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The Edges of Being

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The Casting gives form to the edges of being. This work by Melanie Manchot involves the creation of specific conditions in which to observe and materialise (through film and scriptwriting) the improvised performance of 'different options of being', capturing the moments at which 'the edges of one role in relation to another become visible.'¹

Participants in this casting process must identify and present their 'strongest character', drawing from recollections of lived experience, and imagined or observed behaviours. All of their characters are given a kind of temporary life in the audition, but only some have the possibility of a more enduring existence. *The Casting* seems to constitute a kind of alchemy, transforming raw experience, imagination, ambition and desire into a material entity (the written script) that can confer some kind of permanence, on screen. But the exhibition also creates a structure in which to experience the performance of 'options of being' at first hand.

To what extent might *The Casting*, since it incorporates a live component, be described as an example of 'delegated performance'? This term is used by Claire Bishop to categorise, and theorise, a changing culture and economy of performance art, involving authenticity and risk.² Bishop notes that artists working with performance in the 1960s and 70s (she cites Marina Abramovic, Chris Burden and Vito Acconci, among others) often tended to use their *own* bodies to produce their work. Elsewhere, citing some of the same art historical examples, Joanna Lowry notes that during the 1960s and 1970s the artist's body was frequently placed under some form of duress, with artists appearing to be on the verge of 'breakdown: weeping, shouting, laughing, confessing, and always in extremis'.³ Delegated

¹ Melanie Manchot, *The Casting* (production notes), May 2018.

² Claire Bishop, 'Outsourcing Authenticity? Delegated Performance in Contemporary Art,' in *Double Agent*, ed. Claire Bishop and Silvia Tramontana (London: ICA, 2009), 111.

³ Joanna Lowry, 'Projecting Symptoms', *Screen/Space: The Projected Image in Contemporary Art*, edited by Tamara Trodd, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2011: 98.

performance, in contrast, is more likely to involve a form of outsourcing, in which other bodies tend to stand in for the body of the artist, who has effectively taken on the role of director. The primary location of performance also seems to have changed, with Bishop suggesting that it has moved away from the artist's studio and toward exhibition contexts, including art fairs, where its 'publicity value can be maximised'.⁴

Manchot is not, in my view, engaging in a form of delegated performance. Her practice originated in photography and she does not direct others in actions that she might otherwise have performed herself. Nor does she source performers from a specific social demographic. Nonetheless, some aspects of Bishop's analysis are relevant, precisely because Manchot seeks to examine relationships, and economies, that often remain obscure in the production of art. *The Casting* is not simply a mechanism for the realisation of a film script. Instead, it is a structure for the analysis of complex relationships, involving ambition, aspiration and power, which exist between the artist— who has very publicly cast herself in the role of director—and her collaborators; the scriptwriter, the performers, the exhibition audience, and the art institution. Manchot has previously tended to stage and shoot action in places that are meaningful for her performers, or directly linked to specific historical events that she seeks to reconstruct. In *The Casting*, however, the action occurs entirely within the exhibition spaces of MAC VAL, which are equipped with all of the props required for the audition process, including a table, backdrop material on a stand, a microphone, a tripod, a blackboard, and a wall with casting images. So, while *The Casting* marks a shift in Manchot's usual approach to location, the trajectory is not from the studio to the art fair, but rather from the street to the gallery.

What does it mean to configure an exhibition space as a casting office, or as a film set? Elsewhere, I have observed that many artists and curators seem fascinated by the materiality and sociality of industrial media production, attempting to replicate the aesthetic of the film or TV set within the gallery.⁵ I have suggested that, for some artists, the set may represent an idealised (either imaginary, or simply antiquated) mode of collective

⁴ Bishop, 114.

⁵ Maeve Connolly, *TV Museum: Contemporary Art and the Age of Television* (Bristol and Chicago: Intellect Books, 2014).

creative production, in which roles are clearly defined and regulated.⁶ In *The Casting*, however, the gallery actually functions for much of the exhibition as a site of *pre-*production, rather than production. For several weeks, the script is unfinished, the characters are in a state of gestation, and the ‘set’ is under construction. The physical environment of production is only finalised in the later stages of the show, when the infrastructure of the casting office is adapted to a new purpose. Consequently, *The Casting* formalises, and materialises, uncertainty just as much as possibility, embracing a degree of risk.

According to Bishop, the most significant and successful forms of outsourced or delegated artistic performance involve ‘constructed situations’ that are not tightly controlled. In these situations, risk appears to be maximised rather than minimised.⁷ Risk has arguably become increasingly integral to the project-based cultural economy, which very often favours site- or event-based experiences. The emergence of the ‘producer’ role within many art organisations (from studios to museums) can be seen as an attempt to mitigate the requirement for risk, while also maximising the publicity value that accrues to never-before-seen artworks. By making visible the apparatus of pre-production, as well as the process of production—including techniques of project management and scheduling— *The Casting* both claims and openly occupies the territory of risk.

As already indicated, the aesthetic of the film set seems to have become more prevalent within contemporary art, particularly since the late 1990s. But this phenomenon was predated by a fascination with acting and performing bodies, evident in Warhol’s *Screen Tests* and in the films of Yvonne Rainer, during the late 1960s and 1970s. More recently, artists such as Gillian Wearing and Phil Collins (among others) have returned to the figure of the actor, devising semi-scripted scenarios in which amateur or aspiring performers interact

⁶ See also Maeve Connolly, ‘Trailer Time: Cinematic Expectations and Contemporary Art’, *Exhibiting the Moving Image: History Revisited*, edited by François Bovier and Adeena Mey, Zurich: JRP Ringier, 2015: 130-153, and Maeve Connolly, ‘The Artist as Director: Features, Film Production and the Projective Economy’, in *Artists Moving Image in Britain since 1989*, edited by Erika Balsom et al, Yale University Press/Paul Mellon Centre (forthcoming 2019).

⁷ Bishop, 119.

with professional actors, props and sets, observed by film or TV crews.⁸ Although motivated by disparate concerns, Wearing, Collins and Manchot are all drawn toward the exploration of performance as a component of everyday life, whether as a mode of self-preservation or as a means of self-exploitation. These concerns resonate well beyond the sphere of art practice, particularly in an era when ‘emotional labour’⁹ is widely expected of workers. Arlie Russell Hochschild coined this term, in the early 1980s, to describe the demand for (predominantly female) flight attendants to exhibit or suppress their own feelings, so they might induce a specific state of mind in airline passengers.¹⁰ Hochschild distinguishes between the requirement for service workers to manage their appearance and the performances that are cultivated by actors, often through the use of specialised techniques. But in evolving her concept of emotional labour, Hochschild drew partly upon Erving Goffman’s dramaturgical account of self-presentation in everyday situations of human interaction. According to Goffman, humans often differentiate between ‘front’ and ‘backstage’ situations, using specific settings and props¹¹ to manage and support what might be termed the labour of appearance.

Since *The Casting* explicitly deploys the apparatus of dramatic performance, it is evidently not an everyday scene of social interaction, in the manner described by Goffman. Nor can the participants be described as service workers engaged in emotional labour. Yet Manchot’s project may create a context in which to explore changing conditions, and economies, of self presentation. Designed around the performance of roles that are self-constructed, *The Casting* requires its participants to perform themselves *as* performers. Consequently, it functions as an apparatus for exploration, and differentiation, between that which is held as integral to the self and that which can be defined as a ‘character’, and externalised into the medium of a script. It is through this structure of differentiation that Manchot manifests, and materialises, the edges of being.

⁸ I discuss Gillian Wearing’s film *Self Made* (2010) and Phil Collins’ performance and installation work *This Unfortunate Thing Between Us* (2011), in *TV Museum: Contemporary Art and the Age of Television*.

⁹ Arlie Russell Hochschild, *The Managed Heart: Commercialization of Human Feeling*, Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1983/2012.

¹⁰ Hochschild, 7.

¹¹ Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, Edinburgh: University of Edinburgh Social Sciences Research Centre, 1956: 12-13.