

London, 17th May 2010

Dear Guy Ben-Ner,

We have never met, but I am going to take it that we have a certain comradely right to converse. In fact, I feel that I have already had a dozen conversations-by-proxy with you this week, in the form of my visits with the participants of the Piet Zwart.

So here I am, with a brief to write about a show which is being devised around your brief to the participants. I think this is the effect that the critics of Reaganomics called 'trickle-down'.

I am going to make a guess: your brief to the Piet Zwart participants for their show was a kind of gauntlet thrown down. I wasn't privy to your conversations with them, of course, but that came across in my discussions with them. (You were a phantom presence; the elephant in the room. A bit like that story by Jorge Luis Borges in which an individual who is never encountered directly somehow appears in the traces he leaves in other people.)

And of course, it's obvious in the brief itself too, in the title itself and then all those ALL CAPS imperatives.

What strikes me most, reading this again, Guy, is how gloriously unfair it is! The bullet points are a salvo: a declaration of war on introspection, formalism, narcissism, whimsy, unworldly malingering and general artiness. It is like one of Yoko Ono's Grapefruit (1964) instruction-text pieces being press-ganged into

service as a manifesto for practical revolution; or a boot stamping on a Rebecca Warren sculpture, forever.

It is also, above all, a set of rules for generating a set of rules -- a prescription to be prescriptive. That is where the unfairness comes in, because that kind of structure of discipline, of self-consciousness and of engagement sits more easily with certain artists and certain practices than others -- as, of course, you anticipated. And not unnaturally, and not I am sure to your surprise, it seems to have generated its own rebels and 'Bartlebys', who would prefer not to. The most promising aspect of the whole project feels to me to be that space in which each artist negotiates the impossibility of what you have proposed, and the disintegration of the brief into a set of interpretations and resolved risks.

For JAY TAN, the first obstacle seems to have been very simple: the importance of the resistance of life itself to art's intrusions. The way that art's ear doesn't graft to life's cheek. In Jay's work the animating principle is the question of how process resolves into form. In earlier works she would seek configurations of objects which would formally 'click', but realized quickly that this elusive ideal was a chimera. Instead, she began to examine form as a moment of arrested process and to make things which preserved, sometimes mischevously, that sense of frozen provisionality: a salt-dough sculpture hung on the wall (The Fella, 2010); a digital image of a chatroom conversation between Mythos and Veritas (Vestige in/of the Chatroom, 2009). She became interested -- with a nod to Zeno and his arrow -- in how even a frozen moment has its own duration, which is potentially infinitely divisible into smaller durations; and how unexpected flaws or the scars of chance preserved a kind of openness even in the finished work. Jay's work would seem

to resist the injunction to 'Go and get a life!', both through her instinctive sense that art can't choose to grab hold of life directly, and in her careful parsing of the relationship between going and getting, or process and product.

SJOERD VAN LEEUWEN, on the other hand, was already making work in which he inserted his work into his life, to 'have effect and be affected'. I laughed when he described his home-built Fieldwork Bicycle (2010) as "an absurdly neutral object", somewhere between a work and a tool. He wasn't over-worried about the distinction; the bike had made his latest project possible, in which he cycled through Germany in winter negotiating snowdrifts and enduring the bewilderment of locals, searching for the site where raccoons were first released into the wild in Europe. A pilgrimage of sorts, not unlike Werner Herzog's trek as chronicled in Of Walking in Ice (but with wheels). The 'fieldwork' was open-ended, a semi-comic act of endurance on which to hang the narrative not only of his trip, but of a small piece of not-so-natural history combining Hermann Göring's hunting proclivities, European myths of the new world, and more contemporary fears of "invasive species". The fictions in Sjoerd's work, however, are not so much those he weaves for himself (as a persona he seems to recede into the interstices, the space between slides, in a gentle parody of a self-effacing scientist). Rather, he is interested in broader fictional structures: those notions that nations, for example, have about themselves and each other, and that are quilted from anecdote and specious analogy.

TOM KOK shares Sjoerd's interest in the stilted interchange between science and art. If in earlier projects such as Dipole Analogy 1 (2008) there was a more literal attempt to examine scientific schemas as a starting point for sculptural experiments, Tom's work has both

become more historically specific in its interests and, at the same time, more complex and cautious in its mediation of its sources. Pseudo-illustrative harmonies have broken down, so that works such as Manual for Prospecting (2010) proffer allusions to the laboratory or scientific models (a metal basin filled with paraffin) while at the same time more local, formal logics insistently decompose things into recalcitrant elements (an enigmatic green polyurethane cup; three tiny brass shapes). Guy, I am fairly confident Tom is not going to adopt a child. He will find his own way of accommodating the brief's strictures, by deriving a set of precepts from his analysis of an archaic electrostatic demonstration device (a miniature church which would explode when charged) and making a new work in which the various logics -- social, economic, religious, aesthetic, etc. -- of the original object are traced, however obliquely. Like Jay, he resists the urge to insert the work directly into his own life; but like Sjoerd, he thinks that a sensitive archaeology of something existing can reveal something of the dynamic of how that might happen.

Archaic scientific models recur in the work of PRISCILA FERNANDES, but at a greater level of abstraction perhaps. In the video In Search of the Self (2009), two characters in red and blue T-shirts alternate in drawing an impossibly schematic outline of the self on a blackboard: a kind of theoretical exquisite corpse. An origami dodecahedron (the fifth and most important of Plato's geometric solids) appears as a kind of home-made satellite in another video, held by hands performing a gesture which varies on each orbit. In the video That Which Is Above that Which Is (2010) close-ups of interior of the Sonneveld House dissolve its modernist functionalism into colour-coordinated details of décor. Priscila's work constantly returns to the subjective

moment which adheres obstinately to every system: universals collapse into particulars; apparently simple ideas, unhinged by repeated demonstrations, become absurd or even obscene; the infinite regress of explanations leads to an irrational proliferation of information and meaning. She already has a rule-based system for generating her works which she has dubbed the 'operating table'. Perhaps partly for this reason, she is at pains to distance herself from the brief and is the artist who has most explicitly rejected all your terms.

ANNIE WU's work, shares with Priscila an interest in the 'crisis of representation' and the breakdown of apparently hermetic schema. The differences, though, are quickly apparent. For example, if Priscila's work tends to follow a trajectory of simplicity to complexity, Annie's sets up an oscillation between the two -- emblematically in one work, where the handwritten words 'simple' and 'complicated' are footnoted with their typewritten opposites. References to the playful textual permutations of early conceptualism abound: the pamphlet Type Test (2010), for example, comprises twenty attempts to reproduce the dictionary definitions of 'accuracy' and 'comprehension' with a typewriter, while in There is No Alternative (2009) the titular phrase is hidden in a word grid, which of course offers plenty of alternative accidental readings. Annie is preoccupied with the idea of systems as engineering or accounting for chance, like diagrams of the possible trajectories of balls on a pool table, but this seems to becoming less diagrammatic and more performative. In Gratifying the Senses (2010), the text was generated through the course of a live event, with other artists' work appropriated as props in the sets, in which scripted text was typed live and the audience's interactions then transcribed. Recursive self-reflexivity seems to be giving way to something altogether more

uncertain, which seems true to the spirit of your instructions, Guy, if not the letter.

Another artist moving towards performance, MARNIE SLATER is also interested in engineered chance and coincidence, in the strict sense. In her performance lecture Object (2009), a series of anecdotes about hotel rooms are told in parallel to a flow of projected images. Sometimes seemingly random, at other times premonitory or punning, the images have in fact been generated by searching for arbitrary words from the text in Google Images. In A Room Within a Room (Dust) (2009), a series of audio recordings were made to be installed in a private residence: one, for example, a monologue in which the narrator imagines the life of the editor to whom he is writing, was to be listened to at a desk by a window with a view into the apartments opposite. In both works, the dynamic is of correspondence and non-correspondence: of word to image, or interior life to bounded physical space. We are invited to contemplate the impossibility of not projecting some causal relationship between the two terms, at the same time as they inevitably remain speculative and aleatory. It makes perfect sense that Marnie should be interested in Robert Morris's 21.3.1964, the performance in which he lip-synced his delivery of a lecture by art historian Erwin Panofsky about the different levels of meaning inherent in the gesture of lifting one's hat; the coincidence of speaker and speech is just that: a mockery of causality and stable meaning.

For BAT SHEVA ROSS, non-coincidence is also a recurring structure but following a slightly different logic of superimposition. In her video The Excursions of the Wandering Tinsel (2010), a silent series of observational images are constantly superimposed, except in a caesura in the middle of the work when a single image is allowed its own space: her father climbing a set of steps. The video's musical

logic, drawing on the films of Stan Brakhage and other avant-gardists, weaves together elements of Bat Sheva's life in Israel and her time in the Netherlands, but the threads remain separate -- superimposition, after all, always implies the continued separateness of the elements being combined. Bat Sheva, in a sense, is already enacting the brief: for her, life at Piet Zwart already represents a displacement, an uprooting and a 'dislocality', and this is reflected in works such as Tabula Rasa (2009), an enormous print of her own head in which the face section has been cut out, leaving it as a kind of macabre stage set for a new existence. Similarly, her Pigeon Circus (2009) -- a clothes line hung with bread outside her studio window on an 'open day', extending the spirit of hospitality to the birds -- was accentuated with a recorded ship horn, redoubling the existing sounds of the city and superimposing it with itself. Now, approaching your brief crab-wise, she is interested in Goya's The Sleep of Reason Produces Monsters (1799), but ambivalently: 'I'm not sure if Goya empathises with the sleeping person or the monsters...'.

To your clarion call for art to 'regain its healing or destructive functions', GHISLAIN AMAR wonders quietly if it has ever lost them. For him, nonetheless, your brief is about a art as a set of parameters and his work is already centred on the generative power of the limit. Even in apparently formal works such as Study of a Territory I -- A Limit to Perceive (2009), a series of digital drawings made into slides and a short animation, the flat-colour fields become intelligible only through elements which mark their edge or boundary: an irregular dark blue line becomes a distant mountain range that transforms the light blue foreground into desert. In the performance Study of a Territory II -- Take Tram 23 to the Last Stop (2009), viewers were offered tram tickets to the end of the line; photographs were taken to mark

each terminal point, though they offer no more evidence than one of Robert Barry's Inert Gas Series (1969) images. While Ghislain follows this strand of thinking in his ongoing journeys to the end of Dutch train lines, he is also exploring new ways to rediscover apparently familiar territories: returning obsessively to photograph the same local street corner at different times of day, with different people populating his shots, he hopes that repetition will create the same kind of intimate distance that his transgressive trips sought to conjure.

DIANA DUTA is learning to drum. From scratch. I don't think you can fault her desire to mess with her life (or her neighbours). The plan is to perform cover versions of songs by Romanian bands she listened to in formative teenage years, with various non-Romanian speakers delivering the lyrics phonetically. As when Diana and Bitsy Knox invited a local Rotterdam hardcore band ONNODIG KRASSEN to perform in the basement of a gallery, there is an unnostalgic desire to confront artistic etiquette with something adolescently off-key. A lot of Diana's work seems to function on the principle of translation, whether it is attempting wordless conversational exchange in her band Zonderpit (also with Bitsy) -- everything played on homemade instruments -- or borrowing the title of an Electrelane song, Cut and Run (2007), for a cut-up book based on the term's military meanings, phrases spliced sparsely across semi-transparent pages so they became superimposed. In the installation Gérard de Nerval's Reverie (2010), the question of translation reappears in a text recounting the dandy Nerval's struggles to translate a poem, in which Nerval himself appears to finally be translated into present day Rotterdam. The relationships between the installation's other elements -- a table of objects, some blue masking tape, a heavily edited video of a man riffing on storytelling -- also rely on

a complex web of associations, puns and analogies to hold them in equilibrium.

BITSY KNOX, Diana's musical collaborator, is the only artist who seems to have directly taken up your idea of art as healing, though in quite what direction she will take it I'm not sure. Her work is already suffused with an interest in New Age thinking and a very modern esotericism, which she treats with a kind of satirical sympathy: offering the benefit of the doubt, while doubting the benefits perhaps. When she used a sage stick to perform an 'energy cleansing ritual' of the studios at the start of the Piet Zwart programme, it was a (socially) productive gesture as much as it was a parodic one. Similarly, the video Alph-Art and Ventures into the Memory of Past Lives (My Poor Old Soul (2010) is based on an autobiographical experience which Bitsy herself does not remember: as a young child, she apparently had premonitions of the interior of Windsor Castle on a visit, as if she had once lived there. The story, however, is recounted by four different performers, so that an anecdote about possible reincarnation is itself reincarnated. Behind the performers there is a geometric abstract painting, which has since been altered and hangs in the space with the video, as another form of vestigial 'past life'. Her current interest in revisiting the 'extreme positivity', as she puts it, of 1970s New Age aesthetics is in line with her refusal to ring-fence mysticism as some sociological symptom to be dissected by a coolly critical practice.

You suggested to the students that Ulay's work There is a Criminal Touch to Art (1976) was an inspiration: stealing a painting from the Nationalgalerie in Berlin and hanging it in the home of a Turkish guest worker. SELINA TAYLOR suggests another possible starting point for making the stakes personal in Tehching Hsieh, the performer of several infamous durational

performance works (one year locked in a cage etc.). For Selina, the interest is not so much the extremity of Hsieh's performances as the purity of his commitment and his unquestioning submission to his own schemes: the idea of endurance gives way to an expression of necessity. Selina's own works and performances, on the other hand, seem less about a discipline of the self than an inquisitive, ironic imitation of the world around her. She is attempting to recreate Gene Kelly's choreographed casualness from the opening of An American in Paris (1951), complete with set, while simultaneously intrigued by the idea of making a fitness video for artists who would otherwise be hunched over their studio laptops. She has experimented with having a choreographer direct her in a public market, instructing her to imitate passers-by, but also made the act of falling down the stairs a source of expression, and of discomfort for her audience, through simple repetition. Her mimetic logic hovers between homage and mockery; she noted astutely that, when imitating someone in public, her distance from them precisely calibrated the tone of her performance -- the closer, the more mocking. Like Bitsy, her work is animated by her ambivalence, particularly about the powerful forces of identification at play when we watch acts of physical virtuosity.

Looking at DEREK BRUNEN's screenprint Horoscope (2006-9), in which the epicly meandering path of a single drawn line has been filled in to form an abstract pattern of deceptive coherence, I thought of Theodor Adorno's suggestion that life, 'describes a wavering, deviating line, disappointing by comparison with its premises', only to conclude that 'If a life fulfilled its vocation directly, it would miss it'. (Guy, I suspect that you do not like Adorno.) Derek's interest in the problem of intentionality -- in particular

in relation to questions of unconsciousness, omission and grace -- suggests another productive problem in/with your brief, in relation to the will to 'be affected' and the struggle to submit oneself to one's own orders. 'Amor fati' and wilful submission recur in Derek's work, but with a deflationary, self-mocking streak: a crashed computer hard drive becomes a sculptural tribute to dead data; a series of photos attempt to retrace the steps of a lost drunken evening at the docks (with a nod to Bas Jan Ader). His Plot (2007), a continuous static video shot of Derek digging a grave until he disappears, recalls Keith Arnatt, another artist with a humorous interest in self-burial and intentional paradoxes. (Afterwards, the empty grave was marked with a headstone laid out like a museum label for the work.) Unlike Tehching Hsieh, bowing to the inevitable seems to Derek to offer the possibility of a passivity which is wry and perhaps even quietly anarchic.

I must, at this point, confess that I am -- in all epistolary honesty -- not sure how any of this will come together in practice, in a show, despite all the best intentions and collective feeling and useful sabotage. (For some reason I keep thinking of that Richard Sennett text about the fingers of a hand as a community, or an economy, of action.)

But then again: if a show filled its vocation directly...

Meanwhile, I feel like I too have been the subject of this brief -- this brief which you, presumably, were briefed to prepare -- writing this fictional letter, as a formal constraint for this catalogue, which after all I am not going to send to you, or not by the normal methods.

Another time, I would love to pick a friendly bone with you, with the actual you perhaps, about -- for want of a better word, because this is the wrong word -- autonomy.

The poet JH Prynne once wrote about the difference between difficulty and resistance. Difficulty, he said, is subjective: it is what we feel when we encounter resistance. It is also something we can will into existence. Resistance is harder to define, because it is something inherent in objects: "the stone's hard palpable weight is the closest I can come to the fact of its existence, and the reserve or disagreement of my neighbour is my primary evidence for his being really there."

Guy: I feel emboldened to say, with some certainty, that you are really there.

Best Wishes,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "M. Spalding". The signature is stylized and includes a long horizontal line extending to the right from the end of the name.