Reflecting upon Reflections

June 2020, Bo Wielders

The last couple of weeks I have been squeezing the previous nine months into communicable and intelligible words. 279 days of living ended up on a single sheet of paper and a two hour talk. It is hard to taste the ingredients in the leftovers. But at least we have food.
(reflecting upon the whole year)

There has been so much past in my presence these days, heaped-up with a conscious treatment of time. I realized I need to avoid clocks for a bit. Hence, I didn't lift my head while passing the church or looked at the timer on our oven. Then I grabbed my phone around noon. It was a short abstinence. Back in business. Back at reflecting. This time it is not nine months nor will I use perfectly comprehensible words.
(reflecting upon Exhibition Research Lab)

Reflection is a core element throughout our studies and putted even more emphasize on towards the end of the academic year. Last semester, reflecting nearly became my practice, instead of it being something I would do upon my practice. It brought me here; reflecting upon reflections. I bounce hastily from past to present. With probably some future in between.

In March we started with the Exhibition Research Lab. After a few theoretical classes we all moved into our own houses, behind our own screens. We slightly got acquainted with the dynamics of the group in a physical way, but now we had to learn our digital dynamics. It was difficult to perceive the group as a whole, especially because technology didn't allow us to all be simultaneously visible on the screen. Video calls are a good communication tool to talk in small groups. Making decisions and plans with twelve people through a video call is still doable but takes a lot of time and active participation. I experienced the video calls often as intense and energy draining, but despite that they kept us connected as a group as well as to a structure. Which has been helpful.

For me, exhibiting making is a communal practice. Any communal activity requires some sort of similar understanding of language. Verbal or non-verbal, as tiny as a slight shrug of someone's shoulders or as thick as an English dictionary.

At the same time, a similar understanding of language is not possible nor wanted. Imagine everyone expressing anger with the same words and arm movements. Or everyone making the same sound while laughing. There will not be a lot of exchange during interaction. The exchange that is left, becomes predictable and boring.

What I actually was trying to write in these last two paragraphs comes down to this:
1. We have been learning a new language, the video-call-language. It is not as drastic as suddenly being obliged to only communicate in Basque, but we can't underestimate the impact it has had on our process.
2. My language will never be your language. And that difference holds a whole bunch of intricate beauty.
3. Working on an group exhibition requires an interest in understanding each other's languages in order to communicate.

An unconscious mixture of 1, 2 and 3 made me focus on communication with the other participants of the group through the 'conversation pages' I initiated. These pages on the platform became the starting point and in some cases the endpoint for the work.

After a while, the first round of reflection came along. Ryan and I had to decide what our stay on the stage, the page, would be. We sent an email to the group (see below) with our ideas, findings and future plans. This email started the second round of reflection. What is it that I want to share on this particular page, through pixels, with a distant audience? I turned towards text, text to talk about the conversation we had. I wanted to write about the process we went through, give outsiders an inside of the exhibition we made and are still making.

A little later, I found myself in the third round of reflection. Circling around the absence and presence of value. I experienced the 'conversation pages' valuable for the two of us that participated. We started to understand each other's languages better and managed to communicate with one another. The text 'A letter to Ryan and you' became valuable to share with all the other participants in the group; showing transparency, doubt, personal potholes and my language to understand our language. Then there was, or is, a field of value I have trouble navigating through; the value of sharing the works with a wider audience.

During the built up of the exhibition 'As Real As You Want' I lost the need to share the exhibition and my work. Not because I do not stand behind it nor am I insecure about the result, but the reason for the exhibition to exist and the content we share lost connectivity in my eyes. And I learned, after the opening, that a connectivity between those two is important for me. The distance can be huge but I want to see the pathway.

In my view, the reason we are creating 'As Real As You Want' is not because we all wanted to research the physical and virtual world, but because we all decided to be part of the Exhibition Research Lab. In other words, the exhibition has an educational starting point and my meta-mindset needs to hold on to that. While holding it, I see value; knowing and showing what the stage is made of. This blue-print of the stage doesn't need to be the only content, but I prefer it to be a considerable part of the content and working method.

Before leaving you in June again, I will go back to March for a bit. In March I began digging into phenomenology, vision-centered societies and embodiment within the built environment. While I was trying to understand as well as distance myself from ocularcentrism, we all got pushed back into its core with a frontal force. The switch to the digital realm has been hard on my body, on our bodies. The course has been a playful research into new directions for me. Since I couldn't use the physical body as a direct mediator or communicator for my work.

Working on the exhibition made me understand that my experiences of losing the need to share, seeing value slip through the sink and wanting to walk away from the stage isn't inherent to the format of an exhibition for me. I think it is rather a recurring feeling that comes up when the starting point of creating an exhibition is lost on the way, not being communicated with transparency to the audience or doesn't fit with my interests and values. Through an emphasis on and re-connection with the educational aspect of this exhibition I see the value of sharing it again. And therefor also sharing these words.

So here I am, middle of June, fourth round of reflection; Reflecting upon Reflections. Expanding the blue-print a bit more.

Attachment Reflecting upon reflections: Email 'conversation pages'

from: Bo Wielders
to: Ryan Lim Zi Yi; Tatjana Macic; Alexander Koch; Natsumi Sakai; Todor Rabadzhiyski; Iver Dahl; Lui Wolstencroft; Robin Pieterse; Yannis Androulakis; Ain Nurul Ain Binti Nor Halim, Juwon Lee; Marta Iwanek
subject: Decisions are made
Zo 17-5-2020 12:33

Hey all,

Hereby we send you our thoughts regarding the future of the page of Ryan and me. This email consists of parts of our email conversation that will give an inside why we think we do what we do did what we did and will do what we are planning to do. You can skip to the last two paragraphs for a short-cut to the conclusion.

email exchange after phone call on Wednesday 13 May
snippets from Bo to Ryan
The initial starting point for the 'conversation pages' was to have (textual and visual) dialogs with fellow students directly on the platform, searching for ways to make digital interactions personal and valuable for us. And at the same time create content that is born-digital, to enhance to notion of using an online platform. While experiencing online exhibitions (and online communication) often as very remote, secluded and hard to navigate through, creating these pages seemed helpful to connect with each other and the platform more.
…
Making the pages private or public wasn't a concern in the beginning of the process. We deliberately didn't focus on this to keep the process open. Each page has been growing in their own way, which then naturally leads to a different treatment regarding to publishing it on the online exhibition platform.
…
The page of Yannis and me became a monastery. We talked about text with our own texts. The page is an introduction of ourselves for ourselves and others. We created a little path that a visitor can walk on to explore our thoughts and texts. Therefore making this page public feels as the natural thing to do. It is the content of the conversation that became valuable for us to share.
…
The page of you and me became a window, a conversation in which we shared many references and small or big thoughts. Referring back to the initial intention, it is not this exact content that is important to convey to a wider audience (for me). It is mere the navigation and experience of the dialog; searching for an intimate and personal interaction in the digital realm. Even though we never approached it as a work, we have to take responsibility for it becoming part of a bigger work which is the exhibition in its total. I have slackly ambiguous feelings about property on a physical level. Which makes me nonchalant towards its legalities in the online world. In our dialog we shared many visual references we do not have the copyrights to. Contacting the artist to publish their work on our page would be an option, but as said before it is not this exact content which we feel we need to convey. Deleting some of the images and possibly replacing them with descriptions of the images would be another option, but then the flow of the initial conversation will disappear and leave us with confusing leftovers.

snippets from Ryan to Bo:
I think when I first heard about what you wanted to do, I thought about how my communications (and relationships) with people on the digital and online platforms usually functioned, that is it often feels like I am making very quick transactions of exchanging thoughts and emotions. With this idea, I saw this page slowly developed into something that could perhaps counter that even though it wouldn't always be the case.
…
For the past month, I didn't see it as a work that we had to make. As I can only speak for myself and perhaps you have similar opinions or not, this was merely an act of sharing thoughts and external material that was mostly found online that I thought were relevant or just interesting for me to share with you. With that, I also agree with you that it was not a concern whether or not it becomes public.
…

You said that "deleting some of the images and possibly replacing them with descriptions of the images would be another option, but then the flow of the initial conversation will disappear and leave us with confusing leftovers." Perhaps this way of thinking is needed. I have been thinking, because this is not about "killing our darlings" and what we want to do. Instead, this has progressed into something that is out of our control (in some way) and we should embrace the decisions we make and to find what is really needed for this digital conversation.

…

Perhaps this conversation has reached its end due to the circumstances that we did not see coming prior to this moment, perhaps the most natural evolution of this conversation is the complete deletion of the contents in this conversation. Maybe the confusing leftovers is the most natural way to go about it because in the end, I still feel very strongly about our initial intentions and it is very much connected to the situation now, in which it still isn't about how the conversation will end up, but how can we look at our approach and decisions throughout this time of this conversation. I ask myself now, does keeping the contents really matter to me and you now? Do we really feel like we need to save these articles/images/screenshots/texts? What is the most natural way to capture and understand the attitudes/approach/decisions/feelings we developed and took throughout the process of this conversation. So I do wonder and am still thinking about your suggestions because maybe it is a phone call, maybe it is just a text that encapsulates the process and intentions of this conversations, let's see.

snippets from Bo to Ryan after phone call on Saturday 16 May
Alright, alright, so we will delete the literal content of our page (but not too soon, maybe next week) and write a text about the dialog/the page/the whole experience. I have been thinking about my initial motivation to be part of this elective, which was to understand the dislike and repulsion I often experience towards the end or the aftermath of the exhibition making. I want to use the 'stage' that we created to share these reflections. It seems as the most sincere step for me to take and what I care for right now. We can keep each other updated on the texts/reflections or if want to share something else on the platform than these texts.

snippet from Ryan to Bo
👍

That is it for now, see you on Wednesday
Ryan & Bo