Linda Nochlin: Why have there been no great women artists, ARTnews, January 1971.

³ project webpage: <http://www.relax-studios.ch/detail/2018WTK> (22.12.2022).

⁴ project webpage: <http://www.relax-studios.ch/video/2018research> (22.12.2022).

institution like a museum? Museums have a different structure and they can rarely offer permanent support. Also, the exhibition duration is comparatively longer in most cases. For the exhibition "République géniale" (2018) at the Kunstmuseum Bern, with our contribution curated by Kathleen Bühler, we approached friends, acquaintances and people in their environment for the words, of whom we know that they are involved in the CARE sector, and also the museum team itself. What has caused that the museum is included in the collection of words. **AWADTBWA** is an installation that takes a different form in each version. It is important that the people who give us words have a direct connection to the region where the exhibition takes place. The constant is the concept: a collection of unpopular words to be erased from the vocabulary. The vocabulary, on the other hand, is always changing, the variable is determined by the year, the place, the current issues that people are dealing with, the budget that we have available. A library is physically present in the installation, it is the **Library of erased words**. It contains the collection of cleaning rags with which the words have been erased over the years.

The constant, the variable and the poetic space

Listening is a studio practice (like drawing, for example). In a project like AWADTBWA, the question is: How can this collection of words, images and stories create an experience and become part of a shared discourse? The initial request (what word would you like to delete from the vocabulary?) triggers all kinds of narratives and emotions (what word hurts me, what word can I no longer hear?). And when people finally appropriate the work and delete words, it leaves traces, it makes stains. So, the poetic space of an exhibition is, in a way, the result of repetitions and rehearsals. The concept with which we frame and create a constant is constantly questioned and challenged by the variable of a context. Another project in which the constant is challenged by the variable of the context and in which the installation generates a social space - even if this space is not apparent at first glance - is: **what is wealth?**, a video installation (Cornerhouse Manchester 2010, curated by Gavin Wade - Kunstmuseum Liechtenstein 2017 in: WHO PAYS?, curated by Christiane Meyer Stoll). **what is wealth?** consists of three rooms: the *Cage Room*, the *Waste Room* and the *Wheel of Fortune*. The installation requires the presence of staff during the exhibition, inviting visitors to waste time, to pick up and use some objects, as well as to spin the *Wheel of Fortune* and possibly win a *WEALTH MANIFESTO* poster.

The **Waste Room** is made up of chairs and armchairs brought in by the museum staff and made available to the public for the duration of the exhibition.

The **Cage Room** is surrounded by a 2 meter high construction fence. It contains works from the collection of the Kunstmuseum Liechtenstein (stored in boxes, laid out on and under a table), it contains some of our works (such as the useme*s from the Venice Architecture Biennale 2000, receipts, piggy banks, silkscreens, T-shirts and the videos FEDERICI 2 (2016) and *reservoir news* (2010)). And finally, it contains some publications on Buckminster Fuller's "Strategic Questions" (1966), edited by Gavin Wade. We didn't want to answer **what is wealth?** as a strategic question. Instead, we want to go beyond that and de-strategize it and make it much more open, flexible, uncontrollable, malleable. We use the English word "wealth" even in the German or French language, because the translation richness or prosperity, represents only a part of the understanding of the word. The word wealth translated into German (Reichtum) or into French (richesse) does not contain the same width of meaning of the word as in English.

We provide some guidelines to the surveillance staff on how to welcome and inform visitors. Everyone should be greeted and receive an invitation to sit down, take their time, do nothing, possibly engage in conversation, or simply daydream. The basic idea is that all the things gathered in the cage are accessible. The visitors can spread out in the space and look at what is available. In order to gain access to the objects, the visitors have to leave a deposit in the *Cage Room*. The deposit is supposed to have a value, such as a wallet, a credit card, a watch, a cell phone, or something else that is subjectively considered valuable. The objects are laid out on a blue painted plinth with a mirror surface. The *Cage Room* can be locked. Thus, the staff can remain in the exhibition space and, if desired, outside the cage.

Institutional Critique? Effectiveness, interaction, freedom, ethics

Why do we present this work? We have shown our works mainly in independent art spaces, in contemporary art centers (Kunsthalle), in museums and at a few Biennials. However, at the beginning we never thought that we would show our works in a museum. Not that we thought museums were not necessary. On the contrary. And we believe that all museums should offer free admission. What is important to us is access and appropriation, not only through seeing, but also through touching and other senses, or by using the museum as a place of encounter in a different way than previously planned. We stand up for the generosity of access and provision, so that encounters become possible. Museums could be regularly reinvented. Their use should always be able to be explored, criticized and renegotiated. Whether this is the history of a collection and the dominant canon, the cultural history of the predominantly male gaze, or to reframe questions of authorship. We find that

fundamental questions posed to museums and other institutions, from the creation of canons to plundered property to postcolonial concerns, are urgent and set important themes. Everything must be done so that these processes do not stop but become an obvious part of the functioning of the cultural institutions.

The museum that radiates eternity no longer exists. Museums are under pressure today. Under pressure from a measurable economy, which is the criterion for many politicians when it comes to public funding of art, education and institutions. This pressure has been growing since the 1980s. In many places, it pressures culture, education and healthcare. Museums that grant free admission and whose upkeep is financed by private companies such as petroleum or chemical companies - because the public has withdrawn as a donor or only partially co-finances them - are the result of a serious misunderstanding. For corporations are turning museums into advertising channels and re-colonizing them. Institutional critique is not the core but part of our practice. It accompanies us in our cooperation with curators who invite us to an exhibition and who understand institutional critique and its history in their own practice as a self-evident part of their work. The critical eye on the gaze - THE GAZE - and at civic forms of organization, at the history of the collections, at the addressing of visitors, at the places themselves, is an important part of our work as well as of the work of curators, even if not necessarily on all occasions. Often the artist's fee to be determined is the first varnish check. Especially if we have to raise the issue on our own. Discussions and research (between 1983 and 1995) have been crucial in guiding our aesthetic choices and the economic organization of the studio. But that is not the topic here, for that we would need another lecture on the question: how do artists manage the economy of the studio?

As a collective, we don't know any rules, but we always determine some that help us in our practice. This starts, for example, from the question of what place we are dealing with, where we are and where we hope something can take place. A place, a space is never neutral and is always occupied. Our approach always maintains a relationship with what we can and cannot do with art. Art can do many things. But it is not the art that can bring about change, it is the people who can change something. What effectiveness are we looking for when we develop a work for an exhibition? How can effectiveness be measured? We can't measure effectiveness. But we are looking for effectiveness.

For us, the interaction, the freedom we take to address people, to hear their stories and to give space to their voices in our work, is about the ethics of the self and the ethics of the relationship between the self and the other. This is where the political enters the picture, as the question is always who joins forces with whom to make visible what, to demand, to

fight, to celebrate, and to amplify this in the media or better yet, not do it.

Care – Caring

And finally a few words about **HEALTH COMPLEX**, a new group of works we started in 2017, including so far two videoinstallations. **HEALTH COMPLEX 2021** in: *Art As Connection*, Aargauer Kunsthhaus, curated by the team Katharina Ammann, Yasmin Afschar, Silja Burch, Simona Ciuccio and Bassma El Adisey and **HEALTH COMPLEX beyond Adeline Favre 2022**, in: *TAKE CARE, Art and Medicine*, Kunsthhaus Zurich, curated by Cathérine Hug. The follow-up, the next work in progress, focuses on the economic part of the healthcare system.

The installation **HEALTH COMPLEX** (2021) takes up an entire room. A kind of island of elements is arranged along a diagonal. Visible are: the depiction of care staff in work clothes as advertising photography; the depiction of exhausted care staff in work clothes as a photographic representation on a curtain; TALKS as videos with care staff about their professional clothing; NEWSPAPERS as a video with leafed newspapers in times of the pandemic; professional clothing of the care staff, provided by the Hospital of the Canton of Aargau; and finally furniture such as benches, corpus, shelves and a shower curtain.

The second part of this series: **HEALTH COMPLEX beyond Adeline Favre** has been developed for a wall and stretches across a diagonal into space.⁵ This video installation tells a possible story of care and the power of knowledge in medicine. The images narrate key moments: from the suppression of women's medical knowledge in the Middle Ages to the portrait of Adeline Favre, a midwife from the Canton of Valais and transitional figure of modern patriarchal society (who was against abortion and at the same time promoted coitus interruptus), to the portrait of a vulnerable society that may be exhausted but is determined to become better.

A print shows *Le Manifeste des 343 Femmes*, (*The manifesto of the 343 women*) a call for freedom for interruption of pregnancy published in 1971 in the *Nouvel Observateur* in Paris, written by Simone de Beauvoir and signed by more than 343 women. To the names of the signers we have added in red the name of RELAX member Marie-Antoinette Chiarenza. In addition, two large-format photos - a RELAX self-portrait - show representations of a person who is caring and a person who is being cared for. The boundary between the carer and the person being cared for disappears, making the vulnerability of both bodies all the more

⁵ project webpage: <http://www.relax-studios.ch/detailgroup/2022healthcomplex2/> (22.12.2022).

clear. Finally, a video shows historian and feminist Elisabeth Joris talking about work clothes in the care sector. A clothing originally defined by religious principles, which today is more subject to a commercial orientation of care.⁶

We refer to

The idea that we could tackle something in a detached and independent way is above all ideological. A practice without reference to our friends, accomplices, and real and imaginary counterparts is unthinkable. With RELAX we pursue a multiple authorship. With a **& co** in the name. In the present text (which is a lecture transposed into text form for the present publication) we refer. For example, to *L'éthique du care* by Fabienne Brugère, to Celine Condorelli's manual *Support Structures*, to the activism of the Guerilla Girls since the mid-1980s, or to Fred Wilson's 1992 exhibition *Mining the Museum* in Baltimore.

Publications in connection with this essay

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⁶ project webpage: <http://www.relax-studios.ch/video/2022HC2VIDEO/> (22.12.2022).