

## **WHEN SOMEBODY GETS THE JOB BECAUSE THEY KNOW THE BOSS**

### **Conversation between Simon Thompson and Lucy McKenzie (fragment)**

1. ...when somebody gets the job because they know the boss?

2. Yes, there are two different systems that historian Eric Hobsbawm points to that emerged through the process of the French Revolution. One which is grounded in investing in the aristocratic system, meritocracy, and the other which sees itself as emerging out of the reaction to it, democracy. Democracy encourages the idea that we can 'learn' those values that will advance us, and they are not necessarily innate qualities belonging to those born into a privileged position. Of course the trade off is managing the existence of the two, which is bureaucracy. All three can be in constant relation.

This maybe the nervous ground on which Koenraad proposed a discussion about the inclusion of our friends into spaces which seem to be very different in terms of the power relations which exist there.

Koenraad mentions that artists should neither focus on the business side of art nor take it for granted. But I think these are inseparable components for us as artists and as people in everyday life. For an artist, the support of others through inclusion is always under suspicion of shameless commodification of those relationships which always seem to accrue value on the side of trade. But for Koenraad to think that it simply shouldn't be about this is letting us all off the hook.

1. I think Koenraad is interested in the current Belgian fetishisation of the artist as a business person.

2. The artist as a business person is the bureaucratized artist stuck between conflicting historical values—on the one hand the possessor of innate genius and on the other hand the rightful embodiment of learned skills to be traded at the market, perhaps the most unrestricted of markets even. Still the networks or associations made by the artist seem to fall more openly on the side of displaying friendships and not on the more bureaucratic side of funding, research grants linked with institutions or stipends from commercial galleries.

Sometimes the upfrontness of financial support is made visible when the names attached to the support offer up more in the way of symbolic capital rather than plain monetary funding. Having a venture funded by a well-known artist or institution is actually an endorsement in a multitude of ways, not just primarily economic.

The value of association is interesting for me. I think it could be termed a little better, but I get the feeling that this phrase is closer to an economic understanding of the role that influence has played within art's histories, dovetailing with the aesthetic story art tried to tell in its past.

A good example for me would be what started to take place in London in the nineties. 'Friends' became shorthand for the cohesion and stability of prospective value, or, learning the lessons from the eighties art market, instability and avoidance.

It's very rare to see someone in a situation where they have chosen to show with someone who's work they dislike, or see this as productive. Consider the collapse of a group show in terms of the impossible contradictions and loss of group cohesion as a value in itself, which could be productive in forming a particular type of discourse; I like that idea. It implies to me that the internal situation of a show is always difficult to escape from. But it also implies that the external relation that any exhibition has with the outside world is in need of something more than the reproduction of its internal situation.

Take for example of [REDACTED] His inclusion of friends in shows and catalogues demonstrates the clearing of a little space inside what should be seen as a solo exhibition. At the same time though, I have to say that this procedure is accompanied by a lack of space for the creation of discourse around such an event. Therefore, this inclusion of a network of friends falls on the side of something which I'm calling meritocratic. In fact, I'd go as far as to say that it's meritocracy masking as democracy (inclusiveness, collectivity) and the lack of accountability for this procedure is a foregone conclusion. Meritocracy comes disguised in the form of the traditional A4 printed information that accompanies the show or occupies the space of the accompanying catalogue where a text is produced in some kind of relation to the works exhibited. This is illusive to the extent that it parades as a democratic procedure and perhaps this is why it's so fetishised? Perhaps you could say that the fetishisation of democracy is bureaucracy itself. This is what I would think of as symptomatic of the relationship between art and business; a downsizing of actual space for discourse whilst at the same time an increase in the circulation of objects and information that act as stand-ins for those procedures.

I detected a slightly cynical air in your interview in [REDACTED]; the interviewer had some trouble believing that some of these problems could be bypassed by the inclusion of friends in your practice for specific reasons. Does this relate to what Koenraad was talking about?

1. Well this subject is merely a component in the larger question of separating art and practice. Can one be a lover and consumer of art whilst simultaneously being its producer, and still maintain an idea of distance from these positions?

2. They are linked: lover / consumer. This relationship makes love problematic. Habitually I feel as though I know very little outside of the act of consuming. But I imagine there is a whole world of non-consumption; non-consumptive possibilities versus realizable pleasure.

The things which I know interest us both in this conversation are the practice of art, the role it plays in forming our lives and the wider reach of the consequences of the way these things relate to each other. It's safe to say these are complicated, perhaps even complicated enough to dissuade me from thinking I'm able to discuss them. Still the reason why they are complicated to me is that they assume certain definitions; the terms assume that there is a difference between friendships, nepotism, associations, consuming, commodification etc, and this assumption seems odd to me as the type of questions that Koenraad was starting to ask come from the type of enquiry that leads from the enquiry into capital. And therefore these assumptions have already put in motion a set of definitions in this conversation that I don't think necessarily exist, and it feels as though we are spending the time bending the rules so we can introduce our own terms; there's always this point in a conversation where it gathers its own momentum, its own inertia and starts to speak through you disregarding your intentions.

What I'm more interested in right now is if it is possible to have a friend. Not the inclusion of friends into one's practice and the circulation of this procedure in wider economic systems but, is it possible to just have a friend? I have no real idea of how a friendship could exist under the conditions set out by capital. The fact they do exist amazes me. Why would one need one? It all seems so over coded.

1. What seems over coded? And in what situation?

2. I don't know how a friendship could operate, in any situation. This is especially highlighted when we come to the displaying, recording, transcribing or accounting for friendship. Why don't people just openly hate each other and be done with the pretense of morality? This is what I think when I think on the side of capital, it's complicit with its own logic and its own propulsion, drawing from it conclusions which are its own. Then I think every act of intimacy is suspect. Isn't this what is implied by Koenraad's resistance to the über business artist (the one that's flush with capital and whose own "resistance" circulates without the slightest problem)?

1. But Koenraad's resistance is not unique, it's a prerequisite for many artists, who make a certain type of work, to feel suspicious of explicit professionalism in a very straightforward way.

2. Certainly in the last 30 years. But it's also not just about artists; this has to do with capital. Writers, film makers, musicians, who knows, plumbers—everyone is cynical within networks of association. And it feels almost impossible to escape from. Sometimes I feel like the only action is inactivity, patience.

1. Which is almost the case...

2. Yes. It returns over and over. Any sense of a certain type of activity feeds the very thing that we are talking about as a problem here. Even the most trenchant critique is floated as value now. It's been built into the artwork, for example, as a standard. When we were in New York it seemed to be the situation where a lot of institutional critique was at this impasse, shackled to the very thing it disliked. Whilst using critique as its way of inoculating itself against the 'thing', it was using a critical language which at its basis is essentially theological and therefore immediately de-clawed.

1. But you still haven't decided once and for all that you don't make art? That you are not a creative person anymore?

2. I never thought about whether or not I was creative. Was it good? Was it bad? They were things imposed on the context that I had to work through and find ways to cut loose from.

1. Well you haven't eradicated the possibility of working again, and you haven't replaced or rechanneled that into another drive.

2. No.

1. You even actually approach something as practical as learning how to make clothing as something you would exhibit.

2. But I don't exhibit. I just can't, I mean, it's a mess. Every time I attempt to talk about this it's a mess. Is it enjoyable even?

1. Everything you say about the inability to exist outside of the thing that is critiqued, do you mistrust that opinion?

2. Yes of course.

1. So you acknowledge that people find ways around this kind of problem then? Or do you write everything off as a loss because of its participation?

I agree that there are fundamental problems of working symbolically with others, but equal to those complex problems are necessary and positive things which should not be blanket bombed along with the rest. The point of tension in working socially is not actually caused by associating with others, even associating visibly with others, but by how this is displayed and where (the institutions and media); and this is exacerbated if there is no acknowledgement of the power structures in play.

2. The problem is this idea of 'what's up with them' at the expense of highlighting ourselves as a problem. This is what I mean by the theological impulse in critique. It's as though it can be used as a method of avoiding implication or purifying 'dirty' positions. Some people are like walking institutions. It's as though they have internalized this to such a degree that it's indistinguishable where the singular sensibility of a person and the singular sensibility of an institution actually exist. In fact, I would say that institutions exist secondarily to the impulse to institutionalize. Maybe we all already were institutions before we built any. The interesting discrepancy to me during this conversation is not that between art and life but between critique and capital; and this can take on any form, in any medium. Yes I do mistrust this position; out of a necessity. And yes I'm utterly depressed by the sense of paralysis, which is an affect of the form of my enquiry into capital. Art is a filthy thing just like anything else; it's reliant upon a particular structure, set of relations and networks. But at present I wonder about the relevancy of critique. The production of it highlights those who see themselves as opponents of capital whilst actually being rivals *within* capital.

1. Art has just kept pace with high capitalism, with all the themes of immaterial labor, the 24 hour working practice, intuition, everything that capital relies upon now. Saying that, I don't come to the conclusion that therefore a person should feel guilty about the pleasure they get from art. It's puritanical to say that anything that's enjoyable is somehow towards the power of the state; dressing up, comedy, whatever, the enjoyment of these things is just banal icing on the cake.

When you pick up an issue of *Wendungen*, for instance, do you see on every page: 'this is futile, this is in the service of capital'? Being interested in something, turned on by it, having the desire to understand it is about an empowering self-education. Whether that's within the hands of capitalism or not, you're still giving yourself the tools to say something.

2. I like this. I'm also prepared to think about the fact that futility is absolutely linked with education, along with impossibility, and I'm talking about an affirmative sense of futility and impossibility, not where these values are bureaucratized out of existence.

What I do imagine on some level is that I could find a different way of relating to guilt, which has some relation with what I think about critique's theological roots. It's not so much that one should feel guilty as much as I think that one DOES feel guilty, and the guilt felt seems somehow unavoidably and fundamentally a part of being

alive, not just in proximity to the problem of money. It suddenly struck me how important this aspect of living is. It's necessary to think about guilt simply because it is such a functioning part of consumption, and when it's not being resolved through the absolution of purchase (in order to inscribe more guilt to purchase more) it's a bit like critique in that it finds itself deeply informed by religion. Like I said, I do feel guilt or shame in relation to art, and I do find a certain purity in this and don't wish to resolve it, certainly not by any religious, therapeutic or consumerist options at least.

You need to keep your guilt as your own to have a certain sovereignty. My guilt on my terms, but also open.

It's a difficult one—the way people enjoy things. A lot of people I know consciously enjoy cynicism as a meta-language, which can release you from the situation whilst remaining there.

1. To relate it back to the initial question that had to do with critique as the idea that you examine the space between consumption and production in the field of art, what's being asked for is a hypothetical description of everything that comes into existence while art is being produced as if it can be quantified or categorised; which I have to say, does not pose itself as a particularly relevant task at this time. Is there a space to say that certain things will never be reconciled and that's fine? Intellectuality and critique do not have to be undernourished by a lack of empirical pleasure, and it is possible to enter a house designed by Victor Horta knowing that everything is problematic.

2. I just want to say again that critique at its roots is essentially theological so it would be interesting to see if this could be rethought and I'm trying to think of an example where empirical pleasure such as sexuality is maintained as a surplus, a bit like your idea of the thing that can never be reconciled but is kept nevertheless and not passed over or forgotten. So someone like Klossowski I think attempts to re think critique through the creation of an atheological system. He digs right down into the roots, but still preserves the dead wood. He creates an approach and I think this approach fails and has the details of that failure included in the work; the writings, the drawings.

Now I think critique is something similar; a heightened form of displaced sexuality. Now as for being in a Horta house, this is where you suggest that everything is problematic, but for me, I want to say that being there is much more problematic. I think I'm closer there to something I find much more enjoyable and much more difficult.

I can't keep this train of thought as I keep looping back, like I've been snagged on this problem. Which brings up the idea of plurality of languages coming from this position and, you know, 'why can't we enjoy everything?' as the availability or variety of choice. So what's the problem? And I'm not sure here, just suffice it to say that any line of critical enquiry seems to contain a flaw to me. Even a conservative like Greenberg had this right when he talks about the artist being attached by the umbilical chord of gold to the patron. It means that most ideas of reclaiming a sense of self power end up being to me about severance from the one which one feels dependant upon even when this results in a creative futility.

1. This makes me recall a conversation about fashion I recently had with a critic. This person observed that many designers state their hatred for the constraints of having to change every season and want to distance themselves from what they perceive as the 'typical' fashion client who follows trends mindlessly. The critic wondered why no one simply acknowledges reality, and instead gets inside this given the way an artist

like Jeff Koons has attempted to do with art. There seems to be a little bit more at stake for those other than fine artists in putting their product out into the world self-consciously.

2. Doesn't fashion heighten unselfconscious activity though?

1. It appears to be the number one self-conscious activity on the planet!

2. Well I always think of fashion as very thin mentally, and the only place it starts to get thick is when it comes into contact with art, and by that I mean a particular type of thinking that occurs in a certain place. Constructivist costume is a good example, and if there is some exchange that is taking place between contemporary art and fashion, then this is where art becomes 'seasonal'. I relate this to New York where the turnover of the new becomes blindly calendrical; it's as though the 'blind observation' of the seasons bears more in common with Bataillan sacrificial expenditure, or *The Wicker Man*. These people I think are gloriously engulfed by their negation of self-criticality.

1. On the flip side of this you get the armies of left wing, supposedly underground artists that are just as macho, living through their own fantasies of being historical outsiders.

2. I feel closer to that.

1. You see yourself as an outsider?

2. That's where my empathy lies; unavoidably with the marginalized. I think we have to agree with what faces us on these bookshelves, all this music, the films we have collected, it's generally queer. And I don't blame someone for having trouble with his own fantasy of himself.

But it shouldn't be personalized. I like problems but the idea of the person is a problem. Also 'the idea of the person' may have little to do with people themselves. One of the problems with most personal fantasies I feel is the way in which they smuggle in values like misogyny.

1. Yes, primarily. A tertiary simplistic relation to money is also created. The idea that suddenly if you sell some work you turn into a pig in a top hat with coins coming out your bum.

2. The big stock phrase this calls to mind is 'there's no such thing as selling out'—art schools in London practically taught this as their credo! This idea that, if there was no such thing as selling out, you may as well just act like you *are* selling out and that this will therefore be an interesting line of thought, mimics the attitude that say New Labour took on when it launched itself. And I think this relates back to the importance of your notion of irreconcilable values; the approach you put forward allows for a different relationship towards such things as opposed to the cynical re-appropriation of them in line with the idea that 'this is the way it is now'. All forms of resistance taking on board lessons that they have learned and those lessons are given by winners; the lessons learned by the line of least resistance, or rather making the opposition irrelevant by becoming it; this now appears as a mistake!

1. All the people that were taught this way are having nervous breakdowns or having to work very hard to get out of that mindset; as artists they are part of a generation which is basically redundant.

2. And it's interesting that many of the theoretical tools, which came from the eighties within art, were useless as an approach towards living. No wonder breakdowns or midlife crises were the outcome. Any models built around success, youth etc are going to cause meltdown. Entertaining ideas such as 'there is no way out', the non-existence of an outside, or no outside to language, or hyper-commodification, or reality as abject existence: these things sound more like the determining conditions which form a person like Schreber!

1. One would speculate that if one is cornered by the negativity of any action because of habitual reactivity, perhaps the same reactivity could be used to produce action. All these positions that we find so unsatisfactory can lead us to try and define ourselves against them.

2. Yes, but it's not necessarily facilitated by a belief in pleasure.

1. I don't advocate this.

2. The worthlessness of futility is a result of casting objects and others in the rather over-determined role of the enemy. Which again is a structural problem that cripples critique's ability to actually 'think' on one's own terms and against *them*.

1. Yes but this isn't the case inside Hortas' house.

2. Most people in that house were anesthetized by the idea that it was beautiful.

1. I remember talking about free masonry and thinking about domestic violence...

2. ... and the occult, the film Dune, Veonique Branquinho's clothes ...

1. I remember trying to find the servants quarters and wondering how they cleaned the place. Also uncovering the hierarchy within the Horta family and how this was shown in the planning of the house. We looked at the way in which Horta is used in the service of Brussels and we examined the scale model of the House of the People that was made by Willi in the basement...

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