

Gathering like a diagram, gathering as carrying, gathering in fabulation

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In 2008 a few artists, architects and curators^[1] played a cross-continental game of Exquisite Corpse, a parlour game that first became popular in Europe at the turn of the 20th century.

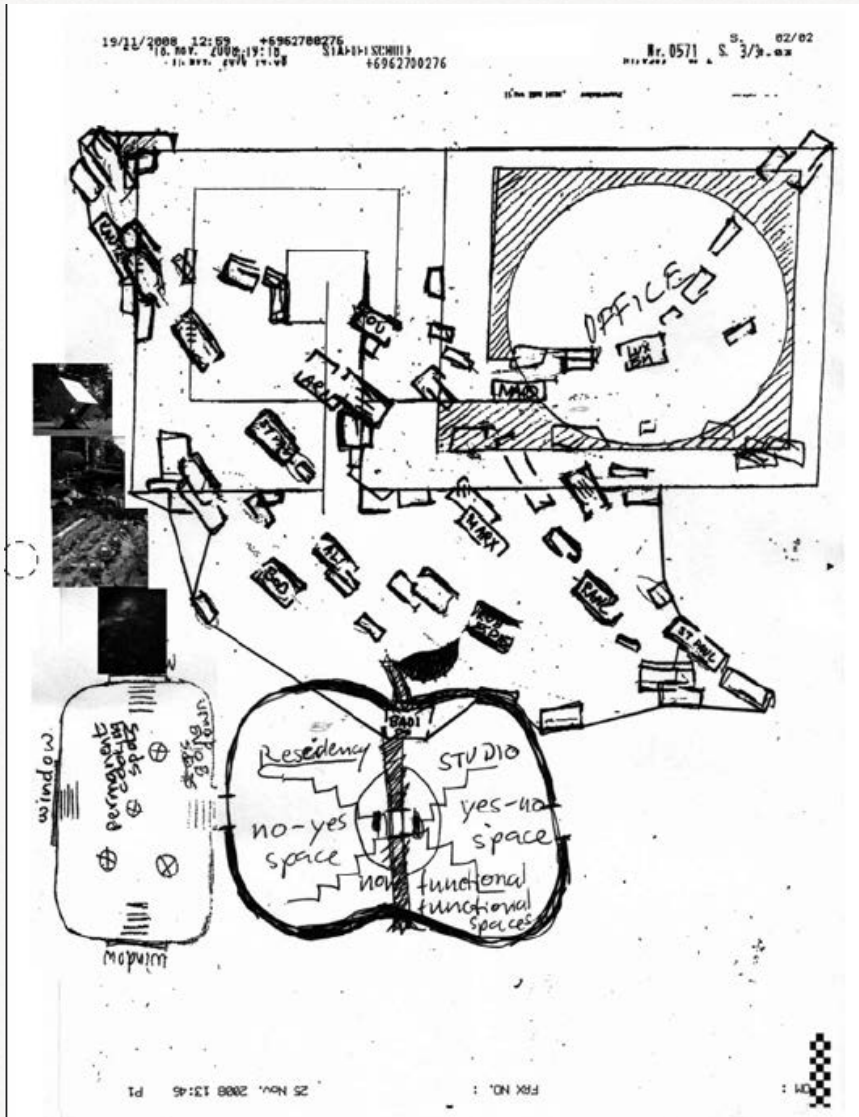
To play, a participant writes a sentence or draws a line on a sheet of paper, then folds part of the paper to conceal their contribution. The next participant – with the previous contribution obstructed - writes something new, and on and on it goes until a body (a poem or a drawing) emerges. A new arrangement of parts - sequential yet random, autonomous yet connected - are revealed through a literal unfolding.

The practitioners in question used this method to diagram, or imagine, a potential art institution. They were each to draw a room, then fax that drawing on to the next participant and so on and so on. What resulted was essentially a plan diagram that does not follow the neat mathematical or aesthetic rubrics that are so common in the spectacular designs we have seen in contemporary art institutions - designs that don't necessarily translate to useability or access. In this diagram of a new art institution, the borders between the office and the exhibition spaces are blurred so that the site of the exhibition can concurrently become the site of organisation. Intercepting both these spaces is a wall-less library, consisting of book shelves that puncture the entire building - like the

[1] Judith Hopf, Raqs Media Collective, Tobias Rehberger, Rirkrit Tiravanija, Anton Vidokle, and Eyal Weizman, Nikolaus Hirsch.

staccato lines telling you where to cut on a page. These shelves act as a sort of spine connecting all the rooms, including the space dedicated to making food and sharing food, a large tiered vegetable garden, and an even larger residency space, shaped like an apple.

When I encountered this Exquisite Corpse diagram a decade ago^[2] I began to wonder if the practice of diagramming could be used as a methodology for retaining openness, valuing systems of transference



Nikolaus Hirsch, Philipp Misselwitz: Exquisite Corpse (with Judith Hopf, Raqs Media Collective, Tobias Rehberger, Rirkrit Tiravanija, Anton Vidokle and Eyal Weizman), Showroom London, 2008

over closed structures – not only in the making of art institutions but in the organising of exhibitions. Paradoxically, the power of this particular diagram is that it is a draft, open to infinite alteration, disruption and polyphony. Whereas mapping distils existing orders and systems, and attempts a representation that will aid in the navigation of what already is, diagramming attempts a navigation of a space that is yet to be produced. This becomes a political – potentially radical – exercise, as it uses the

[2] I first encountered this diagram at a lecture given by Nikolaus Hirsch as part of the Gwangju Biennale curatorial programming in August 2013.

work of imagining as a propulsive, recuperative tool.

A central problem is the diagram's central power: the diagram is a site of potential, but it is also a site of the unmade, the unmaterialised, the longed for. How generative can such continuous longing be, in an unequal world? Despite their abstracted visual nature, diagrams really argue for problems to be resolved in physical space, not just theoretically. Diagramming can be seen as an argument for righting physical reality. But reality gets stuck in its ways - institutions begin to calcify in brick, mortar and bureaucracy, and exhibition practice is stifled by commercial prerequisite or whatever theoretical trend is looping in the art world at any one time.

How to continue the fluidity and imaginative potential of the diagrammatic when we begin to build physical infrastructures of support, or when we begin to organise and curate the exhibitions that circulate the urgencies that we believe require attention? How to sustain the projective, generative potential of a diagrammatic practice? How to do so while still getting things done?

To read a diagram is to engage in storytelling and narrative form. A diagram guides the reader from scene to scene, using drawing and mark-making to flesh out the character of a space. Storytelling provides the necessary context, detail, and intimacy to transform space into place. What if we thought of institutions and exhibitions as modes of storytelling? I don't mean the storytelling enacted by museums to persuade us that history is linear, omitting the politics of intimacy and daily life.

Consider Ursula Le Guin's *Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction*.^[3] Le Guin's carrier bag is a kind of diagram lifted from the page: structurally, it is a vessel that is made from the weave of many threads, but also capable of carrying multiple threads. This is in contrast to the demands of history (with a capital H) which centres a series of heroes at the expense of alternative narratives, histories and experiences. In this case, the heroes are certain monolithic and spectacular infrastructures, mega-museums, blockbuster exhibitions and biennales organised at large scale. This scale, and the wealth that enables it, provides outsized visibility. As a result, certain institutions are not only read as normative platforms intended to determine our experience of art, but also as symbols of progress. Their reproduction is attempted almost endlessly. The process that Le Guin suggests, on the other hand, is far more personal - it is predicated on reading and re-reading the room. The shape of the room could be a singular rock, or a hand, or a snail, or an eye, or a major organ like the liver or the heart, or an interaction of all of those things. The carrier bag is a platform of communication that is carried where it is needed, can be folded and unfolded, stretched or shrunk in response to a context. **What would an art institution or an exhibition look like if it didn't follow the linear arc of traditional storytelling - a beginning, a middle, an end? How do we form practices of gathering that are not full stops or concluding remarks, but are able to receive, to hold, to carry, to give back, and not only take and swallow?**

[3] Le Guin, Ursula K. *The Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction*. Ignota, 2019.

The diagram is a projective future-looking thing, but in order for us to gather constructively we have to engage with the present, and the past that formed the present. Everything has a pre-history. The hyper-contemporary design of a new art museum is, in part, a visual reaction against the stale Doric-columned natural history museum. But is it a reaction against the extractivist logic of colonialism that the natural history museum represents, or only the architectural shell that this history hides behind?

In her essay titled *Venus in Two Acts*, Saidiya Hartman uncovers the various impossibilities of historical accounts through critical fabulation, an approach that she describes as “straining against the limits of the archive”^[4]. There is the impossibility represented by gaps in the archive, there is the impossibility of narrating historical violences because of the breadth of the trauma that they continue to engender. Rather than stop-gap these impossibilities by merely mentioning them, Hartman re-imagines them. Imagination becomes a form of labour, and that labour involves rethinking the usual three-point arc of storytelling:

“By playing with and rearranging the basic elements of the story, by re-presenting the sequence of events in divergent stories and from contested points of view, I have attempted to jeopardise the status of the event, to displace the received or authorised account, and to imagine what might have happened or might have been said or might have been done.”^[5] *Jeopardising the status of the event* through non-linear narration and through a speculative narration of the past and the future. The narration of critical fabulation happens through writing, mark-making, but also through the possibilities of fiction. Fiction, to paraphrase Garth Greenwell^[6], is a special technology that helps us to think about situations that are complex, things that confound.

The word “diagram” literally means to “write through”. It is a form of writing that is primarily spatial. Instituting and exhibition-making are forms of gathering, of organising association amongst publics - strangers and friends. **How can we begin to gather as an act of narration, as an act of writing-through?**

[4] Saidiya Hartman “Venus in Two Acts” in *Small Axe* Number 26 (Volume 12, Number 2) June 2008. pp.11

[5] Ibid.

[6] Cressida Leyshon “Garth Greenwell on Capturing What Thinking Feels Like” in *The New Yorker*, published 14 August, 2017. Accessed 31 May 2022. <https://www.newyorker.com/books/this-week-in-fiction/fiction-this-week-garth-greenwell-2017-8-21>

Mika Conradie has produced curatorial and editorial projects with and for LagosPhoto, Jakarta Biennale, Ujazdowski Contemporary Art Museum, GALA Queer Archive, and the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, amongst others. From 2016 - 2021 she co-directed POOL, a not-for-profit arts organisation. Her writing on art, design and visual practice is published by K.Verlag, Transnational Dialogues, Art South Africa and Gdańska Galeria Miejska. Conradie was a 2022 Writing Workshop Fellow at the Johannesburg Institute for Advanced Study. She grew up in a very small town next to a very big river. Her fiction is forthcoming in NOON.

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