

A SLIGHTLY MODIFIED 12X12 INTERVIEW GAME: 5 MOMENTS FROM 12 INTERVIEWS WITH 5 GROUPS OVER 12 HOURS

Preamble:

the alt.SPACE Network is a newly formed and forming alternative space and project alliance. The idea behind the initiative is to generate a nomadic platform for an informal and on-going critical dialogue around existing artistic practices, strategies, tactics and processes, including both institutional and academic paradigms and self-organized models. The regular activities of the group include art 'open mic' sessions, interview and conversation games, reading groups, collaborative writings projects, public space and walking events, and direct interventions into academic and cultural industries and frameworks.

On the 25th and 26th of August, 2006, we organized one of our interview games, based on the number 12 and around issues to do with non- or anti-institutional self-organized collaborative structures. The idea was to create a kind of pressure cooker situation where 12 contributors – friends and allies, groups and collectives we know and/or have worked with – were to answer 12 questions in 12 minutes. The 12 interviews were to take place over a period of 12 consecutive hours. The questions were kept practical and straight-forward to the point of being almost naïve, though we were careful to keep the one minute answering time virtually impossible to stick to so that the answers would be immediate and direct, somewhat stuttered and stumbled, and function as entry points into the various practices of our interviewees radically different from the conventional biographical notes you find in catalogues and conventional press material. Relevant references, links to websites and other details would be given in the printed transcripts of the text.

As we started out, it soon became clear to us that the interviews would take a lot longer than we anticipated. Additionally, some people couldn't make it in the end, and some we missed due to interviews running over time, etc. In the end, 7 people, including ourselves, from 5 different groups took part in the game which started 11:00 pm on August the 25th and finished about 11.40 am on the 26th. This text comprises a series of extracts, 5 moments, from the interview game along with links to relevant project and group websites. We hope you will find it as interesting as we did.

the alt.SPACE Network

1. In conversation with Carl Lind [Signal, Malmö: www.signal-galleri.org]

August 26, 2006 – 11.00 am (GMT)

the alt.SPACE Group: To what extent do you feel that your practice depend on institutional definitions of success and failure, and to what extent do you feel you can set those parameters yourself?

Carl: I think we can only look at successful and failure from within the history of a project, looking back at what you've done, what it lead to, what it changed, what it made possible. To me, this is really the only way these terms can be used productively, when looking back at a practice, considering whether or not a project has made something possible, made a practice expand.

ASG: Do you feel there is a direct link between cultural production and wider political contexts and how do you feel this relates to your practice?

Carl: Can you explain the question? I don't think I understand.

ASG: Is there a link between, say, capitalist cultures of individualism and competition, notions of property – the right to property – the selling off of what was once nationalized industries and housing, etc., the operative notion of freedom that seems to reside at the core of the wars we are currently facing – is there a link, you think, between these issues or contexts and the different paradigms and parameters of contemporary cultural, or even artistic, production, which are sometimes thought of as outside of those contexts or do you see them as distinct?

Carl: I think there is a link, in a sense, or they should be... I mean, if you don't acknowledge the fact that these two fields are linked, that cultural production is linked to wider social and political structures, if you ignore this link, you end up with a kind recycling of art for art's sake. So yes, I think that as artists, we should be working with, confronting, these relations, and consider the fact that whatever we do, it will have effects within a wider context. There is definitely a link here, and it needs to be acknowledged.

ASG: Why collaborate? What does collaboration mean to you? In what ways is it important to your practice?

Carl: Collaboration is important to me. I feel we need to create networks, united fronts, new starting points, which means that we also need to dismantle the idea of the cultural producer being the individual genius and origin of the work and its meaning. I mean, the notion of an isolated idea has little relevance to me. Different inputs are great, but they need to be worked on from within a group, which will inevitably transform them, generate new options, developments and directions. If they are not worked with in this sense, what you end up with is the equivalent of a traditional group show. A much better model, to me would be to put all ideas, all work, in one big pile, mash it all up and see what comes out of it. Of course, I'm talking in metaphors right now, but this is how I'd like to think of collaboration.

2. In conversation with Benno Gammerl [UNWETTER, Berlin: www.un-wetter.net]

August 26, 2006 – 8.00 am (GMT)

the alt.SPACE Group: Could you talk briefly about a project you think of as a success and briefly about problems or even failures you've experiences within your work?

Benno: As UNWETTER we took part in the Liverpool Biennial doing this Discursive Camping project. It was really quite interesting, fairly concentrated. We had certain topics and we actually managed to get a bunch of different people together to play around with ideas. Sometimes this is precisely the problem – to get people to engage and interact, it is difficult to get beyond that initial point of hesitation. I suppose this could be thought of as failure.

ASG: To what extent do you feel that dominant cultural institutions determine your practice and to what extent do you feel that you, in your practice, can intervene into the institutions of dominant culture?

Benno: This sort of dependency problem seems fairly straight-forward to me. On the one hand, you are of course financially dependent on institutions, funding bodies, etc. but on the other hand, outside of this dependency, it seems to me you can determine the parameters of success and failure of a project or a collaboration yourself. So I suppose, pragmatically speaking, any practice needs to situate itself somewhere between the two.

The question of how you intervene into these institutional structures, on the other hand, is a difficult one. I think to some extent we can successfully intervene and challenge the assertions and structures of hegemonic culture. I mean, we try anyway. For example, we try to make possible non-conventional forms of interchange and exchange, forms of interaction that do not normally take place within the artworld and that often involve links between artists and non-artist groups and communities. This seems to me to constitute a kind of intervention into these institutional structures, both as a form of content and on a really practical level, like insisting that people are let in for free when they come to attend our events.

ASG: What does collaboration mean to you? Why are you interested in collaboration as a form of practice?

Benno: What does collaboration mean to me? It's a way of doing art, I suppose. A mode of production that moves away from notions of the origin of the artwork, original production, because of the fact that there are 5, 6, 8, whatever, people collaborating. I don't know... For me, it's productive on many different levels. I couldn't really do it in any other way.

When I collaborate I'm on vacation from myself!

3. In conversation with Scott Rigby [Basekamp, Philadelphia: www.basekamp.com]

August 25, 2006 – 11.00 pm (GMT)

the alt.SPACE Group: This is a somewhat leading and/or provocative question... Do you find it troublesome that dominant cultural institutions are picking up on and internalizing the kind of critical strategies that more self-organized groups often employ as a way to engage critically with dominant culture – reading and discussion groups, self-organized learning structures, interventionist and other kinds of protest strategies, etc.? In other words, do you feel that it is problematic that dominant cultural institutions take it upon themselves to offer a critique of precisely the kind of dominant culture they represent?

Scott: I would say that when a certain strategy gets co-opted the strategy itself is threatened. A quick example would be Nicholas Bourriaud's co-opting of so-called relational work. It sort of summarizes all kind of participatory work and groups it under this umbrella that sometimes seems to damage the strategies themselves. Not as much as I feared it would perhaps. Now that some time has passed it seems less significant, but during that period it was virtually impossible to talk of any participatory, social strategy without talking about Nicholas Bourriaud, this notion of relational aesthetics and the handful of practices that he makes use of in his work.

ASG: Do you feel there is a direct link between cultural production and wider political contexts and how do you feel this relates to your practice?

Scott: Practitioners within the arts hold a somewhat special place as cultural producers within a social structure. In a sense, it is a position very similar to athletes. I'll give you an example: At one point, the US government sponsored an exhibition highlighting Abstract-Expressionist painting. The exhibition toured the globe – Europe, the USSR, etc. - and basically what was meant to be at display, with these abstract pieces, was a narrative around US dominance: 'we're powerful', 'we're big' – a lot of bravado... And continually, in this way, artists are used to express a cultural and political context, say the freedom of speech, much in the same way as athletes are used, say, to represent freedom to compete through hard work, etc. So yes, I do think there is a really strong connection between what this country is supposed to stand for, and its cultural production.

As for the second part of the question, sometimes I think we're critical of a kind of market economy of human creativity. I mean, the global art market is a huge machine, a multi-billion dollar industry, but it is nothing in comparison to other markets. It does however supposedly represent a kind criticality, the upper echelons of symbolic play. It has symbolic value in this sense. And so I think when artists address something in the art field, we are in fact addressing a symbolic order that in different ways resonates of and links to a wider political context.

The Plausible Artworlds project (for further information, please visit: www.plausibleartworlds.org) we are currently working on is in a sense an expression of the point that it does seem useful to get involved in this massive field of potential creativity [the art world, the cultural industries] both to examine it critically and in to produce plausible alternatives. Multi-million dollar art festivals and art magazines – this organization of the art world – it sort of functions as a paradigm for cultural production, and it

seems useful to redirect some of this creative potential back onto the art world to re-examine how our field relates to larger social and political structures in the world.

ASG: What does collaboration mean to you? Why collaborate?

Scott: For me, what collaboration is *not*, is a mandate. What it is *not*, is to say that the best way to live is to always live and work in a group. That to me is not the intent of collaboration. Much rather, the intent is to show that there is overlap, that we operate in and with overlapping desires, concerns, practices. I suppose I'm talking mainly about the US, and maybe the western world right now, but within this specific context, at any rate, I think collaboration is to assert that competition is not the only or even the best way of progressing or moving ahead.

Even in societies where individual freedom is very high, we are still very dependent on one another, there is overlap, and we already live in groups. We can only really define individuality through the groups that we're part of – from the family to society at large - and in particular perhaps through the most dominant form of group of this period – the corporation. I really think we need to critically look at and examine these forms of human organization, including how artists live and organize themselves collaboratively, without making the assertion that collaboration, in and of itself, is good.

4. In conversation with Lee Simmons [London: www.leesimmons.org]

August 26, 2006 – 2:00 am (GMT)

the alt.SPACE Group: Do you find it problematic that dominant cultural institutions are picking up on and internalizing the kind of critical strategies that more self-organized groups often employ as a way to engage critically with dominant culture – reading and discussion groups, self-organized learning structures, interventionist and other kinds of protest strategies, etc.? In other words, do you feel that it is problematic that dominant cultural institutions take it upon themselves to offer a critique of precisely the kind of dominant culture they represent?

Lee: I don't know... How can you capture a self-organized group that doesn't want to be captured? It seems there are ways out of it. Take any kind of critical strategy or practice - it's not going to function in same way in a museum or gallery as within the context of a self-organized practice.

For me personally, it's also a question of reaching out to people. Institutions such as museum and galleries can be used to reach a larger amount of people, make a practice more accessible. It is not necessarily a question of capture, and it seems it does involve some degree of choice. Perhaps it is a question of coming up with viable strategies...

ASG: To what extent do you feel that dominant cultural institutions determine your practice and to what extent do you feel that you, in your practice, can intervene into the institutions of dominant culture?

Lee: In terms of my work, I think it does perhaps provide a challenge to dominant cultural institutions, but only in the sense that it doesn't really need them to function. The fact that we can just go off and do art work in public places, that we don't necessarily need institutional support, seems to be a critical position in itself.

To me politics, in many ways, seems to separate people, whereas art sometimes seems to generate movement across borders, create encounters, bring people together. This is perhaps a politics too, but in a very quite, gentle way. I'm into basic, core fundamentals – peace, a peaceful life, etc. – and my work doesn't really relate to certain specific political situations, but in terms of more general issues I suppose it does deal with a kind of politics... Having said that, I do sometimes deal also with very specific situations...

ASG: Why do you chose collaboration as a mode of artistic production? What is it about collaboration that interest you?

Lee: Collaboration? I think it can strengthen your sense of identity, what knowledges and qualities you have, what you bring to the table. But it depends on the people you're working with, and the project... The Walk-Talk-Eat-TalkSomeMore project (for further information, please visit: www.ccred.org/wtet.htm), for instance, has not been claustrophobic. It doesn't seem to involve any real sense of pressure. But then it is an extremely open project without any real output. You really just bring what you have and there is nothing you're meant to achieve. It's just quite open and chilled, easy communication between people. This sort of openness makes it easier, I think.

5. Conversation between Ola Stahl, Kajsa Thelin, and Vas Oikonomopoulos [the alt.SPACE Group, London: www.ccred.org/altspacegroup.htm]

August 26, 2006 – 4.30 am (GMT)

On self-organization and institutional parameters of success and failure.

Ola: To some extent we are always dependent on institutional parameters of success and failure. In terms of funding, for instance – you have to phrase it this way or that, according to certain parameters. But then again, there are other sets of parameters that you invoke yourself within a collaboration or collective, right? Sometimes things don't work out in the conventional sense of a success, though in a different sense, and for much the same reasons, the situation becomes much more interesting. The important thing becomes the event itself, not the numbers, not the size of the audience, not the output or documentation. At times something really important is generated from what is defined as failure within dominant cultural paradigms. It becomes a sort of critical strategy that opens up towards new horizons and modes of practice, new ways of thinking and organizing as a form of cultural praxis in itself.

Kajsa: Yes, we've all been working a lot with these alt.SPACE Group conversation pieces, right? Various kinds of conversation based events, some of them very busy, some very informal with only a few people present. We did this City rooftop conversation with Neighbourhood Public Radio from San Francisco. There was only maybe seven of us, it wasn't recorded – though we meant to – but it was really informal and relaxed, a really interesting conversation and, to me, a good event, though in conventional terms, of course, a huge failure. And vice versa, we've organized events with very good attendance rates, recorded conversations, etc. and ended up generating situations that are both a bit intimidating and highly institutional in character.

Vas: To me, it seems there are always elements that are successful and elements that are not so successful, in every project, and what we mean with those terms is never certain. Perhaps we can think of success in terms of what we learn from an experience. I think a successful project, in this more expanded sense, would be the month we spent travelling around Germany and Sweden, and Holland; a success for the reason that we went through parameters of living together different from those we have established here in London, and through this interaction, and these engagements, our moods, drinking times, different periods of living and being together on the move, seeing different people all the time, lack of private space, I think this time can be defined as a success of sorts... By working through these issues as a kind of journey, I think we established something very strong.

Ola: Yeah, perhaps we're talking about process here, and, of course, with process, binaries such as success/failure become rather meaningless and we ought to speak instead of intensities, rises and falls, increases and decreases of capacities, like a physics of process rather than a set of quantifiable entities or judgements of taste.

Vas: Zagreb was very much fun too, but again perhaps not a success in the conventional sense. I enjoyed the whole time we spent there preparing the space, as we had to build it from scratch with only very basic materials... It was exciting, and I think of fun in terms of excitement, as that kind of intensity that sometimes occurs within a particular process when it moves beyond a binary way of thinking. In

this sense, it was exciting to travel from Greece, as I did, to Zagreb, and it was exciting to build the structure, and it was exciting to wait for all the people to show up, like every 5 days or so, coming to stay with us, travelling from all over the world.

On dominant cultural institutions and the internalization of anti-institutional critical strategies.

Kajsa: To me it definitely seems to be the case that when dominant institutions capture or 'cash in on' self-organized strategies, we are really talking about an attempt to depoliticize them. It just seems evident to me.

Ola: You mean in terms of a kind of institutional 'co-opting' of strategies that are critical of precisely the dominant institutions that co-opt them? I agree. I think this is a hugely problematic area. I mean, this kind of institutional capture depoliticizes the critical strategy it co-opts, makes it redundant. When the institutions of dominant culture kindly offer to take it upon themselves to organize a space, internal to the institution, where critical perspectives and positions can be articulated, then what is being proposed is effectively an institutional space that is total and totalizing, a space where no criticality is possible that is not immediately controlled and measured by the institution subject to the criticism. In one pre-emptive strike, it moves against the very possibility of dissent by allowing for it to exist in controlled and measured forms. And it is invisible, invisible in its transparency – it seems benevolent, it seems to allow for criticality to flourish, for a multiplicity of perspectives; some things are let in, are allowed articulation under controlled forms, so that everything else can be successfully suppressed without the institution itself appearing to suppress anything. It is a game of pretences, charades, an interesting and very dangerous game. And as a strategy, it derives directly from the Social Democratic governmental bodies by which it was so effectively exercised in, for instance, the Scandinavian countries, at least until recently when it seems to have been substituted for a more explicit form of right-wing control society.

Kajsa: It's like those t-shirts with Che or RAF... It does tend to always happen... It seems however that different forms of practice are produced from within this conflict. Facing this situation, it becomes necessary to continuously come up with alternatives, to be on the move as it were. In our case, of course, we work with institutions too, but at least we seek to challenge the institutions we work with through a critical engagement, a continuous interrogation, through a kind of nomadic approach – we don't have space ourselves, we don't have regular funding – and through linking people, different groups and spaces and collectives in a potentially critical dialogue.

Ola: So criticality is played out both in form and content in a sense, right? It is not so much a question of positing yourself in what you perceive to be an outside, but of a continuous struggle for dissent within institutions. We need to locate those germinal points where things begin to mutate, take on radical forms, like subterranean tunnels in Marx, or lines of flight in Deleuze and Guattari. This calls for a focus both on form and content, and movement – directions and speeds.

Vas: Working through institutions is a very limited way of working though. You're so dependent on something abstract, an abstract control mechanism determining all your moves, the frameworks you put in place. It is a risky game and you can be exploited everywhere and at any point, you can become a pawn in an institutional game of chess at any point – through institutions, governments, etc. – and then the critical position loses its meaning and it becomes more a question of the recycling of established notions and positions. Instead of fighting against something, you fight for something, for the thing you thought you were fighting against, which is of course really problematic. I think perhaps we find critical positions also outside of institutions, at least partly. We try to do this with our reading groups, with the way we live and work in a self-organized fashion. The reading groups function as a kind of hub either of people here in London or, through the Skype reading groups, people from various locations around the world. And it is not institutionalized. It doesn't lead to research outputs, papers, certificates, and so on and so forth. It is, in fact, useless. It has no value in this sense, but for this reason also, it becomes really useful in terms of generating critical positions.

Topic: On collaboration.

Kajsa: Collaboration, to some extent, does bring you up against yourself, engender relations, meetings, encounters that push things towards new horizons.

Ola: Yes, though on one level we are of course always already collective. From the level of our bodies that depend on the relations that compose them and the relations they enter into with other bodies, to the level of much wider socio-political terrains. It is very difficult to conceive of an absolute inside/outside binary, even on the very physical level of the body. Again, we're coming back to processes and a kind of physics, right? Micro-bodies congealing into organs, organs forming bodies, bodies forming collectivities... And of continuous shifts, flux, transitions, increases and decreases in capacities, and a constant emphasis on potential, the actualization of future potentials. Spinoza said it well – we do not yet know what a body is capable of – it becomes a question not of negative critique but of finding other, new, more productive modes of collective organization. We are always collectively composed, the way we are made up is through complex collectivities, even under capitalism, which is not the optimal form of collective organization, right? Criticality seems to me to be precisely about this notion of pushing something towards the horizon of its capacities, towards other forms of collective organization.

Kajsa: Well, it's difficult... As singularities of sorts I think we are already social, collective, you break it down, but it's always a question of something collective. On a really practical note, though, if we talk about contributing, participating, and so on, then perhaps we can talk of certain dynamics of individuals collaborating, but I'm not entirely sure I want to phrase it in this way...

Ola: Yes, perhaps the terminology itself needs to be displaced as it kind of feeds into a dominant discourse around individuality, the possibility of individuality being given up, etc.. Perhaps we need a new language for this new kind of collectivity – a language without possession, that cannot be possessed, without pronouns.

Kajsa: Yes, I reckon we need to speak not so much of individuals or singularities but instead of the different kinds of collectivization that are viable to us, different modes of collectivity and collective organization.

Vas: I think to a vast majority of people being political means nothing, and social life, being together, is governed by apathy, what you can do for yourself – a highly capitalist way of engaging with yourself and other people. In this sense, cultural production is political and opens up to different kinds of politics, in every way. It involves taking your life as a kind of work in itself, and to think about how you arrange your life, your existence – this is cultural production, right? And it always involves relations, collaborations, different kinds of collectivity.

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