

## INTERVIEW

In this publication, Mia Edelgart talks about her recent works and engages with subjects such as stupidity, vulnerability, slowness, and collective ways of thinking and working. The two guest voices of Mai Corlin Frederiksen and Deirdre Johanna Humphrys infiltrate and discuss Edelgart's approach and process.

The interview was conducted as an email conversation during the summer of 2021.

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*The Interview series is based on conversations with artists who have been residents at Art Hub Copenhagen. Together with an interviewer and guests, the artists present their work in words and images: not just one work or one show, but their current processes, thoughts, and daily challenges.*



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MIA EDELGART

## MIA EDELGART



### PROLOGUE

JACOB FABRICIUS:

What are you thinking about these days?

MIA EDELGART:

I'm thinking about memory and loss. And the combination of the two. But also simply about losing in competition. I've been watching quite a lot of European Football Championship over the summer holidays, and I've discovered Tracey Moffatt's *Fourth* (2001), which I've come to love. It's a series of photos of athletes who finished fourth at major sporting events. The pictures were taken at the exact moment they realized they'd lost.

Then there's the vast loss looming over the planet in the form of the climate crisis – loss of species, habitats and life, which is probably, at least in part, bound up with the basic element of competition in capitalism, where there isn't time to let the fields lie fallow. And I'm thinking about resources in terms of my own nervous system and the limitations it communicates, which I'm trying to understand and use actively in my work.

Art Hub Copenhagen

## INTERVIEW

JF:

Memory and loss is a good place to start.

ME:

My otherwise strong mother collapsed from a seizure last week on the bus. She was picked up by an ambulance and came here afterwards. She has no memory of the hours around the incident, and in the days that followed, she experienced absences, said things out of context, forgot names, had shortness of breath. As she put it, it felt like an alien invasion of her mind every time she got distant. We're waiting for the results of the MRI scans.

JF:

How did you react in that situation?

ME:

I was sad and worried. I've been frantically monitoring her words and movements, while thinking about self-fulfilling prophecies, because my recently concluded work, *Floating Peanut*, about stupidity, was based in part on my relationship to my mother, on emotional heritage and memory. I've always thought my memory was pretty arbitrary, which has bothered me in professional and other contexts. I associate it with feeling stupid. I often remember insignificant things: the colour of someone's shirt instead of the point of the story they're telling, the mood instead of the name, and I forget words or confuse them, like just now when

I called my sister's rabbits "curtains" – an involuntarily absurd language that most of us probably have and that, fortunately, is funny. My mother has often called herself stupid, which may have planted early critical reflections in me about class, intelligence and memory.

I remember with the aid of long lists. The lists are very unsystematic, however. Random things come together and are nearly equated: names of trees, insects, groceries, writers, dreams, passwords for apps, addresses, emotional distractions and things I've to do. I save these lists. I can't throw them out, I generally have a hard time throwing things out, because that would be like forgetting.

My grandfather, who was a hobby artist, would often take me along as he made rounds of the trash rooms in the cellars of the big public housing project where he lived. There, he collected odds and ends for artworks and frames. It was really fascinating as a kid to be with a grownup who appreciated the fantasies aroused by trash and junk, and I wonder whether that might be part of the reason why I'm so bad at throwing things out, because things always have future potential for me. But then, when I sit there talking with my mother about forgetting, dementia and brain tumours, it feels fated, as if we were always headed there, and as if the need for a way to come to terms with loss and forgetting, and an eye for diverse forms of intelligence and clever bodies are becoming even more acute for me.

JF:

Have you followed your grandfather's footsteps and reused material?

ME:

In everyday life – yes! I pick up things, like right now I'm reading a historical novel I've found on the street. I guess as an impulse to let go of control and be influenced, affected by coincidence. In my video works images, words, sounds I find on my way also pile up. But I haven't really come to implement physical trash or junk in my works yet, though I'm slowly moving in that direction. It makes sense in the age of over-consumerism and eco-crisis, and practices dealing with abject art and trashy art has always been what inspired me the most.

JF:

Can you tell me more about how your faltering memory is expressed in professional and other contexts?

ME:

I probably have a fairly average memory. I feel stupid sometimes, *and* I know I'm not stupid. I'm interested in the feelings around stupidity. For instance, the fear of being exposed, as, "In a moment, the others will realize that I know nothing." The imposter syndrome. I'm interested in what we can know about such feelings. Can we ask them questions, examine them, like a kind of subjugated knowledge? What do we know with those feelings, what do they produce, and what do they make us do and not do?

But sure, say in terms of placing myself in an art historical context. I forget artists, artworks, places, terms. I see and read quite a lot about art, and I know it's common that things slip away and also that there's a big difference in how our memories work: how and when we

remember things, and how much each of us trusts what we remember. There's also an oddly 'collectivizing' potential in how you adapt or adjust others' work in your memory. You might even put extra work into it, a bit like fan fiction, to look at it productively. But when my memory feels full of holes, it can be harder to insist on a theoretical professionalism and authority.

JF:

You have worked in many art collectives. Is the collective memory part of the reason why you have worked in groups?

ME:

Not specifically. Or I mean yes, we can lean into each other's different kinds of knowledge. But when it comes to memory and decision making, collective work can get complicated and interesting. We all remember different things and aspects of a conversation, of what we exactly agreed on and so on. Which is why collective work needs practice and methods, otherwise it drowns in perhaps a kind of tyranny of 'structurelessness.' In some of the groups I've worked in we've practiced having conversations inspired by methods from SCT (System Centered Therapy). We mirror each other to make sure everyone is heard and understood. It is a very focused way of working, and it triggered me badly in the beginning because of the slow pace. But what it reveals is how little we actually remember or hear of what other people are saying. Having to repeat even just the essence of what someone just told you, is harder than you might expect. Especially if you're in the middle of a heated discussion, or if you're in an eager moment of generating ideas together.

JF:

How has your collective work changed your memory?

ME:

It depends on what you mean. My memory always changes depending on who I'm with. I figure it's very relational that way. Sometimes it's blocked, and I'm here thinking about in what spaces and settings you actually have access to your own resources. It becomes abundantly clear that feeling safe, safe enough or unsafe, in specific social settings, like in different kinds of professional settings, is a key element to reflect on issues of social mobility, accessibility, etc. Even though we live in a welfare system with free education, breaking with the class you come from is tough work. Like how much discomfort does it take for you to move the way you want? So, in that regard, within some collectivized ways of working to me it feels less strenuous to move freely both in the inner and outer landscape, because there is a kind of ping pong way of thinking and generating ideas, and ideally not the same pressure on the individual.

JF:

Could you mention any writers that have influenced you?

ME:

I've been pretty fond of Judith Halberstam's *The Queer Art of Failure*, which looks at the negative affects of failure, forgetfulness and stupidity, but which also speculates in the ability of negative affects to puncture capitalism's heteronormative, white criteria of success

and ask what's on the other side. Is there another knowledge, are there other ways of knowing something? Forgetfulness also functions as loss here, loss of certain ways of knowing things in a paradigm based on growth and accumulation.

JF:

How have you challenged capitalism's heteronormative structures?

ME:

We could add racist and a lot of other ist-isms... This might be pretty general. Most of us obviously have these structures within us. In our gaze, how we look at others and ourselves or not look at ourselves, also in terms of thinking of failure and success, which is why it is a kind of daily work of exorcism. I'm currently studying to become a therapist, as an extra profession, and I think much of the work we do in that study-group challenges these structures. It is a non-competitive space, where we listen. Like actually listening to our bodies and our feelings, they are full of useful information and clever resistance. It's like learning a new language. I see that as anti-patriarchal, not just having to "man up" and get over things on your own. It is also a privileged space, I'm aware of that.

And then I believe that within art-making there is, more or less, always a core aspect of re-evaluation. Of norms, value-systems, ways of seeing and listening etc. which are often tied up with some of these structures. It is basically a practice of questioning/proposing.

JF:

Amnesia, Alzheimer's and Dementia are some of the diseases I'm most afraid of. Have you done any research in that area?

ME:

No, not really. I've been looking at it a bit now after my mother had her accident, and I was reminded of neurologist Oliver Sacks's classic *The Man Who Mistook His Wife for a Hat*, about different kinds of neurological disorders. A number of the essays in that book are subtitled "Losses". One of them, "The Lost Mariner", is about a man with Korsakov's syndrome. His short-term memory is limited to less than a minute, and he keeps asking the same questions over and over again with great enthusiasm. In the essay, Sacks describes the deficiency of Western medical science when it comes to spiritual life. What's left when you have no memory whatsoever and have lost "everything" that can constitute a subject or an identity in coherent time? The lost mariner can be profoundly moved and touched, even if he has forgotten why. Sacks writes,

"Perhaps there is a philosophical as well as a clinical lesson here: that in Korsakov's, or Dementia, or other such catastrophes, however great the organic damage and Humean dissolution, there remains the undiminished possibility of reintegration by art, by communion, by touching the human spirit: and this can be preserved in what seems at first a hopeless state of neurological devastation."

But the role of the "sick person" in capitalism is also at play here. I've several autoimmune diseases myself,

which isn't entirely comparable, but the point is that, even though I'm aware of it, I always have to reckon with my own expectation of illness as the exception, that is, as if the normal body is healthy and has to operate as a frictionless, silent machine. The artist Carolyn Lazard writes very accurately about being sick of and on the terms of capitalist time, in her essay, "How to be a Person in the Age of Autoimmunity", in which she also struggles with the vocabulary we apply to our immune system, a martial language of invasion and defence. Lazard refers to Virginia Woolf, who writes about why there isn't more literature on the transformative effect of diseases on life and cognition. Why is disease not something to be contemplated in itself? You just have to get it over with, so you can return to the able body, as if the "the body is a sheet of plain glass through which the soul looks straight and clear." Fortunately, there's a growing focus today on ableism, crip theory, neurodiversity and on revising notions of sickness and health.

Something that interests me about contemporary art, and that I often read about regarding literature, is a meta-reflection on what conditions allow for what forms of aesthetics and genres. A lot has been written about what a text written from a state of sorrow or pain looks like. Or about writing from time-crunched motherhood, which, as I remember it, Moyra Davey describes, a bit hyperbolically, as writing from the trenches with a pen as your weapon, where you could be interrupted at any time, and so the text must by necessity be fragmented. In my own practice, there's always the question of how much to edit – that is, how much to allow a condition to peek out. I'm often looking after it when I experience art works, like what the working conditions must have been like. I'm not suggesting that all art should be open about

this. That would be horrible, like demanding public access to the emotional and material life of the artist. It's not that. And this may be a bit of a rant, but it just simply seems important to me to confront my own fantasies about other people's practices and ways of working, about what's professional, what's not. I forget there's procrastination, bullshit jobbing, behind other people's work, and that other artists also are slow, have anxiety and a lack of desire, and struggle with all kinds of barriers at different times. Not everyone, but a lot. Fantasies about other people's lives are such a driving force in our late-capitalist, SoMe, performance-obsessed times. For me, it's about finding out how I myself am an example within this, also through my art practice, and what struggles it should, and can, communicate openly. I somehow need more different criterias for successful art practices. "Sucksess", as Lee Lozano puts it. I lost the thread, from Alzheimer's to different art careers and practices. What's your memory like?

JF:

It's fragmented and selective. I know that I know a lot of things, but I'm very slow at locating answers in my brain. Google has become my extra brain.

ME:

In *Floating Peanut*, I interview an elderly woman from my family, who talks about having to learn by rote in a small village school, which she simply wasn't able to. She talked about the humiliation of not knowing the list of Danish kings by heart. It sounded so remote, and yet it was as if I recognized that shame somewhere in my own body. In connection with the piece I'm working on now, about midwives and childbirth, I've been dipping

into *Moder og barn i dansk folkeoverlevering* (Mother and Child in Danish Folklore), and I found a description of an old rural tradition where mothers had to go to church after giving birth to get “høvse” (an early word for “memory”) for the newborn child. It’s quite tellingly that that’s what they had to get.

But yes, we’ve an extra brain in our pockets. That has really democratized memory, and there are all sorts of critical things to say about it, among them, that our constant access to information isn’t necessarily making us smarter, and that it sets a very high bar for what we’re expected to know. In *Orality and Literacy*, Walter Ong writes about Socrates, who, according to Plato’s dialogue *Phaedra*, argued that the written language as a technology is inhumane, and that it would impoverish human memory, that writing would weaken the mind. Ong’s book is from 1988, and he was drawing a comparison to people’s fear of pocket calculators and computers. In the same breath (and only because I think it’s a fun text and it relates to my own fear of having this text printed), Socrates said,

“A written text is basically unresponsive. If you ask a person to explain his or her statement, you can get an explanation; if you ask a text, you get back nothing but the same, often stupid, words, which called for your question in the first place.”

JF:

You’ve made several works featuring hands as central elements or actual verbal channels. You once told me that hands are more important to you than faces. Can you say *why*?

ME:

For me it’s about being interested in a kind of decentralization of communication, away from the head. I finally watched Harun Farocki’s *Der Ausdruck der Hände*, where he talks about how hands add an underlying text or meaning to the spoken language. They can say something else simultaneously, creating ambiguity. It worked for me to mainly film the hands of the interview subjects in *Floating Peanut* as a way to get something particular out of them without it feeling like portraiture. I was somewhat inspired by Silvia Kolbowski’s *An Inadequate History of Conceptual Art*, which I’ve still never seen, actually. I read about this work years ago when I was a student and it has stayed with me. Kolbowski asks 22 anonymous artists to recall a conceptual artwork they’ve seen in person. You only see their gesticulating hands while they try to recount what they’ve experienced, which often differs from what was actually shown.

JF:

Do you know the German-British physician Charlotte Wolff (1897 – 1986), who worked as a psychotherapist and wrote on sexology and hand analysis, did interesting research about hands and bodily expressions in the 1930-40ies? Wolff wrote *A Psychology of Gesture* in 1945, where she thoroughly analyzed how tiny human gestures reflect our personality. Could be interesting to compare Kolbowski’s work with the way Wolff has analyzed hand gestures and emotional expressions. Have you come across her work?



ME:

Yes I have. I actually think that in Kolbowski's video installation the sound and image are out of sync, which creates yet another displacement, when it comes to meaning. I haven't read Charlotte Wolf's book *The Human Hand*, I think it was you who once told me about her, and I remember reading somewhere that she once did a long hand reading session on Virginia Woolf, which VW should have written curiously about in her diary. I mean it seems obvious to consider the hand that makes a print of a hand as something very emblematic of the human species, when thinking of the Cave of Hands, with the stencils of hands that originates from more than 9500 years back in time, I love that, but I can't help thinking of how different the hand gestures are across of different cultures, classes and genders, times. That there is no universal language of the hand. I wonder how Charlotte Wolf relates to that.

JF:

Could you mention other artists besides Kolbowski?

ME:

I'm also inspired by people in my close circle of colleagues. Deirdre Humphrys and Hannah Lutz made a video work just of hands in 2016, and Michala Paludan has also done a lot of great work with hands, most recently a series of robot hands.

And curiously, I was admitted to the Academy of Fine Arts with a stop-motion horror film about a woman whose hand hops off and commits a crime, and then returns to her afterwards. *Very Evil Dead-y*.



JF:

Can you talk about your collective processes?

ME:

Right now, we're a group of artists who have worked together before, and we've made a kind of system of letters, where everyone writes a letter to everyone else over time. We're currently doing a round two, so there's this parallel ping-pong. It's not intended for anything specific, but is a way of staying in touch and sharing practices. We've worked together doing letters before, exploring and facilitating formats for staying in touch, even though it's almost impossible to practice such group work when we're all living our own precarious lives as cultural workers. All kinds of things get in the way, which really reveals how hard it is to establish deeper communities in practice. It has to be a very high priority and happen simultaneously.

JF:

How did your work emerge with the group that did the exhibition *Det ku' være politisk* (It Could Be Political) (Deirdre Johanna Humphrys, Ninna Poulsen, Selini Halvadaki, Kirsten Astrup, Hannah Toticki Anbert, Hannah Lutz, Elin Már Øyen Vister, Calder Harben, Malene Dam and Mo Maja Moesgaard)?

ME:

In 2015, Mo Maja Moesgaard was invited to do an exhibition at Kunsthal Tistrup. Mo grew up in Tistrup, a small town in Southwest Jutland, and their immediate idea was to bring an exhibition there that they would

have liked to see when they were young. The exhibition presented alternative methods and views of identity, sexuality and on what's political. It was a good premise. The museum, which is based mainly on volunteer work by locals and lies in extension of the municipal gym, became the framework for a fine intergenerational meeting with people from the community, who were very curious. We later did the exhibition *Frog Chorus* at Møstings Hus, and we're now doing the exchange of letters.

JF:

I think it would be interesting to invite Deirdre Johanna Humphrys into this conversation. Would that interest you?

ME:

Yes I'll ask D to write to me! Please, don't correct or change the layout that D will be sending.

DEIRDRE JOHANNA  
HUMPHRYS:

'I DO NOT WANT TO SIT ALONE AND MAKE ART'

I mis remember the words I shouted pointedly and accusingly through tears at B. This recent declaration is in and of itself important information, new and not new saying: I like it better in conversation/ I am an obvious mammal who relishes relation to/ touching together/ savouring feeling connection. Conflicting then that I have chosen now to be quite alone with my work in what was otherwise always collective, collaborative, always this touching together, drawing out in proximity forming impressions of reciprocity.

But the opposite holds too, the opposite took more learning.

In a rural Irish primary school classroom in the late 1980's punishment could be received in the form of public isolation. A too slowly dying custom of placing children in corners facing the damp walls provoked in me a perverse attention for materiality, exploring segregation by scrutinising details, watching edges, surveying floor board topography.

To be alone with current work has also been to practice enjoying solitary spaces solo with all its electricity and tension, learning to enjoy oxygen, enjoy shapes that push against architecture, creating more of it, space that is, for embodying and dawdling certainly.

I suspect this always collective to be a fiction enacted to shield unfamiliar hermetic tendencies, parts of me not-quite-ready-to-come-out perching in doorways fussing about architraves

Readiness is

Parts are

Forming fun

It is not this and not that

We broke up we never broke up

a few elements:

The collection of *dusty-dirt-bits*

Lust along side desire & funny too.

Dirty bits of dust and fluff have a history of materialising between us, first presented to a public at our exhibition 'Imagine blue - *forestil dig blå*' for LOKALE, Pia Rönicke's studio gallery, in 2015. These deposits and traces intimated other forms of knowledge, helping us imagine disparate positions following a strong impulse to lay about on the floor.

The easiest place to collect dusty-dirt is on stairs, so as I climb or descend to bedroom or to studio, to kitchen or back to bedroom, I am often thinking of you.

I will postpone sweeping for weeks allowing the dust clouds to grow, imagining inadequate ways to gather and archive or prepare these pieces, step by step.

Guiltily sometimes I Hoover them up.  
Assigning them to our imaginary archive.

Do you still think about the dust-bits?

Have you got any ideas as to how we can best contain this dirt-stuff tomorrow? what materials do we need to capture it? I have imagined blown glass shortly, mimicking our jam jar predecessors. How can we share the dirt? Expose and exhibit the dirt? Can we manipulate the dirt, does the dirt have to be original dirt, might we make up some dirt? Mia, I have in my mind collected allot of dirt-dust for you. There are cupboards full of the stuff.

Much of our collaboration is performed like this, within shared fantasy.

You are my first audience, you know this, sometimes my only audience and that is real pleasure, a sure luxury. It works like this: I imagine a range of fantastic sculptures, pornographic video collages, room dividers, lengthy surrealist video-essays which I present to you, editing as I tell them. You receive these fantasy-works through sms, e-mail, never by hand written letter, sometimes in the dark, while falling asleep, over the phone, maybe sketched a sketchiness shared and sometimes I just imagine that I have shared a form with you plunging the fantasy-works into an even deeper layer of immateriality but also into a deeper embodiment.

Your response, imagined or real, animates these works. Their performance is held between us, bouncing and echoing, sometimes lost in feedback confusing authorship. You are my first audience and sometimes my only audience and there is a vastness to this forming together apart, coming apart together.

The *funny*

I find allot of humour in your work I am often laughing and that is good

If art can make you laugh berserkly I think it is doing something right, not without juxtapositions of course but laughing brings awareness to the body and to its context laughter makes me feel consider how I fit or misfit in any given space and this makes sense to me. You have a strong funny bone

Do you know that?

I imagine an elbowed limb pointing in directions. What does a funny bone look like to you? Do you have a sense of your funny-bone? Do you imagine its shape?

Is it mostly defensive or offensive, I mean does it have a strategy and method or is it more fortuitous than that? like, what role does humour have in your works?

I imagine that your first audience is actually yourself, and versions of yourself and that there are explicit motivations at work in your myriad collecting sensing feeling your way through focused and chance research, always relating what you find back to your own position and out again. A kind of focus-stumble in orbit. It is luck to witness these cycles, and it is quite fantastic how a shape sharpens while opening.

Is this a good question?

ME:

Thanks for your text and questions. Not knowing how to start, I'll begin with the chair I'm sitting on. It's a hard and squeaky chair, and I'm trying to sit as comfortably as I can, leaning into my spine, feet firmly grounded on the floor – as I just now learned how to do. I'm on a weekend course in the therapy education you finished years ago. On the wall next to me hangs a small pink poster with the words LOVE THE PROCES. It provokes internal laughter in me, annoyance and semi-derision at the imagined ease of the imperative, but also semi-awe at the message. Being here reminds me of making art, especially the collective works we've both taken part in. A way of working in which the group's process, conflicts and language themselves were the material, the stuff, the point. Today we've been taught about polyvagal theory, which has informed your art practice (among other colleagues') for a while. I'm new at it. We were handed a drawing of the autonomic nervous system made by artist Ninna Poulsen. It illustrates the movement between the different branches, the states of the system – stylized, humanoid figures moving around between loneliness, rejection, in contact, joy, some elated, some in gnarly fights, at war.

When we were no longer living close to each other I suggested we send each other dust in the mail. It was an extension of our earlier project. For me it was also curiously romantic: exchanging something that our bodies had shed, shaped by our movements at home, dust bunnies on the stairs, like a kind of closeness by proxy. You turn it more towards *dirt*, you often turn things delicate for me. There was and is no nostalgia in our conversation about dust, which, along with filth, crud, dirt, is the jumpoff for a materialistic queer

feminist and humorous conversation: grease, close to the body, a kinky trip, plastic cleaning gloves in bright colours, shiny, scrub, latex, foam. For me it's tied to the memory of having once been a girl raised by a mother and the performativity of that overdone feminized role that washes things down almost violently in rage at history's heavy reproductive ordeal, emotional backlog. We found a shared interest in looking at what is otherwise removed, and how histories of gender, class and race are linked to collections of microscopic particles. In our exhibition *Lokale*, we gathered the dust after the visitors, and you suddenly smeared dirt all over the show window, I remember it as sudden, improvised, a lot was improvised. The window glass became an object to be looked at in its own right. That's how I remember it. Since then, issues of reproductive work and care have figured as a through line in our collegial conversation and in our separate art practices.

I'd like to put a point here on something about feeling a bit homeless in my art practice. And restless. I start questioning what we're aiming for now. In terms of our work, what are the big institutional spaces where we meet established art, and where art with the authority, elevation and fashionableness of the institution oozes worth and legitimacy, and roughly also exception, detachment and non-life (a little bit like Gloria Anzaldúa writes in *Borderlands*, about the feeling of entering a museum in a Western culture, with white walls and display cases, where things are removed from everyday life and ritual use). What is our role in this great system that feeds and eats in several ways. I remember Charlemagne Palestine once shouted during an artist talk at the Centre Pompidou, suddenly, in the middle of the talk, he yelled, *IT'S LIKE A FUCKING COFFIN IN HERE*.

You have moved closer to soil and I'm not sure if you recently sent me pictures of earthworms or if it's something I wanted to send to you, when I've been contemplating how your amateur gardening is embedded in your work, in your drawings. In the book *Who really feeds the World?* Vandana Shiva quotes Darwin on earthworms: *It may be doubted whether there are many other animals which have played so important a part in the history of creatures.* It's palliative, necessary, to shift your perspective away from the centre, imagine being an earthworm.

And yes, dust and dirt in glasses, maybe gobs of gunk in other gobs, like Lynda Bengli's polyvalent blobs on a smaller scale. We could also look at fatbergs, which I don't know what they are called in Danish, the things that clog up sewers. In my mind, they also exist figuratively as little clots that block new synapses. I don't know about the display. I believe in small-scale works, something where you have to look carefully, zoom in. Perhaps a show designed for smaller animals. Is that too cute? I'd prefer to do something in miniature, though I know you're good at the large scale. I was watching an interview with Phylidia Barlow, where she talks about the value of art that's made that no one sees, that has no audience. Art existing just for the person who makes it, and I thought she was cool and had a point, but also it was too easy for her to sit in her big studio and make that point. It made me think of the gratitude I have when you plunge imaginary works into my consciousness, or vice versa. There's a different openness to imagining things, not only because in the physical world we can have problems with money, space and time (and a lot of other things), but also because in a space with an audience of one, other things, exciting weird things, can happen.

An idea for us would be to work with "fantasies" in sketches, scripts, in models of rooms, like a sneaking half-turned movement out towards a public (is that even possible?), since, after a longer conversation, we both do have a desire to address other and unknown people. In other words, an exchange of proposals, models, that won't be realized, as training and an outlet for the imagination. After you sent me drawings by Unica Zurn, I wanted to work a bit like she does in *House of Illnesses*, where the rooms of a house are parts of the body: *bosom room, hall of bellies.* Maybe that's how the proposals can come together, in a body of correspondence.

*Funny Bone*, yes, *funny* is a fuel that drives me to work. Other people don't always see it. People have very different senses of humour, which in itself is funny to me. I sometimes laugh a lot when I'm by myself working, and you can tell, because you know me. We've often worked with awkwardness together, and with feelings and emotions that are serious and deep, and for me they have a funny side, because they're so much the essence of something human, a product of cultures, structures and norms, and because feelings engender all kinds of unintended things. Our troubled relationship to feelings, like a millstone around our neck, in a culture where everything is rationalized and optimized, and where we are in lack of ceremonies and rituals to help us cope. Maybe art can sometimes facilitate a room for feeling. I think that's both fun and hardcore at once, even when it gets a little bit over the top, and maybe that can be disarming. Laughing at something isn't necessarily the same as not taking it seriously, but it can be a liberating physical reaction, a way of coping however you can. Another thing that's central to my work is our troubled but necessary interaction with language, the place where ambiguities and mistakes arise, words are

insufficient and used clumsily, freaky syntax and all kinds of friction, and I think there's a lot of humour there. People, including me, say things that take you aback, or like when we were working on the Hobbykunstner show 2016, examining feelings produced by competitive conditions, and we interviewed the guy who had ensconced himself most firmly at the trough of the Danish art world, and he smugly and smilingly said, *We compete over nothing*, that sentence is rude and comical, true and very untrue. I don't work with humour that directly, and often what makes me laugh is something unpredictable in the work process.

I'll conclude with this image from Agnes Varda's classic *The Gleaners and I*, because it's about gleaning, picking up things that others don't want, and because it contains images of soil and potato hearts, which reminds me of you.

JF:

Would you care to talk about your other group works?

ME:

I'm part of a group that we sometimes call the Drejervej Group, because we shared a studio there years ago. A lot of us attended Mur og Rum (The School of Walls and Space) at the Academy. The group consists of Thomas Bo Østergaard, Deirdre Humphrys, Ninna Poulsen, Tine Tvergaard, Thea Von der Maase, Joen Vedel, Rasmus Pedersen, Anders Waagø, Eskil Halberg and me. The first show we did together was at Kunsthall Aarhus and was titled *Venskaber* (Friendships). It was a very telling show for us. We did a three-hour improvised live-edited film in the exhibition space. The film was based on



questions about friendship, collegiality and competition. It was a space for us to practice failing together and switching roles and positions. We took turns editing, performing, operating the camera, taking breaks, etc., based on the ideal of organic flow. It became an awkward, hesitant, maybe even boring film, which was also full of intense, tender and poetic moments, where we dared to be vulnerable together, moving out of ourselves and into something unknown.

I'm also part of the interdisciplinary performance choir Syvende og Sidst. We've explored our voices together, particularly by improvising and using our voices for something other than speaking. I've been part of a lot of other groups, too, like the voice ensemble DRANG, but also groups originating in my practice at the Academy, centered on activism and on organizing our own schools. We've held a number of self-organized schools in the big collective Siggalycke in Sweden, which I'm part of. The schools were organized according to principles of the learning space as a political space, and according to an interest in critical pedagogy and in trying to conceive and implement alternatives to the school systems we were all dragged through for better or worse. In one case, for several years running, we organized a radical summer school for sound art where questions of care and reproductive work were implemented in the schedule and we're currently considering doing a summer collective film-making school for children.

JF:

How did the vox pop piece *Death Loop* you made with artist Sebastian Hedevang, about the Copenhagen Metro, come about?



*Friendships*, Still, Video, 3 hours, Drejervej Group, 2015.



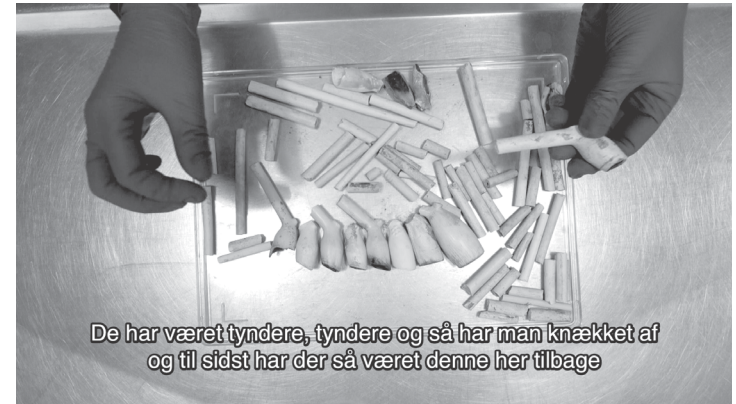
*Friendships*, Exhibition, Drejervej Group, Installation view Kunsthall Aarhus, 2015. Photo: Thomas Bo Østergaard

ME:

Heine Thorhauge and Sonja LaBianca (SOLW) invited my partner Sebastian and me to do a visual response to their composition *Reprise*, as both a piece and a platform for releasing the music. Magnus Clausen and Paola Paleri were invited to do the same, and both works were shown in extension of each other at the G((o))ng Tomorrow festival. We didn't know what the others were doing, which was part of the concept, and the fun thing was that both parties focused on modes of transport. Sebastian and I worked with a resistance to hyper-aesthetic music videos, applying this TV-like vox pop format. Since the Metro had just opened, we went there and interviewed people about the impact of this infrastructure on the city and its future. The fairly boring, local-TV images were set to a moving, meditative piece of music. We intercut the interviews with footage of archaeologist Mia Toftdal presenting finds made by archaeologists when the Metro was tunnelled, items pointing back to life in Copenhagen in the 17th century, like clay pipes and clay flutes. They also found a lot of sharpened pig jaws that children and adults used to strap to their feet for skating in wintertime. There was something very beautiful about this playful image across such a great expanse of time, from an age when there was so much poverty.

JF:

At Art Hub Copenhagen you did a public “performance talk” about your practice and research for your *Floating Peanut* exhibition at C.C.C. Gallery, 2021. Can you tell us about your approach to the talk?





ME:

It was set up like a classic presentation format, with me sitting at a desk with my computer in front of a screen, where I presented images. I'm terrified of public speaking, so I set a basic framework for myself, including not having to look out at the audience. I had painted eyes on my eyelids, so I could perform being present (somewhat stiffly), and I had my dear friend and colleague Deirdre Humphrys with me on the phone, while Heine Thorhauge Mathiasen, who has scored works for me before, improvised a soundscore during the presentation. That had a calming effect on me because a lot of what I presented was delicate, so it worked for me to have him play along or in counterpoint and ramp up the mood when things got too sensitive or cringy. I also had a camera pointing down at my desk, showing papers, notes and a few bananas (eating them is said to be calming), as a reference to Natalia Ginzburg's short story *He and I*, about the difference between her messy desk and her husband's messy desk. Her husband's mess is cool, familiar and intelligent. It looks like the mess on the desk of his father (who was also a professor), while her mess feels strange, even shameful, with no frame of reference.

I cut live between the desk, my computer desktop and a camera out in the street that was filming through water. I thought of the camera as a tear-drenched, anthropological eye observing the street upside down to emphasize how the "researcher's" own state of mind colours the image. It was too much to keep track of. In a way, it could only go wrong. In fact, the experiment was how it would work when it was part of the lecture – the expectation of failure as a way to ponder what success even is. I guess I'm trying to find some kind of potential

in loss, messiness, nervousness and forgetfulness, not only in theory but in practice, which is hard. But it's also a place where I can find some courage or hope against the prevailing performance culture. And it was a way to continue my work on the *Floating Peanut* exhibition at C.C.C. Gallery. The emotional repercussions from that work were fun to present. Including the shame that can be a part of work that comes from a very personal place, and that somehow exposes the space of art as pretty cynical, however you look at it. Not because people are cynical, but because it's a space of work based in part on market conditions, even while, in some respects, it tries to establish an alternative space.

JF:

Why did you title the exhibition *Floating Peanut*?

ME:

It immediately sounded like a state I could recognize: floating around without being able to latch on to anything in terms of knowing anything for sure. And I guess I confused peanut with pea, because it reminded me of a derogatory term for a small brain. But "floating peanut" also refers to the idea of "a brain in a vat", the detached brain, and the association to Krang of the *Ninja Turtles*, whose only organ is a brain floating in a liquid. To me it seems like there is a lot of focus on the brain as *the* central organ in our culture. Imagining a floating peanut, as an analogy to the brain, became a banal image of a neglect of the body as a whole, of our whole nervous system, of all the neurons we've in our stomachs and so on. Then there's the verbal link between nut and head, as in "being a nutcase". But specifically, the title is a reference to tests performed on chimpanzees to measure



their “intelligence” or capacity for innovative problem solving. They want to get hold of a nut inside a transparent tube, but their hands are too big to reach inside. To solve the problem, they have to use water as a tool: if they pour water into the tube, the nut floats to the top. Some of them pee into the tube. Pretty smart. In a subtle visual reference, I filmed part of the work underwater. I used water illogically, as a kind of tool. Also, there was something fluid about a quote from the Ginzburg short story *He and I*, which I had been keeping in my inside pocket for a long time and that I ended up using as part of the press release for the show. The protagonist describes her own intelligence as too fluent, but her husband calls her stupid and lazy. Which she has internalized, even as she still writes very sharply and satirically about his macho self-sufficiency, I enjoy that complexity.

And I’ve all sorts of non-crystallized thoughts about feminized stupidity, but I’ve also met people who were offended by the text, especially women. Perhaps, instead of reading the text as gender-stereotyping, you could read the “I” of the text as a person who constantly feels like a failure, while the “he” represents an authoritarian (patriarchal) system. But, as my good friend and colleague Anna Wærum told me at my “performance talk”, acting dumb or ignorant can also be another way of getting what you want, as the clown in my piece also discusses. It can affirm others in their intelligence, which can give you access to them or to their help. Most people like to be affirmed in their own intelligence. In her essay on Leonora Carrington, Susanne Christensen mentions Carrington’s discontent with the type of woman that the men in the Surrealist circles desired and elevated in their muses. They were *femmes-enfants*, who couldn’t do anything themselves.

gestures, promise.

I never remember actors' names, and as I am not good at remembering faces it is often difficult for me to recognize even the most famous of them. This infuriates him; his scorn increases as I ask him whether it was this one or that one; 'You don't mean to tell me,' he says, 'You don't mean to tell me that you didn't recognize William Holden!'

And in fact I didn't recognize William Holden. All the same, I love the cinema too; but although I have been seeing films for years I haven't been able to provide myself with any sort of cinematic education. But he has made an education of it for himself and he does this with whatever attracts his curiosity; I don't know how to make myself an education out of anything, even those things that I love best in life; they stay with me as scattered images, nourishing my life with memories and emotions but without filling the void, the desert of my education.

He tells me I have no curiosity, but this is not true. I

They were utterly helpless and naive, affirming the man in his reason, even as, at the same time, he sought to reckon with reason in his art. This role for women recurred in the books I read, the films I watched etc. when growing up, alongside a lot of other types, of course, and it has figured for me as a cautionary tale of stupidity. So much so, in fact, that I'm debating whether it has created a kind of inverse misogynistic and self-critical approach to my own openness, naivety and the importance of being comfortable saying "I don't know" or repeating a question.

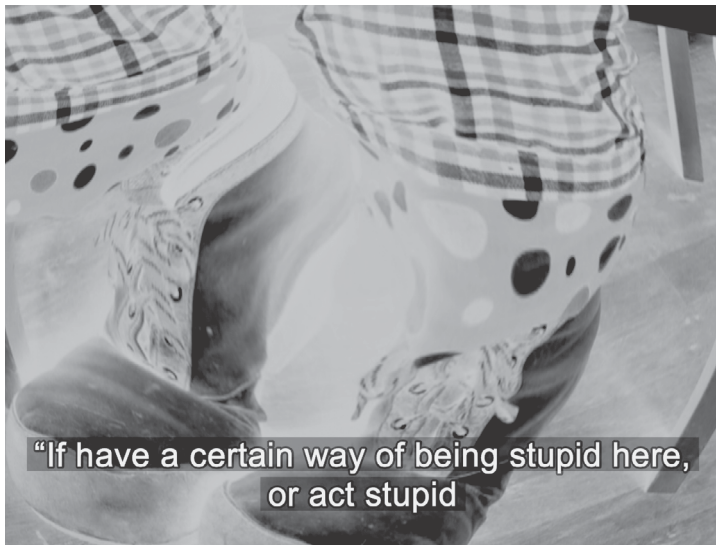
JF:

In several works you use the interview as a form and method.

ME:

Conversation as a work of art is practically a genre unto itself, posing a familiar challenge to what art can be, but that doesn't interest me so much as the fact that it's a way of generating material, a sympathetic engagement that adds unpredictability to the process. It's a form where you can experiment with subjectivities, performativity, fiction and authenticity, which is why I often insert scripted interviews in between non-scripted ones.

Years ago in Porto, I saw a big show of Jef Cornelis' productions. His art-TV format, with experimental interview forms, resonated with me a lot. It was also a revelation to me the first time I saw Vilgot Sjöman's *I Am Curious (Yellow/Blue)* from 1967 and 1968, because of its mix of fiction and vox pop elements. The main character, Lena, played by Lena Nyman, goes into the streets and workplaces asking people who aren't actors



"If have a certain way of being stupid here,  
or act stupid



then I might achieve something"

questions like, "Is Sweden a class society?" She's also at the airport interviewing tourists on chartered flights to Spain how they feel about holidaying in a dictatorship. Suddenly, in the middle of the film, there's a long interview with Prime Minister Olof Palme, conducted by the characters in the film. Something about that juxtaposition was very stimulating to me.

Also, I'm interested in what happens when you translate ephemeral, spoken language into text or subtitles. Text has a different weight to it, which can make the spoken work pretty weird and reveal its chaos. And I'm curious about what happens when you combine interviews and text with images that are not directly related to the topic, as I did in *Floating Peanut* with images of horses and my mother looping alongside the interviews, and with quite amateurish photos of tracks in the snow and psychedelic sequences running alongside the conversations about feeling stupid. By not being illustrations, the images allowed for different cross-readings.

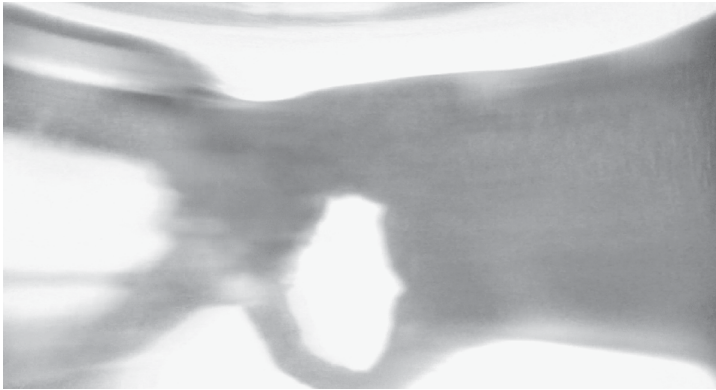
JF:

Horses appear in *Floating Peanut*. Where does your interest in horses come from?

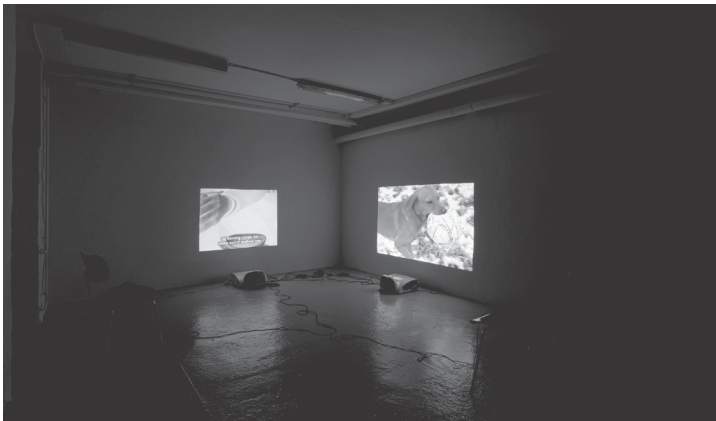
ME:

I'm not interested in horses per se, but my mother is. It was a place to meet her in her interest. She has a friendship with her horse, and we were both interested in the story of Clever Hans.

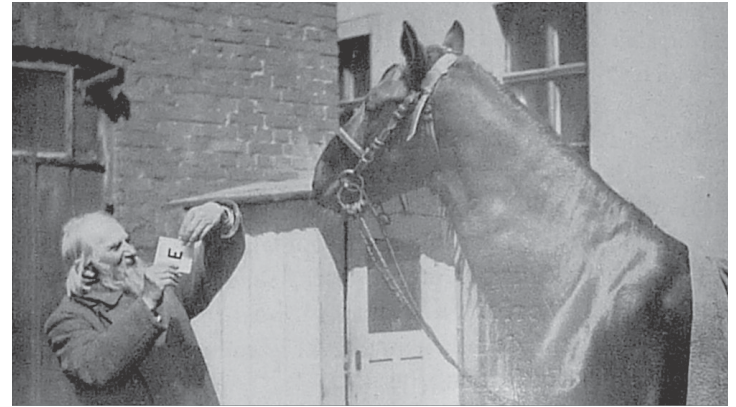
Clever Hans was a horse that performed with its owner, Wilhelm von Osten, a retired schoolteacher, in Berlin in the early 20th century. The gimmick was that Hans,



*Floating peanut*, Still, 2-channel video work, loop, 1:33:24 / 19:10, 2021



*Floating Peanut*, Installation view, C.C.C. Gallery, 2021. Photo: Brian Kure



Clever Hans and Wilhelm von Osten, found footage

miraculously, could spell and count. The horse always indicated the correct answer to problems posed by Wilhelm, who performed with a pointer and board. Word about the act got around and scepticism was voiced. The case was investigated by an appointed commission of 13 men, including a circus manager, a veterinarian and a psychologist. As it turned out, Hans knew neither the alphabet nor addition. But surprisingly, von Osten wasn't consciously cheating, either. The horse was simply reading von Osten and the audience's unconscious body language. When the bodies of everyone who knew the correct answer were screened off, Hans was unable to answer.

That's where the conversation started between my mother and me about feeling stupid, and about how much that feeling is related to verbal language and to feeling verbally impoverished. The story of Clever Hans involves questions of interrelationship in terms of neuroception, of how much of what is exchanged between us is nonverbal, including between humans and other species. Things we know beyond language. In turn, I got pretty enthusiastic about a text by the Belgian philosopher of science Vinciane Despret, *The Body We Care For*, which is about Clever Hans and it explores questions of the way bodies can attune, affect and transform each other.

JF:

Are there other stories connected to Clever Hans?

ME:

When I was making *Floating Peanut*, I had two reference stories that were both titled Clever Hans. There was the

story of the horse and, because it has the same name, I stumbled on the fairy tale of Clever Hans. The fairy tale is about a boy called Hans, who's a fool. Looking to get married, he calls on his beloved Gretel. But because he doesn't know how to go about it, he makes a fool of himself. He goes home to his mother, who tells him, "You should have done this or that," which he does the next day. But the next day, the situation has changed, and he should have done something else instead. He ends up smothering a goat in his pocket, dragging a ham home on a leash and tying Gretel to a hedge and throwing animal eyes at her. Gretel doesn't want to marry him after all. It's an image of a parent-child relationship with no connection whatsoever, and of a man who doesn't use his intuition or empathy at all.

JF:

How did you approach the subject of stupidity when you began your research?

ME:

I guess I approached it kind of "stupidly", giving myself room for "dumb" devices. That is, facile and kind of cheesy video effects, a naive time schedule, an associative approach, which is how I often work. But this time, I used those devices based on questions, which always pointed back to my own methods, as something to lean into. In my series of interviews, I went from one person to the next. I let myself be carried along without quite knowing the destination or whether it would be "interesting". For instance, when I interviewed Carsten Juhl (who used to be my teacher) about feeling stupid (which he couldn't really relate to), he suggested that I interviewed a clown. So I looked up a clown and did an

interview with her. The next day I heard Naja Blytman Trondhjem, an associate professor of West Greenlandic, Kalaallisut, on the radio, and it was relevant to talk to her because of her postcolonial angle and because of her focus on language and grammar. She told me about growing up in a country, Greenland, where the only access to education was through Danish – the language of the colonial power.

Beforehand, I read and thought about stupidity. Stupidity, of course, is related to ideas about intelligence. The sexist, racist, colonialist and otherwise violent history of intelligence research is bombastic. So I tried starting from my own feelings, and from there ask about others feelings and the experienced, situated knowledge inherent therein. Feelings, of course, have been seen as the feminized antithesis of rational knowledge. Moreover, I had an interest in pointing to feelings in the space of art, because, in my experience, that space can provoke feelings of not understanding, of feeling stupid when encountering art or also when showing your work to others. It's a space of judgment that can work both ways.

JF:

How are you sleeping these days?

ME:

Thanks for asking. I often sleep poorly. I've recently been dipping into *Prisoners of Ourselves* by the Turkish psychologist Gündüz Vassaf. I don't know his work, but the book was lying next to the bed I've been sleeping in for the last couple of days (we're going around visiting people this summer). One of the chapters is about the

night, which he describes as a free space. The book is from 1992, and our relationship to the night has clearly changed since then. While sleep and night-time were once seen as the last bastion of anti-capitalism, today there is a huge market for sleep. As yet another performance.

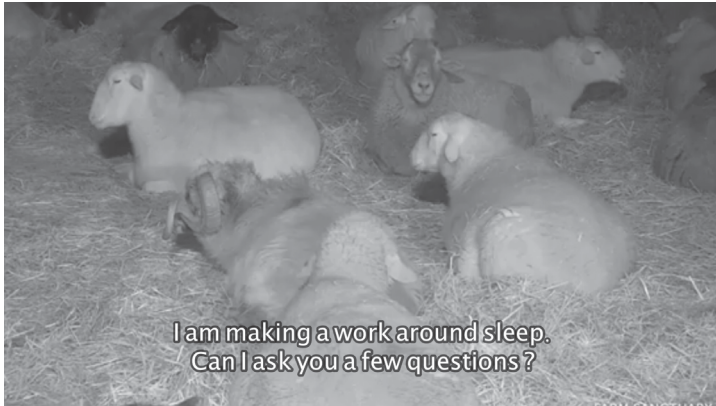
I think of sleep as a vital resource to which we've different access. I made a work last winter that basically involves asking strangers in the street how they sleep – a generic question that still works as a shortcut to knowing how clearly political even the innermost parts of our lives are. The sound of the interviews were edited in as voice overs on webcam footage of sheeps in barns at night. I often use the device of exhibiting, in the space of art, conversations that are seemingly basic or banal or boring. However, it turned out that the street interviews I made also included very dramatic stories of illness, trauma and death, and that a lot of people were happy to be asked. There are so many reasons why sleep patterns don't fit into the daily rhythm of society.

JF:

Your working process sounds like there are certain words, themes, issues or dilemmas that trip up your brain. They tumble around in your head for a good long while, impacting your day-to-day life, and slowly they crystallize out into research and then artworks. Am I getting that right? Can you describe your method?

ME:

That's pretty accurate. There are things I struggle with personally, aesthetically and politically. They tumble around in my body. From there, I often start by gathering



material into piles and folders, so some of my works have a whiff of being documents or images of looking for something, a reevaluation of something or a condition. The question is also this: when are artistic methods something you choose, and when do they come out of necessity or from the available options? There's something special about methods tailored to bodies trying to take care of and find value in themselves. Probably for too long in my own practice, I've tried to strive for a kind of artificial order or a certain way of concentrating.

My way of working without necessarily knowing where I'm going until quite late in the process has often teetered between anxiety and engagement. Often, I do no sketches or final concepts before going into production, which might seem sloppy or unprofessional, unless there's a methodological framework holding up the main, often last-minute, style – a slightly “lazy” aesthetic and associative approach combined with thorough elements. I'm just starting to get a grasp of this framework myself.

JF:

What are you working on these days?

ME:

Apropos loss, I just filmed a birth. For me, giving birth was the most extreme feeling of loss, a sense of separating from a part of my own body. I got to film and take photos of a friend of mine giving birth, to use for a piece. When the baby arrived, after hours and hours, I thought it was dead. Blue and still, it went from the world of water to the world of air. They had to suction some green



water out of its lungs, before the unmistakable, “alien” sound of a new voice broke out along with a sigh of relief in the room. It would have been a macabre and unbearable production of images if something had gone wrong, and several times during the birth, the camera felt awkward, even violent, because I was so worried. I never cried or “sympathy-pressed” so much behind a camera.

I’m not sure how to approach the footage. My focus was the work of the midwife, but I was blown off course a bit. Actually, my interest was in the history of midwifery in relation to the whole institutionalization of childbirth and why someone’s time is worth more than others, explained not just according to a system of meritocracy. Somewhere in the history of midwifery, I found an order from the early 1900s stating that district midwives could no longer be paid in kind. No more soup chickens for assisting at childbirth. The idea of the barter economy triggers a longing for completely different economic models, while at the same time this was an early attempt to assure midwives to get properly paid. I was reading about all of this during the nurses’ strike, with its focus on the civil servant reform of 1969. So-called care workers are poorly paid and under much pressure.

Also, I went to the Royal Library and photographed the first printed book on midwifery in Denmark, *Der Swangern Frawen und Hebammen Rosengarten* from 1513. It’s full of stains and spots, triggering a crazy fantasy of 500 years of births. The book is written by a male physician reckoning with the midwives of his day, which points to the pregnant body as a historical battleground of knowledge-development and feuding. Perhaps the parts will come together. My work will be shown in



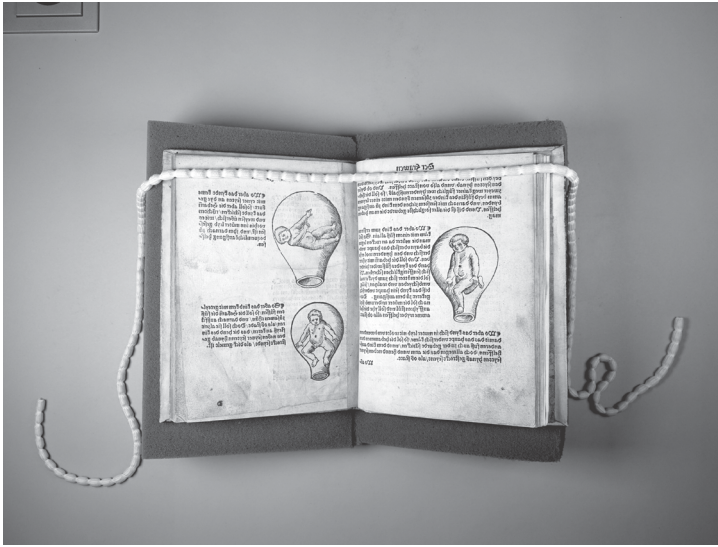


Photo of *Der Swangern Frawen und Hebammen Rosengarten*  
(work in process)

Amager Hospital's disused maternity ward in October [2021, ed.], curated by the Laboratory for Aesthetics and Ecology.

Plus, I'm working on another piece with Sebastian [Hedevang, ed.] for an exhibition for children. It will be a play sculpture with a lot of integrated research elements based on the highly didactic question, *What is Money?* – a question most adults would be hard put to answer satisfactorily. In general, my curiosity about feeling stupid also ties in to my mystification at the grotesque global economic inequality, that the planet's economic resources are so firmly in the hands of so few, even as our own child has started asking questions about what money is, what something costs and why. The sculpture will be covered in a variety of toy cash registers along with a lot of different suggestions for currencies, implying the parallel between play and the fiction and social contract of money.



*What is Money?*, 2021. Toy cash registers, toy money, coins, seashells, clam shells, coral skeletons, starfish, pamphlet, plaster, LED lights, laser print on foil paper, styrofoam, wood. Approx 500 x 400 x 150 cm. Installation view, *Everything is Simple and Beautiful, and You Are My Friend*, Art Hub Copenhagen, 2021. Photo: David Stjernholm



*What is Money?* (detail), 2021. Toy cash registers, toy money, coins, seashells, clam shells, coral skeletons, starfish, pamphlet, plaster, LED lights, laser print on foil paper, styrofoam, wood. Approx 500 x 400 x 150 cm. Installation view, *Everything is Simple and Beautiful, and You Are My Friend*, Art Hub Copenhagen, 2021. Photo: David Stjernholm

POSTSCRIPT:

JF:

This interview has gone through many phases. It used to be much longer, but we've gone through a long editing process with different people. We began the interview during the Covid pandemic in 2021 and are finishing it now in late summer of 2022. It feels like we've gone through a weird wormhole the last couple of years. Our memory has been erased and it feels like we've become two years older but the memory is blank. In the very beginning of this conversation you mentioned your mother's seizure and loss of memory, and I can't help thinking about comparing this. I know it's not the same, but I hate the feeling of losing time and memory.

*What is money?* was shown at Institut Funder Bakke (Funder), Huset for Kunst & Design (Holstebro) and at the exhibition *Thoravej 29* (Copenhagen) in 2021. When you look back at the work and the experiences you have gained I'm wondering if you have developed new thoughts and ideas of how to address issues of money and how you can address value?

I'm wondering if you see *What is Money?* as a tool to discuss money, value and capitalism with children?

ME:

Yes it definitely was! But it was also a piece for adults, and in a sense a way to display that we are the ones who are handing over to the children this broken capitalist world, where money rules, so we should also practice a critical but playful approach to these urgent

topics. With the usage of this Fischer Price toy cash register, which was introduced in 1975, and which many people here recognize from early childhood, we might also trigger the memories of people's first perception or play with money, shopping and so on, which was a way to address the child within the adult.

Alongside the sculpture we had these small information flyers touching upon economic inequality, on both the materiality and the immateriality of money, on the profit some people make on other people's debt, but we could have worked more with finding the right tone and dose of information. As I remember it Yanis Varoufakis writes in *Talking to My Daughter* on economy, that the reason why he hasn't told her about the story of Faustus and Mephistopheles before, isn't that it's a macabre story, but because it introduces a, for children, very inappropriate concept: Debt. And because the story marks a time in history where profit and debt became partners. Varoufakis' book was inspiring in its way of using stories and myths as a means of stimulating fantasy and curiosity, which is a great way to address these economic issues for children, but also everyone else, who like me struggle to grasp the system. Nothing new in it, but I did consider how to work with that in kid-friendly art.

I think our work succeeded as a play sculpture that children actually engaged in and with, but I'm unsure whether it created some kind of critical reflection on money and the way they work. Also it aimed at a very broad audience, with many different approaches, the toddlers loved hanging around on it, and bigger kids had more questions, looking more at the details, the images and the different kinds of money and some of the grown-ups sat watching from a distance, relaxing,

while their kids engaged in this play with old currencies, fake currencies and plastic cash registers.

I went to see the amazing exhibition *The Playground Project* in Lund Konsthall this winter, and I got inspired by the early “bygge-legepladser” (Adventure Playgrounds)<sup>1</sup> only the idea that kids could build funny stuff from junk and recycled wood etc., but also the conversations that could come along with building small-scale communities. Like learning to organise and from a young age trying to imagine other kinds of economic models, instead of just growing up, taking the prevalent one for granted.

JF:

Do you have a good idea of a way of ending the text?

ME:

I don't feel the need to say more. I'd like to give the word to Mai Corlin Frederiksen and ask her for a text.

JF:

OK.

This interview was conducted in the summer of 2021

1 A specific type playground for children. Adventure playground are ranging from “natural playgrounds” to “junk playgrounds”

MAI CORLINS FREDERIKSEN:

YOU BIG, STUPID EGG

The focus of the following text is a reading of artist Mia Edelgart's performance talk about stupidity presented at Art Hub Copenhagen on 9 June 2021, juxtaposed with a reading of the Soeng Joeng Toi community in China and of the LIGHT LOGISTICS distribution network in Hong Kong and their relationship to slowness, detours, the scruffy and the lazy. I will get into how all this fits together a little later. Perhaps it would be easiest to begin by looking at Mia's performance.

The scene is set: Mia sits behind a large desk-like piece of furniture with stacks of various papers and books. In front of the desk is a camera pointed downwards to film the desktop, while another camera films the street in front of Art Hub. To the right of Mia sits visual artist and musician Heine Thorhauge Mathiassen; he will provide the soundtrack to Mia's performance. Between Mia and Heine is a large screen showing footage from the two cameras as well as clips from two films by Mia currently exhibited at C.C.C. Gallery, Copenhagen; they too revolve around stupidity. The footage shown on the screen is edited live by Mia as she speaks.

It is a performance talk. That is, Mia essentially just sits there talking while Heine provides an elegant and sometimes deliberately disruptive soundtrack to accompany Mia's words and images.

Mia has drawn eyes on her eyelids, meaning that even when she looks down to read from her papers, it looks as if she is looking at us – albeit with a slightly distant and glassy stare. But still, it works. We feel that Mia sees us.

Mia is nervous at first. Or at least that's what she says. It is less clear to the rest of us whether she is actually nervous, or whether it is a performative ploy, or whether she truly *is* nervous and that actually *is* her performative ploy. Because even as Mia takes her point of departure in her own nervousness and fear of appearing stupid, she also insists on those very aspects as approaches which point towards the somewhat maligned place stupidity holds in our society. She uses herself as an example, she says.

### A MOSAIC OF STUPIDITY

In the performance piece, Mia alternates between the personal, the private and elements of system critique by pointing to the private feeling of stupidity as part of larger structures. Examples include institutionalised female stupidity or minority stupidity. While Mia sits there, being a woman and being nervous, she uses the camera to give us access to her desk as a kind of proxy for the thoughts she has had during the course of the project.

The performance is structured as a mosaic made out of quotes from various works of fiction and theory; from people Mia has interviewed and Mia's own thoughts. The totality conveys an overall impression of research being conducted into the multifaceted nature of stupidity. The books on the desk are each picked up in the order in which the quotations are read out, eventually causing books to be scattered all over the desk.

The quotes form a fractured mosaic of stupidity in which, for example, the quote from Asta Olivia Nordenhof's book *Penge på lommen* (Ready Money,

2020) becomes an image of the very thing Mia is doing. In her text, Nordentoft describes a similar movement from stupidity as a personal experience towards stupidity as the logic of capitalism when she writes: "I know that this is one of the tools used by the businessman. He triumphs by operating in a language that calls for silence. He triumphs when I think I am stupid." One might say that here an insistence on stupidity crosses over into the political space as a performative critique of capitalist society.

### THE SCRUFFY AND THE FRAGILE

Following on from this (although I can no longer remember the exact order) Mia uses Judith/Jack Halberstam to point out failures and to examine those failures as an artistic and subversive device. As contrasts to normative notions of success, failures can offer an alternative approach which allows a degree of experimentation not accommodated by the norms. We can venture into unforeseen and unexpected places by undertaking explorations and by being willing to accommodate failure; things that are hard to come by in a society which cultivates specific notion of success and achievement. Mia's lecture wants to show us a scruffy, unpolished and fragile surface that sometimes forgets where it was heading, in ways that can make us as spectators uncomfortable, wondering whether Mia has remembered to plan a way out. But she hasn't.

The desk acts as a kind of metacommentary on the battered, scruffy, fragile surface. Mia sits in front of us, telling us that she feels stupid even as we get to see her desk, which tells a rather different story. The desk signals someone well-read, standing there laden with

thoughts and books that testify to thorough research and an insistent effort to understand oneself, one's origins and one's relationship to the surrounding sea of humans. There is a discrepancy at play between the desk and Mia, between the inside (the desk) and the outside (Mia), between the feeling of stupidity and the rational knowledge that she is anything but stupid, as is also attested by Mia's position as a speaker in a reputable art venue.

But as the performance progresses, the desk also suddenly appears messy and disorderly. That is a point in itself for Mia, who explains that she tries to think of the messy, the always-too-late, as a deliberate approach, a way of challenging established notions about the presentable and the thoroughly well-thought-out. And as she sits there, all nervous and in a mess, she acts as a challenge to the eternally assessing, evaluating art space.

DABENDAN:  
YOU BIG, STUPID EGG

As I follow Mia's reflections on stupidity, messes and mistakes, I begin to think about the art communities I am studying in China and Hong Kong. In the summer of 2019, I went to Guangzhou to visit the platform and community Soeng Joeng Toi (SJT). SJT is based in a suburb of the vast metropolis, the one that also houses the city's art academy, and can be said to have arisen out of Guangzhou's quite progressive art environment. SJT was launched by some of the people behind the art institution HB Station, which is loosely affiliated with the Times Museum in Guangzhou.

As part of my visit, I interviewed the curator Li Xiaotian from SJT, and she told me that they were inspired by a

Japanese movement which goes by the name 'manuke'.<sup>1</sup> I should add that Xiaotian actually used the Chinese word, 'dabendan', which has a slightly different feel, and perhaps ties in even better with the idea of stupidity with which Mia has tried to get us engaged. If you translate it literally, 'dabendan' means big stupid egg, and the expression is used as a derogatory slur: you big stupid egg. Another translation might be: you blockhead. 'Manuke' has a similar meaning, although it is more something along the lines of: you lazy sod.<sup>2</sup>

But what is important here is the idea behind the Soeng Joeng Toi community and platform. SJT arose out of a need for a physical space in which to experiment with new ways of being together in an otherwise rigid and very demanding Chinese reality. Criticism of capitalism and of how modern society drains body and soul is part of the SJT's DNA. They point to 'dabendan' and 'manuke' as subversive methods that not only helps you feel better on a personal level, but also lets you become a subversive element in present-day capitalist society. In the interpretation applied by SJT and other East Asian groups, 'dabendan' and 'manuke' take on a much broader meaning, pointing to slowness, humour and care as central to a well-functioning 'manuke' community.

The personal is political and the political is personal, much like Mia's performance, which constantly drags personal aspects into the critique of the system. In this regard, it may be relevant to mention Mia's ongoing association with collective art practices that focus on investigating what communities can do and how we can use the community to challenge a neoliberal state of affairs that leaves little room for slowness, messes and differences.

## HAND-TO-HAND DELIVERY

Ideas about the (absurdly) slow brings me on (or back) to Hong Kong and the rather amazing LIGHT LOGISTICS distribution network that I got to know through artist and light logistician Elaine W. Ho from Hong Kong. LIGHT LOGISTICS is a distribution service brought into this world by the art collective Display Distribute: it is based on a voluntary network of couriers, primarily in South China and Hong Kong, but active all over the world. Essentially, the network utilises leftover suitcase space found among the people in their network, who then take parcels of books to other people when they happen to be travelling to a given place anyway. And it works! – Even if the delivery times may be rather long at times.

The LIGHT LOGISTICS website consists of a list of available and completed routes.<sup>3</sup> You can click on each and every route, where you will find photographs of the parcel being handed over, often accompanied by a small description of the entire delivery process. These descriptions can vary greatly in nature (sometimes they are personal, sometimes poetic, sometimes strictly informative and bilingual in English and Chinese). But the real point resides in how these pictures and personal messages break away from the confines of systematic excel sheets, highlighting the courier as a personal connection. The important thing here is the personal connection being made, regardless of whether the parcel takes the better part of a year to arrive.

Ming Lin, who is also a light logistician, says of LIGHT LOGISTICS that it goes against the grain of the idea of fulfilment, certainly as that concept is understood in the context of Amazon and the whole idea of fast, efficient

and full delivery.<sup>4</sup> Here, every detour that a LIGHT LOGISTICS package and courier makes is more akin to a Guy Debord-esque *dérive*<sup>5</sup> that offers up new, unexpected opportunities and acquaintances.

With their slow, inefficient and personal format, LIGHT LOGISTICS connect groups throughout East Asia (including SJT) in a quite marvellous and rather mind-blowing way.

## INSTITUENT PRACTICES

In a sense, Mia, SJT and LIGHT LOGISTICS represent a safe space for the scruffy, the shabby and the troublesome, the nervous and the failed. And being firmly founded elements in their respective art scenes (those of Copenhagen, Guangzhou and Hong Kong), they insist on an aesthetic capable of accommodating all those things. While celebrating stupidity, that celebration is itself embedded in an institutional critique of institutions, which brings us to something Elaine W. Ho mentioned to me, namely Gerald Raunig and Isabell Lorey and the idea of 'instituent practices'.<sup>6</sup> Having grown out of institutional critique, instituent practices is a concept which points to the need for new forms of management (which they describe as 'the art of governance') and, hence, for new institutions to support new kinds of societies. For the purposes of this reading, the concept concerns the artists' efforts to embed slowness, stupidity and scruffy surfaces in the institution. SJT does so as an established physical community that runs a community centre, LIGHT LOGISTICS institutes slowness through their artful network of couriers, while Mia offers up stupidity as a way of engaging in institutional critique from within, sitting there all nervous at Art Hub Copenhagen, pointing to the slickness of the art space.



Here, stupidity, slowness and the scruffy become the basis for a common vocabulary which is crucial for building institutions capable of supporting and platforming alternative ways of being together.

## END NOTES

- 1 Interview with Li Xiaotian of Soeng Joeng Toi, 25 August 2019. For more information on Soeng Joeng Toi and their concept of *manuke/dabendan*, see Yun Guo and Li Xiaotian, 'Soeng Joeng Toi: opening fissures towards a platform and a bridge', *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies*, Vol. 19, issue 3 (September 2018), 497.
- 2 For more on *manuke*, see Kenichiro Egami, 'East Asia informal networks beyond the borders: sharing of ideas, skills, and experiences against capitalization of the commons', *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies*, Vol. 19, issue 3 (September 2018), 464.
- 3 LIGHT LOGISTICS website: <https://displaydistribute.com/haukun/>
- 4 Ming Lin in DISTRIBUTION ASSEMBLY EAST, 'Eating Bitter as Gratitude for Hard Work: In Anticipation of Independent Publication Practices on Slow Down', LA Art Book Fair 2020, link: [https://displaydistribute.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/Distribution-Assembly-East\\_LAABF\\_2020.pdf](https://displaydistribute.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/Distribution-Assembly-East_LAABF_2020.pdf)
- 5 Guy Debord, 'Theory of the Dérive', *Les Lèvres Nues* no. 9 (November 1956), <https://www.cddc.vt.edu/sionline/si/theory.html>
- 6 Gerald Raunig, 'Instituent Practices: Fleeing, Instituting, Transforming', *Transversal Texts*, (January 2006), link: <https://transversal.at/transversal/0106/raunig/en>

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Yun Guo and Li Xiaotian. 'Soeng Joeng Toi: opening fissures towards a platform and a bridge'. *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies*, Vol. 19, issue 3 (September 2018), 494-504.