

Interview with Fia Backström

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In Fia Backström's practice, the legacy of appropriation art is joined with a socially involved practice. Backström engages and complicates the system—marketing, branding, the cult of the unique—as well as our place in it as individuals. She investigates the shifting faces of ideology and politics. Resisting categorization into one particular movement, her incorporation of media stretches to include printed matter, merchandise-based items, sound, arrangements and displays, object creation, original texts, performances and gatherings. To push things further, Backström incorporates others' artwork and texts within her created environments, testing the very boundaries of art.

Backström's recent exhibition at White Columns in New York, titled *That social space between speaking and meaning*, opened with an acrid letter. Her mash-up poetry of corporate jargon and artspeak began with, "A preemptive war of evacuated words and unlawful combatants, it's more than we can take. Luring language reigns rampant and generic, while iconoclastic moves on the image abound." In the gallery was more text; some were the words of Ralph Nader or corporate taglines-cum-wallpaper. Photocopied and hanging on racks were texts by Julie Ault and Martin Beck, Claire Fontaine, and others. Some texts were framed, including an exhibition review. Thrown into the mix was a donor plaque from the Sculpture Center and conversations—printed on Mylar and hanging over panels—that had taken place in the exhibition. This was an arena for discourse, or at least for the contemplation of discourse. The environment became truly engaged during the event *Poetry Club* that took place from midnight to 4:00 a.m. on the night after the closing.

CHEN TAMIR: Were you happy with your Reykjavík project?

FIA BACKSTRÖM: Oh, yes. For my piece *Content Providers Unite!* I gave over my slot and invited the museum staff to provide the content, to paint their movements throughout the museum with the help of projected hand-drawn floor plans on huge canvases, for that Abstract-Expressionist body engagement. They worked on a dance floor of colored printouts from my source archive, including images of Mohammed Ali and the YouTube Philippine prison dancers. As prosumers, we are constantly providing content, giving over our copyright to frames such as YouTube or Facebook. I became the host or frame, while the museum was turned into an art-producing machine with their interrelations to be played out visually and perhaps poetically.

CT: You work a lot with the supports or "exoskeleton" of art exhibitions, like reviews, press releases, even bios that you send in from other artists instead of your own. When I see it today I call it "meta art," but it seems to have grown out of Institutional Critique. How do you feel about the realm of "institutional critique"?

FB: Joseph Strau said in retrospect of institutional critique that they thought they were launching a critique against commodity society, but what really happened was their friendships had been commodified. This failure just points at the speedy nature of spectacle culture's capacity to profit from cultural capital. At this point, this desire for critique seems more a romantic need for old-school radicalism. I am more interested in where we stand in the construction of our own subjectivities in relation to image culture and the social coalescing into one surface, where all difference gets erased and chains of signification run wild. The art reference in my work is but one component; it has to be included to avoid a faux safe ivory-tower position. Now, there is no outside or alternative activity, and positioning oneself in an antagonistic re0 100 8hip is only decorative, where the opponent is always strengthened. Corporations and reality shows have co-opted criticality and with it self-reflexivity. I heard Sarah Jessica Parker is to host *American Artist* this fall, in which young artists will compete with paintings and sculptures...so art is definitely part of the bigger picture. Among ways to get things moving, how about the mirror of Snow White's evil stepmom instead of Sarah Jessica Parker—a self-reflectivity that includes the whole world

twisted rather than that narcissistic navel study of meta-art, which is a hopelessly solipsistic idea.

CT: For the Whitney Biennial you made *Let's Decorate and Let's Do It Professionally!*—a work that was reminiscent of a fair booth or museum shop, with Whitney logos on wallpaper and tablecloths, as you've done previously for commercial galleries. Is that critique beyond solipsism?

FB: The use of a logo does not in itself imply a critique. If it did, then half the globe's population would be institutional-critique artists. The logo is an image that the host uses to project itself with; I just turn it into a decorative pattern. A super image, as in who owns the image of whom, as these patterns are now *my* commodities. I usurped their image to create *my* signature. In the stock images on display, the viewer was mirrored: smiling people smiling back as contemporary portraits of ourselves. They represent us in an idealized state to which we aspire and with which we identify, ultimately turning us into better consumers. Somehow I see these grotesque faces similar to Dutch 17th-century genre paintings of the new bourgeoisie, who had funds to commission their own representations.

CT: What is your relationship with Relational Aesthetics?

FB: Sweden was one of the fortresses of Relational Aesthetics, so unavoidably I have to consider it. I did *Herd Instinct 360°*, the same performance I did in Reykjavík, in response to the way those gatherings were seen as unproblematic—a bunch of people hanging out—which comes off more as a corporate marketing event for prospective clients. I focused on the romantic notions of communality and corporate, “soft” manipulation as models for leadership. Perhaps the Dada movement seems the closest historical reference for my generation, working in this chaotic social context with the mistrust of the relation between text, image, and sense-making.

CT: When I read the texts you've written, I can't help but think of them as poetry, or a form of creative writing. Can we call it that?

FB: I am a wanna-be poet! I'm interested in different forms of address in language. My work goes in and out of text, in conversations and writings as public notebooks, often on the borders of spoken word.

CT: It's interesting to hear you talk about form. Had you been born fifty years ago you'd have been a Modernist, but your work is so contemporary in its attention to social contexts or frameworks of form. I can't tell whether you're Relational or formal.

FB: I didn't know I had to choose. I agree; it is not possible to split content and form, as forms are social and carry ideological connotations in a very sophisticated way.

CT: Your work is rather obtuse in that way. When I first walked into White Columns I wasn't sure how to access the work, or what my role as a viewer was. I wasn't sure whether to think of the works as objects or texts. Who is your work for? What do you expect of your audience?

FB: I'm flattered you ask yourself. Walking through Chelsea, the attention span is maybe three minutes; one scans the walls from the middle of the room and walks out. There's such an over-saturation that a challenging viewing experience is rare. For the White Columns show, I wanted to slow down the viewing experience and investigate the fissure between image and text. One could still take a distant position and get an aesthetic experience from just a cursory view of the show, but consisting of all text, at different distances from the walls various parts became legible and possible to engage with. It would take weeks to read everything, so by necessity each viewer had different experiences; there's no right one. An overview was impossible, but the various ways with which language was treated allowed the viewer, just as you said, to take into account the ways we are confronted and created by language on a daily basis—and, I hope, to consider our potential subject positions.

CT: I'm impressed by the inclusive nature of your work—citing and incorporating other people's work, be it text, object, et cetera, into your flexible projects. How does that come about? Is it a form of collaboration? That doesn't seem fitting. It's like curating. Some have called it appropriation. How do you see it?

FB: I don't have a name for it, but if there were curators like me, I would never agree to show with them. It is a very irresponsible way to behave with art, whereas I see curation as a serious investigation of and a responsibility for art objects, and for opening up spaces for activity. The effect of these insertions has to be determined by one's position in the food chain of cultural production, from where one sends out to it. Many collaborations today function more like temporary strategic positioning, or product placement for branding. Collaboration has a romantic 60s' sound; it is an easy way to justify almost anything—spinning Bush as collaborating with Guantanamo Bay prisoners...It can become fishy. My work is not a situation of equal input: I am the dictator. I would suggest a more contemporary phrasing such as “out-sourcing” or “temporary willful hostages.”

I instrumentalize these inserted art objects to serve as signification machines, so only well-known icons that have already circulated are used to withstand these stress tests. I exploit their capacity for meaning much like in the movies where actors bring in associations of everything from past roles to their private lives. By using original artworks, that life-threatening attack against the wall separating art and reality, to include everyday objects (i.e., the ready-made), I temporarily re-direct in the opposite direction. To simply continue to produce content, bringing more stuff in, becomes problematic. Let's recycle!

Furthermore, the art objects have a social presence, some of which stems from the aura that exudes from their commodity value. Sherrie Levine obviously looked at this. Sometimes an artist I approach might ask me to re-make their work if it isn't available for loan. As opposed to Levine, I would never do that! The social presence would get lost, as they would turn into my objects and the question would be narrowed into one of authorship. Appropriation is a violent activity; Levine never asked for permission. For me, the private moment of asking for permission is pivotal. It is the point of manifesting prior dialogue, that “CO-” moment. As it is difficult to have a dialogue with someone you never met, the “insertions” are usually solicited from people I know.

So if this were to be labeled curation, it would mean total nepotism, predictable choices, and counter-productive placements. That is a lousy curator! It is not that interesting as a reading. It's even incongruent to the rest of the work, compared to looking at these pieces as functioning materially and semantically inside another, as materials next to other materials.

CT: So the artwork and the photocopied texts, which you have inserted hanging on wooden lines in your last exhibition, share an equal footing?

FB: Their status as objects and their use potential are obviously very different; they signify in other ways. The texts were a way to create a pause in the exhibition, to allow for a private or bourgeois reading moment, in contrast to the more communal or communist wall newspaper arrangement of reading standing next to each other. One could read the photocopies sitting on furniture in the shape of a question mark or an exclamation mark.

CT: This issue of *Sjónauki* focuses on “the market.” Do you have general thoughts about the economics of art?

FB: The market is one way of circulation, where the issue is the creation of value. Like the weapons trade, this market is unregulated; there is no index, so all prices are arbitrarily based on social agreement. As with any capitalist endeavor, the purpose is to raise the value—going up, not down—and there are many interesting ways of doing so. With my insertions, the value of my own work gets relativized due to questions about what a piece of art consists of, with the social component complicating it further. Both of these two factors are completely co-dependent with the

valuation of art in general. As soon as something takes on real value, the freedom of mobility gets constricted by signature style and set identity markers. In the end, perhaps the satisfaction we get out of an art object has to do with what kind of faith we can imbue it with, for sure value helps a long way.

-Chen Tamir