

IF YOU'RE GONNA  
DO IT

TIRDAD ZOLGHADR

As a rule, artists will systematically complain about a text over-interpreting the artwork, smothering it in claustrophobic proximity, leaving no space for the incommensurable. Or they will, on the contrary, bemoan a text's distance from the work at hand. This essay was initially meant to subscribe to the former set of problems. To the reprehensibly pedagogical. The art-critical piece in the book. "Evans' uncanny use of airbrush shades of ochre and magenta are reminiscent of the squelchy tundra of Yorkshire." And it all seemed promising at first. Coming together quite nicely, as they say.

Evans' work is much about mis- and displaced individualities, in terms of who is doing whom any favors, who is using who, and what does using mean in a context such as this to begin with. As Evans works through these constellations, the forms and formats, methods and media are manifold. Films and ceramics aside, the work often takes on the shape of some mere connection between people and ideas, a hovering structure out in the social sphere somewhere, waiting for someone to chance upon it. It emits no sound as it waits. It is looming, lurking, silent. The Marres exhibition title evokes a cell, as in, say, a sleeper cell perhaps. But I see the structures more as disused URLs, or abandoned pop stars. Hoping, skulking, waiting. I was enthusiastic as I wrote, particularly since, tucked away in the lurking structure, was a very idiosyncratic idea of agency and practice. This melee of confusing instrumentalization and suspended agency is particularly attractive to an independent writer/curator such as myself. Ours being the most confused, instrumentalized, and victimized of all creeds. Second even to the artist.

Which is why the catalogue essay was progressing very well. Surprisingly so. To the point where I relaxed, let down my guard. And ultimately made a mistake. The mistake being my decision to consult Evans on the text in progress. Usually, this is not how I work. I had never met Evans, and I preferred it that way. As a staunch supporter of evacuating artistic intention from the critical equation, I usually keep my distance. The staggering problems of the writer, the writing and the bewritten coming together are especially

muddled in the charisma- and aura-driven field of the arts. Artists are nice, but they're also beside the point. Give me one good reason why people are so keen on meeting them. How can an honest artist do his job when he's expected to be a compelling, or quasi-compelling embodiment of his own art, complete with a whole range of batty limelight routines. Shy smiles, witty digressions, earnest frowns, flirty eye contact, all of which is to confirm that the artist is dedicated to the work, but also a likeable chap.

On the other hand, evacuating artistic intention does not absolve the artist from anything. One important aspect of an artist's work is the effect it has on its writers and writer/curators, and I've always believed artists need to take responsibility for this. More precisely, once the prosopopeia of the artist's voice is silenced, it is the work itself that should be taken to task. The indeterminacy of art is a lazy excuse. If there's no such thing as a "truthful reception", then "misguided reception" is an equally misleading concept surely, and relinquishing responsibility altogether is just too comfortable. Both the truthful and the misguided reception must be accounted for to some degree. Why let Hölderlin and Nietzsche off the hook when Nazis put their work to use. Why was it their work, of all poet-philosophers and philosopher-poets. The art should be scrutinized for what led to both the moronic readings and the flattering misreadings thereof.

Be that as it may, at the end of the day, I realized Evans and I were to be working closely together anyway, shoulder to shoulder, not only on Marres, but also on an upcoming show in Estonia. Where, as it turned out, we would be sharing a flat to boot. So much for critical distance. In sum, I decided I might as well share some notes with Evans, including some thoughts on my personal favorite in the Marres show, *Without Thinking*. "To my eyes," I wrote, "the images seem to be sourced from commercial real estate brochures featuring properties going to auction. Offices on the edge of town in archetypal 'transitional' zones, placid landscapes overlaid with a warping video effect, the type of 'transition' used to indicate that the viewer is entering the POV of the character's subconscious, entering their dream/

nightmare scenario. The warp effect is gentle, so the viewer's eyes try to adapt, try to take it for granted." The work is also an obvious allegory of the teaching/learning experience, drawing on Evans' work as guest professor at Oxford. But I was particularly proud of my reference to the cinematic point-of-view. Evans instantly wrote back.

Hey Tirdat

Thanks. Not sure about your POV thing. Not really what I was aiming for. Sounds like a poor man's Pierre Huyghe. Stick to the teaching learning thing. And if we're going to talk teaching we should revisit the basics. What's the basics? Aristotle! Check this out. Might seem a little scary at first but bear with me.

First off, is teaching praxis or poesis? And what about the art? Praxis or poesis?

Praxis (living well) <> poesis (making)

Well, what are examples of poesis, I hear you ask.

Examples of poesis include crafts, sports, military leadership, architecture, navigation, medicine AND teaching AND – wait for it - art (techne)!

Well, you might ask, why is teaching a poesis, for example?

OK. Teaching aims at producing an outcome beyond itself: learning. Externality of the end distinguishes poesis from praxis which is inherently self-justifying and intrinsically worthwhile. Praxis is conduct-through-character. But teaching and art are both examples of poesis, informed by but not reducible to praxis.

You with me?

Now the Frankfurt School, the pragmatist tradition, the phenomenological movement (and many many many others) have added their own distinctive gloss to notions of praxis, the first contrasting it with alienated theory, the second with technical ra-

tionality, the third with what's-taken-for-granted-and-not-genuinely-experienced. Each throws a particular light on practice and thus on teaching and thus on art.

Plus we must always remember Gramsci! (Marxism is generally regarded a "philosophy of praxis".)

Got that boyo?

Rock on!

KRI\$\$

PS: We must be careful not to completely gloss practice with praxis.

Or you'll get Robert Storr breathing down your neck, screaming how the kids don't know the difference. We don't want that am I right?? Hell no!

This is when writer's block set in. Nothing worked any longer. What to do when the artist you admire turns out to be a funky teacher. Like awaking from an erotic half-sleep. To see you've been French kissing the dog. Seeing as I wasn't making any headway whatsoever, I first abandoned the idea of describing *Without Thinking*, then looked to the work *The Recipient* instead, a portrait by an anonymous philanthropist, proposed as a door handle for a variety of high street banks. The reason I opted for this work was not because I appreciated it any longer, but because I knew exactly who the anonymous philanthropist happened to be.

I discovered this by pure chance, as I was hovering behind the gallery assistant one morning, squinting at the gallerina inbox. Quite a find. Sensational. Of course I immediately toyed with unveiling the patron's identity, as I knew the audience would side with me in typical voyeurist gratitude. For once, the writer/curator's semi-creative aspirations would count for something in their own right, regardless of how irritated the artist might become. But I still wasn't sure. It was a bit of a gamble. So in the hope of making virtue of necessity, I considered it more professional and reasonable to give Evans the benefit of the doubt, and to wait for Estonia, and to see whether meeting the artist might, against all odds, be a productive thing after all.

Suffice to say that Evans wears one and the same Hard Rock Barcelona t-shirt at all times. That besides occasionally smelling his armpits and spitting loudly into his kitchen napkins, which he customarily leaves on the kitchen table, each one of them potentially reminiscent of the squelchy Yorkshire tundra, he likes to lecture me on artistic intentions in a premeditated Oxford accent. And to loudly complain about the Estonians. The police are so racist, he says, and people give so much money to organized religion. He's very concerned. I wish more people cared as much as he does. Ultimately, the virtue of my temporary living arrangement lay in the fact that it made my aforementioned decision much easier.

Have you ever stopped and wondered: whatever happened to Andrew Ridgeley?

As a member of WHAM!, Ridgeley rarely played guitar, he couldn't dance, and he wouldn't sing, but just hovered there, looming about, a bit like a Chris Evans structure lurking in the wilderness. Gently wagging his fist in the air as he smiled at the camera. The look of sheer praxis, unadulterated. Ridgeley was the curatorial gesture par excellence. Ridgeley did write the blockbuster "Careless Whisper", but ironically the ballad only kickstarted George Michael's solo career, propelling him far beyond Ridgeley. After which Ridgeley launched unsuccessful attempts at the surfboard industry, Formula Three, Hollywood acting and a solo LP. None of these efforts bore fruit, not even the surfing. An old Daily Mail article claims whenever Ridgeley fell off his board, he had someone shouting "Wham! Bam! I am a man!" To top it all off, Ridgeley was hospitalized with his brother after accidentally surfing through raw sewage.

This unlikely baptism marked a turning point. Ridgeley became a forefront environmentalist fighting for UK beaches and rivers, and together with the registered charity "Surfers Against Sewage" he successfully lobbied for safety legislation which effectively wiped out *Eschericia Coli* in the country. This was also when Ridgeley, harking back, at long last, to the success of "Careless Whisper", returned to behind-the-scenes songwriting, for artists with more of a stage presence than himself, actually ghostwriting a succes-

sion of hits under various pseudonyms. The tide had turned. What else to do now but get into art. Which is where Evans enters the picture. Evans played no small role in Ridgeley's turn to the arts, having known the star from his time as drummer for the soft rock band "Life Without Buildings", for which Ridgeley wrote most of the tracks and performed backing vocals.

As the text before you proves, I've decided to go public with this. If Evans protests, the essay will be submitted to *Paris Match* and *Le Figaro*. But why would he. If Evans is largely about imaginative favoritism, who's doing who, who's doing in who, my gesture would offer more of a conceptual input, more of a semi-creative contribution than one could realistically hope for in a catalogue. From the praxis of loopy instrumentalization to the poesis of tough love and back again. Evans' pet thematics aside, my involvement of Ridgeley can be legitimized on at least three distinct levels.

For one, his trajectory makes him the perfect pop cultural mirror image of the freelance curator/writer as I know it. Ridgeley's time of gently wagging his fist at the camera, even as he was discreetly ghostwriting the frontman's lines, brings the cheerleading bystander/facilitator to a logical, not to say iconic conclusion. For another, we have Ridgeley's track record of flops, which lends him the mystique of the hardened veteran, and the aura of productive failure which the art-world fetishizes so. But we also have Ridgeley's successful activism, and his vaguely internationalist Italian-Egyptian background (according to the Daily Mail, his hooded brown eyes and high cheekbones earned him the surfer nickname "Bin Laden"). Both of which lend him a credibility other philanthropist pop stars lack. Thus Ridgeley's involvement is not only curatorially legitimate, but will create a sensation in its own right, steal the show. "Putain c'est le mec de WHAM! non?" Who cares about the art once the squirmy tweens and schmaltzy middle aged arrive with their cameras? From over here, I can hear Evans scratch his armpits as I write. I smile and gently wag my fist in the air, as I begin to sing quietly to myself.

If you're gonna do it, do it right.  
Right?  
Do it with me.  
If you're gonna do it, do it right.  
Right?  
Do it with me.  
If you're gonna do it, do it right.  
Right?  
Do it with me.  
If you're gonna do it, do it right.  
Right?  
Do it with me.  
Baby – don't you know who I am?  
Baby – I'm your man.

Zolghadr (b. 1973) is an independent curator and writer. He writes for *Frieze* magazine and is editor-at-large for *Cabinet* magazine. He recently curated the long-term project *Lapdogs of the Bourgeoisie* (with Nav Haq) and the United Arab Emirates pavilion at the Venice Biennial (2009); forthcoming curatorial projects include the international Taipei Biennial 2010. Tirdad Zolghadr is the author of the novel *Softcore*, published by Telegram Books in the UK (2007) and Kiepenheuer & Witsch in Germany (2008), and *Solution 168-185, America*, a book on the rich tradition of politicized avant-garde conspiracies in America, published by Sternberg press (2010).

This essay is a publication in the context of the exhibition *The Cell That Doesn't Believe In The Mind That It's Part Of* at Marres, centre for contemporary culture, Maastricht, June 2010.

