

TOWARDS A COMMON ECOLOGY OF MIND

On the collaborative practice of Stian Ådlandsvik and Lutz-Rainer Müller

By Wiebke Gronemeyer

One Cannot *Not Communicate*

This seems at first hard to imagine, as communication is always thought of consisting of an interaction between people within real or virtual situations, which can take place in many kinds of social frameworks. Communication is a relational matter. However, that does not define the type of relationship or situation that can generate communication. We sometimes have to think quite outside the box to imagine a dialogue without words, without a partner, a communication with a stone, for example, or with anything.

As a matter of fact, anything is already communication. That anything is inevitable, unavoidable, and first and foremost consistent. The activity of communication is a priori to anything else, might it be dialogue, interaction, understanding, or sociality. *One Cannot Not Communicate*¹ was as such postulated by the Austrian-American psychologist Paul Watzlawick as the first meta-communicational axiom of the pragmatics of communication. What actually defines communication as a relational matter is not information but commitment.

Mutuality

In the work of Stian Ådlandsvik and Lutz-Rainer Müller there is such commitment. The basis of their collaboration is communication – often non-verbal but gestural, not informational but behavioural. Their ways of working defy the distinction between a relational and a content-oriented aspect of communication. Rather, the matter, structure, and function of their relationship is what constitutes the information – as in content – which becomes subject of their dialogue and interactions. The mutual aspect of their communication is not only the relationship with each other, but also what surrounds them as their environment, the context in which they embed their practice and from which they define their interests that become shared and collaboratively explored.

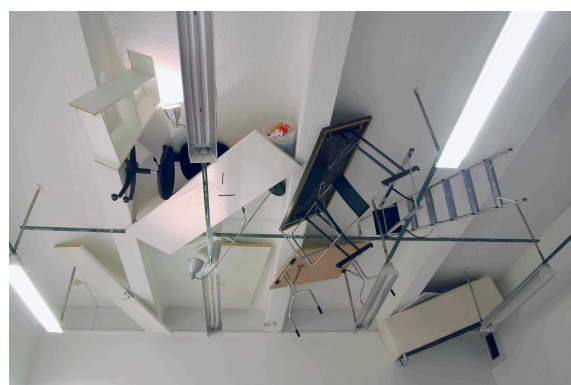
The works that Stian Ådlandsvik and Lutz-Rainer Müller create in their collaborative practice are most often generated in particular situations or contexts that the artists either create for themselves or upon which they react. Repeatedly setting up some quite formal procedure for capturing chance occurrences, their collaborative modes of practice embody an oscillation between purpose and chance, control and contingency. *Still life with modern guilt* is a project that exemplifies this oscillation over the subject matter of collaboration itself.

¹ Watzlawick, P., Beavin-Bavelas, J., Jackson, D. 1967. "Some Tentative Axioms of Communication". In: *Pragmatics of Human Communication - A Study of Interactional Patterns, Pathologies and Paradoxes*. New York: W. W. Norton

At the beginning of 2009 I approached the two artists with the idea to start a project that would reflect on the relation of their individual practices to their collaboration, and vice versa. Over the time the artists developed a conceptual framework for an ongoing exhibition project that approaches the idea of the artists directly reflecting their collaborative practice while producing works from another angle. Instead of using their own arms when making works, the artists chose to produce replicas of the bones in their arms in order to see if those could substitute their own ones in the collaborative decision-making process. In the cellar of a medical clinic in Dresden (Germany) each artist had the one arm scanned that he considered his favourite to work with. The data drawn from these scans has been used to produce exact duplicates cast in Polyamide of the bones in Stian Ådlandsvik's right arm and Lutz-Rainer Müller's left arm. Technically, these bones are the sum of different body parts of both artists. The amount of the respective bones in their arms is exactly the same, although their sizes may vary. But the question remains if both of their arms together, one left and one right, do actually form an entity, and if this in any form provides for collaboration? In order to answer this question as well as to enquire into how their collaborative practice comes about, the artists pass on their decision-making process to a fortune-teller, which is asked to read the bones and articulate a vision for their next exhibition.

Still Life with hyena, lotus and cave

For the first time, this project (with the overall title *Still life...*) was carried out as part of the residency program W17 at Kunstnerens Hus, Oslo. Here, the artists invited a local shaman to interpret the layout of the bones, which they had loosely spread out over some soil in a corner of the gallery space. Subsequently, they took the shaman's prediction over what the exhibition was going to look like at face value and transformed their studio space into some kind of upside-down world, with furniture hanging under the ceiling and a sculpture made of busted fluorescent tubes rising from the floor. The installation's title *Still Life with hyena, lotus and cave* was reminiscent of the quite literal vision that the shaman had pictured.



What started with medical technology conveying a precise information about the artists ended with a loose accumulation and transformation of things in the artists' studio (furniture, equipment, materials, etc.) that previously were designated to enable their work process. The collaborative effort takes away its own conditioning and prohibits the possibility to create any other work in the space. The initial individual information purposely seems to have been lost in the interpretation of the bones by the shaman, from which the artists then emerged in their collaborative thinking about the next exhibition. But can information really get lost or is it as it

is with energy, which can neither originate nor be lost but only be subject to a process of endless transformation?

Still Life with modern guilt

For the current manifestation of this project at MOT International the aspect of transformation is more prevalent in the work itself than it was in Oslo. This time, the bones travelled in purpose-built briefcases to London (one for each arm) and were carefully opened in the gallery. Their constant shuffling during the trip led to a random arrangement from which the interpretation of the local-based fortune teller emerged. The clairvoyant identified some issues the artists had to deal with in their subsequent exhibition while reading the bones, such as iconology, modern religion and fate. The artists transformed the information and interpretation they got from the fortune teller by taking and embedding it into their own communication system as the surrounding to which they respond and that becomes subject to their material gesture. This transformation as a matter of representation is the central element that prevents the project from becoming an execution of the fortune teller's vision and their collaborative practice from being a complementary act of two individuals. It makes it a shared commitment towards an internal communication process as the foundation of their collaborative practice that does not just take in information external to its own generative operations but obscures, irritates, and even antagonizes its interpretations.

This shared commitment towards what is at stake in communication appears and reappears as a constant, unavoidable and at first glance unconscious characteristic of their collaborative practice, long before contemplating what the effects or results of the collaboration might be. Rather than deciding on what it is on which they collaborate, their practice is characterized by the inclusion of everything possible, every possible relationship that could be established in their shared communication with something else – the viewer, the space, things, or just simply, silence. It is what the British anthropologist Gregory Bateson and American psychiatrist Juergen Ruesch call 'noise' – the measure of information that is not related to a message. Noise is what interferes with information, what causes the disruption of a message, and what is, most often, made responsible for the many varying forms of interpretation that result in and of communication. It may result quite literally from background noise, but metaphorically speaking it is most often found in the relational aspects of a communicative situation, that is, in the context.

What Stian Ådlandsvik and Lutz-Rainer Müller aim at in their collaborative practice is to listen to the context in which they both are embedded in with their individualities when collaborating. The context holds the possibility of the evolving nature of their communication to be flexible, adjustable, and even accidental. It seems that the way in which they form ideas rather resembles a continuous effort to obliterate the potential of individual ideas complementing each other. Instead, they try to distill those elements from their communication that are not overtly obvious and spoken out loud. Hence, it is not information that becomes exchanged and that in the evolving nature of their communication develops towards an idea or story for a work or project. Rather, those elements that are not yet individually formulated ideas but overall vague notions and interests to which both can relate, become the subject of their shared interest. Collaboration, here, is first and foremost observing, meticulously holding the breath in order to avoid any disruption of those moments in communication that oscillate between question and answer, proposition and statement. Vagueness and an endless potential of inarticulability are the exemplification of holding the

breath in order to maintain the freedom to explore all possible routes and follow up every imaginable grasp of an idea.

When this becomes manifested in art objects, the decision-making process between both parts in dialogue is less a disclosure, but rather a transformation of its prevention. Gregory Bateson argues in his book *Steps to an Ecology of Mind* (1972) that 'the ecology of mind is an ecology of pattern, information, and ideas that happen to be embodied in things – material forms'². The ecological aspect of interaction, the prominence on context and surrounding, emphasizes on the contingency of communication and the fact that when ideas become embodied in material forms some become favoured and others extinct. That is also inherent in the process of translation from scientific data to the interpretation of their interpretation, which is how the methodology of the *Still life...* project can be described. In a way all of the works and exhibitions that originate in this idea are metaphorical drawings of a communication process that ranges, ranging from scientific medical engineering to the wisdom of a fortune teller. This transformation allows for the rethinking of the aspect of physicality in their collaborative practice. There might not only exist a physicality of an object but also of a dialogue, as the element of content and its codification (context) is present in both. When Gregory Bateson uses the term 'context,' he is describing the ecology of ideas, in which any particular action, might it be dialogue, interaction, speaking, thinking, or making, is part of the context, not an outcome or product of it.³ Their interactions, might they be in the form of a dialogue, an exchange of material, speaking, thinking, or making, is the foundation of their collaborative working process and at once also the outcome of it.

This text was published on the occasion of the exhibition "Stian Adlandsvik and Lutz-Rainer Müller – Still life with modern guilt" at MOT International, London, 23 September 2010 (14 January - 18 December 2010)

² Bateson, G., 2000. *Steps to an Ecology of Mind*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, p. X

³ Ibid, p. 338