

//Emma Hedditch //Elke Zobl //Rosa Reitsamer

## "Working collaboratively is the essential practice of social change and justice"

An Interview with artist Emma Hedditch by Rosa Reitsamer and Elke Zobl

**Emma Hedditch (born 1972, UK) is an artist and writer based in New York. Her work focuses on daily practice, materiality, and distribution of knowledge as political action. She often works collaboratively with other artists and groups, for example The Copenhagen Free University (2001-2008) and Cinenova, a feminist film and video distributor (1999-present). Heavily influenced by politicized conceptual art practices and feminist politics, her work has taken on flexible forms as performances, collectively produced films, fanzines, as well as workshops, screenings, and events. Emma Hedditch was artist in residence for performance at the Munich Art Academy in 2013. We interviewed her in November 2013 after her talk as guest speaker at the symposium "Artistic interventions in the context of feminist and migrant self-organisation and collective practices" at the Schwerpunkt Wissenschaft und Kunst, University of Salzburg in cooperation with Mozarteum University.**

Emma, a lot of your artistic work reveals a connection to political, feminist, and anti-racist activism. Can you please describe your artistic practice and provide us with a few examples? We are especially interested in how you link political activism with your work as an artist.

One first, short collaboration that I want to speak about was with U.S.-based artists Ginger Brooks Takahashi and Ilya Lipkin in New York in 2009. Ilya was asked to participate in a project that Ilya's friend Eric Angles — also an Artist — was part of. They were given access to a storefront in Soho by a young property developer and they wanted to use it for exhibitions before the building was sold. Ilya invited me, and I invited Ginger. We were told we could work with the space for three days. This invitation set parameters for us to consider a certain space. We were curious about what kind of overlap of interests and relations generates access to such a space and asked what we should do with the invitation, and how each of us wanted to use it. I proposed that I would not enter the space but spend time on the streets around and outside of it. Ginger asked for the key and proposed to simply open the door and leave it ajar for three days. Ilya gave up the key to the space and Ginger took it. Spending time on the street forced me to engage with the area around the space and notice what else was there. I also asked the organizers to come outside. Ginger's proposal challenged the idea of the value of the space by leaving it unsecured. These processes also brought up the issue of collaboration, and how the invitation brings you into a certain contract, whether formal or informal. Ilya had a greater sense of obligation than Ginger or I because he felt a closer relationship to the space. Ginger also wanted to throw a cinder block through the window, but decided not to. At some point we noticed that the aesthetics of our refusals and resistance showed a critique of the notions of capital and property, but through a specific formal approach; this is our artistic work.



Image credit: Emma Hedditch, Ilya Lipkin, Ginger Brooks Takahashi, 2009.

I bring up this project as it has a very simple form, and for me quite clearly shows many of the complex negotiations that take time to work through in artistic and political work. We had to negotiate our different relations to the space and to each other, and this raised a lot of questions about what we each felt we can do, or would do on a performative level; and also on a symbolic level, the way we produced images, such as the idea of the key being passed from one hand to another, or waiting on the corner of the street, at a junction between different sites, the space we were working with and the New Museum, which was just around the corner. There was the open door, or the broken window, between inside and outside. We dealt with the symbolic, in relation to the context and how we see each other and the time frame of the project, which was a time to step in and out of. In this instance we wanted to make a strong statement about how we felt about expensive real-estate, and the way this owner/developer was bringing the history of self-organization, or the idea of an empty property, into the logic of neo-liberalism and how we are implicated within it, by being recognized as potential participants who would accept the invitation and act accordingly.

How does your feminist and anti-racist engagement come into your artistic work, specifically?

I think of these as intersecting terms that have several functions; we use such terms to show our intentions and to make more explicit what we are trying to engage with and are aligned with. It is a way of acknowledging and calling up this force and influence, to name these positions and to practice through this positioning.

When I was at art school in Sheffield, UK, in the early 1990s I became increasingly aware and involved in socialist feminist politics and communities that were organizing around their work, which in my direct community was, for the most part, music and film work. I became aware of the critique and methods made explicit in this work. For example, people organized spaces to show films and perform music; they shared knowledge and equipment, and wrote about experiences trying to show their work in other contexts. The critique exposed the multi-faceted and complex construction of gender within cultural forms, and aimed at writing a new history that acknowledges how gender is managed and maintained to oppress and define female bodies disproportionately to male bodies.

Another method, which we call "militant care", made explicit the labor and

conditions of work at different levels of experience based on gendered assumptions about who gets to do what kind of work. The discussion group is a very important site for practice and thinking, and I would say feminist politics really addressed this space through careful consideration of who can speak and how we listen, and how articulations and speech are gendered differently. Feminist informed politics and self-organizing changed my thinking about what my art practice could be and gave me tools to make more explicit what I want to align with, and what we are trying to shed as rigid and violent modes of subjugation. Working collaboratively is the essential practice of social change and justice, and is essential in the fight against the fear of scarcity and punishment. I think just acknowledging each other, as totally dependent on each other is a radical tool.

In 2001 I began working with Danish artists Henriette Heise and Jakob Jakobson at the Copenhagen Free University. The Copenhagen Free University opened in May 2001 in a flat. The Free University was an artist-run institution dedicated to the production of critical consciousness and poetic language. We did not accept the so-called new knowledge economy as the framework for understanding knowledge. Education in that context was increasingly focusing on producing knowledge, ideas, and information related to capital (through student fees and training people for the marketplace) rather than forms of knowledge that are fleeting, fluid, schizophrenic, uncompromising, subjective, uneconomic, non-capitalist, produced in the kitchen, produced when asleep or arising while on a social excursion—collectively.

I also use the term feminism directly in relation to lived experience, which comes from Frantz Fanon, the Martinique-born French psychoanalyst and writer. Fanon's work, especially *Black Skins, White Masks*, his first book published in 1952, analyzes the role of class, gender, race, national culture, and violence in struggles for national liberation and the decolonization of being. Lived experience operates as the unshakeable attachment, appearance, and movement of what it means to be in the world, how to live, and how that is controlled, managed, and maintained structurally through specific institutions depending, for example, on who you are and how you look or behave. At the Copenhagen Free University that was made explicit in relation to education and knowledge production by the space in which we met and worked together, which combined a place to sleep and eat, with an archive of historical and contemporary materials.

In that sense there is an unavoidableness to lived experience, and this is where I would place both art and activism. It is not to say that one is making art and activism all the time, but that one can decide to make art and activism explicit as part of one's lived experience, to live a certain way.

I was becoming more involved in anti-racist activism in Germany and Denmark in 2011 and in 2013, for example, many of the students at the Art Academy in Munich and the University in Berlin that I worked with were very involved in the non-citizen movements as supporters, listening and supporting the needs of persons threatened with deportation and without resources whilst living in Germany. So my work as I see it is to support the students also in their movement from the space of, let's say a direct conflict with their lives at the Academy and the work they are doing as activists.

In New York the work I am doing is connected/embedded in an art historical context, and the racial segregation or separation of a specific period and geography of New York's art history, around the 1960s and 1970s in the downtown Manhattan, loft apartment and performance scene, and how this is constructed as such. Fred Moten's book *In The Break* (2003), was crucial for me in this process as Fred attempts to write the aesthetics of the black radical tradition, and develops a

language for expressing more possibilities of being in that time and space, which have been made impossible or illegible or misrecognized in different ways. I have been working with a group of five young artists in New York at Artists Space, which has existed since 1972, and I consider part of this constructed history. We work directly with Fred's book, to navigate the space of history and a specific racialization of history that we want to critique and construct differently ourselves, because we have to build it, and this is perhaps another way of thinking of art and activism, as a kind of building that is very intentional.

For you, what is an artistic intervention?

An artistic intervention is explicitly tied to imagination and this is an essential part of conceiving the kind of world we want to be in, whether that imagination is for the materials used or choices about who makes the intervention, and when and in what context. Imagination goes beyond what you already can do, or are told you can do, and it also changes something, so you can see if it can be done differently. An artistic intervention can sometimes fail to have concrete effects because it is framed inside an artistic sphere, but the very fact that this sphere exists, still holds some possibilities for thinking differently.

What does creating (social) spaces through art mean to you?

It means mutually recognizing, having solidarity, and supporting one another. How do we, in these relations produce actual physical and psychological spaces for experimentation, research, self-organizing, performing, and actions. We are caught in this materiality and invitation, and possibilities that must be built together, in a collective process. Museums, cinemas, and galleries are social spaces; they are not only for individual consumption and contemplation. We can use these spaces; we can refuse to be isolated, even if this means a kind of over identification with an artist or artwork. Creating one's own space, or context to share with others is exciting and challenges these other spaces, it is an essential part of the artistic landscape, to pursue places that satisfy needs and desires that other institutions can't or won't.

I feel an affinity with practices that do not seek to unify in support, or compartmentalize, but instead offer resources and space to try things out. There is no need to know what we will do, but a willingness to let us do it if we dare. In this sense you could say it is close to anarchist or non-authoritative socialist thinking and organizing. It is a curiosity, and a commitment to distributing resources and knowledge, and having or making the experience of organizing and doing something collectively, with an emphasis on process as much as the final goal.

Collaboration and self-organization are central in social movements and for feminist and anti-racist politics and interventions. You have been working in collaborations with others and have been involved in self-organized contexts. What role does self-organization and collaboration play in your artistic practice?

Collaboration holds a tension in that collaboration is already a dependency, with focus on the social relations and objects or materiality, technologies, etc. So I would not make so much of a distinction about whether I am collaborating or not, and say that it is always a collaboration, to live. But it is an important term to distinguish from the idea that one has an individual practice or the notion of an individual pure subject; and this is something that I feel gets harder the more that ideas of scarcity seem to be around us. So I am proud to participate and be part of different collaborations and try to overcome these dominant forms of individuation and

isolation.

Self-organizing can be complicated if it is not also changing and critical of becoming an insular and isolated practice. So I would say that it is important to be very aware of whom one collaborates with, and organizes with as much as the reasons for organizing. But I also try to be curious and follow invitations to join others, without knowing so much, trying to trust the situation and know that each person makes the collaboration, so one is always an active participant who has the potential to bring something or say something.

Collaboration can also be a negative practice of affirming certain positions, supporting and reinforcing specific modes of being, based on principles of experience, legibility, and performance, which is not necessarily something we can always see, but can be a consequence of our particular position. I think this is happening a lot with invitations from large institutions, it's not always possible to see all of the affiliations and implications that are a consequence of your collaboration, but it's also a condition under which you sometimes have to work, or you feel you have to in order to survive, or pay rent, etc.

How do you see your role in your artistic projects?

I think my role changes depending on the projects, and I am very happy about how open that has become and at the same time somewhat antagonistic, meaning that it is not easy going and open. I mean it is something that others have projected on to me, and that to some extent through a certain amount of resistance and decision-making I have taken on. I think it's important to be able to change and know when you are useful and when not, or learn that through listening to other people and observing what is happening around you. I also like to make things and work with materials and experience the time of making and learning or gaining knowledge from different practices, so it's not so much of a single role or activity.

An article in Frieze (Issue 85, 2004) stated: "Her (Emma Hedditch's) work is entirely collaborative, so that she is more of a facilitator than an author."  
Would you agree with this statement?

Yes, well I don't really like the term author, because it implies individual production, so yes, I agree, but also facilitator has some meanings which are problematic, they imply a certain set of possibilities that a person gives or has control over, and I don't really like this implication, either. But yes, the statement is ok and I think the person who wrote the piece was exploring something that she was interested in as a concept about artistic production and so this writing and description was a good place to relate these ideas. In general it is a challenge to talk about your work, it's hard to describe things that are more of a practice, but I also appreciate very much people who want to talk about these questions and consider it important to have an exchange.

Thank you very much for the interview!

## //Zur Person

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Emma Hedditch

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focuses on daily practice, materiality, and distribution of knowledge as political action. She often works collaboratively with other artists and groups, for example The Copenhagen Free University (2001–2008) and Cinenova, a feminist film and video distributor (1999–present). Heavily influenced by politicized conceptual art practices and feminist politics, her work has taken on flexible forms as performances, collectively produced films, fanzines, as well as workshops, screenings, and events. Emma Hedditch was artist in residence for performance at the Munich Art Academy in 2013.

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## //Zur Person

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Elke Zobl

Nach Studien der Bildnerischen Erziehung, Germanistik, Gender Studies und Kunst- und Kulturwissenschaften (Salzburg, Wien und North Carolina), erhielt sie 2004 ihr Doktorat an der Akademie der Bildenden Künste in Wien. Von 2000-2006 forschte sie an der Universität of California San Diego, 2007-2011 war sie Inhaberin eines Herta-Firnbergs Postdoc-Stipendiums am Fachbereich Kommunikationswissenschaft (Universität Salzburg). Seit Mai 2011 ist sie Assistenzprofessorin am Fachbereich Kommunikationswissenschaft und am Schwerpunkt Wissenschaft und Kunst.

Mehr Info

## //Zur Person

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Rosa Reitsamer

Soziologin, arbeitet am Institut für Musiksoziologie an der Universität für Musik und darstellende Kunst Wien. Ihre aktuellen Forschungsschwerpunkte sind an der Schnittstelle von Musik-, Kunst- und Jugendsoziologie sowie der Cultural Studies und Gender Studies angesiedelt. Zuletzt erschienen ihre Monographie „Die Do-it-yourself-Karrieren der DJs. Über die Arbeit in elektronischen Musikszenen“ (transcript 2013), die Anthologie „They Say I'm Different... Populärmusik, Szenen und ihre AkteurInnen“ (hg. gem. m. W. Fichna, Löcker 2011) und die Artikel „Born in the Republic of Austria“. The Invention of Rock Heritage in Austria“ (International Journal for Heritage Studies, 2013) und „Female Pressure: A translocal feminist youth-oriented cultural network“ (Continuum. Journal of Media and Cultural Studies, Vol. 26 (3), 2012).

## //Literaturnachweise

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- \*1 Fanon, Frantz (1952): *Black Skins, White Masks*.
- \*2 Moten, Fred (2003): *In The Break. The Aesthetics Of The Black Radical Tradition*. Univ. of Minnesota Press