

The Glue and the Wedge

Conversation with Nina Beier and Marie Lund

By Ilaria Gianni and Isobel Harbison

IH – How did your collaboration begin, and how and when did it, in a certain sense, become subject matter of your work?

MJL – We met at the RCA, and our first project was a book we made where we attempted to match up all the clothes we each owned. This project involved letting go of our individual identities, and creating something new. I believe that this idea is always present when you are working together.

NJB – I thought it was just an exorcism, from which point we would be able to move on, and then somehow the interest just stayed within the group structure and started becoming more theoretical. After a while we became interested with the potential of the larger group.

IG – What mechanisms do you use when you decide what groups you work with? How do you instruct them? Do you allow for spontaneity?

MJL - That depends on each project. Each work enters a certain social structure, a certain group that has a certain job: invigilators, gardeners. They are all groups that already have a structure. For example, the group of old revolutionaries in *Reminiscence of a Strike Action* (2007), shared a history and beliefs but as time has passed, they have also become each other's policeman, in judging how they have lived up to their own ideals, so we are interested in pushing in between that particular social structure. We instructed them all to close their eyes for as long as possible to emphasise this particular relationship.

NJB – The already existent pressure makes it become a very specific situation. How do you know if the others stick to the pact? Are they undermining their own beliefs by doing so? We are interested in how groups struggle with their own tensions on a daily basis, and in our work we insert a situation or instruction that might emphasise this. In the case of *The Way*, 2007, in which we asked a group of young socialist to walk through a forest and let their particular route be decided naturally without verbal negotiation, we interviewed them on their process of taking decisions and they said they aimed to discuss things until everyone agreed and hardly ever had to resort to voting. This work explores in their politics the aim and also the form.

IH – I was also interested in the objects within your practice; *Common Objects* 2005/6 fill the negative space between people as they link arms or shake or hold hands as opposed to the more recent objects, which seem more narrative...

NJB – The *Common Objects* can be considered as a starting point; abstract objects or metaphors for relationships or spaces between people. We then moved into making these more and more loaded objects which are like characters that are tied to the event-based work, all about existing tensions or stories, which we put a wedge into: like *The House and The Backdoor* [2007].

MJL – This work is a collection of books that Nina’s mother and her father both had copies of. Nina’s mother kept her copies in the attic as a back-up for the day they might not be together any more. So they contain the story of the place they met, but also of the potential break-up.

IG – There is a certain intimacy in your different use of the object: from physical relation to loaded remembrance in the physical.

NJB – Both types of use come from different directions. In *Common Objects*, objects are used as props that create or push a story, whereas the others (*The House and The Backdoor*, *The Monument*, 2007) are manifestations of a story, which already exists. One is physical, the other narrative.

IG – How do you work on this idea of the wedge in your performances? The tension we have been talking in your videos, in your objects, seems also very present in these events. Is this the case?

NJB – I was thinking about this conflict and about the nature of the imprint: immaterial with no evidence of the wedge. For *The Division* [Tate Britain, 2007] we released a statement that we had invited 50 beautiful people to join the visitors at the event, so by just this one sentence a whole situation was created where everyone was aware of one another, paranoid, and that was never alleviated or overcome.

MJL – I think we have an interest in an unsettled division; creating an invisible line through the audience which might be real and might be imaginary. It was similar to the hand-clapping piece [*All the people at Tate Modern (Clap in time)*, 2007] where all the relationships in the building were scrutinised. Nina and myself initiated it and had instructed the regulars of the house such as gallery assistants, shop staff and security people and members to join us. The visitors then had the choice of either clapping along or being clapped at. Some people were watching, feeling that they didn’t want to be involved but feeling responsible in some way, as if part of a social codex. How long does it take for this to become the norm and for everyone to become involved? It confuses the boundaries of performer and audiences.

IH – ‘Community’ is something Ilaria and I have discussed a lot. Considered as a permanent place, site or collaborative body, ‘community’ is perhaps a misleading. However, when considered as a series of events or gatherings, ‘community’ enjoys greater flexibility, facilitating rupture or break. Perhaps there is a liaison between the collaboration and creating performances that explore ruptures or breaks?

MJL – That is a very big part of our interest; the tension the *The House and The Backdoor* is about, that any union carries in itself this potential to fall apart. We are working on one piece now in a village in Norway, where there were a record number of divorces within one year in the 1990s. We went there with a fascination of the myth, but more specifically trying to understand how the community deals with the break, the falling apart and how you mend it again afterwards.