

Essay on Method

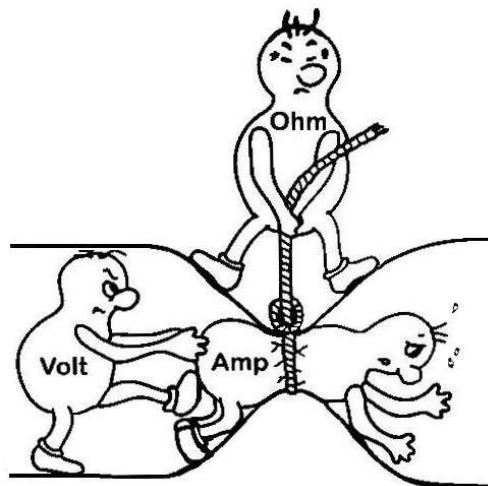
In this text I will examine my practice during the first six months at The *Piet Zwart Institute* and discuss works in their broader political and art historical context.

I began the Piet Zwart programme late due to taking part in a residency at Hospitalfield House in Arbroath (Scotland) This was a research residency at which I spent much of my time reading and writing. The texts I studied covered the themes of the debt economy, 'immaterial' labour and semiocapital¹, affect and the conditions of speech².

I also considered the relationship between sound and image within film theory, defined by French theorist Michel Chion as the interplay between 'temporality and density'³. During the residency I drew connections between these different research areas, and considered whether our current culture is one of sound or image, temporality or density, and how these forms might become cultures within themselves⁴. I used a familiar method, appropriating material to provide a framework for my own work. The source was *British Sounds* by Jean Luc Godard⁵. This is an experimental, but still highly didactic, study of labour relations in the U.K, made while Godard was still collaborating with the Dziga Vertov group. It was made in 1970; a pivotal point in the shift from Fordist to Post-Fordist production in the U.K⁶.

Godard made the work around a radical conjecture: images are too corrupted by capital to contain revolutionary potential; this is located in sound. Around this premise he structured *British Sounds* attempting to give the auditory priority over the visual. I borrowed this framework, giving myself the task of exploring contemporary labour relations and semiocapital through the medium of sound.

I arrived on the masters programme with loose notes written around the threads of interest I had identified. I will now focus on three recent works, which constituted most of a solo show in *SWG3* Gallery, Glasgow (in February 2015). The show was titled *Ohmage*, a play on 'homage' pronounced with a French accent and to 'ohm' the measurement of sound by the degree of resistance at reception. I will use these as points of access into the conceptual material I am grappling with. I will also try to analyze how working within the *Piet Zwart* has affected my thinking process and methodology.



¹ By immaterial labour/ semiocapital I refer to Post-Fordist labour practices within advanced capitalism, which involve the production of no physical good, rather relational/ service based products.

² Research material included: Lazzarato, M. (2011) *The Making of The Indebted Man* Semiotext(e), Beradi, F. *The Uprising* (2012) Semiotext(e), DeLauretis, T. (1984) *Alice Doesn't Feminism, Semiotics, Cinema* Indiana University Press

³ Chion, M. (1994) *Audio Vision* Columbia University Press

⁴ Such as internet glitch/gif cultures which are images but with a rhythmic mode of address usually associated with sound.

⁵ *British Sounds* (originally titled *See You at Mao*) (1970) Film. Directed by Godard, J.L. Roger, J.H. [DVD] Grove Press

⁶ Lazzarato, M. (2011) *The Making of The Indebted Man* Semiotext(e), pp. 18-19

Dumbcane

Is the first work encountered in the SWG3 show, an installation of nine *Dieffenbachia* plants growing under a hydroponic lamp suspended from the ceiling above them. *Dieffenbachia* are poisonous, tropical plants. I chose to include these plants in the exhibition due to their unique history, which I discovered within a Kathy Acker text⁷. The plants were brought to Europe by slave owners as they were useful precisely for their toxicity. If slaves were talking out of turn, or attempting to self-organize, the slavers would force them to chew or eat the leaves of the *Dumbcane* whose poisonous properties would swell the tongue and attack the voice box rendering the subject mute for 24 hours⁸. The plants are now popular to brighten offices and corporate waiting spaces. I find this an interesting metaphor for the former mutability of labour in early capitalist systems of primitive accumulation⁹, a stark contrast to the current climate (in the west) of semicapital/ affective labour, which seeks to harness the articulation and subjectivity of the worker and turn this into a good.



On reflection I have some reservations about this work. On the one hand I think that it is important to draw attention to an under-recognised, violent history, within a narrative of repression crucial to primitive accumulation. However, I also feel uncomfortable with my potential exploitation of this history to which I do not have embodied access as a white, middle-class, European. Most of the world continues to live a Fordist reality and it is perhaps only from a privileged western perspective that we can identify Post-Fordism. There is a geographical dislocation within my comparison: In many parts of the world where

⁷ Acker, K. *Empire of The Senseless* (1988) Grove Press

⁸ Tsack, O. *Not So Dumb After All (The True Story of The Dumb Cane)* North Dakota State University Online [online] <http://www.ndsu.edu/pubweb/chiwonlee/plsc211/student%20papers/articles04/Olivia%20Tkach/otkach.htm> [accessed: 01.04.15]

⁹ Federici, S. *Caliban and The Witch: Women, the Body and Primitive Accumulation* (2004) Autonomedia

goods are produced labour is still 'mutable'. I am aware of the potential violence of speaking on behalf of others¹⁰, and am keen to appropriate within an ethical framework where possible.



Silent Film

Is the second work the viewer encounters. It is the first I made at *The Piet Zwart* and is a 16mm film piece. I contacted numerous call centres within the Rotterdam area to ask for permission to film the interior. A

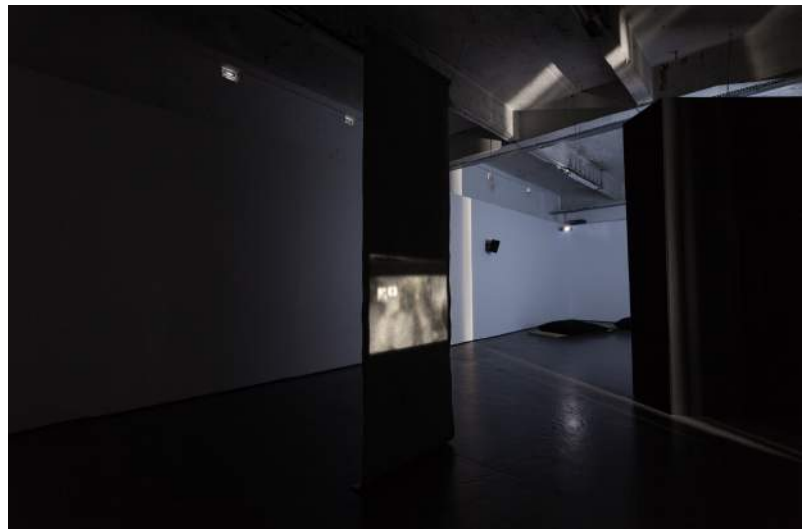
¹⁰ Foucault, M. Deleuze, G. Bouchard, D.F. (ed.) *Intellectuals and Power: A conversation between Michel Foucault and Gilles Deleuze* In *Language Counter Memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews* (1980) Cornell University Press.

large call centre in North Rotterdam called the *GDCC*¹¹ agreed. Angharad and Adam assisted me with filming using a dolly and two cameras. We took sweeping shots over the computers and communication apparatus and panned over the large office space using available lighting.

Before I arrived in Rotterdam I had filmed *MTV* music videos from an LCD screen in 16mm. The camera zooms in on particular moments within the music videos creating a collage of temporal images choreographed to an absent soundtrack¹².

I showed both reels within my first critique and received feedback on the work. After some reflection I ultimately edited the call centre footage out of the piece. In the context of the exhibition where the work was shown I decided there were enough allusions to labour relations that the call centre footage felt heavy-handed.

The work that was finally shown was a three-minute 16mm silent film showing *MTV* footage projected onto a suspended sheet of thick grey felt. The felt surface added another textural element to the work, further compromising any sheen that might remain in the *MTV* videos. The choice of felt as projection surface was both due to it being used as a medium to absorb sound and because of its composition: The fibres of felt are integrated rather than woven leading to Deleuze and Guattari using it as an example of *smooth* rather than *striated* space in their text *A Thousand Plateaus*¹³. This conceptually connected to another work in the show *smooth talker/striated silence*¹⁴, which I will not be able to discuss within this text.



¹¹ *Global Data Contact Centre*, Westblaak 163, Rotterdam

¹² The pace and content of images in the music video are determined by the music they illustrate.

¹³ Deleuze, G. Guattari, F. *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (1987) The Athlone Press Ltd.

¹⁴ *Smooth Talker, Striated Silence* is a digital video shown on LCD flatscreen tilted on its back. It incorporates scenes of zero gravity and 3D polygon animation. Running time: 11.30 min.



Umemaro 3D Takeout Pizza Obscenity (In The Key of Freddy Buache)

Is a digital video work. The image is set small and off-centre within the frame. It depicts an urban street scene in a busy shopping area. After a few seconds a hand holding an iPhone comes into the shot and a thumb plays a youtube video already loaded on the touch screen. On the iPhone a video of an orchestra begins. The image of the hand holding the screen and background continues while a voice-over speaks a fictional narrative that I wrote. The text is read by a French text-to-speech programme. This software does not speak English and so is grossly mispronouncing the words as it speaks them aloud. In the exhibition press release the piece is described as follows:

The absent male French cinematographer relays a poetic account of a virtual relationship between 'I' and 'he'. At once geographically apart and physically together, the protagonists are unified by language and a common medium. Just as the synthesized voice struggles to translate the written script – recomposing the familiar letters into francophonic clauses – so too the incongruous elements of the romance resist assimilation into a regular narrative.¹⁵



¹⁵ Gowing, S. curator of *Ohmage* exhibition (2015) [press release] SWG3 Gallery, Glasgow.



'I' had a job delivering pizza



*these had combined with that
departed feeling*

In this work I was interested in collaging multiple modes of address and subjectivities. I wrote the narrated text in the film from the perspective of a character within a *Hentai* 3D animated porn film. I then appropriated the voice of a male French cinematographer to relay her subjective experience. I have been interested in *Hentai* for some time for the complicated ethics that it poses. *Hentai*, for the first time, fully disembodies sex work. Like most pornography it is largely made and consumed by men but sidesteps the agency of living flesh which most pornography has to negotiate. This may have both negative and positive implications¹⁶.

I am interested in the flatness of the women in *Hentai* who are digitally constructed fit-for-purpose, and couldn't seem to exist in any other world. I wanted to give myself the task of writing subjectively from their

¹⁶ I would argue that, while 3D *Hentai* may mean there is less potential exploitation of living people within porn, it is also totally unregulated in terms of depiction of children/ sexual violence etc. It removes sex another step away from intimacy/ the body, and further devalues sex work as a labour.

perspective to force myself to take a radical leap of empathy. I wrote the text from a combination of my own, imagined and relayed experiences allowing myself to spill over into the character, taking on parts of the Hentai cartoon character's narrative into my living body.

My working around this material was heavily influenced by reading *Testo Junkie* in which Beatriz Preciado critiques the white, male, western-centrism of leftist, immaterial-labour discourse. She offers an alternative reading of the contemporary paradigm in the form of a feminist theory of 'Übermaterialism', locating the 'new economy' within 'pharmacopornography' and the production of chemical excitation within the body.¹⁷

Overall reflections on my practice:

I think *Umemaro 3D Takeout pizza Obscenity in the Key of Freddy Buache* was one of the more successful works I have made this year. The minimal visual stimulus runs the risk of becoming boring but the combination of material still feels like it contains humour and is fertile ground. The process of making the work felt like a thinking-through-doing and has been generative to conceiving new works.

In the first months that I was here at The *Piet Zwart* I felt unable to deconstruct my practice fully as I had the work for the show in Glasgow already underway and was holding on to familiar themes and methodologies to continue being able to produce. This felt frustrating and limiting at times like I could not fully engage with what was offered by the *Piet Zwart's* programme (such as the intense critical dialogue around practice). I had been feeling exhausted since completing the exhibition but am now beginning to have energy for new ideas. I would like to develop my next work quite slowly, giving myself time and space to fully engage with the programme here and to deeply question the form and content of new works.

Kari Robertson, 2015

¹⁷ Preciado, B. *Testo Junkie: Sex, Drugs and Biopolitics in the Pharmacopornographic Era* (2013) The Feminist Press.

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