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WHERE THE ARTWORK MEETS ITS CARRIER
“DISSECTING THE HOST”

HRAFNHILDUR HELGADÓTTIR

THESIS ADVISER: JEROEN BOOMGAARD

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When we think of ‘art,’ often the focus tends to be on the art object itself, but rarely on the context that carries it. But what happens when the context or ‘carrier’ of the artwork is a work in and of itself? In this paper, I refer to that context as a ‘host.’ I have chosen to look at examples where the host is an integral part of the artwork (or is itself an artwork), and in each case I will make an attempt to clarify its role.

What does the word ‘host’ mean? In everyday life, often the host is the person that receives or entertains others. For example, at a dinner party. I guess we have all found ourselves in the position of being the host or being entertained by one. A host can in the same sense also be an organization or a place and even a city. A host can also be found in the biological world, where the guest is sometimes welcome and other times not. Biological hosts are organisms that harbor other forms of life (‘guests’), typically providing nourishment and shelter. This relationship can be mutual (benefiting both host and guest) or commensal (where only one of them benefits), but when the guest is parasitic, then the host can be damaged. And then there is the contemporary host: the computer host, a computer that mediates multiple access to databases mounted on it or provides other services to a computer network. It is in some sense like a storage space.

The central questions that this paper addresses are:

What and who is the host in art? How does this host appear? and How do I and others perceive the host as operating in relation to the guest, and vice versa? I will use the previous definition of the host to look at five examples of artworks and exhibitions where I am interested in defining the host and its ‘guest’ relationships. These five examples illustrate different ways that a host can be expressed through space, form, and narrative, and what influence that has on the perception of the viewer as ‘guest participant’.

To start with I had the feeling that I myself might become a ‘host’. Lately, I have become occupied with ideas and dilemmas around the carrier in art. This could be the context and the space, but in my practice I’m struggling the most with a longing to insert others’ work into my own. And then questions like What does it mean to feature others’ work with in my own art? appeared. What position should I then take? Or could I potentially create both the host and the guest? The examples I write about in this paper are works of art and exhibitions that address this question in different, though sometimes interrelated, ways. These are works that I was curious about and wanted to understand for one reason or another. The five artworks I will explore in this paper are: Drawing Restraint 9 (2005), a film by Matthew Barney, La Carte D’apres Nature (2011), an exhibition curated by Thomas Demand, The Parliament (2012), an installation by Celine Condorelli, ‘Boekie Woekie books by artists’ (1986 to present), a bookstore by Jan Voss, Hattie van Egten and Rúna Þorkelsdóttir, and Real Snow White (2009), a performance by Pilvi Takala.



Dissection #1: Drawing Restraint 9 (2005) by Matthew Barney

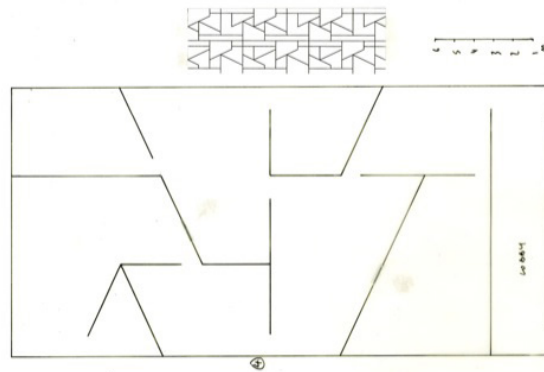
The first example I'd like to explore is the art-film **Drawing Restraint 9 by Matthew Barney (2005)**. I start with this work, because Barney repeatedly uses the words 'host' and 'guest' to describe the different contexts, objects and characters that appear in the film. The narrative of the film is the ultimate carrier/body from which all those things were born and in which they all are hosted.

The narrative of *Drawing Restraint 9* is centered around a whale hunting boat off the coast of Japan called the *Nisshin Maru*. This boat is the main protagonist within the film, playing host to a series of smaller narratives (host-guest relationships) that run in parallel aboard the vessel. For example, one of the prominent storylines is a man and a woman who are travelling to the whale hunting boat, from different directions. They are the guests that are arriving. We follow them through their preparation of bathing and getting dressed in traditional Japanese wedding attire. We then follow the characters as they enter a traditional tea room inside the boat and meet for the first time in a ceremony. The ceremony involves tea rituals conducted by yet another host, a Japanese man who tells them the story of the *Nisshin Maru* whale hunting boat. The couple swim in the room of Vaseline and with traditional knives for cutting whale meat they start cutting each others legs off until whale tails appear, liberating them from the host.

Matthew Barney created a schematic drawing of the entire narrative that shows the prominence of the host as a fixed entity (in this case, the boat) that is inhabited by a more fluid guest. Other, sec-

ondary hosts are located within the boat, meaning that they are simultaneously guests. For example, in the tea ceremony there are three distinct hosts: the boat, the tea room and the conductor of the ceremony. This continues to be true beyond the narrative of the film: many original artworks created as part of that narrative later moved on to be hosted in museums and galleries – architectural contexts which Barney has always compared to bodies or organisms in and out of which life passes[1] and continue to live on as physical artifacts.

Barney also talks about architecture as a body [2] in ways that clarify that when the tea room floods with vaseline, the host is releasing the guests from the body.



Dissection #2: La Carte D'apres Nature (2011) by Thomas Demand

The next example is **La Carte D'apres Nature (2011)** which was an entire show curated by artist **Thomas Demand**. This is a show I saw myself at the Matthew Marks gallery in New York in 2011. Marks periodically invites his artists to curate a show in his gallery, and this was such a show. Demand has selected works from Italian photographer Luigi Ghirri, a photograph by August Kotsch, sculptures by Saadane Afif, Becky Beasley and Kudjoe Affutu, films by Tacita Dean, Der Van Eik and Rodney Graham, and a sound work by Henrik Hakansson. Demand also borrowed three paintings done by the surrealist Rene Magritte. The title of the show is also borrowed from artist publications that Magritte published between 1951 and 1965.

The best means of describing this show, and especially the host-guest relationship is to walk you through my experience:

It's September 2011. I am in Chelsea the former industrial now gallery district of New York City. I'm standing in front of a glass wall there is a door and on the windows is written Matthew Marks Gallery.

When I enter, I'm faced with an immediate white wall so I have to turn right, I walk 8 meters along the white wall until a window appears on the wall. It's a blue / green window and has the shape of couple of triangles fitted together. I can see through the window into the next room even though the wall continues for a bit. I continue the walk, I have seen inside the next room even though I am not yet there. (This feels like I have seen a glimpse into the future.) When I enter the next room,

which is not very large, I have a white wall in front of me with doorways on each side and on my right a diagonal wall, leaving me with two options: left or right. I go for the left opening. This is a space similar size as the one I just came from but with no openings and on my right again a diagonal wall. The wall that I'm facing seems for be covered with red velvet curtains, reminding me of theater curtains. There is a painting hanging on the front of the curtain in a large golden frame, seemingly defying the law of gravity. The illusion is broken when I look closer and see that the curtains are merely a wallpaper image of red velvet curtains. And the painting hangs on the wall.

The painting is Rene Magritte: *L'Univers Demasqué* (The Universe Unmasked), 1932.

In this painting I see a house that is under construction, standing on green grass with mountains in the background. As in most of Magritte's work, we see the world is as we know it, but then realize that something is wrong (the same experience I just had with the 'curtains'): The sky is breaking open into cubes, giving way to another dimension. It feels as if we are being shown something that exists, but we could just never see it before. The landscape depicted in the painting is the host for another reality.

I walk out of the room back to the space I just came from and choose the right door. And this is how it goes through the whole show, trying to remember where I came from, what doors I have been through and where to go next. Throughout there are diagonal walls and windows that show you either the future or the past.

Why do I find this exhibition so hard to forget? It was not necessarily about the artworks themselves, but about the special experience.

We are accustomed to a gallery being the space that hosts art, wherein the viewing experience is guided by either the spatial configuration of the gallery space or by elements that may be introduced to steer our sequence of experience. But in this case there is something more. The apparatus that determines our viewing experience (the labyrinth I have described) is itself an artwork created by the curator-artist Thomas Demand. To create this new work, Demand appropriated the work of another living artist, Martin Boyce. What I call the 'labyrinth' is Demand's spatial rendering of a drawing[3] by Boyce. Demand then invited Boyce to contribute to 'his' work.

Demand's labyrinth establishes itself as a both a framing (commensal) and mirroring (mutualistic) host for the other artworks in the show. For example, Magritte's painting – itself a two-dimensional rendering of a labyrinthine spatial landscape – seems to meet Demand's labyrinth at the site of the picture place. At the same time, Demand is directly referencing Boyce's sculptural work, which Boyce has described as capturing moments experienced in landscapes.[4]

Demand's artwork-cum-architectural-host has a strong presence and creates a very active (interactive) way of viewing the show, both in how the viewer/visitor chooses her/his path, and also in how the structure allows him/her to travel into individual artworks and then zoom out and feel how it is to stand inside a bigger artwork.



Dissection #3: The Parliament (2012) by Céline Condorelli

The next artwork is **The Parliament** by artist **Céline Condorelli**, which was shown in 2012 in the Castello di Rivoli in Torino, Italy. The artist installed an architectural structure modeled after the formal configuration of a parliamentary assembly, where members of parliament sit in a half circle facing a central podium. In her version of this structure, Condorelli inserted a series of video monitors (one at each parliamentary seat) displaying scenes from the Disobedience Archive, a historical archive of acts of civil disobedience from around the world.

What is it that Condorelli aims to do? The artist explains that in creating Parliament, she asked herself, “Can an architecture be utilized to exhibit itself, as a form of display to create altered conditions? Can such an installation be both object and subject?”

At the same time, she creates solid ground for the Disobedience Archive, rescuing it from the main dilemma of archives: that is, what to do with them and how to show them (as a result of which they are rarely seen). And when documents are collected to and archive they lose their context therefore an opportunity to give archives a new body is presented. Parliament gives voice to the archive, itself is a document of voices that insist on being heard. What Condorelli does is to place the disobedience acts within the very site where the laws are created. The act of disobedience is therefore re-cast in a meaningful way.

By building an artwork to serve as a display structure, she has created a host body within which the archive can be situated, activated and interpreted in a new way as the video monitors become stand-ins for parliament members. She therefore simultaneously gives the archive a host and creates a new context for the archive.

How do I perceive the host-guest relationship here?

Governmental parliaments are designed to host a spectrum of ideas and views, while fostering ‘democratic’ consensus about issues/measures that affect a broad public. Disobedience is an act of public resistance/demonstration that usually is a protest against prevailing power structures. By placing

recordings of acts of disobedience at each parliamentary 'seat,' the voice of the parliament becomes one of dissent against its very structure. Condorelli has created a host that is subverted and potentially consumed by its guest.



Dissection #4: 'Bookie Woekie' books by artist (1986 to present) by Jan Voss, Hattie van Egten and Rúna Þorkelsdóttir

The next example is **Boekie Woekie**, a bookstore in Amsterdam specially focused on artist books and other printed matter.

I have been involved in the running of this space for some time now and I always had the idea that it was in many ways like a host to all the strange publications that are there. In Boekie Woekie I feel that the host shows great hospitality to its obscure guests. I also like that the store itself is an ongoing artwork that is disguised as a book shop. Because isn't that what art is? A shop front where the real work happens in the back room?

I asked Jan Voss, one of its founders, some questions on the idea of Boekie Woekie as a host.

H: How I have been thinking about the host, I would say that a host is a carrier of art. Can you relate Boekie Woekie to the idea of being a host of art?

J: It is a host of art, yes. It is a host of adjectives. In language, you have language qualities, descriptive qualities. For all the books that we host, each book is of a certain quality. That quality differs from one to another, and the more qualities that are hosted, the more complete the impression of the to-

tall becomes, the more satisfaction there is and the more opportunities there are to be satisfied. These are the sort of fulfilled expectations and discoveries that somebody who spends some time here can hope to find.

H: And what kind of host is Boekie Woekie?

J: The hosts, those who run Boekie Woekie, see themselves as artists, and the way we carry out our activities is that of artists. So that the contributors of books are artists, and they are hosted by artists. So from both sides, the function of the artist is in the primary position. In regards to Boekie Woekie, if the hosts of a lot of art works are themselves artists, then the quality of what you get is that of an artwork consisting of many artworks. And this double concentration, one in the other, is an enormously powerful substance. This becomes for the visitor totally convincing. He knows he's in an extremely intensified world. That the ones that say they are artists, the ones who run the place, they say that they are artists with the help of other artists, and that all those many artists fuse into one big artwork. So they allow their books to be presented in a context that itself is one big artwork, which becomes almost indestructible. That is a thing that is so clearly IT: personal ambition is secondary. It is really something that stands monumental on its own.

H: Can you explain how Boekie Woekie is not only a shop? And is it pretending to be a shop or using the format of a shop to be something else?

J: I think one should try to catch this question in mid-air and express one's doubt as to whether one ever knows anything for sure. I think that Boekie Woekie is a lot of other things than just a site that is it a shop. In the normal use of everyday dealing with things, it is a shop. But a pretty special shop.

H: If you look at Boekie Woekie in a larger context, as a place in the 9 Streets shopping street of Amsterdam or as just one object in the larger art world. Could it be that Boekie Woekie operates as a parasite?

J: Yes, it is of course also a parasite. But it is more like when you take a walk in a dark forest and you see a lot of trees, and you hear a lot of wind in the leaves, and you think you see something there, a deer jumping or a fly flying around or a spider web: details in that forest that attract your attention. And you can maybe also happen to see a dew drop on a leaf and the sparkling of light in it. And in the reflection in the light in the dew drop you see the rainbow colors. And then you can think of Boekie Woekie, the function of it. We are not a parasite in the sense that we are bringing sickness to others in the world. I don't think we (Boekie Woekie) are living at the expense of others directly. Except when you consider that we are part of a larger metabolic process of the world. We are functioning on many levels as expected, and on a few more randomly, arbitrarily almost, and on others predictably from time to time. It is not a clear yes or no. If you like to see it you, will see it. Some people have less trained antennas for certain signals. They will not even notice it. But I think one of the more special qualities of Boekie Woekie is that it has the potential to be found: refreshing, exciting, and hope giving to quite a few individuals who share the sensitivity. If you have the normal life experience and normal measurements on what is what and then apply them to Boekie Woekie, then you may not find us worthwhile.

Boekie Woekie is literally a carrier for books. There are shelves, vitrines and tables where books stand and lay waiting for someone to pick them up and take a look, and sometimes even buy something. At the same time that Boekie Woekie carries art in these ways, it is also a framework that gives the artist book a more satisfactory place in the world. As opposed to the way artists books are normally

exhibited – shown under glass, with one spread open and no way for the viewer to see the pages before and after – Boekie Woekie allows for the handling of the artifact, which I believe is one of a book's more important qualities. In this way, Boekie Woekie allows the artist book to be more authentically experienced.



Dissection # 5: Real Snow White (2009) by Pilvi Takala

Next example is a video work by **Pilvi Takala**, titled **Real Snow White**. For this work, the artist has dressed up in a Snow White costume and is attempting to enter Disneyland Paris. However, Takala is prevented from buying a ticket to enter the theme park, because – she is informed by Disney employees and security – she is not allowed to dress that way. Takala innocently points out to them that most of the girls waiting to enter Disneyland are dressed as Disney characters, as is she. While this discussion takes place, hysteria is breaking out among children around Takala who have become aware of Snow White's presence. Even as Takala attempts to negotiate with the security officers, she signs autographs and poses for pictures with the children. The security officers continue to insist that she must either remove the costume or leave the premises. Meanwhile, parents who hear the discussion forbid their children to take photos with this 'fake' Snow White, and some children get disappointed by the autograph they have received from her.

For this work to exist, the narrative and character of Snow White needs to be understood as a story that has certain rules written by the Disney corporation. People are very welcome to enter and enjoy this world as long as they follow the unwritten rules. But the idea of Snow White only exists

as long as the narrative is correct. The moment Snow White would do something ‘out of character,’ the story falls apart and with it the fictional world. Disney needs everyone to be codependent in order for it to be a convincing host.

Clearly, as with all Disney original characters, the ‘Snow White’ created by the Disney enterprise is a symbiotic participant in the ecology of the Disney brand and the theme park. However, Takala’s version of ‘Snow White’ is viewed as a parasite that might contaminate the park. (Little girls dressed up as Snow White don’t pose the same threat.) Disney is the unwilling host of Takala’s guest, because she threatens to disrupt their system, even though there is no proof that she will. This can easily be linked to ideas of terrorism, where we have created stereotypes that we believe pose a threat without evidence. But it becomes a psychological threat because it is not clear what it is and where its coming from.

The almost violent response to Takala’s innocent gesture demonstrates how the Disney structure (host) is so meticulously scripted by the company and indoctrinated in its clients all over the world. It becomes clear when visiting parents and children hear the security guard say that she is not the “real” Snow White: the reality comes into question and creates a very surreal conversation on what is real and what is not real. Disney employees not only have to act and work for a company with a company structure, but also understand that they are working for a “real” fairytale.

And what does it mean when there is an active fictional layer on top of our world that has real connections and real consequences? Takala created a great conflict that brings these surprising reactions out into the open. This work reveals un-written rules and social codes that can be seen as a parallel to real situations of unwanted immigrants in Western countries.

The terror of a potential parasite: terrorist threat

The understanding that Takala is like a parasite with in Disney (host)

She could potentially sneak in as a “fake Snow White” but in her disguise she could fool all visitors and live unseen within the body of Disney. Where she could destroy the organism of Disneyland. It is of course because Disney is based on a belief system that has problems with being questioned.

Internal Reflection

The guest is fluid. It can enter and leave, and it can be replaced. But the host needs to be stable, or it needs to appear stable. In art, as in life, the host is the fundament, the narrative and/or a place, the vessel which the guest inhabits and is allowed to flow. As often the focus is aimed at the artwork itself and not on its carrier. I started thinking about the potentials of carriers. I have started focusing only on the structure that can host other artworks, constructed meeting place that is a vehicle for artworks to express themselves in new ways. But these examples (above) show you how meaningful and important that can be, not only in how it can influence the interpretation of the works, but also in how it calls into question the art world in general.

My examples are chosen only as works/exhibitions that have in their own way had some resonance with in me, especially in terms of the different ways they deal with the idea of the host. (At least, I

find it useful to apply this word to them in order to understand them.)

In dissecting these five examples, I didn't have any real expectations in finding a singular truth, but rather I hoped to open something up.

When it comes to my own practice, my interest lies within the method and systems of exhibition making. I'm curious about solutions for display and structures where meetings of different artworks can happen. My work (like the works I have discussed in this paper) circumvents the practical applications of those structures and instead proposes them as tools that assist in composing something new.

I'm inspired by Matthew Barney's schematic drawing in how this mechanism might help to identify the roles of specific objects in my own work, especially in terms of its stable and unstable elements. Just as Barney's deliberately defined 'guests' can be released from his narrative, I'd like to further explore how the host environments or narratives I create can simultaneously allow the characters and objects they contain to exist independent of my structures.

And would it be possible for me to work like Thomas Demand and take a "walk in the park," using the host as a narrative and as a space of experience? Can the way I order and frame the works created by others give the objects a new life, a space to be (re-) discovered?

Demand's work shows me that the act of exhibiting can be a creative act in itself, flirting with the idea of function.

However, even as my work explores the carrier and the context, sometimes I still wish to create independent art objects, objects that can stand alone. Themselves might be 'hosted' in a variety of ways and contexts. Maybe these are art objects that wonder about the function of the exhibition, or even wonder about themselves.

Or as Boekie Woekie operates completely as a shop but still manages to be something much more, and to incorporate others' art. But doing it differently than museums do, because in the shop context things are always in motion, new ones can be added and some things leave when they are purchased.

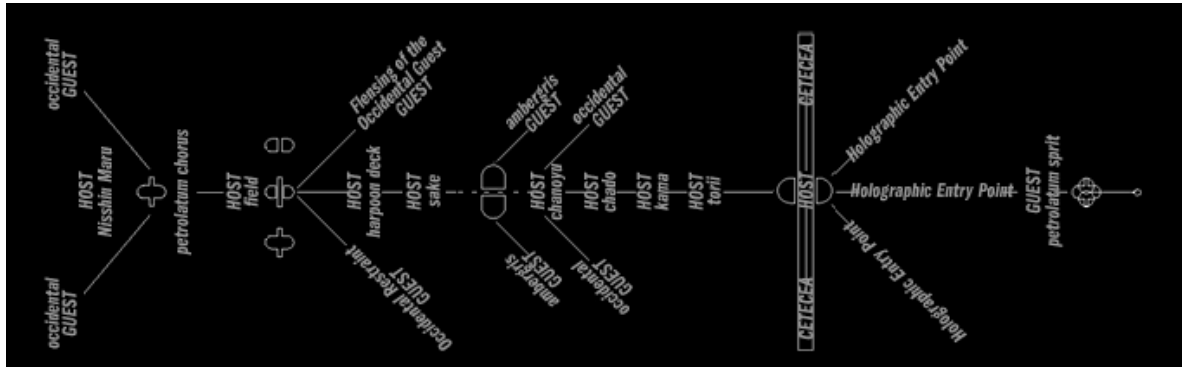
Therefore, I would conclude that in order to put the idea of host to use I need to respect the guests I invite. And be clear about what kind of host I want to be.

As I am currently working on arranging a series of situations where a selected paintings meets a group of musicians. [5]

And that is like throwing a good dinner party, choosing the guests well is about finding/choreographing the right combination of people and understanding that every element contributes to the situation. And I guess we all know how it is to have the joy of sitting around a large table with good people and share ideas. When things find their flow and every element is in its place.

Footnotes:

[1]



[2] “I think that I am quite used to thinking of architecture as a body. I think anytime I approach an exhibition space, for example, I often think of it in those terms – where the door and windows are in relation to where the life passes in and out of this organism, and those passageways are really active for me in making decisions about where to place something.” –Matthew Barney

[3] “Boyce’s discovery of a photograph of four concrete trees made by the French artists Joël and Jan Martel in for the famous exhibition of decorative arts held in Paris in 1925 has become the defining point for the future development of his artistic output. He has since gone on to create his own versions of these modernist sculptures, identifiable in his installation based-work. A further derivative of the Martels’ cubist-inspired interpretations of nature is a grid template from which Boyce formed his own modernist typography. These angular letters feature often in his work and allow Boyce to cultivate his interest in language and narrative.”

[4] “the things that we pass through every day and occasionally catch a glimpse of, and maybe see something that has a meaningful resonance.” –Martin Boyce

[5] Improvisation for a painting: (<http://vimeo.com/84951985>)

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