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An on-going research on Artists-in-Residencies' models and experiences

3 February 2015

Resident Interview

Kunsthuis SYB

Alessandra Saviotti

Marianna Liosi

Cathleen Schuster

Marcel Dickhage

Production

Usership

Collaboration

## "When spectators work, workers observe", collective interview with SYB former residents Alessandra Saviotti, Marianna Liosi, Cathleen Schuster and Marcel Dickhage ~2~

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Vignelli theme by Robbie Manson



**SYB as a Space of Production for Alessandra & Marianna (the curators)**  
[factory/usership/ emancipation/ exchange/ residency/ collaboration]

**Angela:** In the last years we have witnessed a growing interest by artists, curators and art professionals in general to discuss our conditions of work through discussions, projects and new works. What struck me was the peculiar perspective you chose in this project: the one of the spectator, rather than the one of the artist or the curator, as a worker. Can you tell me why it was necessary for you to put the spectator at the center of your project and why you chose to address the act of looking as working?

**Alessandra:** In my practice as independent curator and researcher interested in socially engaged art, the role of the spectator has always been an interesting point to take into account. How is it possible to sincerely involve the spectator, but not forcing him/her to take part in a project? How could the spectator change his/her role in a more active way and become active subject and not a sort of testing ground for the artist? How could an artist or a curator 'use' the spectator and vice versa in order to produce a new meaning/value? These are some of the questions I had in mind when we started investigating the role of the spectator as worker in the art context of SYB. I am not interested in considering the simple act of vision as an active action – I accept that it could be considered enough to activate something in your brain just looking at it – but I don't feel it is enough. When I read **"Is a Museum a Factory?"** by Hito Steyerl, I was amazed by the idea of the museum as a space where the spectators are transformed into workers who are temporary confined, as workers were in the factory. At the same time, I am fascinated by the idea of **'remunerated usership'** introduced by Stephen Wright. What happens when the spectator is transformed into a user able to generate a value (which is not financial retribution, perhaps, but in some different form such as an object for

instance)? Should the user be remunerated for the value that he/she has generated? I think the surplus value (in any form it is) should be redistributed within the community that produced it and I agree with Wright when he says that applied to an art context creator and user tend to merge: usership spills over into production. Usership is creation socialized, and as such engenders a surplus. And who is generating the surplus? The worker!

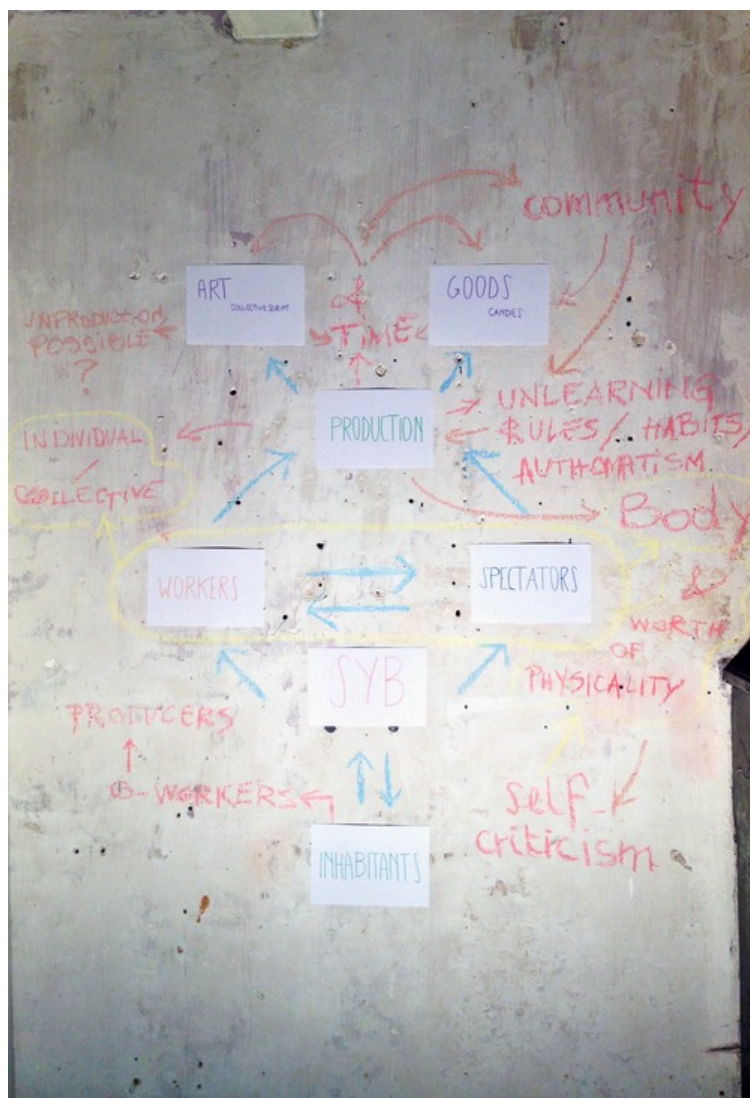
**Marianna:** The exploration of the spectator's role has been pivotal in my research for long time. Considering the viewer as a worker refers to the values that he/she produces both within the frame of an exhibition and in front of a single artwork – these values being human relations, points of views on the reality or contents –. Therefore in this project I was interested in focusing the spectator's gaze and way of seeing as a crucial side of the art production. This belief echoes **Jacques Rancière's** reflections on the spectator. He states: **"Emancipation** begins when we challenge the opposition between viewing and acting. (...) It begins when we understand that viewing is also an action that confirms or transforms this distribution of positions. (...) Being a spectator is not a passive condition that we should transform into activity. It is our normal situation. (...) Every spectator is already an actor in her story; every actor, every man of action is the spectator of the same story." That's why I considered it important to start our first public event with the re-enactment of **Allan Sekula's "Gallery Voice Montage"** (An audio-installation piece composed of two white canvases hung side by side turn out to conceal a pair of loudspeakers over which secretly recorded comments by visitors to the gallery are played back). In this audio-installation piece the gaze, the observation, the individual interpretation and the exchange of thoughts through discourse are at the core of the artwork. Of course, this doesn't exclude that sometimes it's also good to recall to "action", as we did, for example, with the organization of the candy workshops directly involving the children of the village.

**Angela:** With this project you also tried to question the nature of SYB as a residency, a space devoted to research and experimentation through collaboration. These open processes however often need to be visible, to leave a trace that could give an idea to an expert and the general public of what occurred. What did you decide to make visible of your research-process, and what stayed invisible?

**Alessandra:** we arrived at SYB with a clear structure in mind that needed to be filled with content. The exchange between Marianna and I both with the artists and the members of the committee took the form of a flow that lasted for almost a year! So we felt like this process was worth being visible in the space, but we were really curious about how we were going to experience it. If you think about the idea behind the whole project that questioned what kind of work it is to be an artist or a curator, we felt **the urgency to really make visible what it means to be researching, reading, drawing diagrams, discussing with guests** and so on. I was also interested in the idea of writing **a collective script**: what does it mean for us to intervene in an art work? Is it just to give the framework or really to write it together? I think we didn't solve this question, which was a crucial point in this project. In terms of residency, SYB was a sort of a space in between, a refreshing moment, but with the need to show a result. In fact in order to develop the project we got some external grants that required a presentation. How can you avoid this pressure? Maybe it is not possible.. And what would've happened if we really failed in presenting something at the end?

**Marianna:** We decided to stress the visibility of the research itself: the inspiring readings and the artworks, the discursive exchange with the guests, the time employed in this process. To make all this evident we used physical and digital tools. Firstly, Alessandra and I used to work every day in the exhibition space, in front of the big windows on the main street of Beetsterzwaag and this slowly attracted local people's attention. We progressively arranged the space of SYB with **"environmental notes"**: texts, drawings, diagrams and papers on the walls in the project space at the ground-floor. These were extremely useful for us and for anyone interested in what we were doing. We also used **Syb's blog** in a very systematic way, uploading our research material in progress (texts and videos). What was

occurring at SYB became also a visual essay published by our media partner *Atpdiary*, a bilingual (It/Eng) online blog focused on contemporary art. What stayed invisible, or more appropriately, stayed implicit were the spontaneous discussions and reactions that occurred between the four of us, which led to identifying the notion of **"production"** as the crucial, leading and controversial aspect of our residency.



**Angela:** How did you set the collaboration with the artists? Where did your work end and theirs begin?

**Alessandra:** Collaboration should be spontaneous. I mean that you should feel that collaborating with a person is right and it may be fruitful. This is what it pushed us to invite Cathleen and Marcel because they usually work in dialogue with other subjects like we do. I thought that their contribution would have helped us in developing another chapter of our research. And so it was. After we suggested that they analyze the text of Hito Steyerl, they proposed to reenact the original production of candies in the space, but this time having kids participating as a way to involve the local community without creating high expectations. The result at the end of the residency was the realization of the script, a process-based installation comprising a short film that they used as a research tool, like we used the reading materials proposed by the guests. Looking back at the pictures I realize that it was really impossible to understand who did what. Everything was mixed and it was very organic at the same time. So in a way we escaped the productive moment in terms of producing an exhibition. We rather created a structure with different layers. The rest was somewhat open and the result was not orchestrated, on the contrary!

**Marianna:** The collaboration started right at the beginning, as we applied as a

group but the division of the tasks and the roles were also very clearly defined as well as the specific interests and expectations of each one of us. I don't want to exaggerate, but actually the curatorial work intended in its complex articulation in a situation as such, never stops.



Read the previous post for the interview with the artists.

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