

## Visitor Account on Grant Watson's Research Project *How We Behave*

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The premiere of Grant Watson's *How We Behave* film portraits went beyond the usual narrative of introducing its audience to a new project, sprinkled with highlights from the genesis of its making. At first glance, the presentation was set up as an interview-style conversation and a screening of carefully selected video excerpts based on interviews, reflecting the production process as well as the notion of an ongoing project that will appear in various formats. Instead, by embracing its own methodology as a dialogical project reflecting on the multiple layers of existence, during its presentation *How We Behave* became a performative screening that allowed us insight into the complexities and authorial challenges embedded in this equally ambitious theoretical and curatorial project.

Two years ago Watson was invited by If I Can't Dance to propose a project around his research into an interview with Michel Foucault which appeared 1983 in *Vanity Fair* entitled, *How We Behave*. The interview, in which Foucault poses the question, "what if life itself were a material of art making?" became a source of inspiration for not only its title but also its methodology and easy-to-read style. Watson embarked on a project that channelled into the present Foucault's elaborations on his writings and research from the early 1980s on ancient Greek philosophies concerned with the idea of the Care of the Self. While Foucault's interest in a better understanding and transformation of the self focussed on techniques practiced in Antiquity, Watson set out to investigate the notion of the Care of the Self through the testimonies and experiences of contemporary individuals.

The curatorial process unfolded in two distinct phases and functioned in the tension field between the affirmative and the anticipatory, essentially investigating how the curatorial can intervene when art is expanded to include life practice. Technically the first phase consisted of a series of fifty interviews transcribed by shorthand, followed by a second phase in which a twenty-page selection of segments from the original transcripts

were re-performed for the camera to be eventually shown as an installation of individual film portraits in an exhibition.

Literally criss-crossing the globe, Watson has over the last two years conducted interviews in Europe, the United States and South America. Each encounter was dedicated to asking a series of questions on quotidian gestures, habits, and rituals of everyday life, and was structured around a carefully selected order of keywords such as reading, writing, teaching, sex, work, death and disappearance. These terms not only helped keep the allotted time of the interview, but also gave shape to a structure that allows the viewer to identify the qualities of authenticity and agency in each repeated performance. As such the interviews were not only data but also functioned, according to curator Vivian Zihlerl, “as a conceptual tool, as a technique for personal transformation and as an analysis that can bring about social change.”

The first part of the project resulted in a five hundred page transcript, which Watson edited down to a twenty-page script that was subsequently re-performed by a few selected interview partners. What we hear and see when Sylvère Lotringer, Nicole Archer, Suely Rolnik, Jean Mathee, Michelle Dizon, Yael Davids, Christian Nyampeta and others speak about aspects of their lives, sometimes addressing us, sometimes turning away from the camera, is not only a complex portrait of facts, thoughts, and emotions, but in fact a series of staged iterations.

Topics around the ideas of the Care of the Self discussed by the protagonists with Watson during the first interview had not only gone through a process of editorial alienation but had been transformed into a theatrical speech act to be performed, adapted and replayed as an endless loop. The recording collapsed the authenticity of its own iteration. Each speaker was both the master of his own care, yet also the object of the curator's care bestowed upon them, the curator who in the end was neither present within the text nor image. Framed by a setting that references a blue box, the media equivalent of a white sheet of paper, each interviewee is transformed into an actor of his- or herself, performing the authenticity of their own words, filtered through Watson's editing. The resulting film portraits explore how his curatorial work becomes part of a methodology invested in the Care for the Self through the presence and actions of others.

Looked at from a distance, *How We Behave* is also about Watson's own Care of the Self on a personal as well as professional level. Firstly, as an exploration of curating as a performative act, that similar to a postcard announces and performs both the absence as well as the presence of its sender, a proof of the journey. Secondly, as an herculean endeavour that both maps as well as links together a large network of theoreticians and artists, creating a dense multi-layered web of voices that unfold as a collective in time, held together by Watson.

Watching the premiere of *How We Behave* was a collective experience that in return empowered the testimonies we witnessed. These videos not only fed the curiosity of their audience during the *Performance Days*, as many of the protagonists depicted are part of a network of more or less internationally well-known cultural producers, but they also called upon a desire of belonging and identification that is reflected in Watson's prismatic choreography of personal testimonies.

Each of the monologues was a self-conscious performance that via the topos of quotidian life reflected on agency, limits and choices, addressing us, the anonymous viewers, as potential collaborators within a closely knit network of relational strategies. The audience at the presentation was aware of both the intimacy implied in the sense of belonging and exclusion that became part of the first public outing of this archive. Over time, as with all archives, its purpose and use will change, perhaps one day provoking a discussion on how *How We Behave* is also a portrait of Watson's agency and capacity as a curator, who performed and thereby transformed his social network into cultural capital.

This visitor report by Barbara Clausen was written at the invitation of If I Can't Dance, and follows the presentation of Grant Watson's research project *How We Behave*, shown during the Performance Days festival, 27 November - 3 December 2014, Amsterdam.