



Transmission:

# HOST

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Centrefold image: preparations for Roman Ondak's work 'Failed Fall' for Sheffield Winter Garden, commissioned as part of 'Art Sheffield 08: Yes, No & Other Options'.  
Photo: John Hartley

Jeanine Griffin: When I look back on the development of Art Sheffield 08, the idea of hospitality has run through the process. When reading Derrida's thoughts on hospitality, which revolve around the etymological link between hospitality and hostility (the root, *hostia*, apparently means sacrificial subject), I'm reminded of your initial reluctance to take on role of commentator/co-curator – did you think you were the scapegoat or sacrificial guest?

Jan Verwoert: Maybe. It's often like that when you get a gift that you did not expect and that you feel happy about but on the other hand unsure about – that you'd not know what consequences accepting that gift might have. When you accept it, to whom do you become indebted and how do you enter into that contract, or rather, as whom do you sign that contract? I was immediately comfortable with the situation; the atmosphere seemed like a really good environment. It wasn't a worry about becoming indebted, beholden, not at all, but it was about a certain hesitation on my part in regard to the question of whether I could sign the contract that was offered, as the person you wanted me to be or become, since, being a writer, I'd previously thought I didn't want to be or become that person – a curator.

JG: It was also a very particular situation we were asking you to enter into and one that required a lot of generosity on your part – because it was about opening up your ideas<sup>1</sup> to a process of discursive, collaborative curation – an open-ended process which is quite a vulnerable position to be in.

JV: Such a process of developing ideas in an open-ended manner is something that I enjoy anyway and that you do as a writer or

speaker engaged in a discussion in a conference. It's finally more about the responsibility that you have to take on and how you can take responsibility for a process where the outcome is unclear and the function that you will fulfill is not entirely defined. All of that is subject to negotiation, responsibility, accountability, decision-making power, and all these seem intimately tied to one another. That is the tricky deal that you enter into whenever you collaborate with people – in the end you're also bound to be responsible for things that you haven't decided yourself or that are beyond your power. This can also be a question of trust and also a question of a strange symbolic exchange. Many production processes and social structures in the art world are based on symbolic exchanges and so far I had a certain philosophy or ethos of how I wanted to engage or not engage with them. Being a writer puts you in a position where you can be very much in control over how you perform these symbolic exchanges. When other people and institutions are involved, it's more difficult. However, at some point I realised that for several reasons these worries were unfounded. First of all, once you embark on this process of discussing specific choices, specific issues, then it is no longer primarily a question of symbolic exchange but first and foremost a question of practice. It's all about how you moderate the discussion and thereby create the practical conditions that enable a collective to make decisions.

JG: Often in so-called marginal or peripheral sites of practice there is an idea of symbolic exchange or reputational transfer – you buy in the mythos of a particular star system of artists which donates credibility to the context that you're in, so that, presumably, a reputational transfer takes place. We were keen to avoid that from the very beginning. We did not want to create a project that could be interchangeable with any number of other projects by buying in to a certain model of curation that is about bringing in a set of artists only for exactly that sort of symbolic exchange, rather than a sense of their broader practice. This is one reason why these kinds of projects fall down, either because of a generic franchising approach of buying in and bestowing value – often coming from a municipal standpoint in this kind of biennial project - or because of the opposite curatorial tactic which is about 'vernacular mobilisation'<sup>2</sup> – creating a kind of romantic identity of place to which the artists are expected to respond. This curatorial conundrum is something we had to deal with.

JV: The first thing we spoke about was indeed why this notion of reputational and representational transfer is so problematic. We had all of that on the table before we even started talking about doing a show together. Of course you could say from an outside perspective that certain reputational and representational transfer always happens; it's bound to happen inevitably, as soon as you put certain works by certain people in certain spaces. I guess any outside critic can always trace such exchanges and describe their effect and you wouldn't be able to deny it. However, what I hope, or actually, what I've experienced, is that once you allow yourself to have an intimate relationship to a work maybe that process can take a different course. The static symbolic order of the reputational transfer may then be dissolved in the experience of an ongoing communication process. I felt it was all about the time that we allowed ourselves in the process of discussing the show – that you develop a certain intimacy with the work and with each other's position in the course of spending one and a half years ridiculously, democratically talking through each and every choice.

JG: This kind of prolonged deliberation about practice in a group context during which you have to take on board the position and the proclivities and the passions of your peers is quite a rare occurrence. What I like about this collaborative process is that it's a salutary contrast to a solo or more authorial curatorial practice – your ideas are subject to radical change in the process of that kind of discursive scenario and it's a challenging developmental process. Ideas are developed in the process in ways that you can't predict – it's a live process, and it contrasts with a solo curatorial process, whereby that discussion is often internalised. It was a challenging process to relinquish that authorial intent, and still retain responsibility for the final outcome. I don't think you could do it in all your endeavors but I do think it's a really interesting, if sometimes frictional, process that allows you to create something which may have been unexpected at the outset.

JV: Sometimes I felt that this is possible because I come into the group as an outsider and I'm not expected to know about the local politics and the issues that might exist. In this situation, of course you intuitively feel that there might be issues but you can deal with things as if they weren't there and thereby build a common ground that would be impossible if these issues were foregrounded. As an inside outsider you then become a moderator or medium who channels







the energies of the group. This is a pretty interesting position to be in. I also have to say that there was a particular spirit on the side of the host that you embodied for me, which impressed me: the sense of appreciation, first of all, for works and ideas.

JG: There is definitely something about the dynamic of insider and outsider, host and guest, where having someone external to a settled context does create a frisson – a productive tension. The inclusion of an outsider allows the local context to speak to and of itself more effectively. I was thinking about your piece in *frieze* that referred to gestures of convocation,<sup>3</sup> and I wonder whether that is a useful analogy for the curatorial process of Art Sheffield 08. Rather than ‘invoking a deity’ – an autonomous external curator to bring something in from without, fully formed – we actually convoked a new assembly of people to collaborate, not to convoke a new institution but rather, a temporary dissociative community in which these different agendas and interests were present but suspended.

JV: It's strange because I'm usually more for evoking than for convoking – more for the dignity of the solitary voice and suspicious of any ritual or ceremony of convocation that potentially starts a nation church or operative community. Having said that, it's a question of how you want to assume these different roles. The mediator/moderator role is another way you can perform or fulfill a function in a ceremony of convocation, which I think is more of an operative role to play.

However, that you can then reinterpret these roles more freely than usual has a lot to do with the fact that Sheffield is not a city where a myth is already in place, because if that were the case all ceremonies performed would be in a church that was already inaugurated so you would always be performing a service to something – some religion, gospel or cult – that is already established like it might be in other places. I felt that here there is no cult ... it is a godless city! It has to do with a slightly self-deprecating attitude of the citizens of this city – it's a great mixture with a pragmatic confidence that things can be sorted if you want them to be but it's not linked to any particular belief system to which you constantly have to pay lip service, which is great and very useful so everything that we do now, or that the show hopefully did, should not have contributed to any myth. I think that this makes a big difference – we were talking about centres and peripheries and the supposed centres always are full of myths. There is not one

church but many churches and all of them demand some kind of worship. So when you're making a show in the bigger cities you may just end up fulfilling the self-fulfilling prophecy one more time. For instance, as a New Yorker you may feel pressured to put up a show that 'looks like' a New York show, and in struggling to meet that mark you may end up perpetuating a completely empty promise. With Sheffield that promise and myth seems to not quite exist or at least to be radically unclear, even though there are so many agents out there at the moment trying to reformulate that promise as 'the creative city', 'the city of innovation'. The nice thing about it is that it's usually so awkwardly done that I'm not entirely sure that everyone is really willing to believe in it.

**JG:** It was always a priority not to attempt to explain Sheffield to its inhabitants. When you first visited the city, you identified those things that were particular to Sheffield but also had a relevance to any number of other places – the idea that there may be a similar set of post-industrial conditions that are equally pertinent to other tertiary cities of Europe. Those things that have come through in the show like ideas about the ghosts of modernity that haunt these spaces, or issues around work and migration are common to artists' and audiences' experience, be they in Sheffield or Dortmund or Slupsk . . . those things have emerged organically, rather than by attempting to create a notion of a particular vernacular identity that levels the different political realities of place.

**JV:** That's crucial also because there is a certain potential in situations that are not yet fully defined, where there's still an uncertainty about what this city is supposed to mean or represent. How do you perform or act in such a situation? You could understand your task to be to provide a definition, to help the city define itself, but maybe you're then performing a ritual that is doing a service to ideology. You're just providing a brand, not recognising that maybe this still somewhat undefined nature is actually the biggest asset that the city has. To be faithful, or to do justice to that would mean to create something that reflects what's there but still keeps it sufficiently open to the latencies or the unsaid or the not entirely discernible – to understand that as a potentiality rather than to destroy that potentiality by giving it some name and overwriting all moments of undecidability or openness that are still there. As things are not yet worked out, you don't have to work it out for the place but just allow for that conflict, rupture or undecidability to come through in the show.

JG: And you hope to create moments where those potentials are allowed to reveal themselves, without over-determination but it's almost impossible to totally engineer it, to fake it. Before we embarked on this project I found your text 'The Accidental Tourist' really crystallised how your writing was fitting with some of the ideas I was interested in for the project.<sup>4</sup> It was about experiencing these moments of accidental confluence between the local and the international. You talked about sitting in a Stalinist street in Berlin, in an Italian café playing Brazilian music, reading an essay about a French filmmaker's encounter with the Lithuanian accent in Jonas Mekas' films, and discussed how it is these moments of cultural interference that you look for in art. This struck a chord with me as it was also this kind of cultural interference that I sought to create with Art Sheffield. You suggested that these accidental moments of interference can't be faked and also that whilst the *genius loci* of a particular city is an important factor, it's not the sole reason for their occurrence. It also touched on whether a flirtation with the international might mean an escape from a commitment to the local, and this is a key question for this project. How do you maintain a commitment to the local and also have an internationalist intent, to create moments for the overlap and interference of these ostensibly differentiated realms? How can you create the situations – without faking them, or over-defining or smoothing them over – where those indeterminate moments of friction or interference can take place?

JV: The question then is how do you provoke those strange occurrences. You can't force them, but there is a good chance something may happen once you have a number of different artists and people from different institutions bringing different experiences to the table and me, I guess, as a traveller, trying to expose myself to situations that I don't quite understand and which I then try to understand through the art that I see in these places. So there is one set of heterogeneous influences exerted by the art that is discussed. There is another set of influences exerted by the different modalities of the spaces that host the exhibition and the idiosyncrasies of the people that run them. If you live in Sheffield, you might feel that these institutions and people are a given and that together they represent the art establishment, as if they were one entity. From a more distanced perspective, however, you see that this is not actually true. All these spaces have completely different modalities, different politics, potentials, and limitations, so all these spaces should be completely incompatible with each other.

To bring them together and assume that they could actually work as part of one exhibition is already creating a situation where the Brazilian waiter from the sushi restaurant starts making pizza. So there is an invisible heterogeneity that was constantly present in the processes of negotiation.

JG: My interest is in creating a situation where this kind of heterogeneous collaboration and productive ‘interference’ can happen, both in the curatorial structure and the artistic programme itself. The kind of things you identify about Sheffield not having a mythos, about things being open and in a state of transition, means that there is an opportunity to bring this about in a way that can be fluid and mutable. It allows you to develop something which doesn’t become ossified into a particular mode whereby you buy in to a particular culturally motivated form of civic development but it’s self-reflexive and creates a situation where these things can feedback into themselves and onwards, particular and specific unto itself without attempting to create or trade on a definitive local identity.

However, in this kind of project, which does not take place in a metropolitan art centre, discourse often revolves around what’s perceived to be a discordant relation between the local context as host and the influx of the international guests. This may frequently involve the issue of representation: how and by whom the local cultural scene is represented. With this project, as well as including locally-based artists alongside those based nationally and internationally, we’ve used the dynamic of hospitality as a means to cut through this opposition. Host and guest have a parity of power: the host can’t submit totally to will of the guest or would cease to function in the role of host; and the guest, whilst able to make demands on his/her host, must abide by house rules, so a form of negotiation and interchange is always present.

JV: Hospitality is a compelling counter-example because by virtue of manifesting itself primarily on the level of modest performative gestures and vernacular ceremonial exchanges it has comparatively little to do with representation – still it is arguably one of the most potent forms of cultural participation precisely because it creates the very possibility of (and forum for) participation. Obviously, hosting is an activity primarily performed by individual people who have a space in which to welcome guests. Still, there is also a more general

sense in which a place is felt to be hospitable or a city found to be welcoming. In this sense the collective subject (or *genius loci*) of the local can incarnate itself and become an agent of hospitality. This agency simply manifests itself in any random encounter between guests and locals in the city and the particular atmosphere, spirit, and humour of these exchanges. So even before the issue of the inclusion and exclusion of the local in an exhibition comes to figure on the level of representation, the collective subject of the local may in fact always already be included and implicated, present and represented in the show through its performance in the role of the collective host. The crucial point would then be to find ways to appreciate and activate the collective practical intelligence of this performance – by enacting it publicly in and around the exhibition.

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1. Jan Verwoert was invited by SCAF to write a text to provide a conceptual framework around which the programme for Art Sheffield 08, was collaboratively curated. Each member of SCAF (which is made up of representatives of different art spaces in the city alongside independent artists and practitioners) and Jan Verwoert suggested artists whose practice was felt to have a resonance with the ideas in the text, which was seen as a starting point for discussion rather than the script for an eventual exhibition.

2. A term used by Neil Mulholland in a paper for the *Curating Post-Nation* symposium, transcript at [www.situations.org.uk/research\\_research\\_resource\\_situations\\_papers.htm](http://www.situations.org.uk/research_research_resource_situations_papers.htm).

3. 'Private Lives, Public Gestures' in *frieze*, issue 112, March 2008.

4. Editorial in *frieze*, issue 99, May 2006.



Transmission: Host is a series of chapbooks derived from an annual lecture series organised by Fine Art at Sheffield Hallam University. Each week a different artist invites a guest speaker. The host selects, presents, and looks after his or her guest. A critical engagement between host and guest is assumed; what exactly that relationship is will be made evident through discussion. There is an ethics of hospitality, of making the stranger welcome. A host has a standard of conduct, and historically, hospitality has been seen as a code, a duty, a virtue, and a law. There is a bond between host and guest, and in the lecture series and the subsequent chapbooks, this bond is formed by the engagement in and the practice of art.

This chapbook is an edited version of an exchange between Jeanine Griffin and Jan Verwoert using the Transmission theme of 'Host' as a means through which to reflect on the idea of hospitality in relation to the development of the Art Sheffield 08 city-wide exhibition. Jeanine Griffin is a curator at Site Gallery and Manager of Sheffield Contemporary Art Forum and of the artistic programme of the Art Sheffield city-wide events. Jan Verwoert is an art critic based in Berlin and a contributing editor for frieze magazine. They worked together closely on the programme for 'Art Sheffield 08: Yes No & Other Options' for which Jan Verwoert was the invited commentator/co-curator, and collaborated with SCAF to develop the programme. The city-wide exhibition explored the proposition of exhaustion and over-performance in our contemporary post-industrial service culture.