Slow Works – Deceleration as Curatorial Paradigm

By

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Thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the
Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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Chelsea College of Arts
March 2021

Abstract

Curatorial policies currently favoured by large public institutions rely on sound bite information devised by the curator with the aim of making art accessible to diverse audiences. My own curatorial practice has convinced me that this approach, while justified in its concern for accessibility, tends to speed up and compress the initial encounter with art, shortening the time of 'not-knowing', which crucially allows us to appreciate those often contradicting and hard-to-grasp qualities essential to aesthetic experience. In the current political climate of resurgent populism, facilitated by the "echo chamber" effect of social media, reclaiming the gallery as a public space to think – to keep complex ideas in suspension rather than jump to conclusions – is a particularly urgent task.

Original contribution to knowledge: My research challenges the sound bite approach while upholding its concern for accessibility by proposing deceleration as a new paradigm for curation. A 'decelerated' exhibition presents visitors not with foregone conclusions based on theoretical argument but with a structured wealth of contextual material informed by artistic practice and process, enabling audiences to cultivate curiosity and engage in self-directed exploration, on their own terms and in their own time. I look at artistic work processes to inform my methods of curating – including the mediation of artworks – rather than cloak them in theory, or explain them in the written or spoken word, which is almost always the case in contemporary curating.

The exhibitions I make are action-based research and the description and reflection of these form the core of my written thesis. It starts with a literature and practice review that is followed by two chapters on key philosophical aspects of curating/art making: learning how to look, and recognising, respecting and protecting the gallery (and studio) as spaces to think. The final two chapters are on two methods I have developed for slowing down the experiencing of art in galleries and slowing down the curatorial process: the 'information antechamber' and the 'expanded' studio visit.

Thesis contents:

INTRODUCTION

0.1 Introduction

This research project is as much about a refocusing on the importance of time and space to think (both in making and experiencing art), the seemingly simple skill to be able to look while we are in exhibitions, as it is about the curating of art exhibitions.

Its title is about a confidence in that change is possible and desirable but also a plea to colleagues to assess the impact of their work, and for solidarity with one another. Throughout the project and thesis, my concern has been this idea that we have to consider the future of art experiences and galleries/studio spaces and think about what they do before we lose them to more profit-driven ventures that survive in harsh climates. People working with art need to consider how we contribute to, and perpetuate, how things are organised now. To oversee the impact our actions have on artists or the visitor who does not have the privilege to already feel entitled to art experiences at their own pace.

The power-relations and economic prioritisations within the public gallery and art school are synonymous with the general conditions of the world outside of art and this is a critique of those conditions as well.

As I was starting my PhD, the American art historian David Joselit wrote, in the midst of Donald Trump campaigning to become president of the U.S., and the Brexit referendum in the

U.K., in *October* (2016): '[W]e might be entering a moment when the very purpose of art is to slow things down; to afford friction; to refuse easy translation into information.' In the current political climate of resurgent populism, facilitated by the 'echo chamber' effect of social media, recognising, respecting and protecting the gallery as a public space to think – to keep complex ideas in suspension rather than jump to conclusions – is a particularly urgent task. In times of accelerated productivity and consumption, fake news and sound-bite information in both established and social media, we also need a space to concentrate – differently than in other spaces – a place where we do not have to produce or consume anything.

Perhaps some of us do this type of thinking in churches and other religious buildings. I do not attend services. I find them oppressive and steeped in conservative values even though I do agree with many of the humanitarian aspects and thoughts around love and solidarity. Many religious buildings, though, are exceptionally conducive to thought. They were made for contact with something higher and bigger than us and to not be limited by 'hitting the ceiling' of what is currently possible, of tacit knowledge. They are spaces for the transcendental and sublime. At the same time as religious architecture is made for openness and light, air and philosophy; perhaps inevitably, by contrast, it also makes us feel small and insignificant. It reminds us of the power of something bigger, in the case of Christian religion: something that is not democratic, that assumes we are disobedient and that could punish us. It is easy to see why we would want to get away from this but it is a big price to pay to do away with the space – the time and place – for that kind of thought. That is surely why huge public galleries sometimes resemble secular cathedrals. As, though, are certain shops and shopping centres (the Apple Store on Regent street, Wholefoods on Kensington High Street, Westfield mall in Stratford, for example). They may actually seem to be the same kind of spaces. Okwui Enwesor said, in a conversation with Paul O'Neill in the book *Curating Subjects*: 'We live in an exhibitionary context at the moment. We are each in different ways always embedded in a potential exhibition, from the mall to the high street.' (2007, p. 121) In an increasingly entrepreneurial environment, if art exhibition experiences are to be anything other than consumerist, something more like philosophy, then art needs to be protected from corporate pressures and be properly state-funded. It is where alternative futures can be imagined and explored, where ethics and meaning are constantly being discussed and this is necessary and urgently needed for a more sustainable future.

0.1.1 The Gallery as a Place That Gives us Time

Can galleries be places that give us time? (There is a further discussion on this in chapter 5.) Entering a gallery often rather gives us the feeling that 'this will take time', that it requires some work from our side to engage with works and to fathom at least some of the research and ideas that have gone into making them and the exhibition. It is not just a case of engaging with an art exhibition on a visual level, not just about seeing, that I will discuss in the next chapter; we also have to have the time and attention to engage with art. The art critic and writer Jonathan Crary explains in the introduction to his book *Suspensions of Perception* that:

> At the present moment, to assert the centrality or "hegemony" of vision within twentieth-century modernity no longer has much value or significance at all. Thus, as I will argue, spectacular culture is not founded on the necessity of making a subject *see*, but rather on strategies in which individuals are isolated, separated, and *inhabit time* as disempowered. Likewise, counter-forms of attention are neither exclusively nor essentially visual but rather constituted as other temporalities and cognitive states, such as those in trance or reverie.
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> One of the aims of my book *Techniques of the Observer* was to show how historical transformations in ideas about vision were inseparable from a larger reshaping of subjectivity that concerned not optical experiences but processes of modernization and rationalization. (2001, p. 3)

We have ended up in this political climate with all the injustices because the focus is on giving people (those that do vote, and those with disposable income) what they 'want'. Is it not also the curator's job to make exhibitions that people do not necessarily know they want to see and experience? That is not to suggest we make exhibitions more challenging in a sensationalist or revolting way, but simply to challenge the feeling that, because I do not already know something, I might not particularly want it or like it.

As I will discuss in chapter 1, all art exhibitions and galleries are not currently functioning as spaces to think. Far from it. A lot of pressure is put on curators and artists to be productive, and on visitors to move swiftly through overcrowded exhibitions. When a curator does not have time to think, do research or properly collaborate and listen to the artist, they act as any producer or worker who just makes goods or provides services for the accumulation of wealth; they are really just providing content. We could learn form artists to not think like either producer or consumer. The making *is* the thinking and there is a 'product' at the end but perhaps, in an effort to avoid instrumentalisation, it helps to think of it as unfinished and that

we finish it when we connect with it. (More on studio-space-thinking in the section below.)

Could we, as curators, culture audiences, tax payers, voters, do more to recognise, respect and protect the gallery as a space to just look, listen (with our entire bodies) and think? As places to think about alternatives for ourselves and our global and local community. The space should work with the content of the show and artworks themselves, not against them, and also not be ignored. It matters greatly where the gallery is in terms of who feels welcome and is likely to visit, who feels entitled to engage with the works inside, who wants to be associated with it, wants to make the commute or even wants to live in that area. Art-spaces are gentrifiers and that is problematic but the scope of this thesis does not allow me to go into that discussion. The journey there also matters, as does people's journey to work. That is part of the work, without that workplace being in one location, and their home in another, they would not be making that journey. A space can make you feel welcome and want to linger. A space can help you focus by shutting out everything else. The internet can make you feel welcome, it is accessible, but there is so much distraction and once we navigate to another site we might not come back or might just speed-read or scroll through content. The art-space has asked us to come there and give it our time. We know it will give us something in return and it is already a commitment to go there so we will give it a chance. Whereas online it took next to no effort to find something so we let it go easier.

0.1.2 The Artist's Studio Space Makes Art and Thinking Possible

The making-process that is possible according to the time, space and material available is a decisive part of many artists' practices and involves different kinds of thinking from the problem-solving of daily life. Thinking that goes through the artist's hands and lets their hands 'listen', as the sculptor Barbara Hepworth says in a BBC documentary from 1961 about her work. She describes her right hand, holding the mallet, as the 'driver' and her left hand, holding the chisel, as the 'listener'. The band the Manic Street Preachers do not make material art but still need a physical space to make it. Dan Richards interviews singer James Dean Bradfield in his excellent book on artistic work processes called *The Beechwood Airship Interviews*:

> I think there was a point before *Send Away the Tigers* when I was trying to write some tunes and nothing was working and then, for some reason, I was in a corner of my Cardiff flat and the guitar was propped up against the wall and an idea came into my head and it was a really, really good idea - something that went on to be part of the album in an indelible sense - and it really kicked me off; and it's pathetic but it's that spot; I've still got that flat and it's that spot that I

> still return to write. I write there. … [A]nd there used to be a spot here in this studio, at the front; and I'd been through a period of not being able to write anything - what you might cornily call "writer's block" in terms of being able to write a tune - and I still return to that spot, which is just under the front window upstairs. So they're the two places mostly that I write because I've had really incredible luck in those places, previously, but before that it was spots in my parents' house and a rehearsal space in Cardiff called Sound Space which has now been knocked down. There was always a spot there where I always used to go to write.' (2015, p. 214)

James Dean Bradfield goes on to tell of when, at the age of about sixteen, he found a guitar book at Blackwood library and Keith Richards said in it that

> 'the first spot he found where the guitar made sense to him, when he was young, was at the top of his parents' staircase where the echo was just right and he felt as if the world was still, just in that moment. It just made sense that you had to isolate yourself from "the world outside" et cetera and you had to find that spot to actually be true to the idea that might come to you. I don't know why but there you go.' (ibid, p. 215)

With a space comes memories and behaviours that are routine. It is hard to change one's behaviour if everything around us constantly reminds us of who we are. The system of oppressing workers only persists because we are not allowed to think about what it is that we are doing, have no time to educate ourselves and are told we should instead aspire to have wealth like the company-owner, and keep it to ourselves. We have internalised an ideal to be productive and strive upwards without really thinking about who pays for this lifestyle – people who make our clothing under slave-like conditions and the environmental damage of production methods and material use, for example – how we perpetuate this competitive environment and compete with our friends, everyone around us, by being better than each other and competing on an individual basis rather than working together and for the collective good. A space where we are able to leave visual prompts, for thoughts that are still in progress, that means the space is in some ways a part of our brain, or thinking at least, and it seems we should protect these and not think it clever to do away with these physical spaces or feel we cannot 'afford' them. Funding for art should respect such spaces as part of the process. What sort of art do we get if we get rid of studio space? Are galleries necessary then? How do we make them more important, and less like places for consumption?

This thesis goes into a broad range of problems and issues because even if the scope here does not allow me to go to the bottom of each one of them, and what sort of time-scale and word-count would? But if I cannot at least try to look at all these vast and interconnected issues, to get some degree of overview, with the freedom to focus entirely on this project that AHRC-funding has given me, when will I ever? The stumble-blocks I have found in exhibition-contexts are all symptoms of the difficulties we face in the world outside.

Each of my chapters presents either a constellation of existing conditions and threats to changing how exhibitions are curated as in the contextual overview of the current curatorial field where I situate my practice, and the following chapters that suggest some of the ways we can deal with it and move forward.

0.2 Original Contribution to Knowledge

This thesis is an attempt to sketch out some outlines of how we curate and experience exhibitions now and what some of the problems with those methods are, as well as some possible solutions to those. I will examine ideas about what an exhibition visitor needs to know – if they do need to know anything specific – when entering the gallery and how this is best mediated. It is about looking and thinking, seemingly basic tenets for experiencing art but often overlooked when we curate exhibitions that have barriers within them to engage properly in the visitor's own time, at their own pace.

Curatorial policies currently favoured by public institutions such as Tate and the National Gallery rely on sound bite information devised by the curator with the aim of making art accessible to diverse audiences. I give some examples of this in chapter 1. My own curatorial practice has convinced me that this approach, while justified in its concern for accessibility, tends to speed up and compress the initial encounter with art, shortening the time of 'not-knowing', which crucially allows us to appreciate those often contradicting and hard-to-grasp qualities essential to aesthetic experience.

My research challenges the sound bite approach while upholding its concern for accessibility by proposing deceleration as a new paradigm for curation. A 'decelerated' exhibition presents visitors not with foregone conclusions based on theoretical argument but with a structured wealth of contextual material informed by artistic practice and process, enabling audiences to cultivate curiosity and engage in self-directed exploration, on their own terms and in their own time. I look at artistic work processes to inform my methods of curating – including the mediation of artworks – rather than cloak them in theory, or explain

them in the written or spoken word, which is almost always the case in contemporary curating.

0.3 Background

I had my undergraduate education in Art History[1] and then followed a very specialised postgraduate degree in curating art that was mostly centred on analysing and discussing curatorial strategies, business management strategies (supposedly to make curating more 'efficient') and reading art theory, as well as legal aspects such as copyright (and copyleft[2]). Thankfully the focus there was always on the legal rights of artists, not institutions or buyers, thanks to the sound ethics of the leader of that module, Katarina Renman-Claesson.[3] All our assignments were in written form, apart from a few presentations and the degree show at the end. That is when I started to think about why we curate the way we do and what is not being done, how we could make exhibitions better and work more ethically towards both artists, their works and visitors. And I developed my first 'information antechamber' together with the artist Jens Hedin, whose paintings he and I exhibited in my degree show.

During my MA in curating[4] I put in a request for us to collaborate with the Royal Academy of Fine Arts, since Stockholm University does not have a Fine Art department and I was told to make such a collaboration happen under my own initiative. So I did. I started visiting the art school and talking to students and was invited to 'curate', although I was rather a form of filter, the BA-equivalent-show in 2008. That was when I realised just how fundamentally different theirs and our (at university) discussions about art were and how much is missing from the way I had been talking about and looking at art. Questions formed around developing alternative models for (my) curatorial practice: What can we (academics and art theorists, as well as laypeople) learn from how artists look at and talk about art, how art is learnt and taught at art schools? Can the ways of looking and learning, elaborated in art education help us in equipping audiences with the tools they need to engage with art on their own terms, in their own time?

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[1] Stockholm University 2005-2011

[2] 'Copyleft is a strategy of utilizing copyright law to pursue the policy goal of fostering and encouraging the equal and inalienable right to copy, share, modify and improve creative works of authorship.'
https://www.copyleft.org/

[3] Katarina Renman-Claesson is a researcher, writer and lecturer in IP-law.
https://www.nj.se/experter/katarina-renman-claesson

[4] Stockholm University 2007-2011

0.4 Methodology

0.4.1 Prefigurativism

Prefigurativism is making the change now that you want to see tomorrow, as explained in the first comprehensive overview and exploration of its development by philosopher/activists Paul Raekstad and Sofa Saio Gradin in *Prefigurative Politics: Building Tomorrow Today*. Their definition of the term is 'the *deliberate* experimental implementation of *desired* future social relations and practices in the here-and-now.' (2020 p. 36, their emphasis) I have adopted this definition for my practice, and the aim for this research project, and by extension for a new paradigm within curating: I would include in 'social relations' also relations between exhibition visitors and artworks, indirectly then between artists and those same visitors, artists and curators, curators and artworks etc.

My research and curating are a mix of prefigurative actions and looking at what we are already doing in the art world, to protect what is good and do more of that. It is informed by artists' approaches to their work. This seems both reasonable and ethical. Perhaps easier to do when working with living artists than the traditional academic approach, that is a remnant of a role of the curator as caring for art historical objects and theory, but it can also be a method to use when working with historical artworks. Especially when dealing with media such as painting, that is in so many ways still the same as centuries ago. This research also has a foundation in the critique of specialism, which is two-fold: specialism determines what is worth knowing in a certain professional role, and who should spend time doing what. As a curator, my specialism gives authority to opinions and an expert interpretation of art that visitors often do want to hear. My critique and refusal of this authority is an attempt to make art experiences more democratically available, less intimidating and less elitist. This is the decolonising aspect of the project. (More on this in the following subchapter.) It seems ludicrous to assume there is a correct way to interpret artworks. I should add that I am very interested in the intentions behind artworks and I do touch on this in chapters 4 and 5.

The prefigurative approach to make the change I want to see, is for my work to reflect the future I am working towards, together with the people who are affected by it. As far as possible I let artists and artworks have their own space, and not reduce them to something superficial, not speak for them but to think and make together: a form of communal thinking. Writing the thesis and reading is also communal thinking. And when you are striving for communal thinking you cannot take a position of authority. It has to be open enough for people to be able to make a contribution. 'Only love and art can do this: only inside a book or

in front of a painting can one truly be let into another's perspective. It has always struck me as a paradox how in the solitary arts there is something *intimately communal*.' This is Hisham Matar on looking slowly at art in *A Month in Siena* (2019 p. 33, my emphasis)

0.4.2 Decolonising Curating

Slow Works is an effort to decolonise knowledge through ethical curating informed by artistic work practice. Decolonise in the sense of refusing to keep referring to an established canon, let all knowledge count, also that which is not neat and flawless, or already powerful.

As is discussed in key works of post-colonial critique, Edward Said's *Orientalism*, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's essay *Can the Subaltern Speak?*, and Homi Bhabha's *The Location of Culture*, for example, colonialism started from a position of thinking one class and culture (white, formally educated (in the West), male) knows better than another and has a right to organise the 'lesser' culture. Capitalism is built on the same organising principle and perpetuates the inequalities and violence of colonialism. Bhabha describes how the colonial articulation of authority depends on '… *rules of recognition* – those social texts of epistemic, ethnocentric, nationalist intelligibility which cohere in the address of authority as the 'present', the voice of modernity. The acknowledgement of authority depends upon the immediate – unmediated – visibility of its rules of recognition as the unmistakable referent of historical necessity. (1994, p. 157)

If we keep making exhibitions for people who are visiting them now, who *recognise* and value what is displayed now, how do we expect to attract the people who are not already comfortable in a gallery or feel that art is 'for' them? Currently, only certain knowledge and opinion counts. Real communal thinking would include people from any background and walks of life. In the gallery this thinking happens between the artwork (object) and artist, the visitor, and myself. Here in this text the communal thinking is between the reader, the artists I quote – that have given their time and opened up their practices to me – and my words to describe this. To minimise my interference, I keep as close as possible to the initial experience and do not theorise or refer to previous theory or similar artistic practice. First hand experience can be so much more immersive and much more important than a summary. Particularly since we do not always realise what thoughts and knowledge we take from that first-hand experience until sometimes much later and in very different contexts – future experiences of the same artworks, other artworks by that same artists, books we read, things that happen to us, relationships, conversations, etc. Had it not been for taking that time and

going somewhere in person, being present, those meetings would not have happened, those thoughts would not have been had. It is becoming clearer as my research develops that this kind of presence and commitment are key to a more ethical curatorial strategy and to counter what capitalism asks of, and denies, us as citizens.

0.4.3 Action-based Research

Mine is not research about how artists curate, which many do and also refer to themselves as curators, but how curator practitioners from an academic background, and those with an education from curating programmes, such as mine, could look more at artistic work processes to inform their work and stop cloaking artworks in theory, already interpreting and explaining too much when mediating exhibitions. My work is an inhabiting of processes of production through collaborations with artists. I have already learnt so much from this approach, perhaps most importantly to have more humility before my work and to step back occasionally to let it tell me what it is, and what needs doing next. However, my intention is not to form a brand for myself or a recognisable style of curating that is particular to me but to suggest all my colleagues – fellow curators, artist/curators, anyone working with exhibitions, directed towards the general public or for a select or connoisseur audience, along with myself – look at what it is we are doing when we exhibit currently. What do we do to artworks when we fill a space with so many? And visitors' experiences when they need to speed read information plaques because queues are forming, or their attention span is thoroughly tested?

0.4.4 Writing in the First Person

My method of writing in the first person, relying on anecdotal evidence, as well as quoting parts of conversations with artists rather than summarising or speaking for them can be compared to approaches to oral history. It is also concerned with 'accessing not just information but also signification, interpretation and meaning.' This is how Lynn Abrams, the Professor of Modern History at the University of Glasgow, describes the practice and method of research, in her ground-braking overview of oral history theory. Abrams says: 'As a research practice, oral history is engulfed by issues which make it controversial, exiting and endlessly promising.' She describes how the interview [and I would apply this also to the communication through artworks and exhibitions] is an 'event of communication which demands that we find ways of comprehending not just *what* is said, but also *how* it is said, *why* it is said and what it *means*.' (2010, p.1) Like an analysis of an interview in oral history theory, the knowledge that is

produced and disseminated in artistic work also has to be allowed to be dynamic, unfinished and ever-evolving. If there are endless ways to interpret artworks, then we should not expect any description of them, or how they came about, to be objective or final. Exhibitions are involved in creating the meaning of artworks, and are themselves unfinished until visitors engage with and interpret them. That, by extension, includes the writing about exhibitions and artworks in this thesis and therefore the oral history approach seems to be the most ethical and fair.

A Writing & Art technē Conflux workshop, organised by my colleague Louis Hartnoll at Central St Martins in 2019, was a masterclass with the art critic and curator Weng Choy Lee and confirmed to me that anecdotes are the best way to write about art and write about my research. Lee describes in his essay *The Neglected Object of Curation* (c. 2019) how the anecdote has a capacity to 'interrupt the tendency to generalise through a close reading of specific cases – to prompt debate and discussion by challenging assumptions, rather than propping up stock positions.'

0.5 A Paradigmatic Shift – the Covid-19 Crisis

The panicked and immediately inflicted lockdown due to Coronavirus while I was editing this during the spring and then the larger part of 2020 made some problems that I had already been concerned with more explicit. In a rush to reach audiences despite galleries being shut, a lot of curating – or rather uncurated exhibition-related content – moved online at an alarming speed, without much thought as to what that does to artworks or what new or increased pressures that put on the audience and artists. Fellow curator Morgan Quaintance wrote in Art Monthly in June 2020 about this:

> The ICA's relentless daily email of suggested viewing, reading and listening spearheaded by director Stefan Kalmar (sent to members and anyone for whom the institution has contact details) carries many of the worst features of this link-based, art-as-information approach. Engagement in this context becomes a kind of task-based daily work, a series of exercises in prescribed cultural vigilance one feels the pressure to perform along with whatever other repetitious behaviours (exercise, washing hands …) are prescribed as our daily bread in isolation. Behind the keystrokes of every paragraph and hyperlinked daily list lies the wearying institutional edict to remain productive, keep selecting, interpreting, filtering, curating. It is exhausting and unnecessary work.

And on the disregard for curating that was displayed by many and that is thankfully now more of an urgent discussion:

> … Rhizome and the CAC's [Chronus Art Centre's] classic mistake is to confuse the roles of artwork and website, attempting to combine the two in an elaborate structure that should be a simple conduit for the work it hosts and not a lurid distraction from it. Undermining the very goal it was supposedly designed to achieve, the exhibition site buries the artworks under a tangled mess of thematically irrelevant, oddly placed content. … To paraphrase Japanese designer Naoto Fukasawa, the design of websites should dissolve in behaviour. Unless it augments or accentuates the viewing experience, the awareness of an exhibition site should disappear once it is being used. It must do this in order to make way for that which it was built: the art. (2020)

The above could also be a description of how many physical exhibitions, also before lockdown and virus-spread-reducing efforts, are organised where instructions where to walk and how to look at artworks are not at all invisible or neutral, as we seem to treat them but sometimes to extreme levels interfere with exhibition experiences. As galleries are opening up again, although well-meaning and considerate, these are conditions that have to be met in order to re-open, and that must have been discussed and then decided that they are compromises we can live with but for how long? Some of these measures might be here to stay.

0.6 Definitions of the Term 'Art'

I have been searching for a definition of the term 'art' for the sake of having a discussion throughout this thesis but also for being able to discuss it with colleagues and people who do not work with art or who might even consider themselves uninterested in art. In *Thinking Contemporary Curating* (2012) the artist, art historian and critic Terry Smith defines 'art' very broadly: 'By art, to put it at its minimum, I mean any intentionally created existent that, following processes of searching self-reflection and including consideration of previous and other imaginable art, embodies its being and establishes its relationships with its anticipated viewers, primarily through visual means.' (2012 p. 29) I do too, but my definition would be much simpler and in line with how for example the artist John Baldessari thinks: if something is presented or thought of as art (the intentions behind it is to be an artwork) by someone who claims they are an artist, it is art. (Baldessari 1971) Not dealing with (only) received knowledge – that is passed from 'above', from expert down to student, layperson, more junior expert –

but an experienced knowledge, one that takes hard work, concentration, and long-term returning to it, committed attention. It is a part of it as much as the artist is, or I am.

The kind of art that I am interested in and want to work with I think of as 'philosophy'. Liam Gillick, in the e-flux journal book *Are You Working Too Much? Post-Fordism, Precarity, and the Labor of Art* (2011), describes art (at least when it comes to 'art of any significance made in the last forty years') as

> … a series of scenarios/presentations that creates new spaces for thought and critical speculation. The creation of new time values and shifted time structures actually creates new critical zones where we might find spaces of differentiation from the knowledge community. For it is not that art is merely a mirror of a series of new subjective worlds. It is an ethical equation where assumptions about function and value in society can be acted upon. (2011 pp. 70-71)

Many of my colleagues would refer to contemporary art as 'idea-art', including Quaintance in that same article in Art Monthly (June 2020). I needed a term I could use throughout my research project and especially in this thesis but I also realised how important it is to be able to say early on in a conversation with people outside my field, someone who is perhaps sceptical of contemporary art, because those conversations have been important for my research. As much as I appreciate the openness of the term 'idea' it can sound like a bit of an in-joke, and 'philosophy' is a better description of the type of thinking that is not looking for quick and easy solutions. Art-as-philosophy is a definition I can live with, at least while I am writing this thesis. It is art that is not about problem-solving in the sense that we are used to when we deal with economic circumstances or a project that is meant to achieve something specific – productivity in the more straightforward sense – but about asking questions and not knowing what we need to know.

CHAPTER 1

LITERATURE AND PRACTICE REVIEW

1.1 Introduction

My research is action-based and my practice involves making and looking at exhibitions, as well as looking at artistic practices and working with artists over extended periods of time. Looking at artistic work processes informs my methods of mediation of artworks, rather than I cloak them in theory, which is often the case in contemporary curating. This chapter provides an overview of the field in which I situate my practice. It is not an attempt to map out this field in any complete way, as that would be another PhD-project altogether. I have chosen key texts, as well as exhibitions I have visited that have had an impact on my research, for a frank discussion. These exhibitions are what I consider to be great examples of how they can be

made and introduced without explaining and already interpreting too much in a written introductory statement. The discussion is situated in the UK, with one example from Ireland (although the majority of the books have been published in the US) but does not attempt to go much further afield. This is to provide a framework suitable for the scope of one chapter of the thesis. Discussions will touch on more globalised aspects in this field such as biennials and other forms of art-tourism but not go into these in any depth. I am particularly interested in the qualities of encounters with art that, as I mentioned in the introduction I consider are 'philosophy': they deal with questions, some of which are too hard to pin down or too complex to discuss in our everyday life, and do not fit neatly into (party) politics. It is particularly the democratic qualities of art that I want to care for and protect, when art experiences are like a discussion between people who have not previously met, perhaps never will, and with art objects as intermediaries. This is a decolonising project in the sense that it is critical of cultural hegemony and exclusivity, the close guarding of power in relation to knowledge and access to civil liberties. Hierarchies within exhibition making are analysed and a starting point for this research was questions around what discussions and contributions are not currently had within the canon. I have previously worked with mostly artist-run spaces, which I love and want to continue to support. I now aim to take these ideas into publicly funded institutions that have a responsibility to reach beyond an interested elite, address a broad audience, including an international one where translating between written or spoken languages is always an issue.

1.2 Literature and Practice Review

As I described in the introductory chapter, and in addition to the works already mentioned there, I have consulted writings by curators and artists who write about their daily practice, together with more traditionally philosophical texts on perception, knowledge production and -dissemination, the development of specialisms at the beginning of capitalism, and structural hierarchies more generally. Some of these works have influenced my thinking more generally and some have had a direct impact on my research and I have quoted those in my discussions throughout the thesis.

Paul O'Neill has written and edited two of the very few books on curating that are not self-serving[5] and where I find proper discussions and similar ethical concerns to mine: *The*

[5] Curators are so used to 'selling' and reviewing our work in press releases or catalogues, to build on our brand or that of the institution or artist we are working with, that it seems we cannot afford to be honest about failures or

Curating of Cultures and the Cultures of Curating (2012) and *Curating Subjects* (2007). I will quote more articles from these books than from any other source in this chapter. O'Neill, in the former, describes some reasons for that lack of rigorous discussion and examination of our profession: '[F]rom Hoffmann to Obrist, prioritization of the contemporary and the curatorial gesture has created a particular model of discourse that remains self-referential, curator-centred, and curator-led, with unstable historical foundations.' (2012 p. 42)

I read *The Culture of Curating and the Curating of Culture(s)* knowing that O'Neill, just after writing it, took over from Maria Lind as head of the curatorial MA programme at Bard college in New York and thus quite literally shaped and schooled future curators in this mould. The book to me now says more about what is wrong with art curating than it suggests what could be done better. It is an overview of the current situation, as it was in 2012 and still pretty much is, and reads as a textbook on curating. As such, it is not a bad one but nothing more important either. Typically, O'Neill is only interested in developments that were successful, not the failed ones that I always feel I learn from the most. Accepting failure makes us free to experiment.

As a student of (Art History and then) Curating at Stockholm University I was introduced to the fundamental texts in curatorial theory at the time (2007-2011) and these have continued to be influential in forming my practice, either as inspiration or to react against.

In Brian O'Doherty's *Inside the White Cube - The Ideology of the Gallery Space,* he discusses time as in the time that a work is *of*. He says: 'Art exists in a kind of eternity of display, and though there is lots of "period" (late modern), there is no time.' (1976 [1999], p. 15) I found this incredibly enlightening then, and do agree with him about this sense of timelessness, but he leaves out of the discussion the problems of *having* time and *needing* time to engage with and really see artworks and exhibitions. These issues, as I mentioned in the introduction, is part of a critique of the capitalist and consumerist context that contemporary Western art and exhibitions exist in. They cannot be ignored or avoided, not back in 1976 when he wrote the book, and not now. It is surprising he does not enter into that aspect of the notion of 'time' and I decided I would have to do that in my own research. It is as if O'Doherty cannot see that he can only see what he can see because he has taken the time to look at art, and not chosen to do something else with his time, something more traditionally productive. As if time to engage with art is a given. But as we have all experienced, it is not, and as a curator I do have to make

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mistakes.

sure people feel they have time and would not prefer to be somewhere else or do something other than look at art. I will go further in to defining what the role of the curator implies in the practice review part of this chapter.

The Associate Professor of Art at Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute, Mary Anne Staniszewski, whose book *The Power of Display* (1998) helped establish curatorial strategy as a serious research subject, describes a paradigm of exhibition making at MoMA. Staniszewski describes in the book how there was an era, that she also thinks of as a paradigm, of experimentation with the exhibition format 1920-60 and how this led to installation art. (1998, pp. Xxii, 3) However, she does not enter into a discussion about introducing exhibitions or artworks. Exhibition design is a part of my core interest but I will put particular focus on introductions and the ability of the visitor to be equipped for entering exhibitions and engaging with works on an important level. My information antechamber experiments are an attempt to replace the ubiquitous written introductory statement with something that does the same, or rather something much more suitable for visitors from different backgrounds, including those who already are comfortable but perhaps are not actively looking as much as browsing, like a shopper does, exhibitions now.

Okwui Enwesor's wonderful introduction to the documenta 11 catalogue (2002) where he went into, as it seemed to me, all current political discussions, made me realise anything is possible when working with art, but also to not try and do it all at once.

Hans Ulrich Obrist is another curator who is trying to do it all, and is quite unsustainable in his approach to productivity, but whose energy in nonetheless inspiring and helped me realise how important studio visits are, with his many insightful and humorous interviews with artists.

John Berger's book *Ways of Seeing* (1972), with two chapters of only images, was an early confirmation that the same sort of experiment could be made in an exhibition setting since that is also often visual ideas translated into verbal communication. Aby Warburg's *Bilderatlas (c. 1927)* was also an encouragement and inspiration, even if the image-boards were more illustrations to his lectures, they were also important experiments in thinking and communicating with visual material in an academic setting.

Arthur Danto's (1997) and Clement Greenberg's (1961) ideas of the death of the author and the end of art made me realise I am looking for the continuation, rather than the end, and letting artists surprise me, rather than looking for the ultimate. That became a motivation in itself.

At the time Maria Lind was the most important curator in Stockholm, and along with Enwesor one of the most politically courageous curators internationally. Lind was Director of IASPIS, the state-funded international artist studio residency programme in Sweden when she was a guest-lecturer on writing for the Curating MA. I read her as part of the course literature and later had a chance to work with her on a programme of events and an exhibition on immaterial property rights involving 40 artists including Marysia Lewandowska and Palle Torsson, initiated by the artists Goldin+Senneby as part of their residency at IASPIS in 2007.

'Relational Aesthetics', I found when I moved to the UK, is here a contested term. Coined by Nicolas Bourriaud, who was then curator at Tate Britain so his work should rightly be debated. I found helpful his thinking around what exhibitions can be and why art is important. The debate on participatory art that followed drew me in and one reason why I moved back to London was to be able to join the discourse. I read Claire Bishop's *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship* (2012) and the earlier article *The Social Turn: Collaboration and Its Discontents* in Artforum (2006), Gavin Grindon's *Surrealism, Dada, and the Refusal of Work: Autonomy, Activism, and Social Participation in the Radical Avant-Garde* in the Oxford Art Journal (2011), Markus Miessen's *The Nightmare of Participation* (2011) and they were all important for framing my own curatorial practice.

Part of my research is an analysis of how art education equips people for making, and looking at, art and important reading was Charles Esche's essay *Include Me Out* in Steven Henry Madoff's *Art School - Propositions for the 21st Century* (2009), Marion von Osten & Eva Egermann discussion *Twist and Shout: On Free Universities, Educational Reforms and Twists and Turns Inside and Outside the Art World* in Paul O'Neill & Mick Wilson's *Curating and the Educational Turn* (2010). Perhaps more important than any other text was Florian Waldvogel's *Each One Teach One* in a publication from Manifesta 6: *Notes for an Art School.* Walvogel's visionary description of an art school was going to be realised as part of Manifesta in Cyprus in 2006 but was never allowed to come into being, due to the tensions around the border between the Turkish and Greek parts of the island.

Key to a discussion on education more generally, and especially important insights for me around what he calls 'the banking approach' to education was Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970) and, also from that era of strong socialist ideas, the Swedish artist Peter Dahl's *Konstnären som magister* [The Artist as Lecturer] (1980).

Jonathan Crary's *Suspensions of Perception* (2001) connects problems of attention today to the attention regime of the 19th century factory, thus confirming the need to situate the

subject of my thesis in the broader context of capitalist temporality. There are pertinent critiques of consumer/producer behaviour and what it means to be critical of Capitalism even though there is hardly any escape from it, by artists Julieta Aranda, Brian Kuan-Wood, Anton Vidokle and Liam Gillick among others in an important collection of articles on work called *Are You Working Too Much? Post-Fordism, Precarity, and the Labor of Art* (2011) and the literary theorist and critic Terry Eagleton's wonderfully simple and in itself incredibly meaningful *The Meaning of Life* (2007). Crary is the only writer who explicitly brings time into a discussion about what we need to be able to see. He says: '[S]pectacular culture is not founded on the necessity of making a subject *see*, but rather on strategies in which individuals are isolated, separated, and *inhabit time* as disempowered.' (2001, p. 3, his emphasis)

A critique of specialism is essentially a critique of capitalism with its priorities above all else to increase productivity and profits, often at the expense of (worker) emancipation, and seeing people (in their free time) as purely consumers. I have seen this approach and learnt from not only artists such as John Latham and Barbara Steveni, their Artist Placement Group project (established in 1965) in particular[6] (FTHo 2020), but from so many important and interesting conversations with artists whose practice is not explicitly about this. Continuing to build on those ideas and what has already been achieved in the past, this project is aimed at democratising and making more people feel included, entitled and interested in engaging with art, to respect and protect the gallery as an important space to just look, listen (in all senses of that word) and think. I am therefore looking at public galleries, not commercial spaces – and although this might seem idealistic in the current climate, it is an important part of prefigurativism to know the direction one wishes to go in – ideally these would be entirely paid for by taxes that are distributed by a responsible, democratically elected government and not, as it is increasingly becoming, funded by powerful private interests who have accumulated their wealth by exploitation. Of course some artworks are already made as a critique of capitalism, or of their own complicity in it, and in their making cannot be considered as 'productivity' while some are essentially made to order.

I found resonances in the work of colleagues at UAL and the art world at large: Katherine Jackson (UBC and Flat Time House) is also researching John Latham and she agrees that his practice is under-researched, though there was a major retrospective at the Serpentine Gallery that coincided with my event at Chelsea in 2018. Gill Addison's (CSM) PhD focuses

[6] 'Steveni's original concept was to expand the reach of art and artists into commercial/industrial concerns, government agencies and organisations of all kinds, at all levels, including decision-making, and on a basis equivalent to any other engaged specialist.' (FTHo 2020)

on 'unlearning' as a process of re-materialising research; we have had immensely fruitful conversations already. Two more colleagues are researching curatorial ethics: Lynton Talbot (CCW) and Sasha Burkhanova (CSM); both are interested in expanding curatorial autonomy whereas my focus lies on protecting the autonomy of artists and artworks. Two earlier PhDs at Chelsea were also focused on art education and a great starting-point for reflecting on the frame-work of my research: Elena Crippa's *When art schools went conceptual : the development of discursive pedagogies and practices in British art higher education in the 1960s* from 2013, and Katrin Hjelde's *Constructing a Reflective Site: Practice between art and pedagogy in the art school from* 2012.

I needed to go further back in history to find the beginnings of structures and ideas around what is considered necessary knowledge and, as I live in Newington Green, first went to Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman (1792)*. I looked into the foundations for the division of labour that lead to specialism, in knowledge production and dissemination as well as in industrial productivity as is described in Emile Durkheim's, the first professional sociologist in the 1930s, book on the progress of the division of labor and the effect it has on the happiness of the worker (1933), Hannah Arendt's *Labor, Work, Action*, that was originally a lecture in 1958, and Michel Foucault on the Enlightenment in *The Order of Things* (1970). As my then partner was a specialist on Theodor W Adorno he introduced me to Adorno's critical view from inside academia in the aphorisms of *Minima Moralia* (1951). Richard Buckminster Fuller is one of my key influences with his refusal of specialisation (1968) and Pierre Bourdieu's *The Forms of Capital* (1986) and Fredric Jameson's *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* from 1991 were important reads, even if I did not feel I could enter into a dialogue with them, as a reader. More important and more recent writing from the art world included Anton Vidokle's article in the e-flux journal from 2011 called *Art Without Work* and Hito Steyerl's wonderful *The Subaltern's Present* (preface to the German translation of G. Ch. Spivak's *Can the Subaltern Speak? Postkolonialität und subalterne Artikulation* (2007).

Two important texts when thinking about not-knowing has been Feyerabend's *Against Method* (1975) and his term 'epistemological anarchy' pulled me into his discussion around knowledge and how it is even possible to know anything at all, without succumbing completely to Relativism. The other was theoretical physicist David Bohm and holistic physicist F. David Peat's *Science, Order and Creativity* (1987) and their idea of a creative suspension of judgement to allow for new knowledge to form, as well as new paradigms. Peat and Bohm I came to as part of my BA at Stockholm University where there is a fairly generalist approach, compared to the UK, in letting students combine their own degree. I chose courses in Philosophy and

Philosophy of Science along with Art History because I felt acutely it was too soon to specialise. I was fairly sure, without exactly knowing why, I should not trust the 'bankable' reasons for specialising when, perhaps because I was a mature student, I had already realised we cannot know what it is that we need to know.

The economist and psychologist Daniel Kahneman's book *Thinking, Fast and Slow* (2011) has been a life-changing read. It took me a long time to discover because I (wrongly) assumed he preferred the fast thinking of AI, which turned out to be a perfect example of the problems with false assumptions in fast thinking that he discusses in the book. Kahneman won the Nobel Prize in economics for his research on different types of thinking, and the discussion around slower, more deliberated thinking I found incredibly encouraging for my research. It has influenced how I think also outside the gallery and studio space.

Crary's elegant and intelligent writing inspired me to structure my writing like he does and Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing's psychogeographic and socially-politically poignant *The Mushroom at the End of the World* (2015) to allow myself a more sprawling approach to writing. Hers is on a very specific subject that goes into the very heart of what is wrong with capitalism's constant pressure for increased production and consumption.

There are several important reasons why I have chosen the problem of acceleration as a frame through which to examine what it is that we do to artworks and the audience when we aim to (consciously or not) speed up experiences of art and curatorial work processes. My attitude towards curating and academic research are situated in a philosophical framework and I do not see myself as a producer of exhibitions. I am also that but never only. Doing it hands-on means I cannot read the volumes of text that my colleagues do. I do not consume books and speed read, I think through the writing of other people's artworks, exhibitions and texts. I think collectively with those around and before me. Texts are not more important than any other form of communication or communal thinking.

The project started out with a focus on painting, and realisations about how painting is also a time-based medium, not as obviously but quite as much, as film or any other more obviously durational medium. The painting is not always already there, even though it is materially, it takes time to take it in as our eyes move across its surface. The Art Critic and Professor at Staatliche Hochschule für Bildende Künste (Städelschule) in Frankfurt am Main, Isabelle Graw, in a conversation with fellow Professor Kerstin Stakemeier, at the end of the book *The Love of Painting* (2018) says: 'Paintings can be grasped all at once because everything is made known at the same time, which is different to how we experience time-based media. But

because of painting's materiality, its meaning isn't revealed—and this is one of the reasons why it differs from normal commodities that aim for a clear message. Paintings are thus marked by an inner tension: they can be grasped simultaneously, but their meaning can be withheld' (2018 p. 347) I agree with this tension in that the painting seems to be all there all of the time but that we have to spend time with it in order to take it in and discover meaning. Graw says their meaning *can* be withheld but I would say it is always withheld. In what way is anything instantly 'known' then – apart from if we are experts, or this is work by one of our favourite artists, perhaps recognising who the artist is – in what sense do we 'grasp' the painting immediately?

From the beginning I wondered about artists' choosing to paint, what it means to choose such a slow medium, when one is learning to paint skilfully in oil, have to wait while it dries, and what sort of thinking is involved in looking at how a particular colour behaves.

I am not in this project looking at post-studio practice although it is one of the points of departure for my research: The fact that space is so expensive in London (and that I am based at UAL that does not provide studio space for its PhD students) means that artists often have to work doubly to be able to afford space to make art and that has lead me to ask: If artists cannot have a studio, if that space is seen as a luxury, what sort of art do we end up with? What are we doing away with (types of practice, ways of thinking) if we no longer consider studio space necessary?

I do privilege 'the visual' to be able to make experiments and write within the given scope of a PhD but the reader could exchange that for 'sound' or 'film' or 'installations' and in my exhibitions I work with all of those media. However, the scope of this thesis does not allow me to compare the arguments' implications on all of them. My ideas here are not applicable to purely language-based or conceptual artworks that include writing, but that is of course also something that interests me and in those cases the work would not suffer from translation from visual (or audio) to verbal. In thinking about what translation between different languages does to texts, and how different visual communication is from verbal, I find good reason to avoid translation as much as possible. This is another motivation behind the information antechamber as a room with images used to introduce exhibitions.

1.2.1 The Role of the Curator in Contemporary Art

My research and direction as a curator started with questions such as: What is curating contemporary art? Is it simply looking at exhibitions and selecting artworks to make more exhibitions? What could curating be? And what does a curator need to know? There are many

ways of being a curator and probably the biggest difference is between working within or outside an institution, and between working with artists that are living and artists that are no longer around. The living artist is more or less always present – unless absent by choice or if they are restricted by health, geographic, economic or other challenges – throughout the process and we should always take their wishes and ethical concerns into consideration. And always ask them! Because we can. We can ask about their thoughts on installation and how the meaning of artworks is shifting according to our combining them with other works. The artist who is not around is also entitled to the same concerns but here we have to rely on our own judgment more. A historical context often needs to be provided when showing anything from a previous era. Otherwise, how can we expect anyone to be able to engage on an important level? Contemporary work might also need a political, or biographical (but ideally I want to spare people from having to be defined by their past), context that it would be unethical to leave out. There are 'facts' that are not a part of my individual interpretation but rather a historical, social or political context that the audience should have access to. My research at the beginning did not focus on this category of context, and the mediation thereof, but on the kind of interpretation and explanation of artworks that is often also included in an introductory exhibition statement. Those that are a reflection on artworks that I have had a closer look at and a long time to research, my 'expert' reading and opinion that many visitors want to know about. Not do away with introductions entirely, rather make the visitor feel intrigued, that they are given time, rather than asking themselves 'How long is this going to take? That they are entitled to explore and interpret on their own terms and at their own pace. I have during the final year of this project, as a contrast to learn from and to test my methods, also taken on placements with galleries that own historical collections and existing, more or less permanent exhibitions and the historical contexts that come with that, that I have experimented with mediating. I write about this in chapter 5.

1.2.2 Definitions of the Term 'Curator'

I have gathered a number of definitions and descriptions of the role of, and the term, 'curator' to help outline and describe, and make it possible to analyse and discuss the term, while at the same time being aware that repeating these definitions also limits what a curator of contemporary art can be today. I have arranged them chronologically, beginning with those that are now over 10 years old. These definitions also add emphasis to the urgent question I already had about what a curator needs to know. I will address this in the next section.

Paul O'Neill's volume *Curating Subjects* (2007) includes articles by artists, curators and artist-curators such as Dave Beech & Mark Hutchinson, Claire Doherty and Okwui Enwezor and has been a go-to for my thinking since I studied for my MA in curating at Stockholm University. It delivers some helpful definitions of the terms and concepts I am interested in here and I have included very brief biographies to provide some context and reflect the angle from which they were written:

Dave Beech (artist, writer, lecturer, 'producer' of public works and member of the art collective Freee) and Mark Hutchinson (artist, whose practice also includes curating) offer a simple statement to start: '… [T]he job of curation is to mediate the reception of art. (2007, p. 54) They add that 'One way of thinking of the curator is as a kind of expert of display.' (ibid, p.55) and describe the development of the role, which I will quote here in some detail because it illuminates some of the problems of switching from historical or modern art to working with contemporary art. An art that, as I will continue to argue throughout this chapter, is more like philosophy:

> The old fashioned (pre-1970) curator was a keeper of a particular collection: someone who had expert knowledge precisely because the object of their knowledge was fixed and finite. The curator of a diverse, troublesome and changing art, surely needs to begin from a position of doubt and uncertainty, or, indeed, from a position of listening. The curator qua expert is someone who knows in advance what is art and what is good for art. The curator qua listener is trying to find out what a particular piece of art might need. That is, what this latter curator might do is going to be determined by entering into a reciprocal and collaborative relationship with artists. A condition for this possibility is the independence of the curator from institutional and established ties, both contractual and ideological. In a way, this is to suggest the possibility of the curator becoming a co-producer with the artist. This is dangerous territory re relational aesthetics and all that. … A critically self-aware curation would have to enter into a mutual and dialogical relationship with artists. It might not be clear that such a practice was curation at all. Such a practice would have to live with doubt and conflict. (ibid pp. 56-57)

Okwui Enwezor (curator and most notably, at the time perhaps, Artistic Director of documenta 11 in 2002) said in an interview with Paul O'Neill from 2005 that: '… [M]y role as a curator is as somebody who is intellectually interested in art and the meanings that it produces and how one can organise that within the limited context of the institutional space or the gallery space or the public space within which art is presented. (ibid p. 110)

Claire Doherty (then Director of the commissioning programme Situations in Bristol) has a more precise definition (and limited, simply supportive, approach):

> …[W]e might look to the etymology of the term 'curator' and speculate that the same duty of care borne by the custodian of the collection, governs the curator of the context-specific international exhibition. Their responsibilities might be (rather schematically) broken down into two primary objectives: (1) To support the artist to produce as process, project or work that responds to place as a mutable concept, with due consideration to the context of the group dynamic; that is true to the artist's practice, but which moves beyond a replication of previous work; that eventually may also operate outside the originating context; (2) To support and engender encounters – recruiting participants, engaging viewers, interlocutors and collaborators to experience the projects and works as autonomous significations within the logic of an exhibition; provoking opportunities for new understandings and responses to context and initiation potential outcomes beyond the event-exhibition. (ibid p. 103)

There is not a clear separation between those who define themselves as writers or curators and those who identify as artists in how they think of the role of the curator. A bigger difference is noticeable between working inside an institution or as an independent curator, although I agree with Beech and Hutchinson that independence seems crucial also when working within an institution. (ibid, p. 56) However, it is also extremely difficult to achieve independence since we often have to draw up the conditions for our own work in collaboration with institutions, under time-pressure, while having to secure funding on a project-by-project basis. This demands compromise and it is hard to inspire trust and be allowed to experiment with new ways of doing things when there are already procedures (time-saving devices) in place for how things are usually done. It is also hard to be critical of one's colleagues, and have a proper discussion about ethics, when the field is so small that one might have to, and want to, collaborate with those same colleagues in the future.

Paul O'Neill writes about curating as selecting and looking at exhibitions, thinking about exhibitions and making exhibitions. Much of it is problem-solving, and I think this is symptomatic of neoliberal society in general, and not just related to art. Addressing issues around representation and inclusion of previously neglected artists or cultures is key to our profession and all of us are responsible for that, but it should not be about including more artists in the canon, growing their status and the economy of the gallery or developing those people as brands. Nor should it be as in the case of biennials, so much about growing the local

economy, and regenerating the city where biennials take place. O'Neill does discuss this problem in a conversation with Okwui Enwesor, how 'One of the common criticisms directed towards biennials often refer [sic] to duration and the insufficient time given to research process and it is often a small group of curators who are given the responsibility. Enwesor agrees but adds how this really is '… less of a problem of Biennials, but a problem of the organisers, who try to instrumentalise the Biennials for their own civic power.' (ibid p. 116) I will return to some of the problems related to biennials later in this chapter.

Beryl Graham (Professor of New Media Art, self-defines as 'arts organizer' and educator) and Sarah Cook (researcher and curator) make the following statement in their introduction to *Rethinking Curating: Art after New Media* (2010): '[T]he basic definition is "caring for objects", but a curator of contemporary art is just as likely to be selecting artworks; directing how they are displayed in an exhibition; and writing labels, interpretational material, catalogs, and press releases.' (2010 p. 10)

Terry Smith (Artist, Art Critic, Professor of Contemporary Art History and Theory at the University of Pittsburgh, then Distinguished Visiting Professor of National Institute for Experimental Arts, New South Wales and 'was a member of the Art & Language group (New York)') in *Thinking Contemporary Curating*, from 2012: 'Within the art world, the title "curator" has for some time expanded beyond the confines of those who care for collections and stage exhibitions in art museums to include those in museums who curate what are now regarded as core programs, such as education.' (2012, p. 18) And further: 'I am assuming that exhibiting artistic meaning is the main task of the contemporary curator, to which all other roles are subservient.' (ibid, p. 31) Smith, in this book, is on a quest to find a 'kernel of meaning' and he explains this as part of the nature of being an art historian but I think this also stems from a desire to come across as an unquestioned expert. I will quote Smith at length here because I think this too illustrates how we ended up in the current tradition of curators delivering expert interpretations also of contemporary art. He writes:

> Art historians are trained (and expected) to propose a unique observation (no matter how minutely different) on any given topic, outline the facts and problems that pertain to its specificities, and present their solutions before providing a conclusion that proves they are right. Curators, on the other hand, take a far more speculative (and often meandering) approach, outlining the issues at stake from personal experience, describing a project and various artists' practices that test ways to understand key points, then making an open-ended proposition for consideration with the conclusion that research is ongoing. (ibid p. 8)

> I try to set out a framework in which we might identify the *precise shape* of the act of thought—the affective insight—that contemporary life requires of its art, of the criticism of that art, and of the history of that art: the (necessary, but never sufficient) *kernel* from which, via many vicissitudes, art must be made and criticism and history written. (ibid p. 28, my emphasis)

This idea of something like a core of truth illustrates Smith's approach to the contemporary art world and curating but I think is a barrier to letting contradictions co-exist with already established knowledge. It is an approach that comes from specialism and academic art historical practice. Imagine ever being able to identify the precise shape of a thought… Art requires readings that are dynamic and refuse to be pinned down or defined in order to serve a theory. That is its strength even if that does not suit all art historians.

During studio visits I am often asked my opinion what a work is or could be going towards and this lets me know it is a means of communication of an unfinished, not rigid thought. We should not then treat it and speak about it as if it were completely finished when it does end up in the gallery. Because, often, the only reason it is 'finished' is because we set a deadline for it to be included in the show. That is one version of that work. There have been others before and will be after.

To return briefly to biennials: They are, in most of the texts I have consulted here, treated as very important, as big earners and status enhancers for artists and curators. They are, however, also short-term commitments that, along with art fairs, wipe out small galleries who have longer-term commitments since they often lease or have bought their premises and collaborate with, or represent artists for several years. There is also a lack of discussion about the consumer aspects of biennials, as a leisure activity and high-status holiday.

O'Neill, when discussing biennials, does not mention any concerns about whether the local audience actually visits those exhibitions or even feel entitled to engage. He also does not get involved in a discussion about what gets exhibited out of any particular artist's practice, or what gets left in the studio. In fact O'Neill does not mention the artists' studios at all, nor studio visits that are a crucial part of curatorial work. More on this in chapter 4, and what I call the 'expanded' studio visit. O'Neill's relationship to curatorial practice seems rather hermetic, only focusing on exhibitions and projects rather than conversations with artists or discussions around curating or art-making.

For me the most condemning aspect of biennales is that they are usually on a massive scale, which means, that as a visitor to that geographic location, one has to consume them over

a short period of time and there is often no time to go back or reflect between visits. I have noticed this as a visitor to art fairs and biennials and also as an exhibitor, when invited to do a film screening at the alternative art fair in Athens in June 2018, for instance. Visitors would only stop for a maximum of 5-10 minutes and not for the full one-hour-programme we were showing. They are not there to see one piece in its entirety, they are there to see a lot within a small space of time. In a conversation with Hans Ulrich Obrist, Paul O'Neill states something that he does not say in his own book, even though it is a clear result of the pressures on curators to produce content and fill space: 'The preparation and research period for large-scale exhibitions has decreased dramatically with the expansion of biennial culture and the acceleration of art's global economy.' (Obrist 2011 p. 179)

1.2.3 What Does a Curator Need to Know?

Graham and Cook write about how, in their view, '[t]he crucial question of how much technical knowledge curators need has one answer in particular: if an institution can keep a well-integrated set of technical staff and invest in training, then curators need not be their own technical experts.' (2010, p. 198) This begs the question: What does the curator need to know? About media/materials, a particular artwork, or an artist's practice? An artist's choice of medium says so much about their approach to work and is often very political as well as an inseparable part of the artwork itself. I think the above is an argument made to free up the curator from the responsibility of having to take the time to learn and look at the artistic work process itself. This, however, is not so much a freedom as a lost opportunity to gain the most intriguing and crucial insights into artistic thought processes that in turn feed into our understanding, and also the mediation, of artworks when making exhibitions. Not having an understanding of this would be like a cloth expert not knowing the difference in feel between silk and polyester. We gain intimate knowledge of the materiality of artworks when we prepare a surface and plan how best to install them. These skills could be taught, but I think are even better learnt by doing. Who says curators do not need to know about wood, or different kinds of metal, or codecs and projectors? How can learning even about our own tools not be worth taking time over?

My own experience, especially since I have been able to focus on this full-time in a funded research project, is that I learn something crucial from building the show and hanging things, living with pieces at home for a couple of months, really getting to know them, and installing together with artists. I learn things I did not know I needed to know. I also learn how

the meaning of works changes when pieces are installed next to each other and according to the spatial confines of the gallery itself. To not decide what the show is, or try to describe it, until we are done hanging. Perhaps not even then, as it changes every time we see it. The knowledge gained from this process is valuable, and it always surprises me when we subcontract this stage to others. Along with interpretation and mediation. Who benefits from this division of labour? My research is studio visits, talking to artists, seeing art, living in this community, meeting people around me, talking to colleagues, walking in nature, reading about artists work, reading the London Review of Books, reading about spacetime or other scientific concepts, cooking, having my heart broken, being afraid, calm, stressed. Everything goes into my thinking about exhibitions. I write every day about those reflections and communicate those thoughts and feelings while talking to artists and interpreting their works during studio visits. Not necessarily talking in a personal way, but when an artist has made a very serious and profound proposal in an artwork, I feel we have to try to put words on those thoughts in order to reflect on their work and for them to hear a first reaction from one beholder that is not afraid to sound ignorant or naive. I write more about this in chapter 4 on the 'expanded' studio visit.

There is immense pressure on curators to be productive and to constantly fill a space. Success is measured in visitor numbers, not in the depth or profound qualities of their experiences. Since exhibiting art in state funded galleries is not about making a profit, and cannot be measured in numbers related to economic growth, it is instead measured according to the quantity of experiences, rather than quality, which would be much harder to measure. Exhibitions and visitor numbers are a way to prove the institution has made an impact and a contribution to the community. They are a concrete manifestation that justifies money being spent. This is reflected in Paul O'Neill's books as well as the Tate's Annual Report (2016) and the Arts Council's artistic and quality assessment policy (2016). There, it is all about measurable qualities, the number of visitors to exhibitions and ticketed events, the number of artists represented. Exhibitions are also one of my main concerns but not the only one. The production of exhibitions is one thing, but the thinking involved in the process of making them, the research involved, is more important. 'Exhibitions have to be generous and maybe the most important thing is not exactly knowing where they will lead.' (Obrist, 2011, p. 179) Curators who respect the process can act on things that come into our path, make meetings happen between people and artworks, thoughts and ideas and problems, that we did not already know, not expect, or we might have hoped would appear but could not guarantee. It is

not clever to speed up the process and end up with an exhibition that has foregone conclusions and is shoehorned into a particular reading. Nor is it fair to the artist or visitor who were denied their own authorship and reading of the works. Beech and Hutchinson write, in *Curating Subjects*: 'The problem of curation is not that it mediates the reception of art (how could the reception of art not be mediated?) but that it so often adopts a position of expertise in a way that implicitly asserts an authority over art.' (2007 p. 57)

The pressure to be productive, that is omnipresent in capitalist communities, must be resisted so that we can make exhibitions that are something other than just products themselves, or places for consumption. Where else can we just think, and look closely at something without knowing exactly what it is or why we are looking at it? I write more about this in chapters 2 (on thinking) and 3 (on looking). It is not 'helpful' to cater to anxieties of an audience used to having explanations and to cloak this experience in theory, to offer an expert reading, and already 'write the review' of something we spent months thinking about. Curators, like anxious academics, wish to pre-empt critique and already have both the question and the answer ready before the listener or beholder has had a chance to think. Okwui Enwesor said, about the ethical implications of this:

> What is very significant in terms of the curator supplanting the role of the critic is that a lot of works of criticism today, of course is for a generalised public and are almost like press releases in service of either the economic interest of the commercial art world or the ideological purposes of the public museum. Curator's writing is mainly understood by a specialised public, who happen to read exhibition catalogues. That is because attempts by institutions to foreground their own memory has really led to the uses of skills of curators as honest tools of propaganda. (ibid p. 122)

1.2.4 Exhibitions for Discovery at the Visitor's Own Pace

Curating as caring for artworks and artists then, would be my definition. Not selecting artworks as an aide to consumption, or make things more easily digestible, apart from removing barriers as to who feels entitled to enter exhibitions in the first place, and to encourage visitors from any background to have the confidence to interpret art for themselves.

An illuminating example of well-meaning mediation gone wrong was the exhibition at Tate Britain of Paul Nash's artworks that opened in October 2016, just as I was beginning my PhD at Chelsea College of Arts next door. The exhibition had plaques next to most artworks describing the same artworks in words. They were often direct quotes by the artist himself but

I ended up looking at the painting, reading a description of that same painting, that I had not yet had the chance to take in or discover because the information panel, as they tend to do, drew my attention to it after just a few seconds of looking at the image, and then made the discovery of the painting rather boring as I had already been told what to find in it. I wonder if Paul Nash would have wanted it this way. Those descriptions could be helpful in a catalogue with small, perhaps black-and-white, reproductions of artworks or if there are no images at all but surely not when I am standing right in front of them and have this rare chance to experience them for myself.

I have chosen four recent exhibitions that are outstanding examples of well thought-through mediation and carefully curated exhibition experiences. They all cultivate curiosity and encourage people to engage in self-directed exploration, in their own time and at their own pace. They manage to address and intrigue a wide audience without trivialising, hurrying anything or giving spoilers to a visitor's first meeting with artworks. At the end of this chapter I am looking at two examples of more experimental curating and immersive experiences.

Apichatpong Weerasethakul: *Primitive* (2009) installation shot, the Tanks, Tate Modern, 2016-2017.

1.2.4.1 *Primitive* (2009) by Apichatpong Weerasethakul, the Tanks, Tate Modern, London (2016-2017)

Apichatpong Weerasethakul's installation *Primitive* (2009) with multiple projections became a whole exhibition in one of the Tanks at Tate Modern when it was shown in 2016-2017[7] (image above). An exhibition/installation that provided context for itself with seven films projected in the same space (but with free entrance, and on display for around two years), with enough areas to sit and mill around to be able to focus on just one film, while seeing the others in the periphery. The introductory text, while essential in providing political context, however did completely spoil the poetic aspects and sense of discovery that the immersive installation encouraged. Contextual material could have been given without offering a reading of the work and a more visual display could have included maps and perhaps stills of Weerasethakul's other films to date, or from films that have inspired him. This would avoid translating visual communication into verbal, and would address all members of the audience more equally, also those whose first language is not English.

On my visits to the exhibition I saw people slowly milling about, moving from work to work in the traditional way of pausing for a short while and moving to the next work rather quickly, or sitting (including myself) and lying on the carpeted floor. Those sitting or lying down seemed most immersed in the installation and able to connect with the content, interpreting and just letting it flow from all sides. One could only really see a quarter of the content at once, and two quarters in the periphery, with the remaining quarter behind and out of sight. I ended up turning my head and letting in the other screens, at the risk of missing what was in front of me, while editing my own version of the multiscreen project. A version that could not be experienced by anyone but myself, there and then, and that I could not fully

[7] Apichatpong Weerasethakul collaborated with Stuart Comer, then Curator of Film at Tate Modern on the exhibition, which they refer to as an installation in their description on the Tate website: '*Primitive* is a multiple screen video installation, created specifically for display within a gallery, by Thai filmmaker Apichatpong Weerasethakul. It consists of seven videos of differing durations in which the history of the border town of Nabua, in northeast Thailand, is re-imagined as an elusive science fiction ghost story rooted in Thai folklore. The work comprises eight projections, since one of the videos, *Primitive* which gives the work its name, is shown on two synchronised screens. The seven videos are: *Primitive* (duration 29 minutes 34 seconds), *Nabua* (duration 9 minutes 11 seconds), *Making of the Spaceship* (duration 28 minutes 13 seconds), *A Dedicated Machine* (duration 1 minute), *An Evening Shoot* (duration 4 minutes 10 seconds), *I'm Still Breathing* (music video, duration 11 minutes) and *Nabua Song* (music video, duration 4 minutes 12 seconds). Nabua, situated where the Mekong River divides Thailand from Laos, was historically the scene of considerable racial strife and violence. From the 1960s until the early 1980s it was a 'red zone' where the Mao-influenced Communists hid in the jungle. The Thai army curbed the communist insurgent farmers through physical and psychological abuse and murder. The town also harbours an ancient legend about a widow ghost who would abduct any man who entered her empire, earning it the nickname 'widow town'. Weerasethakul transforms the town into one of men, the teenage male descendants of the farmer communists, freed from the widow ghost's empire. These teenagers fabricate their own memories and build a new world, manufacturing a spaceship in the ricefields.'

make sense of, as the meaning of what I saw kept evolving as I watched and listened and processed, finding new clues and cues as the films went on. I am still to this day processing what I saw, and was a part of, in that installation.

Weerasethakul says in an interview with Tate Shots on youtube: 'I feel the Tank kind of fit because of the shape and the size of the space it's almost like this spaceship of the teenagers [in one of the films] and I think that it's going to be very exciting to - for the audience to - go there and to encounter this both intimate space and at the same time feel a little kind of futuristic, and I hope that people would be relaxed enough to sleep inside the space. … Primitive is one of the few projects that is more collaborative and performative … but because I feel really introvert, I think that a movie is a tool to be behind, you know, to just look, so it becomes (replacing) my own eyes.' (2016)

The experience was both sublime and playful, threatening and I know politically charged even without knowing the geopolitical details of where this work has been made. Communal thinking that we would not have had elsewhere happens in that space because we can sit together in the tanks while looking at another screen both to anchor and broaden the content we are currently watching. A slowed down approach was needed because I am editing the film as I experience the exhibition. It was clear I could not take in all the work because there is so much, some screens interfere with others, but I could also see it was meant to be this way and that I have to accept that and let it wash over me, let being overwhelmed be a feeling that is part of the work. It is not tidied up and presented on a plinth like in a traditional white cube setting.[8]

Stuart Comer, who co-curated the show at Tate Modern, said of the project in March 2010: 'For Weerasethakul the jungle is a place of darkness and mystery, in which distinctions between the fictional and the real dissolve. It is a parallel world, populated by enchanted spectres, where mystery and emotion mingle in shadow. The jungle forms a perfect stage for the artist's fascination with reincarnation, transformation and light.' (tate.org.uk)

A review by the White Pube's Zarina Muhammad from 2016 is a stunning account of this dreamy experience successfully achieved:

> …Like licking a soap bar or peeling off ur nail varnish, a slow strange alien feeling nearly

[8] Weerasethakul's most famous work, the feature film that was rewarded the Palme d'Or prize at the 63rd Cannes Film Festival in 2010: *Uncle Boonmee Who Can Recall His Past Lives,* is also part of the Primitive project but is not in this installation, as is an artists' book.

invasive ||||| u can feel it in ur bones, it doesn't sit right, but it's also not that wrong. ||||

like a sticky slowness that only happens in dreams or in films .

This work is slow and hazy and i appreciate the darkness, truly deeply. i have visited it so many times.

once: when me and my boy came to the new tate on an art date.

we curled up with pillows and i rested my head on his shoulder and our breathing fell in sync.

…

fifth: my boy fell asleep in the darkness.

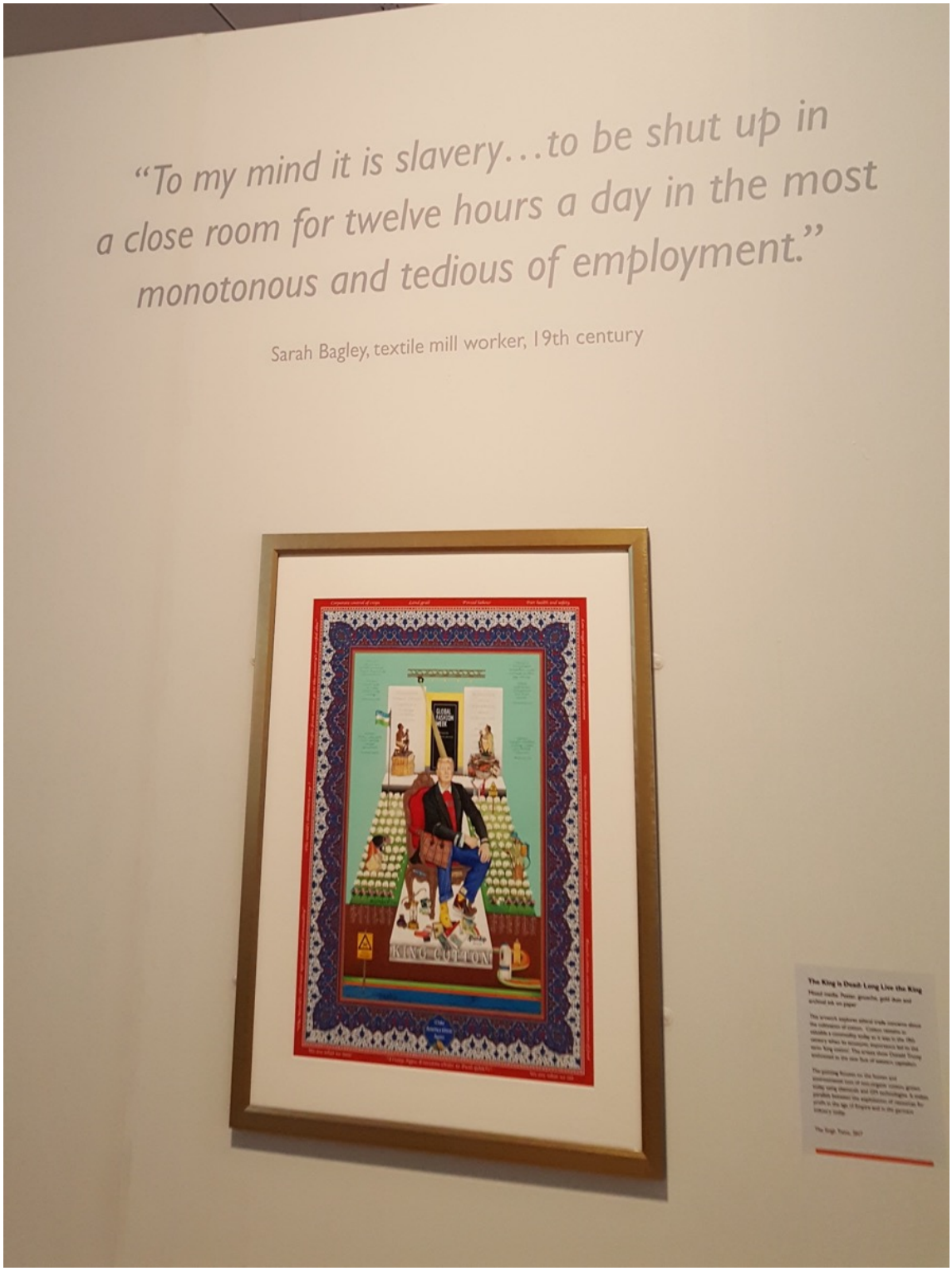
so u crawl all the way down and you enter pitch black turn the corner and you're set apart from these massive slow screens/scenes/dreams

it has a slow cooked tenderness, it melts when i chew it.

sometimes, u see some art, and u just hold it close to ur chest and u don't know why

The Film Critic Dennis Lim writes in Artforum on an earlier display of *Primitive* at the New Museum:[9] Translating the mental wandering of watching an Apichatpong film into a physical experience, the cavelike dark of Primitive as a whole offers no clear signposts, no obvious hierarchy among its constituent parts. It's entirely possible to ignore (or be ignorant of) the specific history that he's mining and experience Primitive as a primal play of darkness and light.' He also mentions how Weerasethakul has ended up in a debate about elitism and slow cinema but that in his opinion, and I would agree, Weerasethakul's work is generous: 'But even a passing acquaintance with the work would disprove the stereotype of a forbidding high-art ascetic. Apichatpong's vision is above all a generous one, and *Primitive* may well evidence the filmmaker's generosity even more than his features.' (2011)

[9] At the New Museum in New York, the display was in a traditional white cube gallery setting, and although I have only seen this documented, not visited myself, it was clearly not the same curatorial strategy behind and it seems to have been made to fit in with more traditional curatorial strategies.



The Singh Twins' *Slaves of Fashion* (installation shot) Walker Art Gallery in Liverpool, January-May 2018.

1.2.4.2 *Slaves of Fashion* (an artwork/exhibition) curated by The Singh Twins, Walker Art Gallery, Liverpool (January-May 2018)

The Singh Twins' *Slaves of Fashion* exhibition was at Walker Art Gallery in Liverpool from January to May 2018. Their large-scale miniature paintings and digital collages are illustrated political statements as well as a rich source of references to ancient Indian painting, capitalism and colonialism. From the description on the Walker Art Gallery website:

> Primarily known for their entirely hand-painted work in the Indian miniature tradition, The Singh Twins' new work combined traditional hand-painting techniques with digitally created imagery. The series included 11 digital fabric artworks displayed on light-boxes, with each one highlighting a different theme relating to India's textile industry. A further nine paper artworks explored the relationship between trade, conflict and consumerism in an age of Empire and the modern day. Also included in the exhibition were 40 highlights from over 100 objects across National Museums Liverpool's collection, which inspired the exhibition.

The exhibition featured a room at the end where films were screened continually: one interview with the artists about growing up in Liverpool and working collaboratively although the art school insists on individual authorship. Another film was a poem about the impact of colonialist Britain on India through looking at the silk trade. (The Singh Twins 2018) The audio could be heard throughout and many visitors watched the films all the way through while I was there. This was striking and encouraging to me: how long people would spend in that exhibition. There were two rooms following suite, filled with items selected by the artists from the institution's archive/collection of fabrics and jewellery, etc. These objects were shown side by side with the Singh Twins' precise drawings and studies of them. Those two rooms contributed to an interesting and enriching research experience after seeing the works (and before seeing them again as it encourages walking around the exhibition a second time), gave lots of clues to the artistic thinking and work processes as well as anchor the work in the local context. This 'new' or 'deeper' context will perhaps always remain with the locals, even with those who were already familiar with the collection, and will see it again in other configurations.

In an interview for the Sikh Channel the Singh twins describe their thinking while working on the show:

> The history of Indian textiles wasn't really about textiles at all when you got into the nitty-gritty of it. It was about the whole history of empire colonialism, slavery and conquest, of course,

> and how that linked into our luxury lifestyle. Because 500 years ago there were consumers, you know, avidly buying things just as we are consumers buying things today, so the exhibition …. is about that link between the politics of trade and the enslavement of people. But also it's about how we as consumers are also slaves to commodities that we buy into, we buy luxury goods even today without thinking of the the consequences of how they've been produced and who suffered for that production. … We were looking at textiles and ceramics and memorabilia in the museums' collections and we were trying to think how do these objects locally fit into this story that we were trying to tell… (2018)

The museums both undermined and emphasised how powerful the exhibition was by including a disclaimer at the end of their description on the website, and on a plaque in the exhibition: 'The artworks in this exhibition reflected the artists' views, not those of the Walker Art Gallery or National Museums Liverpool.' I have not seen a disclaimer like this in any other exhibition before, or since.

Ken's show: Exploring the Unseen (installation shot of Keith Arnatt: Self-Burial, Tate Liverpool, 2018)

Information plaque from *Ken's show: Exploring the Unseen,* Tate Liverpool, 2018

1.2.4.3 *Ken's show: Exploring the Unseen*, Tate Liverpool (2018)

Ken's show: Exploring the Unseen at Tate Liverpool, also in the spring of 2018, was an incredibly generous exhibition by Tate's own retiring art handler and had grown out of looking at art and handling it for over 30 years.

I had never before seen a show curated by a technician, and it feels unexpected at such a big institution. Technicians are often artists and I always want to hear what they see in artworks, since they often spend a lot of time with it and get to handle works, but the usual division of labour means there is no time for that conversation or it is very informal and not usually communicated to an audience.

The exhibition was not introduced as having a theme, partly perhaps because Ken is not a curator and there were so many intertwining themes that one could not possibly have discussed them all in a short introductory statement. There were introductions by Ken to the artworks (see image 4), possibly because of pressure from Tate, but since he is not a curator these readings did not seem to me as 'forceful' and insistent as the usual. This is another

exhibition where artworks were a context for each other but more than anything were mediated through the keen eyes, hands, and heart of someone who has been looking at them for three decades. This is of course hardly ever the case with exhibitions made by professional curators. Hans Ulrich Obrist, while being interviewed by Ingo Niermann in *Everything you Always Wanted to Know About Curating (But Were Afraid to Ask)*, compares curating with writing a book. Niermann asks: 'Literature plays almost no role in today's art … Why this disappearance?' Obrist: 'I think that this too has to do with acceleration and deceleration. Maybe it's because there's a lack of time for reading. … As a novelist, you work on a book for years. You rarely have this opportunity now as a curator.' (2011, p. 53)

Jonathan Jones, the Guardian's regular art critic, says in his review from March 2018: 'Simons has evidently spent as much time pondering art as installing it. And what better way is there to get to know art than by touching, carrying and protecting it? There is a passion here that frequently gets smothered by theory and fashion in the exhibitions that supposedly expert curators bolt together to prove some tenuous proposition. … "Temples were often used in this way in the landscaped parks of wealthy British aristocrats," I read when I look it up on the Tate website. So much for the expert view. Instead of seeing this painting through eyes blinkered by such complacent soundbites, Simons has simply responded to its beguiling light. … '[He]has a feel for art that goes beyond the fashionable, into the secret places of the heart. If only more exhibitions had this much poetry.'

Francis Bacon's studio re-constructed and visible through its windows in a room before the exhibitions of paintings found there after his death. Dublin City Gallery, The Hugh Lane, 2001-present.

Close-up of interior of Francis Bacon's Studio (re-constructed at The Hugh Lane, Dublin) June 2018.

1.2.4.4 Francis Bacon's studio re-constructed at the Dublin City Gallery, The Hugh Lane (2001-present)

My final example is the Francis Bacon studio at Dublin City Gallery, The Hugh Lane. I am bringing up this extraordinary feat of excavation and relocation because it is a wonderful, and rare, example of a visual (and more than that, which I am not able to describe) introduction to his paintings. To the unfinished paintings in the next room, and to all the works we will see by him in the future, and also the ones we remember experiencing in the past. This is an example of how I think we could introduce artworks and exhibitions better than in writing. I am developing a tool I call the 'information antechamber' for using visual material in a room before the exhibition, to introduce artworks. Chapter 5 is dedicated to this method.

Bacon's studio has become one of the most important influences on my thinking and I continue to be inspired by that incredible care and attention to detail. I have included my notes, below, from when I experienced it for the first time during a visit that was spread over many hours over three days, and nearly brought me to tears.

Hugh lane have built an extension to fit the re-situated studio of Francis Bacon. It is located in the former back garden and entered through the exhibitions of the collection, through sliding doors to a modern extension on the ground floor. First we are met by a big projection of Bacon being interviewed by Melvyn Bragg for London Weekend Television's South Bank Show. Bacon talks extremely eloquently and humorously about his work, and life. This was a kind of information antechamber from which one could not yet see the studio and I must have watched it and heard it in the background over a dozen times but there were still new things to think about it. Bacon is extremely good at describing without explaining too much, and his timing and silences make for compelling listening.

On first entering, it felt frustrating to not be able to get closer than looking at the studio from outside windows and doors. However, because there were so few other visitors I really could immerse myself in it, sit down and look at details. Through very careful engineering, with a fish-eyed lens peephole in the most obscured corner, there was not a single area of the studio that I could not see. Comparing it to my information antechamber content, I reflect that photos of details might have been, if not as good, still intriguing and one could get closer. Were I allowed to photograph close-ups and project them really big, I could get closer than there, in the real setting. The sound was too loud of the interview video as it flooded the space and was impossible to get away from, should the visitor want to. I couldn't think, had to put

earplugs in.

On my second day I have an almost overwhelming feeling of thankfulness and I am so glad it proves to me this spatio-visual method works for giving insight into the thinking of artists. It shows so clearly, without any words, how this kind of work cannot be done if there is not a space to be messy, have chaos, think, work, experiment, make things. I think then that I have never had a better experience in a gallery focussing on one artist and that is considering there are not even many of his pieces present. Most of us who have made it to see his studio have probably seen works by Bacon before.

Below is a list of realisations in my notes, both from looking and listening to him talk (I cannot separate the two as the sound of Bacon talking, as I said, echoes through the entire studio annexe):

Francis Bacon ended up paining on the back of the canvas as had no money to buy more canvas.

Instinct tells him when it is finished.

The studio shows a disdain of material goods, a way of working and thinking. It is clearly different from normal 9-5 working.

He wrote a statement in preparation for the interview, of what painting can do! Possibly paraphrasing here: 'Not an illustration of reality but images that are a concentration of reality and a shorthand of/for sensation.'

No clear image of what he wants to do, the work makes it clearer.

Illustration is done better by camera and cinema.

Splatters on images he didn't like, and now likes them. (Also gives depth!)

Bacon so clearly knows why he is doing this.

Sketches would make the paintings mere illustrations of those.

How to learn: Trial and error, just trying to do it.

Let go of control to a point, then take control. (Like my curating.)

Where is Blake's head now? It was there in the inventory pic and on the archive monitor resources.

Being faced with a monitor and searching/browsing images bores me so! I would rather not know how much there is to look at. Or there should be a browsing function like my files on mac or photos where I can see the next and scroll over them or stop. Not have to sit and wait for the next one to come up and not with so much text next to it. They could select a few things for me, as they do on the overview picture, or I can do it over time, not all here now.

Also, the studio is here! Why am I looking at pictures of it instead of it itself? It is perhaps to say there is this resource. Is it available online?

Interesting to see what others have been looking at.

There are no guards here so I can move, and stay, and think, as I want to!

Clever to step up to window level so I can get an overview.

That photo of George Dyer… in the kitchen? In his underwear. I found it so moving, so tender and sexy at the same time.

People do not spend very long here… it is free entry so they can come back any time.

Bacon did not mind showing his studio in the TV interview so it feels less intrusive to be able to see it like this.

Incredible generosity all of this! It shows huge respect for artistic work process. As well as being a reliquary. Is a Catholic cultural thing perhaps? The energy inherent in things that once belonged to great people? Was a part of them.

There is an illusion that nobody has touched this. I have to tell myself this is the work of 7 archaeologists but my brain still does not accept that he did not just leave the room. There is not so much a loss of him as there is a presence, and a belief in the power of great artwork.

It was the fact that someone had put so much thought and effort into making this possible that I found so moving, along with their reverence for the artistic work process and the presence of all his things that made him somehow present. Photos cannot do this. There is an immense generosity here that digital images do not convey.

The art critic Roberta Smith writes in the New York Times in 2002, speaking about an exhibition of Perry Ogden's photos of Francis Bacon's studio in Reece Mews, and the photo of George Dyer on the floor there, and still in the reconstructed studio: `Like its preservation, these photographs could be said to fetishize the artist's studio. But they also provide an unusually tangible tour of Bacon's brain. In the process they reveal art-making as a process of tremendous, hard-won distillation, fed by incalculable amounts and many different kinds of knowledge, work and looking.'

Hugh Lane Director Barbara Dawson, who was absolutely key to securing the studio for preservation and re-installation, was interviewed by the critic Isobel Harbison for Frieze Masters in 2021: 'My vision', recalls Dawson, 'was that it had to be preserved as it was: a small space, only six by four metres, but so intense. It would lose its context if it were cut in half or only half shown. The whole point was that it was this glorious and gory mess, where

marvellous paintings were created, like a phoenix rising out of the ashes.'

Barbara Dawson says in a talk given on the Hugh Lane youtube channel in May 2020: 'The visceral reaction I experienced entering that small cramped space. It was like looking into the artist's head. … For [Bacon] the studio was an intimate environment, a private place of production. I love this genesis of incunabulum where the judgement is suspended in the process of art-making.' And on moving the studio to Dublin:

> The strategy was quite simple and clear: To be successful the entire studio must be relocated lock, stock and barrel with the minimum curatorial authority or intervention. And so insistent was I in the strategy for removing everything with minimum curatorial authority suspended, that Mary McGrath even swept up the dust as a consequence of this focus. … Bacon's studio environment had a sense of timelessness, a place where he experienced a suspension from reality and freedom to immerse himself in his work. His parameters are not physical. The studio is a state of imminent arrival, a no-man's land … where judgement is suspended in the process of art-making. How would we position the studio within the gallery structure - this was extremely important so I identified the location on the ground floors behind the enfilade of galleries. It had to be differentiated from other artworks and a sense of drama to prepare the visitor for the studio was designed. It was created first by entering into an A/V room where a fascinating and often hilarious account of a filmed interview between Francis Bacon and Melvyn Bragg and it is conducted in the studio which has actually remained just as it was in that wonderful film. The combination of digital and physical sort of heightened the excitement and the experience for the visitor.

Interestingly, all of these exhibitions are curated by, or in collaboration with, artists or by people who are neither curators, nor artists but an art technician (Ken's Show) or architects and archeologists

1.2.5 Immersive Exhibitions, Current Experimental Curating

Institutions that have a direct responsibility expressed in their charitable objects to reach a broad audience seem more inclined to more experimental curating. Interestingly, both of my examples are exhibitions of art historical works, in an apparent effort to show their relevance to contemporary audiences and also with a clearer difference between art and contextual material. There is with historical artworks a relatively small risk that the immersive imagery ends up looking part of, or like, an artwork in itself.

1.2.5.1 German Expressionism at the New Walk Museum and Art Gallery, Leicester (Leicester City Council, ongoing)

The New Walk Museum Art Gallery in Leicester has a collection of German Expressionism and the curator Simon Lake has included in the exhibition a dynamic slide show with historical images and data, as well as close-ups and animated versions of some of the artworks, in the middle of the gallery.

I was thrilled to see upon entering, some of my ideas around the information antechamber (the method I use for introducing artworks that I will describe in detail in chapter 5) and it was wonderful to see some of those ideas in practice, and experience them as a visitor. A significant difference from how I use the same kind of method is its placement in the centre of the exhibition, rather than in its own room before entering. This allowed me to experience first-hand what that does to artworks and the visitor's attention, and ability to engage at their own pace.

I know much less about German Expressionism than I care to admit. My immediate thoughts upon entering (admittedly after a long night celebrating my friends' wedding, which is the reason I found myself in Leicester on that day) were that it seemed demanding and unrewarding. It was hung salon-style with many clusters of too many artworks in a smallish white-cube-gallery setting. A lot of the works were prints, but important ones, as I realised when I looked closer.

Four projection areas – three screens and the wooden floor itself – had moving images, slides, textual elements and a soundtrack, that showed six different introductions to six themes present in the exhibition. These were timed and lasted for around two to three minutes with a five-minute break in between each. Their timing allowed, but also limited, our engagement with artworks in the five minute slots between introductions. There were benches placed to be able to look at two screens as well as projections on the floor (although text elements might be upside down), and to look at the other two screens from the side. The content was absorbing and meant it was hard to concentrate on looking at the exhibition while they were running, and thus only left the five minutes of silence between introductions to engage by oneself. Some visitors seemed used to these noise levels or did not mind, or knew they could wait for it to end, and did look at artworks during the introductions as well. It all worked incredibly well and I was thoroughly encouraged in my own experiments with immersive visual introductions.

During my second visit, which lasted one hour and a half, and I had made specifically to look at the exhibition more slowly, and to speak to the curator Simon Lake about his

strategies, hardly anyone stayed to view a whole segment.

Images taken during my visit:


EPSON
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ogy type of art that
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their ideology or
propaganda.

The six pronounced themes in the exhibition each had their own introduction film. Some mainly consisted of close-ups of artworks, and some had a quote from one of the artists. It was wonderful to have that voice present but reading anything longer than a sentence was difficult as it scrolled past too fast and could have been a vinyl text permanently available to read instead. The slides I thought most successful were images from the alternative exhibition to Entartete Kunst in 1937 and it showed how similar the hanging was in the present exhibition, which linked the two and made me accept the over-abundant selection of artworks with not enough space in-between. Another theme was the world wars context and I felt the footage introducing that was blunt and rather clumsy. The soundtrack to that segment was near inaudible apart from gunshots that appeared sensationalist. It seemed like an attempt to draw

in cinema audiences, with expectations to be entertained, to an action movie or any other show where there is an attempt to catch and keep my attention in competition with other things. Here, there was no competition, apart from other displays in adjacent rooms, all the written information on the walls, children playing, and the noise both from that and the projections themselves. Children used the space as a play area. It is not clear to me if children come away with anything other than having played in a colourful dynamic environment and perhaps invigilators should try to encourage and protect a quiet, calm environment for serious engagement with the artworks instead. The ground floor of the museum is a playful exhibition of dinosaurs and Egyptian artefacts and there were clear expectations that upstairs would be fun for children too.

1.2.5.2 Leonardo – Experience a Masterpiece, The National Gallery, London (9 November 2019 - 12 January 2020)

Images taken during my visit:

A description of the exhibition from the National Gallery website (NG 2019), with comments in italics from my own experience of it:

'The Gallery becomes a painting studio, an imagined chapel and a room-sized experiment in this immersive exhibition that leads you through the mind of Leonardo da Vinci to explore his masterpiece, 'The Virgin of the Rocks'.

'What you will experience: The secrets of Leonardo's masterpiece are revealed in four distinct spaces. Each space invites you to look at 'The Virgin of the Rocks' in a new way.

'The mind of Leonardo: Start your journey in a landscape populated by the thoughts and ideas of Leonardo as he sets about painting 'The Virgin of the Rocks'. *A construction of aluminium boxes with mirrored text inside in several languages, signalling that this is a different kind of exhibition experience. My focus ended up landing on the rivets keeping the structure together. They seemed like they were meant to be invisible, or perhaps had been planned without anyone looking at how the final result actually came across. Interestingly, it was shaped like an embrace, and I had the same shape for welcoming people in my information antechamber in Vasteras that I had just made (more on this in chapter 5).*

'The studio: Discover the secrets only science and conservation can reveal in this projection-filled space which unlocks the mysteries of how 'The Virgin of the Rocks' was painted and reveals the lost composition hidden beneath the painted surface. *Focus was on conservation. I had hoped for an imagined recreation of da Vinci's workspace, clues to his working process. Conservation takes consideration and gives insight into this of course but it would have been fairer to the artist had the focus been on his work rather than the museum's.*

'The light and shadow experiment: Take part in the room-sized experiment to discover the dramatic effects of light and shadow on Leonardo's composition for 'The Virgin of the Rocks'. *This room had a digital pendulum light illustrating without telling me verbally how light falls on objects from different angles. A photograph of a human model that let me choose the angle at which to light it from, labelled according to how this was recognisable in the styles of famous painters from art history. It let me understand something about shading, painting techniques, and made me look more closely. It seemed to sharpen my attention to detail for looking at the painting, and any other work after. An inspiration for future mediation of my own.*

'The imagined chapel: At the end of your journey, you will come face to face with the original masterpiece where it hangs on the walls of an imagined chapel for you to contemplate how 'The Virgin of the Rocks' might have appeared in its original setting as part of an elaborate altarpiece. *I was unable to look closely because all of the 15 (or so) visitors present during my visit stood at the entrance to the room (also the shortest way to the exhibition's exit), without stepping closer and*

expressed mild frustration when I moved forward to be able to look. Looking closer, though, was the initial idea of the exhibition's curators: to deal with the spatial challenges of too many people trying to look at the painting where it usually hangs upstairs. (The National Gallery 2019)

'Commissioned and produced by the National Gallery, London. Created by 59 Productions.

'30-second introductions: What you need to know about Leonardo and 'The Virgin of the Rocks', in 30 seconds. Who was Leonardo da Vinci? Why did he paint 'The Virgin of the Rocks', and what does it reveal about his revolutionary techniques? Find out in our 30-second introductions:' (NG 2019)

These are probably questions that the exhibition wants to ask, because the video does not answer them, and could hardly be expected to, in the short span of 30 seconds.

The experience, to me, was of an introduction to an exhibition, not an exhibition in itself. It was different from how I make an information antechamber in that it was *in* the gallery, it *was* the exhibition. It seemed to me unnecessarily expensively made, perhaps to justify the ticket price. However, it was also very encouraging and exciting to see this kind of experimentation in a public gallery and I will take with me those realisations from watching the shadow-pendulum to paintings I experience in the future. There were some beautifully immersive elements to the visual material in the conservators studio but, again, hard to enter the space as visitors crowded the entrance and did not seem to want to or dare to or know that to be immersed one has to enter further in, delve in.

1.3 Curatorial Integrity vs. Pressures to be Productive and Fill a Space

This chapter ends with a discussion about integrity, a conscientious curatorial practice versus pressures to simply to be productive. Because the current curatorial field is not simply how it looks on the outside, or as it exists now – what is recognised in the texts that I have consulted here – but partly it exists in my imagination and in what I plan, as well as in the imagination of my peers.

My project started out as a wish to emancipate – which incidentally means to detach from the hand, a strange coincidence of metaphor perhaps, when what I want to reintroduce is the hand – the hand that makes and the thinking that is linked to the 'listening' and gestures of that hand – to free artists and members of the audience from the oppression of expert opinion. Not as a wish to innovate a signature curatorial strategy. I am not in this profession

only because it interests me but because I personally discovered the power of art-as-philosophy in paintings by Gerhard Richter and Francis Bacon at the ages of 19 and 24 respectively, rather late in life, and I want to facilitate those kinds of meetings for others. For those who already enjoy engaging with art, and want to 'know' more, but especially for those who find it intimidating or even meaningless now.

The professionalisation of the role of the curator seems to me to be at the expense of exhibited artists that are often being instrumentalised, and those alternative spaces where there is less control and that thrive on trust and sharing. Not enough is being done to attract visitors from a lower-cultural-capital-background. Priorities often lie in the stability of a job and pursuing a career in curating, rather than taking risks and experimenting.

Most curatorial strategies seem to be based on facts being delivered to the audience from the expert to the layperson, or connoisseur even. This seems logical when providing a context for art historical exhibitions and research. It is, however, problematic when it relates to contemporary work. Historians have to assume and evoke a condensed socio-political context in order to look at work. In contemporary art we are already immersed in its context, perhaps to the point that we need to be lifted out of our daily lives to be able to see.

If there is one place we can afford to be sincere, and have to be in order to engage deeply, it is the gallery. Nobody will check that we learned anything, or even that we 'got it' in the end. All that we might come away with is either a feeling of having 'consumed' a show, or that we had some thoughts or an insight – however difficult to define in words – that we would not have otherwise had. The connection and communal thinking is not there unless we meet it halfway. I would argue that these insights, or meetings (with the thoughts of the artist, a representative of humanity that we do not usually get to know so intimately) are dependent on honesty and sincerity. Without honesty and sincerity it is impossible to link and connect threads of thought and traces of ideas in artworks to our hopes, fears and regrets.

CHAPTER 2

RECOGNISING, RESPECTING AND PROTECTING THE GALLERY- AND STUDIO SPACE AS PLACES TO THINK

2.1 The Thinking Subject at the Centre of Artistic and Curatorial Practice

2.2 The Importance of Not Always Knowing What We are Looking at

A quote in large font introducing, headlining, the Museums Matter 'manifesto' (by the National Museum Director's Council) from Neil MacGregor, [then] Director of the British Museum, from BBC Artsnight (April 2015) says that "… access to museums and galleries allows everybody to enter another world, think of another world, see the world from somewhere else, reimagine their own world, reimagine themselves… The point of the museum is to allow the citizen to be a better citizen."

What is it to be a citizen, and to be human? If it is to be a subject, have agency, to reflect on our environment and be self-conscious, feel shame, love, want to express complex thought and communicate, and hear what others have to say about it, then we need time and space to concentrate and listen (in a bigger sense than just with our ears). A place where we do not have to produce or consume anything lets us think and concentrate differently. Not problem-solving-type thinking as in our everyday lives, as I will go into detail on in the next section, but letting overwhelming and conflicting thoughts happen without pushing them aside. Art objects are made to express sometimes unfinished thought and let others make what they can of it. Not all artists do this of course, and not all academics do either. In academia we sometimes cheat ourselves out of genuine thought and experience because of our anxiousness to seem clever and to 'own' our expertise, at the cost of sharing and expanding it. An artist who has to support themselves by working full-time in a job elsewhere perhaps cannot afford to be completely free in their thought. More autonomous art practices require better state

funding of artists and museums/galleries just as well as schools and universities, other examples of places for the furthering of knowledge and humanism that need to be protected from market forces and profit-making schemes. Perhaps, when there is no such funding, there does have to be a sellable or showable piece at the end of every project? Is that result to be considered art, then? I am not entirely sure but content with my definition, which I explained in the introduction, that if the artist intended it to be an artwork, then I accept that. For me it has to also be philosophy. The slipping of artist into producer of something to fill a space, or to build on their brand, is linked to an often corresponding slippage of the beholder into a consumer. Though in most cases a consumer of exhibition experiences rather than any physical artworks or products.

2.1 The Thinking Subject at the Centre of Artistic and Curatorial Practice

The thinking subject is at the centre of artistic and curatorial practice. It is also the basis for democracy and an emancipated existence. The three are very closely connected. Hopefully we have all experienced when an exhibition or the architecture of a museum or gallery lets us really think. Think thoughts we did not already have when we came in. Almost in dialogue or some form of communal thinking (that I also described in the introduction) together with the artist, even though they are not usually present or even still alive. This chapter is about having that simple but crucial role of the gallery/museum, and the artworks on display, be the main aim of curatorial practice.

That aim is key for a paradigmatic shift in how we treat, and what we expect from, art and our audiences, and ourselves, as thinking subjects. If we want to protect art from further cuts both to funding and intellectual integrity, or indeed if we want to protect any other institutions that are for the generating and dissemination of knowledge and creative thinking through making. For any paradigmatic shift to be possible, and to make the most of it when it does happen, we have to make room for it: Both mentally and physically we need space to imagine and experiment with doing things differently. A physical space can suggest on a number of levels, visually and viscerally, what is possible, what usually happens there. Being physically present requires the commitment and effort to get to that place, and with that effort already made, we perhaps feel we owe it to ourselves (and the place) to stay to find out what happens next. I wrote about this already in the introductory chapter and also related the same qualities to artists' studio spaces.

2.1.1 Consuming Art

The National Gallery long resisted the pressure from visitors wanting to relate to, and try to collect, exhibitions through their phones. The writer Archie Bland, said in the Independent of their launch of free WiFi in August 2014:

> … [F]ree, but still somehow the product of a transactional mindset. In the first gallery, there were smartphones and tablets everywhere, many more taking pictures than using the WiFi to find more information. Instead of a gallery, the space felt like a catalogue, the visitors reconfigured as shoppers, picking something off the rack to try at home later. Today, the real permanent collection is the one we all store on the cloud.

Consumerist culture has taught us to consume goods (and less material things) in our spare time. If we are not exactly consuming goods we collect them or collect experiences that build our cultural capital and make us feel that we are living a meaningful life, the 'best life' is the term of influencer instagram stories and posts. Meaningfulness is determined by its not being a 'waste' of time and that this can be proven by the goods or experiences amassed, and pictures of these in social media posts, in a sort of bookkeeping approach to meaningfulness. The pressure to consume relieves us of the pressure to be productive. Consumption could be seen as productive in a sense.

Art galleries currently are more like shops than places to think, with the emphasis on collectability, not philosophy. Not so much learning as consuming. We are conditioned to behave like consumers unless someone asks us to reconsider and be something else for a while. Tate Modern even has the escalators and coffee bars of a shopping mall.

Learning new things makes us acutely aware of all that we do *not* know and that makes us feel uncomfortable, makes us feel stupid. It is of course 'cognitive dissonance'[10] and not stupidity and Professor in Cognitive Psychology Robert L. Solso has a version of this term to describe what often happens in a gallery: *visual dissonance* 'between what one expects to see and what one actually sees' (1994 p. 122). Consumerist culture is all about addressing feelings of discomfort with something that can be bought with money. One thing it cannot give us though, is time. If given a space away from this, and if we feel we have to think, we could potentially unlearn our consumer behaviour and learn more about long-term sustainability (not only environmental).

[10] Cognitive dissonance is the social psychologist Leon Festinger's term for the psychological tension caused by 'inconsistency among beliefs or behaviours'.

I will not discuss here the buying of art that does of course also occur, which both artists and galleries depend on. Most of us do not enter the gallery to buy anything, especially not in the larger public galleries and museums where the art is not for sale, and those institutions are my main focus here. When I curate exhibitions, I do not choose to include and show works because they are for sale or in order to sell them. The leading criteria is always whether or not it needs to be shown, and at that particular time, in that particular context.

2.1.2 Time-shortness

Time is perhaps our most precious asset, perhaps even more so than money or goods, at least among the middle classes, the culture that exhibitions currently seem geared towards, those who have disposable income, and feel comfortable in a gallery or museum. Those visitors are not, however, my main concern as a curator. (I wrote on this in the previous chapter.) My curatorial practice is concerned with giving art and artists the highest degree possible of autonomy to communicate complex meaning that the beholder, who should also have the highest possible autonomy, is allowed to interpret on their own terms, in their own time. I am particularly trying to reach people who do not already think art 'is for them', who do not already know what art can do or why it is important. Perhaps especially important for someone who has not got a lot of agency in their day-to-day existence. These (potential) visitors are of course just as likely to be short of time as everyone else. With economic inequality comes also an inequality in who has the power to change things. Decisions as to where funding is going and what remains open or is built, are made by educated and privileged but not necessarily very empathic (at least not towards people who are not exactly like themselves) people who often have no idea what other people need. This is not true democracy then, since not everyone is represented and heard. If we want democracy to work we have to let people think, give them time to read, discuss, think through and try things. It is otherwise very hard to imagine anything other than what we already have, or have lost… And having once had something does not necessarily mean we know how to get it back. It is by imagining alternatives and making them happen that we learn we can change things, also within politics and society at large.

2.1.3 Art is Not Problem-solving

What is allowed to take time? When work is not paid or caring for our family, what do we prioritise doing and why? These questions, inextricably linked with the question around what is

worth knowing, were a starting point for my work to encourage people to stay in art exhibitions for longer and engage in self-directed exploration. We are so used to information being delivered to us by experts on a need-to-know basis and as fast as possible, being briefed so that we can continue what we were doing. Being productive rather than thinking and questioning.

A huge part of our daily lives is problem-solving, whether it be as part of our jobs, how to manage things at home, or in relationships with people. Thinking about and through making art are other ways of thinking, apart from problem-solving. There is problem-solving involved of course, but a great deal more 'listening' to materials and it is not a case of getting as quickly as possible to a conclusion. Quick thinking is what artificial intelligence does best, whereas artistic thinking-through-making never will be. AI can of course be programmed to 'do' this, but could it really be considered a form of 'intelligence' if there is no self-reflective element, no consciousness of the difficulty, no (perceived) resistance in the process? If we do not take the time to think, converse and write, make artworks, then those ideas are not conceived, not communicated and not added to the cumulative wealth of ideas and knowledge in our community. We need all sorts of people to contribute to this, neurodiverse, working class, people of colour, women, older generations etc to keep knowledge complex, not describe neatly or come to a quick conclusion and move on to achieve monetary results.

Psychologist, Economist and Nobel laureate Daniel Kahneman, in his book *Thinking, Fast and Slow* (2011), divides thinking into two categories: automatic immediate thought and thought that requires more effort. (p. 21) In our daily lives priority is usually saving time by making quick decisions. How can we trust these decisions? How can we change anything at all if we do not know the structures behind it: systems of thought, of power relations? We will not be accountable or know why we are deciding one way rather than another unless we analyse.

In the Cognitive Psychologist Robert L. Solso's writing on perception however, he does seem to consider looking at art as a form of problem-solving. He compares it to looking at x-rays from a cancer patient by a specialist. (1994 p. 143) Solso does say it is different because of the subjectivity involved on the side of the person viewing art, and speaks of an intentionality when viewing. (I will discuss intentionality in chapter 5.) However, he does not say anything about the very different reasons we have for looking: to find where disease is developing in order to treat it or to think about the meaning of life or a specific subject. He does say that looking at art is more thinking than looking. I wonder why he is not interested in the difference between having to find something in order to treat it and looking at something in

order to enrich your life or at least an understanding of another person. One is urgent and not philosophical. The other, as I have stated before, *is* philosophy. Perhaps he thinks our engagement with art is fuelled by peer pressure, or internalised pressure from within ourselves, to understand and interpret art under threat of losing face or fear we are not able to enjoy something we are supposed to enjoy. Solso does not seem to believe that art can be a free space to think, away from capitalism. That is not his main concern, and if we acknowledge art's power to do this, does that also bring with it a responsibility to do something about that and not treat it like any other commodity?

Along with the theatre, cinema and nature, art galleries are perhaps the only places where I go to just think. Theatre and books constantly feed us and do not allow for thought-excursions outside of this as much as art exhibitions do. There is not the 'space' to think freely.

2.2 The Importance of Not Always Knowing What we are Looking at

'Art is about things we don't know, about the
things that nobody noticed.'
Lawrence Weiner (2016)

The art experience in one sense makes something happen immediately, while we are in the gallery that, if we engage with it, says: You cannot ignore this thought, I am here telling you or reminding you about these thoughts, or the fact that you do not know what I am communicating. That is also communication, of course. Later, we return to our homes and perhaps forget about it or do not have time to think about it again. In the best cases we continue to think about it over time, sometimes over months or years. Most of the time, then, the knowledge of the artist or artwork is not 'to follow', it is *in* the gallery. It will link and infuse with thoughts later on and be reactivated when we get more pieces of a puzzle that is ours, not someone else's, but that we also have to try to understand. That it is ours does not mean we have access to it all the time or in its entirety.

We could call this 'not-knowing' – knowledge that is in progress when we take it in or project meaning onto artworks. This forms into a more solid belief or opinion when a situation reminds us of it. There is often a glimpse of a realisation that might glide away immediately but at least lets us know that we do not know and that other people know things we do not, and perhaps cannot, know. Surprisingly often I do understand, and that is a form of knowing, even

if I have not lived through those experiences. A humility is needed when looking at art, about lived experience and growing up in a different family, under different social and political circumstances perhaps, or to paraphrase Rancière's writing about the 'ignorant schoolmaster': That we can 'teach' each other things that we ourselves did not know. Or did not realise we already knew. (1991)

2.2.1 To let Judgment be Suspended, 'Creative Suspension' in the Gallery

Paradigmatic shifts are needed to accommodate new knowledge that does not fit in with the existing framework. When we allow signals and bits of information to remain in what Physicists David Bohm and F. David Peat in their book *Science, Order and Creativity* call 'creative suspension' paradigmatic shifts become possible, also in the hard sciences. (2000 [1987] p. 271) This concept of suspension is not just relevant to giving artworks and each exhibition visit its fullest integrity but we should be able to learn from those experiences to treat other information or received knowledge in this same way: To read several sources of news-reporting before making our own interpretation of a situation, learn to see a longer narrative in amongst sensationalist click-bait. Not-knowing is about not being tempted to draw conclusions, not arrive at something like a productive statement. It can be a fuller form of truth that keeps several bits of information suspended, or co-existing in a complex, and lets them conclude as and when other bits of information correspond or resonate with them. We make a connection with something a person tells us, or we see in a painting, because we were thinking about it but we are open to changing our way of thinking, to listening, and letting other peoples' ideas in. To approach something anew with fresh eyes and see its complexity rather than thinking we know it. Rather than looking at images or text that communicate in one direction the thoughts from someone who 'knows' to someone who doesn't yet, this is about the process of forming those thoughts. I came across Luce Irigaray's writing when, at the invitation of the artist Annette Sonnewend, I was organising a reading group on the subject of 'love' and Irigaray speaks of this kind of exchange as: 'opening some possibility or possibilities leading to sharing', also in connection with music or painting. 'To speak from the already known … paralyzes the becoming of the one and of the other.' (2003, pp.16-17) As in a conversation between lovers where it is important to talk but not to expect to say exactly how one feels or what is wrong but the action of the exchange is perhaps all we can achieve and all that is needed. Because we can never describe adequately the feelings we are trying to address.

> Speech thus escapes the calculation that dominates our time. Always open with respect to a unique meaning, always problematic in its reaching the one to whom it is addressed, it can neither seize nor be seized, neither calculate nor be calculated. … [Listening] is more concerned about communicating with the other – and with oneself – than about discovering the exact and definitive sense of a being, to teach the other. (ibid, p. 23)

This is exactly true of conversations during studio visits, because there are fresh realisations and associations that I do not yet know how to describe, which does not mean we should not or could not talk about them, as long as we agree it is the action of putting words on it and that I am trying to make something coherent that is meaningful, not every particular word I use. When the situation calls for it (and much more often also in life outside the gallery) we should suspend judgement and resist jumping to conclusions about what the other or ourselves are saying for the benefit of keeping it complex and not pinning it down too soon. Not diagnosing, but noticing and enjoying describing, rather than feel the pressure to describe it right. The same goes for our internal voice describing what we see in a gallery, and should also go for the curatorial statement. Rather than stating some (often quite arbitrary or even questionable) facts, it should show several directions of thought. That is why I find images more helpful and less wrong, because they do not pretend to be precise and there is more room for interpretation than with a specific national/geographic language. Perhaps images reach deeper into some of our memories. Words can reach memories we had before we knew the words to describe them but the smell and taste of a madeleine is more powerful than the description of it. Yet, I am reading, and so enjoying, Proust's description of those memories in his written work. The visitors to an exhibition need to do that work, there is no way around it, at least not any way that is as meaningful. It is a very private process and only then can we admit thoughts like fear, sorrow, guilt, love, and wishes, to ourselves since we know there will be no test or demand to account for these thoughts in or outside of the gallery. How can we be encouraged to stay and think and have those understandings about ourselves through the thoughts of an artists and curator?

CHAPTER 3

LEARNING (FROM ARTISTS) HOW TO LOOK

'Art is not about telling, it's about showing.'
Lawrence Weiner (youtube interview 2016)

The previous chapter was dedicated to the thinking subject at the centre of making art and engaging with exhibitions. This chapter is on how best to prepare and allow for that focus, to not sabotage or infringe on the works' integrity or that of the artist. Nor the visitor's own experience. In talking about looking, and later in this chapter 'peripheral vision', I do not mean simply vision, peripheral and/or direct, that of course occurs whenever we look at something: we focus on one thing and the surrounding areas are blurred until we move the focus onto them. Here, I discuss (peripheral) vision that occurs before it enters our consciousness. I hesitate to call it perception since not all of it has yet entered consciousness at the time when we are in the show.

My research does privilege the visual before any other form of expression, partly because I had to narrow down the scope of my research. I had planned to try using sound to slow down experiences but first of all I instantly found it has too much of an impact on the interpretation of artworks in the gallery if there is not a separate space for the information antechamber so that sound does not bleed into the exhibition itself. Secondly, there are so many ways I can experiment with visual material, and to experiment with one mode of communication, that I chose one method. This lets me compare versions and make incremental change instead of comparing apples and pears. The visual communication in the

information antechamber, and in the gallery-exhibition, is not only about optical seeing or perception but about being present in a space conducive to looking, and 'having the time' to look, and think.

Exhibitions are often made to be experienced in quite a linear and hierarchical way, as Terry Smith explains and advocates: '… to take its visitor through a journey of understanding that *unfolds* as a guided yet open-weave pattern of affective insights, each triggered by looking, that accumulates until the viewer has *understood* the curator's insight and, hopefully, arrived at insights previously unthought by both.' (2012, p. 35, my emphasis) Although I wholeheartedly agree with the final point that we will hopefully have 'arrived at insights previously unthought by both' there is too often this sense that a visitor needs to 'get' artworks and curatorial themes, as indicated by those revealing and problematic words that I have emphasised in Smith's statement. This chapter is dedicated to ideas as to how this way of thinking can be changed, ideally across the field, to democratise experiences and to protect artworks from narrowing down their possible interpretations.

Ought we not to try to look at artworks in exhibitions like artists look at their work? Again, I do not mean only optically, but any or all other sensory engagements with artworks. Instinctively, going back to where and how artists learned how to look seems to be the right place to start when thinking about how to equip an audience for looking at art, and the final part of this chapter is dedicated to the art school.

3.1 How Long Does it Take to Look at Art, to Properly See an Exhibition?

Much effort is made at larger institutions with a responsibility to 'reach' a broad audience to use different modes of mediation and 'gallery education' but if we do not start with fundamental questions regarding what we need to know and how to look at art, we end up helping some while creating or only moving barriers when we try to remove them from elsewhere. Tate has instructions on their website for how to experience art slowly and in those they state: 'Studies have found that visitors to art galleries spend an average of eight seconds looking at each work on display'. This is a quote that corresponds roughly with the widely recognised findings by the art historian and critic James Elkins from an article he wrote in 2010:

> There have been a number of surveys of how visitors interact with paintings in museums. One found that an average viewer goes up to a painting, looks at it for less than two seconds, reads the wall text for another 10 seconds, glances at the painting to verify something in the text, and

> moves on. Another survey concluded people looked for a median time of 17 seconds. The Louvre found that people looked at the Mona Lisa an average of 15 seconds, which makes you wonder how long they spend on the other 35,000 works in the collection. A survey at the Metropolitan Museum of Art supposedly found that people look at artworks for an average of 32.5 seconds each, but they must not have counted the ones people glance at.

The Tate instructions on how to look at art slowly are a great initiative for those visitors who manage to find it on the website but is it sufficient or fair to instruct and encourage visitors to look slowly when the environment and curating of exhibitions are not at all conducive to that? Providing such information hands over responsibility to each individual to muster the concentration and focus on artworks despite the distractions we have contributed to the situation, and is a failure to acknowledge how those distractions make it harder to concentrate and have a meaningful interaction with art. Do we not have to first show or teach people how to look before we can ask them to do so successfully? How can we even pretend to make exhibitions available to an audience that has not been trained in looking at art (not many people have been), do not know artistic techniques or how objects are made, without at least considering this barrier and trying to do something to bridge or eliminate it? These informal hierarchies are also what hinder people from entering higher education and organising politically, as Raekstad and Gradin discuss in their book on prefigurativism. Theirs is a discussion on how to decolonise meeting-culture but the same can be applied here too:

> [S]ome people are better equipped to participate and be heard in meetings than others, perhaps because they have received better education or been taught how to speak eloquently, or because the makeup of their brain and body is well suited to traditional meeting forms (i.e. sitting in one place and concentrating for long periods of time, reading small print, writing, and so on).
>
> Any activist committed to reaching a truly free, equal, and democratic society must, in other words, consider how to address these informal hierarchies. (2020, pp. 92-93)

Contrary to how Isabelle Graw, who as I mentioned in the introduction thinks that '[p]aintings can be grasped all at once because everything is made known at the same time …' (2018, p. 347) the author Hisham Matar describes the benefits of suspending the need to instantly grasp and instead look for longer: 'I stood in front of Lorenzetti's *Allegory of Good Governance* again. This time the picture seemed to still and settle, to be fixed in place by a structural order that I did not notice the first time. It was as if my eyes had been re-educated by the painting or

perhaps Siena or even the dream of the sea I had had the previous night.' (2019, p. 37)

Along with providing visual cues and immersive material in an information antechamber to achieve this type of engagement, as I describe in chapter 5, I have started to think of painting in a similar way to how I would treat more obviously time-based media. The writer and translator Deke Dusinberre, describes in an article in Art Monthly from June 2020, speaking of the two most recent Marcel Duchamp prize exhibitions, how

> Compared with their competitors, who exhibited sculptural or painterly installations of a largely conceptual bent, the time-based artists benefited from a more-or-less imposed investment of time on part of the beholder. Assuming that s/he decided to sit down, the beholder was committed to the passive consumption of flickering images, as opposed to the hard work of deciphering a conceptual installation. […] In the cinema model, once the viewer has come to rest in a darkened room, s/he tends to stay at rest, shielded from external forces, literally 'entranced'. The avant-garde films my generation championed in the 1970s were just that: films, designed (almost without exception) to be seen in a darkened room, comfortably seated, with nothing happening next door. Once that investment in time and place had been made, patience became easier, because 'moving on' meant 'going nowhere'. Long difficult works that required breaking the boredom barrier, such as Andy Warhol's static portraits and Peter Gidal's ascetic musings, wouldn't stand a chance in today's gallery/museum context, where other still or moving images await nearby. In the painting-on-the-wall model, the viewer becomes a 'moving beholder', shifting at will from one artwork to the other. As soon as attention flags, it will be magnetically drawn elsewhere, rather than turned off, or turned inward, or nudged back to the screen. It is henceforth the beholder, rather than attention, who wanders. This creates a fundamental, if often unrecognised challenge to time-based artists, who, if they are shrewd, know they must incorporate subjective temporal *perception* into the fabric of a given work: the length of a piece should depend on how it is to be viewed; it should perhaps propose an identifiable progression which the beholder can easily grasp, thereby guiding attention through some formal or narrative structure that conveys a sense of 'beginning middle and end'; the artist may have to dictate viewing conditions, such as the level of lighting, need for seating, minimal/maximal size of the screen etc.

Dusinberre says: 'They must design the 'time frame' in which each piece should be set. Otherwise it simply won't be seen, much less understood.' But are static pieces such as paintings or sculptures not suffering from the same lack of attention? I would claim that they do. I don't think Dusinberre would, but both he and I agree that even if artists do design such

a time-frame, bad curating (too much in the exhibition, artworks too closely together, too many different types of context, etc) and that some works make you want to stay, as he describes an exhibition of (and, perhaps crucially, co-curated by) John Smith outside Paris in 2014: '… [T]he intellectual wit, visual beauty and formal inventiveness of Smith's work encouraged viewers to linger.' Whereas in a recent Bill Viola retrospective:

> … [T]he total running time of the works on show was seven hours, not including four endless loop pieces; even the most earnest viewer of Viola's incrementally evolving images, knowing that not everything could be seen yet not wanting to 'miss' anything, was inclined to drift away in search of something 'better'. […] But with time-based works this issue becomes existential: either one glimpse is enough, in which case the work is truly 'moving-image art' rather than 'time-based art', because its duration is immaterial, as is often the case with looped works; or else the artist/curator is demanding super-hero powers of the beholder. The upshot of this is that it becomes unclear at what point the average human can claim to have 'seen' a work. (Dusinberre 2020)

He ends the article by asking: 'Is it really fair to measure time-based works against the 'timeless' arts?' I would instead ask: Is it fair to ask of any artworks to be 'timeless'?

3.2 Peripheral Vision, Delayed Perception

I use the term 'peripheral vision' to describe and discuss the input of visual information that perhaps does not enter our consciousness until much later, that sits and is registered in the periphery, both optically and neurologically. Often peripheral also in terms of import, what someone wants to show me, wants me to see, or I try to capture with a camera – and regard as 'in focus' – compared to the more accidental or less organised, less intentional. The experiences, for example, that I have during a studio visit (and will go into more detail on in chapter 4): In the periphery, whilst talking to the artist, I can see what they have been working on previously, what is not finished, what has been discarded, or waiting to be determined whether it is worth continuing to work on, or if it is going in the right direction. These types of 'insights' are what I would also like to give to visitors of the exhibitions I curate and I am working on (and will describe in chapter 5) a method I call 'expanded' studio visits for doing this.

Expanded studio visits are all about being present and sharing an experience. It is a case of: Go in, do not try to take it all in, just immerse yourself and then move on to the next

artwork (or the next room). This is what we do in a gallery, we cannot actually consume the works, they are still there when we leave and we know we can interpret them in many ways. Parts of some studio visits are recorded to allow me to quote artists in writing, and for reactivating thoughts and ideas later, but these recordings are not stand-ins for the actual visit. As with any situation we are trying to understand, it is a case of having to step back – the same as when you take in a painting – then step forward to look at details, then step back to look at the 'whole' picture again. Even though in neither position the whole picture is visible as we sometimes cannot see detail, and cannot see all detail, unless we spend a lot of time with it. We cannot see all layers and overpainted gestures, the thought process, or references we do not (yet) know. We will see it differently every time we come across it, with new or remembered experiences as references to link to. There also comes a point when we are so used to seeing an image that we cannot really see it anymore.

3.3 How to Prepare Visitors for First Meetings with Artworks?

How do we prepare visitors without spoiling their first meeting with artworks? How do we avoid limiting the experience, and pinning down interpretations? The same questions could be asked about what we need to know when working with art. I will look at this in the next section. If it is something as (deceptively) simple as learning to look, then how do we ourselves learn and teach that to someone, from any background, whether they have or have not visited exhibitions previously?

3.3.1 Looking at One Artwork for 30 Minutes

'Slow art day' is a concept invented by (so it is claimed, although of course curators have had the same idea many times over) an American business consultant who built and launched a website and database dedicated to it (slowartday.com). Slow art day involves looking at a selection of 5 artworks over 2 hours one day every year and is organised by many galleries across the world. I chose to look on my own, in silence, as the rest of the group at the Photographer's gallery (in April 2018) looked together while talking about what they saw. I wanted to try spending 30 minutes with the work furthest away, where there would be fewest visitors, and see if I could keep this up for another three or four artworks. On the top floor of the gallery, in an exhibition of several artists' work, was a black and white, rather abstract, photograph by Awoiska van der Molen: *#412-9*, 2015.

The following is a transcript of my notes from that experience:

Trees

It's like meditation, drifting in and out, feels impossible to stay focused. Look at the surroundings to 'place' it. Don't know what I'm looking at and why. Looks like trees, then smaller, like flower-sized, tree-shaped.

Looking deep inside and remembering time spent in woods, wind, smell, the draw of not knowing what's beyond.

Should I make notes or just look?

Can I concentrate like this four more times today? Does it get harder or easier?

30 mins is too long! 10 min quality is better? Endurance.

Really hard with people moving around me.

Lace, is this how lace came about?

The patterns.

I will look at trees differently.

Really want it to be 3D.

Love looking at lighter parts, the sky through.

And also, the deep dark parts - they seem substantial compared to lightness and not knowing what is beyond.

How come the ground is not in the picture?

How did the curator decide to include this picture?

It is such a zombie-experience if we don't do this?!

Really good to focus on one picture, then see surrounding ones, the one mediates the others.

People are part of the experience, it's a public gallery!

I am a professional but I don't know what it's like to look at an artwork for 30 minutes. As a visitor, or otherwise, I never do this!! Apart from in films - James Benning or something.

One area at the back near the bottom, I didn't even see until the final five minutes! Should have seen it all by now, more than once? How is this possible? I think I can see ground after all. Has it changed? :)

Another new area!! Light in the trees on the right. I think I must have seen it but not found it interesting to reflect over? Not registered.

Layers of a complex, gradually perceived, enter consciousness.

Time went really slow, now in final 15, 10, 5 min going really fast!

Silly now, imagine Edward and Bella [from *Twilight*] in tree.

I went over by 3 mins before I even checked!!
Still don't know if those are trees :) [End of notes.]

When I rejoined the group afterwards for reflecting together, one person described how that photo had made him think of camping. I thought that says more about him than the image I saw and I asked myself, and the group, if it was ethical to just let the visitor think of camping if it had been a picture of a site where, say, a massacre had taken place decades ago. Do we not have an obligation to find out why, or at least speculate why, the artist has made the picture of that particular place, and perhaps keep interpretations in our mind of more serious things than camping? This is my job as a curator, not to trivialise, not to let trivial readings be the only readings. Camping could be about freedom and not exactly trivial but it can always be that *and* the realisation that the ground, the woods, the trees, have been there before we arrived and witness to so much beauty and horror that times are bringing, and we are causing as humans.

3.4 Resisting Translation of Visual Communication Into Verbal

> I have nothing against words—or history, or theory—but I do think there is too much faith (whether implicit or explicit) in the transparency of information in both the art world and academic art history, and too little careful attention (and theorization!) of the opacities of painted, molded, enacted, and digitally recorded stuff. … I prefer to forego reading the Xeroxed press releases offered to visitors at the front desk until I've had a good look at the show. This policy represents a test of sorts—both for myself and for the art on view. Can I apprehend patterns of allusion and palimpsests of codes without the cheat sheet? And conversely, does the art, stripped of its discursive apparatus, hold up? (Joselit 2016)

Artists have often chosen to communicate visually. Who am I then to translate that into verbal communication? I realised this during one of my first ever studio visits, with the painter Jens Hedin in 2007, when he asked me to just look, rather than talk about paintings that were right in front of us. In any information antechamber I make or any text I write about art, I cannot avoid interpreting for people, before they had a chance to see the works themselves. But I can make a conscious and substantial effort to put the work first, not my own existing ideas. To draw on memories of when I first experienced works and recount those thoughts, and to try to meet the audience at that point. I introduce them to thoughts that are years down the line when I have seen the works many times and talked to the artists about them at length as well as

having seen a lot more of their work and influences. When a show is presented, the artists and curators have often already moved on in their ideas about what the exhibition is so it might not seem enough, or very interesting, to tell the audience what initially motivated the project. Instead more is brought in, a theoretical context and thoughts that belong perhaps a year down the line from the point of entry for visitors. Imagine we start a conversation with a person and they leave the room for a year (while we are suspended in time) they then come back and rejoin that conversation. The visitor is left to fill in those gaps themselves. When I finally get to realise a show that has been planned since a year, I can still remember how I looked at works and themes then, I can add thoughts I have had since, but I will not pretend no time has passed. I will try to include all the thoughts and conversations along the way, not take the opportunity to look smart and skip some of those steps, make it seem like I had all of those insights straight away.

I learned how to look by trying to do life drawing, and from lectures during my undergraduate studies in Art History. At Stockholm University, and I know this happens elsewhere too, lectures are given with two slides of photographically reproduced artworks projected side by side, to always look at one image in contrast and comparison with another. It does also put artworks into context, that they may or may not have been intended to have, and similarities and differences chime. It creates resonances within the pairs that make the eye sensitive, makes one think of individual choices, decisions that were part of their making. And what I find more or less attractive, brashness, courage, perfection, all become clearer when they are contrasted against someone else's ideas and choices. The pairing of images also of course occurs in books, where each spread makes/lets us consider images in pairs (or more), unless the editor/author has chosen to separate images with text, empty space or let them take up the whole spread. During my BA we studied the art historian Michael Baxandall's writing on visual skills:

> [T]here is a distinction to be made between the general run of visual skills and a preferred class of skills specially relevant to the perception of works of art. The skills we are most aware of are not the ones we have absorbed like everyone else in infancy, but those we have learned formally, with conscious effort: those which we have been taught. And here in turn there is a correlation with skills that can be talked about. Taught skills commonly have rules and categories, a terminology and stated standards, which are the medium through which they are teachable. These two things - the confidence in a relatively advanced and valued skill, and the availability of verbal resources associated with them - make such skills particularly susceptible

to transfer in situations such as that of a man in front of a picture. (1988, pp. 37-38)

Teaching at art history departments is about giving the training an expert eye would need to recognise details and signature styles. Looking at art as a curator or visitor to an exhibition though, and looking at how we look at art, is also about understanding and exploring how knowledge forms when there is no pressure to 'know' or be an expert in any particular field. There are no immediate problems that need solving in the gallery.

Baxandall has a concept he calls the 'period eye', essentially that we need to look at historical paintings with something like the same sensitivities and knowledge that people would have had at the time the paintings were made. Here he is writing about Fifteenth-century Italy but this is a useful method also for looking at contemporary art, or any art for that matter:

> … [T]he picture is sensitive to the kinds of interpretive skill - patterns, categories, inferences, analogies - the mind brings to it. A man's capacity to distinguish a certain kind of form or relationship of forms will have consequences for the attention with which he addresses a picture. For instance, if he is skilled in noting proportional relationships, or if he is practiced in reducing complex forms to compounds of simple forms, or if he has a rich set of categories for different kinds of red and brown, these skills may well lead him to order his experience of Piero della Francesca's *Annunciation* differently from people without these skills, and much more sharply than people whose experience has not given them many skills relevant to the picture. … Much of what we call 'taste' lies in this, the conformity between discriminations demanded by a painting and skills of discrimination possessed by the beholder. We enjoy our own exercise of skill, and we particularly enjoy the playful exercise of skills which we use in normal everyday life very earnestly. If a painting gives us opportunity for exercising a valued skill and rewards our virtuosity with a sense of worthwhile insights about that painting's organization, we tend to enjoy it: it is to our taste. (1988, p.34)

In the fifteenth-century, just as now, there was

> 'an expectation that cultivated people should be able to make discriminations about the interest of pictures. … [And] the only practical way of publicly making discriminations is verbally: the Renaissance beholder was a man under some pressure to have words that fitted the interest of the object. The occasion might be one when actual enunciation of words was appropriate, or it might be one when internal possession of suitable categories assured him of his own competence in relation to the picture. In any event, at some fairly high level of consciousness

the Renaissance man was one who matched concepts with pictorial style.' (ibid, p.36)

Writing cannot be separated from exhibition making because it is a core part of it. Curators are acting as their own critics and are perhaps anxious to have a visible contribution in the exhibition. That is not always an infringement. Paul O'Neill quotes Liam Gillick in *The Culture of Curating and the Curating of Cultures*: "… [T]he most important essays about art over the last ten years have not been in art magazines but they have been in catalogues and other material produced around galleries, art centres and exhibitions." (2012, p. 43)

The curators and theorists I have referred to here are still assuming we have to use the same model of a written introduction that is either handed out or displayed at the entrance. I need to take their ideas further and assume that in the right environment, we can ask more of the visitors' attention, and manage to keep it, by giving more complex information that remains truer to the work of the artist and curator on the project, rather than filtering down information and making the experience more superficial.

I do of course use words to talk about art, in order to reflect on art and have a discussion about what I see. However, I do not think those words should be the introduction to works that visitors to exhibitions are yet to see. The first meeting should be visual, or audio-visual, and then there can be a moment of research or trying to grasp thoughts, and put them into words. We can read other people's thoughts on the artworks afterwards. I am experimenting with using images in order to remove the habit and compulsiveness of introducing artworks with text. Images are also a signal that the meaning is not that neat and tied up, that it can still be loose and open for interpretation. I want to contribute a context because when I come to a studio visit, and when I leave, I am carrying a context of knowing that artist, their previous work or someone that we both know and have in common. Or their studio is in a complex I know, or in an area I have not been before. That also says something about their life and choices. And even how large their artworks can be in order to get through the physical constraints on space in the shape of a door-frame.

Context is key, on that I think we can all agree, and this is usually given for all exhibitions in public galleries. But any curator who seriously wants to dismantle informal hierarchies and decolonise the making and experiencing of exhibitions has to ask themselves: How can we expect people to be able to look at art in a concentrated and meaningful way if we have not ensured they have the time, space and skills to actually do it? Without wishing to patronise visitors, I also cannot assume it is their individual responsibility to prepare for looking. It makes sense to me that this research is done at an art school, also in that the school might tell

me how artists learn to look, and at least begin to answer a question that could guide curators everywhere, and I will explore in the next section: How does art school equip artists for making art?

3.5 How Does Art School Equip Artists for Making Art?

What is art school for? Who is it for? Is its main purpose to prepare students for the art world, as it is now, or something more utopian? When I asked my supervisor at Chelsea College of Arts, the Curator and Professor in Fine Arts and Feminisms Jo Melvin, at the beginning of this project, her answer was that art schools are for 'learning how to look'. That is such a simple and complex idea that I am still thinking about what it means now.

> "Thinking through making and making things happen" is the ethos around which BA Fine Art at Chelsea is structured. … You will discover by engaging in the projects that Art is fundamentally related to representation, and more specifically related to representing the Abstract — that is anything indefinable, intangible, invisible and hard to locate in the world you experience. (UAL CSM 2020)

CSM/UAL's fine art undergraduate course description above does not mention learning to look. The foundation course does not mention it either but 'Visualisation skills (e.g. drawing, photography, 3D works)' is at the top of the list of selection criteria for the course.

I attempted to find answers as to who art school is for, and what it is for on websites, by asking staff and students at Chelsea and Camberwell, but found it was hard to discuss this with people around me officially. Instead, I decided, toghether with my curator colleague Rosie Ram, to organise a series of seminar-discussions at Chelsea College of Arts (2017-2018) around these questions with participants including fine art students, teachers, journalists, philosophers, practicing artists and academics from other fields to address questions around what an art school is, or can be, and in the extension also what goes on in the art school, what it teaches students and how that is important or could be better organised. We invited people who we have discussed this with, or who we would like to discuss with. Not as experts representing an institution or even our own views but an effort to get people from different areas involved with different experiences and views. We recorded the sessions for our own research, not to be released, because we needed to be free to speak and there are not many places where we can do that. There is no staff room at Chelsea anymore, for instance, and this change happened in the few years that I have been there. It was important there was no

outcome expected, apart from the discussion itself: we were there to talk about what the art school is now and what we want it to be. There was no 'one' answer, about as many different answers as there were people in the discussion. Although these questions proved, perhaps predictably, hard to answer, that does not mean it is not important to ask them.

In part it seems hard to define what goes on in art school because it is not directly relatable to a choice in career, or in life more generally, and therefore it does not make economic sense for many to choose art school. In part it also seems linked to many art schools in the UK going through changes in culture and use of space. Fine art and design are having to compete for space in a way they did not use to, and this has become a sore spot with too much – both status and economic gain – riding on giving equal weight to design and fine art. When I asked students and staff on campus what art school is for I was given definitions that could have come from a policy paper from any school (in London), such as 'networking' and 'entrepreneurial skills'. Those skills could be seen as practical and helpful but it is also a part of the problem because does that not make art schools redundant? If business school is better at teaching students entrepreneurial skills. Should art school be a preparation for the pressures of contemporary art world or something more idealistic: a counter-space to the accelerated temporality of capitalism ruling our everyday lives? Could art school be a place where the emphasis is on thinking and making, not forming a brand or fitting into an existing expectation on the role of the artist as producer and collectable brand? The place for the type of knowledge that is not so obviously useful.

Tuition fees are likely to make students (and their parents) ask if it is 'worth it'. The fees also make it harder for students to do a second degree if they want, or need, to. The Comedian and political commentator Stewart Lee pointedly criticises the corporatisation of art schools in Dan Richard's book on artistic practice:

> The real deceit, the dirty trick, occurred some time ago when student courses were reframed so as to be more vocational and tuition fees rose to a level which altered the student/teacher relationship to that of consumer/provider. In this new situation, the student is encouraged (feels compelled, perhaps) to seek 'value for money', often pressing for exactly the course as written in the syllabus, in the hope of guaranteeing a return on their investment - art schools and universities having inevitably become beshitten with the language of the City - but this reductive methodology only closes their subjects of study down further. Today, art students are under huge pressure to attain a useful qualification towards employment above all else, where in the past they might have hoped to learn about art. At a very basic level the current situation

> makes an arts degree less fun and experimental than it used to be. This change is money driven and damaging a generation.
>
> My fear is that students seeking exactly the courses as written in the syllabus are likely to get them: identikit vocational courses lacking the depth and breadth of skill-set available under previous regimes which were student oriented. Everyone is worse off. Everyone is hampered. The language is monetary when it should be aesthetic. Vice-chancellors write letters which state that 'all aesthetic judgement is entirely subjective' when 'whatever, just give us the money' might be more apt. (2005, p. 412-13)

These same discussions should be had amongst curators and within institutions: What is it that we do to our institutions and practices when they are instrumentalised to increase numbers, be it visitors or earnings? And crucially, in the same vein: What do we do to artworks and audience experience when we 'help' people 'get' exhibitions faster? Either because that is what they ask for (as discussed in the previous chapter on thinking), or because we need them to move through the space quicker.

Learning to look at or with art is also about ceasing to know how to look. Learning to do life drawing, as I have discovered first-hand, is about not seeing what I normally see, the person and the fact that they are nude, to stop looking at them like I would a person who I am talking to and abstract out the shade under their chin or think about where the weight of the whole being is demonstrated.

The next chapter is on the richness of things to take in, most of it in the periphery, during expanded studio visits and in the final chapter (5) I will describe one method I have used for waking up the eyes by looking, before looking at art, and for making the visitor feel like they want to be there, to stay, and feel like they 'have' time.

CHAPTER 4

THE 'EXPANDED' STUDIO VISIT

This chapter is dedicated to a method that I am developing and am applying to all areas of my research, whether it be a first meeting with an artist or a placement with a gallery in a new town: the 'expanded' studio visit. I mentioned in the first chapter how much discussion and literature on curating is focused on curators selecting works, generating content and filling spaces through making exhibitions. Not much is written about my favourite part of curating, and what I propose is one of the most important: talking to artists and looking at work in progress during a studio visit. That experience with works in their own environment – with details registering in my peripheral vision – later informs my interpretation and is helpful when imagining what an exhibition-visitor sees during their first encounter.

I will begin this chapter with a description of what a studio visit is, should or could be, followed by a methodological account of my processes for slowing down curatorial work, doing what I call an 'expanded' studio visit, and finally I will share some of my experience during two visits with the artist Ralph Overill.

The tone of this chapter is inspired by Dan Richards's excellent book *The Beechwood Airship Interviews* that I mentioned in a previous chapter where he visits and talks to artists and lets them describe in their own words, as he quotes them, their thinking process and negotiations with materials. Richards also reflects on his presence during those conversations, and the journey there, as well as on his own work in progress.

4.1 What Should, or Could, a Studio Visit Be?

> You are not my boss, this is not a job interview, this is not a blind date, this is not a cold call or a sales pitch. A studio visit is none of these things and potentially so much more. I am looking to work with people who are on board with my ideas and who I am as a person, and inversely,

> I look for the same in you. We are making an investment in each others lives and dreams and ambitions.
>
> Andrew Birk (2016)

> A working definition of the studio visit might be that it presents an occasion for the artist to show his or her art to a critic [and/or Curator] and to engage in a dialogue with this informed audience of one.
>
> Marjorie Welish (2010, p. 182)

The artist and critic Marjorie Welish says in one of her essays in *The Studio Reader*: 'The people who get the most out of studio visits from me as a critic don't expect any one thing out of a studio visit. Also they are so secure in their art they can discuss it almost as if it were done by someone else.' (1989, p. 183) A critic would have a slightly different reason to do a studio visit from a curator, and that is to judge and already form sentences around artworks or an entire practice. In another essay in the same volume Welish describes in detail how studio visits can go wrong, by being all about wanting to please, and it sounds to me as if she is most pleased with the 'effectiveness' of a studio visit if the artist is so 'well-read' they practically write the critique for her (ibid).

There are many ways to do a studio visit, and often they may seem to be a part of a game or something we know we ought to do but do not especially look forward to, as it is hard to know exactly what is expected of us. But I agree with the above description by the artist Andrew Birk and it could be put as simply as: A studio visit is about looking and listening. Ideally, it is not like a business meeting or an interview: Nobody should feel they have to be convincing, explain or sell their work. A studio visit is sometimes the first contact between artist and curator, apart from an email requesting the visit. It is a first encounter with works, rather than looking at them online in something more like a visual CV. Meeting them in their own environment with details from around the studio walls and work surfaces registering in my peripheral vision that (sometimes months, years) later inform my interpretation.

This is extremely helpful when trying to imagine what an exhibition visitor would see when they first encounter works. A studio visit is a chance to see some of the process and thinking involved, and to share reactions to the work. An opportunity to see work in progress, and pieces that are perhaps seen as failures, ask about the artist's thoughts at present and if they have any exhibitions planned that they are working towards. I want to know if they feel work needs to be done in and of itself or if they need to finish a certain amount of work for an

exhibition. These two might not be hugely different to some artists who are productive because their work is generated by experiment (Ralph Overill for example) and their oeuvre grows as they develop the method. But they matter to me in terms of the intentionality behind works.

4.2 The 'Expanded' Studio Visit

The expanded studio visit is a mix of unstructured and semi-structured conversation. It will begin with looking at what is in the studio at that moment. My asking to see whatever they want to show me, trying to remove the pressure to impress or explain, and maybe a catch-up if we have not seen each other for a while.

The term 'expanded' I have taken from 'expanded cinema' as in the work of Malcolm Le Grice and Gill Eatherley where the work has to be experienced live, with the artist and viewer present. Expanded cinema cannot be recorded and distributed but is all the more immersive because of that.

I choose not to do a lot of research before each visit. I avoid searching for a website (other than for contact details) because that is not a good first meeting with works. It usually feels like it is selling their practice to me or someone else and I start to wonder how long they had to spend building a website when they could be making their actual things. Once I have seen works online I recognise them in the studio but cannot see them afresh for the first time. There are often so many cues when seeing work in the studio, for topics of conversations that could be had, questions I then realise I need to ask.

An expanded studio visit is an undertaking that signals care and attention: If this is not important and worth taking time over, then what is? I am there to pick up on signals in body language and things almost said. Conversations that start in the studio are allowed to spread and digress, to develop and involve cooking or shopping for food as well as a few pints in the pub. There is no pressure to become friends, just to build a mutual trust.

We take the time to look at perhaps unfinished or discarded scrappy bits of work that the artist is not particularly fond of. Those are crucial insights into, and part of, their practice and thought.

A good curator is an empathic listener and the approach has to be an openness to let something happen: Respect, with humility, the space for important thoughts to exist.

Expanded studio visit with Ralph Overill, Billericay, July 2017.

The expanded visit goes beyond the actual studio because the studio does not exist in isolation. It is a haven in a busy and expensive neighbourhood or a beautifully peaceful, bright place in a downtrodden area. To be able to compare artists' accounts I am including a more formal section of the interviews while we are still in the studio with prepared questions – the same for each of them. These usually take about an hour to answer.

Questions are ones such as: Where or how does a print or painting start? [Where does the printing/painting process begin on any one work?] How do you know when it is finished? And: How do you think about intentionality and is it important that curators and the exhibition visitors know what you thought when you made the work, or why you made it? A complete list of questions is available in appendix I.

I make an effort to explain my practice during the visit as well, and describe my ideas in simple terms, though detailed enough to be interesting, and try to gauge from reactions whether someone finds them intriguing or problematic. I do not want to take up valuable time or the focus away from the artworks around me but do think this is necessary for the sake of equality and trust. Ideally we lay our thoughts on the table and are able to analyse, see similarities and differences, and understand why we work with art and what art can do.

I am just one beholder but one who is not afraid to verbalise their experience. Or I do it anyway. Complex ideas and thoughts are put into words for the sake of conversation, not to impress. One artist told me that curators often ask what they can do for him. That question, I suspect, helpful as it sounds also makes them seem powerful and he has to ask them rather than they suggest things. Why does assistance even have to be about doing something other than listening and looking, discussing and thinking? Perhaps it is enough if artists see a work differently themselves because you were looking at it with them.

The pressure to voice impressions and interpretations – wanting to describe thoughts about our work – makes me realise just how much we understand instinctively. We try to put it into words for a discussion, to be able to share and build an understanding. However, it was already knowledge before the words were used to shape it for communication.

4.3 Studio Visit with Ralph Overill in Camberwell College of Arts Print-workshop, Staff Bar and Billericay

I met Ralph Overill when he joined the Chelsea College of Arts PhD cohort in January 2017 and although he has since left to study on a different course, I continue to collaborate with

him and exchange writing.

I have seen screen-printing being done before and done some myself during that foundation year. When looking at Ralph's work during one of our PhD-seminar presentations or the 1st year exhibition when we were colleagues, I imagined how it might have been made. There are visible traces of movement like action painting, and visible signs of the printing process. To then see it being done is extremely fascinating. It becomes a beautiful merging of imagined gestures and processes with realised ones. And there are completely surprising elements, like the sprinkling of water onto the screen after the ink has been applied. Ralph describes influences and reasons behind decisions rather clearly. He discusses what he does and explains how he has relinquished control rather than never gained it in the first place.

The following is part of a transcript of the studio visit in the print workshop at Camberwell College of Arts in June 2017:

I asked: Have you put water on here?

Ralph Overill: It's just the friction of the squeegee, I've pushed it the wrong way. It's almost like I've started developing a language but I'm a bit scared of that because I don't want too much control, that's why I am adding lots of different colours, different ways to let go of control. I might have to stop screen printing at some point, or learn to forget. As a printmaker you have to learn how to do something exactly the same again and again…

EG: Did you know you were going to do yellow?

RO: I am trying to introduce colour without introducing four colours. With four colours I have to wait in between for each of them to dry… I wanted to see if I could get away with just using one colour and see if it would do something differently. And it has.

The colour has an emotion, almost as a memory trigger. When we think of paint in our minds we always think of colour, maybe because of finger painting as a child.

I think I was fortunate that I chose yellow, I was just lucky. I was using CMYK because I am not a colourist.

That yellow with that magenta, etc. will make all the colours on the spectrum. For me it's just a nice yellow that is not afraid to be a yellow.

Ralph is interested in a process that involves speed and moving forward, as well as stopping and freezing a moment. 'The blur of speed as opposed to the clarity of stopping' as he said during another studio visit. He uses existing screens and combines them to see what happens rather than wash them off and make new ones. The images are like letters in a language, they

do not need to be new or original to make new work. He makes, and looks at, and learns from, what is happening. I can see he approaches printing like painting.

> 'The screen prints overlap like consciousness, things entering into consciousness.'
>
> (RO SV Camberwell 2017)

The following is a transcript of part of the recording I made in Billericay in 2017: We are sitting on some tarpauling on the floor and pulling out works at random that are folded and stored in stacks on a desk, floor and in a bookcase.

Ralph says: These big black things behind you, shall we get one out?
And we get out a big piece, probably 80x120 cm, of plywood with a dark but faint, almost medallion-like pattern, a silky shine on the wood-grain. It is beautiful! I do not know what I am looking at, think I have not seen anything like it before and I cannot quite see what it is until I look much closer when Ralph shows me.
RO: They are big. Imagine pressing them by hand… If you see here, it's very faint, but you can just see where the ink is different from the wood surface.
I said: Did you invent this method?
RO: I don't think I did but not many people do this. The size of it! I used to skateboard on these pieces of wood, they would have been ramps at some point. This one was part of a diptych, there is another part outside. It's all shot on that road I showed you.

Ralph explained earlier that the stills he has chosen to print are from moving images shot from a skateboard.
EG: I'm still trying to get my head around how this happened, because I've never seen anything like this before…
RO: It's kind of woodblock in reverse. Instead of cutting away the surface, I'm just putting stuff on. [Using a screen printing technique] It's very subtle, it's just the ink. I had to line it up exactly each on top when it was drying and put another layer through because it only goes on really thin. It's probably three layers on this one.
EG That is black? What colour ink is it? It's almost purple, so shiny…
RO: It was probably a mixture of all the inks that were drying out in the cupboard at work [a college print workshop], because I didn't want to take the kids' ink so I thought: Well, they

won't use these ones. So I mixed them all together into quite a thick mixture that would create a thick layer that would dry quickly. It's probably a grey browny colour and then the black woodblock ink that I've used on top, and the white spirit I used to clean it off must have made it like this. But they led me to the screen printing really. You know, I was working… and they take an hour to print each to make the block. It was a lot of work. I made this series and then they weren't doing anything new for me and I thought what can the screen printing process give me on its own without putting it through the woodblock?

I would not have seen this piece nor understood how it was used, had we not been sitting on the floor of that bedroom and with no time constraint. While being physically in the space and looking at the material that Ralph uses, I understand something I would not have done otherwise. I knew these kinds of meetings would allow insights to happen because I know how sensorially deprived I am while looking at art during a gallery tour or on the computer. How certain details and types of knowledge are prioritised and seen as useful in my daily life, while others are not.

EG: What kind of choices are you making in your work?
RO: Well, firstly there's a choice what to work with, what we were saying earlier: Things kind of pop up from my childhood or things I've been interested in, things ingrained from an early age. They orbit around my practice and then they kind of knock on the door and it's just a choice, or not so much a choice, but being sensitive as to letting those in, I suppose. It *is* a choice because you have to choose whether to let it in or not. Choose not to force it, but be quite passive to the things that want to enter into the work, and then in the making of the work. I suppose it's very much in the moment. The choice is a split second, and that kind of fleetingness. I suppose it comes from karate as well, a kind of zen approach in a way, and just trying to be in the moment, and that particular time and place where you are. And accepting everything about that… making the absolute most of that, and not planning too far ahead. And not thinking too much about what happened before. Everything is just about that, especially with the screen printing. It's a very instantaneous choice.

Expanded studio visit with Ralph Overill, Billericay July 2017.

EG: How do you know when something is finished?

RO: The most important for me is the process of making it, and what comes out, and what I can learn from that. What it can tell me, or anyone else, so it's not so much about the

exhibiting of it. I mean, I always take that as an opportunity because it's great to have many people see it but it's not about me standing in front of it and saying: I did this, and look how great I am, or how great my finished work is. It's more about the making, the curiosity, the inquisitiveness, and how that feeds back into me, and how that spurs me on to make again. And it's that cycle, I suppose.

EG: It sounds almost like a rhythm, then.

RO: I think more and more that rhythm is important in my work. The screen printing has a rhythm to it, as you've seen when you did the studio visit. You have to work with a certain rhythm and some of the rhythms I just make myself, by mistake, just because of the karate I've done in the past. You know at my third dan black belt grading, I asked my seventh dan karate sensei: So what's it all about, the third dan? I'm learning these moves I have to do but what do I have to think about? And he said [in a Scottish accent] 'You need to think about rhythm, son'. That's my very bad Scottish accent [smile] but yeah, you need to think about rhythm. It's all about rhythm, and ever since then rhythm has been in my karate, and it's kind of been more in my practice as well. It kind of knocked on the door, so I let it in without even thinking about it. Maybe it just came in through the cat flap, hah! I didn't even let it in, it just came in.

EG: One of Patricia Norvell's questions: Are you concerned with art objects?

RO: Are images objects? More concerned with images than objects..

EG: If an artist prefers to refer to what they made as objects, even though to me they look like paintings, and they have been made like paintings, but they want to display them standing on the floor, then I accept that. It's obviously important to them that I don't just see them as paintings, they are something in-between, or both.

RO: I think the main thing is: Are images objects? Or, are images just what we see?

EG: Are they material?

RO: Exactly, yeah, am I making the material? Maybe what I'm doing is making the image material, or making the experience of the image material.

EG: Making thoughts in my head. Are they material..? I don't know. [smile]

RO: Yeah, I suppose. I think I'm more concerned with the immaterial and making it material, I guess.

EG: You said earlier you're not making them to be sold, they are not commodities but they are material more than if you were just choosing to write.

RO: I'm a material thinker. So what does that mean? It means I collaborate with material. And objects.

EG: They shout 'ink!' these prints. They are telling me about their materiality. They are more material than a newspaper, that is also printed, but we don't think of its materiality in the same way because it's more straightforwardly communication.

The alleys around the three churches and school in Billericay looked and smelled like my childhood alleys – the paths around my school, and after school club – in the southern suburb of Stockholm where I grew up. This town is suburban and rural, different but a similar distance and commute from London. Only this is a real train ride. It was such a generous experience, and as if we were on a mission. Ralph had planned our day and there were several things he wanted to show me, so a sense of importance and purpose, a trek, but also slow and relaxed because of the calm suburban surroundings.

Lunch in one of the pubs was an absolute reward, so tasty and quite late so we were starving and exhausted. It is extremely hard to continue being that concentrated over a long period of time and with so many external influences: the tools and materials, all the local people Ralph knew, just trying to take in the environment and understand something about life as an artist, and more generally, in Billericay and Essex.

Using this same approach to all my hands-on research – to see it as a studio visit – lets me say 'yes' to invitations because I do not have to do a lot of research to prepare, it means I am free to join if any other activities or meetings come up during the first one, as I am not already booked up, we are not slotting things in. Whether it be an actual visit to an artist's studio to look at what they are working on, to meet new colleagues in a gallery for a collaboration, or even to meet with someone from the city planning department at the local council to understand something about the socio-political aspects of making an exhibition in a new place, or somewhere familiar. The commitment is being present and removing the pressure to already know specifics, be sensitive to peripheral vision and generous and respectful with time and attention (both theirs and mine). It has proven in the majority of cases to be a very ethical and sustainable way to work, one that I recommend to all my colleagues or anyone in any field.

CHAPTER 5

THE 'INFORMATION ANTECHAMBER' – A TOOL FOR INTRODUCING EXHIBITIONS AND SLOWING DOWN EXPERIENCES

Information antechamber in the *Cosmic Play* exhibition of work by Ana Teles and Ralph Overill, Triangle Space, Chelsea, November 2018.

This chapter is about a tool and method that I am developing, in practice, throughout this research project. The tone of writing is therefore more similar to an artist's account of their work, anecdotal rather than academic. Especially the final section that is an account of my plans for, and reflections on, three of these experiments.

5.1 The Term 'Information Antechamber'

My method for introducing exhibitions is a room we enter into, a space to land as one comes in from the street, before we meet the artworks – an antechamber, a room before the main room. When I speak about this antechamber to people they often assume I am saying 'anti', as it is pronounced in a similar way. It is definitely not anti- anything in its attitude towards artworks or ideas on gallery spaces and exhibitions. It is not institutional critique. It is a

pretentious term but the connotations of palace and temple are relevant as they bring with them notions of reverence and respect (whether it is deserved on not), preciousness and sanctity. This is a room where I would like to be able to start building the kind of focus and alertness that I experience after having visited almost any show. Even if the artwork was uninteresting, I often see trees and buildings outside differently when I leave a gallery. Ideally, I would activate that same kind of focus at the start of any show.

5.2 A Tool for Introducing Exhibitions and Slowing Down Experiences

Many curators work in an office or from home – those are quite distant both in atmosphere and use, and sometimes of course also geographically, from our (intended) gallery spaces. We plan exhibitions using a model of the room(s) in foam board, or more frequently now in a 3-d digital model. We are quite removed from the experience of the space and the artworks that are perhaps only at the planning stage. This is the position from which we write an introduction to the exhibition, as I have discussed previously, often many weeks or months before the exhibition is installed. That text is often the one we also send to press and as invitations to the public. It is not so much a description of the exhibition as a statement about what we intend to do, and for the exhibition to be, once we have installed it. Exhibitions do need introductions because we want to make them available to as many people as possible, at least publicly owned galleries do, and I especially wish to reach those that do not already think art is 'for them'.

Hisham Matar, whose thoughts in the book *A Month in Siena (2019)* I mentioned in chapter 3, clearly knows the importance of being present before paintings, and has the confidence to let interpretations be his own, not anxiously looking for what experts see but also is aware of the preconceptions we bring. This is how Matar describes his experience of looking at the painting the *Madonna dei Francescani* (c. 1290) by Duccio di Buoninsegna in the Pinacoteca in Siena:

> I wondered how I would have looked at this painting had I been Christian. Perhaps I would have liked it less, or liked it more, or liked it in a way that was beside the point, to do with its religious symbolism, and I would have then thought that was the point, that that was why it had sustained my interest, and I might have been moved and delighted in a subtly but profoundly different way. … [A]ll this, as I stood in the Pinacoteca, seemed beside the point. The interesting thing is that all the while I looked at the *Madonna dei Francescani* none of these things occurred to me. Instead, I was the mother, the child and the friar. I felt the painting was

> painted especially for me and as though by a brother, not only because Duccio, like all men and women, is a fellow human being, but also because it was obvious to me that he did not intend his picture to be approached from a place of affiliation or allegiance, but rather from the simple position of being human. This is an essential part of the power of the *Madonna dei Francescani*. It is far more interested in human life than it is in God. (2019 pp. 80-81)

Matar describes his looking at artworks in an incredibly skilful and moving way. While I often fail to find the right words to communicate my own art experiences, I also find that speed reading those of my fellow curators in introductory statements to exhibitions is one thing that ruins my concentration and lust for engaging visually. As an experiment, at the beginning of this project, I decided to try to completely avoid the written word in the information antechambers. Another reason to do this was to find out how reliant we are on the written word in introductions, and for promotional material. I wanted to see what images can do when there is no text, then introduce text that is entirely necessary, such as the title of the exhibition and contributing artist names. The introduction of these few details also helps to signal that this is not an artwork, but the equivalent of the usually written statement at the beginning of a show.

As I mentioned in chapter 3, I realised how problematic that norm of describing a broader context verbally is during one of my first ever studio visits, with the artist Jens Hedin who I hadn't met previously. He hesitated when I must have given the impression I was waiting for him to tell me something about the painting we were standing in front of. Thankfully, he refused and said he cannot understand why he is always expected to talk about his artwork when it is there right in front of us. And when he has decided to paint, not put his ideas into words. Hedin and I had several more expanded studio visits and devised the first information antechamber when we exhibited his work in the vacated offices of an old paint-manufacturer in Stockholm in 2008.

We are not alone in having these concerns, as I have found when discussing with other curators and artists, and in recent journal articles on the use of introductory statements in art mediation as accelerators of aesthetic experience (see for instance Williams 2015 and Joselit 2016). Text can, of course, be the right medium to communicate context in an exhibition but it should not be a simple default that is used without reflection as to what it does to artworks.

5.3 If it Looks Like Art, and it is in a Gallery, is it Art?

It is important for ethical reasons that the information antechamber is not considered an

artwork. It is the visual and spatial equivalent of the wall text or introductory statement that is usually found near the entrance to an exhibition. I think we can all agree that that is *not* art. And it is not art because it is informed by artworks, and the emerging themes of the show. The information antechamber is (visual) communication but the focus in it is on the artworks, what I have seen in them. And I am not an artist. The intention is not that it is art. It is a spatio-visual introduction rather than text. Exactly the same, apart from not explaining, not summarising, and not translating because it is using the same medium. This is the most ethical way I can imagine to introduce artworks and exhibitions. It is not the quickest or most convenient but it is an important tool for thinking, just as working with a material process is for artists. The making of exhibitions can be a crucial opening up of thoughts and ideas. Hopefully, ideally, the result should be an act of generosity but it does of course also ask a lot from the visitor in terms of attention and engagement.

5.3.1 Intentionality

When we are looking at something in an exhibition and cannot tell whether it was made just to be sold or to advance the career of an artist or curator, we are effectively treated as consumers. It is hard to know when to put in the work to interpret, and enter into a dialogue with works. There is a risk that we are manipulated into opening up and relating to something that was not sincerely meant.

How does it change how we write an introduction if we establish that all we can express is our intention when we are writing about an exhibition we have not yet built? Or, we end up describing the artist's intentions, that they have written or told us, as we might not have seen the artwork before we write. Works will mean something else and/or additional when they arrive, and are installed next to another work, and we cannot calculate exactly what, or foresee the altered meanings of that completely. The curatorial and introductory statement usually contains contextual information for the audience to be able to engage with and experience exhibitions on an interesting level. It is also intended to make people aware the show is happening, and want to visit, in the first place. However, that information also narrows down and frames the interpretation, often explains the works and already interprets them for that potential audience. As a visitor reading a curatorial statement introducing almost any exhibition, one is often left with the incongruity of what those statements are saying and what is actually in the show. It may seem to us as visitors then, that we do not quite 'get it', or get it 'wrong'. Where in fact it is probably more likely that the curator has not themselves seen the

show when they wrote the statement describing it. Unless it is the very first thing the visitor sees (if they skip that introduction, like I always do) they actually know more about what is visible in the show than the curator did at the time of writing, when they come back to read it at the end of their visit.

It is hard to change this order, of writing a description before the exhibition has taken place, because press and visitors need to be able to plan their articles and visits and we want to make sure visitors know about the show in good time before it has to be taken down again. I am trying to get around this writing/analysis-before-the-fact (and translating visual communication into verbal, to which I will return below) by experimenting with a tool that avoids interpreting and explaining, to instead give contextual material in a more open and generous form by using only images, as far as possible. I do include the names of artists and title of the exhibition. This method also addresses the problem of translating texts to different languages, deciding in what written language to communicate. But also, and I think more importantly – although we curators do not tend to discuss this – translation between visual and verbal communication. I am speaking here of myself and colleagues with a background in art history/academia, who are producing exhibitions for larger galleries and institutions and not about artist-curators with a background in fine art that have already had a focus on the visual throughout their education. My concern is also with what academia considers worth knowing – and not worth knowing – as I have written in chapters 2 and 3. Writing cannot be separated from exhibition-making because it is a core part of it. We need to be good at writing about our work or commission good writing because who else will write about it? Paul O'Neill describes this 'usurpation' of the role of the critic in his book *The Culture of Curating and the Curating of Cultures*: 'Alongside the professionalization of contemporary curating, the ascendancy of the curatorial gesture in the 1990s began to establish curatorship as a potential nexus for discussion, critique, and debate, in which the evacuated role of the critic in parallel cultural discourse was usurped by the neocritical space of curating.' (2012 p. 43)

Curators write about their own shows to build on their careers, defend their choices – that may have been nepotistic, or more or less arbitrary – which is not always a problem in itself but leaves us open to criticism. Artists need curators and critics to write about them, for the recognition and for the analyses of how their artworks are perceived. It is therefore interesting and important, both ethically and philosophically, to think about what writing does to art and exhibition experiences.

5.4 Giving Visitors Time, Rather Than it Seeming Like it Takes Time

A decelerated exhibition environment asks the visitor to give it one of their most precious commodities: time. It is also asking the visitor to work for their own interpretation and for the experience to be more meaningful than an instance of consumption or an attempt to collect memories. We are so used to visual communication demanding our attention and wanting to sell us something, and our response to it is automatic: do we like it, do we want it, or not. The Writer and Researcher Melissa Gregg has a clever and prefigurative approach to the problem of time-poverty in her book *Counterproductive – Time Management in the Knowledge Economy*: that (while we are reading her book, which is essentially a self help book) that reading a self help book on time management *gives the reader time* to reflect on issues to do with time (2018 p. 74). A durational information source and introduction to exhibitions could do the same. This is perhaps especially important if the pieces in the show are not so obviously durational, like paintings, sculpture, or photography. Those pieces that are clearly durational, such as film, also need introducing to make visitors more comfortable, and to be fairer to the works as well. I would argue we should make people feel like they have time to immerse themselves, rather than having to look at the plaque to see how long something is going to 'take'. Seeing an exhibition does take time but our generosity and care in providing a context, as well as an intriguing and suitable physical space, gives people the time to just look and think, that is so hard to come by elsewhere. We are also not asking them to provide anything – the visitor is not a producer or content generator, for once, in this current climate of all-pervasive free media that are in fact completely reliant on our unpaid contributions and attention.

The information antechamber, like I mentioned before, is a space to land as the visitor comes in from the street. A place to start to shake off the concerns of everyday life and time pressures, what usually demands our attention, and focus on the things that do not get much consideration otherwise. To start to feel, as when we are in the company of people we really appreciate, in the words of Hisham Matar (describing his time in Siena): '… I am where I am meant to be and utterly free from the wish to be anywhere else. … Everything I experienced was happening at the pace at which it ought to happen. … I found something in Siena for which I am yet to have a description, but for which I have been searching …' (2019, pp. 96-97)

Key to experiencing art is being open and sensitive, alert and not to screen anything out. That requires trust. A visitor needs to be able to trust the curator, and the artists, to not be violated in any sense by sheer insensitivity, or bored by superficiality. We are responsible as curators (we are, after all, literally 'carers') to uphold and further this trust and that is another

reason why we have to make more effort to work with greater consideration and presence. Even if it is slower and less efficient, thus currently (certainly in the UK) difficult to justify economically to those in charge of budgets and funding.

5.5 Leaving Interpretations Open

Not-knowing, as discussed in chapter 3, frees me from having to explain and deliver something, make it digestible and instead offer a complex for visitors to engage with. I signal that there is no end to these thoughts, resist the wanting to 'get' something, not to collect experiences, shows or artworks but engage in communal thinking with them. With humility before the realisation that we cannot know certain things.

The information antechamber should suggest a richness of material, not be an attempt to control interpretation. It should be comfortable enough for people to want to open up and trust, and intriguing enough for them to want to engage and work a little bit for their own interpretation. I do not mean by this an aim to be productive – it is important there is no product, neither material nor something like a cultural asset – but that the aim is to just look and think. To embrace peripheral vision: to enter, and try to take it all in even if we cannot, just immerse oneself and then move on to the next room. The information antechamber should suggest themes that I have found while engaging with artworks, and the artists more generally. It is fed by experiences and insights from artistic practice and I am treating images exactly like I would treat words: they are the language in which I communicate what I have seen and thought. They are as good, and as inadequate, as verbal communication, and the motivation behind them is to introduce the artworks and exhibitions to people who have not seen them before. Or to show them in a different context, to those who have, lift out other aspects of something familiar. As a curator, I am directing the visitor's attention towards certain things because we can never look at every aspect of artworks, our time is precious and our attention-span is limited. People want an introduction and I intend to give it, just not in the form of an already interpreted explanation, at least not if I can help it.

The information antechamber also looks nothing like an expert opinion since it is not 'efficiently' communicated and neatly tied up but is about associations. I am speaking through images as the curator of that show, but I am only one viewer with a subjective interpretation, of the works and the show as a whole. After all, it is only fair that I who have been thinking about this project for months should introduce it to someone who has just come across it, not knowing why this is being shown here and now. I can point to some of the things that made

me think, that made me want to exhibit those particular works. There can be a generosity in showing the multiplicity of points of access and departure, of ideas and individual artworks, encourage that kind of 'creative suspension' I mentioned in chapter 2, and resist trying to pin down what the exhibition is 'about'.

5.6 Information Antechamber Experiments

The content of the information antechamber needs to be flexible and it may suffer time constraints because, at least the way I have been experimenting with it recently, ideally it needs to be made during the exhibition install. While it is extremely hard to get the peace of mind to develop the material content for the information antechamber when installing, it is worth that pressure and we could factor in more time for that while planning future installs. It is the most fair towards the artworks and artists to actually see what the exhibition is, what the effects are of artworks on one another, what that new context is, before attempting to describe it in an introductory text. I have found that having the option to change slides in the projection at the last minute, or even during the run of the show, after looking closely, and after feedback from the artists involved or from colleagues or visitors, is key to making an introduction that is suitable for what is actually taking place in that gallery at that specific time. Not, then, describing what was planned to happen. That planned exhibition is an entirely, not uninteresting but different, matter.

5.6.1 *Neuromantics:Reset* Screening with Non-Art 'Spacers'

In a film programme I co-curated with the artist Warren Garland, which is called *Neuromantics: Reset* we used a film of a crackling log-fire in a fireplace as a 'spacer' between artworks. We use what we call spacers in all our film programmes because we find it problematic how showing one film after another does not give each film the space it deserves – they influence each other and end up merging. It is also exhausting as a viewer to be thrown into different 'worlds' with no time to reflect in between. On this occasion the screening was in the winter (November 2017), so the fire was intended to 'warm' the audience, if only visually, and it was an effort to stimulate the viewer's eyes like I have just mentioned – to tempt them to linger on the disappearing outlines of flames as they lick the surface of what they consume – while at the same time giving them a break from the politically and philosophically loaded previous film in the programme. It was a space to think, before the next film started. It was also a metaphor for themes in the film programme around a feeling of comfort and safety, a fire is a life-giving

force while at the same time being deadly destructive if not contained in a fireplace. At five minutes it was perhaps a little long and may have looked like the intermission in a long movie. It was only a third of the way through a one-hour-long programme. People did not seem to focus on it and think of it as a metaphor. They picked up their phones and one person went to the toilet. How do we let people also see the fireplace? Not just think of it as non-art, or an intermission in which to just continue normal activities (as a producer/consumer) and be concerned with what they are missing out on outside.

5.6.2 Ana Teles's Studio, First-Year-PhD-Exhibition

The first information antechamber made as part of the Slow Works project was my contribution to the First-year-PhD exhibition at Chelsea College of Arts. (Pictures in appendix II.) Being only six months into the programme, it had a degree of freedom to experiment that came at exactly the right time for me. I was able to test my ideas in practice where recently conceived strategy was put to the test immediately and simply. The relatively low pressure to 'succeed' or prove anything to others at such an early stage was also the perfect opportunity to collaborate with my new colleague Ana Teles.

Through discussions with colleagues and other artists I collaborated with at the time, I realised images would need to be back-projected but that that would take too much space, and be hard to accomplish in the cube-structure that was my share of the exhibition space. Visitors would shade the projection as they went closer and got immersed. A corner-projection would be the best solution for this space and details had to be big in the pictures so that visitors could stand at the entrance of the information antechamber and at the same time be able to see Ana Teles in the process of copying a painting at the other end of the gallery.

I did a 24-hour 'expanded' studio visit to Ana's studio at home in Hastings a few weeks before the show and did a complete 'scan' of her studio using my phone-camera, with an overview-shot to orient viewers, and some details in close-up.

5.6.3 Working on the *Cosmic Play* Exhibition

The following is the thought process and priorities, some starting points for this and subsequent exhibitions:

What needs to be in the information antechamber?

1. Exhibition introduction

Details do work, I saw that in Leicester New Walk Gallery's exhibition of German Expressionism. Can take pictures of Ana's work, that I haven't even seen yet, when we install on the first day and easily add those slides for the next day. That's why projections are ideal, so flexible and can develop as we go along. Be true to the exhibition, much more so than a statement that is often written weeks ahead in order to be sent to press or included in a catalogue.

Do I have to separate details from Ana's and Ralph's work? Yes. Project on different screens and repeat their names on those screens. The fact that most of Ana's work is blue cyanotypes will hopefully make it clearer what works are hers without having to put names next to them.

2. Title
Include the title so it is clearer to visitors it is not an artwork.

3. Google images to do with memories, childhood, melancholy, punk (and Rauschenberg but rather not reference him?), the seriousness of play, excursions or travelling thorough a landscape that feels a bit depressing but we don't yet (perhaps as we get older and have time to reflect we do) know why. Frame them so it's clear they are not part of an artwork? Do a trial! I have many close-ups of Ralph's work already (from studio visits and and two works I had borrowed for a couple of months before the show to 'live with' and experience over an extended period of time), start looking for digital images. Perhaps have those found digital images on a third screen? Look at Ralph's work again, real pieces here and photos from studio visit. What am I seeing?

I did not end up using any images sourced from the internet as I was trying to keep it simple and also wishing to avoid copyright infringement by using images that I did not have explicit permission to use.

Final thoughts: I want to think as much as possible before I have to introduce it but… should have done these slides two weeks ago. Now there is a bit of a rush, but it is also enjoyable to do it quickly. And there is an energy in it because of the rush. If I had done it sooner, it would be different but not necessarily better. Perhaps I would have redone it if I had the time and that would have meant a second interpretation or introduction and maybe the audience then would miss the initial version that might be more helpful. There shouldn't be too many steps already taken when I introduce works.

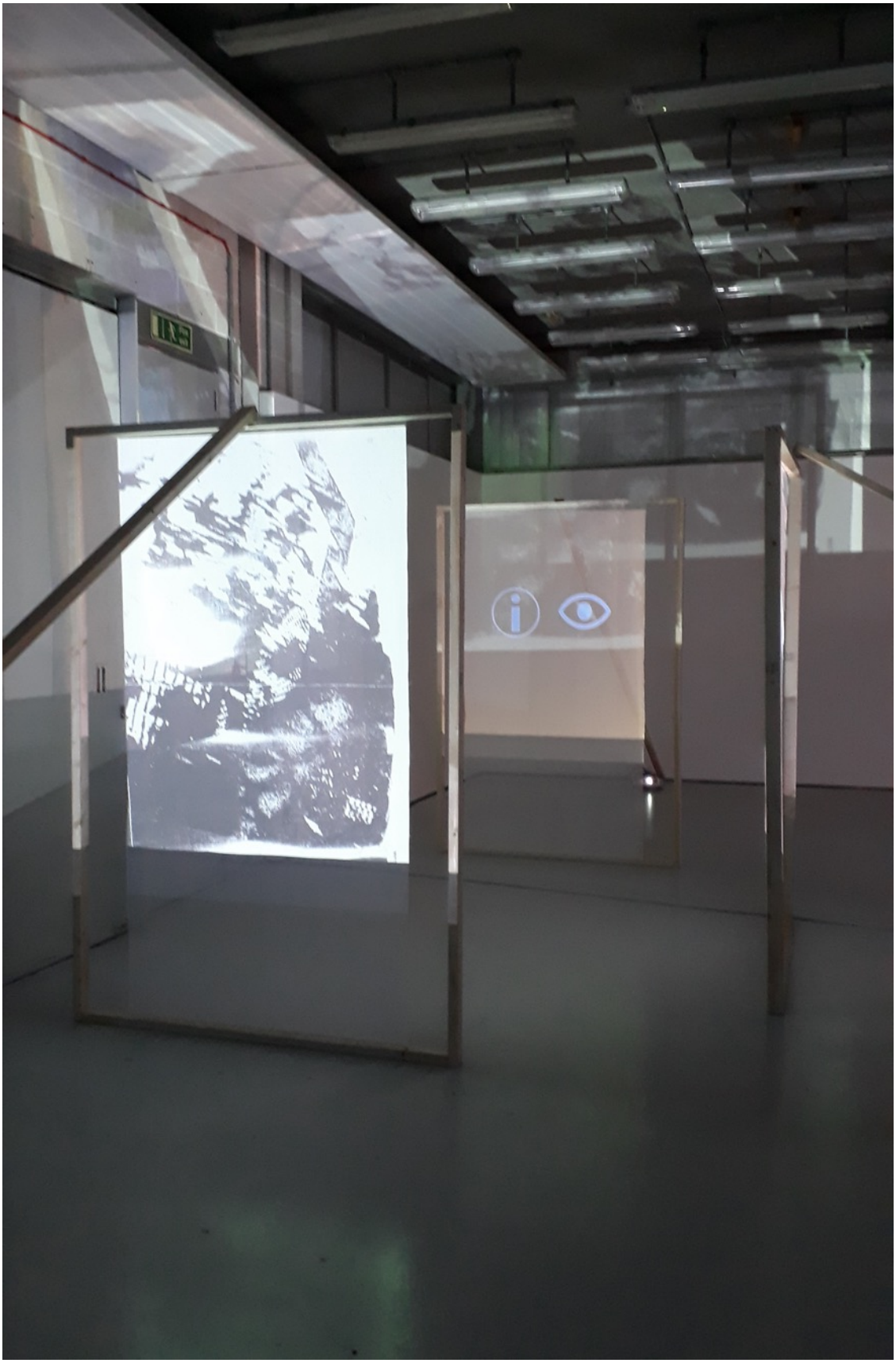
I have started re-introducing some writing such as the title of the exhibition, names of the artists and the words 'visual information' along with symbols for vision: an eye, and for information: an 'i' in a circle. This also helps to indicate that this is not an artwork but a visual version, and the equivalent, of the written statement one usually finds on the wall or on a sheet of paper/booklet at the entrance of exhibitions.

At the beginning of this research project, I considered using survey forms in exhibitions to gauge the visitor's experience of the information antechamber and find out to what extent it could replace the verbal introduction, as well as how other aspects of my curating comes across. However, with the university's insistence on securing written consent, and handing each contributor to the survey a written information sheet about the project, this turned out to be quite the sabotage of a study of an exhibition experience without written materials. I also found I wanted the audience to be able to stay in the thoughts that had started inside the exhibition and not pounce on them as they leave, with questions that could lead them to my interpretations and intentions behind the exhibition, rather than the experience they had already had by being present. I also did not want to rush reflections that should have time to develop over days or weeks and in an attempt to avoid this, during one exhibition period, I collected email addresses of those who filled out audience experience surveys and invited them to an informal discussion two weeks later. Only one person attended. I abandoned these plans for feedback and have relied on discussions with colleagues, artists, and others who I have met in the exhibition, or invited there, to hear their reflections, along with my own observations on how the audience moves in relation to artworks and their responses, without having to explicitly give it on a form.

Because of the layout of the Triangle Space at Chelsea, being just one room of 2000 sq ft with four movable wall-blocks of around 2x10 ft, with a wall of windows, letting in a lot of daylight apart from during the opening, and the artworks were prints, with one moving image piece on a monitor, there was a situation of artworks needing rather a lot of light whereas my projection onto semi-transparent fabric in the information antechamber needed darker conditions for details to show crisply. After discussing with the artists, I ended up switching lights on and off, and this worked surprisingly well and led to my understanding something about lighting and testing lights, or darkness. I was in the space during the whole exhibition and noticed how visitors went close up to the works when the lights were low, they were more immersed and looked at detail, and as they moved further away to take in the whole of the larger pieces, I would switch on the lights, and colours would come out. Although colours

were also interesting to see in the darker setting, especially deep dark surfaces and highlights. We ended up with two different exhibitions and the visitors were able to see them both and compare. I alternated lighter and darker conditions according to where visitors were in the space.

Exhibition documentation (more in appendix II):



5.6.3 19-19 - *En konsthistoria från 1919 till 2019* [A History of Art From 1919 to 2019] Exhibition Vasteras Information Antechamber

'There is something about gently moving shadows that
makes me never want to lift my gaze.'
Hisham Matar (2019, p. 100)

For the first time, I made an information antechamber for an existing exhibition. There were no studio visits in my preparing it but visits to the storage/magazine, local council offices where I was allowed to accompany the Conservator Christina Runesson when she installed paintings and prints on loan from the collection with her colleague Karin Olofsson. I was able to study the make-up of the city and the visitors to the museum, also those who do not usually visit, the collection and space itself – a magnificent former industrial red brick building. During the annual culture-night event – when visitors came that prefer the festival atmosphere and can bring their whole family – while invigilating, I began conversations with a few visitors who seemed interested to talk. I found a visual-skill-set that former technical staff have, who had been working in that very factory or for the council as engineers, that I want to encourage and keep in mind when I am considering the material that goes into the information antechamber and when decisions are made as to what artworks are included in exhibitions locally.

I had not worked with, or in, Vasteras before and only discovered and became intrigued and delighted with the museum when I had booked a flight from the 'wrong' budget airport near Stockholm the previous Christmas. I decided to make a day of it – to see if there was an art gallery – and found the art museum, and the local history museum next door, in the former ASEA electrical factory as well as a city with contrasts between an abundance of shopping malls, a stunning brickwork cathedral and a museum-class block of old worker's housing on a raging river right in the centre of town.

There were at least eight apparent or planned and outspoken themes in the 19-19 exhibition and it was organised chronologically (apart from a special focus on the female body throughout art history): Neue Sachlichkeit [New Objectivity], portraits, the Gothenburg colourists [Göteborgskoloristerna], Surrealism, Abstraction, 'political art' (leftist), the female body in art history, women artists on their own bodies/portraits, the absurd and humorous (satire), the artist as researcher that moves freely between media.

There were a striking number of portraits, works by famous artists, but not necessarily

their best as they would have had to have been for sale, and affordable for the institution (which is the issue shaping all collections, apart from those of the biggest, most powerful, institutions). Strong women, experimental, humility, anger, politically motivated, and critical against oppression. This was also true of the screened-off area on the female body in art history, although the separation with a thick pleated fabric – similar to those in passport photo booths that are cropped so nothing unseemly goes on behind it – gave those works an air of shame and fetischisation and, if that is possible, objectifying those female bodies even more. I should add that this was also in response to, and in the context of, an exhibition on feminism and activism in a Gorilla Girls retrospective in an adjacent room. *19-19* was a large exhibition upon the centenary of the wonderful and diverse collection belonging to the people of Vasteras, and was a huge act of generosity spanning an enormous amount of artists and interests, techniques and themes. For my experimental re-introduction, the information antechamber, I thought perhaps I could narrow down the scope and present a subjective, but done by a professional, selection, a 'best of …'. I was in a sense re-curating the exhibition, temporarily and without physically touching the displays or artworks, and was incredibly grateful to Katrin Ingelstedt, lead curator of the exhibition, who gave me completely free hands to do this. A generous exhibition but also demanding, and it became a test, that I think many, especially regular, visitors enjoy: Do you know your Swedish art history? Which artist is this? You should know this artist/work…

The exhibition had a timeline running along the base of the wall in a very effective way without interfering with artworks but giving four types of dates of significance: significant dates in the history of Vasteras city, within feminism, and in national as well as international developments.

I decided to show details that had grabbed my attention at my first visit, without thinking too hard about what they were, while also being sensitive to whether they are inappropriate or misleading, misrepresentative of the works, before I let them stay. It became a good self-limited selection of around 30 images since it was based on, and generated through, that one single first visit of my own. I did add to this a few details of works that had not grabbed my attention during the first visit but that I had found because I had been looking for longer.

The physical space for the information antechamber was a passage from one room to another, from interactive meeting-space (sometimes used for pram-parking) into a concentrated and demanding huge selection of fine art. Around a hundred pieces, I would say, mostly painting but also some sculpture.

Many visitors ask for a leaflet and I want them to feel they have access to the information they 'need' but not give them a leaflet just because they are expecting one. Colleagues in Vasteras wanted me to address this desire to be informed, and write a short information panel if only to make clear it is not an artwork. The consensus was that most visitors would assume this, and be annoyed if there was no information about the artist or title nearby. I ended up writing this label next to the entrance of the information antechamber as a compromise:

Visuell introduktion till utställningen '19-19' av frilanscuratorn och doktoranden Emma Gradin (London/Stockholm) som en del av hennes forskning om att sakta ner konstupplevelser. [Visual introduction to the exhibition '19-19' by freelance curator and PhD student Emma Gradin (London/Stockholm) as part of her research on slowing down art experiences.]

Even as we were installing the fabric – six metre long and three metre wide pieces of semi-transparent fire-proof netting suspended from the ceiling – made a big difference to how the space was experienced. The fabric hanging, free flowing but guided into an ovoid shape with the help of an ingenious and inexpensive construction by in-house technician Bengt Anderson using a flexible plastic plumbing pipe. It was billowing like water, or a jelly fish, as people approached and made a serene calm space in which to land. The sun came in through the windows behind it and threw chequered shapes from the window panes, extraordinarily beautiful and made me see the space differently. It made me see those windows, and that passage at all. From a void into a space, a place to land or feel almost born(e) into the exhibition. In my notes from that first day of installing, I wrote: It slows you down by narrowing the space like a traffic control measure would do but not aggressively or intrusively. It meets you and lets you pass in a slightly better mood than when you arrived.

I had my landlady in mind, who I had spoken to a couple of weeks earlier while planning this experiment. She said then she does not go to the museum very often (even though she is good friends with at least one of the staff there and works with aesthetics and design) as she finds it rather dreary and demanding. I asked her how an exhibition should be for someone who feels the same way to want to engage with it. More like a shopping experience, she said, in how that is directed at you and grabs your attention. As I was observing the finished information antechamber from a sofa in the connected room, I heard a young girl exclaim 'WOOOOW, a portal! Wooow!' And she stroked and worshipped the projection until I said not to touch.. Immediately, I regretted interrupting, and hopefully being told to stop is not

what she remembers from the visit. This is a constant problem with something that is also a huge blessing as it draws a wide audience: having the very interactive and touch-friendly local history museum as a neighbour.

I spent a lot of time in the gallery while installing and testing the content of the information antechamber, and also when it was finished – from a distance that did not interfere with visitors experiences – and it was clear that simply suspending fabric in a passage between two rooms of a vast industrial building with very high ceilings, before I had even started to project the images I was going to use for slowing down experiences, made people slow down. There was a gentleness in the architecture then that made it feel very different. Much research has of course gone into exhibition architecture but I will not recount that here.

Documentation from information antechamber for 19-19-exhibition (more in appendix III):

CONCLUSION

A curator that does not take the time to think, do research, or properly collaborate and listen to the artist, ends up doing what any producer or worker who just makes goods or provides services for the accumulation of wealth does; they are just providing content. The making *is* the thinking and of course the end result is a 'product' but to avoid instrumentalisation, it has to be allowed to be unfinished. We finish it when we connect with it.

Curators need to have, and take, time to make the content and the tools of mediation. We are the ones who have spent time in the gallery with artworks, with audiences, we made decisions about what was included, and what was not. That is the knowledge, the information that goes into the mediation, the information antechamber, in my case. If we give the job of mediation to someone who says they can do it faster, we should have a discussion first about what is worth doing and what we do have time to do, if not that. A curatorial team should have skills that are necessary should we need to put something in writing, or use images when they are more suitable. Curating should be about testing things, to let people be surprised by what is possible. That includes surprising ourselves. As curators and academics we cannot be anxiously avoiding mistakes because we are making mistakes as it is, anyway, in the way we are doing things now.

A 'decelerated' exhibition presents visitors with a structured wealth of contextual material informed by artistic practice and process, enabling audiences to cultivate curiosity and engage in self-directed exploration, on their own terms and in their own time. Foregone conclusions based on theoretical argument have to be avoided. A decelerated exhibition does not explain works or themes in the written or spoken word, or cloak them in theory, which is almost always the case in contemporary curating.

The prefigurative method of using deliberately experimental implementations of desired future relations between, in this case, exhibition visitors and artworks, the artists who made those works and the visitors, artists and curators, curators and artworks, proves we can do things differently and means the change has already started.

In my research I have tried to avoid translation from visual to verbal communication and to remove as much written language from the mediation of works as possible. I instead let the contextual information and introduction be shaped by the kind of looking and thinking that goes into making work. If we have a limited amount of time in the gallery, it should be used to do what cannot be done on a computer, phone or in a book to read at home: to be

present before the artwork and immerse ourselves in it.

I do privilege the visual before any other form of expression in my research but it is not only about optical seeing but about being present in a space conducive to looking, and 'having the time' to look, and think. It is a very private experience to face your dreams and fears and think about what our obligations and desires are. But it is also communal in that so many of us share similar thoughts and ideas. To share those with a person (through their artworks) we do not know personally makes a community, and is very different to thinking these thoughts alone. It is harder to find this connection and the peace to engage with public sculpture outside, on the street, or in a park. There are moments when this does happen but ideally, I wish to make people feel comfortable just looking at something for an extended period of time, say for half an hour, as in the encounter I recount in chapter 3: Not knowing exactly what we are looking at but to just stay in this state. I came away from that experience wondering if I have ever really seen artworks before, and that I need to see them all again.

Any curator who seriously wants to dismantle informal hierarchies and decolonise the making and experiencing of exhibitions also has to ask themselves: How can we expect people to be able to look at art in a concentrated and meaningful way if we have not ensured they have the time, space and skills to actually do it? Without wishing to patronise visitors, I also cannot assume it is their individual responsibility to prepare for looking.

It is a skill to look at paintings. Visual skills come from all sorts of things we do, jobs or hobby. Skills in looking *are* specialised: I know what fabrics feel like from making my own clothes, and how different fabrics 'behave'. That probably gives me a more intimate, more haptic, experience of skilfully painted folded fabrics than it would someone who is not as used to, or interested in, handling it. Looking is specialised but all specialisms should be welcome. Not just art-specific, or academic, art historic. Not text-based knowledge before visual or haptic knowledge. A lot of work is text-based now, not just in academia, and a lot of our interface with the world around us is text. Decolonising the art world and academia involves looking at what is deemed as 'not academically relevant' (that already fits into our canon) and consciously engage with knowledge and skills from places outside, from the periphery, whether it be geographically distant or just not usually let in.

A lot of curatorial work is done out of habit and it is hard to change our behaviour if everything around us constantly reminds us of who we are and what we usually do. Some colleagues may be reluctant to give up a position of power they have worked hard to reach. A curator's specialism gives authority to opinions and an expert interpretation of art that visitors

often do want to hear. My critique and refusal of this authority is an attempt to make art experiences more democratically available, less intimidating, and less elitist. There is a lot of effort made by public museums to reach new audiences but we are not likely to attract people who are not already comfortable in a gallery or feel that art is 'for' them if we keep on making exhibitions that respond to the feedback of the people who are visiting them now.

With the Covid-19 pandemic and lockdowns there has already been a paradigmatic shift. Many of us (involuntarily) slowed down our daily lives during national lockdowns. Many are working even harder than before. With the shared experience of lockdowns it has become easier to talk about slowing down and we all had to find new ways of doing what earlier seemed to be the only way of doing things. A lot of solutions were found online but when galleries are closed we also realise more than ever before how important they are, what we miss, that we need places outside our homes, space to experience, to see and hear things together with other people. To have material objects before us that we can relate to and form a connection with, to think thoughts we would not otherwise have had. Living with such an immediate threat to life – both life as we know it and more literally – as the Covid-19 virus has posed, makes us think about what is worth living for. Why fight so hard to survive, and save the economy, if all we can do is go to work and go straight home after. Or not even leave home and our only connection to the outside is through a screen or mobile device.

We must not kill with control what art exhibitions are, we must not say yes to all the regulations during a pandemic, to one-way systems and policing people as they are trying to engage with works. A visit that starts with queueing and waiting will be entirely different from the usual generosity of flowing through the doors without booking in advance.

The paradigmatic shift I was aiming for in my research is already here but we have to shape it to something that is good for the future and sustainable – not just environmentally but ethically – across the board.

Going forward, this PhD research will form a base for practical implementation and further action-based research on slowing down the experiencing of art in galleries, and slowing down the curatorial process in general. While continuing to make exhibitions in collaboration with contemporary artists in London, Stockholm and Berlin, continuing to experiment with using the the tools developed during this PhD – the information antechamber, the expanded studio visit – a plan is also being drawn up for a post-doctoral research project with one of the galleries holding the British public's art collections. The objective and purpose of which is to increase accessibility and inclusivity for visitors that currently face language-barriers,

younger/older generations, those without higher education and former knowledge of art and art history. To increase engagement, increase freedom to interpret and give visitors a sense that they 'have time' and are intrigued, in response to the two major reasons adults do not currently visit public art galleries and museums.

Slow Works provides a model for a bridge to visitors, particularly those that do not have the education or already the interest to engage with bodies of research but bring their life knowledge to interpretations of artworks. With deceleration as its focus, and immersion as an anchor that makes the visitor more present in the physical space, images of details are cues to paintings in the adjacent rooms and there is an emphasis on the importance of not-knowing and thinking through making, rather than storytelling or a narrative. This will be aimed at all visitors but mainly adults (similar to the usual wall-texts in exhibitions).

Experimental development of the information antechamber is driven by the need to improve audience engagement and mediation, to reshape exhibition experiences. The next step is to generate new research findings such as how spatial and light-conditions can prepare visitors for engagement and remove barriers for those visitors who do not currently feel entitled to their own interpretations. It will redesign visitor experiences, change the culture of curating and exhibiting art (history) to widen participation through removing language barriers and increase the public's sense of entitlement to qualitatively excellent experiences with their own collections. They are entitled to their 'dividends' and not enough work is currently done for people to feel they can or should prioritise visiting exhibitions even though exhibitions can increase mental wellbeing, give people a place to think and get away from the pressures of daily life, increase visual skills – applicable also outside the gallery – and, perhaps most importantly, to increase concentration levels.

The methods I have developed during my PhD research give visual cues to expert interpretations while still allowing people their own. It is a pioneering model for the application of research into contemporary artistic work processes to exhibiting art (history), and furthers responsible custodianship through innovative methods of mediation that protect the autonomy of art works while affirming their contemporary relevance.

Part of the plan is to initiate a research advisory panel formed of artists, curators of contemporary art, art history specialists/curators, conservators, and neuroscientists, with a special focus on outreach through radio and TV-media and promotional activities to brief the public on what to expect from slow art experiences, while creating a series of pioneering exhibition experiments.

The broader objectives of the project continue to be to challenge the accelerating temporal logic of capitalism, especially in its attritional impact on our ability fully to engage with art, to demonstrate the value of democratising art spaces and make them more accessible by removing language barriers and to recognise, respect and protect the gallery- (and studio) space as places to think.

GLOSSARY

Below are brief definitions of how I use terms that are discussed in further detail in the full text. These definitions were often arrived at for the purpose of this text and will continue to evolve along with my continued research.

Action-based research

Practical experiments in time and space, learning from doing. Often called practice-based research but since anything can be included in one's practice, theory as well, and the format of a PhD often gives primacy to writing, I have chosen to emphasise the making in my work process.

Art

Anything that someone who thinks of themselves as an artist has made and considers to be art. The intention behind making something is that it is a work of art. See further definitions in the introduction chapter.

Audiences (new)

An audience consists of people who attend exhibitions and events, whether invited or they have found their way in of their own accord, perhaps through chance. New audiences are people who did not previously know they were interested in a particular exhibition or event, or not interested in art in general, either because they have never been introduced to it or they cannot prioritise taking the time to engage.

Curator

A person that cares about art, and mediating it to people. Curators work as a bridge between a work of art (by extension then, artists) and the (potential, intended) audience at their first or continual meeting(s). See further definitions in the introduction.

Decolonisation

To analyse and remove social and political structures that benefit the ruling classes in the West.

Exhibition

Showing artworks in a space, removing them from the environment where they were made, and often putting them next to works by other artists.

Gallery

A physical space where curators, artists and audiences can work, as in look (and listen) and think, differently from other places where work is justified only if it is productive in a capitalist sense.

Instrumentalisation

To use people or things in order to reach results for an individual rather than get to know what we can accomplish together, for each other, and others.

Not-knowing

Letting information exist in a complex, suspending a need to pin it down, and give it time to form new, complex and detailed, perhaps self-contradictory, knowledge.

Paradigm

A set of circumstances that make something possible to grasp and relate to but that can, and must, change when new circumstances come into being for social, environmental or scientific reasons, in order to think in new, or more sustainable, ways.

Peripheral vision

Visual input that occurs outside the (intended) central focus and may not reach our consciousness until (much) later.

Philosophy

Asking questions and letting things be complex. Particularly very hard questions such as what it is to be human.

Power relations (in art)

We all need power to be able to do things. Within a paradigm, only the people who are already in power, and those who follow their methods, can decide what gets done and who should do

it. Ideas outside of this paradigm and power structures relating to it are deemed impossible or not desirable. Because of the subjective aspects to judgements in art it is extremely hard to question decisions about funding and foregrounding certain practice. Achieving a powerful position is often reliant on the support of peers and fosters a culture of 'tribes' with mutual support and loyalty that does not let new thinking in from outsiders or other tribes.

Prefigurativism

Making the change now that you want to see tomorrow. Change is achieved through experimental methods that prove the possibility of change even as they are being tested.

Slowness

A state not conducive to capitalist pressures of being productive, or the accelerated consumerism of our daily lives, but sustainability (not just environmental) and giving people places, and time, to think.

Studio

A physical space where artists can work and think, differently from other places where work is justified only if it is productive in a capitalist sense.

Studio visit

An agreed meeting in an artists' studio (or other space if they do not have a studio) to look at works in progress, discuss the process of making artworks, and in my case exhibitions, and discuss life and art more in general. This approach to talking about work can also be applied outside the art world, when arriving in new circumstances and wanting to learn how other people think and work.

Studio visit (expanded)

As above but there is less of a time- and space limit and the visit can expand to include social or practical aspects outside of, but connected to, the studio and artistic work processes.

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Thank you!

My heartfelt and sincere thanks first of all to my immediate family: Saio Gradin, and Nikolaus Perneczky whose ideas, courage and support has made my research possible and without whom I would not have even attempted to start a PhD-project. Thank you also to my supervisor Jo Melvin for all the support and trust, Malcolm Quinn, Beth Bicher, Nick Tatchell, Athanasis Velios, the Estates-team, Neil Cummings, Paul Goodwin, Dan Byrne-Smith and Paul Coldwell at Chelsea College of Arts, Dan Sturgis, Lucy Steeds, Jane Nobbs, Sam McKeown, Ana Teles, Ralph Overill, Irene Revell, Noah Angell, Francis Gooding, Harriet Salisbury, Warren Garland, Jens Hedin, Sigune Hamann, Jonathan Kearney, Ilona Sagar, Owain Caruana-Davies, Tobias Teschner, Billy Howard Price, Martin Grennberger; Katrin Ingelstedt, Bengt Andersson, Shahla Mohebbi, Christina Runesson, Jenny Hellberg, Åsa Grönlund, Frej Drake, Lina Ahtola and Anna Wignell at Vasteras Museum of Art, Kristina Müntzing; Carol Hughes, Emma Molyneux, Katie Normington, and Jane Gawthrope at technē, Liz Wilkinson, Amanda Windle, Rob Gadie, Ruth Solomons, Hannes Ribarits, Carrick Bell, Dan Richards, William Kherbek, Tom Prater, Kate Fahey, Onyeka Igwe, Tim Smith, Charlotte Warne Thomas, Wayne Binitie, Rosie Ram, Myrto Farmaki, Denise Ackerl, Amy McDonnell, Greer McKeogh, Mo Thropp, David Panos, Anna Ådahl; Sam Basu and Liz Murray at Treignac Projet, Karen Di Franco, Ami Clarke, Pierre Emmanuel Fillet, Anette Sonnewend, Kate O'Shea, Eve Olney, Susan Merrick, Karen Parker, Florence Enock, Arvid Wretman, Theo Forsbeck, Rut Karin Zettergren, Tomas Rydin, Daniel Lergon, Matthew Johnstone, Phoebe Stubbs, Johan Norling, Fanny Paul Clinton, Laura MacCulloch, Hans Rosenström, Ellen Wettmark, Nicolai Gütermann, Katarina Kinzel; Gareth Bell-Jones and Katherine Jackson at Flat Time House, Lynton Talbot, Terry Slater, Nathan Menglef, Niklas Holmgren, Gunnar Nilsson, Hans Hayden, Birgitta Åkerström, Florence Enock, Stella Sideli, Borbala Soos, Simon Lake, Silvie Jacobi, Eva and Gida Perneczky, and, finally, my parents Kerstin and Per Gradin.

APPENDIX I

Artist studio visit questions:
1. Where or how does a film or painting start? [Where does the filming/painting process begin on any one work?] How do you know when it is finished?

2. What made you want to work on this piece? Why now?

3. How do you think about intentionality and is it important that curators and the exhibition visitors know what you thought when you made the work, or why?

4. Is there any kind of material you would NOT want the visitor to see, [like sketches or research material] present in the studio now?

5. What about time in your work? Would you describe your work as slow? [Takes a long time to [learn how to] make, conceive of, finish, look at, lasts a long time?]

6. Can you tell me how you started working with video/screen printing/painting?

7. You are based in [Berlin] and showing in [London], do you think the audience will approach your work differently [t]here?

8. What is the thought process involved in the different stages of a painting/film/print? Is it possible to describe it? [Does one colour determine what the next colour will be? Do you have favourite materials, how a colour moves on the canvas compared to others?]

9. You include text in your artwork, could you tell me about your thinking around using text as well as imagery?

10. What kind of choices are you making in your work?

====

Patricia Norvell's primary interview questions to conceptual artists and Seth Siegelaub, 11 interviews April-July 1969:
1. Currently what are your artistic concerns and how have they evolved?
2. Are you concerned at all with formalist artistic issues?
3. Are you concerned with art objects?
4. Do your aims dictate the presentation of your work and, if so, how?
5. Or do you have choices in its presentation and, if so, what kind?
6. How does documentation function in your work?

(Some of these are quite specific questions relating to conceptual art but I am using them in all my interviews.)

APPENDIX II

Information antechamber: Ana Teles's Studio documentation:

Overview (that was projected on one wall, immediately adjacent to the projection of slides below)

Slides 1-12 (of 63 that were projected for 10 seconds each) effectively a scan of the studio space from ceiling to floor, left to right from entrance, with close-ups of interesting things I (and I imagine the viewer) would like a closer look at.

First-Year-PhD exhibition, Triangle Space, Chelsea College of Arts, March 2017

26 FILMES QUE SE ESCONDEM

1) Mal. Alberto Seixas Santos, Portugal, 1989.
2) O rio do ouro. Paulo Rocha, Portugal, 1998.
3) A Raiz do Coração. Paulo Rocha, Portugal, 2000.
4) Khamjé dorat Nojaat. Abbas Kiarostami, Irão, 1988.
[onde fica a casa do meu amigo?]
5) Zendegui va digar hitch. Abbas Kiarostami, Irão, 1991.
[e a vida continua]
6) Vilarinho das Furnas. António Campos, Portugal, 1971.
7) Histórias selvagens. António Campos, Portugal, 1978.
8) Zu früh, Zu Spät, gyan Maria Straub e Daniele Huillet.
[Demasiado cedo, demasiado tarde] Alemanha, 1981.
9) Portrait of Jason. Shirley Clarke, USA, 1967.
10) Agora e nas. Teresa Villaverde, Portugal, 2009.
11) Celine et Julie vont en bateau. Jacques Rivette, França,
[Celine e Julie Vão de barco] 1974.
12) Sedmi Kinásky. Vera Chytilová, Checoslováquia, 1966.
[Sexuais e atrevidas]
13) O fato completo de a procura de Alberto. Inês de Medeiros, Portugal, 2009.
14) Comédia infantil. Solveig Nordlund, Portugal/Moçambique, 1997.
15) Force of evil. Abraham Polonsky, USA, 1948.
[o poder do mal]
16) Stroszek. Werner Herzog, Alemanha, 1977.
[A canção de Bruno S.]
17) Mariana Alcoforado. (M.M.). Eduardo Geada, Portugal, 1979.
18) Letter from an unknown Woman. Max Ophuls, USA,
[Carta de uma desconhecida] 1948.
19) La maman et la putain. Jean Eustache, França, 1973.
[A mãe e a puta]
20) Beau travail. Claire Denis, França, 1999.
[Belo Trabalho]
21) O Separador (M.M.). Sinde Filipe, Portugal, 1995.
22) Koyaanisqatsi. Godfrey Reggio, USA, 1983.
[a vida fora do equilíbrio (na língua Hopi).]
23) Thirty Two Short films about Glenn Gould. François Girard,
[32 curtas metragens sobre Glenn Gould] Canadá, 1993.
24) Natal. Cláudia Tomaz, Portugal, 2008.
25) Velhas são as trapeiras. Monique Rutler, Portugal, 1979.
26) A lei da terra. Alberto Seixas Santos, Portugal, 1976.

II

Mais 5 FILMES japoneses
seguidos de mais 5 FILMES portugueses:

1) Ninguém Sabe. Hirokazu Kore-eda, 2004.
(Dare mo shiranai)
2) O meu maior desejo. Hirokazu Kore-eda,
(Kiseki) 2011.
3) Um lugar à beira-mar. Takeshi Kitano,
(Ano machi, shiban shigurana umi) 1991.
4) Desgraçadas (Okuribito). Yojiro Takita, 2008.
5) A balada de Narayama. Shohei Imamura,
(Narayama bushiKe) 1983.

1) O Convento. Manoel Oliveira, 1995.
2) Quaresma. José Álvaro Morais, 2003.
3) Agonia gerido Inês de Agosto. Miguel Gomes, 2008.
4) Os mutantes. Teresa Villaverde, 1998.
5) Sangue do meu sangue. João Canijo, 2011.

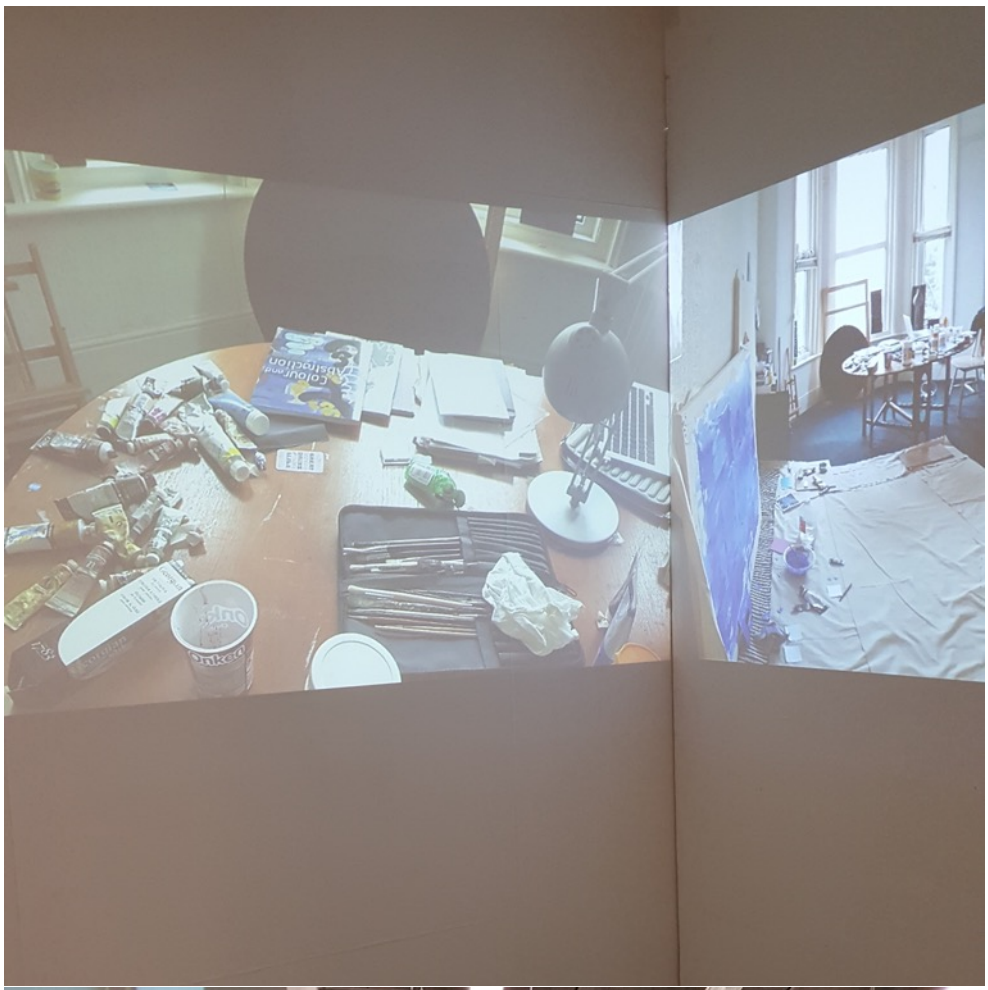
Mais 10 FILMES do Séc. XXI:

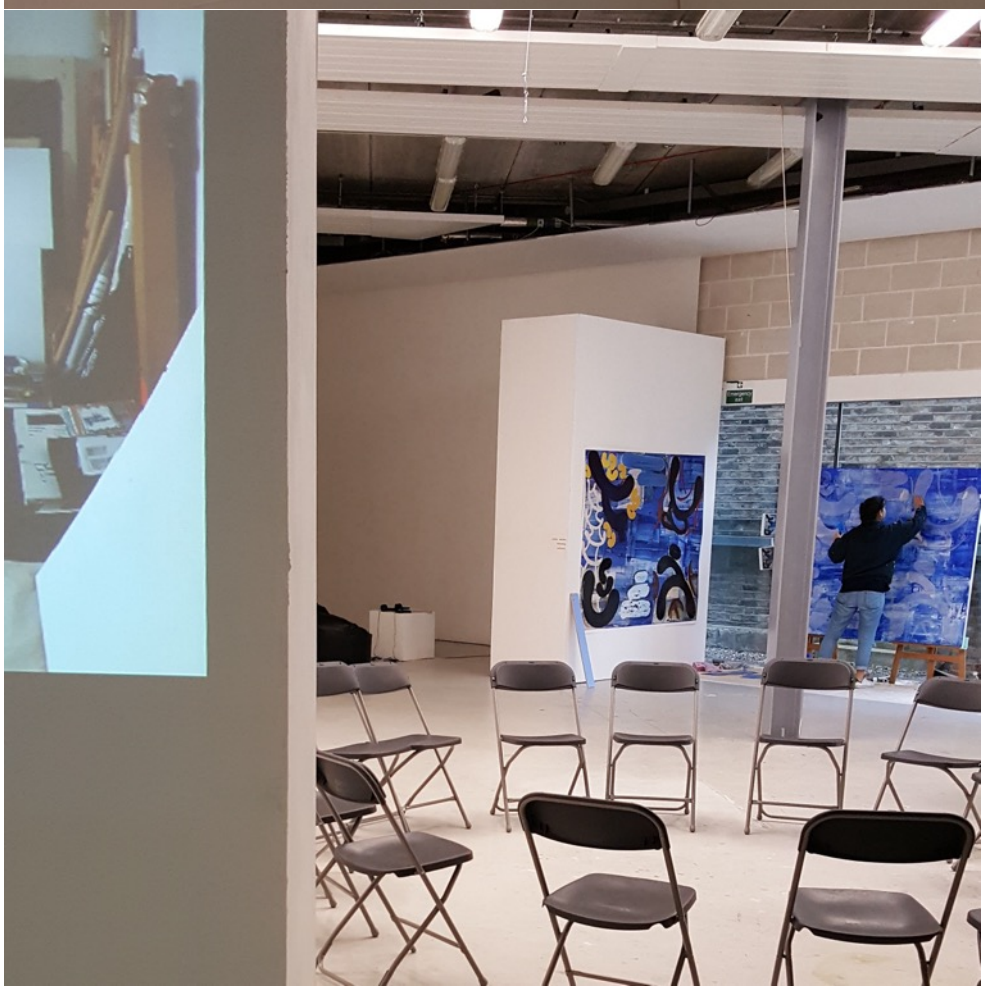
1) Eu, tu e Todos os que Conhecemos. Miranda July,
(Me you and Everyone we Know) USA, 2005.
2) Ferro 3 (Bin-Jip). Kim Ki-Duk, Coreia do Sul, 2004.
3) A história do camelo que chora. Byambasuren Davaa
(Ingen nudnee) e Luigi Falorni, Mongólia, 2003.
4) Caramel (Sukkar banat). Nadine Labaki, Líbano, 2007.
5) Mel (Bal). Semih Kaplanoglu, Turquia, 2010.
6) Eu, tu, eles. Andrucha Waddington, Brasil, 2000.
7) Alice. Marco Martins, Portugal, 2006.
8) Mano-a-mano (Tomboy). Céline Sciamma,
França, 2011.
9) Attenberg. Athina Rachel Tsangari, Grécia,
2010.
10) Isto não é um filme. Jafar Panahi, Irão,
(In film nist) 2010.


Georgian


Georgian


-BACKROUND
-TRY THE GESTURE
WITH ACRYLIC





APPENDIX III

Information antechamber: *Cosmic Play* exhibition documentation

Ana Teles and Ralph Overill, curated by Emma Gradin

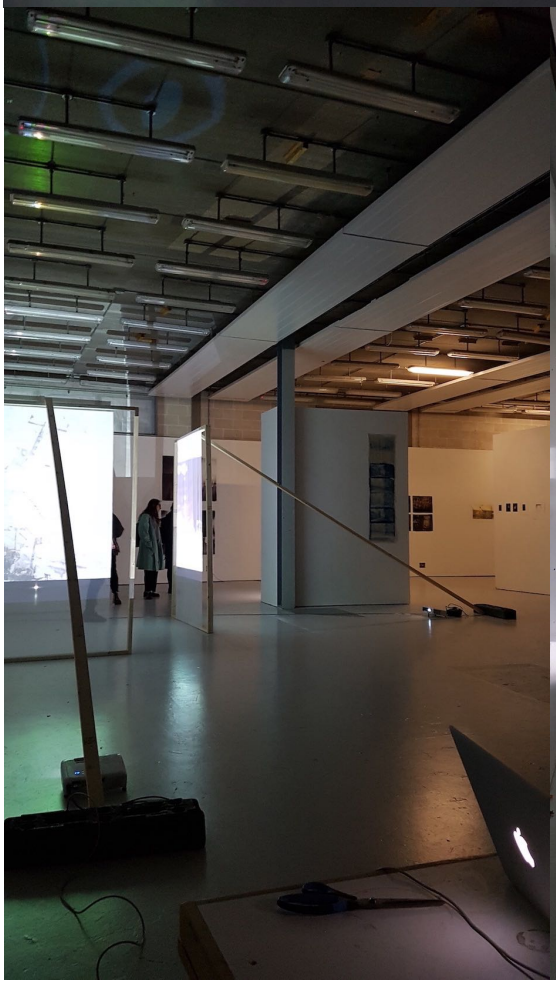
Triangle Space, Chelsea College of Arts, London, November 2018

Exhibition installation shots: Information antechamber, information antechamber overview, exhibition, information antechamber in low light.


information
antechamber

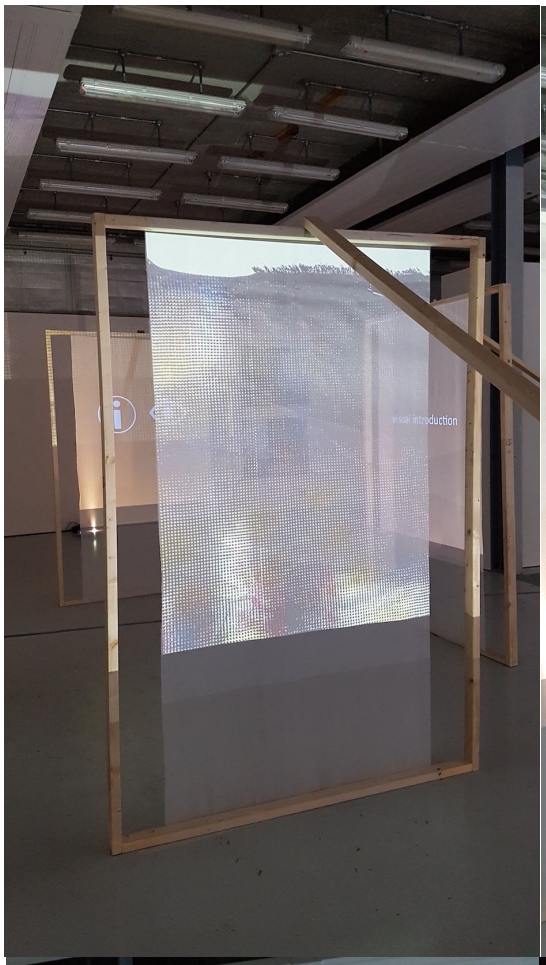

Ana Teles


Cosmic Play
New works by Robin Overill
& Ana Teles
Curated by Emma Gradin



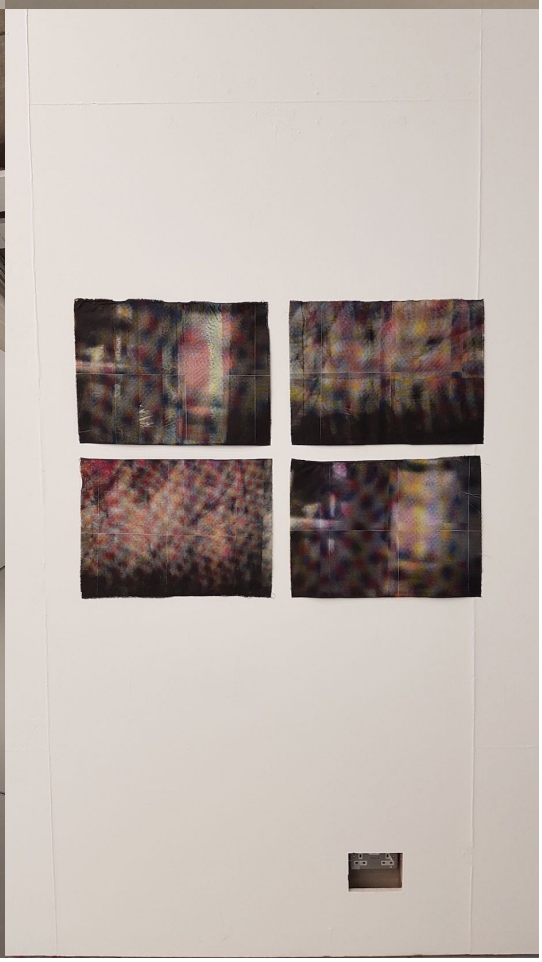

COSMIC
PLAY

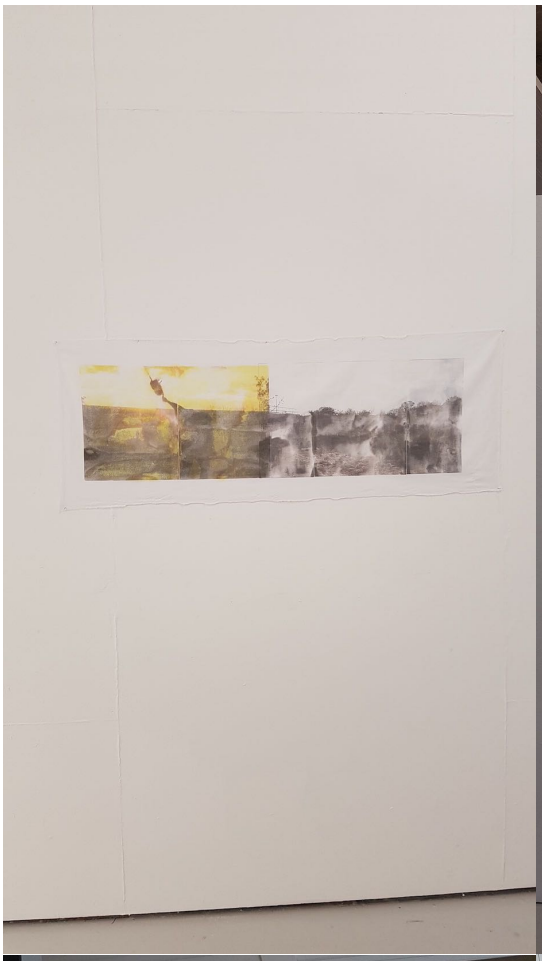

COSMIC
PLAY

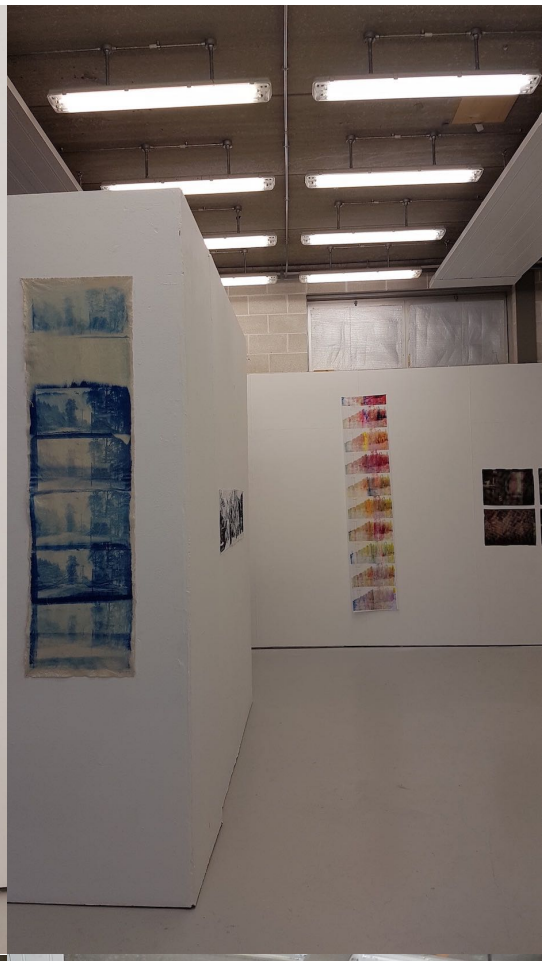



Cosmic Play
New works by Ralph Overill
& Ana Teles
Curated by Emma Gradin

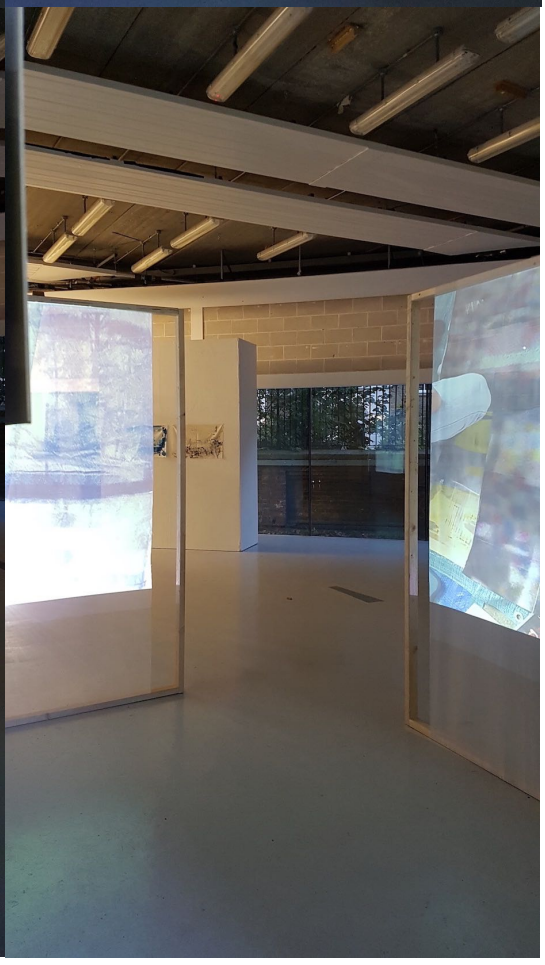

Ana Teles












Overill
Gradin


APPENDIX IV

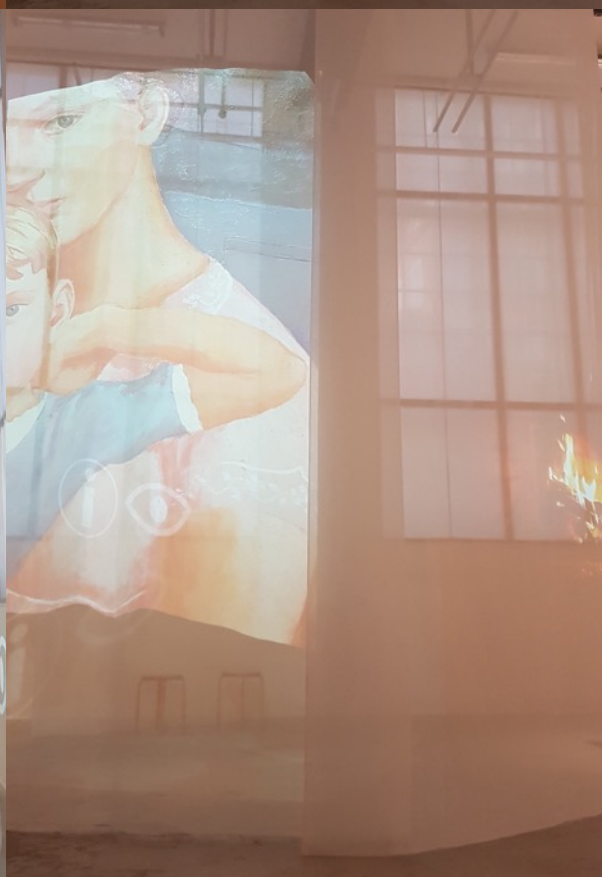
Information antechamber for an existing exhibition, documentation

19-19 Vasteras Museum of Art, May and September 2019

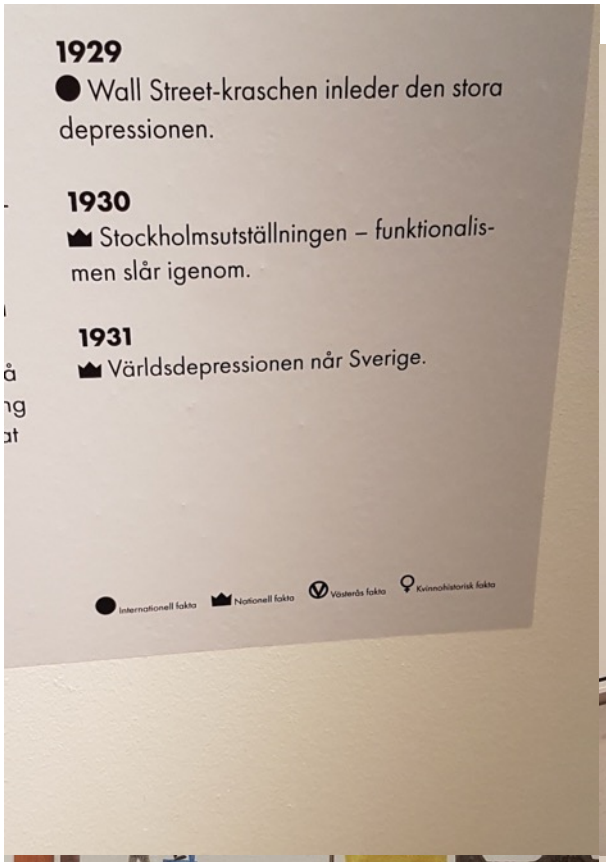
Overview of slides
Example slides
Exhibition installation shots

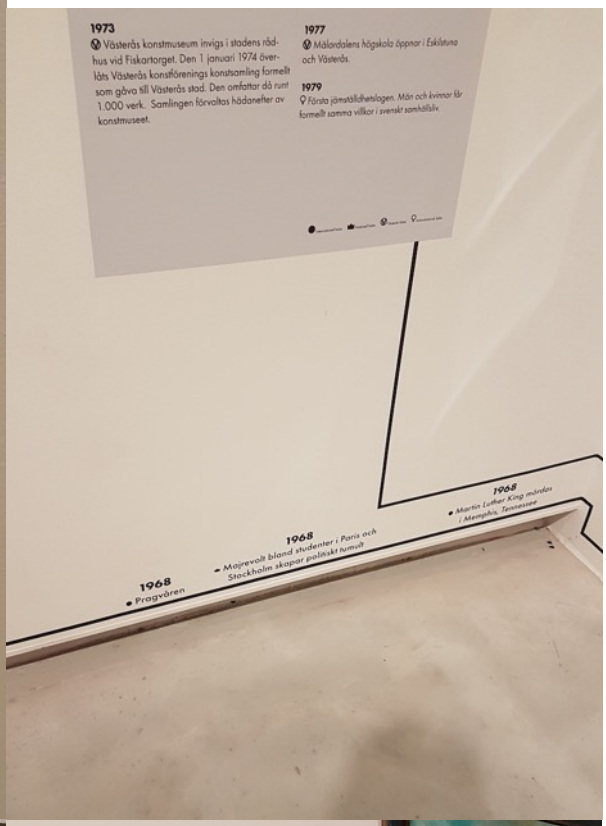
One projection had immersive found footage and was immediately adjacent to a projection of slides (showing for 10 seconds each) with details from artworks in the exhibition as cues.



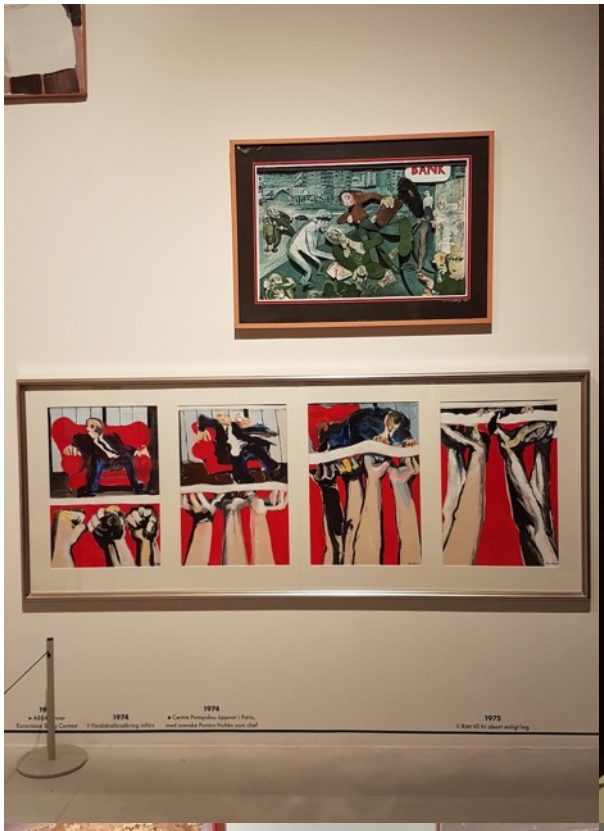



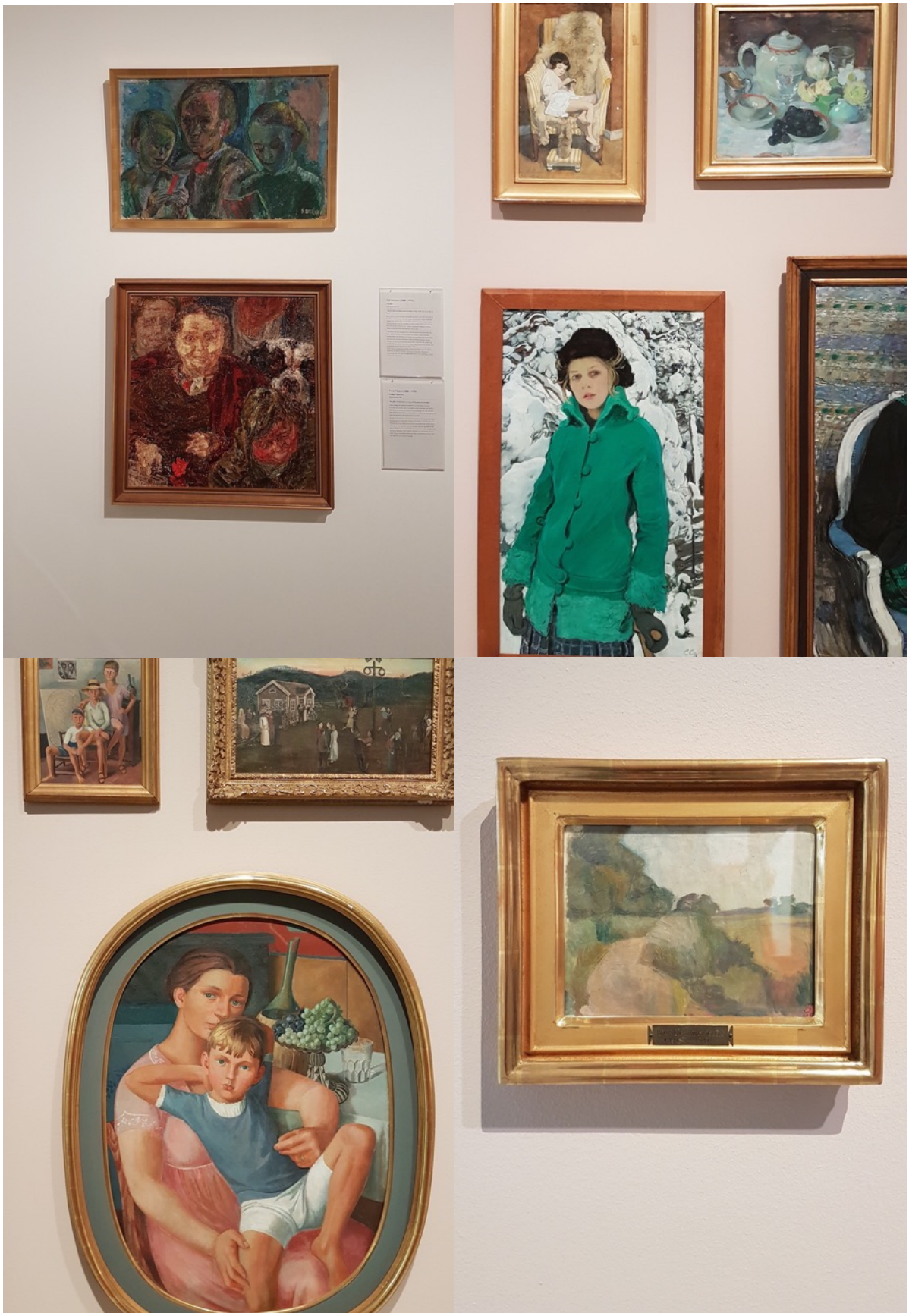

19-19

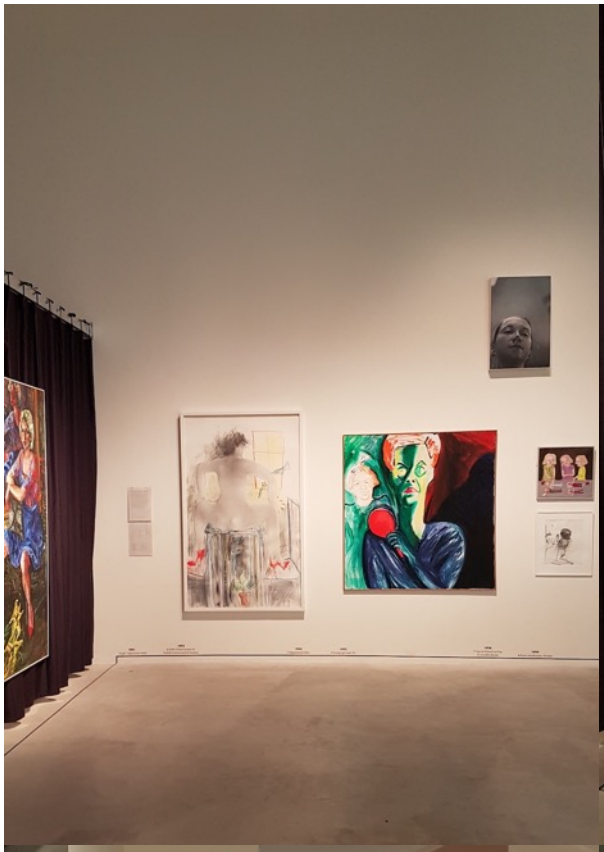

1929
Wall Street-kraschen inleder den stora depressionen.
1930
Stockholmsutställningen – funktionalismen slår igenom.
1931
Världsdepressionen når Sverige.
Internationell fakta
Nationell fakta
Västerås fakta
Kvinnohistorisk fakta


1973
Västerås konstmuseum invigs i stadens rådhus vid Fiskartorget. Den 1 januari 1974 överlåts Västerås konstförenings konstsamling formellt som gåva till Västerås stad. Den omfattar då runt 1.000 verk. Samlingen förvaltas hädanefter av konstmuseet.
1977
Mälardalens högskola öppnar i Eskilstuna och Västerås.
1979
Första jämställdhetslagen. Män och kvinnor får formellt samma villkor i svenskt samhällsliv.
1968
Martin Luther King mördas i Memphis, Tennessee
1968
Majrevolt bland studenter i Paris och Stockholm skapar politiskt turmoil
1968
Prag-våren

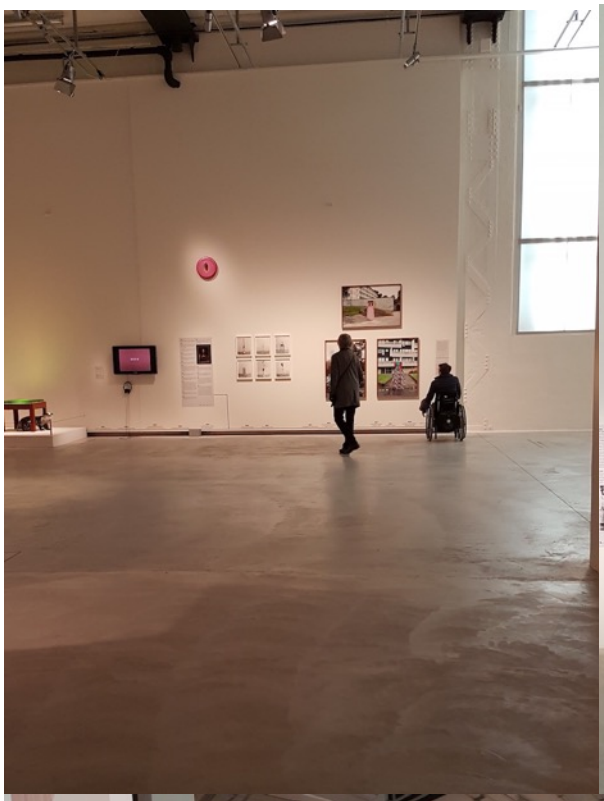

BAR
FARGHAN
CAN

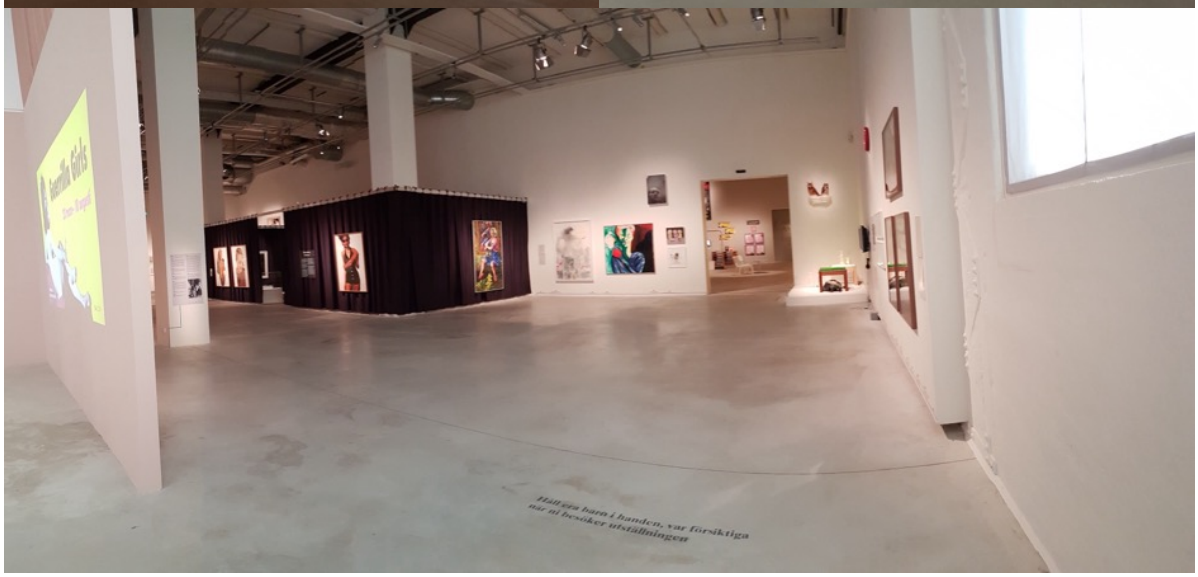

BANK
1974
1974
1975






19-19




Hantverk Etniks
Halltiga barn i banden, var försiktiga
när ni besöker utställningen