

Kajsa Dahlberg

In a conversation with Niklas Östholm
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Kajsa Dahlberg in a conversation with Niklas Östholm:
curator and member of Index exhibition group

Niklas Östholm: The work *A Room of One's Own/A Thousand Libraries* consists of a book. In my view, there is in this specific project an exciting relationship between the form and content of the book. It is bound like a library book, and put together by photocopies of the Swedish translation of Virginia Woolf's *A Room Of One's Own* from 1929. Woolf's book could perhaps be described as an overview of female writer's position within the history of literature since it focuses women's possibilities and their access to this history. Furthermore: how women's creativity and what they actually write reaches public light, and how women enter the world of Academia. Altogether Woolf's starting point is a true belief in the fact that also a woman has a need for a room of her own. When I think of the bound books of the library, I imagine blue, brown, yellow and orange covers – that is, quite strong colour markers. Also, a warm feeling of the Swedish folkhem's ambition for adult education with a concept of equality bound into the design.

Yet your book is completely white. To me this signals an 'object', a book which has been casted, hence another type of conservation than, say the library book, might suggest. Simultaneously I am struck by the thought of the white as a tabula rasa; as a carte blanche of sorts. In this way, the form expresses an ambition to promote and give voice to the very ideas it contains, that is, Woolf's book and the comments written in it by numerous readers. How did you start working on this piece?

Kajsa Dahlberg: What was really important to me in my work with the book – and which also makes it relate to the video *20 Minutes (Female Fist)* – is the act of reading in one and the same time as a communicative and private space. What interests me the most is the description of a subjective position in relation to a larger system. For me this works in several layers: in Woolf attacking a patriarchal system; in the reader's reactions on her text; and in their relation towards the library as an institution.

There is nostalgia surrounding the library and the notion of adult education that of course is difficult to ignore. I was afraid that one might read the book as a celebration of the library, which of course may not be a problem. First I would like to make clear the work as a method of shedding light to a subject's relation to a system which is larger than itself. A process that, on its own accord, might lead to the formulation of new, different spaces. In this way, it has the possibility of functioning, as you put it, a cart blanche.

The choice of keeping the book completely white also has a reference to pirate copying, as a text-based equivalence to the white-label records of the music world. The discussion surrounding copyright and its antithesis – copyleft – is also a kind of public debate that interests me a lot.

My idea is furthermore to return the book to the libraries: I'd like it to be re-registered without being given a certain given place in the shelves. The cover lacks a title, and I am fond of the idea of placing the book in connection to Woolf, but that it actually eventually would disappear among the shelves.

My obsession for the book has been almost inverted, as I have concentrated, not on the text itself, but on the space surrounding it. Finally, I became quite fond of the repetitive act of getting the same book distributed from the library's system over and over again. Actually it was a coincidence that had me taking interest in the notes made in Woolf's book. A few years back I wanted to give the book to friend only to find that all the Swedish editions were sold out. It has been a really important book for me, so I was quite astonished by the fact it was no longer possible to purchase. Instead, I got hold of the book through a library, I had it copied, and bound it into hard cover. I liked the look of it, which indicated copy and original at one and the same time. This particular book that I got hold to through a library contained lots of notes, which contributed to the fact that I wanted to read it again. I started to collect these notes without actually planning it should later become an artwork. At some point I started to collect in more systematic way, simply by addressing all Swedish libraries that had the book in their possession. Which proved to be most of them. While I was working with this project, a new edition of Woolf's book was released, which of course was a positive thing.

NÖ: First I thought the book consisted of selected pages, chosen by you from out of the material collected from the libraries. This is however not the case. Could you describe how you actually did this?

KD: The book is a compilation of *all* the notes collected by me. In principal one could say that it contains all notes existing in all the library editions available in Sweden at a certain point. Each time I have arrived in a new town I have checked up *A Room of One's Own* in the local library, basically I have copied and collected all pages with notes or with sections underlined. I have also received a lot of help from librarians, some of the libraries made copies on their own accord and had them sent to me. I now happen to have many library cards... And my statistics from borrowing books must look rather strange.

Gradually I have collected an archive of all these copies, each page isolated from the other. I was lucky since it turned out that all Swedish editions have exactly the same set of text. This is, for instance page five contains exactly the same text, regardless what issue you are reading. This facilitated my work since I could collect and put them into an archive, one by one. Having done this I choose one page as an original and transferred all notes with the aid of a light table. In other words, all notes have been traced by hand to one and the same page. The designer Otto Degerman then made a fantastic job in compiling the pages, in addition he co-ordinated the printing procedure

NÖ: One of many trends lately, especially when it comes to the documentary art, quite often the process itself proves to be the work of art. Many times, a large part of the artist's material in the ongoing research can be presented as an archive open for any viewer to take part of. Do you ever ask yourself the question where the process on the one hand ends, and the work on the other, actually starts?

KD: Well yes, I think that is really difficult to know. It will always take me some time to realise where that limit is, and then I am still not sure. My method is quite process

based and both *A Room of One's Own/A Thousand Libraries* and *20 Minutes (Female Fist)* consists of very protected processes. For instance, I was thinking a lot whether the book should contain a list of all contributing libraries, from where all the notes came, or not. To me, it is always a balance, it is quite easy for me to get caught up by the mere course of the events, and I rarely have a clear idea of a result when I start a new project. I can imagine that you to a greater extent might get involved than if you have a very clearly formulated idea from the start. Generally, I try to get rid of as much as possible of the process in the final presentation. Most of the time I wish that the work should function independently. Not that I have something against a lot of information as an integrated part of a work of art, actually I think it is rather interesting with that kind of process motivated projects. What I fear however is that there will not be enough space left for the viewer. Perhaps, this is where the real meeting happens, in my opinion.

NÖ: I have often read about different writer's relationship to Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*. There are passages in the book that has been underlined, reread, retold to friends and then frequently quoted. But what I didn't know was that the book of Virginia Woolf was full of under linings and marginal notes. The way you have compiled your work, it means that nearly every line is now highlighted. I don't know if it needs to be said, but your work about creating a space for one's own within the space of a library book becomes congenial with the content of the book, and with its title. How did you first encounter *A Room Of Ones Own*?

KD: I think that is really interesting, how underlining made in a private situation becomes a common reference. In a discussion not only referring to the text itself, but to underlining that has been made over and over again. In this way, the act of reading becomes a part of the text itself. It is an excellent example on a process where the storytelling coincide with the history writing itself. I read *A Room of One's Own* for the first time when I began my studies at Malmö Art Academy. It was then I first came in contact with feminist theory, and with philosophy as a possible tool to use. My situation and my attempts to formulate an identity as an artist contributed to the book becoming even more relevant for myself.

NÖ: When reading your book, I notice that I track certain handwritings in the marginal in order to create an image of the person behind them. It becomes like a seminar of voices. When working with this piece, what kind of pattern can you make out from the under linings, and especially from the comments and the marginal notes?

KD: The marginal notes creates an entity, a common pattern that is also strongly connected to the text. This temporary entity is for me the most important. It's interesting that a lot of reactions show a shared experience. In this way, they create both a story and a history writing. Woolf is very pedagogical in her line of argument, it's almost a bit irritating at times, although it perhaps makes the notes clearer: easier to follow and to interconnect. Of course I became attached to the comments that were more personal, or the ones getting upset about her arguments. There are a few more subtle addendums that unfortunately get lost in my book but that are really nice. In one of the

books, somebody had underlined all the times Woolf uses the word *wrath*, which proved to be quite often. I think eight times on one page. There were also several books that had only a few under linings or words. As in one of books where the only thing that was highlighted was the words *lemon to silver*.

NÖ: To make notes in a book is for me a way of establishing a dialogue with oneself. When I read other peoples notes and markings, for me it becomes like making an intrusion in another person's private thoughts. How do you view this?

KD: I actually feel a bit vulnerable in the light of someone else reading my notes and markings. Reading, and an individual's responding on a text is, like you say, something deeply personal. It reflects your experiences, references and thoughts. There is of course a great risk for vulnerability in another person seeing and interpreting your patterns of thoughts. Perhaps this discomfort comes together with a fear for one's reading being revealed as a fake.

But I think it can also be that you read more into the notes than there actually is. The note itself is nothing but a trace of an experience, not necessarily something that could be understood by the next person. The next reader will have to create a personal experience of the text. Then you have already shared that space; it is already too complicated to provide with any easy explanations.

NÖ: To make your voice heard in the public space, to be seen there and recognized for the person that you are. Maybe this is a possible entrance? But despite all this, I get curious to know something about your line of thoughts. It is a question you ask yourself when watching *20 Minutes (Female Fist)*, and also afterwards. Why do you put the lens cap on?

KD: There are probably several explanations and circumstances that have made the work looking like it does. When I started this I had an idea of what I wanted to do, but no definitive form. I had read this article about an activist group from Copenhagen on a net-based magazine. They formulated a lot of things that I had thought myself in my work as an artist. I was interested in their way of acting politically, at the same time existing outside the already existing political framework: their way of dealing with society by functioning sexual separatistic. The group defined themselves firstly in negative terms by saying we are not Anarchists; we are not Feminists; we are not Marxists etcetera, This was an important start for me; how can you create an identity for yourself, at the same time avoid being defined from the outside? To know only what you don't are becomes the starting point for a need to create a new identity, a new language, and, in the end, a will to change the way things are.

From the beginning my work dealt with how to document their work. I was interested in how one ideologically and formally could make a film about a group that refuses to have a representation, or to be defined. Of course, the refusal will also be a representation of sorts; you cannot get away from that. But what kind of images could possibly be produced, making such recognition impossible? For me it became a kind of obsessed utopian idea that you would need to reinvent a language of images, or the media of video

as such. Thinking of the result, one could perhaps argue that I avoided the question by leaving the lens cap on. In that sense, it is an investigation that will have to continue. That is also the basic reason why the film looks like it does. I was allowed to make a recording, with sound. I don't actually know if it would have been OK also to include the image. It was never an alternative on my part: to make a classic interview featuring a talking head. One could say that the recording was part of my research that then turned out to be the starting point for the work itself. The lens cap became a strategy to show the problem of representation. It really dealt with me trying to find a functioning relationship between form and content.

NÖ: To make your own voice heard in a public space, not being visible, without being seen. This is something that comes across in both *A Room of One's Own/A Thousand Libraries* and *20 Minutes (Female Fist)*. The works both touches upon and poses a series of questions. It is moving, at the same time frustrating, that these voices will not speak about themselves. When I think about these works and their relationship to a public space, the idea of a public dialogue is present. What mechanisms will decide who will get access there? And how can you influence the preconditions of these mechanisms?

KD: I guess this is generally a problem for minorities in a society that presupposes normality. Either you strive for becoming a part of that society and fight for the same rights that the majority have. Although, then you run the risk of becoming the norm, to be devoured whole and made invisible. Or you refuse to take on the ambition of being understood and accepted, and you build an alternative culture together with others. Regardless of what you choose, you run the risk of disappearing. It is a paradox.

But if you find yourself in a position where you at all times need to relate to the rest of society, what can you use as a strategy in order not to lose yourself? What can you do, avoiding being defined from the outside? And how can you make the normality, the majority, realising that they, too, embodies a position, among others? Perhaps you need many parallel strategies.

But this resistance against being defined of what you perceive as a repressive structure is both important and interesting. I think a lot of people can identify themselves in it. It reflects a larger issue regarding the possibility of producing counter images to the normative narratives that are mediated from the rest of the society.

NÖ: The woman in the film does not appear in front of the camera, only with her voice. Simultaneously she stresses the importance of making the lesbian culture visible. In that way, to me, she becomes an image of today's society; the will to become visible, to find a spot in the public space, making her voice heard. The woman speaks about the anonymous and the collective but we never find out who she really is: her name; her looks, what she previously has been doing; her background. Why?

KD: For me it was important that the film didn't deal with the activist movement in Copenhagen per se. The idea was rather to find a way, projecting this discussion back onto us, on the ones looking at this film. This would prove to be more difficult if the viewer had to relate to a specific person with a specific past and a history.

I think she has this amazing ability of talking about quite controversial matters, at the same time, making it sound as if it was complete self-evident subject matters. To me, the universal becomes the most important in the end: the description of quite a specific position suddenly turns into the norm. I believe, or rather, I hope that a lot of people can relate to her story in different ways in a need to relate to the world. The idea with this film is not to ensure media limelight to a marginalised activist: rather the other way around, to test the possibility of having her speaking for us. This interests me: the relationship between the specific and the universal.

NÖ: I appreciate that what is the centrepiece of the work, the monologue taking place on the other side of the lens cap, is framed by two silent panning shots of a square in Copenhagen. A square may be the first thing we relate to when thinking of a public space, a space with people in motion. I enjoy some of the micro histories acted out there. In the final part, one person photographs another that just stepped outside the frame. Another person seems to ask the people passing by some poll interrogation. Of course the images speak for themselves, but what is your intention showing them totally silent?

KD: Partly for the same reason, the sound not having any image. It is a decision that is based on form, simply to produce an effect of classic *Verfremdung*; to enhance a certain meta meaning. The film does not deal with Rådhuspladsen in Copenhagen (which is the place we are actually looking at) but with the public space as a concept. This might be understood anyhow, but I thought it is more clear with sound removed; in this way the image will be "charged" through the story. Like in the way you tell me this – all of a sudden you opt to interpret the small scenarios that is acted out on the square. I simply wanted the viewer to have a larger space in order to think about how the film is constructed and put together.

NÖ: *A Room of One's Own/Thousand Libraries* and *20 Minutes (Female Fist)* poses a series of questions of how to appropriate space, mental and political space, but also physical and real. Notions and groups that do not sympathise with the norms of society. One wonders why, ultimately, society will not get more multifaceted. Why is that, in your view?

KD: That is a good question. But to create an entity at the end of the day it deals with enabling people to take part in public life on their own terms. I think it will be important to make your life political in many levels in order to create a space for yourself and others. This is something feminists repeatedly have stressed since the time of Virginia Woolf, and long before that. It is just very few who actually listens.

NÖ: During the preparation of your exhibition for Index, you have been talking about making a third piece in order to find a visual link between the other two works.

KD: It will be a print, an image describing a book, only existing as a postscript code in the library's database. A librarian that I contacted during the work with *A Room of One's Own/Thousand Libraries* told me he had registered fictive books that do not exist. As

it happened, one of these books, *Universum och lifvet därstädes* is still in this system. I have tried to find a proof for this book's existence in this database. There is a relation on the one hand between the contradictory stories that fit into the books of a library and the order of the cataloguing, on the other. I thought the librarian's choice of act was an interesting expression for all this.

NÖ: Art, as I see it, offers multiple spaces. And I am thinking both on how institutions (such as Index) and artists work here. Some spaces have more of a temporary character, others are consistent. Art often deals with creating a context where different spaces can emerge, be it a separatist space, or a space in dialogue with the rest of the society, to paraphrase film. In your view, what are art's – and the artist's – possibilities of dealing with issues that – may – be of importance for society as a whole?

KD: Yes, of course I believe in artists and art institutions playing an important role in the society. This may sound a little bit diplomatic, but I think it is important to realise both possibilities and limitations within an artistic space.

I find that there is a tendency within society where certain public issues are pushed on to the cultural sphere. This is madness in a double sense: apart from depoliticising issues that should be given a broad discussion in society. Also because it limits the art as a space and its critical reflection by handing over to it a few functions, useful to the society. But as you say: an explosive, political content can be found in the fact that it is a public space that is not defined on before hand. It is constantly re-negotiated which in turn creates a space for critical reflection.

Translation by Mats Stjernstedt

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