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A Question Like A Loop

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Black Box

The Project Cube is a dark space and it serves as the site, setting and staging area for *An Artwork in the Third Person*. Inside this Black Box, reflective surfaces, luminous forms and precious objects compete for attention. Some of these precious objects are just paper documents from the Project Arts Centre Archive, presented under glass and dramatically lit from above. Others are more esoteric, including an assortment of ornamental lamps, embroidered cushions and upholstered stools arranged on a tiered black structure made from stage risers. Macramé baskets and beaded curtains are suspended overhead, catching the beams from coloured spotlights. In amongst the clutter of craft artefacts, video images of faces and colourful texts are visible on flat-screen monitors. The Cube is a quiet space and the voices of those on screen are not audible. In order to listen, one must climb onto and around the structure, locating the headphones attached to each monitor while taking care not to mistake an ornament for a seat.

Locations

The students from the Dutch Art Institute (DAI) are depicted mostly in close-up, with occasional glimpses of hand gestures, or details of legs and feet. Many of the interviewees refer to the fact that they are sitting in a gallery and fragments of unknown artworks often appear in the background. Each video ends with a credit, identifying the date, the name of the interviewee and the city (Amsterdam) where it was recorded. But there are no establishing shots of this other gallery, and no cutaways to the interviewer. Pierce remains off-screen and mostly unheard, her

words replaced with text. At the moments of transition from one question to another, sounds of a rock band playing or practicing somewhere else are heard.

Uncertainty

If these video documents deliberately allude to unidentified spaces through sound and image, many of the paper documents initially seem easier to place. An address (East Essex Street, where Project is still located) is visible on several hand-written letters. But precisely because they assert a direct, material link to the exhibition location, these archival artefacts actually generate uncertainty. If they were sent from Project how did find their way back to their point of origin? Perhaps, in fact, these are file copies and not quite letters at all....

Professionalism

A press release from February 1977 announces a public seminar on The State of the Arts in Ireland at Project Arts Centre and all 'artists, craftsmen, teachers, students etc.' are invited. An agenda has been set; a panel consisting of a politician, two educators, an Arts Council representative and an artist will examine 'the feasibility of forming an artist's union'. Other documents reveal tensions between the Arts Centre's aspirations towards professionalism and its self-proclaimed status as a radical, artist-led organisation. This is most obvious in a series of formal letters from the Visual Arts Secretary and the Visual Arts Chairman following an exhibition of student work at Project. The matter at hand is the appropriate compensation for a sculpture unfortunately destroyed during the opening, by a 'drunkard'.

Research

The Cube is a multi-purpose space and, as is the case with such spaces, it is highly flexible in theory. In practice, however, flexibility tends to be constrained by logistics, resources and the force of habit. To combat the tendency to repeat tried-and-tested arrangements, Pierce has

studied the stage, lighting and seating plans produced over the past four years. This aspect of her research process does not generate obvious traces or artefacts – in the manner of the archival materials and video interviews – and instead yields only a sense of disorientation.

Television

The Black Box setting, the use of lights and props and the exploration of the roles of artist and student, emphasise the proximities and parallels that exist between art and theatre. But *An artwork in the third person* also invokes a third term – television. This is not just because of the prominent presence of monitors displaying video interviews, during which one participant mentions watching ‘a reality TV show on MTV... a very dumb kind of thing...’. It is more precisely a consequence of programming a screening and discussion of Rouch and Morin’s *Chronicle Of A Summer* (1961) as part of the installation. Despite the absence of cameras, the experience of sitting together under the coloured lights amongst the monitors and props is a little like being present at the recording of a particularly esoteric TV show.

Images of Artworks

A black and white poster incorporating images of sculptural objects advertises an exhibition entitled ‘Foundation Studies’, which might once have taken place at Project. Presumably student art works, these objects loosely resemble some of the hand-crafted things dispersed around the platform. Verbal images of artworks are also offered by the present-day students in response to Pierce’s opening question. The phrasing is slippery; ‘describe an artwork using the third person’ or ‘describe an artwork in the first person’. At least one student tries to imagine an artwork *as a person*. Subsequent questions introduce further ambiguities, and further images of artworks in the form of the interview itself; ‘when do you think an artwork becomes a work?’... ‘do you think this is an interview or an artwork?’... ‘do you think people in the space right now think this is an artwork?’.

Temporalities

The state of immediacy that Pierce associates with 'being student' is one of directness, urgency and excitement. Is this state produced or perhaps undermined by traditional art school pedagogical notions of 'immersion' or 'activation' intended to assert the importance of the present moment? Might there be multiple temporalities at play in art education? Educators and their managers are often oriented towards a future structured by milestones and key performance indicators. But traces of the past still tend to persist in art school environments, whether as folktales concerning the exploits of past students or in the more tangible form of unwanted or unfinished artworks abandoned around the campus.

'The Academy and the Blackboard'

A number of newspaper clippings from 1977 are interspersed amongst the posters and letters from Project's archive. They chart a dispute between the Curator of the Municipal Gallery of Modern Art, Dublin (now the Hugh Lane) and several members of the Advisory Committee concerning the status of a blackboard by Josef Beuys. The residue of a performance that took place several years earlier, the blackboard was included in an exhibition against the wishes of some artists on the Committee. In a 1977 contribution to *The Irish Times*, entitled 'The Academy and the Blackboard', art critic Brian Fallon defends the Curator's autonomy but not the work of Beuys, who he dismisses as an 'Establishment figure' not unlike the 'defunct' academicians in the permanent collection. In retrospect, the incident seems to signal resistance against emergent notions of curatorial authority but, at the same time, a tacit acknowledgement of the exhibition as the moment in which an art work comes into being.

A Question Like A Loop

‘How you separate your life from your art? Do you find these questions difficult? Where do you think you are going as an artist?’ Pierce’s interviewees are artists but they are also students. Their involvement is voluntary, informed by their knowledge of Pierce as an artist with an interest in pedagogy who has also occupied the role of educator. A complex power dynamic is apparent in the videos. Conscious that they will be identified by name and perhaps judged on the basis of their responses, the interviewees take the process seriously. Some deal with the situation by saying as little as possible. Others say a great deal even while they struggle to articulate their experience. One pauses often for words and demands more time, choosing her words carefully and comparing the form of a question to a loop.

The Masque

Perhaps all questions are ‘like a loop’, simply because they attempt to elicit a response. Each interview ends with a statement that might also be a promise; ‘Now I’ll give you a fair crack, you can ask me a question’. Several questions are posed but no answers are forthcoming, on screen at least. Because Pierce’s subjects occupy the dual roles of artist and student and constantly direct their attention towards her, the situation of the interview is a little like a courtly Masque in which courtiers play at being actors for the pleasure of their sovereign. Unlike the Masque, however, *An Artwork in the Third Person* does not function as a spectacular entertainment to be consumed from a privileged vantage point, but rather exists somewhere between discursive event and artefact. Although a provisional arrangement of props and documents, staged in a particular configuration for a specific time and place, it exists in memory as an almost tangible multi-faceted construction, designed to be experienced from several angles, taken apart and, in the right hands, reassembled into something new.