

DISCONNECTED MATTER

SAMUEL VRIEZEN IN CONVERSATION WITH CECILIA BENGTTSSON

Anybody invited to realize a project in 1646 is asked to engage in conversation with a previously unknown correspondent.

This conversation takes place via e-mail and stretches through the whole period during which the artists develop their initial idea into final results. 1646 invites the correspondent at the other end of this contact to figure his/her way through this actual process.

In trying to picture what result the artists' work is going to, such exchange can become a reflection on the amount of otherwise untraceable choices of the moment which make up to the artists' practice.

This issue is part of the exhibition by Cecilia Bengtsson *Disconnected Matter*, January 17 2014 in 1646. The exhibition is part of *The Ongoing Conversation* series, a collaboration between 1646 and the Master Artistic Research, The Hague.

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JANUARY 9: Samuel Vriezen [SV] to Cecilia Bengtsson [CB]

Hi Cecilia,

I guess it's easiest to start very simply... Tell me about the works that you are showing at 1646. How would you describe them?

Cheers!
S

JAN 10: CB - SV

Hi Samuel,

First of all I am getting conscious that the audience that will read this, that it won't just be my thoughts intertwined with yours but we will be somewhat self-conscious all the time. How do you write an uncensored and honest email to someone when one knows that this will be distributed to a public?

.....

To answer your question (eating 'Bugles' at the same time, you know these cheap crappy snacks with nacho/cheese taste?), in the exhibition there will be a body of works that I have been developing the last month and a half and that are still in the making. To really describe them in minute detail wouldn't make much sense, since they are changing every second day. I am looking for something and I have to find it, I know it is there, in the works, and the knowledge about what exactly will come through the making.

Most likely there will be three works in the exhibition and they will all somehow revolve around the binary of connecting/disconnecting. It is also part of the title for this show; "Disconnected Matter". I thought for a long time that I was working around presence and absence (of a human body), but lately I have been thinking that I am much more interested in that which creates this (experience of) presence and/or absence, the 'active' elements so to speak. (My partner is playing Rome Total War in the background so I am getting a bit distracted).

Thinking further about it, the reason I don't feel comfortable describing the works in detail is not only that they are in process and are changing (they will probably still be in process on Friday), but I also want them to be a surprise, a gift and an experience. Like with Tino Sehgal's work, you never know what will lie around the corner. And if you don't know his oeuvre and style you most probably won't even know that it is a work of his, since his name won't be around. I went to the Venice Biennale this year and walked around a corner in the general exhibition hall in the Giardini and there were two people

crawling on the floor, making strange noises. I immediately understood it was from Tino, but another visitor may not know. The funny thing was that at first I was like "ah I get it" but then I couldn't leave. There was something spell-binding within the simplicity of his work. That is what I am aiming for often, a work that is extremely simple but still keeps you hexed because of some quality it has. It is a dangerous game, simplicity, my works almost always risk falling into a nothing or 'duh' kind of feeling, but I feel that it is also there where one can find the most profundity. I guess this is why I (and you too, right?) can understand George Brecht so well. Plus why should one make art if it wasn't risky?

SV - CB

Hi Cecilia,

I don't want to say too much about Brecht, since I know not too much of his work, but what little I know is indeed inspiring. We got to talk about him when we both attended this reading group devoted to "the Event in art and politics", which was mostly high theory stuff. But much as the Event in Badiou or Deleuze or whoever is an intriguing subject, there's hardly anything more simple and mysterious than George Brecht's events.

His "Word Event", consisting only of the word Exit (after a bullet point), is one of the art works I keep thinking about. What happens? How can a word be an event? The word itself, I mean. When you write it down, isn't it supposed to be permanent? And is Exit the word, or is it what the word does? As if the event is the word exiting through itself. The word as the black hole that it disappears into. So in a way you really can't see it. It's amazing how Brecht could get to that dynamic with such simple means.

I guess this certainly relates to what you're saying here: the absence/presence motif, but also the dynamic behind that pair. I want to ask you if you would agree, if you think you can indeed map this dynamic onto your work. But I'm even more intrigued by your partner, who suddenly makes his surprising presence felt in this exchange (like the audience you write about), though not by participating, but instead playing Rome Total War.

That's a computer game which I didn't know - I played (and wrote) games throughout my teen years but later stopped doing that because I know how they can draw me in completely. Looking it up, this one looks like one I would enjoy immensely indeed (note to self: stay clear!) but what strikes me the most is the title itself. It's an anachronism: Total War is not a Roman but a modern concept, meaning the full mobilization of all people and resources. War is by itself already a form of total engagement. Life and death and involving masses of people: surely no disconnected matter.

Except, you can't really know what you are engaging with if you're in a war. If you did, there would be no point fighting it, you'd know in advance whether you'd win or not. I'd say you can't really have a war without this

uncertainty and without "fog of war": the uncertainty of not quite knowing the situation, of where friend and enemy are, of what everybody's up to. That alone makes "total war" a bizarre concept.

Of course, it's atmospherically in complete contrast with Brecht's minimal gestures. But I'm fishing for a connection. Their appearing together, randomly, in the same email is just too interesting. Do you have any thoughts perhaps?

Cheers!

S

JAN 11: CB - SV

Hi Samuel,

What a challenge to answer to this email you sent! I will do my best (considering that I am now in the toy-store where I work and may have to go and actually work sometimes, as if this is not work..)

I really enjoy your description of the Brecht work, because that is indeed Brecht; a constant uncertainty about what is actually going on and the poetic gap you are being left in. Maybe what I feel needs to be emphasized when you directly draw a relation between this word exit that is 'exiting' (disappearing) on itself and the absence/presence I am working with, is that it is about the *experience* of this binary. It is not really about what is there (or not) but what we experience to be there. And this is defined by a whole range of parameters, including materiality, the paper, the ink, the meaning(s) of the word, but also preconceptions and expectations (speaking of mapping). You talk about what the word does, its performativity. I do not so much work with words as I work with bodies and the performativity of these bodies. In relation to absence and presence what really fascinates me is that we can experience something (a body in the wide sense of the word for example) to be there at the same time as it is also not there, like Exit is there and also not. An absence in presence so to say.

In relation to that, I also want to mention that as I work with bodies, I often work with technologies; objects that somehow mediate a presence: TV screens, speakers, phones etc.

To return to my partner playing Rome Total War at home; in general the reason I am throughout the text referring to what is happening around me has to do with a sense of that everything is relevant. The moment I am writing is not separated from where I am and what I hear or see around me (like now, for instance, I just heard my colleague opening the drawer of the cash-machine, since I am at work). When I make an art piece it often (not always) extends indefinitely or perhaps 'indefinitely' (a word I just made up). The audience is part of the work; how they chitchat in the middle of the installation, sipping some drink and crunchingly eating crisps. The walls are part of it and the work extending out, beyond. Sometimes this is more apparent, sometimes less. I believe Brecht's works

also extend into everyday mundane life. The clearest example is maybe his Three Chair Events.

If you look at the more specific example of me being aware of my partner playing Rome Total War, it's a mediation of a war situation in which one (you mention it yourself) so easily gets drawn into. I often wonder 'where we are' when we are playing such a game, or for that sake utilize any screen or any of the mediating technologies I mention above. I am not so much interested in the particular technologies as I am interested in the body (mind included!) in relation to it.

You ask me if I can map the dynamic behind absence and presence on my work. I wouldn't call it mapping, that's a too ordered but also incomplete way of understanding it. I am researching the dynamics, looking for clues and trying to understand how they work. Not only finding them, but working with them.

There is something else I would like to put out there. There is a turn in my work that is going towards theatricality and also affect. I don't know yet how to deal with this. I feel a need for 'very basic human somehow', a bit opposite to the poetic gap of Brecht, or maybe not?

SV - CB

Hi Cecilia,

I guess I have a different understanding of mapping, less to do with order, than with the activity of ordering. It has to do with my belief that there is nothing more irrational than rationality itself. As long as you allow for different maps, that is - then every map can point to its own incompleteness. There could always be other ways of mapping. But also, if a map pairs a (hitherto mysterious) object (or landscape) to an order, in a sense it co-creates the disorder of the object of landscape at the same time. Does this make sense?

That aside, your choice for the word 'disconnected' intrigues me. In your answer you talk about the relevance of things happening around you or your work (I think John Cage would speak of 'interpenetration'). One could see such events (distractions? interruptions?) as forms of accidental connection, of course. Likewise, with mediation: we tend to think of such technologies as establishing connection. Our typing is connecting to the audience, and since we're on email which is part of the internet network, we're also by definition connected to the NSA and Obama... so, why disconnection?

Cheers!

S

JAN 12: CB - SV

Hi Samuel,

One of the reasons why disconnection intrigues me is that we are often not aware of it. It is overlooked and unmapped

so to say. Using the internet we experience the connection and that to which we are connected to, but not the rest; everything 'outside' our screen of focus. Buddhists practicing Vipassana Meditation say that the human can only focus on one thing at a time. Having a feeling of being connected to the abyss of information will unavoidably mean that there are other things you will have to miss. I am typing this in the train, but therefore I cannot feel the movements of the train (i.e. I am not aware of them). Actually since humans started to think we have had this 'problem' of displacing our mindfulness (to use the cheesiest word I know for the moment) to a dark corner. But I do wonder what the body is in 2014 thinking of this theme. What do you think?

There is another reason why disconnectedness (or absence in presence) interests me. As a child I early developed a way to escape; to bodily be in one place but my mind switching off. I had a sick mother and I guess the stress and anxiety was too much for a child to deal with. I developed my own way of avoiding it. I have always wondered where I go on these moments..

But in general I think you are right, connecting/disconnecting are on the same coin and can easily switch places, sometimes it is just a matter of perspective.

JAN 13: SV - CB

Hi Cecilia,

Indeed, or are you a butterfly, dreaming that it is Cecilia Bengtsson? The moment of waking up from such a state of disconnection is perhaps even more mysterious. Does it bring you back to normal time, or has this other place in fact always been a part of this time? Like a rupture or disconnection that itself is constitutive part of the fabric of the continuity of everyday existence? I wonder if this may be related to your interest in stuttering, which plays a role in one of the works you're presenting?

As to your question about focus, I'll just offer an observation from my own experience. Somehow, if I hear multiple sonic streams, I can listen to them in the way you appreciate a landscape. Polyphony in music depends on that, but more fundamentally it's possible to somehow appreciate the simultaneous occurrence of multiple musics, or music and other sounds. I can even listen to a piece of music while copying out parts in musical notation for another piece of music that I'm working on myself. However, the moment text is involved, my mind can only deal with one stream. If I read or write with music playing in the background, I do not notice the music at all, other than in the vaguest atmospheric manner possible. I find this fact intriguing, and I've tried to explore perception of multiple texts at the same time in a number of works. Interestingly, I think that can be done when you apply the right sort of compositional perspective to it (thinking of timing, density, rhythm, imitation, variation, etc.), so really working in an intermediary field between music and text. However, fundamentally it seems the brain, or at least

mine, does deal with these two things differently. (By the way, this is one reason why I resist the notion that music is linguistic. It's related to language, but it's not the same thing.)

Cheers,
S

JAN 14: CB - SV

Hi Samuel,

When I come back to 'reality' from such a state I think what I experience is that time passed for the others but not for me. As if there is no time in that other place. Which of course is a bit odd. The stutter is definitely dealing with this interruption in everyday time and speed. It is also highlighting the difficulties accompanying such disconnectedness. It is hard to get somewhere productive when one is constantly interrupted.

About sound and maybe a bit ironically, what you describe about different streams of sounds and polyphony, a Buddhist would simply call 'hearing'. Sound waves putting the tiny hair cells in the ear in motion, transforming the movement into an electric signal that the brain then understands as sound. This way of looking at it is of course very bodily and basic and I still wonder what a Buddhist would say about polyphony..

Trying to practice what you are describing, here and now where I am sitting in my living-room, taking in the sounds of the traffic outside and the heater in the room, I am wondering if I am not just constantly switching my attention from one sound to another and then back. What you describe seems like some kind of hyper-awareness (which in your case may be the common state with regards to sound). I can recognize this hyper-awareness but in relation to spatial arrangements more than to sound. What I also notice is that if I am hyper aware of something I am very little aware of other things (this would again affirm the idea of focus on one thing). My partner often accuses me of being absent-minded in a conversation, but that is merely because my brain is so busy dealing with another sensory input. To be very aware is definitely not good for the social skills, that's for sure.

As an add-on:

Researching a bit about the ear I found one interesting note: the ear is the only organ that is functioning perfectly mechanical. With all the other sensory organs there are chemical reactions involved, with hearing not. Thinking of machines and technical equipment (that we have mentioned before) I found this fascinating. I am not yet sure how exactly, but it seems relevant. Also in the case of being aware of polyphony.