

Ghost Singers, Crowd Pleasers, and Non-Participation

A conversation with Bruce Hainley, Karsten Lund,
Ramaya Tegegne, and Helena Vilalta
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Karsten Lund: Thank you all for joining this conversation today. I think this is the first time some of us are meeting each other, so I'm excited to see what unfolds. Ghislaine's last publication, in 2023, was a collection of her own writings, Bosses¹, which interweaves reflections on her practice, passages about being a new mother, and other observations from daily life. In contrast, Ghislaine and I imagined this new book, published by the Renaissance Society, as a collection of other people's voices. So we're talking today without Ghislaine. Instead, it's just the four of us calling in from Houston, Chicago, London—and Ramaya, you're in Switzerland, right now?

Ramaya Tegegne: I'm in Marseille today, actually.

KL: So we're in four different cities. Ghislaine's voice floats in my head often, and maybe yours too, so I'm sure her comments will come up in our discussion, but without her here I suddenly thought of Roberto Bolaño's novel The Savage Detectives, where you have the main characters circling around this missing poet, someone who is always there but also not there. Each of us brings our own relationship to Ghislaine, and I know we've each had different exposures to her work. In the spirit of starting somewhere concrete, I'm curious to hear from each of you: what was the first Ghislaine Leung work you saw, or if you prefer, is there a certain work that you keep coming back to?

Helena Vilalta: I'm happy to start. The first time I saw Ghislaine's work was in East London, in a nonprofit gallery called Cell Project Space, back in 2017. This was one of her first solo shows, titled The Moves. I had known Ghislaine for a few years by then, initially in her role as Distribution Manager at LUX, which is an agency in London that supports moving image work, but this was the first time that I encountered her work as an artist. What I remember about that exhibition most of all is the mood of the space, which, as I remember, played with the contrast between coldness and warmth. There were large glass panels with fragmentary text printed on them and office-looking carpet. But the coldness of these materials was offset by the warm glow of several mushroom-shaped nightlights, plugged into every available power socket in the space—a piece titled Shrooms, which you may have seen in other iterations of the work. At the back of the exhibition space there was a smaller room, with a DIY architectural model sunken in the floor, so that you had to hunch down to see it, vaguely reminiscent of the space that Cell Project Space occupies. As in the main space, a socket within this model had been fitted with another nightlight, this time in the shape of a fairytale house—a kind of Hansel and Gretel situation.

The exhibition spoke to Ghislaine's interest in the structuralist and materialist language of critique, but I was also struck by this sense of intrusion of this other space, this domestic space, maybe even a childish space, erupting into the space of critique. This is something

that intrigues me in her practice, and which she has been pushing more and more in her recent work: this sense of intrusion, aesthetically but also programmatically. So, on the one hand, by amplifying the dark or perverse side of everyday commodities—for instance, baby monitors being used as surveillance devices or inflatables that deflate over the course of the exhibition—and, on the other, by asking structural questions about intrusion and encroachment. For example, thinking about the relation between artistic labor and other forms of work, specifically the work of mothering. What supports what, and what encroaches upon what? And, more broadly, considering the relation between material resources and more embodied, emotional resources.

RT: So I actually met—I'm going to say Gil, which is how I know her—I met Gil in the context of a group exhibition which we were both invited to contribute to, among other artists, and it was in Friart Fribourg in Switzerland. It was a show curated by Balthazar Lovay and the title of the show was the dates of the exhibitions: October 12 – November 25, 2018. The show was about circulations, in its larger sense, so it was addressing working condition hierarchies, institutional authority, and many different things. The work that Gil presented was called Public Sculpture. I have the score here: "A group of toys in the collection of a public library are given a catalogue or call number inclusive of the group. The group is loaned and displayed in an exhibition space." She, or the institution, basically borrows those objects from the library and displays them in exhibition spaces. In Fribourg they were all lined up in one single line, and what struck me was that they were all domestic toys. Somehow the fact that she chose these from all the possible toys—I thought that was very strong. It really, for me, felt like, if you were a girl, or born as a girl, you have to play with toys like these. What it meant was also very strong for me personally.

My work for this exhibition was to invite all the artists in the show to have a conversation the day before the opening. It happened that almost all the artists were present in Switzerland for the show. We all discussed together working conditions, money, and how each had made this show possible for themselves behind the scenes. Just a year before, in 2017, I launched a campaign called Wages For Wages Against, which was, in the beginning, a campaign for the fair remuneration of artists—or just for the remuneration of artists at all, because in 2017 in Switzerland, nobody was paid for a show. Then, for this specific show in 2018, all the artists received a fee, and for me that was one of the first times I received a fee as an artist. So, we basically discussed this. I think it's somehow very connected to Gil's work in general, this question of how we make things happen in the background and the connection of that to the actual work.

Bruce Hainley: For me, it depends on what we mean by "first" and by "seeing." Preparing for today, it hit me that I've only actually seen Ghislaine's work in person a single time—that was Balances at Maxwell Graham, in 2022. Ghislaine did not travel to New York for that show, and the monies that would have flown her to New York and paid for accommodations, etc., were donated to A Better Balance, a local caregiver support organization that describes itself as "the work and family legal center."

I first noticed her work though because of her show at Chisenhale in 2019. After seeing documentation of that exhibition, I started looking around, thinking about her work, reading about it. I asked her to speak at an MFA program I was teaching in, and we began a conversation that continues in various ways. I'm pretty sure we began talking before the world shut down because of the pandemic, and then it did shut down. Ghislaine ended up doing her talk on Zoom.

Later I was asked by Haris Giannouras to participate in a roundtable conversation in conjunction with PORTRAITS, Ghislaine's exhibition at the Museum Abteiberg, with Suzanne Titz and Fatima Hellberg. I'm pretty sure Ghislaine did not travel to Mönchengladbach to install in the amazing Abteiberg because of the pandemic. The congruity and difference between the virtual and the conceptual, what comes to constitute work and how, structures no small part of her project, through her scores.

It's funny that two works already mentioned, Shrooms and Public Sculpture, are two of my favorites, too. I mean, I think about those works a lot. Particularly Shrooms. It's so provocative, such a crowd pleaser, and winsomely smart. You don't always get those three things—zip-zap—simultaneously. Just the way she used and thought through the library for Public Sculpture in—

HV: I think it was in Reading.

BH: Reading, UK. At Reading Library. It's a beautiful piece—so tight, and yet so generous in terms of what it activates, both the benefits and predations of role playing. The library's toys are pleasing for children but they're indoctrinating the tots into certain kind of roles that might not be so playful. No small part of the beauty arrives from Ghislaine's decision that the toys don't only circulate as Public Sculpture in an exhibition, they are also always available in Reading at the library to be borrowed by the children.

KL: My first encounter anywhere was also at a distance, I'm sure. It might have been the Chisenhale show for me, too, which was titled CONSTITUTION. I remember it was very striking visually, and even from a distance it had this kind of cryptic force that was somehow inviting rather than off-putting. But there are entire dimensions of her work that I only started to grasp later, and I think it was works like Shrooms, and then Public Sculpture later, that started to really hook me, for all the reasons you've mentioned. For me, I went on to invite Ghislaine to be in a group show a few years back—where we showed Public Sculpture and did borrow the toys from Reading Library, after applying for a library card—and then after that I worked on a solo show with Ghislaine at the Renaissance Society last year, with a bunch of new scores.

But across each of our introductions to her work, I feel like we're starting to articulate multiple layers in Ghislaine's work already. There is the structural part of it, how it "works." And then also what you're actually seeing, or the mood it creates, and certain choices are being made that influence those outcomes, too.

RT: My favorite work, I would say, is also Shrooms. I saw it first in KW in Berlin. I curated a show at Helmhaus in Zurich and there I invited Gil to show this work. The show was about access in the arts. Not only in the disability sense, but in a larger sense of accessibility, or rather non-accessibility: who has access to institutions, to artworks, to being an artist. Shrooms somehow discloses the invisible structures behind an institution, first of the building, because it shows its electric structure, but also, for me, it talks about the ramifications of what's behind an exhibition space. What's behind all the structures, all the links, all the things that are there but the public doesn't see. It's like the mycelium of mushrooms, then these cute and caring mushrooms kind of pop out. I agree with Bruce's word "crowd-pleaser" to describe Ghislaine's work. Shrooms talks also about care and safety and interdependency. This work is really growing a lot on me. At the end of the show, we had to give away most of those mushrooms. I kept one of them at home and I also gave them to my friends. So

even if the mushrooms now are not her work anymore, because the work happened only in the performance of the score, for me it's still there with me, it's still accompanying me every day.

BH: Following on what Ramaya was saying, I've been thinking a lot about Wants, the song work you had in the exhibition in Chicago, Karsten, which comes from My Fair Lady. It was funny, I was preparing to talk about Ghislaine's work to some undergraduates and was reading around and someone says, "Oh, there is the sound of Audrey Hepburn's voice in the Ren space," and I was like, "Yes, but that's not right." For the George Cukor-directed musical, we're seeing the fair lady Audrey Hepburn sing, but we're hearing Marni Nixon. She's ghost-singing. The ghost singer and her ghost work. "Ghost-work": invisibility and the "invisible" structures/labor that allow the world, from the household to the Kunsthalle, to function. Such ghost-work provides one way to reflect on Ghislaine's own enterprises. Even the shift from the work on the wall in the Balances exhibition—Hours, which was noting Ghislaine's time available for making artwork in relationship to the other kinds of work she was doing—to the wall works in Basel, a move from black and white to vivid color. Jobs, the list of jobs she's taken on, over decades, provides another way to think about the invisible structures, invisible labor, invisible performances and actions that make up the term "artist" and support that old thing, "art."

RT: I went to see the show at Kunsthalle Basel, and there were these giant inflatable black numbers. One is "8", and the other one is "175." 175 is the number of days she's been working on that show, and 8 is the number of days she should have been working on the show for the amount of money she was being paid, 3,000 Swiss francs. To me, having these two works next to the lists of jobs she had to perform in order to make her artistic practice possible, was very striking. They're giant numbers and they take up the whole room, but they also deflate after a period of time, so it's almost a feeling of failure but also being tired of the conditions we have to work under as artists. So, for me, these are simple actions that talk a lot.

KL: At first, her work's conceptual or linguistic mechanisms, and the socioeconomic realities it points to, seem to look in different directions, but that's not really the case. The way Ghislaine talks about it, these questions of labor and the way the scores operate are closely tied together. Re-reading her book Bosses this week, I was drawn to her statement, "The score is not an idea or material, it's from the conditions of my life." So there is the question of how the scores work, and their outcomes, but there's also this question of why the scores? Why use scores in the first place? Part of the answer then is that it's a way of directly channeling the conditions of life.

HV: Reading the scores as written propositions, separately from their materialization, made me realize how different they are, at least formally, from the tradition of the conceptual score. Within an art context, we tend to think of a "score" as something that's performative, that's about performing an action. Whereas the scores that are collected in this book are not at all instructional—instead, they're very descriptive, they almost read like image captions.

One way in which Ghislaine's scores do build on the legacy of the conceptual score, however, is in the relation they set up between the general and the specific. In Bosses, she describes the scores as general "parameters for how a particular work is shown," which need to be interpreted in the specific context in which they are shown. This means that an institution does need to interpret the scores after all, often in collaboration with the artist. Ghislaine talks about how this process of co-creation allows her to make the work more porous

to its social context, but also more contingent on conceptual and aesthetic decisions made together with others. There is also a related idea of making the work more alive. I think this is a wonderful concept, this idea of aliveness, of a work that is relational and changes together with its circumstances.

I have also been thinking about the relation between the scores and the sub-scores. The scores are all formatted the same way and they're very consistent, whereas the sub-scores comprise two different kinds of propositions. Some are about establishing boundaries and limits in the relationship between Ghislaine and the institutions she works with. Fundamentally they are about negotiating her position. Alongside these are self-directed instructions that outline the principles that guide her practice, rather than establishing protocols for a specific working relationship. For instance: "Invert your shame," or "Listen to the labour that is already being done. The life of the body. Slow feelings." How do you push back against specific aspects or assumptions about what an artist is supposed to do? But then, also, how do you counter the conceptions of value you have internalized throughout your life?

KL: Ghislaine sometimes uses the phrase "contextual contingency," which I like. It underlines a kind of responsiveness or adaptability. But you also just mentioned how the sub-scores speak to or set various "boundaries" and "limits." Those were two words that came to mind for me too, when I was reading through the sub-scores recently. I think you're right that there are two different strains of sub-scores, some that are setting boundaries or expectations for access to her and her participation, and others that fuel the work or give it the aliveness you pointed to, valorizing qualities like vulnerability or humor. The subcurrents within the sub-scores are telling, I think.

HV: Yes. In a way, the format of the score depends on the principles of the sub-scores. At the same time though, as the scores progress and change over time, they also push the sub-scores to change. In the more recent sub-scores, Ghislaine talks about the life of the body, feelings, how she's trying to move outside of her comfort zone. She also talks about pushing against the instinct to control everything, about wanting to let go. I think this comes from the decisions she makes, but also from what happens to the scores once they operate and exist in the world. So, for me, the relationship between the scores and the sub-scores is interesting to think about in terms of circularity: it's not only about how one set supports the other, but actually about how they change each other.

KL: This relationship to control, or giving it up, arises in various ways in certain scores and throughout the sub-scores, I think. Ghislaine might informally refer to the scores as "instructions" on occasion, but while working on the Ren show she was more likely to say they are "descriptions" that "outline the implementation and materials of a work." For me, on the curatorial or institutional side of this relationship, I have come to really recognize how open the scores are. This is not a Sol Lewitt situation, in which "the idea becomes a machine that makes the art."² There are often a huge number of possible outcomes. There are often crucial decisions to be made that are not precisely outlined in the score. You rarely know exactly what needs to happen. At the Ren, I started feeling like the scores were generating all these weird surpluses, beyond the descriptions, beyond the meanings one might expect.

BH: A score is not a contract. Or, we don't think of it as a contract, although it can entail certain contractual affections and/or responsibilities. Performing a Bach fugue, there is variation, interpretation, allowed, necessitated, but too much variation, and someone might

go, “That is no longer Bach.” A score is also not a certificate. A Félix Gonzalez-Torres piece enacts a kind of legal language. The score has a plasticity and aligns itself with a different history of artmaking, performance, and even choreography.

Who is “performing” the work? We are almost in the zone of “actants,” to use Jane Bennett’s description of vibrant matter.³ Who is making the work and who is making the work happen? Of course, the artist—but the preparators and curators of the institution are there, and then the audience is there, to enact this thing we see as a work by Ghislaine Leung. The score, without necessarily notating all of those participants, attends to what needs to be constituted for this experience to happen. Such precision in her having arrived at the term “score.” I would love to know when that became the term she used, as opposed to other kinds of terms that could have been employed.

HV: I agree. I think Ghislaine is purposeful in how she phrases the scores so that the action remains implicit. This brings an openness to the work, in terms of how the scores might be enacted and who might enact them. But then within that there’s plenty of variation. Some of the scores have specific conditions or constraints. For example, a piece featuring a playhouse purchased in the country of the exhibition and tape at minimum ceiling height for the same country, so that the installation changes depending on the location where it is shown.

On the other hand, the score for Holdings is very open in terms of how an institution or an individual might read the idea of “an object that is no longer an artwork”. There’s a lot to interpret. Almost every one of the terms needs interpretation: What is an object? What is an artwork? Similarly, Browns, a score that sets out that “all available walls” are to be painted brown, also triggered a process of institutional self-interrogation when it was shown at Museum Abteiberg in 2021. I really appreciate Ghislaine’s openness, in terms of thinking about who the different actors can be, and how the scores might be interpreted.

RT: I also like the use of “score” because it somehow gives responsibility to others. The artist is not, anymore, the sole performer of the work. The institution has to take it on and has to also be there. We’ve all internalized self-exploitation, which is something Gil is talking a lot about. Just think of the title of her book, Bosses, We are all our own bad bosses. Then why not let the institution also be part of the negotiations? Asking what’s the agency of the artist. So for me, it’s really talking about shared responsibilities.

KL: Echoing this sense of shared responsibility, another word that Ghislaine has used is “co-creativity,” which I think Helena alluded to earlier. In a way, Ghislaine is saying that everything is made with other people, and that’s true even for a painting show, right? And yet there’s also something that’s very specific to her work. To what extent do you all see Ghislaine doing something that’s novel, versus recognizing, by her own admission, an important reality that has always been there?

BH: The Ren show marked the working-through, for the first time, I believe, of “a work that is no longer an artwork.” What a thrilling oscillation. I flash to the meeting of Walter Benjamin and Duchamp on the streets in Paris in 1937, after which Benjamin went home and wrote—in French, and I’m using Elena Filipovic’s translation into English—“once an object is looked at by us as a work of art, it absolutely ceases to function as such.”⁴ This notion of delay. The temporal conditions around Ghislaine’s work—obviously, the score puts a kind of metronome

into play, but that never guarantees knowing the work or its “when.” Such surety would be antithetical to the entire project, but such “delays” allow a work that’s no longer an artwork to be present, in a kind of never-never-land phasic existence.

RT: In Bosses, she writes about how we institute things ourselves, and we institute them through processes, action, and policies. I’m really interested in the concept of the institution—like, what is an institution? And Gil actually disrupts the institution’s role by asking it to be part of the making of the work. Even if we know every institution is part of making a work, they don’t feel they are. So, she’s confronting us with this reflection of what an institution is. An institution is a set of habits that are defined and repeated. The more you do things, the more it’s easier to do them, the less effort you make. What she does is she disrupts this. We, all of a sudden—I mean, we, the institution—have to make an extra effort to accommodate the work.

It’s also talking about people, how some people are welcomed within institutions, but also how some people are not welcomed. It can take an extra effort for the institution to include you, depending on who you are, what your identity is. So I’m really interested in how she’s breaking our habits and bringing awareness as a spectator, as a public, as an audience. When we see an exhibition by Ghislaine, you also are not used to seeing this kind of show—it requires an extra effort, but a necessary one.

HV: I agree, and I think that this speaks to how Ghislaine works with the exhibition as a format. I wanted to return to the question of time, because it’s so central to her show at the Ren. How do you bracket the life of the artwork? We know that the readymade is a way of pointing to something in the world and bracketing it from its surroundings. I would say that Holdings frames this question not in terms of where is the artwork, but when is the artwork.

For me, an analog in Ghislaine’s work is the idea of the toy, which can be activated and deactivated much like an artwork, subject to specific circumstances. I was thinking about the toy elephant that was exhibited at Kunsthalle Basel, and which I assume was one of her daughter’s toys, and how it associates the contingency of the artwork to the contingency of the toy – an object that is both a normal object in the world, and one which, given the right circumstances, can be made to perform countless roles in the hands of a child, but which just as easily can be left behind and return to its life as mere object.

KL: That stuffed elephant toy in the Basel exhibition is actually another iteration of Holdings—it’s another object that is “no longer an artwork.” So if it’s not an artwork, is it just a toy again? Is it something else? Within the show it becomes this very personal note amid all these other works that are really driven by these formalizations of the statistics. It’s softer, both in a physical sense and I want to say in an emotional sense, too. And yet the elephant isn’t explicitly noted there as once belonging to Ghislaine’s daughter, so it’s both this potentially personal and also newly impersonal object.

HV: It’s interesting to think how the toy elephant then links the exhibitions in Basel and Chicago: two shows that strike different chords but are complementary all the same. They both invite us to think about time. This is more obvious in the Basel show, perhaps, in terms of the social use of time, how that is legislated, and how it intersects with questions of commitment, obligation, work, remuneration; that’s all very much in the foreground. But in the Chicago show, time appears as well, in terms of loss, I would say. Thinking about an object that is no longer an artwork also implies the experience of loss.

KL: You could think about her father's story too, which Ghislaine shares in a short text she wrote to introduce the show in Chicago, or more broadly the relations to places and certain identities across a life, or to knowing a language.

HV: Exactly. I have noticed how the exhibition texts for both shows are very different from the descriptive texts that Ghislaine has used to frame her exhibitions in the past. Among other things, these texts address intergenerational time: her relationship to her parents, her grandparents. And so that, for me, opens up another dimension of time. In the exhibition text for the show at the Kunsthalle Basel, for example, she reflects on her parents' attitude to work and money: you could think about it in terms of personal history—in terms of the experiences that have "constituted" her as a person, to use a concept that she often refers to—but importantly, also, about how this personal history intersects with social history; how it is also an expression of the social structures that are visualized in the show, and their longer history.

We have talked about how the piece Holdings at the Ren addressed questions around the lifespan of the artwork, but there are two additional works shown alongside this piece which also bring out other dimensions of time. One is a school photograph of Ghislaine, framed in cardboard, titled GLX, which, we are told, has a dedication on the back for her paternal grandfather, written in Chinese. Much like the object that is no longer an artwork, this photograph has an unresolved status as a letter that was never sent, but discontinuity here also speaks to the experience of displacement and estrangement, since as a young girl Ghislaine copied the Chinese characters without understanding them, since growing up in England, she didn't speak her father's and grandparents' language. The exhibition space was also filled with a song from My Fair Lady that Ghislaine's father often used to listen to before coming to the UK, evoking the use of culture as an instrument of assimilation and identity construction. The fact that it is exhibited under the title Wants, I think, expands the meaning of Holdings, which is also the title of the exhibition, beyond its more literal sense as a collection of things or possessions, to ask questions about what we hold on to—in terms of objects, but also memories, desires, identities—and what we let go of.

BH: Another term that seems to be circulating, but is not quite yet mentioned: "the memorial." Ghislaine's work Onions positions an early instance of this crucial mode/mood: the family painting that must be sold for survival, and then a stand-in for it is made, opening a dossier of questions. Is the artwork always a stand-in (for something)? Art is radically what it is and yet also a stand-in for something else: other kinds of values and emotions, and intellectual labor, what have you.

Was there discussion of the kinds of things that could be works that are no longer artworks, that they would resolve as specific to the Ren's institutional history? "Holdings" becomes an archive of accessible, material remnants from its own ongoing enterprise. What was the scope of your conversation with Ghislaine around these oscillating things?

KL: Ghislaine played an active role in the decisions about how to fulfill this score, so it was an unfolding set of conversations between me and her. Although for scores like Holdings, the conversation quickly spreads. The Ren doesn't have a collection, but there are things leftover, remnants of past exhibitions at the institution. Leading up to the show, I started making a running list in conversations with some of my colleagues, including our registrar, who has a long memory of the Ren's exhibitions, and our chief

preparator, who knows well what kind of objects are still around. You have to decide what fits under this category or not. Is an object still an artwork? Was it never an artwork? What makes an object's identity change?

Then it was a whole other set of decisions, with Ghislaine, about which of the Ren "holdings" to include in the show. In the end, we selected two objects that are from the Ren's informal "holdings." We showed this orange and white striped fabric from Daniel Buren's 1984 exhibition, compacted into the cube-like form of the cardboard box that held it for the past forty years, and one of our ergonomic office chairs, which Trisha Donnelly had previously wheeled into her exhibition here in 2008. We could have easily done five versions of this score only using Ren-related stuff, tied to the institution's history, but Ghislaine also knew she wanted some of the re-categorized objects to be from her own holdings. She wanted to have a personal stake in it so it wasn't about co-opting other artists works. So we brought in the blue and pink foam tiles, which used to be Mixed Sports. Those were in Geneva. The baby gates came from a show that was in Berlin. And then the pink blackout curtains were from Cabinet. There was also an ethics at work in deciding how to act on the score.

RT: I wanted to talk about one other work from the show in Basel, Surgery. It's shown at the far end of that exhibition space. You have to walk all the way through the show and then there is this little room that has a window, and there was this massive square column in the middle of the room. The score says, "the portion of the artist's body mass removed via hysterectomy as a portion of a room made unavailable." And also it says, "no reproduction may be made of this artwork." I remember when I went there I couldn't know what to think of this work. There was this person, an employee of the institution, who was standing there to make sure nobody would take a picture of it. I don't think it's even reproduced in her portfolio or on the website of the Kunsthalle. You encounter this work only if you came and saw the show in person. And also in relation to the first sentence of her book Bosses: "I'm tired of hiding everything about it. Hiding became intolerable at some point." I felt this—that I was entering into her intimate space by just reading the score. I was wondering if you saw the show, and what did you think of this work? Because it was very intriguing for me.

HV: I didn't see the show, but I read the piece as having to do with setting limits. I was struck by a passage in Bosses where Ghislaine talks about her having internalized the idea that she must have unlimited resources—something that typifies our neoliberal present: that you're your own boss, your own publicist. Whereas other works address questions about the institution's resources or her own material and emotional resources, Surgery, for me, frames the question of vulnerability from a bodily perspective. What is vulnerability, not only in terms of the artwork—such as wanting to make the artwork vulnerable, contingent, or porous—but also where her vulnerability as a human being sits within all this.

KL: I feel this other connection between the Surgery piece and the photograph of Ghislaine in the Renaissance Society, as we think about the circulation of images and also measures of vulnerability. With Surgery, as Ramaya was saying, it's a piece that tells you not to photograph it, and this is then policed by the institution. In the Ren show, the school photograph is straight across from you as you walk in the door, almost looking back at you. In an interesting way, this also brings me back to Ghislaine's sub-scores as well: one of them is a rule about not distributing her own photograph for any purpose. So at the Ren, this work in

some ways is a breaking of her own rule, but through this photograph of her younger self, this loop in time. To show her face within the Ren show like this involves a kind of willing exposure that she doesn't usually allow, and with this comes a great feeling of vulnerability.

BH: Technologically we live in a moment where there is an expectation that everything, and especially the artwork, will be instantly, radically decontextualized. A picture will be taken of it. It's everywhere. Through social media, it becomes viral, everywhere and nowhere. There hasn't been a lot of thinking of what that has done to the notion of the artwork. Working with people in their early twenties, I sense that a fatigue is hitting them for real—the rough conditions of how we (non)encounter people and things in the world at this moment.

RT: That makes me think of Gil's work, *Times*. The score is: "Access to exhibited works is limited to the studio hours available to the artist." She has another sentence in her book, where she says, "My methodology is to feel the responsibility of what happens if you remove. What are you adding? What are you stating in that?" This makes me think of just this present conversation we're having, too—where Ghislaine is not here. She kind of set us up together, all of us discussing her without her being in the virtual room.

HV: There's a piece by Adrian Piper—I don't think she ever realized it, but it effectively exists as a score—in which she imagined some of her friends talking about her on stage. Perhaps we're enacting a version of that.

KL: I think for this conversation Ghislaine gravitated towards people she has had some other moments or connections with. That decision feels meaningful. When I reread *Bosses*, I picked up on the part where she talks about some of the artists she most loves—Hannah Darboven, Julie Becker, Lee Lozano—and mentions their "full vibrational porosity of the material of life and work." Last night I was listening to an interview with Hari Kunzru, whose latest novel is set in the art world and has an epigraph by Lozano. So somehow these considerations keep arising. Kunzru was noting there's a slowly growing canon of artists who have dropped out or refused to participate. Some of them have managed "to make their non-presence count," he was saying, so that they're "more important than the hundred artists who are actually there."⁵ Martin Herbert's book, *Tell Them I Said No*, tells another set of stories in this vein.⁶ But for Ghislaine's work, I'm interested in the particularities of her presence and non-presence, which suggest both similarities and differences from these earlier artists and those past moments in time. I know, Helena, you've written about Lozano, so I'm curious for your thoughts.

HV: I often think about Ghislaine's work in relation to both Lozano and Mierle Laderman Ukeles—both artists who she mentions and refers to often. We could take Ukeles's formulation "My working is my work"⁷ as a point of departure to think about Gil's capacious understanding of the working conditions that shape the making of art, not only in terms of economic conditions, but in terms of the multiple commitments that one holds simultaneously, including the work of maintenance, affective relationships beyond the home, and ideas of self-care. In other words, how artistic labor is framed by a net of interdependencies that are not always acknowledged.

But I would say that Ghislaine's approach to artistic labor is filtered by Lozano's interest in actually what *doesn't* work, and here I'm riffing on the title of a recent monograph by Jo Applin.⁸ For Lozano, this meant an attempt to counter prevailing conceptions of artistic labor through a series of strikes, work stoppages, and boycotts by which she performed her

refusal to accept the status quo. I think Ghislaine's sub-scores in particular share much in common with Lozano's self-directed instructional pieces, whose aim was to break internalized emotional habits and disrupt existing systems of validation, and which boil down to her statement: "I refuse to participate in malevolent systems."⁹ Where they meet, I think, is in their understanding of their work, in part, as a practice of deconditioning, of disinvesting from insidious ways of thinking and feeling.

But Ghislaine does not share in Lozano's politics of non-participation. While she does set barriers to the demand for unlimited availability and publicity that governs the art world, she is also very present in other ways. This is evident in the sub-scores, where she sets out her decision not to attend exhibition openings or gallery dinners, for example, which she amends with the caveat "go if you must but understand the consequences." She's aware these things need to happen, and why, but she insists on doing them according to the rules that she sets for herself.

In this sense, I think Ghislaine's work is engaging with the conditions of the neoliberal art world quite specifically, but also thinking about refusal in different terms than Lozano. Not refusal in terms of withdrawal or non-participation, but refusal in terms of testing creative strategies that run counter to prevailing modes of working in the art world. She seems more interested in finding alternatives and working together with others to make things change, than in setting off on a one-person revolution. She has a much more transformative notion of refusal, I think: "I'll say no to this, because I want this other thing to happen."

BH: What Helena was saying resonates for me as an unpacking of what we actually encounter when encountering a work "that is no longer an artwork." Because we only encounter it in an art show, it's truly paradoxical. What and when is it? It keeps turning over in the way irony turns, like you can never get to the end of the irony. Karsten, your question makes me think of Laurie Parsons. The Museum Abteiberg did a Laurie Parsons show, not long before they started working with Ghislaine. Of course, one can look at Laurie Parsons's artistic trajectory as another refusal, eventually arriving at a nonparticipation in the art world, since she works now in social services. But about the work of caring for other people, one could say, "The work is just not appearing here, in the recognizably demarcated so-called art world."

Is the artist never not an artist? Once you have a certain trajectory of being an artist, does that stop? One can announce its stoppage, but does the artistic pursuit actually stop? I met someone who knows Laurie Parsons, and they said, "I'm convinced she really has not stopped making work." They didn't say what the ongoing work is or if it ever will be shown, but I don't believe it's her social work that is the artwork. How invigorating that there might be something else going on. Let's open up a dossier on the various kinds of demands for different kinds of appearance or performance. The negotiation of such demands wouldn't be only a personal negotiation; it would potentially lead to dialogue with other people, other institutions, but it could also, productively, ethically perhaps, lead to certain revocations and refusals, in the positive and/or productive sense, at any moment.

KL: I'm working at an institution that has been around for a hundred years, so the idea of the legacy of an institution is way more present in my mind than it might be somewhere else. That makes me interested to think about this in relation to something Ramaya brought up before, which is Ghislaine's idea of the artist as an institution, or the way she asks, generally, what is it to institute oneself? Within this frame, we can also think about the legacy of the artist as an institution, even after they've decided to do something else. I think this also

connects to Ghislaine's position that this is not about criticizing things as an external force but recognizing that something more self-reflective has to happen. If we return to the idea of the artist "instituting," or the artist as an institution themselves, Ramaya, I'm curious what this bring to mind for you, since you were thinking about this kind of self-instituting before.

RT: Maybe a way to think about this is also the idea of dependencies, which is a very important notion in Gil's work. She sees the art world as a set of dependencies. It reminds me of a quote by Octavia Butler, where she says, "Dependence is sexy."¹⁰ I really love this quote. When I read the book Bosses, what was really striking was her notion of collectivizing. Ghislaine is working as an artist by herself, but then she's trying to collectivize her work by making and using these scores, so trying to share the work with the institution.

For me, it's really talking about how we are dependent on each other, as artists and institutions. Institutions need artists and artists need institutions. She also talks about self-care as social care, in the sense that we need to perform a maintenance of each other. It's really interesting to somehow see the artist/institution relationship as something that is not confrontational. But then we have to also think of how we build this together, how we discuss. How do you bring back agency and discourse?

KL: I like what you're saying about this, and it makes me think of potentially operating with, or acknowledging, a wider range of dependencies. That's something in this that feels different to me in Ghislaine's work, compared to the kind of non-participations in the past.

HV: Yeah, definitely, I would say that. When Ramaya was speaking, I was thinking about this notion of "co-creativity" again. Part of it is thinking about the co-production between the artist and the institution. But it's also about creativity much more broadly. I was thinking about the cake that appears in the Kunsthalle Basel show, for example, which celebrates the time spent with her partner, her daughter, her art. The title, Four Years in Ten Years in Twenty Years, hints at the ratio between different quantities of time, which also structures the rest of the pieces in the show. But what is celebrated here is the interdependency between those different emotional and creative commitments. If an artist like Ukeles was concerned with how the work of maintenance is structural to capitalist production, yet hidden or concealed from view, here what Ghislaine is celebrating is the bonds that survive despite the exploitative conditions that are outlined in the surrounding walls of the exhibition space.

KL: Going back to this question of Holdings, one of the options we could have shown are some Félix Gonzales-Torres works that are a very important part of the Renaissance Society's history. FGT is an artist who in his own way was very attuned to interpersonal dependencies. You think of his partner Ross in a work like Perfect Lovers. We have two clocks on the wall at the Ren that were the actual pair of clocks used for that work, which appeared in his show here in the nineties. But FGT, for me, also amplifies the matter of the afterlives of an artist or an artwork. When Ghislaine and I were making choices about how to enact the Holdings scores, we thought about these important FGT works that were shown at the Ren. As Bruce was saying earlier, now his works live in this highly legalistic realm and the estate has strict contracts; seen through that lens, the clocks the Ren has are absolutely not an "artwork" anymore. On the other hand, the two clocks, just barely touching, have such a mythic, unmistakable presence that even after the fact it feels like they evade their legal status. They're almost too auratic for their own good.

BH: One could say that's the overwhelming conundrum of living under capitalism. There's something about Gonzalez-Torres and value. Success changes how things are considered. Perhaps everything about art is not visible or accessible at any given moment. Certain aspects of art might be immobilized by the context and/or conditions they appear in. How might FGT operate now, to baffle some of those conditions? Perhaps the spirit of Perfect Lovers has been manipulated by this cruel moment in ways that make not even the doppelgänger of the readymades but the actual clocks that had once been the work unavailable as "works that are no longer artworks" because too haunted, undead.

HV: I didn't see the Ren show, but I find it intriguing because there are things that I can't get my head around. I think it leaves things open, and that makes it interesting. One idea that I keep on returning to is the notion of holding on to absence: holding on to something that no longer is, or that is no longer what it was. We could relate this to personal narrative, and what it means to no longer be connected to certain parts of your heritage. Or, as I think Bruce said before, parts of your identity become hard to access. But for me it also connects to specific decisions about the realization of Holdings. I was struck by how her piece Mixed Sports was re-presented here: these are bright blue and pink foam tiles which filled the gallery floor during her exhibition at Cabinet in London in 2021 in a striking pattern, but which here were simply piled up on two pallets parked in the middle of the space. Seeing the documentation of the show made me think about the architecture of the Ren's gallery space as an attic, a domestic space where you store disused objects and lost memories.

BH: Not only domestic space, but educational space. One of the things that's going on with the toys of Public Sculpture is the toys are learning tools. Not that I would want to use the give-and-take of learning between child and parent as a metaphor for what is exchanged between artwork and audience, but it does lead one to consider how meaning is produced in those conditions.

HV: I also think about the educational aspect of the work in relation to the idea of inter-generational time, and how one effect of becoming a parent is that you start thinking more about your own childhood. Having to make decisions about another's person education—about boundaries, rules, and discipline—also makes you think about your own conditioning. I'm purely speculating, but there might be something about Ghislaine's use of toys, or objects relating to childhood more broadly, that allows her to look at societal conditions in a micro scale. And here we might think of Shrooms again and how it mobilizes the question of scale.

KL: What you're saying about discipline makes me think in yet another way about the Ren show. The three Holdings objects that are Ghislaine's own former works all evoke these child-related settings, whether it's pink children's curtains, or the baby gates, or the foam floor tiles, but the other objects are all slanted towards the office or adult work culture. One iteration of the score is literally an office chair from our office that was previously used in a Trisha Donnelly installation. And then there's also the Jobs poster. So the show is also tracing this circuit from child to adult, or play to work perhaps, and maybe back again. There is something about a lot of classical children's education that is also about socializing them. People have made the argument that it's not just about learning, it's also about preparing you to be a good worker, a disciplined worker, training you not to go off script.

BH: It makes me want to consider the possibilities of bad education.

KL: That makes me think about a work like Public Sculpture again. The first versions featured the doll houses and the brand name, child-sized vacuum cleaners, these role-play facilitators. In Ghislaine’s show at Simian in Copenhagen, Public Sculpture was back again, only that time it featured different objects: these monster-like bubble blowers. They’re enticingly odd toys, but also cute and honestly funny. The kind of colorful creature that seems to say, “I would never indoctrinate you.” Which reminds me that another inherent quality of Ghislaine’s scores is that they are meant to be repeated, and they can change over time. Public Sculpture has been done seven times now, I believe. It turns out Shrooms has now been done twenty times in different places. Each time it’s potentially different. You start to get this tangible sense of the scores projecting into the future. In a different manner, the sub-scores are also reaching for a longevity of a creative practice. Maybe we can end on that—that future arc in the scores or the sub-scores.

BH: Given what you’ve just said about Shrooms and its popularity—and we all admitted right at the beginning that it was one of our favorites—other ways of negotiating Holdings present themselves. Perhaps Ghislaine’s way of working puts in productive tension how to rethink the retrospective? Is it a demand, a command, of the institution or the art market that we get the retrospective or survey? I know many artists just loathe the entire notion of such clotted retrospection. Perhaps Ghislaine’s already baffling that retrospective possibility. She has written into the scores a way of providing an impasse to that demand or obligation for the constantly new thing.

KL: It’s a funny thing to be making a book that is gathering the years of practice from 2015 to 2025. On its face, it seems like it embraces this retrospective-ish impulse, but immediately this all feels quite different from that. We can glean something from looking at this longer trajectory, but it also still feels so alive.

HV: One question I had is whether she has made the sub-scores public before.

KL: Some of them have come out individually in different contexts, I believe, but this is the first time they’ve been gathered and more formalized into a list. I know it was an effort on her part to take stock, more actively.

HV: I also wonder if the fact of gathering them together might also inflect the practice in the future.

KL: The last sub-score says, “No filler, no expectations. Let it be wide open and weird.” And then it says, “initiated 2025.” Since it’s 2024 right now, that means that at least one of the sub-scores is like a promise to her future self.

As we end, I’m curious if anyone else has closing thoughts. Ramaya?

RT: There was just one more quote that I wanted to be somehow in the conversation. It’s from the book Bosses: “Art is an immense psychological risk. It’s hard to take that risk without support.” It was a very deep quote for me, because it’s what I feel every day as an artist. It’s super hard to keep on going, and I really think she is brilliantly trying to bring into the exhibition space this idea of a support system, as opposed to competition in the arts. That’s what we are facing every single day. This book of ten years of work: it’s amazing to be able to sustain that long, as a female artist even more.

1. Ghislaine Leung, Bosses, (Divided Publishing, 2023).
2. Sol Lewitt, “Paragraphs on Conceptual Art,” Artforum, Summer 1967, 80.
3. Jane Bennet, Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things (Duke University Press, 2010).
4. Walter Benjamin, “Paralipomènes et variants de la version définitive,” quoted in Elena Filipovic, The apparently marginal activities of Marcel Duchamp, (MIT Press, 2006), 65.
5. “A Damning Appraisal of Art World Elitism,” The Art Angle podcast, October 17, 2024. Hari Kunzru’s novel is Blue Ruin (Knopf, 2024).
6. Martin Herbert, Tell Them I Said No, (Sternberg Press, 2016).
7. Mierle Laderman Ukeles, Manifesto for Maintenance Art, 1969, Queens Museum, New York.
8. Jo Applin, Lee Lozano: Not Working (Yale University Press, 2018).
9. Lee Lozano, Private Book 6 (New York: Karma, 2019), 19.
10. This quote appears in one of Octavia Butler’s journals, as seen in an X post by the LA Review of Books, <https://x.com/LAReviewofBooks/status/805094451475611648>